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Grade A American Beef

by acaseofthemondays

Summary

Darcy gets stuck babysitting the Winter Soldier when Cap and the Super Secret Boy Band have to run off and do some Avenger-ing.

It turns out to be a really, really great choice for everyone involved.

Notes

Some of you are familiar with this work, as I originally posted it over a year ago. Then I took it down because it was the first fic I'd ever written and, after growing (hopefully) as a writer, I wanted to refine it and make a product that I was happier with. And now I'm bringing it back.

To those of you who are new to this work, this fic is complete and being edited as I go. There will be 34 chapters and just over 175k words. It is my giant baby and I love it and I hope you will too.
There were exactly three things Darcy Lewis was prepared to cheerfully wake up for: homemade French toast, Christmas morning, and sex of the mind-blowing variety (subpar sex was met with her usual post-slumber grumpiness.) Loud, insistent knocking on her apartment door at 3am was decidedly not on that list, so it should come as no surprise that she let loose a rather feral growl as she rolled from her bed to seek out the source of the knocking. Darcy grumbled and stumbled her way to the front door, a hint of murder flashing in her eyes, before ripping the door open with a startling amount of violence from someone who could be solidly categorized as “civilian”.

“What. Do. You. Want,” she spit out, her eyes slowly focusing on the two blurry figures crowding the hallway outside her door.

“Oh...Darcy?”

Oh great. Of course. Who else would be here to see her in all her grumpy, rumpled glory but Captain Gloriously Handsome and...was that? Yep. Yep. Captain Glorious and his equally attractive, if utterly terrifying, bff superassassin, the Winter Beefcake.

Jesus, whyyyyy?

“Oh, hey Steve. And friend of Steve. How may I help you boys, at 3 in the godforsaken morning, I might add,” Darcy said with about as much charm as a sea slug. But really, who could blame her?

Steve Rogers, ever the gentleman, swiftly apologized for the late hour. “Darcy, I am so sorry for waking you, but I need your help, and...well, it couldn't wait till morning.” Steve then proceeded to give her the biggest, saddest puppy dog eyes he could manage in the dim light of the hallway.

Well crap. He knew that was her kryptonite. Being friends with beautiful superheroes could be utterly unfair sometimes. With a sigh and a rather impressive eye roll, Darcy waved the two men in, closing the door softly behind them. Steve marched in with entirely too much grace and confidence for her taste, while Beefcake filed in behind.

Darcy hadn’t seen a whole lot of Bucky since the good Captain brought him in a few months ago. He didn't interact with the rest of the team very much, mostly sticking to Steve's shadow or their apartment. He was obviously doing better though than he was when he first started living with Steve in the Avengers tower, but there was still a skittishness to him and a hunted look in his strikingly blue eyes. Even here, in her 100% non-threatening, overtly civilian domicile, his eyes shifted restlessly from one corner of the room to the next, his shoulders hunched forward in a defensive posture that was honestly breaking her heart a little bit. Enough to make her stow the grumpy attitude, at least partially.

In a gentler tone than she’d been previously using, Darcy asked, “Sooo, you need my help? With what? I'm not exactly good for much in the Avengering business. I mostly just provide sass and donuts.”

“You do much more than that, and you know it,” Steve gently chided. “You single handedly took on the role of head PR agent for all of us, you run every aspect of our social media presence, plus you're basically our unofficial, in-house therapist after missions.” Steve’s voice then took on a rather wheedling tone. “You’re such a natural at taking care of people, Darcy. It's a gift that all of us appreciate and have sorely needed from time to time.”
As touched as Darcy was by Cap’s impromptu little pep talk, the further along he got in his monologue the more suspicious she became of his intentions. Especially when his eyes started to periodically dart back and forth from her to his friend who was skulking over by her kitchen cabinets at the moment.

With a quick, apprehensive breath, Rogers continued, “We’ve got a rather sensitive mission that the whole team is headed out for at 0500, Darcy. Well, all of us except Bucky.” Steve paused, gauging her response, “He hasn't been cleared for missions yet so he’d be there alone. The whole time. With nobody else. By himself.”

Darcy heard Bucky snort and then mumble out, “I think she gets the point, Steve.”

She glanced over at the spysassin leaning on her kitchen counter before snapping her narrowed eyes back to the face of her friend who was giving her an increasingly guilty look. “Steven. Grant. Rogers. Are you asking me to babysit Bucky Fucking Barnes, a.k.a. Murderbot 5000, while you and the other Avengers go play superhero?!?”

