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**His Arms Held All the Songs I Needed**

by **The_She_Devil**

**Summary**

Steve becomes enamored with the lead singer of a local band. If only he could keep his cool long enough to not make a complete and utter fool out of himself.

**Notes**

Huge thank you to my beta, **Hannah**. She is amazing and everyone should love her!

Title inspired by "The Waltz We Were Born For," by Walt McDonald

I’ve stolen songs from various artists and used them as originals for the purposes of this fic. In order of appearance:

Hozier - “Jackie and Wilson”

Jackie Wilson - “A Woman, a Lover, a Friend” (this was a cover song in the fic, Jackie Wilson was the original artist, although I imagine Bucky singing Otis Redding’s version)

X Ambassadors - “Hoping”

Cold War Kids - “Love is Mystical”
The mission had gone off without a hitch. Natasha had gotten some intel about a small Hydra cell on the western border of Novosibirsk, Russia – a solid enough lead but supposedly a low level threat – so only Tony, Steve, and Clint had accompanied her. They’d infiltrated the base that was operating under the guise of a welding factory within twenty minutes, with the guards enthralled by Natasha’s damsel in distress sh*t.

She’d driven her Mercedes into a snowbank so convincingly that Steve, watching with Tony from his outpost atop a nearby hill, had nearly had a heart attack. Leaving the car half-buried in the snow, she then wrapped what she’d called a babushka – a beautiful black scarf embroidered with bright flowers – around her head and neck, pulling it tight against the wind as she stumbled through the snow-laden road in the sky high heels that Steve had balked at and that she had insisted Russian women were born wearing.

The guards had met her at the barbed wire fence, postures tense and rifles at the ready. However, they had relaxed at the sight of the voluptuous redhead. They’d eaten right out of her hand, tripping over themselves to offer her their handkerchiefs as she cried big alligator tears over crashing her father’s car. The two men elbowed each other as they fought to give her their coat, despite the fact that she was already wearing one.

Steve had never seen this particular skillset of Natasha’s before, instead familiar with the deadly, efficient grace of the Black Widow in battle. He had watched transfixed, straining to see through the snow with his binoculars, until Stark had placed his hand beneath Steve’s chin and tipped his mouth closed, Steve’s teeth snapping together with an audible click.

After shooting Stark an unimpressed glare, he’d returned to his watch just as Natasha went in for the kill. She had two men down within moments, wrapping her scarf around the neck of another. The sleek lines of her powerful thighs and elegant feet moved fluidly through the air as she slipped behind him, kicking another guard in the face while doing so before strangling the last and dropping him like a dead weight.

She turned to Steve and Tony then, standing atop the nearby hill – Clint was positioned in the trees by the backdoor in case they needed backup – and offered them an exaggerated thumbs up and a jaunty smile, making Steve grin despite himself.

After that, they’d stormed the front entrance to find two dozen disorganized Hydra agents. Steve threw himself into the fray and took out half of them on his own while Natasha and Tony handled the rest, and Clint picked off the few trying to leave through the back exit. Steve found six more Hydra agents playing cards in a back room that was cloudy with cigar smoke and heavy with the stench of vodka. Barely breaking a sweat, he dodged the inebriated soldiers’ uncoordinated swings and kicks as he easily disabled them one by one.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. couldn’t have handled this?” groused Clint, who was wiping the blood off his arrows in the back of the quinjet as Natasha and Steve guided them home.

“Sure, they could’ve,” Natasha shot back absently, eyes on the dash as she adjusted their altitude. “If you could trust any of them.”
After Project Insight, S.H.I.E.L.D. had nearly disbanded. The government had been quick to sell off the agency in an attempt to save face, and Tony had privatized it under the Avengers and subcontracted their services back to the government. With Fury going to ground, the board – which included all of the Avengers, with Tony as president – promoted Maria Hill to director, allowing her to vet all agents at her discretion, though it was a slow and arduous process making sure none of her new hires had nefarious intentions.

Steve just thanked God that the best soldier Hydra had possessed had been Brock Rumlow, and that Steve had been able to stop him on that helicarrier. It had nearly cost Steve his life, but he would’ve gladly sacrificed himself once again for the greater good.

“Come on,” Tony cut in, swaying down the aisle to his seat and collapsing into it dramatically. “It was every man’s dream come true: action, adventure, a deadly vixen, the bad guys got got and the good guys won. I’m calling it a job well done. Who’s up for a celebration?”

Clint groaned, Natasha remained impassive, and Steve, glancing towards the back, said, “It’ll be midnight by the time we make it back to New York, Tony.”

Steve had relocated back to New York once S.H.I.E.L.D. had been acquired by Tony and temporarily (or permanently, who knew at this point?) housed at Avengers Tower. All Steve had to do was hop on the subway and take a couple trains back to his apartment in Brooklyn, and then he’d have enough time to shower, catch up on an episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Natasha had recommended it, and though he’d balked at the title, now he kind of liked it), and then go to bed.

It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy spending time with his friends – he did, despite them constantly calling him a stick in the mud – but they could be loud and intrusive, and had this obsession with setting him up with any woman that would walk by, as if the only requirement were breasts, brains need not apply.

He’d always been alone growing up – too scrawny for any women to give him a first glance, let alone a second one. He could admit now that he was also attracted to men, something he was sure Natasha knew even though he’d never told her, but it wasn’t like that was something you could share back then. Steve may have been a bit of a rebel in his younger days, but he’d always been too scared to seek out the queer bars. It’s not that he’d been afraid of being arrested, but rather that the men there would find him invisible too.

Now, he had no idea how to interact with the men and women who he was interested in, not that there had been many. He was always afraid that his celebrity overshadowed his true self: the art “nerd” – a word he’d picked up from Sam – that could sit quietly sketching for hours who enjoyed listening to jazz with his eyes closed and a whiskey in his hand, the guy that laughed too loud at jokes and was a completely awkward cheeseball. They didn’t want him. They wanted Captain America, trademark included.

So he had gotten used to the solitude, to keeping himself occupied with art or books, and he could admit he preferred it most days. Maybe it was detrimental to getting used to living in a new century, but the outside world could be just as loud and intrusive as his friends, and sometimes it was just too much.

“Just in time for the party to start!” Tony insisted, holding his hands out in supplication. “Come on, guys. When’s the last time we all went out together? Thor’s birthday? That was like, months ago, and we had it at the Tower. Come on, just one time? Please?”

Steve exchanged a glance with Natasha, silently holding a conversation.
Should we? Steve asked, but his face said he really didn’t want to.

Meh, Natasha responded, shrugging her agreement, but her face said she really didn’t want to.

“I’ll go if there’s food,” Clint supplied.

“Fine,” Steve sighed. He tipped his head back against the seat, mentally preparing himself for a crowded, trendy club where they would sit in a giant booth sectioned off with velvet ropes, drinking thirty dollar drinks while the nearby twenty-somethings snapped photographs on their phones and men and women begged to be let in with pouty lips and flashes of skin.

“I’m not going into a nightclub full of children,” Natasha stated, her voice edged with something dangerous. It seemed like Steve wasn’t the only one tired of Stark’s trendy, hipster clubs. “I want a bar, and I want two dollar beers, and I want the air to be filled with so much smoke I won’t be able to see your face from one foot away.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “I suppose I can make do.”

So that was how Steve found himself in a dive bar, drinking a two dollar beer right out of the can, with a haze of smoke around him so thick that he could swear he had a nicotine high. Natasha was sitting to his right, Clint to her right, and Stark was standing across from them, frowning down at his vodka and tonic.

“This vodka tastes like rubbing alcohol,” he complained, pinching a withered lime between his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed it futilely. “There isn’t even any juice in this thing.”

“Admit it,” Natasha murmured, before tipping her beer can to her lips. “The place has a certain appeal.”

Tony wrinkled his nose as his eyes traveled over the worn, wooden booths riddled with obscene carvings and graffiti, their stuffing bursting from the torn vinyl. He lifted a foot from the peeling, cracked linoleum floor, a sticky sound following, then rolled his eyes to the ceiling as if praying for strength. Finally, he placed his drink on the table heavily, crossing his arms over his chest.


“Oh, come on!” Clint pleaded, indicating the stage, empty save for the instruments. “The band hasn’t even come on yet!”

“Yeah, Tony,” Natasha chimed in, smirking around the lip of her beer can. “The band hasn’t come on yet.”

“You have to at least hear the band,” Steve agreed, expression serious.

“I hate all of you,” Tony stated, grabbing his drink and downing it with a wince. He clutched at his side. “Oh, God. My liver just shut down.”

“Surprised it hasn’t happened sooner,” Natasha said. “Relax, Tony. Live like the common folk. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

They fell into conversation, Clint mentioning a new trick he’d taught his dog, Lucky, which evolved into talking about the merits of owning a stray versus purebreed, and then devolved into how all Chihuahuas were shit. Steve wasn’t sure what a Chihuahua was, and he certainly had never heard of a Puggle (Wasn’t that from Harry Potter?), so he instead quietly sipped his beer and surveyed the
It was a strange mix of piercings and tattoos and high heels and victory curls. Men had beards and long hair, and women had hair shorter than army regulation in the forties. One man was wearing a dress, looking just as stunning as Peggy on a Saturday night, and some of the women hadn’t even shaved their legs beneath their cut off trousers. Steve was fascinated by the fashion and by the casual acceptance, but he tried not to stare, especially since no one was giving the Avengers even a second glance. He at least owed the bar patrons the same respect.

He was subtly studying a tattoo on a man’s calf that was so intricate and beautiful he already knew he was going to draw it later when the music on the stereo lowered and a deep voice resounded through.

“Hi,” a man said, and Steve pulled his eyes away from one work of art to another.

The man on stage standing before the microphone was tall and lean, wearing dark skinny jeans that hugged his powerful thighs, and cuffed up over black boots. Beneath a denim jacket, his white, deep vee neck shirt revealed a dusting of dark hair against creamy pale skin, the fabric so threadbare that Steve could see just a hint of his nipples. His dark hair was tied up in a messy little bun with strands escaping to frame his strong jaw, high cheek bones, and blue eyes the color of the arctic – the last color Steve had seen before he’d slept for seventy years. He was –

“Jesus, that guy’s hot,” Tony, of all people, blurted. “He’s like some kind of gorgeous, hipster hobo.”

“Isn’t he?” Natasha asked, her eyes sliding to Steve just long enough for him to blush, caught out. He was at least lucky enough to have remembered to keep his jaw off the floor this time.

“I’m James, and this is my band,” the man went on, grinning crookedly as his eyes passed over the crowd. “We’re Redstar. Thanks for coming out, and we hope you enjoy the show. If you have any requests, we’re happy to play them as long as they aren’t shitty.” He leaned away, then reconsidered and spoke into the microphone again. “Oh, and make sure to tip your bartenders. Don’t be that guy.”

He turned back to his band, a drummer, a guitarist, and a bassist, the latter two also with microphones. The drummer counted – “one, two, three, four,” – then the music erupted, a guitar heavy with reverb, the bass supporting, and the drums offering a steady beat. Steve was pleasantly surprised; they were actually pretty good. Now to see if James could actually sing.

“So tired trying to see from behind the red in my eyes,” the man crooned, voice breathtakingly soulful and smooth. “No better version of me I could pretend to be tonight…”

“Well, call me effectively mistaken,” Tony called above the music as he wriggled his way between Steve and the wall of the booth to sit down where there really wasn’t room. He managed it anyway. “I guess I did have to stay for the band.”

“She blows out of nowhere, Roman candle of the wild,” James went on, “laughing away through my feeble disguise. No other version of me I would rather be tonight. Lord, she found me just in time. ‘Cause with my mid-youth crisis all said and done, I need to be youthfully felt, ‘cause, God, I’ve never felt young…”

Steve was transfixed as the song went on. James performed with his whole body, face displaying his yearning, lips pouting. He leaned towards his microphone, clutching the stand with the long fingers of his right hand, his eyes open and fixed on the people around him. He came to the final chorus, flashing a wide grin, happy and bright, eyes glittering. He meant the words he was singing, he was
telling the truth, and Steve believed him.

“She’s gonna save me, call me baby, run her hands through my hair...she’ll know me crazy, soothe me daily, but yet she wouldn’t care...we’ll steal her Lexus, be detectives, ride ‘round pickin’ up clues...we’ll name our children Jackie and Wilson, raise ‘em on rhythm and blues...”

And Steve thought, yes.

The band played a few more songs. James’ voice, dark and smoky as it wrapped itself around Steve while caressing his body and alighting his skin, was slow like molasses and smooth like honey. Steve hadn’t even realized Tony was standing right beside the stage until James tipped down towards him after a song ended, leaning in close to hear him over the loud chatter of the bar.

“What’s he doing?” Steve asked, as Tony pulled out his wallet and flashed a bill. Steve was too far away to see how much it was but, knowing Tony, it was probably a hundred.

“Looks like he’s making a request,” Natasha replied. “If you tip, they’ll play what you want.”

Suddenly, Tony turned and pointed right at Steve, James following his finger and meeting Steve’s eye for just a brief moment – long enough to get Steve’s heart pounding – before turning back to the billionaire.

“God damn it,” Steve groaned, knowing full well exactly what Tony was asking James to play. Star Spangled Man with a Plan.

Great. He finally managed to find and maintain anonymity in a crowded bar only to be grandiosely outed by his irritating, yet well-meaning, friend.

Natasha laughed softly beside him. “Can’t run from your past, Rogers.”

“You did it,” Steve shot back.

“It helps that my past wasn’t distributed on thirty-five millimeters across thousands of movie screens over the course of several years,” she countered. “Not including all the posthumous documentaries, and the resurgence of your image in film and media after they found you in the ice.”

“Don’t forget Youtube,” Clint pointed out. Sighing with resignation, Steve dropped his head back against the wooden booth with a thud.

“No,” he could see James say, unable to hear his voice from this far away. Jesus, thank God. Undeterred, Tony just pulled out more cash, insistently holding it towards the other man, and there was no way James could deny him his request now. There were probably hundreds of dollars there, if not more.

James eyed the money and smiled, slow and indulgent, and Steve took a deep breath, already feeling himself blush as he prepared himself for the worst. Then James said something else that he couldn’t make out, before turning away without taking the money, Tony looking bereft and Clint bubbling a surprised laugh.

“What?” Steve asked, just as Natasha said, “What did he say?”

“He said, ‘No is a complete sentence’!” Clint responded, gripping his beer tightly to his chest as Tony dejectedly made his way back to the trio. “I bet the last time somebody spoke to Stark that way was – well, probably Pepper, and probably today, but still!”

“Make a request?” Natasha asked coyly as Tony pouted from the other side of the table. “What’s he going to play?”
“Definitely not Star Spangled Man with a Plan,” Tony replied, crossing his arms over his chest. “I offered him five hundred bucks!”

Steve’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. Five hundred dollars was a lot of money; he wasn’t sure he would’ve declined that kind of cash when he was younger. His attraction to James swelled as respect was added to the pile which already included gorgeous, confident, and talented.

“Some men can’t be bought,” Natasha said, shrugging casually.

Despite the fact that Tony hadn’t gotten his way, Steve was unable to shake off his embarrassment, cheeks still burning and his mood souring. He stood up, needing to step away from the table. “I’ll get the next round.”

“Oh, come on!” Tony cried, throwing his hands up. “Don’t be mad. He’s mad, isn’t he? Steve!”

Stepping up to the bar, Steve blew out a breath with a puff of his cheeks and waited for the bartender to come around. He absently tapped his fingers to the beat of the music, belatedly realizing it was pre-recorded and not the band when he spotted James standing beside him, holding a drink and talking to another bar patron.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked Steve, who blinked at him dumbly for a half second before responding.

“Another round for the table, please,” he requested, then grinned. “On Stark’s card.”

“You got it.”

Waiting for his drinks, he fidgeted restlessly for a moment before glancing back at James, who was now standing alone. Well, he couldn’t just say nothing, especially after James had so impressively denied Tony Steve’s humiliation. Steve may have been nervous, but no one had ever accused him of being a coward; he wasn’t going to start giving anyone a reason to tonight.

He cleared his throat. “Excuse me.”

“Oh, sorry,” James apologized, taking a step back as if he were in Steve’s way.

“No,” Steve tried again, rolling his eyes at himself and huffing out a breath. “I just – you’re – in – the band?”

James’ eyes met his, a tiny line forming between his brows as he eyed Steve skeptically. “Yes.”

“You’re very good,” he stated, dumbly.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Steve breathed, nodding. “And thank you for not playing that stupid song.”

“I did say I’d only take requests as long as they weren’t shitty,” James stated, casually brushing off the sentiment. “No offense.”

“No, I didn’t...write the song,” Steve stated, and an awkward silence fell between them. Reaching out for anything to say, his fingers grasping at air, he blurted, “Can I buy you a drink?”

James held up the drink in his hand, which was full. “I’m good.”

“Right.” Steve could feel the heat in his cheeks, but he bravely held out his right hand. “Well, it was
nice to meet you. I’m Steve, by the way.”

“James,” he replied, but didn’t move for a moment, eyeing Steve’s hand and then glancing around before grinning apologetically. “I’d shake your hand, but...”

Steve frowned in confusion for a fraction of a second before James tilted his body to the right, holding up his drink again and displaying his left side, which was when Steve realized he was missing an arm. Jesus Christ, he’d been so enamored with this man’s voice and confidence, he hadn’t even realized he had no left arm.

If Steve’s face had felt warm before, now it was absolutely on fire.

Steve blinked and then sighed before meeting James’ eyes; they were glittering with amusement, as the corners of his mouth quirked up towards the sky. Steve was definitely being laughed at, although James was valiantly trying to hide it.

“I’m going to sit down now,” Steve said, grabbing his drinks off the top of the bar and nodding towards his friends.

“Okay.” James responded with a barely suppressed laugh, eyes tracking Steve as he meekly shouldered through the crowd, missing his pointy elbows and tiny frame while he fought his way back to the table.

To be honest, he felt just as small after his mortifying conversation with James, just as awkward and inadequate as he had striking out with all those dames at the dance halls seventy some odd years ago. As Steve deposited the drinks on the table – hands reaching for them before he even sat them down – he dropped heavily back into the booth and wished, for once, to not be invisible.

When Steve got home to his apartment in Brooklyn – the one bedroom being modest in this century but extravagant compared to the shoebox he’d inhabited in the thirties (and, Jesus, the rent!) – he wandered around for a little while putting his dishes from the drying rack away, wiping down the already clean countertops, and folding up the throw blanket strewn across the couch. He considered vacuuming, but it was three o’clock in the morning and he was sure his neighbors wouldn’t appreciate the noise. He turned on the bathroom light, eyes narrowed and considering, but he’d already scrubbed it with bleach that morning. Really, his apartment couldn’t be cleaner.

He knew he was restless, just trying to find something to keep him occupied, to distract him from what he really wanted to do. So he sighed, giving in to the inevitable, sat down on the couch, and flipped his laptop open.

Steve was not as inept at the twenty first century as Tony Stark might believe. He was aware that one could literally find anything on the internet, including people. (It only took one Google search of himself to understand what a terrible idea that was. So many people didn’t like him. By the time he’d finished two pages of articles and blogs and tumblrs, he’d nearly agreed that, yeah, that Captain America guy was a jerk.)

Embarrassed but also determined, he typed Redstar into the search bar. There were surprisingly many results from the vast depths of the internet – from tech businesses to food brands to restaurants – so he tried again: Redstar band, New York. Bingo.

There was a website. He eagerly clicked on the link and an impressively artistic homepage appeared, all dark colors and rough edges. At the top of the page, there was a photo of the band playing on
stage, James leaning into his microphone, face rapt. Without anyone around to judge him, Steve openly studied the figure on his screen: the long legs and those sinfully thick thighs, the lines of his torso and elegant stretch of his neck. His hair was shorter in this picture, not quite long enough to tie back yet, but still long enough to tuck behind his ears. It looked slick with perspiration and Steve wondered what it felt like, what it smelled like. Probably sharp with some fancy shampoo, masculine with the scent of sweat.

Flushed with shame and more than a little arousal, Steve shook himself out of his reverie and scanned over the actual words on the page. The lead singer was listed as James Barnes, with no other information besides that he was from Brooklyn, New York. Steve couldn’t help the fluttering in his stomach, knowing this small detail that they shared. Still restless, humming with energy, he immediately stood and crossed to the window, staring out into the streets and wondering if James was nearby or if he lived on the other side of the borough, if they were looking at the same view right now.

He moved back to the laptop to see if he could find anything else about the man and scrolled down to find a list of shows and dates, heart stopping at the information. It hadn’t even occurred to him that he could actually find him again, go to a bar and maybe happen to run into him by complete coincidence.

“Oh, fancy running into you here,” he said to the air, trying to sound casual, then wondered aloud, “Who talks like that?”

He cleared his throat, sitting up a little straighter with a cocky grin, and tried again.

“In all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world,” he began, ineffectually impersonating Bogart’s Transatlantic accent, before laughing at himself.

There were links to YouTube videos of the band playing and he clicked on a random one. The lights were low and intimate; the guitar was offering a bluesy tune, with the drums light and steady. He recognized the song as being from an R&B artist from the sixties that Sam had recommended: Jackie Wilson. He remembered because the singer and Sam shared the same last name and Sam had insisted they were related as some kind of half cousins twice removed.

“I want me somebody to hold my hand,” James sang, in a slowed down version that worked so well with his sultry voice and the heavy reverb of the guitar. “Somebody to love me and understand. I want a woman...I want a lover...I want a friend…”

Steve closed his eyes, letting the voice wrap around him as he had in the bar. He pretended James was right there in front of him – up high on the stage looking down at him with those bright blue eyes, smiling, and maybe blushing a little, shy to be professing himself to Steve so publicly, or maybe the heat in his cheeks was from desire. Maybe it was turning him on to be so blatant in front of all these people with everyone knowing that the moment they were alone they would no longer have any reason to bridle their passion for one another.

“I want me somebody to share my love...” In his mind’s eye, those blue eyes were on him; he could feel them, heated and intense. Steve trailed his hand down his abdomen and cupped his crotch gently as he breathed and listened in the dark of his apartment. “Loving is something I’ve got plenty of...” He pressed down on his cock with the heel of his hand, rubbing through his jeans and sending a little thrill shooting up his spine. “I want a woman...I want a lover...I want a friend...”

“I don’t want a fancy girl with powder and paint!” James went on, his voice strong and pleading – almost a moan. Steve popped the button on his jeans and unzipped his fly, shuddering a breath as he stuffed one hand into his pants and shifted slightly to use his other hand to push them down and over
his hips in order to achieve better access. “And I don’t want a woman who thinks she’s a saint! I’m looking for someone who’s not make believe, and doesn’t mind giving so that she may receive!”

“There must be somebody somewhere around...” He wrapped strong fingers around his erection – hard as steel and already dripping, a bead of iridescent precome sliding down the tip. “That’s looking for someone to give pound for pound...” He swept it up with his thumb and used it to smooth the slide down into his grip, unable to help thrusting up into it. “I want me a woman...I want a lover...I want a friend...”

“I want this little girl right now! I want to run away now...” He should have been embarrassed – getting excited like this over a real person and touching himself. “Need you here by my side now. I need you to protect me...” It was perverse, almost violative. What would James think to know he was being used this way? “I need you to stand right by me...”

And James sang, “And I want you, and I want you to just, come on, baby...”

And Steve thought, Maybe he would like it.

That was all it took for Steve to blow off into his own hand – fist flying over his cock and ass clenching hard as he thrust up and up and up – gasping like a fish out of water while James told him through the tinny speakers on his laptop, “And I want you, I want you, I want you, I want you...”

It really was a coincidence, the next time Steve ran into James and his band (or so he had thought). He was out with Natasha, walking to the subway after a long day of training at Avengers Tower, when she asked to loop around down an alley so that she could purchase a bottle of water from a corner store.

Steve waited patiently outside, holding his jacket in his hands and bouncing on the balls of his feet while his eyes traveled over a group of women smoking outside of a bar across the street. A bouncer was standing at the door checking IDs (although most of the patrons seemed to be in their thirties and forties), barely glancing at the driver license of a woman with large cleavage. Steve rolled his eyes up to the sky, catching sight of the name of the bar above the entrance.

The Hideaway. Wait. What was today? His eidetic memory immediately recalled the list of locations and dates from Redstar’s website, checking his watch for the time and noting that the band was set to play in one hour.

