no matter how long the day is (i'll come home to you)

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Summary

Steve’s spent an hour along Portobello Road before he sees the paparazzi on the left side of the street, trying to be inconspicuous by a street lamp. He crosses the street and ducks into the first store he sees, tucked behind a screaming red door and under a blue and white striped awning.

He listens, feet planted in front of the door, shoulders tense, as he looks around the shop. Row upon row of books are on the shelves in front of him, the wood creaking under their weight. Behind the counter is a dark haired man wearing a jacket, elbow on the table, stubbled chin on one hand, gloved left hand flipping the pages of a book.

No one follows Steve in.

Or, the one where Captain America travels the world, learns how to be Steve Rogers again, and meets Bucky Barnes along the way.
Also: the one where two old souls fall in love over young adult books, long distance calls, and texting at strange hours of the day.

Notes
Bucky Barnes lives a thoroughly ordinary life.

He wakes up every day at quarter to seven. He goes for a jog, his feet hitting the pavement in sure, measured steps, favoring his left side. He wears a long sleeved shirt, even under the warmth of the morning sun. His neighbor always greets him with a smile upon his return, her mouth stretched too wide to be genuine, eyes always straying towards his left arm.

At nine, the chime over the door to What the Book? jingles, and Bucky, with his hair in his eyes and half-awake, stumbles in, a dark jacket and a glove on, regardless of the weather. Scott, his sole employee, has two cups of coffee in cheap Styrofoam cups ready by the counter. By nine ten, Bucky is finished with his coffee, which he’d heaped with ludicrous amounts of cream and sugar. By nine fifteen, Bucky will be five articles deep in Buzzfeed on his mobile phone.

It will go on like that for most of the day. Customers and travelers will stop in (and more often, people looking for a roof when it is raining; What the Book? Gets more sales on rainy days than not; Bucky supposes there’s just something wrong about browsing a bookstore, dripping wet, for the better part of thirty minutes, with the eyes of the owners on you and not buying anything) and on good days, only five people will ask if the shop sells anything other than young adult books.

At eleven thirty, Scott will leave to grab them lunch, and they’ll be eating in the backroom thirty minutes later, the smell of vegetables, fried food, and styrofoam permeating the tiny room. By one, Bucky will be shelving, while Scott looks over the accounts and entertaining the low trickle of customers that pass through the shop. They’ll close the shop at eight, and Bucky will have a drink at the pub or dinner with his friends. And the cycle resumes the next day.

And then one day, Steve Rogers walks into the shop and his life changes forever.

Steve Rogers does not have a thoroughly ordinary life.

He was born in 1918, got injected with an experimental drug, served in World War II in a costume, and got frozen in ice. Still, he’s alive and only twenty nine in 2014. He saves the world and fights aliens.

But hey, today, he’s trying.

He looks around the subway platform, shoving his hands in his pockets—light gleams off the steel surfaces of the ticket machines, grime clings to the tiled floor, and the awful lighting bathes everything in yellow. A young couple stands holding hands a few feet away from him, both of them looking down at their phones. Even further away, a petite woman with her hair in a high, sleek ponytail stands with a Chihuahua inside a shoulder bag. It’s not full of people today, given the hour.

Steve hears the train long before it arrives.

It creaks to a stop in front of him, doors opening and welcoming him to a world of hard plastic chairs, metal poles, and more strangers. The couple from the station sit a few rows behind him, the blond leaning against the window, the brunet leaning against him. The brunet holds up his phone for the other to see. He’s gesticulating, the sleeve of his red hoodie slipping down his wrist, and rolling his eyes at something on the screen. The blond listens with a patient yet amused smile, catching his boyfriend’s wrist in one gentle move before he accidentally hits one of the many hoops adorning his
Steve lets his eyes linger for only a moment, letting his heart warm, before giving them their privacy. It’s a sight he’s gotten used to the past couple of years, the urge to stop and do anything to protect them from prying eyes settling down to an uneasy knot in his stomach. He knows that that feeling will probably never go away, no matter how long he lives. But along with that warning feeling of *don’t let the police catch you*, it’s now followed by the blossoming of happiness, at how love can be expressed so openly.

Steve feels the rhythm of people settling into seats, the drone of the announcement on the speakers. As the subway hums along the tracks, he muses about the musical he watched, how miserable the Phantom was at the end, maybe even more than when the musical started. Nothing changed for him, in a way that would make him happier (not that the Phantom was innocent by any stretch).

Not for the first time, he thinks about how it would be nice to have someone to talk about things like this to—those inevitable thoughts after watching a play or looking at art, sharing a funny encounter at the gym, or even after trying some really good food. Mundane, everyday things.

But he’s alone today, and there’s no one to talk to.

Not the man standing near the doors, one hand on the rail, the other in his coat pocket, his eyes sliding over to him every so often before skittering back to the doors. Not the lady across from him, staring at him with wide eyes, face framed by straggly blonde hair, trying to hide her smartphone behind the handbag on her lap as she takes photos.

Of him.

Steve bites his lip, trying to fight the frown that’s making its way onto his forehead.

*It’s just a picture,* he reminds himself. *It’s nothing to get angry about.*

He breathes in, squashes the other part of him that screams, *it’s rude, she could at least ask for a photo if she wanted one.*

It’s overshadowed by the one that screams, *You’re Captain America. Photos are part of the package,* anyway.

Steve turns his head instead, watches the walls pass by outside.

*It’s just a photo.*

Bucky’s leaning on the counter, his weight on his forearms. “Do you think, if we race down a hill —”

“No,” Riley says.

“I haven’t even started!” Bucky protests, but he’s already grinning.

“Barnes, you don’t even need to finish,” Riley says, rolling his wheelchair backwards so he can look at Bucky from across the store, eyes twinkling.

“That’s what he said,” Scott pipes up helpfully from the back room.

Riley bursts out laughing, tossing his head back. There’s a vague bird-shape design growing out on
the side of his crew cut, from when he thought it was an amazing idea to shave a design on it. Both Sam and Riley insist it’s a falcon; Bucky begs to disagree.

Riley shakes his head as he rolls towards the doorway. “Anyway, I’m off.” He lifts up the book from his lap, using it to wave at Bucky. “School waits for no one.”

“Alright, be careful,” Bucky says, waving back as Riley leaves. There’s a crash and a muttered curse from the back not a second after the door closes. Bucky ignores it, a usual sound when Scott’s in the backroom, and shakes his mouse to wake his computer up to look at the week’s financials.

“Yo, Bucky! They delivered a box of Dr. Seuss books,” Scott calls out.

Bucky stops comparing numbers in the spreadsheet. “I didn’t order any.”

“Well, they’re here.” There’s a sound of books being shifted and dropped on the floor. “Wow, this is a lot.”

Bucky sighs. He lifts his glasses up and rubs his eyes. He tore one of his contacts in the morning and had to resort to his glasses, which he doesn’t like using all that much For Reasons. And now he has a box full of books he doesn’t need.

He loves Dr. Seuss books as much as any other bibliophile, but his shop doesn’t really have a kids section. Getting these returned is going to be hell.

“If this is another one of your practical jokes, Lang,” Bucky mutters as moves to the back room.

“I ain’t that cruel,” Scott calls out, in sing-song.

Bucky has to agree.

Steve strolls down the grocery aisle with a basket in hand, contemplating between whole wheat, rye, or raisin bread when he spots a pap furiously taking photos from the cookie aisle.

He stifles a sigh. Clint's told him a couple of times that he can do his grocery shopping online, but Steve likes looking at the produce, deciding which aisles to hit for maximum efficiency, comparing item prices, and weighing things in his hands before he makes a decision.

Slowly, he turns and drops the whole wheat loaf into his basket. The pap snaps in succession. Steve wonders what the headline is going to say—maybe

    Captain America buys bread.
    What you find out will shock you.

He snorts to himself.

Captain America doesn’t have a bread preference. But Steve Rogers might.

There’s a muted thump from the display near him. A Latina teenager stands in the aisle, blue sweater ending above her waist, curls cascading down her back. At her feet lies a mini-avalanche of tissue paper rolls, conveniently between Steve and the pap.

Steve looks at the teenager, briefly catching her eye. She glances at him and flashes the smallest of grins.
Stunned, Steve nods his thanks.

(It’s not everyday that someone willingly gets into trouble for him.)

She clasps her hands together in front of her waist, painting a picture of guilt, as a store employee arrives. If Steve focuses enough with his enhanced senses, he can hear her apologizing.

Steve shakes his head as he walks to the counter, a small smile on his lips.

“Having a good day?” the cashier asks, scanning his items through.

“It got better,” Steve says, offering a small smile as he hands over payment.

“Enjoy the rest of your Wednesday,” the cashier offers, finally looking up at Steve. He blinks twice, eyes round. He quickly adds, “And the rest of the week too.”

“You too,” Steve says.

It’s not an ordinary Wednesday, but it’s a good Wednesday.

*A*

On Saturday, Steve heads to a gym in Bed-Stuy. It’s one of Clint’s recommendations, a place he drops by frequently. Steve knows Clint lives somewhere in the area, but he’s surprisingly mum about his home, off handed mentions of an apartment and a dog.

Steve stretches and heads to the treadmill. Beside him, a dark haired man around Clint’s height is jogging in place. He’s built, the numbers on his treadmill showing he’d been on for twenty minutes. Steve tries to grasp for his name, remembering that he’d introduced himself a few weeks ago. He’s got an excess of bravado, the kind of guy that Steve Rogers would’ve gotten into a fight with, seven-odd decades ago.

Captain America doesn’t get into fights with civilians.

“Hi,” the man smirks at him through stubble. “Nice seeing you here today.”

Steve nods, the name finally materializing out of thin air. “Hi Brock.”

Brock increases his pace, curling his hands into fists and emphasizing the curve of his muscles. “How was your week?”

The same since he woke up from the ice.


Brock nods. “Didn’t see you on the news, so that’s good for the world—no huge villainous threat to all our lives.”

Steve nods. Brock starts to talk about a recent business trip, airplanes and modes of transportation and the like. Steve’s ready to half-tune him out, when—“What was it like inside the Valkyrie?”

Steve’s surprised enough about it that he falters in his pace for a millisecond. He blinks and keeps on, knowing that only someone of Natasha’s level would’ve spotted the slip.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Steve says. He wants to force a smile, bring his Cap persona through the conversation. He focuses on the meter in front of him instead.
“Right, of course,” Brock says. He looks at his trainers and laughs nervously. It sounds like a hollow sound inside a drum, off-kilter and fake. “Why would you even want to talk about that.”

Steve doesn’t say anything. Brock continues talking, possibly bragging, jumping from topic to topic that requires little input from Steve, until he finally gets to talking about diets and workouts.

“So I’m trying out these protein shakes,” Brock drones on, “And they’re supposed to help you build muscle with the right exercise. Kind of like how the serum worked on your old body!”

That’s not the same thing, Steve thinks. He’s at a full-out run now, Brock still jogging in place beside him.

“That’s not the same thing,” he says.

“Sure!” Brock says quickly. “I’ve actually been reading online that too much of the mix can make certain parts of your anatomy smaller, which is a lie if I’ve ever heard one. When you took the serum, did everything get bigger?”

“No,” Steve says, hitting the stop button. He looks at Brock.

“Right,” Brock smirks.

“They’ve got photos in the exhibit. My hair stayed the same,” Steve says, face deadpan.

He heads to the pull-up bars.

The next day, Steve’s phone starts vibrating off the hook as he’s eating breakfast. He calmly puts his spoon back into the bowl, Oreo-O’s sloshing back in milk. Beside him, his phone blows up with messages.

That’s never a good sign.

Steve swipes his phone screen open, an uneasy feeling making its way up from his stomach. There are messages from Clint, Nat, Maria, and even Tony. He clicks on the first one.

It’s full of eggplant emojis. Clint.

His gut proceeds to sink. He thinks he knows what this is about.

Maria’s message is only a photo of a tabloid, the headline clear:

BIG BEFORE THE SERUM!
Our favorite Captain, exposed!

Steve fidgets, hair raising on his arms.

Under the photo is a message.

May 25, 2014 8:00 AM EST
Maria Hill: Do you need our team to do some PR?

Official as always.

Steve knows he should be thankful. When he had come out as bisexual a year ago, Pepper Potts and
Maria were ready to help him field everything and get him to the right shows and right interviews. Everything Captain America does is politicized, taken apart, and analyzed under a microscope. He knows he can trust Maria with this—well, that and throwing his phone away and ignoring the current problem wouldn’t help, and it would just be plain rude not to reply, especially to someone who helps him (even if she—or the agency they both work for—continue to send agents to watch over Captain America).

Steve sighs and sets about replying,

June 1, 2014 8:05 AM EST

**Steve Rogers:** No, thank you. It’ll blow over soon enough.

As he eats his cereal, he thinks that just once, he’d like an ordinary life.

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Steve Rogers was never meant to survive the war. He grew up living one day at a time. Surviving with a single parent in the middle of the Depression, just making it through day by day. Money was needed for rent, for food, for water, for heat. For tangible things. Steve never had to think much about the future, about dreams; he always needed to just survive today, tomorrow, every day, before he even got to that luxury.

(He still saves money like he’s going to go hungry tomorrow even if he knows he doesn’t have to.)

Steve’s goal—maybe this century would call it his dream—was always to fight in the war. To fight because others are fighting, because it isn’t fair to stay on the sidelines when others are giving their lives up by the day, to keep on fighting so others can live. There wasn’t a life for him outside the war.

And then he met Peggy. And Peggy was a beautiful curveball, a possible future, the first time he thinks there could be life after this, *if we live, maybe*—but they were both in the war. Steve at the forefront, Peggy an agent and an influential figure that a life after wasn’t really in the cards. Steve made the decision to crash his plane to protect people—and also *because he’s not really losing anything by doing so*.

And then he woke up—with a whole life ahead of him.

Unfortunately, the world decided what to do with it for him.

Steve Rogers would live, way past what he thinks he was meant to, and be, first and foremost, Captain America.

And the world watches Captain America.

(He’s out of the costume today and off the stage, but he still feels like that monkey on a unicycle, drawn on a small notebook on a rainy day.)

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“I saw the headline,” Natasha says, by way of greeting.

“You and every other person in the world,” Steve grumps. He angles his pencil, shades the front part of the life-size slab of meat he’s drawing on his notebook. The meat stands in front of a sea of people, all of them jeering at him.
“Woah, don’t get such a big head there, Steve,” Natasha says over the line. “It’s only in America.”

Steve snorts, amused despite himself.

“So,” Natasha said. “You remember that thing we talked about before?”

Steve frowns. He puts the pencil down, removes the phone from between his shoulder and ear.

“When we were discussing your army back pay?”

Oh. That.

“I’ve filled out the forms,” Steve says. “Months ago. When you left them in my room. Without me asking.”

Steve feels he needs to make a point there.

Natasha just hums over the line. “You did. Word on the street is—aside from the unchanging size of your package, I mean—you’re about to get it soon.”

Steve feels warmth spread on his cheeks. He soldiers on, focusing on the news at hand. He knows getting his army back pay went through a longer process. Adjustments were computed, the years he’d been gone added up, as well as increases for promotions and accolades given to him while he was under. The total amount kept rising higher, meaning red tape did too, and he’ll be surprised to get the money—or even any at all. It’s not like he needs it; S.H.I.E.L.D. already pays him a hefty amount for carrying the Shield and donning the costume again.

(His eyes almost bugged out of their sockets when he saw his paycheck for the first Avengers mission.)

“Shit, sorry, Steve,” Natasha says. Steve distinctly hears the sound of gunfire. “I’ll talk to you later.”

The line goes dead.

“Bye,” Steve says, to the empty air.

“We’re hitting the Columbus Tower,” Bucky says, “because Iron Man’s gonna blow it up.”

“Alright,” Steve says. “Let’s do this.”

“Wow, look at this mess,” Scott whistles, fingers splayed on the counter.

The front page of Scott’s favorite American gossip site was open on the store’s computer, headline blaring over a photo of Captain America from the first and only Avengers press conference.

CAPTAIN AMERICA’S LAST MOMENTS
What secret is our favorite hero (after Iron Man) hiding?

“Poor guy can’t get a break,” Scott says, eyes scanning through the article.

Bucky says, “I bet you today’s lunch that there is no secret.”

“Shh,” Scott says. Then a minute later, “Fuck.”

Bucky’s eyebrows rise. He waits for an explanation.

“There’s nothing. Just a mention of him not wanting to talk about the Valkyrie. Which dude, why would you even ask him about that? Are you his therapist?!” Scott asks the computer.
Bucky shakes his head. “You owe me lunch.”

“I never agreed,” Scott laughs. The chimes on the front door jingle, letting in a pair of giggling teenagers, their hair dyed colors of the rainbow.

“Time to work,” Bucky says, pushing Scott away from the counter and toward the customers.

“I work hard for the money so you better treat me right, Barnes.”

The day the online article about Steve refusing to talk about the Valkyrie is posted, is the same day his back pay finally comes through. He feels like the amount is too much, even by today’s inflated standards. It leaves him reeling. He’s never seen that many zeroes in his life.

June 10, 2014 2:00 PM EST
Steve Rogers: What do I do with these many zeroes

June 10, 2014 2:00 PM EST
Natasha Romanoff: put smiley faces in em

Steve frowns and checks the name again. Definitely still Nat.

The phone beeps again.

June 10, 2014 2:02 PM EST
Natasha Romanoff: its clint btw

Steve shakes his head, a small amused smile on his lips. He could ask if they were away on a mission, but that wouldn’t be very smart of him.

An hour later, another text message comes in.