Steve, apparently taking affront to both her tone and choice of nickname for his buddy, gave her an offended scowl and a sharp, “Darcy!” before unsubbly glancing at Bucky to gauge his reaction to the name. The man in question was still scoping out the shadows of her apartment and thankfully didn't seem hurt by her inability to think before she spoke.

Wincing with slight chagrin, Darcy lowered her voice to hiss, “Seriously, though! Is that what you're asking me to do??”

Steve sighed and lowered his voice as well, “Essentially? Yes? It's not good for him to be alone right now. He's doing better than he was...but there's still a lot of damage that he's working through. It's harder for him when there's no one there to remind him he’s no longer trapped in that life. He needs someone to watch over him, make sure he's eating and at least attempting to sleep. You've been doing that very same thing for Jane, Stark, and Banner for years. Surely you can handle one fossil from the 40s.” Steve ended with what he hoped was a charming smile, praying that the humor of his little joke would get him in Darcy’s good graces.

For her part, Darcy just stared at him open mouthed for a minute, not even sure how to respond to his harebrained plea. “Can't SHIELD take care of him,” Darcy sputtered. “I mean, that's their job, right? To back you guys up, support the Avengers and whatnot? Surely they could assign some agents to the care and feeding of one super soldier?”

Steve rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Yeah, Darce, they could. And he'd be perfectly safe, but he wouldn't feel safe. He's had handlers for the last 70 years, and that's all those agents would be to him. More handlers. He doesn't need that, he needs a real, honest-to-God, caring person. And you're the most genuinely caring person I've ever met Darcy. I mean that.”

Ooh, damn him. He really did mean it, too. He was all full-blown, blue-eyed sincerity, and he'd pulled on her heartstrings with that “handlers” comment.

As personal PR agent to the Avengers, she'd been one of the few people with the clearance to read Barnes’ complete and unredacted file, in the hopes she'd be able to spin his tragic backstory into something more palatable for the American people. And she'd done a damn good job of it, too. After the months she spent championing him in front of millions on one news station after another, the majority of the American public were currently appalled that their WWII hero had been so horribly mistreated.

It had been easy too, because everything she’d said had been true. The man had been mistreated,
abused, and used in ways that made her gut clench with nausea just thinking about it. She'd used that righteous indignation on his behalf to fuel every speech she'd given and defend against every ugly diatribe made against him by those who would paint him as the villain. Man, fuck MSNBC. And fuck Hydra. And fuck her, because she could already feel herself preparing to agree to Rogers’ idea.

Darcy gave an internal groan. Well, maybe not entirely internal, if the way Barnes eyes darted over to her was any indication. “Fine,” Darcy sighed, “I’ll do it.”

Steve’s smile in response to her agreement was just entirely too radiant for this early in the morning in her opinion. “Really, Darce? You’re an absolute peach! Thank you!” Steve ducked to gather her into an exuberant hug that was, again, too much for this early.

Darcy absently patted a bicep through his Cap suit, “Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m stellar. How long am I on babysitting duty for?”

Steve’s face quickly turned from radiant to cagey before he gently set her back on her feet. “Well, about that. Like I said, sensitive mission. Not a whole lot I can share on details, but...I’m not entirely sure? Potentially a couple...months...maybe more?”

“Months!” Darcy shouted, eyebrows rising threateningly close to her hairline. “I’m getting a new pet supersoldier for months, plural?!’” Darcy pinched the bridge of her nose. “Goddamnit Steve. I love you, but what the hell? Ugh. Fine. Fine. It doesn't matter. I said I'd do it and I always keep my word. Mostly. But you owe me so big Steven Rogers! So big!”

Darcy was once again swept up into an overly enthusiastic hug. “Aw Darce, you really are the best! Whatever you want, it's yours. I'll even let you ride the shield down a snow bank like you've always wanted.”

Steve set a giggling Darcy back on her feet. The smile stretching across her face slipped from fondness to mischievous fairly quickly as she began to ponder her options. “Steve, anything I want? Really?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “The sky's the limit.”


Steve was suddenly filled with apprehension at the growing smirk on his friend's face. “Uh, okay, what...what do you want?”

Darcy tapped her chin thoughtfully before answering. “You know, I've always wondered what you look like underneath that suit, Cap. You strip buck naked for me right now and I promise to take excellent care of your Bucky for what sounds suspiciously like an indefinite amount of time.”