“Got somewhere to be?” he heard Natasha ask from behind him, her eyes on his watch.

“No, no,” he replied, hastily. She narrowed her eyes. “Just, um, was wondering if it was too late for a drink.”

“Too late?” she balked, glancing at her own watch, although he doubted Natasha never knew what time it was. “It’s nine o’clock, Rogers. If anything, it’s too early.”

“Oh,” he said, face falling.

She smiled pityingly. “Come on, old man. I’ll let you buy me a drink.”

“Thank you?” he teased, holding out his arm so she could slip her small hand into the crook of his elbow as they made their way across the street.
There was only standing room in the tiny, dingy bar – a true hole in the wall if he’d ever seen one. The place stank like liquor, cigarettes, and somehow vomit, and the floor was sticky and wet. There were TVs everywhere broadcasting various sports games on mute, which seemed to be the focus of most of the patrons. The people were older, which was kind of nice, because hipsters made him feel old and awkward even though he was closer to their age. However, there were quite a few men and women that recognized him as Captain America and gave him the good old stink eye. Tough crowd, he supposed. They were probably Republicans.

He grabbed their drinks and headed back through the crowd, finding Natasha seated on a high stool beside one of the only tables in the place.

“How did you manage this?” he asked, indicating the table as he sat down at the other unoccupied stool.

“I’d tell you,” she murmured, emphasizing her Russian accent, “but then I’d have to kill you.”

Steve widened his eyes and gasped. “That’s the first time I’ve heard that line!”

Natasha grinned, taking a sip of her vodka and then frowning into her glass. “Did you ask for top shelf?”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “Americans.”

They chatted for a little while about their training, the art festival this weekend, that picture of Steve picking a wedgie on his run in the park that blew up the internet. All the while Steve’s attention kept wandering to the stage, startling every time there was movement out of the corner of his eye and quickly cutting his gaze to catch a sight of what he hoped would be James. The man was nowhere to be seen, however, but it wasn’t like he had any instruments to set up, and someone else who wasn’t in the band had set up his microphone and done a quick soundcheck.

Natasha noticed, because she noticed everything, but declined to comment, which Steve knew from experience was more dangerous than if she had. He met her eye after turning away from the stage for the thousandth time, a slow grin spreading across her lips as she sipped her drink, but he remained stubbornly silent, refusing to be the first one to crack.

Placing the empty glass heavily on the table, she finally said, “Alright – ”

It was all she got out before a deep voice cut in from behind Steve. “Buy a lady a drink?”

He turned to see James wearing a sly smile, bright eyes focused intently on Natasha. Steve couldn’t help the swooping feeling in his gut because, of course, James was probably straight, and even if he wasn’t, even if Steve stood a fraction of a chance, Natasha was – well, she was Natasha: red hair and a wit just as dangerous as her curves, a striking ray of light in a dark hellhole such as this place. Of course he’d notice her, everyone had the minute she’d walked through the door.

She smiled at James, indulgent and sexy in a way Steve had never seen before, and right then he knew he was toast. Steve just sat there, awkward and big and out of place, like it was the first day in his new body.

“What’s in it for me?” Natasha asked.

James barked a laugh, surprised. “What’s in it for you? A free drink!”
“Baby, I haven’t paid for a drink since I was tall enough to see over the bar,” she murmured, voice low and slow like honey. “So one more time: what’s in it for me?”

“I won’t try to fuck you after you accept it,” James replied after a pause, and Steve nearly toppled his stool over standing up so fast. He turned to James, chest to chest, so close he could smell his cologne even through the haze of cigarette smoke.

“Excuse me,” Steve interrupted, tall and imposing. He noticed the way James’ eyes traveled up and down his body appreciatively but thoroughly ignored it, too angry to give it any regard. “That’s no way to talk to a lady.”

“Natalia will have your balls if she catches you calling her a lady,” James shot back, fighting a grin, and Steve realized he’d been had. He immediately stepped back, glancing at Natasha with an accusing glare. She was smiling.

“Steve, this is James,” she said, standing and coming to stand beside the other man. She snaked an arm around his waist casually, standing on tiptoe as he leaned down so they could exchange a kiss on each cheek in a European-style greeting. She turned back to Steve, eyes alight with mischief. “But you’ve already met, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, at the Brass Tap,” James recalled, although Steve had no idea what the name of the last bar had been. He held out his hand. “Call me Bucky.”

“Bucky?” Steve inquired, reaching out hastily to grasp the other man’s warm hand, grip firm. Steve’s hands were, of course, sweaty due to the adrenaline that was still spiking despite the fact that there wasn’t going to be a fight tonight. “Like Buck Rogers?”

James – Bucky – met his eye, considering and poking his tongue into the side of his cheek for a second. “If you want me to take your last name you’ll have to ask me to marry you first.”

“No, it’s a – an old pulp character,” Steve stammered, blushing furiously.

“I know,” Bucky stated, looking shy in a way that was absurdly endearing and made Steve’s heart flutter. “It’s a middle name family tradition thing.”

“Right.”

“Anyway,” Natasha said loudly, and both men startled as they turned their attention back to her. “What kind of music are we hearing tonight? I doubt this crowd likes originals or covers of old R&B.”

Bucky grinned. “You would be right. Hitting the classic rock tonight.” He scrunched up his nose adorably in distaste. “Not really our thing, but their money’s green too, so.”

“I’m sure you’ll sound great,” Steve declared, nodding with confidence, and Bucky shot him a pleased grin.

“Thanks.” He took a step back. “Anyway, gotta warm up. See you guys later. Nat.”

“James,” she responded, squeezing his hip before he disappeared into the throng of people. They sat back at the table, Natasha pinning Steve with an amused stare – one perfectly manicured eyebrow arching knowingly. “Well. I’m not used to being ignored. You know he was flirting with you, right?”

Steve nearly choked on his beer. “What?”
She rolled her eyes. “You’re rusty.”

“Rusty would imply I had any experience to begin with,” Steve shot back, unable to help himself as he glanced over his shoulder, but Bucky was nowhere in sight. “How do you know him, anyway?”

Her eyes darkened, gaze slipping away to the table as she slid a finger around the lip of her glass. Natasha didn’t do anything by accident; she could have told him with a blank expression, but she was letting him see it, her sadness, and while he appreciated the trust, her reaction filled him with dread. He waited with bated breath, but all she said was, “Rescue mission.”

He felt a chill run down his spine. *His arm*... Bucky must’ve been in the military, special ops with invaluable intelligence, if Natasha had been sent to retrieve him.

“You kept in touch?” he asked, as much as he could ask for without invading Bucky’s privacy.

“Mission went kind of sideways,” she stated, frowning. “Got stuck together for a few days. He was...” – and now she was smiling fondly – “charming, to say the least. Even despite the circumstances.” Then, she rolled her eyes, shaking her head with disbelief. “He even got me to kiss him.”

Steve huffed a laugh. “Really? I supposed if you can get the Black Widow to do anything, she’s indebted to you for life.”

“Basically,” she said, with a quirk of her lips, then nodded at the stage where the band was setting up.

“Hey, guys,” Bucky murmured into the microphone, eyes cutting across the crowd to meet Steve’s and smile shyly. “I’m James, and this is Redstar. We’ll be playing some classic rock for you guys tonight and if you have any requests that don’t suck we’ll gladly take ‘em. Don’t forget to take care of your bartenders.”

“You knew,” Steve suddenly blurted, turning to Natasha, appalled. She grinned, a calculating glint in her eye. “You knew he was going to be here tonight. You led me here, with the water.”

“Anyone can lead a horse to water, Steve,” she stated, sagely. “But even I can’t make him drink.”

Steve rolled his eyes, not oblivious to the challenge, but not about to rise to the bait. She wanted him to ask Bucky out, but how would he even go about doing that? He hadn’t lied when he’d told her all those months ago that connecting with people was hard – trying to find someone with shared life experiences impossible. But Bucky had been a soldier, had been hurt and crawled his way back, and had made himself some kind of life. He had put himself out there in front of all these people and was so confident and charming that Steve hadn’t even noticed Bucky was missing an arm, for God’s sake.

Bucky was brave and Steve was a chickenshit. He might’ve piloted himself into a glacier, but he’d never intended to crawl his way back from anything, to build any kind of life, to take risks and actually live with the consequences.

Sighing, he turned away from Natasha to focus on the band, definitely not missing her sad resignation, and quickly lost himself in the music. They cycled through songs he recognized as Tony’s favorites, even if he couldn’t remember the names of them all. Bucky and his band carried the tunes well, his voice smooth and strong, the guitarist, drummer, and bassist playing tight and clean. Steve tapped his foot to the beat and nodded his head along while trying not to imagine Bucky at war, hurt somewhere, wondering if anyone was coming to find him or if he was going to die there,
if he’d ever see his loved ones again. Steve just focused on him now: smiling and cocksure, happy and free.

Steve should’ve known the moment Natasha sunk her teeth into anything, she was wont to let go. He should’ve known she would bring it up again, and again...and again, in the most inconceivable of situations, but it still took him by surprise when, in the middle of punching a human-sized bug in the face in the center of Central Park, she asked, “So have you asked him out yet?”

Green slime exploded in his face, thick and sticky. He probably could’ve dodged it if she hadn’t distracted him. “What?”

“James,” she grunted, elbowing another bug off of herself and kicking backwards right into its gut before spinning and shooting it square between the eyes with her pistol. Its head burst, but she had the wherewithal to avoid the subsequent spray of bug juice. “I know you went to another one of his shows. He said he saw you there, but you didn’t talk to him.”

“He did?” Steve couldn’t help but ask, swiping his shield clean across the neck of another bug and this time actually managing to avoid the green slime.

“Yeah,” she replied, breathing heavily as another bug came at her. “He said it was cute.”

“He did?” Steve asked again, sounding like an idiot but unable to help himself, or the blush he felt creeping up on his cheeks that he’d blame on exertion should anyone call him out on it.

“He did,” she repeated back at him. “I said it was creepy.”

“Natasha!” he cried, ducking beneath the swiping stinger of one of the bugs. “Why would you say that?”

“Because it is creepy.”

“I was just in the mood for live music!” he insisted, and he would never mention – not even under the duress of torture – that it took three trains and fifty-five minutes to get to the bar Bucky had been playing at. “Now he’s going to think I’m a creep!”

“Maybe you should talk to him,” she shot back coyly, rapid firing at a set of bugs flying at them and knocking them all right out of the sky. “Explain yourself. So he doesn’t think you’re a serial killer.”

“Please tell me you did not tell him I’m a serial killer,” Steve pleaded as he backflipped over yet another bug before shoving the edge of his shield between its shoulder blades. “Natasha, you know me!”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Does anyone really ever know anyone?”

“Natasha!”

Or, a week later, when she and Steve were hiding wedged inside of an air vent in the basement of a Hydra base, Steve’s heart pounding as soldiers’ heavy boots stomped by in search of them. Natasha’s head was tucked right under his chin with her entire body pressed flush against his from face to toes in the stifling hot enclosure. Already always running warm, Steve thought he was going to pass out from the heat, beads of sweat dripping down his back and into the crack of his ass.
“Do you want me to ask if I can give you his phone number?” Natasha whispered, her breath warm on his neck.

He jerked his head back to look at her but only managed to bang the back of his head against the side of the vent. Incredulous, he asked, voice low, “Are you joking right now?”

“He keeps asking about you,” she stated with a casual shrug that he could feel, like they weren’t about to suffocate in a Hydra base in Idaho – if the agents didn’t get to them first. “Said he hasn’t seen you at any more shows. Unless you’ve just become a better stalker.”

“I am not a stalker!” he hissed quietly.

“That’s what I said,” she agreed, implying it had come up, and he could hear the grin in her voice.

“Can’t we talk about this later?” he asked desperately, immediately realizing his mistake as soon as the words left his mouth.

“Sure,” she replied, voice full of promise.

He managed to avoid her for an entire week, finally running into her at Avengers Tower when Tony asked him to come by to test out the flexibility of a new suit. Natasha was already there when he arrived, loading rubber bullets into a gun, and, thankfully, didn’t mention anything about Bucky.

He should’ve known his luck wouldn’t last.

“Redstar’s playing tonight in Manhattan,” she tossed out far too innocently, shooting at Steve from across the room as he twisted and flipped away. Startled, he tripped on the turf, stumbled forward, and caught himself on the wall before he hit the ground. She took the opportunity to shoot him right in the ass, the rubber bullet ricocheting off his left butt cheek, and then let out a peal of laughter he’d neither heard nor ever expected to hear come out of her mouth. “Bullseye!”

Tony raised his eyes from his computer screen with interest, where he’d been studying J.A.R.V.I.S.’ analysis of Steve’s and the suit’s performance, which is exactly what Natasha had been aiming for. She didn’t even bother to hide her smirk as she lowered her weapon and pulled the safety glasses from her face.

“What’s Redstar?” the billionaire asked, then gasped. “Oh, that band? With that cute boy you like?”

“How do you – ” Steve began, then rolled his eyes at his own stupidity. Okay, so no one had ever accused him of being a spy, or a very good one.

Tony flashed a grin. “We’re all going. I hope everyone knows that.”

“No one’s going anywhere,” Steve interjected, before they could do any more scheming.

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Tony shot back.

Steve sighed, limping towards Tony’s workstation while rubbing his sore ass. “Fine, go. But I have plans tonight.”

“Plans?” Natasha blurted, as if it was the most absurd thing she’d ever heard, to think some loser like Steve could have anything to do. “What plans?”

“As much as this might be difficult for you to believe,” he said, “not everything I do revolves around you guys.”
“Ouch,” Tony hissed, holding a hand to his chest. “I think I need some aloe for that burn.”

“Are we good?” he asked, gesturing to Tony’s computer.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Great,” Steve said, shortly, then turned on his heel and headed to the locker room to change into his civvies.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it, on his way downstairs and out into the busy streets of Midtown Manhattan, clutching his sketchbooks and pencils too tightly in his hands. He wanted to see Bucky again, of course he did. His voice, his stage presence, the way he performed with his whole body – Steve couldn’t get it out of his head. He had watched dozens of YouTube videos of Redstar, whatever he could get his hands on, just for a taste of the gorgeous, irresistible singer. He closed his eyes and thought about him when he went to bed, cool sheets heated by his own desire, panting Bucky’s name as he came.

It didn’t negate the fact that he was way too embarrassed after Natasha’s incessant conversations to ever consider seeing Bucky perform ever again. The small details of what she’d revealed they talked about behind his back was enough to make him want to throw up; Bucky probably thought he was some kind of weird, awkward nerd – which, in all fairness, he was. Steve Rogers was, at least. And for the first time in his life, he wished someone only saw him as Captain America.

“Hey,” he heard from beside him and Natasha appeared out of nowhere; he was used to it by now. He glanced at her only briefly before returning his glare to the sidewalk. “Look, I’m sorry for being pushy. I just...James is a great guy. And so are you. I want you both to be happy.”

He blew out a breath with a puff of his cheeks. “Not sure how I can stay mad at you when you say stuff like that.”

She grinned cheekily. “You can’t. So? Redstar tonight? I’ll buy you a drink...”

“But will you try to fuck me afterwards?” he asked and the shock of pleased glee on her face that he was sure she couldn’t have hidden if she’d wanted to was enough to make the swear worth it.

“Still full of surprises, Rogers,” she murmured fondly before knocking her knuckles against his shoulder gently. “I’ll text you.”

It was still early and he honestly had nothing to do so he decided to make a quick stop at the nearby coffee shop he liked that actually served their drinks in real coffee cups instead of paper, and maybe sketch for a little while in the setting sun. He stood in line and pulled his ballcap low to avoid the stares. There were a couple girls at the counter ordering while he waited for his drink, whispering to each other and trying to take covert pictures with their phones. He sighed, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets and trying to look small.

“Mind if I snap a picture?” came a voice from beside him – a voice he would recognize fifty feet away underwater. Bucky grinned, holding up his phone sheepishly. “I want to use it for your contact in here.”

“Captain America doesn’t give out his phone number to just anyone,” Steve chided playfully, in his commanding officer voice.

“What about Steve Rogers?” the other man asked, and Steve smiled a little smile, a pleased flush gracing his cheeks. Bucky tapped his phone, the camera shutter sounding, then studied the photo before looking up at Steve from beneath his long, dark lashes. “That’s the one,” he said softly and
flipped the phone to Steve. “Now I just need your number.”

Steve bit his lip, fighting a grin as he took the phone and keyed in his number. He handed it back to Bucky, their fingers brushing. “Does that mean I get yours?”

Bucky thumbed at his phone again, and Steve felt his own phone vibrate in his pocket. “There you go.”

“Not so fast,” Steve warned, pulling out his cell and opening the camera. “I get a picture too.” Bucky groaned, scrunching up his face. “Fair’s fair.”

“Alright,” he conceded, taming his windblown hair before standing at attention and flashing a charming grin. “Okay, go.”

Right before Steve thumbed the camera button, Bucky made a silly face, making Steve laugh. “Got it.”

“Lemme see.” Bucky shuffled closer so that they were standing shoulder to shoulder, the heat of his body searing Steve even through his jacket. “Gross.”

“No, I like it. I’m keeping it,” he insisted and then slipped his phone back into his pocket. “So what are you doing here?”

“James?” the barista called, pushing a cup of coffee across the counter. “Steve?”

“Just got off work,” Bucky replied, stuffing his phone into the pocket of his hoodie and grabbing his coffee. He thanked the barista. “Wanted to unwind before heading home.”

“Work?” Steve blurted, picking up his own coffee and offering his thanks to the woman behind the counter as well.

“Yeah. Playing gigs in dive bars surprisingly doesn’t pay the bills,” he stated wryly, before nodding at an empty table in the sun. “Let’s sit over there.”

Steve hadn’t wanted to assume Bucky wanted company, so he was delighted to be invited to join him. They sat across from each other at the small high top, and Bucky pulled off his hoodie and shoved it into the seat next to himself. Steve placed his sketchbooks and pencils on the table beside him, then removed his own jacket – the sun feeling warm and inviting against his skin.

“What do you do for work?”

Bucky looked shy all of a sudden, shrugging self consciously. “I work at the library.”

“Right over here?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s great!” Steve encouraged, smiling. “What do you do there?”

“I’m a Library Information Assistant,” he said, a little more easily. “Basically putting the books away, helping the patrons, answering the phones. Stuff like that. I started as a janitor. You know, after – ” He indicated his arm. “After I got out of the army, there wasn’t a lot of jobs out there for an amputee with literally zero work experience except for the military. They have a work program for disabled vets, so they let me clean the place at night, and I guess they liked me.”

“That’s great, Bucky,” Steve said. “How did you get into music?”
He cut his eyes away, squinting against the sun as he glanced out the window. The hurt and sadness was still clear in his gaze, making something twist in Steve’s gut. “Music’s always been there,” he shrugged. There was something he wasn’t saying, something Steve was missing, but he didn’t want to pry; they weren’t even really friends, he had no right to ask.

There was a gentle kick to his foot from under the table and Bucky smiled again, leaving his ankle pressed right against Steve’s. Steve dared not to move, dared not break the contact, while his heart tripped with fear and excitement and hope all at once.

“What about you? You ever think about doing something different?” Bucky asked, then seemed to reconsider his question. “Sorry, that was invasive.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he replied, waving away the implication with his hand. He sat there for a moment, glancing at his sketchbooks and pencils lying nearby, grounded by the press of Bucky’s leg against him. “I guess if I could do anything, it would be art. Not sure what I’d do with it, though.”

Bucky’s eyes lit up as he glanced at the sketchbooks. “May I? I mean, only if you want to.”

Anxiety mounting, Steve put on a brave face. “Sure.”

Bucky eagerly reached for the first book, though he carefully took it in his hand and laid it on the table in front of him. He opened to the first page: a sketch of Peggy, her curls flowing gently over her shoulders, lips shaded dark, eyes bright and sharp. Immediately, Bucky’s smile dropped, expression stunned.

“Holy fuck, Steve, this is amazing,” he murmured almost reverently and then thumbed to the next page: The Howling Commandos, from a picture in the museum in D.C., brought to life by Steve’s memory. They were all standing in a line, arms draped over each other, cigarettes in their mouths. Dum Dum with his bowler hat, grinning beneath his moustache; Gabe, his skin dark and smile bright – he’d always been so handsome; Monty, tall and lanky, a red scarf wrapped around his neck; and the others.

Bucky grinned at that one, skimming one elegant finger across the bottom of the page and looking up to catch Steve’s wistful smile.

“‘What would I do with this?’” James repeated incredulously, shooting Steve a sharp look. “‘What would I do with this?’ Fuck, sell it. Or put it up in a snooty gallery where none of it’s for sale. Or, I don’t know, draw for graphic novels or movie posters or advertisements or – whatever. Steve, you’re talented.”

“You think so?” Steve asked, unable to help his blush or the smile overtaking his face, and he had to admit, Bucky’s excitement was contagious.

“Steve,” he said, very seriously. “I lost my arm, not my eyes. This is incredible.”

Bucky turned to the next page, Steve realizing too late what the other man was about to see, but he still made a valiant effort to stop him. In a burst of motion, Steve shot his big hands out to block the page and snatch the book up, startling Bucky and nearly knocking over both of their coffees in his haste.

It seemed that Bucky, however, was not against fighting dirty. He grasped the book, twisting his body to shoot his elbow out and knock Steve’s wrist away. At the same time, he placed one foot on the seat of Steve’s chair and pushed him away with unexpected strength, the wooden legs scraping loudly against the tile floor. It was just far enough for Bucky to drag the sketchbook out of Steve’s
reach and into his lap.

They’d drawn quite a few stares in their scuffle, but Steve was too mortified to even notice, because Bucky was staring at a picture of himself. Not just any picture – not just a quick sketch from memory, not just a scene caught in time. Steve had put hours of work into this picture, carefully tracing out the angles of Bucky’s brow and jaw, obsessing over the slope of his nose and the fullness of his lips. Eyes closed, lashes long and lush, sweat beading over his brow and a flush on his sculpted cheeks, Bucky was singing into a microphone, yearning towards it, pleading with every line of his face, begging, *please, I’m right there, please, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop* –

It was an orgasm face. Steve was fully aware of this. He dropped his face into his hands, cheeks on fire. He probably looked like a tomato, and Bucky was never, ever going to forgive him for drawing something so profane; he’d never even asked for permission. It was one thing to think these kinds of thoughts in the privacy of his own home, but to draw it, for everybody to see – for Bucky to see – God, Steve was such a pervert, he could hardly stand it, and Bucky was – Bucky was –

Bucky was smiling, when Steve dared to peek through his fingers. He was watching Steve from beneath his lashes, a sly little grin on his face, actually – actually *blushing*. It was the sweetest, most sexy thing Steve had ever seen.

“I’m sorry,” Steve nearly whispered, because he still had to say it.

“No, it’s okay,” Bucky insisted, closing the sketchbook carefully and pushing it back over to Steve while he leaned closer. He placed his chin on his fist, alluring in a way Steve could never hope to be. “I should look that way more often.”

Suddenly, the air between them was charged and static danced over Steve’s skin as the two men looked at each other from across the table. They were so close Steve could smell Bucky’s cologne mingled with the dry smell of old books and ink, see the laugh lines at the corner of his eyes, and he wanted so badly to press his thumb into the perfect cleft of his chin and feel the scrape of stubble against his broad palm.

It was too intense for either man, both breaking into grins before they giggled like two school children, embarrassed at their own boldness.

“So,” Bucky said, eyes on his coffee. “I have a show tonight. Natasha said she was coming. Will you be there?”

“Yeah,” Steve replied, still a little breathless.

“Cool,” he stated, perking up. “We start at nine. Come early, I’ll find you.”

“It’s a date,” Steve blurted without thinking, regretting the words immediately, but Bucky only flashed a grin.

“Okay,” he agreed easily. They smiled at each other stupidly from across the table before Bucky downed the rest of his coffee. “I gotta go get ready, but I’ll see you later.”

Bucky stood up and Steve politely followed in suit. Shrugging on his jacket, Bucky turned to Steve half expectantly. After a moment’s consideration, he leaned forward, right arm extending, to which Steve extended his own right hand only to realize half a second too late Bucky that had been going in for a hug and not a handshake. Laughing at him, but not unkindly, Bucky placed his warm hand into Steve’s, shaking firmly as Steve prayed for death.