June 10, 2014 2:02 PM EST
Natasha Romanoff: go see the world you saved, steve

He’s not sure if it’s still Clint or Nat. It feels like something either of them would say, a quiet moment of understanding underneath the facades they build up living the lives they do.

He texts back a simple, Thanks.

It’s three PM, one of the slowest times in the bookshop. Bucky scrolls through his Instagram feed, sifting through authors’ promos and photos, Sam and Riley’s date night selfies, Scott’s photo of the boxes in the backroom with a vintage filter slapped over it, Helen Cho smiling with her arms around two others, all of them wearing Oxfam t-shirts. He comments with heart eyes on Riley’s close-up photo of halo-halo, feeling a sudden craving for the shaved ice dessert with sweet beans, coconut, and ube. He stops on Helen’s photo of a young boy in a threadbare orange shirt, impish grin on his face.

The caption below reads, this kid just asked me if I liked Messi, along with the laugh-crying emoji. Bucky double taps the photo.

Not three seconds later, the top corner of his Instagram flashes with a message.
Helen: Do you even know what that meant?
Helen: Hey, Bucky.
Bucky: Hey to you, too.
Bucky: Messi, the football player? Not your type.
Helen: …
Bucky: Wait, is it a meme???
Helen: Watch some TV shows sometime, Bucky. :P
Bucky: Can’t, there are too many books to read and movies to catch up on.
Helen: Figures.
Bucky: How are you? How’s everyone?
Helen: I’m great, can’t you see I have kids asking me if I like Messi?
Helen: Everyone’s doing well. There’s only a couple of us left here that you know; a lot of the
volunteers are new. We just finished a community project here and we’re heading out soon.

Helen sends over a photo of a neat row of concrete bungalows, painted a cheap garish blue, beside
dirt roads. Two children are on the side of the frame, grinning toothily at the camera. Bucky feels
warmth spread in his chest—families now have more stable homes, thanks to their efforts.

Helen: Given any thought to coming back?

Bucky’s heart twitches. His palm starts to sweat. An explosion flashes through his mind, unbinned, a
little girl cradled in his arms, excruciating pain on his left.

Bucky: I can’t.
Helen: I understand.

And Bucky loves that about her—there’s no pity or fake sympathy.

He takes a deep breath, calms his heart down.

Helen: I found something interesting. I think you’ll like this.

Helen sends over a photo of a garage. There’s a shabby sign on it that says FREE BOOKS.
Underneath the sign are rows and rows of books and magazines, extending all the way inside.

He smiles, grateful for the distraction.

Bucky: That’s really cool. Those second-hand?
Helen: Yes, second-hand. They’re always open and willing to receive donations.
Bucky: Send me the contact details.

Steve sits in the park, pencil making rough strokes against the notebook on his lap. There’s a man in
tennis shorts and a blue shirt sitting in a manner that’s too relaxed a couple of benches away, like he
doesn’t actually know the meaning of relaxation.

Steve sketches him, the arm braced against the bench, shades on. Instead of the sports logo
embroidered on the man’s shirt, he changes it to the S.H.I.E.L.D. insignia.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent flicks a glance at his watch. Steve continues sketching—he details the
branches of the trees behind the benches, the way the blades of grass move with the wind. He draws
another bench across from the agent. There he places a thin man with hair covering his eyes, coat too
big, slumped over the bench. When he’s finished, the sun’s close to setting.

**Steve Rogers: Man Out of Time** newspaper headlines screamed when S.H.I.E.L.D. revealed that Captain America is alive and well.

Steve's got all the fucking time in the world now. He's healthy, he's alive, he's not on the edge of death, and he's not running towards death (well, not every day, at least).

Steve’s got a life. He has an apartment, a passport, and a whole notebook of historic occasions, social movements, and pop culture references to catch up on.

Life is good.

Life is fine.

Life is totally not how he expected it to be.

His world’s narrowed down to a fishbowl. The world is watching Captain America’s every move, cameras and smartphones at the ready to broadcast a single misstep.

It’s a world where Steve Rogers has no place in.

He tears the page from his notebook and jogs past the man, surreptitiously dropping the page as he passes by.

He doesn’t need to look back to know the agent picked up his work.

* *

When Steve gets back to his apartment, he heads straight for the laptop stored near the desk. He looks through the other sketches he made in the park while his laptop boots.

There’s Paris as he remembers it, cobbled streets and looming architecture. A dive bar in London, the pianist picking out a tune amidst loud soldiers. Rough terrain and mountains in Austria. Machinery, cages, and faceless soldiers.

When his laptop finally beeps, he tugs the machine closer and double-clicks on a browser window. He types in ‘Paris on a Budget.’ Link after link pops up—hostels, blogs, and more blogs. He clicks on the first link. There are beautiful photos, a walkthrough of the trip, a map, a budget.

Steve sits back and looks at the page. He dives back in, clicking through pages of links, blogs, countries. When he emerges from his Google hole almost ten hours later, he’s armed with a plan.

* *

When Natasha sees his list, her lips form into a line. Her hair’s a blood red today, curled at the ends and framing her face.

“Are you sure about this, Steve?” she asks. Her legs are crossed under the table, a booted stiletto heel balanced on the floor. There’s nothing to signify she’d been on a mission, except for the wrist bandage peeking out from her jacket sleeve. Clint, meanwhile, has a bandage on his left shoulder and three stitches above his eyebrow. Steve’s willing to bet that the one on his shoulder is fake. It makes enemies drop their guard, thinking someone doesn’t look competent, despite their bulk.

Steve nods. His back is to the wall, doors of the café within his line of vision. Natasha and Clint are seated on either side, with an easy view of the entrances.
“Somehow, this… both was and wasn’t how I imagined you doing this,” she says, slowly placing the list down on the table, fingers pressing it into the wood.

“Ah, let him be, Nat,” Clint says, eyes giving a cursory glance through Steve’s list. There’s a beat as Steve waits with bated breath, not sure of a reprimand or a sound of disapproval. “He’s a big boy.”

Nat rolls her eyes.

Clint leans forward, weight resting on his forearms. “Now when you get to Paris, here’s where you gotta go first—they make the best fucking coffee ever.”

“You drink coffee straight out of the pot, Clint,” Nat says, left eyebrow arched elegantly.

Clint shrugs. He shifts, legs knocking into Nat’s under the table. “Exactly.”

Steve listens as they talk, but he can’t decipher most of Natasha’s half-smiles or the way Clint moves around his seat. He’s with his team, but it still feels like he’s a stranger, looking in from the outside.

* *

“You’re a terrible cook, Sam,” Bucky says, delighted. He surveys the mess in the Guinto-Wilson kitchen—upturned cutlery and pans in the sink, jars of sauce on the counter, and bowls of ingredients next to them.

“You managed to burn toast daily when we were flatmates, Barnes,” Sam says, pointing the spatula at him. “You literally have no room to judge.”

Bucky extends his arms wide. “I have all this room to judge.”

Sam tosses a tomato at him. Bucky catches it in one gloved fist, making a face at the mess in his palm. He’s about to toss it back when the click of the front door reaches their ears.

“Anyone home?” Riley calls out, wheelchair making its usual noise in the hallway.

“In the kitchen,” Sam answers, setting the spatula down and wiping his hands on his bright-yellow apron. HOT STUFF COMING THROUGH is printed on it in block letters, but Bucky likes to pretend there’s nothing there.

“Woah,” Riley says, surveying the damage from the kitchen entrance. “Uhm. How was your cooking attempt today?”

Bucky starts snickering.

“Fine, until Robocop here showed up,” Sam says, walking to the entrance and greeting Riley with a kiss. “Salad’s in the fridge and done, at least.”

“I’m sure it’s all Bucky’s fault,” Riley says solemnly, patting Sam on the cheek.

“You’re perfect for each other,” Bucky says, grabbing a napkin to wipe off the tomato from his glove. He tosses it in the bin as Sam and Riley talk about Sam’s attempts at cooking.

“Well, if all else fails, there’s still some meat we can cook into adobo,” Riley says. He glances at the clock near the fridge.

Both Sam and Bucky freeze, look at the stroganoff Sam is attempting to make. Bucky knows Sam is thinking the same thing he is—hell yes, adobo.
Bucky tries to work his mental telepathy on Sam. *Let the stroganoff burn, Samuel. It’s halfway there anyway.*

(The stroganoff survives and doesn’t taste as awful as it looks. They have adobo the next day.)

Steve jumps off the train in Murau, St. Leonard with only his backpack. The sun greets him, warm and lazy. Snow covers the mountains and the slopes. He shifts his backpack onto his shoulders and begins the trek up to the resort.

(He could take a cab, he knows. But he’s spent the night in the night train traveling to Austria, and a little walking wouldn’t hurt. Besides, he’s walked this way before, tired, hungry, and recuperating from injury, sometimes with the extra weight of someone leaning on him to make it through. He should be able to walk part of the same way, now that he’s in top form.)

Three and a half hours later, Steve finds himself at the front of the family-run hostel he’s booked a stay in, his calves burning with a pleasant ache from the exercise.

The hostel is a sprawling three-storey, a comfortable homey feeling exuded by the yellow walls and terracotta roof. Inside, the floors are made of a rich warm wood, the sofas decked in red afghans, table centerpieces with red cloths.

It’s a beautiful place.

Steve takes a walk, boots leaving imprints on the cold snow. He takes a look around at the surrounding mountains, the snow. The last time he was here, he was liberating people sentenced to be forgotten, sentenced to die—or worse—by their own.

Steve doesn’t know how long he stands there, feels the sun attempt to warm his face, the cold seeping into his bones. He hears the sound of machinery, the grunts of hungry and tired soldiers, the stench of human bodies in close quarters with the accumulated weeks’-worth of sweat, blood, and piss. If he looks closely, he can envision where the factory was ages ago, before the magnificent ski resort that stands here now took its place.

This is the place where he became Captain America. It wasn’t the serum, or his tenacity, his drive, or even the USO costume. Here, he chose to stop being a dancing monkey.

And he succeeded.

He didn’t know it then, but this is—was—where Steve Rogers took a step back to make way for the beginnings of Captain America, the figurehead of the greater good.

“Hey,” a voice calls out.

Steve turns, yanked out of his thoughts. A woman with dark hair stands a few feet away from him. “Gonna stand here all day?”

Steve shrugs. “It’s a nice view.”

She looks over the area with him, at the vastness before them. “Huh. Well, if you’re ever bored, there’s a bunch of activities over there.” Her accent is melodic, rhythm dancing through the vowels in her words. She points her thumb towards the slopes. “Skiing, snowboarding, and the like. If
you’re interested.”

Steve nods. “I’ll keep it in mind, ma’am.”

She makes a face. “Don’t call me ma’am. See you around.”

She trudges off without a backward glance, heading towards the slopes, sporting equipment in tow.

Steve watches her leave before he opens Google on his phone and searches for snowboarding (sport, developed in the 1960s). He looks at the little photo on Wikipedia, staring. Then he opens YouTube. Steve watches videos for an hour.

* *

The next day, Steve decides to heed the woman’s advice and heads to the slopes. He doesn’t rent any equipment, though. He sits at one of the rest areas and pulls out his notebook, and begins sketching.

“If you’re out here,” a female voice says. Steve looks up and sees the dark-haired woman again, this time in purple winter gear, one hand blocking her eyes from the sunlight. “Then you might as well learn how to snowboard.”

“Hello,” Steve says. His grip on his pencil tightens reflexively.

“I’m Kate,” she extends her hand to him for a shake. “I teach snowboarding lessons.”

“Steve,” Steve offers, standing up and shaking her hand.

She looks at him in amusement, gesturing for him to sit again. She looks around pointedly. “So, snowboarding?”

“No, thank you.” Steve says.

She wrinkles her nose. “Did you just come to stare moodily at the horizon, then?”

Steve opens his mouth. He nods seriously. “I guess so.”

She lets out a small laugh. “Tell you what—it’s pretty slow this season. How about I give you a free trial, then you decide if you want to continue or not? You have any gear?”

* *

Steve finds himself on the slopes, Kate calling out instructions. He focuses on balancing, the thrill of learning, knowing something new firing up the blood in his veins.

“Alright, go!” Kate says.

Steve pushes of down the slope. He’s halfway through, balancing when an unbidden bubble of happiness blooms in his chest—the rush, the exhilaration of sliding down a mountain with only wood on his feet and winter gear protecting his body.

Steve laughs, feeling the cold air whip against his face.

(The rush makes him feel like he’s alive).
“Thank you,” Steve says. He means it.

It’s been awhile since he was actually treated like…. Steve Rogers, normal person, human being.

It’s a good feeling.

“You’ll be all right,” Kate says, looking at him. She motions to the snowboard then vaguely towards the place Steve stood yesterday, staring into the past. “Here or whatever it is. You’ll be all right.”

For the first time in a long time, Steve feels a warmth in his chest, lifting the corners of his mouth up in a smile.

Steve came to Austria with sadness surrounding him like a vice. He leaves with snow, sunshine, and a new trick up his sleeve.

(He’s bringing the Shield next time. He’ll be able to save up on renting a snowboard, at least.)

Steve’s mood trickles down to a sobering calm the closer he gets to his next destination. He sleeps fitfully, half-aware of the movements of the gentleman next to him, and the soft snores of the woman across the aisle. When the sun drifts in the window, warming his face, he finally gives up on sleep. He opens his eyes and waits.

The train shudders to a stop in Berlin.

Steve heads to the Denkmal für die im Nationalsozialismus verfolgten Homosexuellen first. The place is quiet and empty. In front of him stands a simple cube structure, made of concrete, with a tiny window on the side. When he looks inside, a short film of two men kissing is playing. He watches, his hand curled into a fist and trembling.

Slowly, he breathes through his nose, closes his eyes, and steps back.

He stays for a little while, watching, letting the grief wash over him. It’s better now, he thinks. It has to be.

With a last look at the the exhibit, he takes his leave, goes the two-minute walk to the Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas. He goes down the uneven steps, concrete slabs on either side of him. The deeper he gets, the more lost and alone he feels. He’s over six feet tall but he doesn’t see much outside of the installation, hiding him from the sights and sounds of the city.

He makes his way to the information center downstairs and into the Room of Names. He listens in the dark room, individual names flashed on a screen with their birth and death dates. He listens to the short biographies of the people lost.

And oh, how so many were lost.

He remembers telling Nick Fury, days after waking up from the ice, the cold debrief they’d given him—brand new world, war won, safe, comrades gone—They say we won. But they didn’t tell us what we lost.
And seeing all this, today, he wonders, what if they’d lost more? What if he hadn’t taken the serum, what if he hadn’t crashed his plane? Would it have made any difference?

Those are things he knows he will never have the answers to.

But if crashing his plane on the ice meant somehow, there was less of this… even if it was just a little… then maybe it was worth it. Losing his life. Losing his home.

He stays and listens until it’s time to close.

* *

“Captain America’s in Europe,” Scott says, smacking Bucky on the shoulder with a hardbound copy of _The Hate U Give_. His eyes are trained on his mobile phone.

“What’s he doing here?” Bucky asks, grabbing the book from Scott’s hand and tucking it away under the counter, away from further damage.

“He’s in Germany,” Scott clarifies, brandishing his phone in Bucky’s face.

Bucky squints at the photo.

“Damn,” he says. In it, Steve Rogers is standing inside the Holocaust Memorial. The concrete gray slabs surround him from all sides, a stark contrast to the picture of health he makes. It makes the hairs on Bucky’s arm rise.

“Yeah,” Scott says. “I’m sending this site a virus. It’s going to disappear like that site that thought it was a-okay to slander the Captain just because he came out.”

Bucky shakes his head. “Don’t get caught, Scott.”

Scott flashes him a grin. “I like how you don’t stop me doing shit, Barnes.”

“I’m your employer, not your mother.” Bucky says.

“And thank fuck for that.” Scott says, pumping a fist in the air.

* *

Steve hasn’t been approached for a photo or a selfie in two weeks, not since he flew out of the States. So it was bound to happen, Steve thinks to himself, scrolling past the photo of him in the Memorial. Thankfully, he’d already hit the train bound to London by the time the photos came out.

* *

Steve’s spent an hour along Portobello Road before he sees the pap on the left side of the street, trying to be inconspicuous by a street lamp. He crosses to the other side, pushing his dark aviators up his nose. He ducks into the first store he sees, tucked behind a screaming red door and under a blue and white striped awning.

He listens, feet planted in front of the door, shoulders tense. His eyes dart around the store. Four rows of wooden shelves are in front of him, leading to a path to the counter. Behind the counter is a man wearing a dark jacket, elbow on the table, chin on his hand, flipping the pages of a book with his gloved left hand.

No one follows Steve in.
He relaxes by a hair and heads to the nearest shelf. Row upon row of books are on the shelf, creaking under their weight. He runs his fingers along the spines, pulls a book out at random. There’s a dog with a pitchfork spearing it drawn on the cover, against a blue background. He puts it back. There’s no semblance of order to the books, Steve finds. They aren’t arranged alphabetically by author or title.

He looks up, hoping for a sign—a genre, maybe? But there isn’t any. He looks towards the register.

He’s walked along the shelf so he’s near enough that his enhanced vision lets him read the man’s nametag on his jacket. It says James in white block letters against a dark gray background. James has dark hair tied up in a bun, a hint of stubble across his jaw.
Steve pulls another book out again.
It’s the cover that attracts him. White, with a quote in embossed rainbow colors in front:

_We were all heading for each other on a collision course, no matter what. Maybe some people are just meant to be in the same story._

He picks it up, feels the weight of it in his hands. He flips the book and skims through the awards and accolades and the summary. He ends up taking the book to the register.

James isn’t there. Steve stands, holds the book in his hands as he looks around. The bookshop is small, dust motes floating through the top shelves, lit by a ray of sunlight from the window.