Darcy gave a wicked grin and a wink at Rogers, internally congratulating herself on her brilliant choice and perfect pun usage. She could hear Bucky in the background making a vague choking sound while Steve stared at her with open mouthed shock.

“I...you... what?” Steve asked sharply.

“You heard me, Cap,” Darcy replied. “If I’m going to risk my life babysitting spysassin Barnes, then I’m sure as hell going to be able to die with the experience of seeing firsthand the National Treasure that is naked Captain America.”

Steve continued with his shocked staring, while Bucky’s choking sounds gradually clarified into what was definitely choked laughter. Which pleased Darcy to no end. She didn't think she’d heard a
single thing resembling laughter from Barnes in the entirety of his stay with the Avengers. She was kind of proud of herself for giving him the giggles, actually.

Bucky’s laughter continued to grow to full on guffawing, which seemed to momentarily snap Steve out his shock enough for him to give Bucky a deeply pleased and bewildered smile. He seemed as surprised and happy with Bucky's reaction as Darcy was.

“Jesus, Steve, this dame,” Bucky choked out, “Where have you been hiding her?” Then, much to Steve's horror, Bucky added, “You better start undressing Cap, I think the lady means business and you've got to get back to base soon.” Barnes’ laughter slowed with a deep sigh and he took a minute to wipe the tears from his eyes.

Steve swiveled his head back and forth between the two brunettes before his eyes settled on the floor in front of him. He took a steadying breath through his nose and clenched his jaw in the patented Captain America’s Look-of-Determination™. Having steeled himself for the task at hand, Steve began unbuckling the belt to his tac pants, to Darcy's utter delight. Swiftly and with zero eye contact with either of his supposed friends, Steve stripped down to his black Under Armour boxer briefs.

He paused then, not sure whether Darcy was going to make him completely disrobe, when the lady piped up, “The underoos too, Cap. I want the whole shebang.” Blushing harder than he had in probably 70 years, Steve yanked the last bit of fabric to the floor, before straightening up into parade rest.

“I am a fucking genius,” Darcy breathed. She took her time getting an eyeful of the good Captain, lingering on the expanse of muscle beneath pale skin. Well, more like violently pink skin at the moment. Darcy couldn't help whooping with glee at Steve's blush and obvious discomfort. She had to admit, she had a bit of a wicked streak and this was pushing all her buttons in such a good way.

Steve, who was still refusing to look her in the eyes, gave an exasperated sigh. “Are you done ogling me yet, Lewis? I would like to get dressed and regain my dignity sometime in the near future.”

“Oh ho, my dear Captain. I have only just begun to ogle and I do believe I said the whole shebang was required, including a good look at that star-spangled booty.” Darcy waggled her eyebrows at Steve suggestively, but the gesture was lost on him as he was still patently refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Barnes, on the other hand, had gotten a good look at her eyebrows and apparently found it hilarious because he'd quickly dissolved into a puddle of mirth on her kitchen floor.

“Shut up, you jackass! This is all your fault,” Steve yelled.

Bucky seemed unfazed by the accusation. “Stevie, I will gladly take credit for getting you into this mess,” Bucky gasped between boyish giggles. “Oh God, Steve, if you could see your face! I haven’t seen you this red since your Ma caught you hoarding her unmentionables catalogues!” If anything, Steve’s blush deepened further and Bucky erupted into huffing sobs of glee.

Oh wow, Barnes was being super adorable with his giggle fit. This may have been the best decision of her life. Naked Cap and a giggling Barnes? Damn, she was good. Darcy gave a quick whistle to regain Steve’s attention, who finally looked at her, only to see her twirling her finger to prompt him to turn around. He rolled his eyes at the gesture, this embarrassing interlude, and the whole damn day to be honest, but dutifully stomped his feet and turned around to give Darcy the spectacular view she’d asked for.

Darcy gave another whistle, this one low and decidedly appreciative, before snapping to attention.
“God bless America,” she breathed, giving a little salute. “Land of the free, home of Dat Ass.”

At that comment, Bucky positively roared with laughter, still seated on her kitchen floor, left arm wrapped around his gut, while his right hand repeatedly smacked against his thigh.

“Alright you knuckleheads, that's enough,” Steve growled. “You've had your show, Darcy. I've paid in full!” He then reached down and began aggressively redressing himself, keeping his eyes to the ground.