“See you later, Steve,” he stated, eyes sparkling with amusement as he slipped his hand out of
Steve’s, fingers lingering. He turned slowly away, gaze assessing Steve from over his shoulder in a way that made a little thrill shoot up Steve’s spine, who stood up a little taller to offer a better view. Bucky laughed again, rolling his eyes, before finally turning away and leaving the shop.

Sitting down at his table again, Steve picked up his spoon and tapped it against his palm while bouncing his knee, filled with so much jittery, nervous energy so big he wanted to burst. He had Bucky’s phone number. He had Bucky’s phone number, and he made him laugh, and Bucky didn’t care that he was the biggest dork on the face of the planet, and he was going to see him tonight – on a date.

Steve had a date. His first date in the twenty-first century. Christ, he wanted to laugh and vomit at the same time.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, startling him. He fished it out to find a text message from Natasha with three thumbs up in a row, and couldn’t help but glance over his shoulder, checking all the sightlines before turning back to his phone.

Steve: Are you spying on me?

Natasha: No james just texted me he ran into you

Steve couldn’t help the grin that broke out over his face.

Natasha: Hes gushing about you

Steve: What’s he saying?

Natasha: That youre totes adorbs

Steve: I don’t know what that means.

Natasha then texted a picture of a small, fluffy kitten stuffing its paw into its own mouth.

Steve: I am not totes adorbs. I’m a superhero.

Natasha: Supernerd

Natasha: Relax, he likes it

Natasha: Says he wants to know how far down that blush goes

Steve choked on his coffee in the middle of the cafe, managing to spit most of it back into his cup. Ducking away from the stares from surrounding patrons, he furiously texted back:

Steve: Natasha!

Natasha: What? Im curious too

He sent her back five poop emojis in a row.

Of course, because the Universe hated Steve Rogers and had it out for him ever since the day he was born, disaster struck right as he was getting ready to go out for the evening.
He was already running late. He’d been so keyed up for tonight that he’d decided to run what had probably amounted to a marathon and then played a pickup game of basketball with a bunch local teenagers, slamming dunks over their heads and then putting them up on his shoulders so that they could do the same. He posed for obligatory selfies and signed autographs, delighting in the joy on these kids’ faces. By the time he’d gotten home, he’d been as tuckered out as a dog who’d been run out by its owner, sitting down on the couch and closing his eyes for just a second before gasping awake like his first day out of the ice. He’d fallen asleep and knew that he was late the instant he’d opened his eyes.

Currently, he was hopping on one foot across his living room, half in and half out of his pants, searching for his ringing phone. He only had an hour before Bucky’s show started and he’d told the man he’d meet him early, which was definitely not happening now, and where the hell was his phone?

He finally found it still buried in his coat pocket, Natasha’s name flashing across the display. She was probably calling wondering where he was; he was supposed to have met her fifteen minutes ago.

“Hey,” he greeted breathlessly, tripping in a pant leg and subsequently slamming his elbow into the wall so hard he dented the plaster. “I’m almost ready, I’m on my – ”

“You’re not watching T.V., are you?” she interrupted, and he immediately stopped everything he was doing, standing in the living room with a blank expression and his pants around his ankles as his eyes found the dark television. Slowly, he grabbed the remote off the coffee table and turned it on, holding his breath.

There were robots on the television in a country he’d never heard of tearing up the capital city. They were shooting lightning out of their hands. Smoke plumes billowed as terrorized citizens ran in the streets littered with overturned cars, buildings crumbling all around them.

He said a bad word.


“But I have a date,” Steve said softly, unable to stop the petulance in his own voice. Abruptly, he thought of Peggy, thought of his last conversation with her before he’d gone down in the plane, thought of what he’d said seventy years later to Fury in the middle of Times Square. “Second one I’ll miss in a row.”

“You’re Captain America, Steve,” she told him, voice not unkind, and, although she may have been trying to comfort him, it only made him sad. “James is a smart boy, he’ll understand. Stark and I will be there in twenty.”

So he pulled on his uniform and headed up to the roof, waiting for the jet to arrive and take him off to Europe. Legs dangling from side of the building, he pulled out his cellphone and called Bucky. It rang four times before going to voicemail. He tried again and again but Bucky was probably getting ready to sing and didn’t have his phone on him, or maybe it was too loud for him to hear it, or maybe he was busy looking for Steve in a crowd of people, disappointed and angry and humiliated to have been stood up.

He pulled up YouTube on his phone, thumbing through Redstar’s page and selecting a video. The stage was dark and intimate, and Bucky was grinning down into his chest while the bandmates behind him played a soft, slow melody.
“Falling in this great divide...the earth, it shifts, and I’m on the other side,” James sang, voice smooth and soulful. “And I swear the world’s going crazy, but I keep on hoping...”

Steve didn’t have any right to feel so disappointed, did he? Natasha was right, he was Captain America after all. He’d asked for this. When he’d taken those shots and laid Steve Rogers down in that metal coffin, he’d resurrected himself into the man he’d always dreamed he could be. This was what he’d wanted, wasn’t it?

“Keep on hoping...when it all feels broken, gotta keep my hope alive...”

His mind drifted to what Bucky had said earlier at the cafe, about doing something other than Captain America. He thought about his art hanging up in a gallery somewhere, lit by the soft light of a sunset, his heart and his love right there in graphite and paint: Peggy, the Howlies, Natasha, Sam, the park down the street where he played basketball with those children, the Brooklyn Bridge, Bucky.

“Cause this war won’t wage itself...it’s time we tip the scales with the weight of the world on ourselves now...” He thought about commissioning his artwork for movie posters or graphic novels, painting in an empty space with wooden floors and big windows to let the light in, paint on his jeans and his feet bare. “And I’ve been wrong a thousand times or more, but I keep on letting on...”

He thought about sweat dripping down his back as he traced careful lines of bright colors onto the storefront of a building in the summer heat while the owner pointed and collaborated, bringing a vision to life and getting a pat on the back for a job well done. “Gotta keep on hoping...it all feels broken...gotta keep your hope alive...”

When the jet was in view, Steve sighed and paused the video. He heaved himself up to standing and called again, this time leaving a voice message. “Hey, Buck. It’s Steve. Rogers. It’s Steve Rogers,” he stammered, rubbing a sweaty palm on the back of his neck. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it tonight. There’s been an incident and I have to go. I really – ” He huffed out a breath, feeling like such a heel. “I was really looking forward to seeing you. I hope you’re not too mad at me to let me make it up to you when I get back. I’ll call you the minute I can. Bye.”

His phone didn’t survive the mission. He was dumb enough to stick it into his suit and forget about it, not even realizing it was there until a Doombot shot him with a bolt of lightning from its gauntlet. He didn’t twist away fast enough and a spark of electricity jolted at his hip. Only when the impact didn’t affect him did he realize what had happened.

“No!” he cried, pulling his fried phone out of his pocket and staring at its charred remains before fixing the Doombot with a menacing gaze. He felt a dangerous spark of satisfaction when the machine actually took a step back. “You’re going to pay for that.”

One entire week later, after destroying every Doombot in existence and assisting with cleanup – because despite how much he wanted to leave, they really would be assholes if they just blew everything up and left the citizens of Latveria to clean up their mess – the Avengers finally returned to New York.

Steve was exhausted. It was nearly midnight. His suit, while improved by Tony’s ingenuity, was nearly destroyed, torn and frayed in several places, bloody and scorched in others. Maybe if he had been in a right state of mind, he wouldn’t have ever considered invading Bucky’s privacy, but he need to know where he lived, and he needed to know right now.
Tony happily, if not a little manically in his tired state, typed away at his computer and found him the address in less than two minutes. Steve would’ve been startled, if he’d been more awake than asleep. Natasha, looking fresh as a daisy, only smiled as she piloted the jet to Avengers Tower.

Finally, at two in the morning, he dragged himself up three flights of stairs and stood before Bucky’s apartment door, the frame holding him up more than he was leaning against it, and knocked.

There was no answer for a few minutes. He knocked again. Bucky had to be home. It was a Friday, but Redstar wasn’t playing anywhere tonight. That wasn’t to say Bucky didn’t have a life, and that he wouldn’t be out with friends, or maybe with some other guy who hadn’t stood him up and then disappeared off the face of the earth. The thought alone turned his stomach sour, but he had no one to blame but himself.

Closing his eyes, he raised his hand again to knock futilely on the old wooden door when he heard the lock slipping open. Instantly, he was awake, adrenaline spiking and fraying his nerves, and he sprang back to attention, chin raised, ready to face the firing squad.

The door opened, revealing Bucky standing there in his pajamas, soft fleece pants and a threadbare tee shirt. His hair was a rat’s nest, half escaping the elastic he’d used to tie it back, his face adorning a sleep scar running all the way from forehead to cheek. He was the absolute picture of beauty.

Squinting against the bright light of the hallway, voice laden with sleep, he asked, “Steve?”

“I’m so sorry,” he immediately said, holding out his blackened phone. Bucky took it hesitantly, face scrunched up in confusion as he studied it before turning back to Steve. “There were these robots, they were destroying Latveria. We had to go down there and stop them, and then after that there was all this clean up, and the government had us do all this press. It was such a mess, I couldn’t get away, and my phone! My phone got hit by lightning. I couldn’t call you, even if I wanted to – which I did. Want to, I mean, but I didn’t have your number and Natasha didn’t have her phone, and we were so busy with – ”

“Steve,” Bucky interrupted, quietly but firmly. He blinked hard. “I only understood like, fifty percent of the words you just said. Can you please stop talking and come inside?”

Silently, Steve followed Bucky into the apartment, lit only by one lamp in the living room that he’d probably turned on on his way to the door. It was small and old, filled with secondhand furniture, a large throw rug covering most of the wooden floor; it looked so homey and inviting. Bucky dropped the phone with a clatter onto an entryway table and slipped his hand around Steve’s wrist, pulling him into the kitchen and turning on the overhead light.

The other man ran his gaze over Steve from hair to toes, eyes big and wide and scared. “Are you okay?”

“What?” Steve asked, bewildered. “I’m fine.”

“You look terrible,” Bucky told him, grasping at a frayed piece of Steve’s suit smattered with blood and pulling it away, revealing smooth skin underneath that had healed mere hours after his wound. He trailed warm fingertips against Steve’s flesh, making him shiver. “You’re not hurt?”

“No, I’m fine,” he repeated. “The serum. I can’t get hurt.”

“Whose blood is this?”

“Mine.”
“So you can get hurt.”

“Well, yes,” he conceded. “But I can’t stay hurt.”

Bucky digested that for a moment, and Steve waited anxiously before Bucky threw his arm around Steve and pulled him close. Bucky breathed in the scent of him, body trembling as he held him. Tentatively, Steve brought his arms up and placed his hands on Bucky’s back, feeling the strength and warmth beneath his fingertips.

“Are you mad?” Steve asked, nervously.

“Am I mad?” Bucky shot back wetly, taking Steve by surprise. Was he crying? He sniffled into Steve’s neck. “Steve, I saw you on the news. I saw those robots, they threw you around like a ragdoll! They had lightning coming out of their hands, for christsakes!”

“That’s what happened to my phone,” Steve explained.

“Would you shut up about your damn phone! I don’t care about your phone,” Bucky stated, voice shaking as he hugged him tighter. “I care about you.”

“So you’re not mad?”

Bucky leaned back, eyes red, wet lashes pointing like rays on the sun. His face was open and sincere in a way Steve wasn’t used to working with the Avengers, letting him see every ounce of fear and concern and fondness. “Of course I’m not mad, you big, handsome idiot. I’m glad you’re okay, and I’m really glad that you’re here.”

“I came right away,” he assured him, nodding. “As soon as I got off the jet.”

A complicated array of emotions flittered across Bucky’s face, before he bit his lip to stifle a grin. “You came here right off the plane,” he uttered, then shook his head in disbelief. He wiped his eyes as he turned away. “Well, have you eaten? I got eggs.”

Letting out a breath that started all the way from his toes, Steve’s nerves unbundled and the tension in his muscles relaxed for the first time in one week. He grinned. “Eggs sound great.”

Steve wanted to help, but Bucky wouldn’t let him. He insisted Steve shower, giving him a pair of basketball shorts and a tee shirt to change into when he was finished. Bucky’s bathroom was so small Steve could barely wedge himself into the shower stall, knocking his elbows into the walls and sending bottles of shampoo and conditioner to the floor. He tried to bend down to pick them up but only succeeded in throwing the shower door open with his ass, the handle banging loudly against the wall.

“Okay,” Bucky said, voice bubbling with laughter.

They ate eggs sitting facing each other on the couch, legs folded beneath their plates and knees touching. Bucky made coffee too, sitting on the table nearby in mismatched mugs. Their forks clashed as Steve tried to steal eggs off of Bucky’s plate, giggling like children, and Steve imagined a life where he and Bucky could’ve been doing this all along, thick as thieves and pulling each other into and out of trouble.
They talked for hours. Steve’s eyes were wide with interest as Bucky described growing up with three younger siblings, all girls (although one had been born after he’d moved out), running around a cramped two-bedroom house with only one bathroom. Bucky hadn’t even had a bedroom, they’d just cleaned out the dining room and hung up doors so he could have some privacy. Steve, an only child, admitted it would have been nice to have some company, while Bucky had yearned for silence and solitude every once in a while.

Steve told Bucky about all the back alley scuffles, the bloody noses and bruised ribs, the time in fourth grade he had an asthma attack in the middle of a fight and coughed so hard he threw up all over Billy Iannucci. Steve blushed even now at how embarrassing it had been, especially when Billy told all his friends at school the next day and they all started calling him Ralph Rogers. Bucky laughed so hard he cried at that one, calming down only to erupt once more in a gale of laughter, stopping only when Steve, indignant, pushed him so hard he fell off the couch.

In the hush of dawn, when night was the darkest, Bucky told him about the bullet that took his arm. About the hole they took him to, when they followed the trail of blood and found him half-dead in an alley. How they tortured him for information, stuck knives and steel rods into his wound, poured acid onto his skin, effectively destroying any chance there might’ve been to save his arm. Natasha had come for him eventually, because Bucky had been doing reconnaissance and gathering information for months out there; Steve hurt to think if he’d been any other soldier, maybe they would’ve just left him there to die.

The extraction went sideways, he and Natasha getting stuck in a building collapse, the two of them waiting for their own rescue when his arm turned black, when the fever from blood poisoning struck, and when he convinced Natasha his last dying wish was to kiss the most beautiful viper he’d ever seen.

“Smart choice of words,” Steve murmured, smiling gently at the strong, brave soldier seated across from him. “She would’ve never kissed you if you’d just called her beautiful.”

In turn, Steve told him about flying the Valkyrie into the Arctic. About hearing Peggy’s voice for what he thought would be the last time. How scared he was, wondering if it would be quick, wondering if it was going to hurt. How he prayed for God to forgive the mortal sin of suicide, hoping the valiancy with which he’d done it would be enough, but still waking up in Hell seventy years later.

When the sun rose, yellow light cutting in beams into the apartment and enveloping them in a warm glow, they were lounged back in the cushions, Bucky pressed into Steve’s side, hand splayed over Steve’s belly. Steve’s arm held Bucky loosely, fingertips trailing feather light over a revealed expanse of skin at the small of Bucky’s back. Their legs were stretched out on the coffee table, tangled together, Bucky’s bare toes rubbing back and forth over the back of Steve’s calf.

Steve shifted, his face tipping down so he could see Bucky’s beautiful face better, those ice blue eyes bright with feeling, the cut of his jaw and that cleft in his chin. No one was stopping him now, no one was around to see, so he brought his hand up, pressed his thumb into the cleft of Bucky’s chin where it fit perfectly, and cupped Bucky’s jaw in the palm of his hand. His stubble was rough and masculine, the scent of him overwhelming Steve’s senses. Bucky watched him with round eyes, pouty lips slightly parted. His hand tightened into a fist in Steve’s shirt, tugging him closer.

Close enough, so their lips brushed, soft and sweet. Steve closed his eyes, breathing him in as he wrapped his arm tighter around Bucky, pulling him in. He brought his other hand up to Bucky’s hair, feeling as soft as it looked, if not in need of a wash, tugging gently until he was rewarded with a soft sigh.
Bucky’s hand skirted up his shirt, over the ridges of his abdomen and around to his back, blunt
fingernails scratching over his heated skin. Steve arched away from the touch when it trailed back to
his side, stifling a laugh.

“Oh, my God,” Bucky huffed into Steve’s mouth, pulling back to look into his face with pure glee.
“Captain America’s ticklish?”

“No,” Steve stated, as Bucky poised threateningly to tickle him again. Faster than Bucky could blink,
Steve rolled them expertly so Bucky was pressed into the cushions, Steve’s fingers finding his sides
and tickling him mercilessly. Bucky giggled unabashedly, absolutely adorable, gripping at Steve’s
arm with one hand as he wriggled futilely beneath him.

“Oh, okay!” Bucky cried, laughing so hard tears were leaking out of the corners of his eyes. “Okay! I’m
sorry, I didn’t mean it!”

Steve leaned back, straddling Bucky, who was flushed and panting, hair in disarray, Steve more
turned on at the sight of him than anything he could ever remember. They stared at one another,
panting from exertion, Bucky’s eyes dark with desire as they swept over Steve’s hair, his face, chest
and belly. He snaked a hand under Steve’s shirt, scratching at his abs before gripping at the fabric
and pulling him down.

“Come here,” he said, and Steve would gladly hear those words for the rest of his life.

He readily obliged, resting his elbows on either side of Bucky’s head and caging him in as he leaned
in for another kiss. This one was much more heated, a slick slide of lips and tongue, Bucky’s mouth
warm and wet. Steve trailed a hand down to his side, the other tangling in Bucky’s hair, rucking up
his shirt to explore warm skin, fingers finding the curves and grooves of his abdomen, palming the
swell of one pec, only pausing when he met the rough edges of scars.

“Is this okay?” Steve asked, because he didn’t want to hurt him, physically or emotionally, if Bucky
didn’t want him to touch him there.

“You don’t have to touch it if you don’t want to,” Bucky said, eyes cutting away.

“I don’t want to if you don’t want me to,” Steve explained gently. “But it doesn’t bother me. I just
want to make sure it doesn’t bother you.”

Bucky considered this for a long moment, worrying his lip between his teeth and still not meeting
Steve’s eye. Finally, bravely, he raised his chin and said, almost challengingly, “It’s not pretty. It
freaks a lot of people out. Most people won’t even go near it.”

The tee shirt Bucky was wearing was big enough that Steve couldn’t see the stump of his amputated
arm beneath the sleeve. Now, he pushed the sleeve up slowly, telegraphing his movements, eyes on
Bucky’s the whole time. He didn’t only look bitter, or brave. He looked scared, that Steve was going
to see him and be uncomfortable or, even worse, disgusted. Steve wondered how many people had
reacted that way, damning each one of them, as his fingers found warm skin.

Finally, he looked away from Bucky’s face and to his arm. It had been amputated more than halfway
up his bicep, the smooth skin pockmarked with suture and scalpel scars, with burns and scrapes from
hot shrapnel, the splash of acid, lacing up his arm like latticework.

“Does it hurt?” Steve asked, softly. Bucky shook his head silently, jaw clenched. Steve grasped what
was left of his bicep and squeezed firmly with his big hand. “I want every part of you, Bucky.”

“Even the parts that aren’t there?” he nearly spat with a challenging tone.
“Everything I’ve ever wanted is right in front of me,” he said, and meant it, every word, even if he hadn’t known it only weeks ago, adrift and wandering this new world surrounded by billions of people but never more alone.

Bucky skimmed his tongue over his teeth, the corners of his mouth quirking up as he fought a smile. “Whatever,” he finally said. “Are you gonna kiss me again or just feed me lines all night?”

“No line,” Steve insisted. “But we can go back to the kissing.”

Their lips met again, Steve testing his own daring by slipping his tongue into Bucky’s mouth, tracing the ridges of his teeth and finding the warmth of his tongue. They kissed for what felt like forever, and between that and the roaming hands and those soft, wounded sounds Bucky was making, Steve couldn’t help his erection, blood-full and aching as it rubbed against his shorts. Bucky would have to forgive him for staining them, and he blushed at the thought of giving them back like this; maybe he could take them home and wash them first.

He angled his hips away so Bucky wouldn’t feel how hard he was, flustered by his own excitement and his inability to control himself. That was, until Bucky wrapped his arm tightly around Steve and pulled him closer while arching up at the same time, Bucky’s own erection stabbing Steve right in the valley where his thigh met his hip.

“Bucky!” Steve gasped, jerking away as if he’d been burned.

“Sorry,” Bucky quickly blurted, panting with his red mouth and swollen lips. “Too much?”

Bucky was hard. Bucky was hard for him, and he didn’t care if Steve knew. He wasn’t embarrassed by his own arousal, or ashamed of it, or afraid. He was bold and brave and beautiful, his desire a gift that he wanted to share with Steve, not a dirty secret to be swept away to the darkest recesses of the mind.

Still, Steve couldn’t imagine just laying down with a man – with Bucky – without knowing it meant something more. He’d read all about the sexual revolution in the sixties. About the movement to accept sex outside of marriage, even with multiple partners, men and women dating around freely without judgement. About the pill women could take not to get pregnant, about nudity, pornography, homosexuality. Maybe if he’d seen it, lived it, this wouldn’t mean so much to him, but it did, and he couldn’t help it, or deny who he was.

“I’ve just...” Steve began hesitantly, scared but never one to back down out of fear, “I’ve never done this before.”

“The gay thing?” Bucky asked, eyes kind.

“The every...thing,” Steve admitted, heart pounding.

Bucky’s expression didn’t change, to which Steve was eternally grateful. He only asked, “What do you want?”

“I want everything,” Steve replied, but he didn’t only mean sex. He wanted sex, yes, – God how he wanted – but he wanted love, and caring, he wanted Bucky, all of him, his mind and body and soul.

Bucky studied him carefully, with those arctic eyes that could see right through Steve, and he whispered, “I want everything too.”

Bucky smiled, not bright like the sun on a clear day, but like the soft glow of warm sunbeams peeking out from behind the clouds on a rainy day, gentle and hopeful. He reached up and cupped
the side of Steve’s face, and pulled him in to kiss him very, very sweetly.

“Let’s go slow,” he murmured against Steve’s mouth, arching up again, hand skimming over his shoulder and down his chest. They kissed again, leisurely and tantalizing. Bucky wrapped his arm around Steve’s neck, tugging him down. “Come on. I don’t break that easily.”

Steve hadn’t even realized he’d been holding back, so used to being careful with his inhuman strength. It had taken him forever to hold pencils without snapping them in half, mugs of coffee shattering in his hands, even tripping and bracing himself for a fall could crack plaster.

So carefully, he pressed against Bucky full length, letting the other man take his weight, Bucky strong and firm beneath him. Bucky sighed into his mouth, happily trapped, squirming beneath him and creating delicious friction. Steve could feel the contours of his body, his swollen pecs, the hard muscles of his abdomen, those powerful thighs wrapping around his waist. Their cocks ground together, hot and hard beneath their clothes, shooting electric sparks of desire right up Steve’s spine and short-circuiting his brain.

Bucky’s hand fisted the back of Steve’s shirt right below his collar, tugging it up until their lips parted so Steve could pull it over his head. The other man’s eyes went huge as he raked his gaze over Steve’s body, Steve’s pale skin flushed with his wanting. Bucky skimmed his hand over the warm, reddened skin almost reverently, before grasping at his nipple and twisting in a way that zinged pain and pleasure combined, a new sensation Steve could’ve never imagined. He hissed through his teeth, cock jumping in his shorts, and suddenly the most important thing in the world was to get closer, now.

“Bucky,” he whined, grasping at the hem of Bucky’s tee shirt and glancing up beseechingly. “Can I?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, letting Steve push his shirt up and off, smoothing down his hair as soon as he was divested of it. He laid back, eyes focused on Steve as if too afraid to look at his own body, but Steve only leaned down to kiss his mouth, his jaw, his collarbone, the juncture of neck and shoulder, smooth skin and scars alike. His hands ran all over Bucky’s chest and belly, his shoulders, his right arm and what remained of the other, rutting against the other man like an animal, and maybe he should have been embarrassed to be so excited, but Bucky was panting and making these small, hurt sounds, and Steve couldn’t stop himself if he tried.