“You have it down your pants,” says a slightly exasperated voice, American accent evident. Steve looks around and there, at the corner, is James talking to another customer. “Look, just put it back please.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The book you’ve shoved down your pants.”

“My… pants?”

“Yeah.”

The other’s man tone turns lascivious, dripping honey. “Well, if you wanted to see what was in my pants…”

There’s a beat of silence and Steve wonders if he should just leave the shop or bust them for public indecency, when: “Oh for the love of—your trousers, then. The book down your trousers.”

“There is no book down my trousers.” The statement is definitive, and really, Steve can tell it’s a lie.

“—” James says, then shrugs. “Look pal, we can do it the easy way or not. I can call the police, have you arrested. Or, you can pull that copy of _Catcher in the Rye_ out of your pants, pay for it, and go on your own way.”

There’s a shuffle.

“I’m going to go back to the register now,” James says. Steve watches as he walks past the wall of books, grumbling about the utter disrespect for literature. James startles when he sees Steve, then gives him a small nod in greeting, as if he hadn’t just had a conversation about books being shoved down pants. Trousers. Whatever. “Ready for me to ring you up?”

Curiosity piqued, Steve shakes his head. “Just going to check this shelf here.” When he turns, the would-be thief is behind him, clutching a book between his hands.

Steve tries to ignore him, stepping closer to the bookshelf. He frowns, wondering just how in hell James finds anything here, when there is no semblance of order.

“Excuse me,” the man says, book in hand. “If I could just get your autograph.”

Steve counts in his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees James’ eyebrows rise a fraction.

“I don’t sign autographs.” Steve says, firm but kind.

Pants Man just stares, holding out the book.
Steve sighs. “Is that the book that was down your…trousers?”

James smirks.

“Why don’t you grab a second book? Can’t go around traumatizing more people,” James says, leaning against the counter, chin in hand. He’s wearing a brown glove on his left hand, leather against his stubble.

Steve picks out a book from the shelf. *The Book Thief*. Huh. The cover is the color of parchment, a little girl dancing with death. He flips to the back and reads the summary.

He looks up, opens the book to the front page.

“Could I borrow a pen?”

James wordlessly hands him one. Steve nods in thanks.

“Dear—” Steve scribbles on the front page, the lines of ink starting to bleed on to the white paper.

“Rufus,” The would-be-thief supplies helpfully.

“—Rufus,” Steve makes sure his scrawl is nearly unintelligible. “You belong in jail. Cap.”

Steve hears a snicker being stifled. He looks up at the sound, the corner of his mouth lifting. He turns back to Rufus and hands him the book.

“Could you, if you could, sign your whole title?” Rufus says, not accepting the book.

“I didn’t know there was a Captain Britain in this universe,” Steve says wryly.

Rufus blinks owlishly at him. Steve stares back.

Pick your fucking battles, right? Stifling another sigh, Steve signs the book with *Captain America*, like that’s all he is. He drops the book into Rufus’ eager hands. Which at some point in the last ten minutes had been down his pants.

“Thanks,” Rufus says. He shuffles to the register, both books clasped in his hands. Steve goes back to the shelf. The titles stare back at him, a life he lived, a life he slept through. *Code Name: Verity*. *Hitler’s Canary*. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. *Number the Stars*.

“I’m seriously calling the police next time,” Steve hears James say from the register.

“Won’t be a next time,” Rufus says, cheerfully.

“Better not be,” James says.

When Steve turns around again, Rufus is there, staring at him.

“I was just wondering,” Rufus says, “If you would like to have dinner with me?”

Steve’s blinks, but takes it in stride. It isn’t the first time something like this happened.

“Sorry, I can’t,” Steve says, trying to keep a straight face. *Put the dancing monkey face on, Cap. There you go.*

“Oh well, I tried.” Rufus holds out his hand to shake.
Steve stares.
James stares.
Rufus stares.

“Uh,” Steve says. His eyes flick to James for a cue.

“Dude, seriously,” James says. “That was down your pants.”

Rufus shrugs.

“Maybe next time?” Steve tries.

“When?”

“When you’re not a budding thief and when you’ve practiced decent hygiene,” Steve says firmly.

“Sounds fair,” Rufus says agreeably. He walks out of the store without looking back.

James starts laughing, shoulders shaking. Steve looks at him.

“Sorry,” James says, trying to control himself. “It’s just…” He starts laughing again and pretty soon, Steve is joining him, their laughter loud in the tiny bookshop.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve says, moving closer to the register.

“James Barnes. But you can call me Bucky,” James says, extending his hand. His eyes are a brilliant shade of gray.

“That’s not what it says on your tag,” Steve says, nodding at the pin on his chest.

Bucky isn’t even fazed. “This tag is for people I don’t want to talk to, pal.”

Steve snorts. “Charming.”

Bucky grins at him. “So, what’ll it be?”

Steve sets the book down on the counter.

Bucky’s eyes stray to the cover, reading the quote in front. The smile that blooms on his face is soft. “Great choice.”

*

Bucky stares at the closed door of his bookshop, the one that Steve Rogers, Captain America himself, just walked through, paper bag in hand. Carrying a Young Adult novel. About art, twins, family, and first loves. A book on the Rainbow List Top Ten.

Sam is going to die with envy.

Scott is going to die, period.

Bucky leans against the counter, palms holding his weight. He looks down and laughs, the surreal experience just hitting him. Captain America. In his little bookshop. Jesus.

The door opens and a man comes in, eyes roaming the bookstore. He’s wearing dark jeans and a
jacket. After a cursory look at one shelf, he approaches Bucky.

“So, ah, do you have… the latest E.L. James?” He looks at Bucky, from his hair, chin, to his nameplate, down to his gloved hand. Bucky’s hand twitches at the scrutiny, but he keeps it on the counter.

“No, sir.” Bucky says, resisting the temptation to hit his head on the desk. “This is a Young Adult bookstore.”

“Oh,” the man says. He looks around the store, assessing. A camera peeks out from his side, the strap digging in one shoulder as he reaches over to pluck a book out at random. “A bit dumb isn’t it, just to sell one genre?” he asks, looking over the copy of To Kill A Mockingbird in his hands.

Bucky wants to pry the classic out of his hands. “Young Adult books span a range of genres.”

The door opens again and Scott comes in, toting a paper bag with two plastic containers. Good. He can foist this dude off to Scott.

Bucky takes the paper bag from Scott once he reaches the counter. “I’m gonna head to the back,” he says.

Scott narrows his eyes at him but turns to the counter. “I’m gonna head to the back,” he says.

Scott narrows his eyes at him but turns to the counter. “They’re out of everything, so I only managed to get salad.”

Bucky stops in his tracks, turns, and glares at Scott. Scott smirks at him.

Their customer clears his throat.

Bucky ignores him, sighs the sigh of the put-upon. “I’m gonna go put this down and get us something filling.”

“Hem, hem,” the customer says.

“Right on, bossman.” Scott says. He turns to the customer. “D’you want water or something?”

Bucky snickers in the backroom.

Bucky buys lunch at a Persian place a block down from the store, two shawarma wrapped in pita bread, oozing with hot sauce and mayonnaise. He’s lost in thoughts, wondering if a sign ‘WE DON’T CARRY E.L. JAMES HERE’ on his shop window would be too much, when he bumps into a wall of bricks, the shawarma knocked of his hands.

“Shi—uhm,” the wall of bricks says.

“Oh fuck, sorry,” Bucky says, cringing at the lost shawarma. When he looks up, there, in front of him, stands Steve Rogers. With a mayonnaise and hot sauce stain on his (tight, two sizes too small) white shirt. “Oh.”

Steve gives him something that resembles half a smile, half a wince. One hand is rubbing his chest, right below where the ugly stain is. Bucky’s eyes widen; he’d hit Steve with his metal arm. Oops.

“Sorry,” Steve says. “Are you hurt?”

“I am so sorry,” Bucky says, for hitting you with solid metal. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.
Are you okay?"

Steve drops the hand soothing his chest, looking at Bucky’s arm, still covered in a jacket and a glove, then back up to his face. “It’s alright, it’s just a shirt.”

Bucky swallows. “Uh, yeah, that’s gonna stain. And it’s not really a good scent to walk around in, you know. You’ll attract flies.”

Steve chuckles. “I’ll live.”

“Look, if you want, you can get cleaned up at my place? My flat’s just over here.”

Steve looks at him and considers, tongue running over his bottom lip. Bucky’s eyes flicker to the movement, then back up to Steve’s eyes; wishing they weren’t covered by the aviators. “Where?”

“There,” Bucky says, pointing with a gloved hand to his apartment across the street, a few doors down. “Blue door.”

Steve twists. He looks at Bucky’s apartment, the bright blue doors nestled between two white columns, surrounded by other colorful walk-ups, then looks up and around, almost as if looking for other people.

Bucky shifts and scoops the fallen shawarma, tosses them in a nearby trash bin.

When Steve turns to face him again, his face is furrowed in concentration. He takes a hesitant step back, then breathes, sets his shoulders, chin jutting out, before he gives Bucky a small nod. Bucky tries to smile reassuringly as he steps forward, Steve following him.

“I’ve got some stain remover that will work. Or I could lend you a shirt. Normally, I’d say they’re too small for you but I don’t think you have a problem wearing shirts that aren’t your size,” Bucky says as they cross the street.

Steve’s mouth drops open.

Bucky snickers.

*Bucky’s not a slob, not really. It’s just that sometimes, it’s tiring to have to clean up after yourself every single day. So he’s got a couple of unwashed plates in the sink, books scattered on the sofa, and maybe a stray jacket over an armchair. It’s not a pigsty. It’s a normal adult apartment.

Bucky tries to remind himself of that as he lets Steve in.

“Nice place,” Steve says, hands in his pockets, shoulders stiff. He takes in the leather couch with Japanese thrillers between the cushions, the circular bookshelf Bucky installed himself when he was on Pinterest mode, groaning with books and Harry Potter Funko Pops, the view of the kitchen with last night’s take-out peeking out from the trash.

“Thanks,” Bucky says. He turns to face Steve. “Bathrooms right up here, to the left. Follow me and I’ll get you something to change into while you’re cleaning that up.”

Steve Rogers is in Bucky Barnes’ London apartment. It’s probably as weird as it sounds. Bucky muses as he goes through his drawers in search of a clean shirt that’ll fit Steve, finally seeing a gray short-sleeved henley.
He knocks at the bathroom door. Steve opens it with his jacket in one hand, his white shirt in the sink. His aviators are folded next to the tap.

“Uh.” Bucky says, blinking at the expanse of chest in front of him, muscles bulging through a white undershirt. Like, how is it possible to have that much? He shoves the shirt to Steve’s chest awkwardly. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Steve says, one hand coming up to grasp the shirt, blue eyes locking on to Bucky’s.

Bucky breathes, feels the static on his skin. “Sure, pal.” He forces his fingers to let go of the shirt, one foot stepping back. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

He turns to go, the click of the door closing behind him. When Bucky arrives at the first floor landing, he leans against the wall, takes a moment to take in the utter surrealness of the day, then proceeds to the kitchen to scrounge up something to feed his unexpected guest.

Steve shakes his head. He’s checked the bathroom for bugs, feeling a little silly as he finished and found nothing. Of course there’s nothing to find. Bucky is a civilian who works in a bookstore. He’s not an undercover agent or secret paparazzi. He rubs the stains out of his shirt, letting the suds soak in his skin. There are more people inclined to not stare at him like a sore thumb than the opposite. He thinks of Kate, the families staying in the snow resort in Austria, the bright-eyed teenager at the supermarket. His gut tells him Bucky is more like them and less like people like Brock.

He lifts his undershirt, feeling the area where Bucky bumped into him earlier. There’s a fading red mark, his healing rapidly stopping any bruise from happening. To even get one from a bump—Steve thinks of the glove, the force of the bump, how Bucky favors his left side when he walks—Bucky must have a heavy prosthetic. Metal or mechanical, even.

He wonders what happened before quashing the thought down, shoving it in the trunk in his brain marked ‘Not Your Business’.

He pulls the borrowed shirt on. He’s got the stain out of his own shirt, but most of the front is still drenched. He tosses the shirt over one arm, jacket over the other, and finds his way back downstairs.

Bucky is leaning into the fridge, gloved fingers curling around the corner of the door. The side of the fridge is occupied by poetry magnets. It looks like a cloud of random words—longing, seventeen, daybreak, together, furnace, and a bunch more—before it breaks into a separate group from the cloud, five horizontal lines—

when I tell you I love you
what I mean is
i’m

Steve doesn’t get to read the rest when the fridge door closes and his eyes stray to Bucky holding up a see-through plastic container.

“Care for some Vanilla Plum Crumble Pie? It’s not fresh from the oven, but it was only from last night—a friend of mine’s trying his hand out at baking. We can heat it up.”

“No, thank you,” Steve says.

Bucky shrugs, places the container on the table. “More for me and Scott then.” He gestures to a glass bowl of fruit in the middle of the table. “Plums? Bananas?”
“No, thank you.”

“Soda? Juice? Water?”

“No, thanks.”

“Do you always say no to everything?” Bucky asks, a half-amused smile on his lips.

(Bucky has been welcoming and kind but the thing is—Steve is just not used to being offered anything, to being treated as a guest in someone’s home. He’s too used to people thinking he’ll do things for them—like saving the world after waking up from dying.)

Steve bites his lip. “Only on days ending in y.”

“Oh well, glad that’s clear, then,” Bucky says, snorting.

“I’ve imposed enough on you already,” Steve says, shifting his weight from his left.

Bucky looks at him for a beat, then, gently says, “It’s not an imposition. I made a mess, I invited you in my home.” When Steve says nothing, he points at the shirt hanging on Steve’s arm. “Gimme that, we can toss it in the dryer.”

“You really don’t need to,” Steve says.

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Steve. Come on.”

“Let me do it, at least,” Steve says. He’s probably going to search Bucky’s laundry room for bugs too, God help him, if he’s left alone.

Bucky motions to a doorway just off the kitchen. “This way, then.”

Steve nods and enters. He focuses on his breathing as he places his shirt in the dryer. There are still people who value privacy, Steve. He presses the buttons to begin the spin cycle.

As the machine hums to life, Steve glances at the mostly closed doorway, a brief second of indecision before Natasha’s words echo in his head. Better safe than sorry, Steve. He scours the laundry room efficiently, inside the washing machine, sides of the equipment, the pull-out ironing board. His enhanced hearing catches a ringtone, hears Bucky pick-up a call.

Satisfied with the inspection, Steve moves to walk back to the kitchen, already feeling a little foolish because the laundry room is a strange choice for a room to have surveillance in, and guilty for thinking this way of a person who has been nothing but kind to him—although he knows that whatever gut feeling he may have about Bucky, the circumstances are different here than with the others. He’s not in public; he’s in someone’s home.

He’s got one hand on the doorknob, when he realizes Bucky’s still on the phone, the conversation filtering through the open doorway.

“Yeah, I’ll be a bit late coming back,” Bucky is saying. Steve hears the sound of a chair grating against the floor. Inexplicably, his heart rate speeds up, body ready for action. Two rooms are free of bugs, but…

“I ran into someone,” Bucky says. There’s a thunk, like a heavy metal object landing on a wooden surface. Bucky’s prosthetic? “Just having a quick catch-up.”
The knot in Steve’s chest loosens. *Not everyone wants to sell your face to the papers, Captain America.*

*Just trust your gut. Steve Rogers would have.*

“Well it’s not my fault you failed to buy lunch, right?” Bucky is saying. Then he laughs, a choked up sound. “I am not having sex right now.”

Steve feels his face heat. He should probably close the door, not that it would stop his enhanced hearing. He watches his shirt in the dryer, the white flying around in circles. There’s twenty minutes left; he should probably stay in the kitchen. No one actually watches their clothes spin dry.

“Because if I was, I wouldn’t be here talking to you, fucker,” Bucky finishes.

Steve’s blush intensifies.

A loud ringing sound fills the room. Startled, Steve pats his pockets and pulls out his own phone.

Maria Hill is on the line.

*They’re in Bucky’s hallway; Steve’s still in the borrowed shirt, jacket on, back to the doorway. Somehow, the space feels so small.*

“It’s been interesting, Steve Rogers,” Bucky says, hint of a grin peeking at the corner of his mouth. “Kind of surreal, but interesting.”

“Glad I could provide you entertainment,” Steve says solemnly. “I can’t imagine the shenanigans you normally get into, bookshop and shawarma and all.”

(He’s resisting the urge to say, *Thanks for giving me a sort-of normal few hours.*)

Bucky laughs, a full bodied one, and Steve wants to move closer, drawn to the sound. Bucky smiles at him, eyes soft and warm, inviting. His eyes flick briefly to Steve’s lips before going back to his eyes.

Bucky clears his throat. “So, I’ll find a way to get your shirt back to you. FedEx it, or something.”


“Oh,” Bucky says, keeping eye contact. “You could get my number.”

He leans back just a fraction, and Steve detects the slight nerves for what it is.

Steve listens to his gut feeling.

“I could get your number,” he agrees.

They stare at each other.

Bucky’s first to break eye contact, chuckling. He hands his phone over to Steve.

“Here, put your number in. I’ll give you a call so you can save mine.”

“Okay.” Steve keys his number in, hand shaking only slightly. He looks up apologetically as he
hands the phone back to Bucky. “I'm sorry to leave like this. I really need to go.”

“Go save the world, Captain.”

“I'll keep in touch.” Steve’s only been here for a couple of hours but there’s a certain kind of solace in the place. Going out the door would mean entering the busy, noisy, world again.

“Good,” Bucky says. He grins. “I'll make sure you do.”

Steve nods and turns his back, fingers grasping the doorknob.