Bucky’s laughing fit was starting to finally die down and for the first time he really looked at Darcy. “Stevie...this dame,” he sighed in wonder. The smile that split across his face as he looked at her was breathtaking. And honestly, after all the messed up shit he'd been through, the fact that she could do something to evoke a smile like that from him...well, she wasn't sure she'd ever been prouder of herself. Or more determined to repeat the results.

It was at that moment that a certainty sank into her gut. As long as he was with her, she was going to make it her mission to see that smile as often as possible. She looked away from Barnes then to see Steve looking intently at her with what appeared to be understanding and...well, what she thought was probably respect. Her thoughts and emotions were notorious for being written on her face at all times, so it was likely that Steve had sussed out her newly self-appointed mission in life.

Her suspicions were confirmed when Steve, now fully dressed, pulled her into a firm hug and whispered a soft, “Thank you,” into her ear. As before, she patted a bicep, nodding her head at his acknowledgement. Steve released her then and took a deep breath. “So, I need to be heading back to the Tower.” He backed towards her front door, opening it and reaching around into the hallway to pull a sizeable black duffle bag into her apartment. “Here's Bucky’s bag, it’s got all his clothes and some of his favorite books and weapons and a few movies that Sam said he needs to catch up on. There's also a sat phone to contact me with if something...if things aren't working out great...or you guys need help, or whatever. Um. I think that's it? Am I forgetting anything?” Steve looked at her searchingly for a moment.

Darcy arched an eyebrow at him in response, folding her arms and leaning her hip against the door frame. “Why do I feel like you're a new mom, handing off her lethal baby and giant black tactical diaper bag to the babysitter for the first time?”

From startlingly close behind her, she heard Bucky reply, “That's because Steve is a born worrier and the biggest girl on the planet. Maybe the universe.” Steve responded with a huff, but before he could say anything, Barnes stepped around her to put a hand on his friend's shoulder. “Steve, I'm gonna be fine. She's gonna be fine. I'll stay outta her way, eat when she tells me to, and try not to do anything murderous. Okay?"

Steve looked up at him with a resigned sigh and a small smile. “Yeah, okay Buck. I'll see you later. Darce, thanks again for doing this.”

Darcy responded with her own small smile and a bob of her head. “Sure thing, Cap.”

Steve gave them both a quick once over, nodded his head and then turned to walk purposefully down the hallway towards the elevators. Darcy stepped back into her apartment followed by Bucky who closed the door behind them. With a tired sigh, Darcy checked the waving kitty clock on her kitchen wall.

“Welp,” she said turning to Barnes, “it is almost 4am on a Saturday. Usually, on this most sacred of days, I am not out of bed until noon, so I'm going back to sleep. My room is the first door on the left, guest bathroom is the next door. Last door on the right is the guest bedroom. If you're hungry, help
yourself to anything you can find in the fridge or pantry. Make yourself at home. I have to go face plant on my bed now. Goodnight, Sergeant Barnes.” With that, she gave a sloppy salute and turned and walked toward her bedroom.

Bucky stood there for a moment after she had closed her bedroom door, just breathing in the scent of her home, familiarizing himself with the new surroundings. He knew she couldn't hear, but he whispered a low, “Goodnight,” into her quiet apartment anyway. He then hefted his duffle bag to his shoulder and headed towards the room she'd indicated for him to stay in, praying that when he lay down he'd actually be able to sleep soundly for once.
Darcy woke slowly to the sound of soft and fervent cursing coming from her kitchen, the low tones of a male voice carrying in beneath her closed bedroom door. She scrunched her brow in confusion for a moment before the events of last night began to filter back into her memory.

Crap on a stick. In her infinite wisdom, she had taken in a stray supersoldier in the middle of the night, hadn’t she? One who was now cursing up a storm in her kitchen for unknown reasons. That sounded like a promising start to her morning...or mid-afternoon, as it were. The sound of Bucky’s cursing became increasingly concerning and creative the longer she lay in bed. For fear of having him go completely nuclear in her kitchen, Darcy jerked out of bed, grabbing her glasses from her nightstand and shoving them on her face before stepping out into her hallway. As she rounded the corner of her kitchen entryway, she saw Barnes’ large frame standing in front of her Keurig, one fist raised menacingly at her coffee maker.

“Barnes, what the hell are you doing to my baby?”