Bucky pushed at the waistband of Steve’s shorts with his fingers, and Steve’s heart jumped with a little thrill of suspense, but he didn’t hesitate to take the hint and wriggle himself out of them. He grasped Bucky’s soft pajama pants once he was done, kneeling up on the couch to do so, smiling when Bucky kicked out of them with gusto.

There was a moment where the air was so still, the two men absorbing every detail with their eyes. Bucky’s chest was dusted with dark hair near his neck, but smooth over his belly, which was hard and ridged with muscle. There was another trail of hair below his navel, leading the eye down, down, to his hard cock nestled in the dark curls there, fat and shining with precome, right above his heavy balls. Those thighs Steve had dreamed of, thick and firm, paler than his sunkissed knees and shins; Steve had to touch them, to grab them in one hand each, feeling the strength and masculinity in them, wanting to lick and bite along with the rest of Bucky’s beautiful body.

“Steve,” Bucky sighed, hand reaching out. Steve threaded their fingers together, coming down to feel his skin from head to toe, groaning at the heat and firmness of Bucky’s body beneath his with no barriers between them. “Oh, Stevie.”

His heart soared at the endearment, his mouth finding Bucky’s to kiss him, hard and fast and eager.
Their hips moved against one another, cocks sliding effortlessly with precome, so good, so much better than Steve could have imagined.

“Is this okay?” Steve asked, carding his fingers through Bucky’s hair and grasping a fistful to angle Bucky’s head back, revealing the long line of his throat. He kissed and sucked at the tender flesh, knowing he was going to leave a mark but not caring. He wanted everyone to see it, to know that Bucky belonged to someone, even just for a little while.

“Yeah, it’s good,” Bucky replied breathlessly, his hand sliding down Steve’s back and grabbing his ass in a strong grip, trying to pull him even closer. “This is good. Just like this, Steve, just like this.”

Harder, faster, they humped against one another, a spark building from the tinder, the fire burning brighter and hotter between them. Bucky made a sound, catching it behind his clenched teeth, back arching and muscles straining, and for one silent moment, Bucky stilled in Steve’s arms, until he released a breath that sounded like it started from his toes, spilling heat between their bodies.

“Oh, Steve,” he sighed, shuddering through his orgasm. “Stevie, yes, yes, yes!”

It was too much, more than Steve had ever felt before, and he thrust madly against the slick warmth sliding against his dick, furiously chasing his pleasure. There was a pressure building inside of him, deep in his gut, the fire burning, until it exploded inside of him like backdraft. His entire body tensed as he came, hand gripping Bucky’s hair, his other grasping at the couch cushion so hard he heard the fabric tear in his hand.

“Bucky!” he cried, spurting hotly. “Oh, oh, Bucky!”

Bucky was making a face, wincing as he twisted his head away from Steve’s vice like grip on his hair.

“Oh!” Steve gasped, startled as he released his hold. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“No, it’s okay,” Bucky soothed, huffing a laugh as Steve attempted to smooth away the ache with his big hand, petting Bucky’s hair clumsily. The other man placed a palm against the side of Steve’s face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. “It’s perfect.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, grinning like a maniac.

“Yeah, you punk,” Bucky shot back, smiling just as big.

“Jerk.”

“Bed?” Bucky asked, then scrunched his nose up. “After cleanup.”

“Bed,” Steve agreed, shifting back and off the couch, holding out a hand to Bucky. “After cleanup.” He hoisted Bucky up off the couch, frowning at the torn cushion as Bucky made his way down the hall. “I’ll pay for that.”

“Yes, you will!” Bucky called over his shoulder.

“Worth it,” Steve whispered, then jumped into motion to trail after Bucky like a lovestruck puppy.

Steve wasn’t sure he’d ever actually spent a whole weekend in bed before – at least, not when he wasn’t literally bedridden while sick with whatever various illness had struck him before the serum.
He felt luxuriously lazy, wrapped up in rumpled down blankets that smelled like Bucky, waking up intermittently only to eat or rut against one another, stroking and tugging on their cocks, kissing and panting and exploring each other’s bodies.

He’d also never received a blowjob before, but it was officially his new favorite thing. Bucky had been delighted to learn they didn’t need to use condoms, Steve’s serum effectively making him immune to all diseases, and Steve couldn’t say he wasn’t equally as happy with Bucky’s mouth on his bare cock, warm, wet suction, tonguing at his slit while his fingers squeezed his balls, drifting behind them to press at the sensitive skin there. Steve shot off like a rocket within moments, embarrassed at how quickly he came but Bucky only grinned smugly and licked his lips while Steve tried to remember how to breathe.

At some point, well into the afternoon, Bucky made blueberry pancakes from scratch, Steve watching with fascination from over his shoulder and stealing blueberries out of the container when Bucky wasn’t looking. Bucky caught him twice, slapping his knuckles with the end of his spatula the second time, which ended in a tickle fight, which ended with Bucky pressed up against the wall, Steve’s mouth on his cock and pancakes forgotten, although Bucky impressively held onto the spatula the entire time without realizing it.

Bucky seemed content not to take things further than handjobs and blowjobs. While a part of Steve just wanted to get it over with to soothe the ball of nerves he felt any time he thought about it, he and Bucky were so new – sex was so new – he didn’t want to rush. He was sure it would happen when the time was right, his imaginative brain managing to intermingle the swooning romance of The Farmer’s Daughter and the hardcore pornography of the internet.

Just once, they left the apartment, to grab some pastries from one of the bakeries down the street, because Bucky was craving cinnamon rolls the minute he’d woken up from one of their various naps. As they walked down the sidewalk, he’d reached out and taken Steve’s hand casually, who startled at first until he’d realized they were allowed to do this now, that no one was even giving them a second glance. Steve had grinned so big, his heart so full he could hardly stand it. Holding a man’s hand in public. Who would’ve thought?

On Sunday night, after a dinner of Chinese delivery, Steve had to admit that he’d well overstayed his welcome and that it was time to go. Both men had work tomorrow – Bucky at the library, and Steve with the other Avengers and Maria Hill on their efforts to rebuild S.H.I.E.L.D. Steve hadn’t even written up his de-brief yet, which included a post mortem and after action review. Maria would have his head if he didn’t have it ready first thing in the morning.

“I have to go,” Steve stated reluctantly, after throwing the takeout boxes into the garbage. Bucky stuck out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout. Steve grinned. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Bucky replied, coming up close to Steve in the kitchen and threading their fingers together, Steve placing his other hand on Bucky’s bicep above his amputation. “I have some adulting to do, too. Like laundry. Also, you kinda ate all my groceries, so now I have to go shopping.”

“Supersoldier metabolism,” Steve explained, then shrugged with his face. “It is kind of your fault for inviting me in.”

“I guess that’s the first and last time,” Bucky shot back, Steve stepping in closer, crowding Bucky up against the kitchen counter.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Steve promised, voice soft in the space between them.
“Oh, yeah?” Bucky asked, tipping his chin up invitingly. “How’s that?”

“Fifty bucks about cover it?” Steve asked, a glint in his eye.

Bucky swatted at his chest. “I don’t need you to pay me back, jerk.”

“Then what do you want?” Steve asked, and even now, after this weekend, he was still afraid of the answer.

“Dinner?” Bucky suggested. “I have a show Thursday and Friday, but I’m free Saturday night. You busy?”

“Barring saving the world,” Steve said ruefully, “I should be free.”

“Great,” the other man responded, then leaned up to peck a quick kiss on his lips, and Steve was surprised to find it just as thrilling as all the other different kisses, the ones that were fast and heated, or slow and languid. Sweet and chaste were just as good. “See you then.”

They kissed again, a little more heavy this time, with Steve pressing Bucky back against the counter, his thigh wedged between Bucky’s legs. Eventually, Bucky pushed him away before things got a little too heated, Bucky laughing at Steve’s obvious frustration.

“Oh, my uniform,” Steve remembered, before he walked out the door.

“It’s right here,” Bucky said, opening the entryway closet door and pulling out a black trash bag. Before he could close the door, Steve caught sight of a piano keyboard propped up longways against the wall, covered in dust. “Sorry. It really stunk.”

“What?” Steve asked, brain still stuck on the keyboard. He glanced at the trash bag. “Oh. No, it’s fine. I’ll see you Saturday, okay?”

A keyboard. He couldn’t stop thinking about it the whole way home. Bucky had played the piano once, that must’ve been what he’d meant at the coffee shop when he’d said the music had always been there. Before the military, before he’d lost his arm and either the ability or the will to play, or both.

If he hadn’t thrown away the keyboard by now, Steve had a feeling playing piano was something he still held onto, something he missed. Despite how strong Bucky was, and how brave and resilient, it still made Steve sad to know that he’d lost something so dear to him.

He supposed losing something in the war, making sacrifices, was expected, part of the deal in enlisting. It still didn’t make it any less sad.

Steve had a date. Natasha had been ribbing him mercilessly all week at S.H.I.E.L.D. offices. She’d gotten some kind of details from Bucky, although nothing explicit, thank God, and had caught him texting back and forth with the other man quite a few times, always with a dopey look on his face.

_Im writing a song_, Bucky had texted on Friday.

**Steve:** That’s great, Bucky!

**Bucky:** you inspired me
Steve could instantly feel himself blushing, grinning down at his phone like a loon.

**Steve:** What is it called?

**Bucky:** captain america blew me

**Steve:** Bucky!

**Bucky:** captain america blew me away

**Bucky:** you didn't let me finish

**Steve:** That is not what it's called.

**Bucky:** it's not

**Bucky:** doesn't have a name yet name comes last

**Steve:** When can I hear it?

**Bucky:** when it's done

**Steve:** Well, can you at least tell me what it’s about?

There was a pause for about thirty seconds, the little ellipses that said Bucky was typing appearing and disappearing about five times, until, finally:

**Bucky:** courage. hope. love

“Is that James?” Natasha asked, smirking from where she was leaning in the doorway to Steve’s office. He startled, quickly throwing down his phone, heart pounding – not only from Natasha sneaking up on him.

“Maybe,” he said.

“You know he’s famous now,” Natasha stated, fishing her phone out of her back pocket and pulling up the internet. Steve leaned forward to peer into the screen, seeing a picture of himself and Bucky at the bakery they’d patroned over the weekend. Steve’s hand rested intimately across Bucky’s lower back, Bucky looking up at him with a big smile, and it was so obvious they were together it was ridiculous. Steve blinked up at Natasha, mouth falling open. “His name’s not out there yet, but it will be. Come on. You didn’t think this would happen?”

“No!” he exclaimed. “Not – I mean – not yet! Not without some time to...I don’t know! Think about it, or control it, or – oh, jeeze, Natasha! Bucky’s – ”

“Bucky’s fine,” she interrupted, before he spiraled himself down into a tizzy. “He’s the one that texted me about it. He was actually pretty excited to be on TMZ.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Steve groaned, leaning back in his chair. “What are we going to do?”

“You’d have to talk to Pepper about that,” Natasha told him. “She’s the PR guru around here. I mean, eventually, you’ll have to make a statement. Captain America being gay is a pretty big deal.”

“I’m not gay,” he told her, because he’d loved Peggy, he had, and if there had ever been an end of the war for him – if she would have him – he would have married her in a heartbeat. “I like both.”
He dropped his head into his hands. “Oh, God.”

He was going to have to come out to the entire United States of America. He was going to have to stand behind a podium in front of dozens of cameras and hundreds of journalists, and reveal intimate details about his personal life. Just thinking about it made him want to vomit, shining a light on himself like that and, even worse, on Bucky, who had done nothing to deserve paparazzi following him around, nosy newscasters poking into his privacy and rifling through his past.

“Hey,” Natasha urged gently, expression sympathetic. “This literally just broke today. I’m sure Pepper’s going to call you once she consults the PR team. So tell her you’ll deal with it on Monday, and just take this weekend to enjoy you and James.”

“Yeah, okay.” Steve sighed, miserable. “Was there something you needed?”

“Actually, I was just wondering what you were wearing tomorrow.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, suddenly panicking. “I hadn’t really thought about it. Christ, Natasha, first the photo, now this? How many curveballs are you going to throw me today?”

She laughed. “Sorry. What about that dark blue button down that brings out your eyes?” she suggested, deceptively casual, not at all like she’d been thinking about it. “With those jeans, the dark wash.”

“You don’t think those are too tight?” he asked with a frown.

She grinned wolfishly, her fingers in an OK sign. “Trust me. They are juuuuust right.”

He could take a hint. So on Saturday, he dressed in his pressed shirt and skinny jeans, tugging on his boots before styling his hair, desperately brushing down his stubborn cowlick with his fingers. Bucky was so handsome in such an effortless way, and Steve liked him so much, he wanted to look just right.

He’d made the mistake of getting ready too early, so now with forty-five minutes to kill, he decided to meander around Brooklyn for a little while, trying to walk off some of his excess energy and quell his nerves.

They were going to a restaurant nearby that Bucky had picked out, a classy joint offering upscale comfort food that had lots of good reviews on Yelp. Steve had even looked at the menu in an attempt to restrain himself from ordering five different plates that he could easily pack away with his metabolism; he didn’t want to embarrass himself.

Not wanting to seem too eager, he walked around enough until he’d only be ten minutes early, texting Bucky that he was at the restaurant once he was standing on the sidewalk out front. He stood with his hands in his pockets, eyes on the crowd around him, seeing Bucky’s hair or his skin or the set of his shoulders in every man that turned a corner or crossed the street, heart quickening only to drop when he realized it wasn’t him.

He glanced at his watch. It was five minutes past when they were supposed to meet, but that was okay. Bucky was probably just running late, although he hadn’t texted him back yet, which was odd, because Bucky seemed to live with his phone in his pocket, texting Steve back sometimes within seconds.

Five minutes was no reason to worry, but at fifteen, Steve frowned down at his phone, typing, *Everything ok?* then sending it off. Another ten minutes went by with no reply, Steve tapping his phone nervously against the palm of his hand. This wasn’t like Bucky. Come to think of it, he hadn’t...
heard from him since earlier this morning, which was also unusual.

He called him, the phone immediately going to voicemail. He tried to imagine a scenario that wasn’t awful where Bucky would stand him up, but the best case he could think of was that Bucky just didn’t want to see him anymore and decided to dump him in a very hurtful, very obvious way, but that wasn’t like Bucky either.

He made a second phone call, but not to Bucky this time.

“ Aren’t you supposed to be on your date?” Natasha answered without preamble, sounding puzzled.

“I think something happened to Bucky,” he said, hurriedly making his way down the sidewalk towards Bucky’s apartment.

“What makes you say that?” she asked, tone immediately turning serious.

“He stood me up,” Steve told her. “I haven’t heard from him since this morning, and his phone goes right to voicemail.”

Bucky lived just a few blocks over. It was why they’d decided to meet at the restaurant. Steve was running now, as fast as he could without knocking into any pedestrians, clutching the phone to his ear in a tight grip.

“Maybe he fell asleep,” Natasha offered, but she didn’t sound like she believed it either.

Red and blue flashing lights. He could see them before he even rounded the corner to Bucky’s street, reflecting off of glass windows and street signs.

“Oh, Bucky,” he breathed, stopping short at the end of the block. There were police cars lining the street, officers coming in and out of Bucky’s apartment building. Steve couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think, he could only stand there, heart pounding in his chest, mind blank with panic, only managing to blurt out, “ Natasha.”

“I’m on my way,” was all she said, before the line went dead.

Steve sat with his head in his hands on Bucky’s couch, the same couch they’d stayed up all night talking to one another, telling stories and revealing secrets. The same couch they’d first kissed on, they’d first taken each other apart on. The fabric was still torn where Steve had unintentionally grabbed it too hard when he came; he could see it out of the corner of his vision, the white stuffing escaping the hole, and pressed his fingers into his eyes until all he saw were splotches of colors in funny shapes.

Someone had broken in here, and taken Bucky. The neighbors had heard it, the door cracking in from a heavy kick, screaming, fighting, and, finally, silence. No one had dared to come out of their apartment, only calling the police from inside their homes, and Steve supposed he couldn’t blame them, not with New York as dangerous as it was, but if only someone had – if only – if somebody had just –

“Steve,” Natasha said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up at her with a pleading expression, but there was nothing she could do for him. “We should head back to the Tower. Tony’s already pulling up all the street cameras in the surrounding areas. We need to start looking.”
“Yeah,” he agreed quietly, standing and glancing around at the broken coffee table and overturned bookcase, at the glass all over the floor from the shattered window. There was blood spatter on the wall, a spray of red on the pale yellow paint that trailed down to the hardwood floor. He prayed it wasn’t Bucky’s, but the police wouldn’t know until the results came back.

God, this was all his fault. Those pictures on the internet, of himself and Bucky at the bakery, there was even one of them at the coffee shop that had surfaced, of the first day they’d exchanged numbers. He should’ve known better. He should’ve stayed away. Bucky wasn’t even enhanced, he wasn’t a mutant, he was just a man, he couldn’t defend himself against Steve’s enemies, he was too breakable, too precious.

“We’re going to find him, Steve,” Natasha stated, voice as hard as steel, and he’d nearly forgotten that Bucky was her friend too. He touched her elbow gently, his turn to comfort her.

“Yes,” he said, with just as much conviction. “We are.”

And he was going to kill the asshole who dared to harm a hair on Bucky’s head.

It hadn’t just been one man who took Bucky. It was five. Five men, dressed in full combat gear and armed with assault rifles, had parked a black van in front of Bucky’s building, stormed inside, and came out carrying an unconscious Bucky between two of the men in broad daylight, throwing him into the back of the van before piling inside and driving off.

Five men. Someone only sent five men when they wanted their victim to come without a fight. So why did the apartment show signs of a struggle? Why was there blood on the wall? Had Bucky fought back, or had the men taken pleasure in knocking him around before subduing him?

He didn’t want to think of it, of how scared Bucky must’ve been, must still be, wherever he was. He didn’t want to think about what they wanted from him, or what they were doing to him to get it. He didn’t want to think about that hole in Iraq, Bucky bleeding and half-starved as his arm rotted away.

Steve anxiously tapped his foot against the floor, mouth pressed against his fist as he analyzed the footage over and over again in the small conference room he’d been holed up in for the past several hours. They’d lost the van on the interstate, where the cameras had been intentionally disabled, but if Steve kept looking, maybe he would see something new, something he’d missed, something – anything.

“Cap,” Tony called, as he strode into the conference room, an open laptop in his hands and expression wary. Natasha was right on his heels, but her face was carefully blank. “There’s good news and bad news.”

“Just tell me!” Steve pleaded, slamming his hands on the table and standing up so fast he toppled his chair over. He was breathing hard, too overwhelmed by how helpless he’d felt for the past several hours to deal with Tony’s panache. “Please, Tony, I don’t – I can’t right now.”

Tony blinked, startled, before bounding into motion. He slid the laptop on the table, facing Steve. “This was dropped into the S.H.I.E.L.D. server,” he explained. “It’s a video. I’ve gotta warn you, Steve – ”

“Play it,” he commanded, voice dangerously low. Tony pressed a key, the screen illuminating with Bucky’s image.
He was tied to a chair in a nondescript room, his ankles and wrist bound to the legs, thick ropes wrapped around his torso to keep his other arm tight to his body. There was a gag in his mouth, his nose bloodied and more blood trailing from a wound on the side of his head, his shirt collar stained red and torn. One of his eyes was swollen shut. He was barefoot, only wearing his pajamas, something so vulnerable about that that Steve had to blink back the sting in his eyes. His breathing was audible, hard and fast, looking so very helpless, but so very, very pissed.

God, his Bucky. His brave, brave Bucky.

“Hello, Captain,” came a voice from off screen, and then a man wearing a black mask with a white skull painted onto it came into view. There was something about his voice, something Steve recognized, but couldn’t place. “I’ve got something that belongs to you.”

He approached Bucky, who flinched away as far as he could in his bindings. Undeterred, the masked man grabbed Bucky by the hair and forced his face toward the camera, gripping his jaw in his other hand, fingers pressing cruelly into Bucky’s skin. Bucky struggled still, unwilling to sit docilely through his captivity, and Steve’s heart swelled with pride even as he wished for Bucky to comply for his own safety.

“If you want him back alive, I suggest you follow my instructions,” the man said. “I want five hundred million dollars wired to the account number attached to this video. I want in in twelve hours. Once the money is cleared, I’ll send you the coordinates of where to pick up your boyfriend.”

He shook Bucky by the hair, who tried to twist away, yelling angrily beneath the gag, and even though he couldn’t be understood, the gist of what he was saying was clear: he was not going out lying down. The man laughed, wrapping an arm around Bucky’s neck to pull him in close in a twisted hug.

“I like this one, Cap!” the man announced, voice full of laughter as he knuckled at the top of Bucky’s head. “He’s feisty! Been having lots of fun with him, you sure know how to pick ‘em.”

Releasing his prisoner, he moved closer to the camera, familiar brown eyes glaring from beyond his mask. “So if you want to see him again, I suggest you transfer the money. Otherwise, in twelve hours, I’ll be sending you the coordinates of where to pick up his body.”

As the man moved back behind the camera, Bucky managed to slip the gag from his mouth, screaming, “I’ll fucking kill you –!” before the video went dark.

Staring at the dark screen, Steve breathed for just a moment. He was trembling with rage, adrenaline spiking with nowhere to go, mind a scary whiteout blank, but he couldn’t function like this. He had to pull himself together, for Bucky’s sake. He took a deep, calming breath, and let it out.

He turned to Tony and Natasha. “Who is he?”

“He goes by Crossbones,” Natasha told him. “He’s an independent terrorist responsible for several attacks here and overseas. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s been tracking him for months.”

She wanted to say more, he could tell, but she pursed her lips, glancing away with – anger? Guilt?

“I have five hundred million dollars,” Tony said, without hesitation, and Steve couldn’t have ever loved Tony more than he did in that moment. He could play that Star Spangled Man with a Plan as many times as he liked; hell, Steve would sing it for him. “I have to make some calls, but I can get it wired in time. It’ll be close, but I can make it happen.”

“Hill’s not going to allow it,” Natasha interjected, then held up a hand when Steve opened his mouth
to protest. “We don’t negotiate with terrorists. Or give them enough money to fund whatever attacks they have planned next.”

She did it again, stopping when there was something else, and Steve finally snapped, “Just say it.”

“It’s the best lead we’ve ever had,” she stated. “If we can trace the video, find their base of operations, and capture Crossbones, we’ll save a lot of lives.”

“And what about Bucky’s?” Steve retorted. He leaned down to key up the video, paused on Bucky’s face, then turned the laptop towards her. She glanced down at the image before turning away, jaw working.

“It’s the right thing to do,” she finally said, then squared her shoulders and looked him right in the eye. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me if this wasn’t any other hostage, we wouldn’t be doing the same thing.”

They stared each other down for a few tense moments before Steve let out a breath and looked away, shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Natasha, we can’t,” he pleaded, looking at Bucky on the laptop, at the blood on his skin and the frightened look on his face. “This is my fault. We can’t leave him this way.”

“We won’t,” she insisted, coming up close to him and placing a hand on his arm, squeezing firmly. “We’re going to find him, and we’re going to find Crossbones.” She smiled then, slow and terrifying. “And only one of them is going to make it out with his balls intact.”

They moved their efforts down to Central Operations, a large room with desks and computers and an oversized monitor at the head of the room. There was a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent at each workstation, including Tony and Natasha, searching for a trace on the video and trying to crack the destination of the account number for the wire transfer. There was also an all-points bulletin out for the black van that had taken Bucky, and while there had been many hits on black vans, none of them were the right one.

Maria Hill supervised the agents with a keen eye, moving up and down the aisles, barking orders and offering advice. Steve envied her calm, concise demeanor, the way she held her poise despite the pressure. In contrast, he felt like such a mess, hovering around nervously and trying not to ask too many questions, wanting to understand what the agents were doing but afraid of distracting them. There was nothing for him to do except watch; he didn’t know anything about computers, or how any of the agents were conducting their searches, although they all seemed intensely focused on their work. He was grateful for their help, but still frustrated at their lack of progress.

At hour two, they still hadn’t found anything.

At hour four, Steve pulled Maria aside and said, “We should call his parents.”

“We can’t,” she responded simply.