“Hey,” Bucky calls before the door closes behind him. “Take care, okay?”

Steve throws a small smile over his shoulder. He doesn’t know why those two words almost break him.

*  

Steve’s got a cut on his cheek, a bruised rib, sprained ankle, and a broken arm from a calculated play in stopping the villain du jour. He surveys the aftermath, broken buildings and blocked off streets, wisps of smoke curling the air.

He can’t believe he was racing down a mountain on a snowboard just a few weeks ago.

Natasha steps into his line of vision, stopping into a wide stance in front of him. “What the fuck, Captain.”

Steve winces. “It was the only way. Civilians would have died if I didn’t.”

There is complete and utter silence. Steve feels a trickle of fear make it’s way down, starting from the back of his neck.

“Sixteen. We've done sixteen missions together in two years. And every single one of them you found a way to make a sacrifice play.” Natasha’s voice spears through Steve like ice.

“That's not true.” It was usually because there wasn't time to do anything else.

Really.

“Bullshit. Kill this stupid notion that you have to sacrifice yourself to save others, Rogers,” Nat says, eyes burning. “That’s not what being a hero is. That’s what someone who has a death wish does.”

They’ve been fighting for days. Steve is exhausted. “What would you have done?”

“I always have an exit plan, Steve. And if I didn’t, I’d damn well look for one.”

“Because you feel like you have too much to make up for?” As fast as he’d said it, he wishes he could take it back, grab the words from the air, lock them back in the darkness in his mind, his heart. Natasha’s face remains the same, but Steve knows her enough, the slightest flash of hurt crossing her eyes.

A hand lands on Steve’s shoulder. Hard. He winces.

“Easy. You okay, Cap?” Clint asks, but he’s looking at Natasha.

“No,” Nat says, slowly. Her eyes haven’t left Steve’s. “It’s because I want to live.”
She walks off, heels not even making a sound.

“Yeah,” Steve manages to choke out. “I should…”

“Don’t,” Clint says, looking him in the eye. “Cap. Steve. I know you think we don’t care about you, that we’re only following you because S.H.I.E.L.D. made us, but, joke’s on you, man. We do. We care. So we’d appreciate it if you didn’t try pulling shit like that every time. It’s getting old.”

He claps Steve’s shoulder again, hard, then turns and follows the path Natasha disappeared down to.

Steve sits and buries his head in his hands.

August 10, 2014 7:10 PM EDT
**Bucky Barnes:** I saw the news. Are you okay?

August 10, 2014 11:59 PM EDT
**Steve Rogers:** I’m fine.

August 12, 2014 01:02 AM EDT
**Steve Rogers:** Maybe I’m not fine.

Steve lies awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. He’s in D.C.

It’s early morning in London.

August 12, 2014 03:05 AM EDT
**Bucky Barnes:** How bad is it?

Steve squints at his phone, before he finally understands.

August 12, 2014 03:15 AM EDT
**Steve Rogers:** Healing.

August 12, 2014 03:16 AM EDT
**Bucky Barnes:** ...You didn’t mean physical injuries

August 12, 2014 03:30 AM EDT
**Steve Rogers:** It’s ok.

August 12, 2014 03:30 AM EDT
**Bucky Barnes:** No, it’s not. I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?

Steve types. Steve erases. Steve watches the little dots on his screen as he types and erases.

August 12, 2014 03:45 AM EDT
**Steve Rogers:** I finished the book I bought from you.
August 12, 2014 09:00 AM BST
**Bucky Barnes:** How did you find it?

August 12, 2014 09:05 AM BST  
**Steve Rogers:** "Reality is crushing. The world is a wrong-sized shoe. How can anyone stand it?"

Bucky stares at the words on the screen. Of all the quotes to pull from the book, he didn’t expect that to be the one to resonate with Steve Rogers.

Then again, maybe he should have.

August 12, 2014 09:08 AM BST  
**Bucky Barnes:** "You have to see the miracles for there to be miracles."

*   

Steve didn’t use to hate hospitals. No matter how many times he’d been in them as a child, as a teenager, as an adult, they’d always been places that saved him and a place where his mother saved people. They weren’t the best places but they were good places.

He understands people that hate them now. The smell of medicine infiltrates his senses, the tang of sterile equipment and cleaned floors. The lights feel extra bright against his eyes.

It’s a few days since he was discharged, and today he’s visiting Peggy. She’s grown weaker since the last time he saw her, frail wrists over the white sheets.

Steve rallies and carries on talking about the places he’s been, the things that changed. He thinks maybe he’ll go to that dive bar in London where he asked Peggy to dance.

“Oh, Steve,” she says, her eyes glassy. “I wish you wouldn’t torture yourself this way.”

Steve stops.

She’s looking at him, and it feels like she can see his soul, see the man he is before the costume everyone sees, like she remembers. “Visiting those places… I hope you aren’t making yourself miserable. Don’t live in the past. All we can do is do our best, and sometimes, the best we can do is start over.”

Steve looks at the floor. Steve Rogers lives in the past. Captain America… lives here.

“Tell me more about that bookshop owner,” Peggy says, a tilt of delight in her voice.

Steve shrugs. “We… text.”

“Hmm,” Peggy says. There’s a quiet beat, thrum of the machines in the air.

“You know, I used to be afraid you’d go the way of Charlie and Algernon,” she says, eyes closed. The sudden shifts in topics happens sometimes, with Peggy.

“Who?” Steve tries to remember if he knew anyone named Algernon from the war and which of the many Charlies she could be talking about.

“It’s a book, Steve.” Peggy’s looking at him now. Her eyes are still as beautiful as when he first saw her years ago. “Never you mind. Don’t look for it.”

Steve holds her hand until she doesn’t recognize him again.
It’s because of Peggy’s words about starting over that Steve finds himself at the airport again, continuing his trip from his disrupted itinerary. He looks around, bored, before staring at his Starkphone.

He and Bucky have been texting regularly since the aftermath of the mission. It’s… nice to have someone who isn’t deeply entangled in the uncontrollable part of his life. Someone he can pretend to be an ordinary person with.

It makes him feel calm. Warm, even. Bucky’s easy to talk to, and he doesn’t make Steve feel like he’s a relic, a celebrity, or a weapon to be used. Like Steve’s just some guy he met in a bookstore who also happens to be Captain America.

It’s 11 am, so it shouldn’t be too bad a time to call, right?

He bites the bullet and presses the green button.

Bucky picks up on the third ring. Steve can’t stop the grin trying to take over his face. “Hello. Are you busy?”

“Nope,” Bucky says. “How are you?”

Steve settles into his seat, back trying to rest comfortably against the red cushion and cramped row of airport chairs. Why are airport waiting area chairs so small, anyway? A little boy sits across from him, hands tapping against a yellow gaming device with a sticker of a… rat looking thing with red cheeks in front. Next to him sits a teenager with the same dark hair, her neck arched uncomfortably on the headrest as she stares at the ceiling. Steve’s eyes, against his better judgment, flick up as well. It’s…. nondescript, as far as ceilings go.

“I’m at the airport and I forgot a book to read. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Hmm.” Steve hears the clinking sounds of the register across the line. He bites his lip; Bucky seems busy—but he said he wasn’t, so he should take Bucky at his word.

He swallows the offer to call again, even as he hears the crumple of bills. Bucky’s voice is smooth over the line when he asks, “Long or short flight?”

“About seventeen hours,” Steve answers. He hears a woman at the other end of the line, exchanging pleasantries. There’s a muffled response from Bucky, and Steve imagines he’s put his hand over the mouthpiece. Steve hears faint footsteps on the line. Across him, the girl with dark hair has finally looked down from the ceiling and is rummaging through her bag.

“The hell.” Bucky says, voice clear again. “Well, you’ll probably need at least a couple, pal. Although there are movies on the flight that you can watch.”

Steve hums. “I don’t want to spend the whole time watching.”

“Fair. You can sleep too, you know.”

“Hey, if you don’t have anything to recommend…” Steve starts, a challenging lilt in his tone.

“Easy,” Bucky says, chuckling. “Alright, so you’ve read Harry Potter, right? If you liked that, you’ll probably like the Percy Jackson series—the sequels with the Roman Gods, I’m not that sure of yet, but the original one—”
“What’s Harry Potter?” Steve asks. A man in a gray suit rushes by, newspaper clutched in one hand. Across him, the siblings are whispering.

“You don’t know Harry Potter? You come into my bookshop, pick indie books and Rainbow List Top Tens of my shelves, and you don’t know Harry Potter?” Bucky’s voice starts off calm and evolves to incredulous at the end, and the sound of a book hitting the floor comes through.

Steve can’t control his laughter, eyes crinkling, the stress of the previous days slowly melting off him. The siblings stop talking to give him twin looks of weirdness.

“I hate you,” Bucky says.

“Okay,” Steve says, surprisingly agreeable.

“Fuck,” Bucky mutters. Steve laughs some more.

“Clint made me watch it,” Steve explains. He stretches his legs in front of him, his jeans pulling at his thighs. “I have a list.”

“Oh?” Bucky asks. Steve imagines his eyebrows rising.

“It was Nat’s idea. Things I have to see to be updated with this century. It’s got notable historical occasions, social movements, pop culture, and music.”

Steve hears the mechanical whir of Bucky’s arm in the background even as an announcement for a boarding comes over the speakers. “Can I see it?” Bucky asks.

Steve’s heart makes an unexpected jump at the thought of seeing Bucky again. “Sure.”

“Cool.” Maybe Bucky is smiling at the other end of the line.

“So, tell me more about Percy Jackson?”

* 

Steve manages to board without much incident—the TSA agent gives him a long weary glance though, gray eyes giving him a thorough once-over, muttering that he looked extremely familiar before letting him pass.

(Steve finds himself smiling in delight later; getting suspected of being a troublemaker would’ve happened to Steve Rogers, once people knew how he wouldn’t back down from a fight, but not Captain America, hero, symbol of all that is good and just).

* 

Steve arrives in Rome at ten in the morning. From the airport, he takes the train and transfers straight to Monte Cassino. He watches the sights pass by from the window, observes the neoclassical and fascist designs of the buildings.

When the train stops at Cassino, he grips his backpack straps and begins the twenty-five minute walk uphill to the Montecassino Monastery.

He walks behind a group of friends, tourists like him, probably around his age too. One of them looks over and smiles at him.

“Salut,” he says, blond hair flopping over his eyes. “Ça va?”
“Ça va,” Steve replies. “Je ne parle pas Francais… much.”

Steve’s French skills are rusty, not to mention they were limited to basic conversation during the war.

“Pas mal,” the tourist says, smiling, nodding in understanding. He’s soon drawn back into conversation with his friends, but the air around them is open, easy.

The Monastery is grand, sprawling across several hectares. Steve stops by the Church first. The Basilica’s high ceilings are bathed in golden light, portraits painted between the stucco designs of the ceiling. It’s a beautiful restoration, without a hint of the massive damage it’s taken over the years—from looting in the early centuries, to the one caused by the Allied Forces during the War. The underlying current of guilt thums in his veins. Beautiful, it’s beautiful, but underneath these walls darkness lies—so much innocent blood spilled on the off-chance that the Nazis would be using the place as a base. Even when the Germans sent word to both the Vatican and the Allied forces that they wouldn’t.

Outside, Steve spots the Polish war cemetery that spans across the valley.

They say we won. But they didn’t tell us what we lost.

In this place, hundreds of civilian lives seeking refuge were lost. All from an order served by the very people he willingly wanted to serve.

Steve spends the day in Montecassino, going through the museums and admiring the work on the Basilica. He pays his respects to the dead. Each grave tells him that eventually, some people do become the monsters they set out to fight.

* *

August 20, 2014 04:00 PM CST
Steve Rogers: “Sometimes mortals can be more horrible than monsters.”

August 20, 2014 04:10 PM CST
Bucky Barnes: Looks like someone read Percy Jackson.

August 20, 2014 04:14 PM CST
Steve Rogers: Someone did.

* *

Steve pockets his phone and walks around the 6e arrondisment, cap pulled low over his head. He stops by a café and orders some café au lait, sits on one of the wooden chairs outside. He plants his feet on the metal table stand, coffee between his fingers. The sun warms his shoulders. He closes his eyes, inhales the scent of the coffee.

Enjoi the world.

A brunette girl with ringlets skips by, poodle following her on a leash, her *au pair* following close by.

Inside the café, two girls are giggling over a mobile phone. The one with pink streaks in her hair has her sneakered foot looped over the rung of her the stool, elbows planted firmly on the table as she leans closer to her friend. Her eyes are sparkling with mischief.
Natasha and Clint would probably call the café hipster. Steve bites his lip at the thought of his team. He’s used to swallowing his emotions or shoving his frustrations out with a good fistfight. He doesn’t feel equipped to handle emotional confrontations, not face to face. He drags his hands over his face and considers—writing a letter maybe? A long text?

How does one apologize for something they aren’t completely sorry for?

It’s been a thrumming thought in his head for weeks since the mission.

He looks out at the street, waiting for the words to come. When Steve’s alone, he knows he gets into his head too much. It’s not unreasonable; there’s hardly anyone around he knows that he shares some life experience with.

Steve Rogers has always been quiet.

He thinks about Italy, and how it was almost instinct that made him reach for the phone in his pocket, quote of one of the books he’d read during the flight coming into his head, unbidden. He pulls his phone out.

August 24, 2014 03:25 PM CEST
Steve Rogers: How does one apologize for something they aren’t completely sorry for?

August 24, 2014 03:30 PM CEST
Bucky Barnes: Do or do not, there is no try.

August 24, 2014 03:32 PM CEST
Steve Rogers: ….so don’t apologize?

August 24, 2014 03:33 PM CEST
Bucky Barnes: Don’t give a damnass half-hearted apology.
Bucky Barnes: What did you do?

August 24, 2014 03:35 PM CEST
Steve Rogers: Nothing.

August 24, 2014 03:37 PM CEST
Steve Rogers: Fought. Didn’t have an exit plan.

August 24, 2014 03:40 PM CEST
Bucky Barnes: Damn, Steve.
Bucky Barnes: I know you’re mega-enhanced and all, but that doesn’t mean people don’t worry about you. Apologize. Mean it.

August 24, 2014 03:42 PM CEST
Bucky Barnes: This… feels historically accurate.

August 24, 2014 03:45 PM CEST
Steve Rogers: But I would do the same thing again, if the situation arises.

August 24, 2014 03:47 PM CEST
Bucky Barnes: I'm disowning you.
Steve’s in his fourth art gallery for the day. Out the window, the sun is low on the horizon, painting the cobblestones pink and orange. Inside, various artworks made by twenty artists are on display. Different styles are displayed, canvases are stacked in shelves for people to look through and purchase. Steve contemplates a painting of reds and oranges, abstract human faces on the canvas.

He remembers the book he picked up in Notting Hill, remembers, Because I can see people's souls sometimes when I draw them.

And he thinks of the drawings in his notebook, angry lines and desolate sketches.

He wonders what his soul looks like.

* * *

Bucky’s phone buzzes with a message. It’s a photo of a painting, bright blues and greens, a world in peace.

Underneath it is another quote, “We wish with our hands.”

When he checks the sender, it’s still Steve. Bucky takes a deep breath, wondering how in hell an ordinary bookshop owner became text buddies with Steve Rogers, Captain America.

He doesn’t know what possess him to do it, but he does it.

‘It’ being sending an ordinary photo of the bookshelves in his shop to Steve, as a reply to the painting.

Underneath it, he tacks on: “It’s time for second chances. Come try another book.”

He has to grip the counter when the reply comes, just minutes later. “Okay.”

* * *

There’s an art shop next to the gallery. Steve contemplates the displays, the stack of canvases, the rows of pastels, the cubes holding pens and pencils in all colors. He hasn’t worked with color since before the serum.

Maybe he can try it again.

Steve leaves with a new sketchbook, a brush pen, and a travel-sized palette of watercolor.

* * *

Steve’s on the train heading to London from Le Gare du Nord, watching the world pass him by, contemplating a quick sketch in his notebook. Paris has been calm and quiet—something he doubly appreciates after everything. Across him sits a pot-bellied man in a paisley shirt, eyes lined with crows feet, liver spots dart around towards his ear.

“Where you headed, son?” the man asks, voice rough.


The man nods. “Would you like to play a game of checkers?”

Steve blinks.
“The ride is long, and I know you millennials have your phones, but I hope you could humor an old man.”

“I’d be honored, sir.”

Steve’s plays with the man, whose name is Charles. He finds that Charles’ father served in the war, that Charles runs a bakeshop and is on the way to London to attend the wake of a friend, and that Charles can’t understand some modern technology and had given up trying, for the most part (“there’s always going to be something new and better, and learning can’t be forced. If I can understand it, good. If not, there really isn’t anything missing.”), before his phone starts buzzing.

“Girl problems?” Charles asks, as he moves a piece to take one of Steve’s.

“I’m not in a relationship with one,” Steve says, moving a piece towards Charles’.

“Boy problems, then?” Charles asks.

Steve looks up at him.

“What? It’s 2017. People can talk about this freely now,” Charles grumbles, taking another one of Steve’s pieces.

Steve opens his mouth. He thinks of the Brock fiasco, of his photo on the paper again, then he forges on anyway.

Steve Rogers is stubborn like that.

“None of that, either.”

“Do you want them problems?”

Steve gives a small chuckle. He takes a piece and moves it across the board in an inverted W, taking four of Charles’ black pieces. “I think you’re distracting me.”

“Well, I thought it was working,” Charles sighs, looking at his travel checkerboard forlornly.

* * *

When Steve enters What the Book?, he’s greeted with a loud welcome and a sudden thump of a book falling on the floor.

“Uh, hello.”