“With all due respect, Miss Hill,” he barreled on, a surge of anger spiking in his gut, “they have a right to know.”

“With all due respect, Captain Rogers,” she shot back, voice firm, “I can’t control what leaves this room. His parents could try to organize their own search, appeal to the public, get on every news
channel in the Tristate area, and blow this whole operation. Right now, we have the element of surprise. Someone leaking this could mean the difference between Barnes’ life and death.”

Not placated, he spat, “You mean it could mean the difference between capturing Crossbones and seeing him escape.”

“That too,” she shot back coolly, “but I didn’t think that’s what would appeal to you.”

“His mother is a school teacher and his father is an electrician,” Steve urged vehemently. “He has three sisters, two that still live at home. The youngest one is only five. You don’t think they should know what’s going on?”

“My personal opinion doesn’t matter, Captain,” she stated, “and neither does yours. What matters is what’s best for this country, which also so happens to be what’s best for saving your boyfriend’s life. Accept that for the gift that it is.”

With that, she spun on her heel and walked away, effectively dismissing him.

“For what it’s worth,” she offered, turning back over her shoulder, and he was surprised at the sympathetic look in her eyes, “I feel sorry for them.”

At hour six, they received another video.

“This one’s live!” an agent announced, everyone in the room frantically typing at their computers and swiping at their screens.

“Pull it up on the main screen,” Maria ordered, and Steve’s breath caught at the sight.

Larger than life, there was Bucky, no longer restrained to the chair, but still tied up and gagged. He was kneeling on the ground, breathing haggardly. There were two men standing nearby, only their legs visible from the low view of the camera. One of them stepped forward and swung their leg out, kicking him right in the side of his ribs.

“The feed’s bouncing off too many I.P. addresses,” Tony murmured from his station close by to Steve, who had no idea what that meant. On the screen, Bucky grunted from beneath his gag as he fell down to the dirty ground, catching his breath for just a moment before struggling back to his knees. “It’s moving faster than I can trace it.”

“Little fucker just doesn’t know how to stay down,” Crossbones’ voice came from off screen. He came into view, squatting down in front of Bucky and examining him with a cocked head, Bucky glaring though obviously dazed. Abruptly, Crossbones slapped him across the face – hard – sending Bucky to the floor again.

“Stay down,” Steve begged quietly to deaf ears. “Bucky, stay down.”

It took Bucky some time to recover, shoulders heaving with every breath, but he dragged himself to his knees, wobbling momentarily and eventually steadying himself, chin raised with defiance. Crossbones laughed in his face, shaking his head in disbelief, until Bucky reared back with whatever strength he had left and headbutted him right in the solar plexus.

Steve shouted in surprise, a nearby agent breathing a swear, another across the room hooting with approval. Crossbones sprawled backwards to the ground, the other two men in the room rushing forward to drag Bucky up by both arms, one of them punching him in the gut before tossing him down to the ground almost off screen. They could only see the ends of Bucky’s legs as the men beat him, kicking and punching mercilessly.
“No,” Steve whispered at the screen, heart pounding. He was helpless, standing here in an air conditioned room with reinforced windows while Bucky was being tortured somewhere so close but still out of reach. “They’re killing him.”

Crossbones came to the camera again, face taking up the whole view, but they could still hear the sound of flesh hitting flesh, Bucky’s grunts and groans of pain.

“I told you he was fun,” Crossbones said, still a little breathless. “Six hours. If he makes it that long.”

“I got it!” Tony shouted, as the screen went dark, making Steve’s heart leap with joy, the rest of the room murmuring with excitement. Steve looked at the computer screen, but all he saw was numbers. “I got – something! They’re still in Brooklyn. Not an exact location, by the Navy Yard, somewhere – somewhere in there, it was the closest I could get.”

“All right, people!” Maria called, everyone snapping to attention. She began separating the field agents into groups, ordering some to helicopters, some to ground. “We’re going in there heavily armed, but do not forget this is a hostage situation! Wheels up in thirty, let’s move!”

In thirty minutes, Steve and Natasha were flying in a helicopter over the East River along with several other S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopters, Tony a blur of red and gold in the sky as he zipped around in his Iron Man suit. There were black SUVs on the ground, driving in an organized search up and down the streets, Maria Hill back at headquarters coordinating through their comms.

It was dark, well into the early hours of the morning. Steve held a pair of high powered, military grade binoculars up to his eyes, peering down at the Navy Yard and surrounding areas for anything that might reveal where Bucky was, knees bouncing with energy and nerves that had nowhere to go. Natasha piloted the helicopter expertly, her own eyes scanning the streets and buildings.

“Black SUV!” Steve exclaimed, heart rate ratcheting up as he pointed down to the vehicle located behind an empty warehouse so hastily he slammed his finger into the helicopter window. “Tony, can you get eyes on it?”

“Coming,” he sing-songed, appearing within moments beside their helicopter, hovering in the air with his pulsars flaring. “J.A.R.V.I.S., run a comparison scan with the SUV from the security footage.”


“Natasha!” Steve cried.

“Yep,” she replied simply, expression intense as she steered the helicopter towards the property of the building and announced her landing and coordinates to the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D.

The building was a huge brick structure surrounded by a barbed wire fence adorned with for sale signs. The SUV was parked in the back lot, and Natasha made sure to land the helicopter so it blocked the only gate to the street. Steve grabbed his shield and hefted it across his arm, shoving the door open and jumping from the helicopter before it had fully touched the ground.

“Steve!” Natasha yelled, but he wasn’t waiting, not when Bucky was inside, not when someone was hurting him, killing him. Not when he could already be too late. “Stark!”

“I got him,” Tony replied, flying down to hover directly in front of Steve. “All right, Jean Claude van – ” Before he could finish, Steve slammed his shield into Tony’s chest, knocking him sideways and out of the way. “Not cool!”
Steve ignored him, barreling on toward the back doors. Natasha ran forward, a pistol in each hand, her face pinched with ferocity and body poised for a fight. Tony joined them at the double steel doors, the three of them sharing a look and nodding before Steve kicked the doors in effortlessly.

It was dark, which wasn’t unexpected. What was strange, however, was the quiet.

“We’re in the building,” Natasha murmured into her comm. “Something’s off.”

“Proceed with caution,” Maria said. “Backup’s on the way.”

Carefully, they treaded through the empty room, the only sound their footsteps. They cleared room after room, finding nothing but old office furniture, empty filing cabinets, desks, chairs. At least the dust had been disturbed on the floor in the hallways, showing recent occupation, but had they left? Had they given up on obtaining the ransom and taken Bucky somewhere else? Or – or had they killed him, leaving him behind? But what was the van still doing outside?

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Tony stated, echoing Steve’s thoughts. “Where is everybody?”

“There could be a secondary vehicle,” Natasha said, making Steve’s stomach drop. He hadn’t even thought of that. “They could’ve ditched the van knowing we –”

They all heard it at the same time – Steve and Natasha with their enhanced hearing, Tony with his Iron Man suit – a shuffling noise from a room at the end of the hall. Quickly, silently, they traversed the corridor, weapons raised at the ready. They reached the door, pausing briefly and listening, but there were no further sounds from beyond the flimsy wood. With a glance at Natasha and then Tony, Steve nodded at Tony, who raised his hand and blasted right through the wood with a pulsar. Steve rushed in, shield raised, Natasha right behind him with her gun raised. Steve came up short, however, at the scene before him.

The first thing that hit him was the smell. It was blood and piss and death, humid and all-encompassing as it hit his nostrils and got caught in his lungs. Bucky was sitting in the same chair from the video, legs splayed, appearing almost casual if it wasn’t for the way his body was nearly draped over the chair like a wet rag, wrought with exhaustion. He was holding a rifle across his lap and tilted towards the door, finger on the trigger ready to fire but unable to hold it up. There were five bodies around him, including Crossbones. None of them were alive.

Tony lifted the faceplate of his suit. “Well, this is anticlimactic.”

Bucky lolled his head to peer up at them through one eye, the other still swollen shut. He spat blood onto the floor. “Took you long enough. Thought I was going to have to find my way home, too.”

“Bucky,” Steve managed, bewildered. He dropped his shield and ran to him, skidding to his knees in front of the other man, hands hovering; Bucky looked like one giant bruise, body wrought with fatigue, Steve didn’t want to touch him. “What – how did –” Steve let out a burst of air. “I came to rescue you.”

“Rescue me?” Bucky asked, outraged – or as much as he could be, in his current weakened state. “What do I look like, a damsel in distress? I don’t need any rescuing. I just need a ride home when I’m done.”

Steve gaped at him, incredulous, wondering how he’d gotten so lucky, finding the strongest, bravest man in the twenty first century.

“He didn’t even care about the money,” Bucky told them abruptly.
“What?” Tony asked, frowning.

“His name is Brock Rumlow,” Bucky went on. “Said he was a friend of yours.”

“Rumlow?” Natasha blurted dubiously, immediately moving to his body and removing his mask, revealing half of a face scarred by fire, the other half twisted in a rictus grin, but it was obviously Rumlow. How he’d survived Project Insight was inconceivable to Steve, but there he was, and he’d definitely left the battlefield with a grudge he was willing to go to any lengths to satisfy.

“He was just using me to lure you here so he could blow us all up,” Bucky stated, raggedly, then reached out with a shaky hand, the gun clattering to the floor beside him, and touched the side of Steve’s face so tenderly Steve nearly started to cry. “Couldn’t let anything happen to you. Good thing they underestimated the one-armed guy. Untied me to piss. Idiots.”

Steve swallowed the lump in his throat, so carefully placing his hand over Bucky’s on his face, too afraid to hurt him to do anything more despite how desperately he wanted to fold Bucky into his arms and never let him go.

“Come on,” Bucky said, just like he had the weekend before, sharing his couch, his body, his love, except now he was panting, barely conscious, but still wanting. “I don’t break that easily.”

“Oh, Bucky.” Face crumpling, Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky and pulled him close, tangling his fingers into his greasy hair and inhaling the scent of him. He closed his eyes tightly, hot tears still managing to escape. His Bucky, so strong and so beautiful, fierce and fearless, safe and alive and with him, here, a little worse for wear but still here.

“I think I need to go to the hospital,” Bucky said, voice barely audible, and when Steve leaned back his eyes were closed, but he opened them just for a moment. “Also, you owe me two dates. And don’t forget...the couch cushion...”

“You got it,” Steve choked out, as Bucky’s eyes slipped closed, and he pulled him up into his arms like a bride on her wedding night, just as tender, and carried him into the dawn.

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Bucky had three broken ribs, a concussion, dehydration, a slew of lacerations with some requiring sutures, bruises – including internal bruising – and the doctors were not sure whether he would regain his perfect 20/20 vision in the eye that was swollen shut from multiple hits. He also had two broken knuckles, but he’d done that to himself when taking down his kidnappers, and the resulting splints on his ring and little finger effectively gave him zero fully functional hands.

Sleeping so heavily thanks to a combination of exhaustion and medication that a building collapse probably wouldn’t have woken him, Bucky looked so small and pale in the hulking hospital bed and white sheets. Steve sat by his bedside for hours, until the sun rose and set again, his shield forgotten beside him.

At six o’clock in the morning, the sun just peeking through the blinds, Bucky’s eyes shot open, a gasp on his lips and his whole body jerking awake. Steve immediately shifted forward, touching Bucky’s forearm gently but firmly.

“It’s okay, you’re at the hospital,” Steve told him quietly. Bucky’s breath was coming fast, but he
was looking at Steve with clear eyes, who tried to smile reassuringly. “Okay?”

Bucky nodded, relaxing back in his bed. Steve removed his hand from Bucky’s hesitantly, whose gaze traveled over Steve’s form suspiciously at the gesture. “Are you okay?”


“You been here all night?”

“And yesterday.”

“Damn,” Bucky said, eyebrows raised. “They must have me on the good shit.”

“You’ve been out for a while,” Steve agreed, then suddenly took on a guilty expression. “I only left to shower and change, and that was only because the nurses complained. But then I came right back, honest.”

Bucky leveled him with a stare. “You mean you haven’t been sitting here every minute of every day, sopping my brow like a war bride?”

For some reason, hearing Bucky’s teasing voice rough with exhaustion and no doubt hoarse from yelling sprung tears to Steve’s eyes, who tried to reign in his emotions but couldn’t seem to stop once he’d started. He pressed a fist to his lips, sucking in a breath, his shoulders shaking with effort.

He knew what he had to do. He’d known all night, even before then, the minute he’d reached Bucky’s apartment to find him missing. He just didn’t think it would be this hard.

“Hey – ” Bucky began soothingly, but Steve cut him off, because no way was he going to allow Bucky to soothe him after everything Bucky had been through, and if Steve didn’t get this out now, he knew he never would.

“Bucky, I’m so sorry,” he said, nearly pleaded, wringing his hands in his lap. “This is all my fault. I should’ve – I shouldn’t’ve – we shouldn’t – ” He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. God, but he was going to miss Bucky so much. “Bucky, I don’t think we should – ”

“No,” Bucky hissed, with more vehemence than Steve would’ve thought him capable of right now, in his current state. He pointed with one menacing finger, the effect ruined by his two other fingers straightened with splints. “You are not denying me the dignity of my choice. Not you, not that asshole Rumlow, and certainly not fear. I let fear make enough choices for me after I lost my arm. I ain’t doing that again. So if you leave me, you leave me because you want to leave me, not because you’re scared. You understand?”

Unable to speak, Steve sat there speechless, so enthralled by Bucky’s beauty when he was this angry. Taking his silence for acquiescence, Bucky’s face crumpled but he quickly held himself in check, taking a deep, shuddery breath before continuing.

“So you tell me right now, Rogers,” he demanded, voice wavering. “Are you a coward or not?”

“No,” Steve replied, voice barely audible, and he tipped forward and pressed his forehead against Bucky’s, who bought his hand to Steve’s neck and held him tight. “I’m so sorry, Bucky.”

“I know,” Bucky assured him. Steve pressed a kiss to his lips, gentle, tender, and full of promise.

“What if it happens again?” Steve asked, because they had to consider it, with all of Steve’s and the Avengers’ enemies out there, terrorists and criminals and opportunists.
“Who do I look like? Lois Lane?” Bucky shot back, then sighed dramatically. “Christ. Your anxiety is giving me anxiety.”

“Sorry,” Steve huffed with a watery laugh, then looked up from beneath his eyelashes. “You were so brave. You’re amazing.”

Bucky cocked a grin. “Handsome, too.”

The door burst open, startling them both. Steve sprang back, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. He stood up immediately, turning, and blinked at the sheer number of people in the doorway.

There was an older woman looking harried, dark hair a mess, cardigan buttoned wrong; she had a square jaw just like Bucky’s, standing tall and poised to fight, fierce and beautiful. There was also a man with graying hair and steel gray eyes, tall and lean, classically handsome with that perfect cleft in his chin. Behind them was a tall young lady that looked to be in her twenties; another girl, early teens, still gangly and growing into her body; and still another girl, this one small and rail thin, all elbows and knees. All the children had dark hair and blue eyes, just like their brother.

“Oh, Bucky,” the woman breathed, voice cracking.

Bucky smiled, love in his eyes. He reached out a hand. “Hey, Mommy.”

Finding their cue, the entire family sprang forward into the room, surrounding Bucky’s bed with a flurry of moment. His mother’s hands hovered as if she was afraid to touch him anywhere, but he grasped her wrist and pulled her forward and into his arms. She started crying, although valiantly tried to hide it. His father laid a large hand on Bucky’s hair, smoothing it back, his two older sisters hugging each other and touching their brother on his legs, the only part of him left accessible.

Steve smiled softly at the sight before him, heart swelling. He was about to excuse himself when there was a sudden, swift punch to his gut. It didn’t hurt, but he was still shocked, doubling over and shifting back as he held his side protectively.

Looking down, the smallest Barnes was standing with her feet firmly planted, fists raised, her face the perfect picture of fury.

“Grace Elizabeth!” Mrs. Barnes hissed, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in disbelief. She grabbed her daughter’s wrist and hauled her to her side. “We do not raise our hands to people! Do you know who that is?”

“I don’t care who he is!” she shouted. “He hurt my brother!”

“He did not hurt me, Gracie,” Bucky interjected, trying to sound serious, but Steve could see the shock intermingled with amusement. “He saved my life!”

“Actually, I didn’t,” Steve spoke up meekly, horrified at the entire exchange. Every eye in the room was on him. “Bucky saved his own life. He had everything taken care of by the time I got there.”

“Well, you gave me a ride to the hospital,” Bucky offered helpfully.

“Promise he won’t get hurt again!” Grace demanded, crossing her arms over her chest and stomping her foot. “Promise!”

“Gracie!” Mrs. Barnes insisted.

“It’s all right, ma’am.” Steve knelt down before the little girl, putting them at eye level. “I can’t
promise you that.” She raised her fists again, but this time, he grasped them in his, holding her hands gently in his giant palms. “I’m not going to lie to you, because you’re a big girl, right?”

“Yes,” she muttered shortly.

“There’s lots of bad people out there, Miss Grace,” he told her gently. “I can’t promise your brother won’t ever get hurt again, but I can promise to try to keep him safe, as best I can, and I can promise to do everything in my power not to let this happen ever, ever again.”

“Promise?” she asked, voice small.

“You have my word,” he swore, and gave her a salute.

There was a quiet snort from the other side of the bed, Bucky’s eldest sister covering her mouth with her hands. She whispered to her brother, “Gracie punched Captain America.”

“I know,” Bucky whispered back gleefully.

And that was how he met the Barneses.

“I heard about Rumlow,” Sam said to Steve from the other end of the phone, the line full of static. The reception was mediocre at best from the Dominican Republic, where his friend was currently volunteering on a two week mission trip delivering medical aid to a small village. “That’s crazy, man. He went down in the helicarrier.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, ambling in the hallway outside Bucky’s room, not wanting to stray too far. “He definitely didn’t survive unscathed. Had scars all down the side of his face.”

“Man,” Sam sighed. “Never a dull moment.”

Steve hesitated, voice caught in his throat, anxiety spiking, but if there was anyone he could say this to, it was Sam, and he supposed if Sam had heard about Crossbones all the way in the a remote village in the Dominican Republic, he must’ve heard about this. It was in every paper in in the world, after all. “You know, I met someone.”

“Wow,” Sam replied, shocked and excited, so maybe he hadn’t, ratcheting Steve’s anxiety up even further. “Considering how badass Peggy was, I can’t even imagine the kind of woman who’s got you hooked. I’m actually kind of scared.”

Steve glanced inside the small window of the door to Bucky lying in bed, Grace tucked into his left side, the middle sister Olivia cramped into his right, and the oldest Becca standing beside them, every one of them smiling as they all looked at something on one of their phones. Their parents sat in chairs on the other side of the bed, his mother and father clutching hands as they regarded their children. Bucky looked tired, a little worse for wear, but so happy, his family’s eyes shining with joy and love.

Gracie caught sight of him watching through the window, pinning him with a severe glare. Bucky followed her gaze, turning back to her and swatting her on the arm. “Would you stop?” he heard Bucky say, muffled through the closed door, then looked back to Steve with a dubious shake of his head, grin on his face. Steve smiled back, softer than he meant to, but helpless to it.

He took a deep breath. Now or never. “It’s not a woman.”
There was only a fraction of a pause.

“That’s why I couldn’t imagine her,” Sam retorted, recovering smoothly. There was a grin in his voice. “Tell me about him.”

A week later found Steve staring listlessly into his coffee at Tony’s top floor lounge at Avengers Tower after a long day of S.H.I.E.L.D. candidate interviews. He sighed as he absentely stirred sugar into his espresso, elbow on the table, cheek pressed against his fist.

“Stop moping,” Tony pleaded, watching him from across the kitchen. “You’re like a big, sad teddy bear. I can’t take it anymore.

“Leave him alone,” Clint said, from his stool across Steve, where he was perusing takeout menus. “He misses Bucky.”

“We all do,” Natasha stated, picking up a menu from the pile in Clint’s hands and dropping one on the top. “I want vindaloo.”

“I don’t want Indian,” Clint protested. “I want pizza.”

“When don’t you want pizza?” she shot back, then looked at Steve. “Why don’t you call him?”

“I don’t want to bother him,” Steve stated. Bucky had been convalescing at his parents’ home, the dining room cleared out once more to accommodate him. They’d texted back and forth, calling occasionally, but Bucky hadn’t invited him over, and Steve didn’t want to intrude, even though Natasha insisted he would be more than happy to see him. Bucky, sure, but Steve wasn’t so confident his family wasn’t still sore about him getting their son kidnapped and nearly killed and not telling them about it until twenty-four hours after his rescue.

“Whatever,” Natasha replied breezily, picking up her cell phone and moving into the living room. “I’m ordering.”

“Not Indian!” Clint called after her. “You know it gives me heartburn!”

A few moments later, in between Tony and Clint arguing whether GTA four was better than three, Steve having no idea what they were even talking about, his phone vibrated with a text. He picked it up, heart tripping at the alert of a new text from Bucky.

**Bucky:** Nat said your pout could end wars

**Bucky:** Is that how u won ww2?

Steve rolled his eyes to the ceiling, but couldn’t hide his grin. When he glanced at Natasha in the other room, she was busy ordering her weight in Italian food.

**Steve:** It was actually the tights.

**Bucky:** I knew it

**Bucky:** My high school history teacher owes me $$

**Bucky:** Why dont you come over? Im lonely
It was unbelievable how much those words cut right through Steve’s gut, and he wondered if Bucky thought he was avoiding him on purpose. He was, but not because he didn’t want to see him. He just didn’t want to face Bucky’s family.

**Steve:** You have five family members there. How are you lonely?

**Bucky:** Rn its only 3

**Bucky:** Becca left like 2 days ago her brother is too lame for her

**Bucky:** Plus she has a new bf and apparently hes totes hot

**Bucky:** Haven’t seen him yet cant judge

**Bucky:** Jury is split liv says hes cute gracie said hes gross

Steve smiled, equally amused at the conversation as he was impressed as usual by how fast Bucky could type, and he didn’t even have two hands like Steve.

**Steve:** Totes gross?

**Bucky:** !!!!

**Steve:** You said three. Who else is missing?

**Bucky:** Liv is at her bffs

**Steve:** Where’s Gracie?

**Bucky:** Shes right here

**Bucky:** Were watching frozen for the 10000000 time

**Bucky:** Pls save me

“Vice is obviously the best GTA,” Natasha interrupted, as she strode back into the kitchen, Tony and Clint immediately erupting into a newer, louder argument. She turned to Steve, ignoring them. “So are you going over there? Because I sent over enough Italian food to feed a small army, and you should probably hurry to beat the delivery guy before they get stuck with the bill.”

“Natasha!” Steve gaped, as Clint said, “No! What about my pizza!”

“I ordered Indian,” she stated, without removing her gaze from Steve. She raised her eyebrows expectantly. “Look, I know you’re scared – ”

“I am not scared,” he cut her off indignantly.

“Fine,” she dismissed. “A coward.”

His eyes widened. “I am *not* a coward.”

“That’s what I thought,” she stated, smirking, then glanced at her watch. “I told them to be there at six, so you have about an hour to get to Brooklyn.”

“At rush hour!” Steve complained, springing out of his stool and continuing to protest the whole way
to the door. “I won’t even have time to go home and change! My pen exploded in my pocket earlier, I know you can see the stain! I don’t even know if I have enough money on my metro card! Natasha – God!”

“Wow,” Clint said, grinning wide despite the fact that his jaw was hanging open shock.

Tony was equally as impressed. “Cross that off my bucket list: witness Captain America throw a temper tantrum.”

Natasha only smiled into her coffee as Steve slammed the door behind him.

Steve’s Uber from the subway station pulled up to the small brick apartment building as soon as the delivery driver was about to knock on the door, the man’s arms laden with bags. Natasha wasn’t kidding when she said she’d ordered enough food for an army. He jumped out of the car, throwing a thanks over his shoulder as he accidentally closed the door too hard, wincing at the thud and then pausing to apologize through the window.

“I got it!” Steve called, the delivery man turning with surprise. He did a double take at the sight of a frazzled Captain America pulling out his wallet as he ran up the stairs.

“You’re – ” the guy said, eyes wide, frozen in place.

“That’s me,” Steve stated, grinning as best he could. He pulled some bills from his wallet. “How much do I owe you?”

“Um,” the delivery man stammered. “It was already paid for. I just need you to sign.”

Steve sighed, internally cursing Natasha for making him rush when he hadn’t even needed to. Now he was stuck in his office clothes – wearing his dad khakis, as Tony put it – with a giant ink stain on the pocket, and he didn’t even know what his hair looked like. He grabbed the check, signing against the brick wall of the building, the delivery driver watching with avid eyes.

“Thanks,” Steve said, handing back the check with a twenty-dollar bill for a tip.

“Sure,” the guy replied, looking at the signature in awe.

Even though it was the last thing Steve wanted to do, jittery with nerves at meeting the Barnes again and wondering if they were going to find him out on their front steps before he was ready, he was raised politely by his mother and didn’t want her turning over in her grave, so he offered, “I can sign something else for you, if you want.”

“Yeah, dude! I mean – sir – Captain! That would be great!” He whipped off his hat, with the name of the restaurant on it, holding it out with the pen. “Can you sign the brim? That will be so cool!”

Steve gave his most charming photograph smile. “Of course.”

Holding two pizzas and three bags containing takeout containers, the garlic and spices making his stomach growl embarrassingly loud, Steve cautiously ringed the buzzer. Immediately, his anxiety spiked, and he let out a breath in an attempt to calm his nerves.

“Hello?” came a tinny voice through the buzzer, Bucky’s mother.

“Hi, ma’am,” he replied, speaking into the little box. “It’s Steve Rogers. I was wondering if I could
come in? I hope it’s not too imposing, but I brought dinner.”

There was a long pause, in which Steve thought he was going to throw up, and then the door was unlocking, opening to reveal Mrs. Barnes in a sweater and jeans, her hair pulled up into a neat bun. Steve was once again struck by the resemblance between herself and Bucky, the strong jaw and the slope of her nose, although her eyes were a rich brown. She glanced at the food in his hands, then studied his face for a long, tense moment, as if she could see right through him. Absurdly, all Steve hoped was that his cowlick was behaving.

“What a pleasant surprise, Captain Rogers,” she greeted, eyes as hard as steel. “Bucky didn’t tell us you were coming by.”

“He didn’t know,” Steve replied hastily. “My friend sent me over with some food.” He realized what that might’ve sounded like, and quickly backtracked. “Not that I didn’t want to come. I just didn’t want to intrude with Bucky spending time with you all. Ms. Romanoff – my friend – she sort of ambushed me, so here I am.” He wasn’t sure that sounded better. “I’m glad to be here, if that wasn’t clear. If you’ll invite me in. Which, you don’t have to, but you can take the food. Please. Ma’am.”

Christ, could he stop talking?

Mrs. Barnes smiled in an amused sort of way, and he felt the knot in his stomach unwind. She pushed the door open further. “You’re in luck. We haven’t eaten yet. Come in, Captain.”

“Please, call me Steve,” he responded, following her inside. There was a small foyer before a narrow staircase, a potted plant in the corner, and she led him upstairs to their apartment.

“Liv is sleeping over at a friend’s. Becca doesn’t live here anymore, but she’s been stopping by. She’s out with her boyfriend right now,” Mrs. Barnes explained. “So it’s just the four of us tonight, but I’m sure we can save the leftovers for tomorrow.”

At the top of the landing, she pushed open another door, leading into a living room filled with worn furniture and antique wood, crowded but in a cozy sort of way. There were pictures lining the walls of the family, one specific grouping with class photos: Gracie in a cap and gown with a description of graduating kindergarten; Olivia with a fall backdrop proclaiming the current year; Becca with her own cap and gown, having just graduated last summer; and there was Bucky, standing proud and tall in his Army dress uniform, all sharp angles and pressed lines, with an American flag as the backdrop.

It was from before he’d lost his arm. He wondered if it bothered Bucky to see the picture there, or maybe he didn’t care at all, maybe he was glad to have served his country. Steve wondered if one day, he would be close enough to Bucky to ever find out.

“Right this way,” Mrs. Barnes said, nodding towards the small hall that lead to the kitchen. Beyond that was a hallway, leading to more rooms and a pair of sliding wood-paneled accordion doors beyond which Steve could hear the small, tinny music of a Disney movie. “You can put that down right here.”

He placed the food on the table inside of a very small kitchen. The refrigerator was adorned with colorful letter magnets, arranged into words like LOVE and FLOWER, and, surprisingly, GRACIE EATS FARTS and BUCKY IS UGLE.

“Gracie’s still working on her spelling,” Mrs. Barnes stated, when she caught Steve looking.

Steve huffed a laugh, before asking, “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I’ll get the plates,” she replied, then indicated the hallway. “George is in the shower. Bucky and
Gracie are right in here.”

His anxiety spiked again, suddenly nervous and excited to see Bucky for the first time in more than a week, wondering if he would be upset with Steve for not coming sooner, or if he would be upset with Steve for coming by unannounced, or—worse—if he would be upset with Steve for coming by at all.

Mrs. Barnes knocked on the doorframe, before sliding the folding doors open to reveal Bucky lying in bed, propped up against the headboard, Gracie tucked into his side clutching a tablet. The lights from the movie illuminated their faces, Bucky looking tired with dark circles under his eyes and a little bit in need of a shower. The bruising on his face had all but faded, mottled yellows and greens leftover, and he still had the removable cast on his arm holding his broken ring and little fingers straight, but there he was, alive, healthy, gorgeous

There was nothing else in the room except an open suitcase full of Bucky’s things, and a small side table holding various items like his wallet, toiletries, and some well-worn sci-fi novels.

“What?” both of her children said at the same time, not looking up from the movie, and Steve’s mother would’ve slapped him senseless if he’d ever addressed her that way.

Mrs. Barnes, however, just rolled her eyes fondly with a shake of her head. “Bucky, you have a visitor.”

Steve held his breath, but when Bucky’s eyes rose, his entire face lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July, bright and dazzling and beautiful. Steve’s stomach swooped with his sudden relief, unable to help smiling back soft if not a little unsure.

Of course, Gracie was eyeing him warily, as he was apparently still in her bad graces. He couldn’t blame her, however, and still felt terrible whenever he recalled her righteous anger at the hospital, swinging her small fists against a mammoth of a man she could never hope to defeat but still willing to anyway in her love for her brother.

“Steve!” Bucky exclaimed, sitting up a little straighter in bed and smoothing back his hair, which was wild from laying down. “What are you doing here?”

“Steve brought dinner,” Mrs. Barnes answered.

“Really?” Bucky asked excitedly, as Gracie said, “What’d you bring?”

“Gracie,” Mrs. Barnes called in a warning tone, her eyebrows raised expectantly. “What do we say?”

“Thank-you-what-did-you-bring-for-dinner?” she said all at once.

“Well, I’m not sure what’s all there,” Steve replied with a nervous smile, “but there’s definitely pizza.”

“Pizza!” she proclaimed, throwing back the covers and jumping out of bed, wearing pink ballerina pajamas complete with a frilly tutu. She ran towards Steve and Mrs. Barnes in the doorway, both moving over to give her space to get out, but she continued towards Steve at a rapid pace. He nearly jumped out of her way until she swung her arms around his legs, squeezing him tightly before running out the door, yelling, “Thanks, Steve!”

“You wait for me, young lady!” Mrs. Barnes hollered, following after her, but not before knocking on one of the hallway doors. “Honey, did you bring your clothes in there? Steve Rogers is here, don’t come out naked.”
“Who?” Mr. Barnes called back through the door.

“Steve Rogers!”

“I didn’t bring any clothes in here!” he yelled, obviously not having heard her first question. “Can you bring me something to wear?”

Steve turned to Bucky with a half-stricken expression, hardly able to believe family members would speak to each other like this with a guest in their home, but Bucky only offered him a helpless expression.

“Maybe they only sound loud because the apartment is small,” Steve offered.

Bucky laughed. “Yeah, maybe.” He suddenly looked serious, eyes heated as they raked over Steve’s form, and he reached out his hand. “Come here.”

Steve reached for him like a drowning man reaches for a life preserver, threading their fingers together as best he could with Bucky’s cast before allowing the other man to pull him down onto the bed. Considerate of being respectful in Bucky’s family’s home, he stayed perched on the edge of the bed, Bucky curling closer to him like a flower to the sun. He wanted to kiss him, so badly, more than anything he’d ever wanted, but instead he reveled in the warmth of Bucky’s hand in his, rubbing his thumb over Bucky’s.

“I’m surprised you came,” Bucky said quietly, gazing down at their interlocked hands, looking self-conscious and insecure in a way that was like a punch right to Steve’s gut, especially knowing he was the reason Bucky was feeling that way. “I thought you were avoiding me, or whatever…”

“I’m so sorry, Bucky,” Steve nearly pleaded. “I wasn’t avoiding you, exactly, just… I wasn’t sure I would be welcome here in your family’s home after what happened.”

“Steve – ”

“No,” he insisted, swiping the air with his free hand. “What happened to you is directly related to you being with me, however you want to slice it. If I were your parents, I would hate me, too.”

“They don’t hate you, Steve,” Bucky said gently. “They aren’t exactly happy I’m dating a superhero, but I told them exactly what I told you. I’m not letting fear dictate my life, and I’m not letting it dictate how they feel about you. They can not like you because you’re a dickhead, or you have rude table manners, or, I don’t know, you’re a Republican – ”

“I’m a Libertarian,” Steve told him.

“Oh, my God, that’s actually worse,” Bucky breathed, then shook his head. “Please don’t ever say that to my dad.” Somber once more, his expression became intense and eyes a brilliant ice blue as they focused on Steve as if he were the only man in the world. “Listen. The point is, if they don’t want to like you for who you are, that’s their right, but it’s not going to be because of some assholes that use me to get to you. Nobody gets that power over my life. Nobody.”

“You’re so beautiful,” Steve blurted, because he was whenever he got like this, fiery and passionate and ethereal. He was rewarded with the sweetest blush on Bucky’s cheeks, just a dusting of color, and he had to kiss him then, reaching up with his free hand to cup his strong jaw, days’ worth of stubble rough against his palm.

He leaned in, pressing their lips together, intending to keep it chaste, but he hadn’t seen Bucky in over a week, hadn’t kissed him in just as long, hadn’t laid with him even longer. He couldn’t stop
himself from wrapping his free hand around Bucky’s waist, pulling him in close, pressing their chests together and feeling the heat of Bucky’s body against his own. Bucky released Steve’s fingers and carded his own through Steve’s hair, gripping it tight and shooting a thrill down his spine right to his cock.

“I missed you,” Bucky murmured against his mouth, and Steve felt a new kind of thrill, the kind that filled his heart with joy and his stomach with butterflies, and he never wanted this to stop.

“I missed you too,” Steve confessed, before Bucky made a pleased sound deep in the back of his throat, a low rumbling that Steve swallowed. “Oh, Bucky.”

There was the sudden sound of a throat clearing in the doorway, both men springing apart. Steve nearly stumbled to the floor in his haste, knocking his knee into the hardwood before he managed to stand, as far away from the bed as possible without actually leaving the room.

“James,” Mrs. Barnes said, in that same warning tone she’d given Gracie when he hadn’t thanked Steve for dinner.

“Mother,” he shot back, smiling innocently up at her.

“Come eat, if you aren’t too busy,” she deadpanned, then breezed out of the doorway as Steve wished for death. His face was on fire as he stood there backed against the wall, afraid to even look at Bucky in fear his mother would return and think Steve was disrespecting her home again.

“Steve,” Bucky said, voice full of laughter. He dared to glance up at Bucky’s eyes, sparkling with amusement. “I’m almost thirty years old. I can kiss my boyfriend if I want to.”

Steve forgot all about his embarrassment, his heart stopping at the words, and he came forward to dazedly kneel down before Bucky right on the hardwood floor. “I’m your boyfriend?”

“Well, yeah,” Bucky replied, adorably shy, his eyes cast down to his fingers picking at the bedspread. He looked up at Steve from beneath his dark eyelashes, shrugging. “I mean, if you want.”

“I want,” Steve said, taking Bucky’s hand in both of his, but it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. “Come home with me. After dinner. Let me – ”

“Okay,” Bucky interrupted swiftly, seeming to understand what Steve needed, what Bucky probably had needed for the last week stuck here in his parents’ home when he should’ve been with Steve all this time. Steve should’ve known better, should have listened to Bucky and not let fear rule his life, but he was going to make it right, and never be afraid again.

They smiled goofily at each other, lovestruck stupid as they gazed into each other’s eyes and reveled in their shared happiness.

“Buck-EEEEEEE!” Gracie shrieked from the doorway, making both men wince simultaneously and her parents call her name scoldingly from the kitchen. “We’re waiting on you, butthead!”

“Get out of here, you banshee!” Bucky yelled back, grabbing a pillow and throwing it at her, but it only struck the doorway as she sprinted away. “I’m telling Mom you said that!” He turned to Steve, who was frazzled by both siblings’ screaming match, Bucky smiling as if nothing had even happened. “She’s right, though. Let’s eat. I’m starving.”

Steve laughed softly as he stood up, but not before leaning down to kiss Bucky on his forehead, smoothing back his hair at the same time. “Your family is something else.”
“You think this is a show?” Bucky asked, as he strode across the room, wearing pajama pants with the solar system on them, his grey shirt proclaiming Give me some space. “Wait until we start fighting.”

“I’ll make sure to bring my shield,” Steve promised, Bucky’s laughter musical as he followed him out the door.

Dinner was lively, more so than even the rowdiest of evenings at Avengers Tower. Bucky’s parents did everything in their power to embarrass their son, regaling Steve with tales of how much trouble he used to get into as a child, especially with Rebecca, who was only eighteen months younger. They had been thick as thieves, Becca the mastermind and Bucky the brawn, the two of them giving their parents a run for their money. They’d briefly had a few tense years when Becca had gone through a punk phase in middle school, which Steve knew what that was, but Bucky’s “emo phase” was a new one.

“What is – emo? What is that?” Steve asked.

“It’s when you’re sad all the time so you wear black on the outside so everyone knows you’re black on the inside,” Gracie helpfully supplied. “And you paint your nails and your eyes black too.”

“You weren’t even alive when I did that,” Bucky protested grumpily.

“I saw the pictures!” she huffed indignantly.

Steve grinned wolfishly. “There’s pictures?”

After dinner, once Steve and Bucky washed and dried the dishes and set them back in the cabinets, Gracie grabbed one of their hands each and announced, “We’re watching a movie!” to her parents, who were watching television in the living room.

“Nothing scary before bed,” Mr. Barnes stated, then added, accusingly, “Bucky.”

“I know!” he called, Gracie pulling them into Bucky’s makeshift bedroom. He exchanged a guilty glance with Steve. “She said she could handle Gremlins, how was I to know?”

The bed was a full sized, small for one grown man, let alone adding a supersoldier and a little girl to the mix, but they managed. Steve kicked off his shoes, settling back first in the center of the bed since he was the largest, Bucky on his left side and Gracie on his right. She stuck the tablet into Steve’s hands, leaning close to poke and swipe at the screen faster than even Tony could’ve as she pulled up her list of movies.

“Not Frozen,” Bucky said, as her finger hovered over the picture of a white-haired girl and her red-headed sister. Grace harrumphed but moved on. “Why don’t you see what Steve wants to watch?”

“What do you want to watch, Steve?” she asked politely, still scrolling. “I have all the movies.”

“What about Snow White?” he suggested. “I saw that in the theatre with my mother.”

“Okay,” she agreed easily, pressing on the movie, then wrapped her small hands around his wrist and pulled his arm up and over her shoulders, until she could settle against his side and lay her head on his chest. She kept his arm around her waist, twisting his arm hair absent in her tiny fingers, comfortable and sweet, as if she’d never ever been mad at him before. Bucky, meanwhile, snuggled
into his other side, holding his hand and leaning his head against Steve’s shoulder, the tablet balanced on Steve’s knees between them.

A little while later, when the Queen was proclaiming to be the fairest of the land, Steve’s eyelids were already feeling heavy. He didn’t want to be rude and fall asleep so early, but it had been a long day full of emotions, and he was tired. In his periphery, he saw Bucky’s mother hovering in the doorway. She was smiling softly with amusement, catching his eye and holding a finger up to her lips to indicate silence. When Steve glanced at the Barnes siblings on either side of him, both were fast asleep.

“I guess you’ll be spending the night,” she whispered, coming forward to ease the tablet out of his hands and turning it off, placing it on the bedside table. “Any requests for breakfast?”

“No, ma’am,” he quickly replied, voice low. “Whatever you prefer is fine.”

“How about waffles?” she asked.

“Waffles sound great, Mom,” Bucky murmured, half-asleep, as he snuggled closer into Steve’s side.

“Waffles it is,” she said, then leaned in close to pull the comforter higher over the three of them. She leaned closer still, to kiss Bucky’s forehead, then her daughter’s, and then, remarkably, impossibly, Steve’s, who closed his eyes and gratefully received the gesture like a benediction. She smiled, settling the covers around Steve tenderly and brushing his hair off of his forehead with the gentlest of caresses.

He reveled in the feeling of being tucked into bed that he hadn’t experienced in nearly eighty years. Heart seizing at the gift he’d been given, with Bucky to his one side and Gracie on the other, their mother treating him like something precious, like one of her own, he was so full of love he could hardly stand it.

“Good night, Steve.”

“Good night, Mrs. Barnes.”

She paused, eyeing him in the dark for a moment, then said, “Call me Winnie.”

“Good night, Winnie.”

“Sweet dreams,” she said, as he closed his eyes, and it was too hot, and the bed was too small, but there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

After waffles, and bacon, and eggs, and real maple syrup from Canada that was so good Steve took a picture of with his phone so he could buy it himself later (although he never made waffles, he didn’t even have a waffle maker, but just in case), Bucky’s family bid their tearful goodbyes to their son. Mr. Barnes shook Steve’s hand, eyes crinkling just like Bucky’s when he smiled, warm and genuine. Gracie wrapped her arms around Steve’s waist in an impressively tight hug, and made him promise to come back so they could watch Frozen together, saying pointedly at Bucky’s groan, “Bucky doesn’t have to come!” Mrs. Barnes gave him a gentler hug, whispering into his ear, “Take care of him. Please,” and Steve promised, “I will,” and she believed him. She said, “You’re always welcome here.” And he said, “I know,” and the most miraculous thing was that he believed her too.
He stood at the edge of the sidewalk, trying not to listen with his enhanced hearing, trying to focus on the sounds of traffic and sirens and roadwork, but he still heard it, when Bucky’s mother held her son in his arms and said, “I’m so proud of you. You’re my strong, brave, little boy,” and ached for his own mother, whose scent he could no longer recall, or the feeling of her arms around him. He still heard it, when she said, “You take care of each other, Bucky. He’s big and strong, but he needs you, too,” and wondered if someone was seeing him for the first time in his entire life.

He still heard it, when Bucky said, voice full of affection, “I know, Mom. He’s such a dope. I’ll be careful with him. I promise.”

“He’s not the only dope around here. You better be careful too,” she huffed back thickly. “You let me catch you on the news one more time and see what happens.”

Steve was still reeling when they made it back to his apartment, shaky and unmoored, heart bursting with joy and aching with hope at the same time, bittersweet like the soft sounds of a love song drifting in and out over an old radio. Bucky stood there in the middle of his living room, the first time in Steve’s home, eyes wide and bright as he examined everything in the room with equal parts unabashed curiosity and unbridled excitement, and Steve wouldn’t know it then – wouldn’t even know he’d hoped it until much later – but Bucky would never leave.

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So they lived together, and loved together, and Steve held Bucky when he woke up screaming, believing he was still stuck in Iraq, or in that warehouse with Rumlow. Bucky held Steve when he woke up gasping, ice stealing his breath and chilling his bones, indulging Steve when he gripped him too tightly, imagining Bucky missing or lost as if Rumlow had succeeded, as if 1945 had taken him just like it had taken everyone else he had ever known.

Life went on, with Bucky back to work at the library and going to weekly therapy sessions at the V.A., and Steve working with S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers. Bucky still couldn’t bring himself to perform on stage just yet, still nervous around crowds, but he remained inspired – Rumlow hadn’t taken that from him – and Steve was so proud to see him writing his music.

He was even more proud, nearly months later, when they went to pick up Bucky’s things from his apartment, that he left the keyboard behind. And Steve wondered, not for the first time since meeting Bucky, if there would ever come a day when Steve would be brave enough to leave his shield behind.

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It was early evening. Bucky was surrounded by messy piles of sheet music as he laid on his stomach on the bed, the sharp glow of the setting sun highlighting the brown hues of his hair, the angles of the muscles of his back and legs. He was in his pajamas, because he always pulled on something from his vast array of soft sleep pants and tee shirts as soon as he got in the door, which endlessly amused Steve. His lips were lips set in a determined line and a furrow of concentration on his forehead, fierce and focused and lovely.

“Hey, creeper,” Bucky said, when he noticed Steve hovering in the bedroom doorway.

“I wasn’t creeping,” Steve protested, blushing furiously, caught out. “Just looking.”

“Can’t blame you,” Bucky shot back with a grin, rolling onto his side. “I’m good to look at.”
Laughing, Steve came over to the bed and sitting down at the edge, Bucky swiftly sweeping his music aside. He didn’t like Steve to look at it until he was ready, self-conscious and shy, absolutely endearing.

“How was your day?” Bucky asked, looking up at him, his hair lying in soft waves on the bed.

“It was a day,” Steve admitted, shrugging, then sighed. “The downside of acquiring S.H.I.E.L.D. is having to keep the government happy.”

“I didn’t think they owned S.H.I.E.L.D. anymore,” Bucky said, frowning.

“It’s part of the subcontracting...contract,” he told him uncertainly. “Tony explained it to me, the lesser of two evils or something like that.”

Essentially, they’d given up their right to choose missions, leaving it to the discretion of the government. It meant sometimes, they went places Steve didn’t think they should be going, or – worse – not going places he felt deserved the same attention. It may have been arrogant, but he still believed the safest hands were his own. At least, he thought, they were able to vet and hire their own; small favors, and all that.

He rubbed his hands over his face and sighed again, wondering when he’d gotten so tired.

“What about you?” Steve asked, forcing a smile. “How was your day?”

“There was a field trip today from one of the elementary schools,” Bucky said, eyes lighting up. “They were doing like a scavenger hunt thing, and they had to find all this different stuff in the library. There was like a thousand kids, and they were all in groups so they needed a bunch of chaperones, and one of the assistants that was supposed to help called in sick, so they asked me to fill in.” Bucky was talking so fast Steve could hardly keep up, but his excitement was catching, and Steve found his smile shifting into something more real as Bucky went on. “I was really nervous because I’d never done it before. They don’t really let me around the people, you know?”

“Bucky,” Steve cut in firmly, because he knew the only reason why Bucky worked alone was because he’d decided people didn’t want to be around him, not the other way around.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Anyway, it was me and like five kids, and, Steve, it was so fun! The kids were amazing! There was one kid named Marcus, and he was so smart! He was like, six, and he knew all this shit about space that I’d never even heard of!” He scrunched up his nose in distaste. “One of the kids was kind of a shithead – ”

“Bucky!”

“– but the others made up for it,” he finished with a grin. “And I did such a good job, they said I could do it every time from now on!”

“That’s great,” he stated, wishing he could have the same enthusiasm for his job. If anyone had ever told him seventy years ago that he’d hate going to work every day, after the exhilarating thrill of making a difference every day, he’d have bet his shield it would never happen.

“I know!” Bucky exclaimed. “They have field trips all the time! Oh!” he suddenly said, holding up a finger before rolling onto his other side and digging into his backpack on the floor by the end of the bed, crumpling all his music beneath him in the process. He fished out a business card, holding it out to Steve. “I met this guy named Juan at the V.A. today. He runs their art therapy program.”

Steve took the card, glancing down at the bold black font. Juan Alvarez, RMHCI, MS. Steve didn’t
know what the letters meant, but they looked pretty official. He looked up at Bucky. “You’re thinking of doing art therapy?”

“No, not for me, dummy,” Bucky shot back, eyes still lit with excitement Steve didn’t understand. “For you.”

“You want me to do art therapy?” he asked, bewildered.

Bucky rolled his eyes so hard Steve was afraid they were going to get lost inside the back of his head. “Not to do it. Juan needs help. They have a huge backlog of vets signed up that can’t get in because they only let each teacher have so many students, but he said with a volunteer helping the teacher he could bring in more people.”