“Hi,” the man says, eyes round. His face is deceptively young, like he’s been twenty for the same amount of years. He’s got a pin on his jacket like Bucky does, SCOTT printed neatly on the front.

“Scott, did you find—” Bucky emerges from behind one of the book stacks, seven hardbound books cradled in his left arm. He’s wearing a dark short sleeved tee that stretches across his shoulders, a hint of black ink on the metal under his sleeve.

It’s the first time Steve is seeing Bucky’s arm uncovered. He’s known Bucky for a while, text conversations, and phone calls, and the pieces of him Steve glimpses in the books he recommends, thoughts and words and quotes flowing on a page.

This just feels like another piece of Bucky he gets to share, something he knew was there—that literal bump on the road did try to leave its mark, after all—but hasn’t really seen.
Steve thinks that bump in the road is leaving its mark, in a different way.

“Hey, Steve,” Bucky says.

“Hi Bucky,” Steve says.

They stare at each other across the store, and Steve thinks he kind of looks like an idiot, maybe, standing there and almost smiling.

Scott makes a strangled noise in his throat.

“Right,” Bucky says. He sweeps his free arm in a grand gesture across the store. “Feel free to browse, yeah?”

“Sure,” Steve says. He tilts his head to the side, staring at Bucky’s arm. He sees the way Bucky’s shoulders tense. “Is that the Deathly Hallows symbol on your arm?”

Bucky shoulders relax as a grin, bright and beautiful, makes its way across his face. “Yep.”

“Nice choice,” Steve says. He nods once at the dumbstruck Scott then slips between one of the shelves.

He goes through the titles, admiring the cover illustrations and color palettes of the books in front of him. Bucky works nearby, shelving and stacking, the rustling of paper and thumping of books echoing through the shop. Steve’s poked through a bunch of back-cover summaries before he asks for recommendations.

“*Ready Player One,*” Bucky says instantly, going back to the counter, finished with his work.

Scott snorts. When Steve glances over at him, Scott shrugs. “It’s his favorite. Sometimes, it’s like he’s getting paid to advertise it.”

“Shut up,” Bucky says, good-naturedly. He looks at Steve.

Steve waits.

“If you ever get into gaming and science fiction, pick it up. And not only that, there’s a whole bunch of socio-political and religious commentary as well,” Bucky says. “Honestly a lot of novels in the YA genre are smarter than the world gives them credit for.”

Steve can feel the corners of his mouth twitching. He walks through the spaces between bookshelves and finds the book. “Okay. I’ll... keep that in mind.”

“Though you might not appreciate that as much right now,” Bucky adds, almost as an afterthought.

“This?” Steve asks, lifting the book from the shelf. A frown crosses his features. He skims the back summary. “Why not?”

“Gaming and pop culture references. Tons of them.”

“I should be offended,” Steve says. He looks at the book again, eyes softening to something sad. “But you might be right.”

“A friend mentioned a book to me in passing,” Steve says as he goes to the counter to pay, even with Bucky’s word of caution. He’s nothing if not stubborn. “Flowers for Algernon. Would you have that here?”
“Oh,” Bucky says. He takes the book and rings it up, fingers deftly moving to place it in a paper bag. He avoids looking Steve in the eye. “Sorry, Steve, we only carry Young Adult books here.”

“Not included in this shop’s very wide choice of material, then.”

“Nah,” Bucky says. He’s looks at Steve, eyes soft. “You could pick it up at your nearest chain, though. It’ll be under science-fiction.”

Steve doesn’t know why the air around them feels weighted.

“Hey, would you look at that! It’s time for me to leave,” Scott says suddenly, looking at his wrist. He’s not wearing a watch. “I’ll see you later, Bucky.”

Bucky rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Standing date?” Steve asks.

“Yeah. We—a bunch of us—all eat at my best friend’s apartment every month. We’re the willing subjects to his cooking experiments.”

“Ah,” Steve tamps down the disappointment he feels rising in his stomach.

Bucky looks at him, inclines his head. “Do… do you want to go with me?”

“Oh,” Steve says. “Wouldn’t I be imposing?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Definitely not. They’ve been bugging me to bring a date for ages anyway.”

“A date, huh.”

Bucky looks him in the eye. “Do or do not, there is no try.”

Steve snorts. “A date sounds perfect.”

Bucky grins, before he winces. “Actually, I probably better apologize in advance.”

“Why?” Steve asks, frown between his brows.

“You’ll see.”

*D*

Dinner with Bucky’s friends is good; it’s a lot less awkward than Steve expected it to be.

“Now, wait up. I’m going to give the last piece of cake as a prize to the saddest act here,” Sam says, snagging the plate from Bucky’s outstretched hand and placing it in the middle of the table.

“Well that’s not fair,” Bucky says. “It’s you, obviously. Pining after your teammate for years.”

“Okay, okay.” Scott clears his throat. “It’s me, obviously. I have a Master’s degree in Electrical Engineering. I stole from criminals, gave it back to their rightful owners—I’m the modern day Robin Hood. I married a wonderful woman, have a beautiful daughter.”

Steve watches, because as far as sob stories go, this isn’t even close. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“So I find out this company has been overcharging their patients—I thought it was a mistake, I
corrected the code. Turns out, it wasn’t. I was forced to change the code back and got fired to boot. So of course, I stole shit from the CEO, corrected the code, drove his car into a pool—“

The whole table erupts in laughter, Riley slapping Sam on the arm in exuberance. Steve meets Bucky’s eyes over the piece of cake, Bucky’s eyes soft. Scott grins, shrugging.

“It is funny, in hindsight. But yeah, the car in the pool was probably overkill. I got arrested, did three years, my wife divorced me and got engaged to someone else. I tried to look for a job but no one would hire me, even if I never really stole from anyone that didn’t deserve it.”

The table quiets.

Scott breathes. “And the worst of it is… my daughter barely remembers me. I visited once, during her birthday party. She barely knew who I was. My ex-wife wouldn’t let me near her until I could pay child support… I could barely even sustain myself, since I couldn’t get a job.” He shrugs. “They send me family postcards every Christmas.”

“Shit,” Sam says.

“Yeah.”

Steve stares. This man had just laid out his life and failures like it wasn’t a big deal to be vulnerable, to have your weaknesses poked at.

He looks down at his plate.

Scott brightens. “Do I get the cake?”

“Hell no,” Bucky says.

“Far as I can tell, you’ve still got full use of all your body parts, despite your exciting past.” Riley says. “Now I on the other hand. Air Force, 58th Squadron, worked pararescue. Saved people. And what do I get? I get blown out of the sky and lose function in both my legs. Have to be wheeled around all the time. I live in a house full of ramps.”

Steve looks at his lap.

“But!” Bucky says, “That got Sam’s head out of his ass and now you two are married.”

“True,” Sam says, and he looks at Riley like he could hang the moon. “And look at Bucky here. Worked as a humanitarian with Oxfam for years, comes back and gets a freaky metal arm, then hides away in Notting Hill, of all places. To add icing to the cake, he’s got a freaky customer that tries to shove a book down his own pants.”

The table laughs.

“Thank you for that succinct life story, Sam,” Bucky says. “And it’s down his trousers, you heathen.”

The table erupts in another round of laughter.

“Anyway, at least I get the last piece of this heavenly cake,” Bucky says, reaching forward, metal arm reflecting the light.

Steve bites his bottom lip. “Wait. I haven’t had a turn.”
The whole table turns to him as one. Steve feels the air stifling around him. What did he just do?

“Uhm. You think you deserve the cake?” Scott asks.

It feels like the lights have all turned to him, heat rising. Steve shoulders on. “At least a shot at it.”

“All right, let’s see what Captain America has to say.” Bucky is looking at him with those eyes. Steve looks at him, then to the table. He licks his lips.

There are so many things he wants to say, so many things itching to crawl out of his chest.

“I was born a century ago. My father died in the first World War. I was in and out of the hospital a lot—not just because my mother was a nurse, but because I had every sickness imaginable. Always managed to just hang on, though.” Steve smiles a little, remembering his body, the way he’d groggily wake up and be surprised that he was still alive. His mother’s weary, yet happy face.

“I got into fights a lot; I don’t recommend that when you’re at least a foot shorter than everyone. Dames didn’t give me the time of day. I wanted to go serve our country so badly, but got rejected every time I tried to enlist. I’d even resorted to lying on the forms.”

Steve takes a breath. Everyone is looking at him. Bucky’s fingers finds Steve’s under the table, a questioning touch. Comforting.

Steve turns his hand, palm up, closing his fingers around Bucky’s.

“Then one day, a doctor for the army saw me. Dr. Erskine. He asked me things, and the next thing I knew, I was part of this government experiment to make super soldiers. Not soon after, Dr. Erskine was killed. He was the only person who knew the exact formula for the serum. So instead of an army of super soldiers, they ended up with just me—and I got reduced to a performing monkey until they could find a way to replicate the formula. I was an asset, I wasn’t ever really human.”

There’s a heavy silence over the table. Steve imagines the USO girls kicking it away. One, kick. Two, kick. Who will redeem, heed the call for America?.

He breathes and continues. “After a while, I got fed up. When I heard over four hundred men were missing, I went on a rescue mission. Got them back and finally started fighting. You know the rest—plane, crashed in the water, frozen.”

Bucky squeezes his hand. Something catches at Steve’s throat. He wants to say, I still don’t fully understand this world I woke up in. My friends were alive before I crashed... but now everything’s changed and everyone’s gone. Aliens attacked just a couple of years ago. Aliens.

What he says is, “I was saved by strangers, who, by all accounts, would be the age of my children if I had any. Found out that only one person I knew from back then is still alive. Peggy.”

He darts a rueful smile at Bucky. “But most days, she doesn’t remember me either. She’s got Alzheimer’s now.”

Everyone is staring at him.

Steve tightens his grip on Bucky’s fingers.

“Nahhh,” Scott says and the table explodes in chatter again, the energy building. Steve exhales, hearing bits and pieces over everyone talking to each other, like everyone in America loves you and you got to punch ALIENS. He smiles. Talking about it… wasn’t as horrible as he thought it would
be.

He even feels a little bit better.

Sam’s looking at him.

“Don’t go stealing my date now, Samuel,” Bucky says, but he’s smiling.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Robocop.”

Bucky’s declared the winner. But that’s alright because he shares the cake with Steve, laughter and chocolate on his lips.

*

“Hey,” Sam says, catching Steve by the door. Bucky’s saying his goodbyes to Riley, body half bent over his wheelchair and metal arm safely tucked to his side as he gives Riley a one-armed hug.

“If you need someone to talk to,” Sam says, “I can recommend some good people over at Veteran’s Affairs back stateside.”

“Oh,” Steve says. Therapy? That… wasn’t something he knew much about. Men came home from wars broken and they did the best they could, after. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s tried throwing a therapist at him at the beginning, another new century thing, but it isn’t really something he thinks he needs. “I’m fine.”

Sam looks at him. “I’m just saying. If you need to talk.” He nods at Steve. “I used to work there, after Riley. I couldn’t fly again either. First time I flew back up, I kept seeing him getting blown out of the air.” Sam rubs his hand over his eyes, breathes. “I gave up my wings, went to work with people like us.”

Steve claps Sam on the shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“Alright, Cap.” Sam says. “If you change your mind, you know how to reach me.”

Bucky strides over to them. “Still trying to steal my date, Wilson?”

Sam rolls his eyes, draws Bucky into a hug. “You take care, Bucky.”

“You too,” Bucky says. His left arm hangs by his side.

Bucky turns to Steve, eyes warm. “Ready?”

Why don’t you touch people with your left arm? Steve wants to ask. Instead he says, “Yeah.”

They walk out to the cool evening air, the streetlamps twinkling in the horizon. Shrieks of excitement reach Steve’s ears from the closed door behind them. He flushes, glances at Bucky. Bucky’s got a tinge of red on his cheeks as well, a look of horror and embarrassment mixed on his face. He shakes his head.

“Sorry. They do that every time I leave.”

Steve bursts out laughing, rich and loud in quiet evening.

Bucky sighs as they start walking. “Captain America fanboys, the lot of them.”
Steve smiles, looks at the pavement, and sidesteps the topic. “Did you all serve?”

“Nah, just Sam and Riley,” Bucky answers, hands in his pockets. “I was in the Philippines round the same time Riley and Sam were in the Air Force. They got selected for the Air Guard later. I was working at the time, helping with disaster relief prevention and community-building.”

Steve’s eyes flicker over Bucky’s frame. “Yeah?”

“Yep.”

Steve waits, but doesn’t get anything else.

“Did it hurt?” Bucky asks.

“What?”

“The serum.”

“A little.” A lot.

They stroll pass well-built houses. The houses are all the same, black grilled fences and stone stoops leading up to doorways. The only thing differentiating them from each other—to show their individuality are the colors, pinks, yellows, blues, and whites. But even then it’s the kind of manufactured, planned design that speaks of forethought rather than actual individuals expressing themselves. It’s a beautiful aesthetic, anyway.

“What was it like?” Bucky asks. “Punching Hitler?”

Steve’s been asked this more than once since he woke up from the ice. I punched him 500 times. He finds himself being honest. “That didn’t happen.”

“There’s a wide array of people who believe you actually punched Hitler, Steve,” Bucky says gravely. “Don’t go disappointing them.”

Steve lets a ghost of a smile slip over his face. “It would have been extremely fulfilling though, I think.”

“Damn right, it would,” Bucky agrees.

Bucky looks to the left. “This here’s a private park where the rich people go.”

It’s a wall covered in vines with an iron gate.

“What’s in it?” Steve asks.


Steve stops, considers the closed area. It’s a place that locks people out, only letting a select few in. Some part of him revolts at the idea, that some people deserve certain things just because they have money. His mouth opens before he thinks about it, “Let’s go in.”

Bucky stares at him.

It’s a flashing thought to take it back, but Steve finds he doesn’t really want to. He looks up at the tall gate instead. He could definitely hoist himself up over this. He glances at Bucky. “Do you want to go first?”
“It’s private, Steve,” Bucky says. He’s looking at Steve like he can’t believe Steve is real. It makes Steve...feel.

“You always follow rules like that?” Steve asks.

Bucky laughs. “I can’t believe Captain America wants to break into a garden.” He shakes his head, smile tilting at the corner of his lips.

It’s not just a garden.

“It’ll be fun. See how the other half lives.” Steve’s feeling a little bit reckless tonight, but in the scale of reckless things he’s done, this rates in the negatives. “Do you need a boost?”

“Nah,” Bucky says. “Go ahead. I’ll see you on the other side.”

Steve curls his hands around the iron gate, the metal cold in his fingers. He lifts himself up, up, and over. He lands on his feet with a small thud. The gardens are illuminated by a lamp here and there, but it’s dark and quiet otherwise.

Here we are. It’s a garden.

It’s not just a garden.

It’s what the locked gate stands for; class difference, build a fence, and keep people out.

Steve breathes.

“Well it’s nothing special,” Bucky’s voice says, close to his ear.

Steve jumps, startled out of his thoughts. “Shit, Bucky. You scared the beejesus out of me.”

Bucky looks at him, eyes wide. Then he starts laughing. “Did you just say beejesus?”

“I—yeah.” Steve flushes.

“We have to get your language updated, Steve,” Bucky says, eyes teasing. “If you want to at least blend in in this century a little.”

Steve shrugs. Some days, he isn’t sure if he does, and if he ever truly will. Most days, he’s okay with that. He says nothing.

Bucky seems to sense the mood. He starts walking, the grass crunching under his feet. Steve follows, hands in his pockets.

“You know, I never got that? Beejesus?” Bucky asks. “Is there like, a beemary?”

Steve looks at him, and when Bucky turns to look back, his eyes are serious. Caught off-guard at the absurd question, Steve finds himself laughing.

“It’s a perfectly legit question, Cap. How about a Beejoseph? No?” Bucky’s eyes are alive and twinkling like the stars in the night.

“Steve,” Steve says, almost like a reflex, a firebolt slinging out of him that he doesn’t catch.

“Hmmm?” Bucky asks, turning those beautiful gray blue eyes on him.
Steve takes a breath, steadying himself. “Call me Steve,” he says.

Bucky looks at him for a beat, before his eyes soften to a strange sort of understanding. Steve gathers up all the courage he has in him, lets it wrap like a vice around his heart.

“Sure, pal,” Bucky says.

“Okay,” Steve says. He feels real, a little bit like he actually exists, like he’s not just some shadow following a myth, a legend. He breathes, releases the threads around his heart.

He reaches for Bucky’s hand.

Bucky lets him hold it.

They walk through the gardens. The leaves rustle when the wind blows, the early signs of spring blossoming in the bushes, the trees. The topiaries are shaped like animals—bears, giraffes, birds, bees, and more. Steve mentally marks it to the list in his head: the rich may have money, but you can’t account for taste.
Soon, they reach an illuminated area with benches spaced out from each other. In the day, Steve
imagines children running, couples sitting on the benches, and maybe a group doing yoga. They walk towards one of the benches. As Steve stands in front of it, he notices a gold plate with an inscription affixed on the backrest. Shifting a little to let the light shine on the plate, he reads,

"For Ben, who loved this garden. From May, who always sat beside him."

"Mhmm. Some people do spend their whole lives together," Bucky murmurs, sitting on the bench.

Steve thinks of Peggy in the hospital, hair white, lines across her face. Peggy was supposed to age, strong and beautiful. Peggy wasn’t supposed to forget him.

But Steve wasn’t supposed to live after the crash, either. His life has turned out a lot different than he thought it would. And for better or worse, it’s time to live the one he has and stop dwelling on the what could have beens and what should have beens.

He still has the what can bes.

He looks at Bucky.

Bucky pats the seat next to him.

Steve turns and sits. They let the silence wrap around them like a blanket.

Bucky shifts next to him, left arm in between his legs, his torso angled toward Steve. In the dim light, he looks almost like a statue. Again, Steve itches for a pencil, to capture this beautiful man on paper.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Bucky asks.

“Traveling,” Steve answers. His heart lurches and he blinks, slowly realizing that a part of him doesn’t want to leave.

“Oh,” Bucky says. He licks his lips, resting his weight against his right elbow on the back of the bench. “Shall I make your last night in London worth it?”

Steve inclines his head. “What do you have in mind?”

Bucky kisses him.

Steve sits on the floor of his hostel room, looking at the last few items he has yet to pack. The wooden floor is cold under his legs, t-shirts and a jacket folded in front of him, ready to be stuffed into his backpack.

He thinks of the next place on his list. He thinks of Natasha’s disapproval, shown without words, and Peggy’s eyes when he talked about where he’s been. He thinks of looking at graves, walking in places drenched in history’s blood. He thinks of Captain America, Hero, Legend, Public Figure.

He thinks of Steve Rogers.

Brooklyn boy whose personality was too big for his body.

And the best that we can do is start over.

He calls Bucky.
“Yes, yes, Dr. Seuss books will be picked up and sent to Manila. I’m a responsible bookshop-sitter, don’t fret, Barnes,” Scott says, shooing Bucky away from the counter and towards Steve.

Steve’s waiting for him between the Series That Are The Perfect Length and Series That Should’ve Stopped Earlier sections of his bookstore, eyes frowning at one of the back cover summaries. Bucky’s pretty sure Scott’s got suspicions on how the books in those particular shelves are arranged but he’s working on the more reasonable assumption of classification by Very Specific Elements In The Story, like Lucky Number 7, or Orphan Main Characters. Steve, meanwhile, still looks as clueless on the arrangement as he did when he first entered the bookstore.

(Bucky thinks he just needs to give Steve more books to go through and he’ll figure it out. He’s more observant than the modern world gives him credit for.).

“What did you want to do today?” Bucky asks, as they begin to walk down Portobello Road. Stalls are lined up in the middle of the street. They pass by people shopping, amidst the tune of tourists attempting to haggle.

Steve shrugs. “The London Eye, maybe?”

“Full tourist route, okay. Oh look, antiques,” Bucky says before Steve can answer. He’s motioning to a red storefront, silver vintage luggage cases and varnished brown boots on display at the entrance. Bucky glances at Steve. “Your brethren.”

“I’m only twenty-nine,” Steve protests.

“But technically,” Bucky says, turning on his heel and walking backwards to face Steve. Steve has the sudden urge to hold the lapels of his jacket and steer him away from the pedestrians. “You’ve been alive for almost a hundred years.”

“Which means you’re going on a date with an old man,” Steve says. Bucky hasn’t hit any oncoming pedestrians...yet.

“Good thing I’m old at heart.” Bucky says, flashing him a grin.

“Oh you’ve got an Oyster Card, huh,” Bucky says, watching as Steve taps the card on the train station’s turnstile.

“Like a proper tourist,” Steve replies, amidst the low hum of people in the station.

Bucky smiles, holds his hand out. Steve takes it. They wait for the train on the platform, hands clasped between them.

Bucky’s leg is a comfortable warmth against Steve’s own. As the train rolls along the tracks, Steve notices a black book peeking out of Bucky’s jacket pocket, just a little bigger than Steve’s palm.

Bucky sees him looking.

“Anything catch your eye?” Bucky asks, smirking. The light from the carriage throws geometrical
shapes on his face.

Steve rolls his eyes, catches the end of the little black book between his fingers, tugs it out of Bucky’s jacket.


Bucky shrugs. “I like having a book on me when I commute. This one’s something I picked up a couple a’ days ago.”

Steve turns the book over in his hands. “What’s it about?”

Bucky turns, just enough to face him, their legs pressed closer together. “It has three short stories. The first one is about finding a dead body in a grove. There’re different narrators and they all give you their accounts on how this samurai died and ended up there.”

“Was the criminal caught?”

Bucky smiles at him, eyes warm. Of course that’s what Steve would want to know. “Each one of them give different versions of the story, a detail or two always refuted by another account. The reader isn’t really sure who did it. Mirrors life, power of perception, lack of objectivity, all that jazz.”

“Hmm,” Steve says, flipping the book over in his hands. He wants to keep Bucky talking, the blossoming excitement in his voice obvious. He likes listening to it.

“Seems like you like these kinds of stories, too.”

“Yup,” Bucky says easily.

“Why’d you decide to sell only Young Adult books?” Steve asks. The question’s been on his mind since the day he stumbled into Bucky’s shop.

Bucky laughs, leg shifting against Steve. “I love books. I loved sports as much as the next kid, but I’d always spend the night reading under my blanket with a flashlight.”

Bucky stops, looks outside the window, then meets Steve’s eyes. “Books transport you somewhere else, you know? And I believe they have a way of finding you at the right time.”

His voice is quieter when he says, “Like they did for me.”

Steve knocks his shoulder into Bucky’s. The train rolls along gently.

“A week before my dad died, he bought me a copy of Harry Potter. After the funeral, I just… dove into it. It helped me escape the pain for a little while. Then it started helping me cope, having somewhere to escape to for a couple of hours a day, where life wasn’t so miserable.” Bucky’s looking at his lap, hands held together. “So I chose Young Adult books since… for all those young ones like me who need an escape, or kids just figuring themselves out… I want them to know they have a place to go.”

Steve reaches over and squeezes the top of Bucky’s enclasped hands.

“And after this,” Bucky lifts up his gloved hand. “I wasn’t able to go back to work, and… well, it really took awhile. Had to move here, too. But I know there are other ways to help people than being out there. It’s a different kind of help and a different set of people than before, but if I’m helping anyone, then I’d like to think it counts.”
“You are,” Steve says. He reaches up and holds Bucky’s left hand. “It does. Thanks for sharing this with me.”

Bucky looks at him, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Thanks.”

In that moment, Steve thinks he’s never seen anyone as beautiful.

*

That night, Steve draws the London Eye in his notebook, towering above the city. In the corner, he draws a gloved hand, reaching out. Blue sleeves with a symbol peeking out, hair in a short bun at the base of his neck.

The sky is a splash of colors—blue, purple, pink, and orange.

It’s the first time he’s used color in a long, long time.

*

August 29, 2014 2:18 PM BST
**Bucky Barnes:** Take care on your flight out.

August 29, 2014 2:21 PM BST
**Steve Rogers:** (photo attached)

August 29, 2014 2:22 PM BST
**Bucky Barnes:** askfdad
**Bucky Barnes:** ???
**Bucky Barnes:** Is that my arm
**Bucky Barnes:** and London! Did you draw that???
**Bucky Barnes:** Wow. It’s amazing.

August 29, 2014 2:25 PM BST
**Steve Rogers:** It needs work.
**Steve Rogers:** But thank you.
**Steve Rogers:** I’ll text you when my flight lands.

*

When he arrives at the airport, Steve takes his time walking by the area. There are so many stores inside the airport, it’s like a giant mall. He finds a bookstore and picks up a copy of *Flowers for Algernon*.

Steve’s Steve, so of course he reads it.

*

Steve stares at the blank ceiling of his hostel, head resting on one arm behind his head. There’s a cobweb at the corner that stares right back at him. The mattress is too soft against his back. He can try to get a different room, he knows, but it seems like a waste of peoples’ time when the one he has now is perfectly serviceable.

His phone rests against his chest, his hand curled around the small device. A book lies on the floor. Steve picks his phone up and types.
September 1, 2014 01:30 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** You ever read *Flowers for Algernon*?

Bucky Barnes is typing.

Steve watches the little dots on his screen disappear.

Bucky Barnes is typing.

September 1, 2014 01:32 AM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** Yes.

Steve wants to talk about it, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t know if it’s because he wants it to happen to him—or if he doesn’t want it to.

September 1, 2014 01:33 AM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** Expanding out of my recommended list? I’m impressed.

September 1, 2014 01:38 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** My best girl told me not to read it. So I had to.

September 1, 2014 01:40 AM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** Sounds like something you’d do.

Steve, despite himself, feels the ghost of a smile. He never was good at following.

September 1, 2014 01:42 AM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** Did you like it?

September 1, 2014 01:43 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** Yes.

Talking about this is good, he reminds himself. He takes a breath and plunges on.

September 1, 2014 01:45 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** Feels a little close to home, though.


He understands why Bucky had that expression on his face the day he asked about the book.

September 1, 2014 01:46 AM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** Is yours permanent?

September 1, 2014 01:46 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** So far.

Steve breathes. He gathers his courage around him like a shield and sends the next message.

September 1, 2014 01:48 AM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** I’m wondering if it isn’t now, though.

He looks at the words on his screen and wants to take them back. He also wants to follow it up with *What happens to me then? Do my muscles atrophy? Do I age instantly once the serum is out of me?*
Will people look at me and just remember me as “The man that used to be Captain America”? just as much.

He waits.

September 1, 2014 01:50 AM HKT

**Bucky Barnes:** Do you want to talk about it? Though honestly, you’d probably be better with Stark or Banner for this one—they can give you science-y answers that I can’t.

September 1, 2014 01:51 AM HKT

**Steve Rogers:** No.

**Steve Rogers:** I guess we’ll just find out.

He doesn’t want anyone poking and prodding at him anymore.

It takes three seconds after he sends the message when his phone rings.

“Steve,” Bucky says. “I know *Flowers for Algernon* is an amazing book. But it’s also fucking depressing. I’m sorry you’re going through this.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, right?” Steve says. “It’s fine. I just related to Charly too much. Being a human lab experiment and all.”

“You’re not a human lab experiment,” Bucky says.

“You want to try saying that again?” Steve asks.

Bucky takes a deep breath on the other end of the line. “You’re a brave man, Steve. You did what you did because you wanted to help. You did it for your country, for your convictions. Don’t lose sight of that.”

Steve breathes. Holds on to the words like a lifeline. “Thanks.

They are oceans apart. Steve knows that. But right now, he feels like he’s got Bucky next to him, close as any person can be with someone else. They talk some more, Steve about the few places he managed to see in the city before retiring for the night, Bucky about some customers in his shop and Sam’s latest cooking experiment. Soon, Bucky urges Steve to sleep, and Steve hangs up.

It feels like a well-worn tradition now, to willingly share a piece of his soul with a quote lifted from the most recent book he read.

September 1, 2014 02:30 AM HKT

**Steve Rogers:** “I don’t know what’s worse: to not know what you are and be happy, or to become what you’ve always wanted to be, and feel alone.”

September 1, 2014 02:30 AM HKT

**Bucky Barnes:** “The path I choose through the maze makes me what I am. I am not only a thing, but also a way of being—one of many ways—and knowing the paths I have followed and the ones left to take will help me understand what I am becoming.”

Steve drags his hand up to cover his eyes. He lets the tears fall.

Steve walks around the streets of old Macau. The streets are narrow, small spaces, tourists milling
about, shopkeepers calling people to sell their wares. He passes by a huge pastry shop, the storefront a wide open area. There are cookies hot off the pan, pastries on trays, different kinds of nuts on display. He watches as a group of tourists—though they look young, maybe college students at most—eat samples of everything, then wash it down with water from the store’s dispenser. One of them sees him observing them, lifts his thumbs up and points to the peanut pastries. Amused, Steve goes and tries doing the same. He ends up buying a box of pastry to take with him to the hotel.

Steve walks around Largo da Sé, taking in the old cobblestone streets and architecture. He spots a food stall with a long line, and falls in, curious to see what the five Hong Kong dollar treat would be. It turns out to be egg tarts, all inside a food warmer with a humongous yellow smiley face on the top. He buys a piece and bites into it, the tart still warm in his fingers. The burst of flavor on his tongue so rich, he goes and lines up again and buys three whole boxes. He devours one box sitting on a bench by the fountain, his super soldier metabolism making quick work of the pastry.

He walks around some more and spends the time ‘til the sun sets sketching the Ruins of St. Paul in his notebook.

A young man sits a few spots next to him. His hair’s so blond it’s almost white. Green long sleeves cover his arms, and his face is protected by red sunglasses.

“Man, for a tourist destination, people stare a lot,” he says. “Ain’t y’all ever seen a guy in red Ray-Bans before?”

Steve snorts.

“Hey,” the man says. On closer inspection, he looks like he’s in his early twenties. “Nice drawing.”

“Thanks,” Steve says. “You like art?”

“My ex did,” he replies. “We were supposed to go here together but we broke up.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says.

“I’m Tommy.”

“Steve.” Steve shakes Tommy’s hand. He looks at Tommy, then the boxes of egg tart next to him. “Want some?”

“Sure that’s not poisoned?” Tommy asks, looking at the boxes dubiously.

“Why would I do that?” Steve asks, lines crossing his brow.

“Well, it’s weird to be offered food by someone you just met,” Tommy says shrugging. “Even if the stranger is a superhero.”

Steve stares. Tommy grins.

“But sure, I’ll have some. Might be the world’s karmic contribution for the day; get my heart broken, one month later, eat egg tarts with Steve Rogers.”

Steve shakes his head, before he registers the use of his name. “You mean egg tarts with Captain America?”

Tommy looks at him, an egg tart halfway to his mouth. “Eh, I kinda like Steve Rogers from the history books. Takes a special kind of dude to sign up for what you did without knowing if he’ll
even be Captain America in the end, you know.”

Steve smiles.

*

In Hong Kong, Steve eats lunch in one of the street stalls. His frame is hunched over one of the smaller chairs, plastic table laden with noodles and orange and pink chopsticks in a metal cup. He watches the people pass outside, the cadence of their conversations passing through his ears.

He contemplates the chopsticks before signing for a fork. He snaps a photo of the colored plastic sticks, sends them to Bucky.

September 4, 2014 7:30 PM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** Never could get the hang of these, even then.

He pulls his notebook out of his jeans pocket next, snaps a photo of the page that has ‘learn how to use chopsticks’ on it, under ‘watch the moon landing 1969’, and above ‘dr. who’, sends it to Bucky too.

September 4, 2014 7:40 PM HKT
**Bucky Barnes:** I’ll teach you next time ;)

September 4, 2014 7:45 PM HKT
**Steve Rogers:** Looking forward to it.

*

In Seoul, Steve shares a table with a woman at a student-budget restaurant. She has jet black hair and long dark lashes that remind Steve of the night. They both order by pointing to their menus, eye contact, and as much smiling at the restaurant owner as they can muster.

She looks over at him and grins, greets him in accented English. Steve can’t place the accent, but he starts laughing when he realizes they can talk to each other. Steve can travel fine when he’s in tourist areas, but go outside of that and it’s a little bit harder, having to communicate with his expressions and body language. Which is all fine, until he realizes that one hand gesture can totally mean something different when he’s in another country (as proven in an Incident Which Will Not Be Named). He didn’t have that problem, moving countries during the war, since there was always someone who could talk in the local language in his team—whether it be French, or enough Italian to pass—but doing it alone is a whole different ball game.

It’s kind of fun.

Besides, he has his Starkphone and the internet, something that saved him on a couple of occasions for things like “ATM” or “shopping bag”, searching for a photo and showing it when the limited language knowledge across both sides and gesturing didn’t make the cut.

“My friends think it’s this amazing thing, traveling alone when you can’t speak the native language, but it’s not that difficult. Even when you’re not an outgoing person, just the thought of getting lost will make you resourceful and get you talking to people,” she says when their orders come. She starts picking at the kimchi with her chopsticks.

Steve stares at the metal sticks and asks for a fork and spoon.

“Right,” Steve agrees. “And we can use the internet to help communicate. Makes things easier.”
She points the chopsticks at him. “Exactly! For other things too—I’d never have been able to schedule my itinerary this way without their handy subway app.”

“I’m Steve,” Steve says, reaching out to shake her hand.

“Narda. Also, we’re totally friends now.”

“Are we?”

“Yes. I’m traveling alone, you look like you’re alone, foreign country, might as well bond, right?” She gestures to him and herself, two strangers eating together amidst a crowded room of locals, bustling with conversation. “In my culture, a lot of socialization happens over food. And when you’re mad at someone? You don’t eat with them. So once you offer someone you’re having an argument with food, or invite them to eat—that means you aren’t mad at them anymore.”

“That makes sense,” Steve says. “Must be hard in big city restaurants though, you can’t exactly take your time eating.”

“Sure, we can. It’s our culture, so we don’t have those ‘eat then hustle you out’ restaurants in the first place,” Narda says, mixing her bowl of bibimbab. “So what brings you here?

Steve shrugs. He starts eating his rice, alternating it with the spicy tofu soup. He’s found that he likes spicy things a lot more now. “I wanted to see the world.”

It’s an honest answer, something that’s starting to ring even more true now that he isn’t limiting himself to surveying the damage left by actions or inactions he—or the people around him—did back then.


Steve starts laughing, a grain of rice stuck in the corner of his lips.

*

At the airport, Steve snaps a photo of *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* before he brings it to the counter. He sends it to Bucky. Sure enough, a message pings through.

September 11, 2014 5:00 PM KST
**Bucky Barnes:** You bought a YA book somewhere else

**Bucky Barnes:** Are you cheating on me D:

September 11, 2014 5:01 PM KST
**Steve Rogers:** You know your hipster bookshop fulfills all my needs.

September 11, 2014 5:02 PM KST
**Bucky Barnes:** Smooth, Steve Rogers.

Steve tucks his phone in his backpocket, satisfied.

*

It’s a sunny morning in Jeju Island when Steve receives the message.

September 12, 2014 10:00 AM KST
**Sharon Carter:** She’s gone. In her sleep.
Steve’s heart stops. It feels like the world around him, already held together with tape and regret and wishes, is unraveling again. He cancels the rest of his scheduled trips and books a flight back.