Steve looked from the card to Bucky with dawning understanding, mouth falling open. “You want me to volunteer?”

“Yeah!” he replied, smiling wide. “I’ve seen your stuff, you’re great at it. These guys would love you there. You’d get to do art, and they get to have Captain America as a teacher!”

“Bucky, I’m not a teacher,” he protested, heart hammering in his chest at just the thought of men and women looking to him for some kind of guidance when he barely had his own shit together. He hated his job, his only friends were his coworkers, and he still woke up screaming at night thinking he was crashing a plane into the arctic. *He* was supposed to lead soldiers who’d already been through so much to a place of mental health?

“Hey,” Bucky said, watching Steve with gentle eyes. “You don’t have to decide right away. It’s not like I told them your name or said you’d do it or anything. Just, you know...think about it.”

Steve cleared his throat, leaning forward to pull out his wallet and stuff the card inside with his cash. “Sure thing. So, what are you working on?”

“Just some ideas,” Bucky replied casually after a beat, relief washing over Steve as Bucky allowed him to change the subject.

“Can I hear any of it?”

“Sure,” he said, picking up some papers before side eyeing him. “There once was a man from Nantucket.”

There was a pause, wherein Steve raised his eyebrows expectantly, unable to help himself. “Go on.”

“Oh, my God!” Bucky let out a peal of laughter, wriggling happily on the bed. “You don’t know that one?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Well, I don’t know, Bucky. Did he have a dick so long he could suck it?”

Bucky’s eyes and mouth opened comically wide for just a moment, before he burst into another gale of giggles, eventually falling into a coughing fit. Steve watched with amusement, hoping to always make Bucky laugh just like that, even at his own expense.

“That’s been around even since *I* was a kid,” Steve told him, grinning.

When Bucky could finally could breathe again, he rolled back onto his stomach, reaching across the bed with his hand and kind of pulling himself forward, and Steve realized with an uptick of excitement in his heartbeat that he was crawling towards him. “You know, it kind of turns me on
when you talk like that.”

Now Steve was blushing again. “I curse. I was in the army, for God’s sake.”

“Say a bad word,” Bucky urged throatily, kneeling up and placing his hand on Steve’s shoulder.

“Shit,” he responded dutifully, placing his hands on Bucky’s hips. Bucky sucked in a breath through his teeth, like he was wounded.

“Oh, yeah, baby,” he breathed, eyes alight with mischief. “Say another one.”

Steve fought a grin. “Damn.”

“Oh, Steve!” he sighed, throwing his head back with exaggeration like those dames in the movies of the forties and fifties. “Another one!”

“Ass.”

Bucky threw him an unimpressed look. “That’s not a bad word. That’s anatomy.”

“What about cock?”

Now that surprised him, mouth falling open in shock before he grinned slyly. “That’s so hot. Say it again.”

“Cock,” he repeated, emphasizing the consonants and drawing out the vowel, trying to sound dirty and sultry, even if it embarrassed him.

“Damn, Steve,” Bucky breathed, for real this time, eyes heated and tongue sliding out across his lips. “Now I really am turned on.”

Then they were kissing, a slick slide of lips and tongue, a little bit messy, a little bit desperate, and a whole lot perfect. Steve pressed one hand against the small of Bucky’s back, the other threading through his hair, pulling the other man onto his lap.

They separated only for the necessity of breathing, panting against each other’s mouths. Bucky grinned, leaning his forehead against Steve’s, arm wrapped around Steve’s neck. Bucky was hot and solid against him, if not still a little bit leaner than he had been before his capture, and it hurt Steve to think he was too distressed to eat because of what had happened to him.

He was still beautiful, the sun gilding his hair, casting shadows across his strong jaw, eyes dark with lust and lips swollen from their kissing. He gazed down at Steve, enraptured as he rubbed his groin against Steve’s belly, his ass grinding down onto Steve with delicious friction.

Although it had been several weeks since Bucky’s kidnapping, they had yet to be intimate again. Bucky had spent a lot of time sleeping, his mind and body healing, stealing naps even during the day to make up for restless nights. He spent all of his other time working, writing music, going to therapy, or visiting his parents, who, understandably, were nervous being away from him for too long.

The times they were alone, Steve was content just to be with Bucky; on the couch watching television, exploring a Brooklyn he’d always known and never known with Bucky as his tour guide, cooking dinner and drinking local beers, buying the ones with the craziest names just so they could say they’d drank a “Bïeryoncé.”
They’d kissed, yes, several times. Necking like teenagers in a way Steve hadn’t ever done in his life, Bucky’s five o’clock shadow leaving his face red and raw in a way he secretly loved, the bruises Bucky would suck into his neck and collarbone giving him such a thrill when he saw them in the mirror later, even if they were quick to fade. But they hadn’t gone further than that, Bucky easing away and redirecting them into snuggling close to cuddle, which Steve was more than happy to oblige him with.

He understood, completely, that Bucky was retaking control of his body, of his mind, after what had happened to him, and he would gladly let Bucky lead until the other man was ready. While the sinfully slow undulation of Bucky’s hips over his may have been an indication, Steve wasn’t about to assume.

“Steve,” Bucky whispered into the air between them.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked gently, before brushing the hair away from Bucky’s face and gazing up into his blue, blue eyes.

“Come on,” Bucky insisted, a little too casually, casting his eyes away and pulling his face away from Steve’s hand to tug impatiently at the hem of his shirt. “I haven’t seen you naked in, like, forever. I forgot what your abs look like.”

“Bucky,” Steve pleaded softly, and the other man paused to look up to find Steve’s worried expression. “We don’t need to rush. You’re still – ”

“Don’t,” Bucky cut him off, face adorning a hard expression that was equal parts frustrated as it was determined. “I want this. I want you. I’m ready.”

“Okay.” Steve nodded with a certainty he believed in. He knew what it felt like, waking up seventy years into the future as a pariah, wishing, just once, that someone would treat him like a normal human being instead of constantly asking if he was okay, or handling him like a piece of glass, and he wasn’t going to do that to Bucky. “I trust you.”

Bucky placed one hand on the side of Steve’s face, Steve nuzzling into it instinctively. His eyes searched Steve’s, finding naked understanding, truth, honesty.

“I love you,” Bucky said then, and Steve’s breath caught in his throat at the words.

“I love you too,” Steve replied, because he had, for a long time, and he wasn’t afraid of it, wasn’t going to miss another opportunity, not when he’d been given another chance at life in this scary new world with this brave, bold, beautiful man.

“Yeah?” Bucky asked, smiling a little crookedly, in that way that always made Steve’s heart flutter.

“I’m with you ‘til the end of the line,” he promised.

“I like that,” Bucky responded, smile growing into a full-blown grin, eyes crinkling at the corners with it, before he leaned down and pressed his lips to Steve’s once more.

This one wasn’t messy, or rushed; it was slow and sweet and intoxicating, Bucky slipping his tongue past Steve’s lips, his teeth nipping at Steve’s mouth, hand gripping his neck possessively as he pressed in close with his whole body, his entire being. Steve felt his love and his fear, felt his wanting and his offering, felt everything wonderful and scary when you needed someone this much, when you found your other half you hadn’t even known was missing and didn’t ever know what you’d do without it.
Steve slid his hands under Bucky’s shirt, up his sides and around to his back, feeling hard muscle beneath smooth skin. Up higher, finding the impressions and curves of scars, his fingertips reading them like braille as he trailed over every part of Bucky that made him who he was. Bucky shivered beneath his touch, breaking the kiss to tip his head back and pant into the air, breathing Steve’s name into the sky like a prayer.

He took the opportunity to kiss his neck, his collarbones, and the small divot in between, his tongue lapping at soft skin heated with desire. Gently, tenderly, he braced Bucky in his arms and laid him down on the soft, down comforter, lying astride him, careful not to crush him beneath his weight.

“Come on,” Bucky pleaded, voice high and needy. He didn’t like it when Steve held back, but Steve was still so afraid to hurt him, to damage him beyond repair, to be the one to finally break Bucky after everything the man had been through. “I want to feel you, Stevie. Don’t – don’t – ”

Steve silenced him with an indulgent kiss, deep and intoxicating, carefully resting his full weight on top of Bucky and pressing him down into the mattress. Bucky sighed with satisfaction into his mouth and arched up into him, squirming in his arms, alive and restless, running his hand down Steve’s back and boldly placing it on his ass to give him a firm squeeze. He pulled him in and pushed his groin into Steve’s at the same time, grinding their hips together in an agonizingly slow tease.

Steve was already so hard he could hammer nails, relieved to feel Bucky’s own matching erection against him. Emboldened by Bucky’s enthusiasm, he allowed his own hands to roam Bucky’s body, through his hair and over his shoulders and down his sides, all the way to his tapered waist. He dared to go lower, sliding his hands beneath Bucky’s ass, down the back of his powerful thighs and pulling them up and around Steve’s waist. He bent his own legs up beneath Bucky, his cock rutting into the cleft of Bucky’s ass through the thin fabric of Bucky’s pajamas, eliciting a low moan from the back of his lover’s throat that Steve swallowed.

Bucky was breathing heavily, chest heaving as Steve snaked his arms back around Bucky’s body, holding him close, surrounding him. Steve nipped and licked at his neck, kissed up his jaw, overwhelming him with love and affection.

“Steve,” Bucky urged, in a way Steve had never heard, shooting a thrill down his spine right down to his balls and up his cock, flushed with arousal. He paused in his ministrations to look into Bucky’s eyes, dark with desire and bright with love. “I want you to fuck me. I know we haven’t done that before, it’s okay if you don’t want to.”

“I want to,” Steve replied immediately, nodding enthusiastically. “Just tell me what to do. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Bucky told him, a little too desperately, eyes a little too wild.

Steve paused for a moment, taking in the sight of the man beneath him, considering. Bucky may have been intent on reclaiming his autonomy, but he was a little too eager to get there. Steve knew what it was like, to be so desperate to go back to the status quo, even before waking up in a new century, even before the serum. He knew what it was like to grasp at the idea of normalcy with both hands and hold on tight, reckless and impatient to prove he wasn’t even a survivor, that he was fine, more than fine, challenging anybody who thought otherwise.

“Bucky,” he chastised softly, because Bucky had nothing to prove to him. However, he didn’t want to hurt his pride, or make him feel too vulnerable; Steve had hated that when he was smaller, or bigger in this new, scary century. So instead, he appealed to his conscience. “I want this to be good for me too.”
Bucky immediately looked apologetic, letting out a deep breath and visibly composing himself. Steve eased him through it, running his hands gently over his skin, feeling the muscles release their tension one by one. Bucky nodded eventually, body relaxed beneath Steve, eyes looking clear and present.

Steve smiled, gentle and tender. He leaned down and pressed his lips to the corner of Bucky’s mouth, to his forehead, to his jaw, his neck, and murmured into his skin, “There you are.”

They undressed almost reverently, as if revealing one another to each other for the first time. Steve traced every new bit of flesh with his hands, following his touch with his mouth, Bucky writhing and arching beneath him, the muscles in his belly contracting deliciously when Steve nipped at his ticklish sides.

Bucky, in turn, left no part of Steve unexplored, gripping at his shoulder, his back, sliding down the bumps of his spine and kneading into the firm globes of his ass before coming right back up to cup the swell of his pecs and pinch at his nipples. Steve blushed with a little bit of shame at how it thrilled him to be handled so commandingly, but Bucky only grinned when he noticed, biting his bottom lip with a bright glint to his eye.

“Later,” Bucky promised, and that little thrill turned into a full-blown undercurrent of electricity, humming deep beneath in his skin and low in his belly. He tugged Steve closer, wrapping his legs around Steve’s hips and nibbling at the tender skin of his earlobe. “Right now, I want you inside me.”

Steve shivered at the hushed words uttered into his ear, blowing out an anxiety-riddled breath and feeling excited at the same time. “Just tell me what to do.”

Distractingly, Bucky pressed his hips up, their equally hard cocks sliding against one another, made easier by the precome on both of them. Bucky was so hot and hard against him, he could hardly concentrate, but he needed to pay attention. He didn’t want to screw this up, not something this important.

“There’s lube in the nightstand,” Bucky said.

Steve’s mind jolted to a stop on that one. “There is?”

“I brought it from home,” Bucky advised him. “When we went to get my stuff.”

“Oh,” he managed to say, then reached over to pull out the drawer, groping around and finding lubricant, holding it in his hand like it was a live grenade about to go off. He couldn’t help it, he started blushing, cheeks and neck and chest warm within moments.

Bucky smiled, amused, but not mocking. “Lean back.”

He pushed his hand against Steve’s chest, who studiously leaned back on his haunches to pay attention, Bucky’s legs splayed open on either side of him. As always, Steve was struck by his beauty, by the hard lines of his muscles, the soft smoothness of his skin juxtaposed to the battle scars on his left side, the confident way he displayed himself to Steve, unaffected by his nudity, proud to share that part of himself with Steve.

Holding out a hand, Bucky said, “Squeeze some onto my fingers.”

Steve popped open the cap of the lubricant to comply, tipping it over and carefully squeezing the bottle. A few drops came out, the spout kind of clogged, so he squeezed a little harder – too hard. The cap shot off entirely, nearly the entire bottle of lubricant spilling out right after it.
“Oh!” he exclaimed, hastily tipping the bottle right side up and cupping a hand beneath Bucky’s in an attempt to catch the lubricant, which had mostly poured onto Bucky’s belly, sliding down his hip and onto the sheets in a sticky mess. “Oh, jeeze. I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Bucky insisted, bubbling with laughter. Steve was so embarrassed; what a dope! God, could this go any worse? “Steve,” Bucky gently interrupted his frantic mental berating, wrapping slick fingers around Steve’s cock, too messy and too wet and Steve’s brain just whited out. “It’s okay, I promise. You didn’t ruin anything, see? Just…” And then he was releasing his grip, Steve gasping out a breath like a fish out of water. Bucky grinned wickedly. “Hold that thought.”

Once the lubricant was wiped up and both men moved to the other side of the bed, Bucky held out his hand again, Steve managing not to supersoldier the bottle this time, Bucky saying, “Let’s try this again. Now watch.”

Bucky laid back, spreading his legs wide and bringing his knees up, feet planted firmly on the bed, revealing the most intimate part of himself to Steve unabashedly. Their eyes locked, Bucky’s half-lidded and dark with desire, his lover licking his lips slowly, Steve’s gaze following the movement. Feeling on the edge of something momentous, Steve held his breath as Bucky reached past his hard, flushed dick; beyond his heavy balls; to the tiny, furled opening to his body. He pressed his fingers right there, rubbing in circles before pressing in further, his long, middle finger pushing past the ring of muscle smoothly.

He watched with rapt attention as Bucky slid his finger in and out, back arching, an almost pained expression on his face. He soon added another finger, thrusting them in and out of himself, hips pressing down eagerly into his own hand. He was panting, chest heaving, making these small, hurt sounds. He was so stunning, so sexy. There was another sound then, almost a whine, and Steve was surprised to realize it had come from himself.

“Bucky,” he pleaded, unable to stand to sit there anymore, he had to touch, needed it. He reached out, hands hovering. “You look – ” he began, but there weren’t even words to describe how beautiful Bucky was, how much Steve wanted him. “Can I touch you?”

“Yeah,” Bucky replied, voice strained. “Yeah, Stevie, touch me. Touch my dick.”

Steve didn’t need a second invitation; he wrapped a strong hand around Bucky’s heated erection, pumping him in a firm grip, swiping his thumb over the tip through the precome there and smearing it across the head, down the length and back up again. He took his free hand and dared to trail his fingers over Bucky’s, feeling the slick of the lubricant, the heat of Bucky’s body. Bucky slipped his fingers out, grasping Steve’s and pressing them against his loosening hole, Steve’s heart pounding in his chest, anxious and excited all at once. Tentatively, he slid one finger into Bucky’s body, the lubricant making the glide easier than Steve expected.

“Yeah,” Bucky breathed, Steve watching him carefully for any kind of discomfort, but he only seemed to be feeling intense pleasure. He added a second finger, pausing to squirt a little more lubricant onto his fingers, dribbling it down between Bucky’s legs and watching it slide down into his hole. Bucky was so tight, so warm, Steve’s cock ached at the thought of breaching him, of burying himself in that hot channel. He rutted against Bucky’s thigh like an animal, leaving streaks of precome against his creamy skin and the dark hairs there.

“Try to – ” Bucky began, grasping Steve’s wrist and angling his hand, and when Steve brushed over a certain spot inside of him, Bucky shouted so abruptly Steve startled. He nearly removed his hand, until Bucky said, “Yeah, just like that. Just like that.”

Whatever he’d done, Bucky liked it even more, and Steve made certain to hit over that spot with
every thrust of his fingers. Bucky was breathing heavier, thrusting up into Steve’s hand and rocking back down onto his fingers, emitting one continuous moan, high pitched and needy. He gripped Steve’s bicep with his hand, sticky fingers digging into his skin, the muscles of his abdomen contracting as he curled up instinctively.

Steve was enraptured at the sight of him, at the idea that he was making Bucky feel this good, more turned on than Steve had ever thought possible before. Steve had never put his fingers inside himself, he had always been too embarrassed even when he was alone to try it, but now, seeing Bucky like this, falling apart right beneath his touch, he couldn’t wait to see what all the fuss was about.

“Wait, wait!” Bucky cried suddenly, and Steve immediately pulled back, dropping Bucky’s cock as if he had burned him but careful not to jerk his fingers out of Bucky’s body, instead easing them out.

“Did I hurt you?” Steve asked, frantic.

“No,” he replied, bright eyes finding Steve’s. He swallowed hard, dropping his head back onto the bed and gripping hard at the base of his cock, visibly trying to get a hold of himself. “I don’t want to come yet.” He offered a crooked grin. “I don’t have a supersoldier dick, if I go off now I won’t be ready again in five minutes.”

“You don’t need to be,” Steve told him, rubbing a soothing hand up and down his thigh. “It’s okay, Bucky. I don’t mind.”

“I do,” Bucky said, dropping his lashes and peering up at Steve from beneath them. “I want to come with you inside me.”

“Oh,” Steve said, the air escaping his lungs like a punch to the gut. “I want that too.”

Bucky smiled. “Come here.”

Steve clambered on top of him, bracketing Bucky’s head between his forearms, Bucky’s legs coming up around him. He was scared, thrilled, ready and not all at once. “Tell me what to do.”

“Kiss me,” he demanded, and Steve readily complied, leaning down and brushing his lips across Bucky’s very, very sweetly. Bucky arched up into him, his wet hole sliding over Steve’s cock, jolting him into a surprised moan. Reaching between them, Bucky grasped Steve’s erection, guiding the head of his dick right to his entrance. Steve pushed gently, urged forward by Bucky’s hand and his own passion, feeling himself breach Bucky’s tight hole with minimal resistance.

“Steve,” Bucky sighed, so softly, as Steve slid home, enveloped in tight heat, Bucky’s body gripping at his cock, as close to another person as he could get. It was overwhelming, what he felt for Bucky then, for the trust Bucky was showing him, the intimacy he was sharing with him, the love. It was beyond lust, beyond desire, beyond anything Steve could have ever imagined.

“I love you,” he said then, the words pulled from him by a force outside his control, and Bucky smiled, eyes crinkling, gaze filled with joy.

“Yeah,” he responded, before kissing Steve, deep and slow and thorough. “I love you too. Always. To the end of the line.”

“To the end of the line,” Steve agreed, with his whole heart.

They moved together, Steve thrusting up into Bucky, who gripped at his back with strong fingers, eventually sliding down to cup his ass, urging him on. A litany of praise fell from Bucky’s lips, how good Steve felt, how well he was doing, how much he liked it, keep going, don’t stop, don’t stop.
Spurning Steve on, he thrust harder, up, up, into Bucky, sliding his hands under Bucky’s body and gripping his shoulders, holding him in place for even more leverage.

“Oh! Oh!” Bucky yelled, head tipping back and eyes screwing closed, and Steve was really pumping into him now, the slick slap of their bodies meeting loud and obscene in the air. Bucky was getting tighter around Steve’s member, the muscles of his body going taut with tension. “I’m right there, I’m right there! Just – oh! – just – Steve – Steve!”

There was a brief moment wherein Bucky went completely rigid in Steve’s arms, a second later releasing a breath that trailed into a moan, rubbing himself against Steve’s belly, warmth gushing between them as he came in hot, white ribbons. The rhythmic pulse of his ass around Steve’s cock sent Steve tumbling into his own orgasm right after, pleasure slamming into him like relentless waves of a stormy ocean, washing over him again and again. He thrust hard once, twice, three times, pulsing hot come deep up into Bucky’s body, slicking him up inside even more, filling him up with Steve’s seed, possessing him.

They both lay still, Bucky panting into the air, warm breath ghosting over Steve’s ear as Steve breathed into the pillow. Steve felt warm and lazy, tired and used in a way that was so different from battle fatigue, with a satisfied feeling resting deep in the pit of his belly. When he pulled back to gaze into Bucky’s face, his lover’s expression was pure bliss, lips plush and pouty, cheeks flushed crimson, his hair sticking to the sides of his face with perspiration, the most gorgeous thing Steve had ever seen.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked, gently brushing the hair back from Bucky’s face, tangling his fingers through the sweaty strands.

“Yeah,” Bucky replied, still catching his breath. He cast Steve a tenderly worried glance. “Was that okay for you? For your – first time?”

Thrown, Steve smiled, a rush of affection overcoming him. “Oh, yes.”

“Good,” Bucky said, leaning up to kiss him, and Steve closed his eyes tight, desperately committing this moment to memory, never wanting to forget how it felt, how it had changed him, how nothing would ever be the same.

Bucky dropped his head back, a mischievous glint in his eye, then clenched tight around Steve, sending a fresh flush of blood to his cock so fast Steve gasped, dizzy with it. “So when can you do that again?”

Steve grinned wickedly. “I could do this all day.”

“One black coffee, please,” Steve ordered, smiling politely at the barista, whose bored expression said she couldn’t honestly care less that Captain America was standing in front of her at the coffee shop, which was exactly the reason why he’d loved this place. Well, that, and that he could still remember Bucky charming his way into Steve’s phone contacts right in the waiting area, or the way he’d lit up while perusing Steve’s art, or how he’d looked with the evening sun casting shadows across his face, darkening his eyelashes.

“And a large caramel vanilla latte,” Natasha added, smiling sweetly. “Extra caramel, extra whip.”

Steve rolled his eyes fondly, grinning as he grabbed his wallet and slipped some cash from it, before handing it to the barista. He teased, “Watching your figure?”
“Always,” Natasha shot back, turning gracefully on her heel.

“This is yours,” the young woman behind the counter said, holding out a business card. Steve grabbed it as quickly as possible, wanting to slip it back into his wallet before Natasha noticed. He failed spectacularly, knocking over a jar of individually wrapped biscottis and the stack of house CDs sitting beside it, sending them everywhere.

“Sorry!” he cried, picking biscottis and CDs up hastily and elbowing over the tip jar, change clattering loudly across the counter and to the floor beyond. “Oh, jeeze! I – ” He raised his hands in the air as if in a stickup, breathing heavily and regarding the barista with wide eyes. Quieter, he said, “Sorry.”

“Just go,” the barista stated, and he nodded, blushing furiously as he tipped his face towards the floor and crept as carefully as he could towards Natasha, avoiding the stare of every patron in the place. His friend was waiting with two coffees in her hands, smiling in a way she rarely let herself, eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Wow,” she murmured, nodding approvingly. “So that happened.”

He meekly grabbed his coffee from her, leading her to the very back of the cafe, knowing the minute they sat down she was going to say something. He slid into the booth, staring at his coffee so hard he was almost sure it would start boiling, waiting. Daring to steal a glance, Natasha was casually pouring sugar into her coffee. He almost – almost – made a comment, because surely that coffee was sweet enough. How much sugar could she possibly need? But he’d served in World War II, he knew how important it was not to crack first.

Until Natasha started tipping chocolate powder from the shaker on the table into her drink.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Steve commanded firmly, Natasha’s eyes meeting his challengingly. “It’s caramel and vanilla! Chocolate doesn’t even belong!”

“There’s always room for chocolate,” she replied, then leaned forward with a dangerous poise that could’ve been misconstrued as flirty if Steve hadn’t known her so well. Her lips drew into a sharklike grin, before she withdrew a beige business card from God-knew-where, holding it up between two long, slender fingers. “So who’s Juan Alvarez?”