* 

The funeral is a blur, full of people in suits, S.H.I.E.L.D. agents swarming the place. He sees Nick and Maria in the pews, spots Nat and Clint manning the perimeter. Sharon takes the podium to talk about her aunt.

The church is full of strangers.

The Carter family offers him a place as a pallbearer. He accepts.

Peggy’s lived a long, full and rich life. She was always so strong, so smart, so brave. He knows she’s left a legacy—being the person she was and in the existence of S.H.I.E.L.D. She lived a meaningful life.

(Steve still wishes they could have had that dance.)

The place is heavily guarded enough that no errant paparazzi slips by.

Still, Steve slips out on his own after they lower her into the ground.

* 

When Bucky opens his door one bleary Saturday morning, ready to go on his morning jog as usual, he does not expect one Steve Rogers to be standing there.

Words of surprise die on his lips as he takes Steve in, the way he’s standing, head down, shoulders hunched in. He looks like a single touch could shatter him. When Steve sways forward slightly, Bucky reaches forward with his left arm and catches him.

“Hey. We should go in,” Bucky says.

Steve looks up, eyes cloudy. He nods.

* 

It’s started to drizzle outside. Steve sits on Bucky’s couch, staring at the wall. He can hear Bucky talking to Scott over the phone even through the closed laundry room door.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says as soon as Bucky emerges. “You should be at work.”

Bucky does a double-take. “Hey, no.”

“I could have called,” Steve continues. “Or I shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Steve,” Bucky says, easing himself next to him on the sofa. “It’s alright. You can come here whenever you need to.”

“I just,” Steve starts, rests his elbows on his knees, rubbing his eyes with his palms. “I didn’t know where to go.”

The confession is quiet, pulled out of him, but it echoes in the room.

“This is a good place to go,” Bucky says, looking at him.
Steve breathes, tries to hold his emotions together. He pitches forward a little.

Bucky frowns. “Steve. How long has it been since you’ve had any sleep?”

“I,” Steve starts. He thinks about leaving from one end of the world to the other, fourteen hours with no sleep on a plane, straight to the Carter family and Peggy in D.C., flying back out since Peggy wanted to be interred in London, the day of the funeral, walking aimlessly around the city for a night… “Couple of days.”

“Right,” Bucky says, standing up. He doesn’t call Steve out on the lie. “You should sleep. There’s still a mattress in Sam’s old room, but excuse the exercise equipment.”

“I’m booked at a place—” Steve says, running his hands through his hair, squeezing the strands a little. He doesn’t move to stand.

“And you’re already here,” Bucky says gently. “Come on and sleep.”

He holds his right hand out to Steve.

Steve takes it, lets himself be pulled and prodded to go up. It is nice, to have someone take care of him, for a change.

* *

When Bucky comes back in the afternoon, a few hours before he usually does, his apartment is still dark, door locked as it usually is. He steps in and looks up the staircase, wondering if he should check on Steve. He nixes the idea, letting Steve have his rest.

Steve doesn’t seem like the type to just disappear without a word, especially after showing up without one.

Bucky sits on the couch, pulls out one of the books wedged in between the cushions. He’s engrossed in Kanae Minato’s *Confessions* when he hears footsteps on the stairs.

Steve walks into the living room, barefoot, in Bucky’s sweatpants and another of Bucky’s shirts. The bags under his eyes are still there, but his eyes are clear and lucid. He isn’t swaying on his feet anymore too, so Bucky counts that as a win.

“Hi,” Steve says. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, once, before settling.

Bucky folds the corner of the page he was reading. “Hey. How are you feeling?”


“Good,” Bucky says. “Come sit.”

They sit in silence.

Finally, Bucky asks, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Steve shrugs. “Not… not really.”

Bucky shifts his head to the side, considers Steve for a second. “Okay. Are you hungry?”

Steve’s stomach answers for him.
Bucky orders Chinese for dinner, figuring it would be as good a distraction as any.

Learning how to use chopsticks does distract Steve for the night, Bucky snickering at his attempts while slowly sneaking wontons and pork dumplings away from him using his chopsticks.

Steve makes a valiant effort at protecting his food with his own chopsticks, before placing a hand over Bucky’s left hand. Bucky startles but gives him a small smile, lacing their fingers together.

“Cheater,” Bucky says.

Steve looks down at their interlaced fingers.

“Can I ask you something,” Steve starts.

“You kind of already are, Rogers.”

Steve rolls his eyes. “I’m not... Don’t answer if it makes you uncomfortable, okay.”

Bucky lowers his chopsticks. “Okay. What is it?”

“Your left arm,” Steve starts. “You don’t really touch people with it. Riley, Sam. But you’re okay with me touching it.”

“You noticed,” Bucky says, hints of awe in his voice.

“It’s you,” Steve says. It feels like a confession.

Bucky looks at him, small smile at the corner of his lips. “I’m just scared of hurting them, is all. You? You’d probably be able to crush this piece of StarkTech with your bare hands.”

“Oh,” Steve says. “That makes sense. Wait... your arm... is StarkTech?”

“Yup,” Bucky says, shrugging. “I got this after Stark revealed himself as Iron Man and ceased production on military weapons. One of his new ventures included functioning prosthetics for vets and people like me. Of course, the media went crazy about that change, so I hide the arm in public because ‘til a year after that announcement, the media was all over people benefiting from the tech, like we were the next Kardashians. I just got used to hiding it.”

“I didn’t ask,” Steve says, smiling a little.

“You wanted to know,” Bucky says, pointing at him with his chopsticks.

“That’s true. Can you feel with it?”

“Pressure, mostly. Temperature,” Bucky says, snatching another piece of dumpling from Steve’s carton.

Steve’s mouth drops open. “Stop stealing my food, jerk.”

Bucky’s lips twitch. “What are you gonna do about it? Can’t take them back since you can’t use yours properly, anyway.”

Steve narrows his eyes.
He learns how to use chopsticks that very night.  

*  

They watch the moon landing after dinner, sitting next to each other on the couch with the lights off. A book presses against Steve’s side from between the couch cushions but he ignores it, much like they’re both ignoring the elephant in the room.  

*  

After the documentary, Steve doesn’t get up. Instead, he says, slowly, voice quiet in the room, “Buck.”  

“Yeah?” Bucky asks, glancing at Steve’s profile.  

Steve is still looking at the television. He breathes, shoulders hunching before relaxing. “I think I want to talk now.”  

“Okay.”  

Steve runs his hands through his hair.  

“I’ll make us some tea,” Bucky says, standing up and heading for the kitchen, switching one of the lights on along the way. He has an idea of what’s coming—the news of Margaret Carter’s death made headlines. He busies his hands with pulling out mugs and tea bags, steadying himself to listen.  

Bucky hands Steve a mug of tea. Steve wraps his hand around the black mug. This Is My Quidditch Cup is written in white font.  

Bucky sits in the armchair next to the sofa. Steve looks at him, but doesn’t say anything.  

“Peggy died.”  

“I’m sorry.” Bucky says.  

“I know she wasn’t doing very well for a long time,” Steve says. “And I’m glad she’s not suffering anymore.”  

“And… I’m trying to come to grips with both losing her… and that she’s more than just someone I lost. Someone I loved. She’s also what I’m supposed to be, right now—old or dead. It’s hard because,” Steve pauses, sucks in a breath. “Because right now, if I wasn’t dead, I’d at least be as old as she was. Silver hair. Lines on my face. Liver spots. Instead, I’m still twenty nine and as healthy as I was before I crashed into the Arctic.”  

Bucky’s heart clenches. “That’s… yeah.”  

“Do you know… before the Battle of New York, I’d only been awake for two weeks?”  

“What?” Bucky asks, horrified. That was in no way enough time to adjust to anything.  

Steve laughs, a dark edge creeping into the sound. He tells Bucky that it had only been two weeks since he woke up in a strange room, baseball game playing on the radio, a woman with the wrong clothes entering the little box he was in.  

Two weeks since he ran out of a building full of agents and into a New York that was both familiar and strange, since a man with an eyepatch told him that they’d saved him from the ice, that the war...
has ended, that it’s a new generation.

It had been two weeks and from then on, he’d been living a strange half-life that was no longer his own.

Steve takes a sip of the tea. The warmth helps calm him down a little.

“When I woke up—I felt like the war was only yesterday. Just a week ago I’d stormed a base with my team, gunfire all around us. After I woke up, they brought me to a hideout of some sort. I asked for information about my team and… they gave me their folders. Dugan, gone. Morita, gone. Falseworth, gone. Gabe, gone. Howard, gone. Peggy—Peggy was alive, but.”

Steve shakes his head. “Fury tried to get me back into the world by asking me to save it.” A ghost of a smile crosses his lips. “He knew exactly what to say. And I’d dived in, headfirst, back to the fight. In a world where nothing made sense, it felt good to go back to something I knew how to do, what I’d wanted to do, once upon a time.”

Bucky reaches over with his right hand, rests it on Steve’s knee. Steve takes comfort in the warmth.

“And after the Battle… I didn’t know what I wanted then, really, but I thought I was ready to give that a good think, instead of jumping at what was familiar and readily offered.”

He doesn’t know why he’s telling Bucky this much. He meant to stop at losing Peggy, but it’s like once he started talking, he couldn’t stop, his mouth wouldn’t stop, his heart wouldn’t stop pushing the words out like they’d been buried in there for years and it wanted its space back, thank you.

“I feel like I’m mourning the loss of two people,” Steve says, trying to sort out the mess in his mind. “I lost someone I loved… and the only person left who knew me before I became this. It’s like I’m mourning for Steve Rogers too.”

Steve laughs again, dragging his hands roughly over his eyes. “I’m so fucking selfish. Peggy died, and here I am talking about myself.”

“Hey,” Bucky says, squeezing his knee. “You are allowed to feel what you feel. There’s no wrong or right way to feel about this, Steve. If you feel like part of you died with Peggy, then that’s okay. But Steve Rogers is still here.”

“Is he?” Steve asks, his eyes bright blue. “I didn’t realize how hard it would be—waking up in a different time is bad enough, losing all your friends in the blink of an eye is worse, but having to do all these while everyone thinks of you as just Captain America… Sometimes I wonder if people even know Steve Rogers exists as an actual person. Not just as Captain America’s alter-ego.”

“They do. And if they don’t, they will,” Bucky says. “I know telling others about yourself is hard, even for us normal people—so I can imagine what it’s like for Captain America. But I bet people are willing to get to know Steve Rogers too. He’s been doing well so far, traveling and meeting people.”

Steve sits back, stunned.

Bucky smiles at him, watching as the realization sinks in. Gently, he says “Let people in, Steve. They’d love to get to know you if you just gave them a chance.”

Steve shakes his head. “Even then… with the people I meet now, I’m still careful. The legend of Captain America is too big. I’m afraid … that it’ll be all of who I am, that it’s already that way. That I’m already someone who says ‘watch your language’ when Steve Rogers would have cussed. The Steve Rogers that existed before Captain America… nobody remembers that guy anymore. Not the
“So, show them.” Bucky says. Then stops, because what the fuck, he’s giving advice to someone who’s, technically, years added, decades older than him. He forges ahead at Steve’s look, in for a penny, in for a pound, and all that.

“There is no one way to get better, Steve. For me, that meant moving and building roots somewhere far away. For you, for others, it could mean traveling. Building a new life. And if you need to travel, or do other things that Captain America wouldn’t do, just to find, or be, the Steve Rogers you want to be again… then go and do it.”

“I have a responsibility to Captain America,” Steve says.

“You’ve *given* your life as Captain America,” Bucky says. Then, in a quieter tone, “And I know for someone like you… you’ll always fight for someone who can’t. But you need to take care of yourself too. And if years ago, they both could exist equally—Steve and Cap—that *can* happen again. You just have to let yourself do it.”

Bucky breathes. “I mean, you showed me who Steve Rogers is,” he says. “He might not be a hundred percent Steve from the forties, but hey, I wasn’t a hundred percent the Bucky Barnes I was yesterday, either.”

Steve looks at his lap, at Bucky’s hand still resting on his knee. He covers it with his own hand.

“I…” Steve breathes, closes his eyes.

He’s silent for a long time. When he looks at Bucky, his eyes are clear. “I can try.”

Bucky looks back at him, a soft smile gracing his features.

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Steve’s lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling of Bucky’s guest bedroom. Their conversation runs through his mind.

At this moment, what would Steve Rogers do?

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Steve knocks on Bucky’s door.

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Bucky opens his door in bare feet and sweat pants, hair hanging loose. Steve feels punched to the gut; he can see the deep scars on Bucky’s shoulder, the muscles straining against the metal.

Steve meets Bucky’s eyes. They don’t say anything. Slowly, Steve takes a step forward, hands lifting to rest on Bucky’s waist. Behind him, Steve sees a glimpse of navy blue sheets, streetlamps reflecting off the window.

“Are you sure?” Bucky finally breaks the silence, bringing his own hands up to rest lightly on Steve’s wrists. Steve soaks in the touch—one is cool, the other is warm.

“Yes,” Steve says, stroking his thumbs over Bucky’s exposed hipbones. He looks straight into Bucky’s eyes, dark in the night. “Are you?”

Bucky’s grip tightens around his wrists. “As I am of anything.”
Steve lets himself get tugged forward, their lips meeting in a kiss. He closes the door behind him.

Sunlight peeks through the window and hits the wooden surface of the table, enclosing the kitchen in a warm glow. The aroma of bacon and scrambled eggs fill the air. Bucky’s kitchen is a bit of a mess, pots and pans stacked in a corner, various bottles and plastic containers stacked on the counter.

“Hi,” Steve says, stopping at the bottom of the staircase. He shifts his weight a little, his heart thumping against his ribcage. It’s not often that someone can sneak past him in his sleep.

Bucky’s poking inside the refrigerator, metal arm holding the door open.

“Hi,” Bucky replies. He lifts up the box of juice in his hands, and motions to the table, smiling. “I made us breakfast.”

Steve’s heart instantly calms.

“He reads and cooks,” Steve says. “What more can you ask for?”

“A kiss would be nice,” Bucky quips.

Steve laughs. He pads over to Bucky, one hand settling around his waist. Bucky’s lips are chapped against Steve’s own, hand warm against his neck. Steve angles his head to catch Bucky’s bottom lip between his own. Steve feels like his heart is being tugged out of him, roping itself to Bucky’s.

They break apart.

“Good morning,” Bucky whispers.

“Morning,” Steve says, eyes dropping to Bucky’s lips again.

He steals another kiss, just because he can. Bucky smiles when they break apart, stepping away from him.

“Grab a couple of glasses in the cupboard next to you, would you?” Bucky says, moving towards the table.

Steve turns and opens the cupboards. He has two glasses in hand when a photo catches his eye. It’s held by a magnet on the door, adults and kids grinning at the camera around a water well dug into the ground; Steve spots Bucky carrying a toddler, biceps straining against his Oxfam shirt. He doesn’t have his metal arm yet. Steve’s eyes slide over to the poetry magnets near the photo. He remembers seeing them the first time he went to Bucky’s, the words in magnets in uneven lines:

when I tell you I love you
what I mean is
i’m happy
because, love, no matter how long the day is
i’ll come home to you

He glances over at Bucky, his hair loose over his shoulders as he places the juice in the middle of the table with the rest of the food. His heart does a funny thing in his chest.

They settle in to eat, Steve’s legs taking up room underneath the table. Bucky’s in a threadbare tee next to him, talking about the latest book in a series he’s following. Steve lets the feeling of comfort
It almost feels like home.

Steve’s phone rings, the vibration sliding the device against the table, shattering the illusion. He swallows the piece of bacon down, and looks at his phone.

He frowns.

Next to him, Bucky stops talking.

“Steve,” Maria Hill’s voice is clear over the line when he picks up. “We have a situation in Switzerland. Where are you?”

Steve’s eyes drift over to Bucky, morning stubble over his chin, laugh lines at the corner of his eyes.

“London,” is all Steve says.

“How,” Maria says, but says nothing else. She continues to brief Steve about the mission, points succinct. By the time the call ends, Steve’s sitting straight, back tense against the back of the chair.

Steve places his phone down on the table. Bucky’s eating his eggs, chewing slow and measured.

“I have to go,” Steve says.

The world is on a tightrope and Steve needs to go.

He doesn’t want to go.

Bucky nods. “World needs saving.”

“I’ll come back,” Steve says.

Steve has to go. Steve needs to go. Some part of Steve, the selfish part he keeps buried deep down, doesn’t want to go.

Here, he is Steve Rogers, human being, and not Captain America, living legend.

“If you want me to,” Steve tacks on quickly, realizing he’s being presumptuous.

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Of course I do. And I told you, you can come here anytime you need.”

“And what if I don’t need?” Steve asks, turning his fork between his fingers.

Bucky looks at him, lowering his own fork to his plate.

Steve takes a breath. “What if… I just want to.”

A smile breaks through Bucky’s features. “Then I’d fucking love that, Steve.”

Steve grins back. “Good.”

He leans over and kisses Bucky.

It tastes like bacon and orange juice and home.
They’re standing in Bucky’s hallway again.

“Take care, Steve,” Bucky says, swallowing. Like his heart is in his throat.

And like the first time he hears it, the words take a hold of Steve. Only instead of breaking him, he lets them wrap around his heart, thinks, People care about you, Steve.

“I will.”

A S.H.I.E.L.D. jet gets Steve to Switzerland soon enough, and he meets with Natasha and Clint at a S.H.I.E.L.D. bunker.

Natasha looks ready to give him the briefing, shoulders set back, face impassive. Clint’s a couple of steps behind her, arms relaxed, visor on.

“I’m sorry,” Steve begins.

Natasha blinks. Clint has the smallest of smiles on his face.

“I was… I am, reckless. I… don’t know if I’d have done what I did in New York differently, but I’m going to try.” Steve nods at Clint. “And thank you. For the wake-up call and not following me after Peggy’s funeral.”

Clint shrugs, acknowledging that he did see Steve leave that day. “Like I said, Cap. We’re not your bodyguards.”

“Nat,” Steve says.

Natasha waves her hand. “Forget it.”

“I,” Steve says.

“I said,” Nat says, looking him straight in the eye. Her shoulders have dropped back, but her feet are still apart, firm on the ground. “Forget it, Steve.”

Steve looks down, breathes. “Okay.”

“So,” Steve says, looking up at the unnaturally darkening sky. “What’re we up against?”

The fight takes eight grueling days, several buildings, a certain amount of explosions, and a handful of civilian casualties. Hawkeye runs out of arrows and ammo, fingers broken in a fall. Natasha’s got that look in her eyes, a busted lip, and a long gash running up her hip. Steve’s got the worst of it, broken nose and bruised ribs, possibly a fractured knee, but he’ll still heal faster than Clint will.

But here’s the thing: Steve does not pull a self-sacrificing move, even if he could’ve done it.

It was a close thing, but hey, baby steps.

They all still end up in the Switzerland S.H.I.E.L.D. medical ward, though.
The med bay they’re brought to isn’t busy. The nurses have just left, after checking all their vitals, patching and bandaging their wounds. Natasha’s reading her mobile phone, sitting in the corner of the bed Clint’s sleeping in. Clint has a pillow over his face, light snores permeating the room.

When Maria enters the S.H.I.E.L.D. ward, she congratulates them on a mission well done, and gives them a quick debrief. Then she turns to Steve and drops a magazine into his lap.

The headline blasts a bright yellow.

Solace from loneliness?
Mere days after the death of Margaret Carter, former S.S.R. agent and founder of S.H.I.E.L.D., once comrade-in-arms Steven Grant Rogers, more commonly known as Captain America, your great red, white, and blue superhero, was seen leaving the home of one buff brunet in Notting Hill. Seems like Cap isn’t as broken up by his former paramour’s death at all.

“Are we releasing a statement?” Maria asks, crossing her arms over her chest.

Steve bites his bottom lip.

He thinks of the quiet places he’s been, the people he’s met, the people he’s yet to meet. He thinks of the man in the gym, the people stumbling over themselves to get his photo, being used as the face and symbol for modern warfare. He thinks of Peggy in the hospital, Natasha and Clint in the coffee shop before he left. He thinks of Bucky, quiet conversations, blue sheets in the sunlight, and words stuck on a fridge.

He looks at Maria.

“Here’s my statement,” Steve says. “Captain America is on-call as an Avenger. Steve Rogers is going to live his life.”

“Amen,” Natasha murmurs from the corner.

Maria works fast. Bucky sends him a screenshot of the press release later afternoon, which almost every news site had picked up. Below it is the caption:

Bucky Barnes: You go, Steve Rogers. Four for you, Steve Rogers.

September 25, 2014 04:04 PM CEST

Steve Rogers: And none for gossip rags, bye.

“You know you have a Starkphone, right?” Natasha says, eyebrow raised. She’s standing in front of him, as she was moments ago, trying to convince them all to sneak out and get some real food. Before Steve got distracted with texting.

“Yes,” Steve says, looking up from Bucky’s latest reply.

Natasha bends over him, presses a couple of buttons on his phone. The display lights up, a hologram appearing.

“Hey,” Bucky says, blinking at him. His hair’s tied back in a bun, black frames atop his face. There’s a wall of books behind him, the muted sounds of Scott talking to someone on the other end. “We do video calls now, okay. Wait, are you in a hospital?”
“You wear glasses,” Steve blurs.

Natasha’s eyebrows rise even higher, the smirk on her lips all too knowing.

“Not if I can help it,” Bucky says, making a face. “Hey, are you in the hospital?”

“Just the med ward in S.H.I.E.L.D.” Steve says, brushing it off. “Why not? Don’t you need them?”

“Just the med ward, well that’s comforting,” Bucky says. “And I do. But I prefer contacts. I mean, it’s hard to look to your left or your right with these frames blocking the way, Steve. How am I supposed to catch people shoving books down their pants then?”

Steve chuckles. Clint scrunches up his nose, mouthing, “Pants?”

“And also,” Bucky continues. “Tea. Do you know the steam from tea makes glasses fog up? So I have to remove them. Just, contacts any day, man. Except I lost one down the sink this morning so.”

“Yes,” Steve says. “And you should also know that I’m not alone in the med ward right now.” He flips the phone around to show Nat and Clint—Nat gives a slight nod, assessing Bucky, while Clint gives a wave with the hand that has two fingers taped together.

“Nice meeting you all,” Bucky says. “Well, at least you don’t look that beat-up compared to Hawkeye. Sorry, man.”

“It’s cool bro. You speak the truth,” Clint says, pushing himself up to his feet. “We should go and do spy things, Nat.”

“Yes. Let’s go be subtle and leave Steve alone,” Natasha says, walking after Clint.

Bucky’s laugh follows them behind the closed doors. Steve rolls his eyes, fighting down the blush that’s creeping up from his neck.

“There is no try,” Bucky says, reminding Steve of their conversation about apologizing to Natasha. “You did it, huh.”

“I did,” Steve confirms. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Bucky says. “Not even going to point out that you already are.”

“Punk,” Steve grumbles. “You always tell me to be careful. Even when we didn’t know each other well. How come?” Steve asks.

Bucky rolls his eyes. “Because I want you to take care?”

“Even when we didn’t know each other?”

He smiles, takes pity on Steve.

“I picked it up in one of the countries I was working at. If people were good friends, instead of just a goodbye, they ended their conversations with ‘take care’. It feels apt,” Bucky explains. “Especially with who you are. And well, now I really care about you, so there’s that too.”
Steve smiles.

“I’ve been thinking,” he starts, face turning serious. His heart’s thumping, like it needs to jump out of his chest at this very moment.

“Well, that’s a good sign,” Bucky says.

Steve narrows his eyes at him but forge ahead. “I think I’m going to travel a little more.”

Bucky blinks. “That’s great,” he says, still smiling at him. There’s a crash from behind him, followed by the sound of Scott swearing. “Where to next?”

“I don’t know yet,” Steve says. His lips suddenly feel dry. “Are you mad?”

“Why would I be mad?” Bucky asks, eyebrows meeting together.

“I might not be able to visit you as soon as we thought,” Steve says.

Bucky shrugs. “Do what’s best for you, Steve. I’m not your keeper, you don’t owe me anything.”

Steve frowns. “No, you aren’t. But you know what you are to me.”

Bucky holds his gaze. Steve feels his chin start to jut out, a purely defensive reaction. He tempers it in.

Bucky says, softly, “I know. I really like you too, old man. So you go find that Steve Rogers you need.”

“And what about you?” Steve asks.

“You asking me to wait?”

Steve hears books being stacked again, hardbound covers hitting each other.


“Good,” Bucky says, straightening.

Steve’s heart sinks.

“Don’t look like a kicked puppy, Rogers,” Bucky says, rolling his eyes. “If people from your time could do long-distance with the war and minimal technology, we’ll be fine.”

“Oh,” Steve says, unable to stop the smile on his face.

Bucky winks. “Besides, you’ve elevated us to video calls. Better be prepared.”

Steve laughs.
It’s noisy, humid; the streets are wet and reek of garbage, even when there isn’t any, like the stench had seeped into the concrete. Steve walks on, getting stared at—tall and white and blond, a stranger in their midst. Still he walks on, looking at the cheaply made items—everything from clothes, shoes, bags, kitchenware, to toys.

He’s walking past one stall when a familiar logo catches the corner of his eye. It’s a box of Harry Potter figurines. Fake Harry Potter figurines that look nothing like their movie or book counterparts. Steve grins.

He buys them all.

The air is fresh; tall trees rife with life surround him. The roads are long and dirt-packed, but he hikes through them with no problem. Steve’s taking a rest with the rest of his tour group when the guide holds a plastic packet out in front of him, food inside.

He looks at the plastic packet. The white label on it reads:

He looks up. The guide is smiling widely at him, his two front teeth missing, unruly hair covered by a cap, the color faded by the sun.

Steve takes two worms and finishes them in one bite.

They’re not bad.

“Tastes like chicken,” he says.

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Steve’s in a proper hotel this time, the rates equal to the usual hostels he stays in. It’s almost midnight by the time he gets back to enjoy the hotel’s firm mattress.

September 31, 2014 11:58 PM HKT
Bucky Barnes: At Sam and Riley's. We're playing Risk.

October 1, 2014 12:00 AM HKT
Steve Rogers: Should I add that to my list?

October 1, 2014 12:01 AM HKT
Bucky Barnes: Well, if youuuuuufaldsfj
Bucky Barnes: PLS DNT DISTRACT BUCKY. OUR TEAM NEEDS 2 WIN - riley
Bucky Barnes: Hope ur having a good tym wherever u r! cheers frm me. But not sam bc he is being competitive!! - riley
Bucky Barnes: Sry steve, am confiscating buck’s phone 4 a bit. here’s a photo 2 tide u over - riley

A photo comes through. Riley’s arm is taking up most of the space, but Bucky’s sitting next to him, eyes bright, sleeves rolled up. The painting on his arm is different today, and Steve’s heart skips a beat when he sees it’s Captain America’s shield. Sam and Scott are on the other side of the table, visors with I AM # 1 atop their heads.

October 1, 2014 04:00 AM HKT
Bucky Barnes: Sorry about that.

October 1, 2014 04:04 AM HKT
Bucky Barnes: Aaand you’re 7 hours in the future. Night, Steve.

*'

Bucky’s settled in for the night. He's lying on his side, bedside lamp on, reading the newly released Fangirl when his phone lights up with a message.

October 1, 2014 06:40 AM HKT
Steve Rogers: You mean you’re seven hours in the past. Good morning, Buck.
Steve Rogers: Pls. tell Riley I’m sorry for bothering your game?

Bucky grins.
Bucky Barnes: Oh he’s got game alright.

Stifling a yawn, he drops the book on the space next to him and burrows under the covers, thumbs still typing furiously.

Bucky Barnes: Sam just gets competitive. And so does Riley. You better be prepared next time, they’ll make you play.

Steve Rogers: I’m looking forward to it. You changed the symbol on your arm?

Bucky Barnes: The beauty of this mecha Stark arm is that I can change the design whenever. Kinda enjoyed the middle finger this dude recently gave the media, so he’s on my arm this week.

Steve Rogers: Should I be jealous?

Bucky Barnes: Maybe. I hear this guy’s really handsome.

Bucky Barnes: He’s got nice abs, too.

Steve Rogers: Huh. Sounds like tough competition.

Bucky Barnes: Yep.

Smiling softly, Bucky types out:

Captain America ain’t got nothing on you, Steve Rogers.

Back in Manila, Steve tries out a car-sharing service one night. The driver’s name is Juan, whose home province Steve visited on one of his travels. They’re chatting about the beautiful sights in the area when the car ends up stalling thirty minutes into their trip.

Juan is apologizing to him profusely, suggesting he just take another ride when Steve asks if he needs any help.

“Oh, no, no!” Juan says, waving his hands in front of his body. “I’ll change the tire myself.”

“It’s not a problem,” Steve says. He’s already moving towards the back of the car, checking out the busted tire.

“I just need to flag someone down to borrow a jack,” Juan insists. “Please go back in, I’ll turn the AC back on for you. Or you can get a cab.”

Cars pass by them at a steady pace.
Steve shakes his head. “But I’m having fun talking to you. I haven’t even told you about eating worms.”

Juan blinks at him and laughs, belly shaking. “Ok, ok. Let’s flag someone down and borrow a jack.”

“No need,” Steve says moving a few steps. “You have the tire and tools?”

Juan looks at him in bewilderment, but nods.

“When I say go, start working.” Steve says, bending down behind the car, fingers gripping. He lifts up, the car moving up with him. “Go.”

Juan stares at him, wide-eyed, jaw dropping. “Uh.”

“You should fix that,” Steve says, mock-serious. All things considered, a car isn’t the heaviest thing he’s lifted, but it’s heavy just the same.

“Okay, Superman!” Juan finally says, and gets to work. Steve tries not to let his shoulders shake too much from laughing.

It’s all over the news the next day.

But Steve’s already at the airport, too busy playing Words with Friends with Sam, Riley, and Bucky to be bothered.

(Sam and Riley really are competitive. Bucky’s trouncing them all, though.)

Steve walks the streets of Ho Chi Minh. He’s making his way to the City Hall when he sees a stall on the side of the street. Stall is a generous word, even. Striped yellow-and-black road concrete blocks are lined up next to a building that’s under construction, and the road blocks are piled with books. As he moves closer, he sees travel guides, classics, and bestsellers. There’s something off about them, like the printers ran out of ink or gloss—that’s when he realizes that the books are pirated, probably self-printed copies.

He snaps a photo and sends it to Bucky.

October 5, 2014 02:33 PM GMT+7
**Bucky Barnes:** Are those… pirated books

**Bucky Barnes:** Huh.

**Bucky Barnes:** On one hand, more accessible/cheaper reading material. On the other hand… piracy.

October 5, 2014 02:35 PM GMT+7
**Bucky Barnes:** You are giving me a moral dilemma and it’s not even 9 am.

Steve smirks. Motorcycles speed past him as he waits for the pedestrian light to change to green.

October 5, 2014 02:36 PM GMT+7
**Steve Rogers:** Knew you’d appreciate it.

October 5, 2014 02:37 PM GMT+7
**Bucky Barnes:** Screw you, Rogers.
Steve Rogers: You already have.

October 5, 2014 02:38 PM GMT+7
Bucky Barnes: ...Looking forward to doing it again, then.

Steve visits palaces, art museums, historical sites, temples, war museums, parks, tourist traps, flea markets. He hikes, climbs mountains, eats foreign delicacies, makes video calls, and bonds with strangers.

Steve finds that he likes *pan de sal* hot from the oven best, looking for beautiful book covers, running in the morning (no matter where he is), beating Sam at Words with Friends, sketching quiet observations, talking with strangers, learning memes from Clint, helping others when he can, learning about modern art and art history, and texting Bucky every day.

He especially likes talking to Bucky every day.

Overall, it’s a quiet life.

Steve loves it.

Bucky still wakes up every day at quarter to seven. He goes for a jog, sends a text to Steve, then heads to What the Book? to start his work day. He texts Steve during the day and hangs out with Sam, Riley, or Scott after work. They go to the pub, play games at Sam and Riley’s, and test out Sam’s cooking. Sometimes, Steve calls him at night, London time, telling him about things he saw or what he did that day, smiles on both their faces.

It’s an ordinary life, really.

Bucky loves it.

On an ordinary Wednesday morning in November, Bucky opens his door to leave for work as he usually does.

He finds Steve Rogers standing in front of him, backpack hanging off one shoulder, brown jacket zipped up to his chest.

“Well, I could get used to this happening,” Bucky says, a slow smile curling on his lips.

Steve grins.

Steve Rogers lives an ordinary life.

Kind of.

He wakes up every day at six sharp. He goes for a run, greeting other regulars on his route as he goes. He comes back at twenty minutes to seven. It’s more than enough time to corner Bucky in their little hallway, hands slipping beneath shirts, chin scraping Bucky’s stubble as they kiss, before Bucky leaves for his own routine.
At eight, they make breakfast together with the sun shining through the kitchen windows.

At nine, they walk hand-in-hand to What The Book?. He leaves with a kiss and goes to a nearby university with a good art program. His classes end at three and he goes for long walks, or hangs out with Sam or Riley, or video calls Nat and Clint, or drops by Bucky’s store to read in the backroom. They always have dinner together. After, they try to cross a movie or a show off Steve’s list, Steve’s head in Bucky’s lap, feet hanging off the side of the couch.

Sometimes, when the world needs it, Steve dons a costume, flies off in a jet, hits very bad people—or aliens—with a vibranium shield, with a team of two highly trained spies. Sometimes the battle takes long, grueling days. Takes a lot more out of him than what’s seen on the surface.

But that’s okay. Because Steve knows that no matter how long the day gets, he always has Bucky to come home to. And Bucky always has a home in him.

Just like any other couple living an ordinary life.

End Notes

This fic is a Notting Hill adaptation that decided to take a life of its own. Young Avengers cameos abound. All the books mentioned here are real and were published when the fic is set, except for The Hate U Give, while I'll Give You the Sun was published in the same year, but at a later date. The poem on Bucky's fridge is a translated stanza from Juan Miguel Severo's kapag sinabi kong mahal kita (when I tell you I love you).

This is my first fic in a long time—so joining the Stucky Big Bang was a personal 'go big or go home' challenge. I DIDN'T GO HOME \o/ I'm so glad I made it, and it's all thanks to these amazing people:

artgroves for making such gorgeous art, bringing Notting Hill!Bucky to life. *__* It's been a pleasure working with you. The art is crossposted in their No Matter How Long The Day Is tag on tumblr.

dracusfyre for asking the hard questions, shaping Steve's trip, and lending her amazing beta skills. obsessivereader for not being afraid to get her hands dirty and unspool the threads of this fic, providing the best chart, and her amazing eagle eyes. Your inputs were invaluable and this wouldn't be half of what it is (whatever it is XD) without you both.

To the OG, you are the reason I am happier in the mornings. To deceptivesoldier, because we made SWT work even from opposite sides of the world, and we finished. Thanks to the SBB slack for the early sprints and of course, the SBB mods for putting this all together.

And to you, for reading this fic. ♥

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