He gaped at her. “How did you – ?” he began, then shook his head, not bothering. He snatched the card out of her hand, slipping it back into his wallet with a grumble. “He works at the V.A. He’s the head of art therapy.”

“You’re thinking of doing art therapy?” she asked, curiously.

“No,” he corrected, shaking his head. “Teaching it. Or – volunteering, I guess.”

She frowned. “That’s what I meant.”

“Really?” he balked. “You don’t think I need therapy?”

He hadn’t meant to say it that way, but that’s what had come out. Before he could backtrack, she grinned with a shrug. “Well, you are one hundred percent certifiable, so, probably.” With the grace of someone intimate with shifting personas, in the blink of an eye Natasha was serious, but she was also herself, allowing him to see her empathy and kindness, her self-deprecation. “But isn’t everyone?”

“Come on,” he protested, casting his gaze away and staring at the array of pastries in the display
window. “I’m the last person who should be helping damaged people put themselves back together.”

“They’re not damaged,” she replied sharply, with a vehemence that made him look back to her with surprise. She was regarding him defiantly, chin raised, eyes cold and hard; then he remembered that she was a soldier too, one that had come in from the cold a long, long time ago. “They’re just a little lost.”

“And I’m supposed to help guide them?”

“No,” she told him, as if he were the biggest idiot alive. “You’re just supposed to be there for them. Listen to them. They don’t want your advice. They just need a friend.”

“Are we friends?” he asked slyly, because he was curious to know the answer, while also eager to change the subject.

She compressed a smile, lips switching at the corners and eyes glittering. “No. I just like going for coffee with dumb, good looking men.”

“Well,” he shot back. “I like going for coffee with mysterious, beautiful women.”

“Hey,” she reconsidered, grinning wide, before holding up her coffee in a toast. “Maybe this is the start of a beautiful friendship.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, before he clinked his cup against hers.

“Steve, can you give me a hand over here?” Alice Alvarez asked, a very petite, very pregnant woman standing beside a pallet full of boxes in the rented hotel banquet hall.

“What am I?” Sam Wilson asked, from the top of the ladder he was standing on to hang up a banner. “Chopped liver?”

“Don’t be jelly,” Steve said, pausing in unfolding large, round dinner tables. Mrs. Alvarez let out a peal of laughter at his phrasing. “Did I say that right?”

“Oh, sweet baby Jesus,” Sam blurted dubiously, turning back to his task. “Where is Bucky? I need to have a talk with that boy. Contaminating Captain America with his middle school white girl slang.”

“He’ll be here for the dinner,” Steve told him, jogging over to the boxes. “Where do they need to go?”

“Eventually, they’ll be on the tables,” Mrs. Alvarez stated, then brushed a hand through her blonde hair, pushing her bangs into disarray. She was beginning to look frazzled, and more than a little tired. “It’s all the tablecloths and napkins for the dinner. I just need them out of the way until the tables are set up, and then we can unpack them.”

“So, just against the wall there?”

“Sure,” she replied, before he squatted down and picked up the entire pallet with just a grunt of effort, carrying it across the room and depositing it on the floor with a heavy thud that vibrated throughout the room. She shook her head, grinning. “I will never get tired of that.”

“Show off!” Sam cut in.
“Won’t find me on moving day,” he quipped, dusting off his hands. “Where’s the cutlery and stuff?”

“It’s coming later.” She placed one hand protectively on her belly, the other pressed against her lower back, glancing around with a sigh. “Okay, where’s my seating chart?”

“Hey, sit down for a second,” Steve directed, grabbing a folding chair and placing it behind her. She collapsed into it heavily, sighing gratefully. “You shouldn’t be standing so much. How many months are you now?”

“Eight.” Pressing two firm hands to her shoulders, he began to massage her tense muscles, feeling them loosen and give beneath his touch. “This isn’t the 1940s, Steve,” she complained. “Pregnant women can do – ” Suddenly, she moaned loudly, a little obscenely, and Steve felt himself blushing. “Oh. Oh, Steve. I take that back; you can do whatever you want to me. Good, Lord. If only I’d met you first.”

“Do I have something to be concerned about?” Juan Alvarez asked, his arms laden with yet another box that appeared to be filled with decorations. Steve could see various candles, small mirrors, and silk flowers.

“Yes,” Mrs. Alvarez sighed, as Steve dropped his hands like he’d just touched a hot stove and said, “Of course not.”

“You ruin all my fun,” she pouted to her husband, then stood up to greet him with a kiss.

Mr. Alvarez was a short, muscular man, with olive skin and very green eyes. He carried himself tall like a soldier, his dark hair in a crewcut. The first time Steve had met the art therapist, he’d wondered if it was to fit in, especially since he was younger than Steve had presumed; a therapist in charge of war-torn soldiers seemed like someone who would have some age on him, but Mr. Alvarez was only a little older than Steve, and he’d served for several years before taking his honorable discharge to go back to school.

They’d met nine months ago, in an office that seemed to be half-serving as a storage room, shelves lining two walls and piled high with various art and office supplies. Steve had shoved himself into a small folding chair Mr. Alvarez had withdrawn from behind his desk, the metal groaning beneath his weight as he’d sat down. Knees pressed right up against the desk, his art portfolio across his lap, Steve had barely had room to breathe, but Mr. Alvarez seemed disaffected by the cramped space or stifling hot air.

He’d watched avidly, palms sweaty with anxiety, as the therapist had reviewed his extensive volunteer application.

“It says here you’re former military?” the therapist had, improbably, asked, looking Steve right in the eyes with a straight face. “Tell me a little about that.”

“Uh,” Steve had stammered, taken aback. “Well, sir, I served in World War II...as...a captain.”

Mr. Alvarez had smiled then, wide and mischievous. “I’m just fucking with you,” he said, and Steve let out a shaky laugh, some of his nerves dissipating with it. “What are you doing here? Captain America ain’t exactly known for his love of the arts.”

“I – ” Steve began, a new wave of anxiety washing over him. “I brought some pieces. I know it wasn’t on the list of documents to bring, but Buck – Sergeant Barnes – said I should bring some of my work.”

“I don’t care if you’re a good artist,” Mr. Alvarez told him harshly. “We’re not trying to create the
next Van Gogh. We’re trying to help people process their shit through the medium of art. Look, I just want to know if you can stand in a room full of men and women with varying degrees of mental and physical trauma and be cool. I want to know you can respect them despite their disabilities. I want to know you actually want to be here, and that this isn’t just some publicity stunt to get Captain America good P.R. because he just came out of the closet.”

“No, sir,” he quickly protested. “I want to be here.”

“Why?” the other man challenged. “Avenging not exciting enough for you anymore?”

Steve had known the question was coming, but he hadn’t known what the answer would be until he’d said it. Looking deep within himself, he just let himself say it, the first thing that came to mind: “I don’t think it’s enough anymore, period, sir. God put me on this Earth to fight for the greater good. I fought for the greater good. I died for the greater good. I don’t know how to do anything else, but...I’m just not sure I’m doing that anymore.”

There was a great pause, wherein Mr. Alvarez had studied him with keen eyes, and Steve was sure his chances just had gone up in smoke. He was basically badmouthing the government, S.H.I.E.L.D., even the Avengers, expressing his bitterness, the jaded view he’d woken up from the ice with. It may not have been the wisest decision, with Mr. Alvarez working for the government too, and living in the twenty first century, but it was what lied in his heart, and no one had ever accused Steve Rogers of being a liar.

The therapist made a considering face, before nodding. “Alright.”

“Alright?” Steve asked, a little dizzy from the exchange.

“Barnes vetted you,” he stated, shrugging, then glanced down at Steve’s portfolio. When he raised his eyes again, they were glittering with amusement. “Your reference in D.C. checked out too. I do want to see your shit though. I’m curious as fuck. Hand it over.”

Their friendship had bloomed from there, Steve steadily becoming more and more involved in the Art Therapy Program, and becoming less and less involved in the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. He took less missions, only jumping in when his presence was absolutely necessary, like when a terrorist group threatened to obtain a biological weapon from lab in Lagos, or a mutant used his powers to hold the entire Pentagon hostage, or when those genetically engineered sharks got loose off the coast of California.

Okay, that last one had been for fun.

Currently, Steve and the Alvarezes, along with Sam’s and several other volunteers’ assistance, were setting up for the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival, hosted in Washington D.C. this year, where over a hundred veterans would be exhibiting their art; or performing musical, dance, dramatic, or original writing selections in a gala variety show. Tonight was the big welcome dinner kicking off the event, a meet and greet for the finalists and their families. They only had a few more hours to set up, and Steve was jittery with nerves and a kind of excitement he used to think could only come from the exhilaration of missions.

“Steve!” he heard from the doorway, twirling to see Bucky coming in through the door with a big smile. He was surprised to see him so early – they were supposed to meet at Steve’s hotel room before the dinner to get ready – but he was even more surprised to see his family trailing behind him, all three siblings and both parents. Gracie ran forward, bounding through the room and jumping over boxes to leap into his arms.
“Miss Gracie!” he exclaimed, picking her up and twirling her around, delighting in her gleeful giggles. “What are you doing here?”

“Daddy took us all to Washington!” she told him, as he set her down. “We took a train aaaaall the way down here! It was sooooo boring!”

“It was?” he asked, enthusiastically. “Well, that sure is nice of your daddy to bring you all here.”

“We’re going to see the president!”

“We’re going to see the White House,” Bucky clarified, grinning wryly.

“You are?” He was speaking to Gracie, but couldn’t take his eyes off of Bucky, who was grinning probably as big as Steve, looking goofy and beautiful.

He’d cut all of his hair for his new job at the library as Outreach Associate, doing so well with the children on field trips they’d promoted him to working with the Supervising Librarian to prepare and conduct programs for children with and without disabilities. There were a lot of responsibilities – Bucky actually had people working under him now, all volunteers – and he’d wanted to look professional. Steve had loved his long hair, and undoubtedly kind of missed it, but there was something about the clean cut look that made Steve weak at the knees, especially when Bucky put on his fancy work clothes.

Maybe it was because he extra liked running his fingers through it and messing it up, peeling him out of those prim clothes and tearing him apart inch by inch.

“Steve!” Gracie called, tugging at the hem of his shirt, and he realized he’d missed all of what she’d said, gawping at his boyfriend like a lovesick puppy.

“Grace Elizabeth,” Mrs. Barnes chided gently, taking her daughter’s hand and tugging her back. “Take a breath.” She smiled at Steve apologetically. “Steve, honey, this looks wonderful. We’re so excited for your show.”

“Thank you, Winnie,” he said, reaching out to pull her into a hug, because they did that now whenever they met, the small thrill Steve felt still just as fresh as the first time, every time, especially when she called him by the same endearments she bestowed upon her children. He looked to Bucky’s father, standing with his hands on Olivia’s shoulders. “It’s nice to see you too, George.”

“Did you see the game yesterday?” George immediately asked, as they shook hands. Their hatred for the New York Yankees was only trumped by their greater hate for the Boston Red Sox, who had played them yesterday. It was one of the only times anyone would ever see the two of them rooting for the Yankees. The last time they’d watched one of their games together, they’d been so loud one of the neighbors had actually complained, so it was probably for the best Steve had been out of town.

“George, save it for dinner,” Mrs. Barnes pleaded, stepping back and shuffling her other children forward. “Kids, say hello to Steve.”

“Hi, Steeeeeeve!” Becca, Olivia, and Bucky chorused cheekily at the same time.

Steve laughed. “Hi, guys.”

“Bucky!” Mrs. Alvarez called, her husband right behind her. “Is this your family?”

“My man!” Sam butted in, coming forward to give Bucky a high five before pulling him into a brief hug. Bucky introduced both Alvarezes and Sam to his family, Sam charming Mrs. Barnes straight
away with an ease that made Steve envious, but he supposed it might be a little easier for Sam considering he hadn’t almost gotten her son killed. They soon fell into a conversation about the best restaurants in the area to have some lunch, leaving Steve and Bucky alone on the side of the banquet hall.

“Hey,” Steve said quietly.

“Hey,” Bucky returned, looking up at Steve from beneath his eyelashes, before reaching out and taking Steve’s hand. He locked their fingers together, coming up close. “Missed you.”

Steve’s heart soared. “I’ve only been gone for two days.”

“You didn’t miss me too?” he pouted, and Steve wanted to kiss him so badly.

“I never said that.”

“We still meeting in your room to get ready?” Bucky asked shyly.

“Of course,” he replied immediately.

“Great,” Bucky said, biting his lip in that way he did when he wanted to kiss Steve, but also wanted him to make the first move. Not one to resist, Steve leaned forward, grinning like a loon before gracing Bucky’s lips with a chaste kiss, aware of the several people in the room around them. It wasn’t that he was ashamed to kiss his boyfriend in front of anyone, but he was still a gentleman.

“Bucky,” Gracie sing-songed, “we’re leaving!”

“Gotta go,” Bucky stated, still standing close, and Steve couldn’t help but kiss him again. Bucky grinned, happy and bright. “See you later, okay?”

“Yeah, see you.”

They did meet before dinner to get ready in Steve’s hotel room, greedily exchanging kisses that turned into rushed, graceless blowjobs for lack of time, before Steve ran downstairs, then continued to run around all night, assisting the V.A. staff along with hotel banquet staff. By the time he’d gotten back upstairs after cleanup and having a few beers with Sam and Mr. Alvarez at the hotel bar – Mrs. Alvarez having retired for the night hours ago – it was already two in the morning.

Quietly, Steve entered the room, Bucky sleeping soundly in an expanse of white, down comforters in the large king-sized bed, wearing his soft pajamas. Steve sat at the edge of the bed and watched him for just a moment, hair mussed, pink lips slightly parted, his hand resting on the empty side of the mattress as if reaching for him even in his sleep.

He was so happy, to have someone so handsome, so strong, so brave. His Bucky, funny and lovely, confident and loyal, brash and wise, everything Steve could’ve ever wished for in a lover. The one thing he’d never thought he would find again, someone to share his life with, unafraid and unassuming. Just...easy. It was so easy to love Bucky, it was so easy to be loved by him, and he was the luckiest man in the world.

Once he’d gotten ready for bed, brushing his teeth and taking a piss, undressing to just his underwear, he grabbed his laptop and gently moved Bucky’s hand to slip beneath the covers and settle into bed.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed before he rubbed a hand down his face, eyes tired from the laptop screen in the dark. Glancing at Bucky, he realized the man was awake, watching him with
“Davis said you could make up that test?” Bucky asked, voice rough with sleep, more than a little sexy. He snaked a hand between the blankets to rest on Steve’s thigh.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed. “But if I don’t catch up on all this homework it won’t matter anyway.”

School. Captain America was going to school, on a G.I. bill through the Veterans Affairs office that Mr. Alvarez had helped him apply for. It was just community college, nothing that impressive, although if you asked his friends – especially if you asked Bucky’s mother – he might as well have been accepted to Harvard.

It was exhilarating, this whole new world at his feet. It was also scary, and every day he wondered what the hell he was doing in a room full of eighteen year olds, what the hell he was thinking going back to school at the age of ninety-five. But if all these brave men in his life – Sam, Bucky, Mr. Alvarez – could do it, could overcome their fears of the unknown and find new purpose after the military, maybe, just maybe, Steve could do it too.

His only problem was being called away on missions, missing class to fight terrorists and mutants and those frisky sharks. His teachers had not been amused, requiring notes from S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers, Tony Stark typing up excuse notes on official letterhead with far too much glee.

“This is only your first semester, Steve,” Bucky reminded him. “This is the easy stuff. What happens when it gets hard?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it,” Steve replied, but even as he said it, he knew the odds were slim he could make it work. Not when the workload got tougher, and the classes grew in number.

“Babe,” Bucky gently urged, waiting until Steve looked at him. His expression was sympathetic, eyes kind. “You’re going to have to choose.”

“Choose what?” he groaned, pressing his hands into his eyes. “Saving lives or going to school?”

Bucky rolled his eyes fondly, in that way he did when Steve was being an idiot, but Bucky loved him anyway. “You don’t have to fight aliens to save lives. You save lives every day at the V.A. You’ll save even more lives with your psychology degree. You’re not choosing between saving lives and going to school. You’re just choosing a different kind of fight. You just have to pick which fight you want more.”

Steve looked at him – really looked at him, his perfect, smart, beautiful boyfriend – really trying to find any fault in his logic, but there was none to be found. Bucky was right; the Avengers didn’t need Steve, not when there were so many others capable of taking his place. But did Steve need the Avengers? More than he needed school? More than he needed the art therapy program at the V.A.? Did he need to help the world at large more than he needed to help those on an individual level? Did those individuals need him more than the world?

Christ, Steve was dizzy. He pouted. “Can’t you just tell me what to do?”

“As much as I love doing that,” Bucky replied, rolling over to his other side, his back to Steve, “You’re on your own.”

The bar was dark, a haze of smoke in the air, the floor sticky with spilled drinks and littered with
cigarette butts. Steve was crammed around a hightop table with Natasha to his left and Clint to the other side of her, both of them holding cans of beer. Tony was here, drinking a top shelf whiskey that wasn’t top shelf enough for him, and Pepper too, which should have been strange, to see pretty, proper Pepper in a place like this, but what was strange was how not out of place she looked. She was standing comfortably in her sky high heels, holding a can of beer, smiling at everyone that walked by with bright eyes.

“What time does it start?” Pepper asked, brimming with excitement. “I haven’t been to a concert in forever!”

“Just about twenty minutes,” Steve replied, glancing at his watch, then grinned ruefully. “Although, it’s not exactly a concert. At least, not what people are calling concerts nowadays.”

“You are not regretting me taking you to see Sammy Hagar,” Tony chastised, pointing a finger accusingly. “We were stageside!”

“It was very loud,” Steve complained, knowing he was sounding his age, but he didn’t care. He’d hated it there. “And a lot of the people there were very drunk, and smoking a lot marijuana.”

Clint snorted with laughter mid-sip, spitting his beer back into the can. “Wow. Can you even get high?”

“Sammy Hagar shook your hand!” Tony cried. “The Red Rocker, the lead singer of Van Halen, shook your hand!”

“I know you know that means nothing to me,” Steve said, then quickly amended: “Not that I didn’t appreciate the invitation.”

“Just maybe next time invite someone who will appreciate the show,” Clint cut in. “Like me.”

“You were out of town,” Tony dismissed with a wave of his hand.

“How is Bucky feeling?” Pepper asked, interrupting the conversation with a dry glance at Tony. “This is a big night for him.”

“He’s nervous,” Steve replied, letting out his own anxious breath. “But he’s going to do great.”

Pepper offered him a huge smile. “Of course he is. He’ll be fine.”

“I know,” Steve said, but couldn’t help the anxiety he felt on Bucky’s behalf, performing his first show since his capture.

“We missed you on the last mission,” Natasha stated, casually, but nothing she ever said was without purpose. “It was a big one.”

“I know,” Steve told her, twisting the tab on his empty beer can. She was right, and the guilt he still felt over opting out of world-crisis mission remained a hot barb in his gut, gnawing at him. “I had finals, and I’d barely had time to study as it was between the V.A. and training those new recruits at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

She eyed him critically, but not unkindly, just examining him, and he fidgeted beneath her gaze.

“Buy me a drink,” she finally said, tilting her head towards the bar. “Anyone else need anything?”

Drink orders received, he followed her to the bar, the crowd parting in front of her as if she were the
six-foot-two supersoldier carving a path through them. They waited behind a few patrons, the bartenders busy fulfilling drink orders on a busy Friday night.

“You know, Steve,” she began, after they’d ordered, a considering expression on her face. “You gave your life for your country once. No one would blame you if you wanted to give your life to something else now.”

She looked at him, hurt in her eyes, fear, love, and he was so grateful to her for letting him see it, when she could have hidden behind one of her many masks, but she was his friend in this moment, just Natasha and Steve, standing in a shitty dive bar and sharing a drink.

“No one?” he asked.

She smiled knowingly, turning her gaze back to the bar, then shrugged. “They’d get over it.”

“But they’d know it wouldn’t change anything, right?” he asked, too softly in a place like this. “They’d know I was always just a phone call away?”

“Can’t get rid of me that easy, Rogers,” Natasha said, turning to him again, and now her eyes were alight with gratification. “Just ask James.”

The radio station playing over the speakers died down just as Steve and Natasha made their way back to the table, Bucky and his band coming onto the stage and moving to their respective places. Bucky looked delectable, his hair slicked back like all those army boys in the forties, wearing a tee shirt that was much too tight beneath a navy blue blazer pinned up on one side, his jeans practically painted on. He was smiling, but Steve could see the jittery nerves in his movements, not as fluid as he usually was.

“Hi,” Bucky said into the microphone, almost shy, and when he met Steve’s eye, some of the fear melted away. His gaze trailed to the others at the table, to his friends, and he grinned wide, happy to see them there to support him at his first show since his capture. “We’re Redstar. My friends are here, so we’re going to try really hard to impress them. As always, if you have any requests, we’ll take them, so long as they aren’t shit, and don’t forget to tip your bartenders.”

He leaned back for a moment, clearing his throat, then returned to the microphone. “This is a new song,” he said, then looked to Steve again, soft and meaningful. “It’s about hope, and courage, and love. I hope you like it.”

Steve’s heart swelled with joy at the same time as his stomach fluttered with butterflies. The song Bucky had been writing for him, all those months ago. His brave, beautiful Bucky had finished it, was going to share it in front of all these people, for everyone to hear. Steve was so excited he could hardly stand it, giddy like a schoolboy whose sweetheart had just professed his love, and more than a little turned on at the thought of Bucky proclaiming his feelings for Steve so publicly.

Bucky indicated for the band to begin, the guitarist playing a few chords on a nearby keyboard, drums beating rhythmically. Steve couldn’t help tapping his hand against his thigh at the catchy beat, other bar patrons taking notice and moving to the music.

“And when my heart won’t break...” Bucky began, voice full and deep and soulful, and, God, had Steve missed it, more than he had even thought until he’d heard it. “An empty space between my lungs...And when my knees won’t shake...I’ll drink to find inspiration…”

“Steve!” Pepper cried excitedly, grasping at his arm. “He’s incredible! Why have you been hiding him from me?”
“Oh, to be young and gorgeous,” Tony groused, a playful glint to his eye. “I’m very rich. I can get you one of those, you know. For your birthday.”

Pepper actually looked delighted at the idea. “Can he play at my birthday?”

“It’s extra if you want him to jump out of the cake naked,” Clint warned, pointing at Pepper.

“What are you, his agent?” Tony shot back.

“You don’t know me.”

“Shh!” Natasha hissed.

“Living life with no need for the breaks...something happens when I lean on my mistakes...” Bucky went on, leaning into the microphone, gripping it tight with his hand, yearning and honest. “Love is mystical, love will break the chains! You might feel invincible, and you might be afraid...light in darkness will show you the way...give you the power to believe again....”

Steve was enraptured, watching Bucky on stage, eyes so boldly on Steve as if he was the only person standing in the room. He was as gorgeous as ever, even more so, brave and self-assured, not as if he’d ever been unscared, but as if he’d persevered, withstood, come out the other side strong and spirited; his Bucky.

“Oh, can’t you hear the future is calling, for heaven’s sake?” Bucky crooned, singing with his whole body, long and lean, larger than life backlit by the stage. “It's either hell or high water, let's get outta this place...I feel your skeptical eyes on my mental state...I lift my hands to the sky, and I lower the stakes, oh, yeah...and I lower the stakes, oh, yeah...and I lower the stakes...”

The crowd bouncing around Steve, energized and just as taken with the man on stage as he was. Bucky was happy, and Steve was happy. He was so happy, surrounded by his friends and with the man he loved, who loved him too.

Steve smiled at Natasha, who tipped her beer at him before taking a sip. He smiled at Clint, who was flirting with a pretty girl in the crowd beside him. He smiled at Tony and Pepper, both focused on the stage, and he smiled at Bucky, who pointed right at him and smiled back as he came to the final chorus.

“Love is mystical, do you feel the same? Love is irresistible, it’s calling out your name...light and darkness will show you the way...give you the power to believe again...give you the power to believe again...give you the power to believe again! Give you the power to believe again...”

And Steve believed.

End.

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