Bucky froze, shoulders jumping to his ears, startled by her sudden appearance and obvious dismay. He quickly pulled the offending fist behind his back and took a step back from the coffee maker, looking very much like a giant, grumpy toddler who’d been caught in the midst of mischief.

“Nothing ma’am. I was trying to make coffee. The machine was not complying,” Bucky murmured softly. He hesitated and then snuck a quick glance at her face before returning his gaze to the machine with a slight scowl.

Darcy walked over to her precious, life-giving baby, crowding the space between Barnes and the counter, before wrapping a loving arm around her Keurig. “Lana is not a machine. She is a nurturing, sustenance-giving lady who deserves to be treated with respect. You can’t just manhandle her into compliance, she is complex and beautiful. You must use finesse, Barnes. Finesse!”

Bucky, who had scuttled back a bit upon her approach, leaned against the opposite counter from her, crossing his arms over his chest. “You named your coffee maker?” he asked, cocking his head to the side and lifting an eyebrow into a condescending arch.

Darcy sniffed, not deigning to reply to his impertinence, and turned towards Lana because coffee
actually sounded pretty amazing right now, despite the fact that it was far past morning. She pulled a mug from the cabinet above her and picked out what flavor of coffee she wanted. Today seemed like a hazelnut creme kinda day. As she fiddled with the buttons on the brewer, she felt, rather than heard, Barnes slide up to the counter beside her.

“Can I help you?” she asked, glancing up at him over her shoulder.

“Nah doll, just trying to pick up on some of that ‘finesse’ you were talking about. Didn’t realize Lana was a lady, otherwise I woulda treated her right from the beginning. I gotta make amends, don’t I?” Barnes looked down at her with a smirk and a wink and Darcy was suddenly very aware of the fact that he was very much in her personal bubble at the moment. That awareness was swiftly followed by the secondary awareness that she had not brushed her teeth this morning as of yet.

“Right. Amends,” she replied, nodding her head and taking a solid step to the right, allowing Barnes access to Lana and enough distance to avoid any morning breath incidences. Hopefully.

Darcy waved a hand at the machine, “Well, the hard work is done now, just push this button here and badabing badaboom: coffee.” She took another step towards the kitchen entryway. “I think you’ve got it from here Sergeant Barnes, I’m gonna go...make myself presentable,” she said, tugging at her holey cotton sleep shirt and running a hand over her spectacular case of bedhead. She spun on her heel and booked it to her bedroom, missing the way Barnes’ head dropped and a frustrated sigh escaped his chest.

He used to be better at this, he thought, while pressing the button she'd indicated. Talking to people, making friends...it used to be as easy as breathing. His Ma always called him “charmer” and said that he'd never met a stranger. But everything and everyone was strange to him now and he couldn't quite figure out how to regain the ability to bridge the relational gap. Darcy’s quick exit was becoming an achingly familiar reaction to his friendly overtures these days. No one seemed willing to spend more than a few seconds in his company before running. At least Darcy didn't seem as scared as the others, just deeply uncomfortable. Christ, why was this so hard?

With a fizz and a spurt, Darcy’s cup of coffee finished brewing. He set her cup aside and pulled a mug from the cabinet she'd gone to earlier, mimicking her actions and setting his own cup of coffee brewing. He was rummaging around in her fridge when he heard Darcy step back into the kitchen.

“Looking for something in particular?” she asked.

Bucky turned to look at her. She was fresh-faced and dressed in denims and some kind of sweater...thing, with her hair collected and piled on top of her head. She still wore her glasses and Bucky thought she looked like youth incarnate, all rosy cheeks and soft lips and...wait. She’d asked him a question hadn’t she? Shit.

“Uh. Yeah,” he mumbled, shaking his head clear. Then with more confidence, “You got any creamer? That fancy flavored stuff?”

Darcy arched an eyebrow in amusement. “Sorry, buddy. All I've got is milk. I figured you as more of a black coffee kind of guy, what with the military background and all?”

Bucky turned back to the fridge, crooking a finger through the handle of the milk jug and pulling it out. “I like what I like. What's the point of being in the future if I can't enjoy the little luxuries of this century?” he asked, shoulders hunched defensively.
He really did enjoy that fancy stuff. The common kitchen in the tower had a particularly delicious selection and he'd become notoriously fond of it. He'd gotten about a third of the way through a bottle of pumpkin spice flavor one morning when Clint had caught him sipping the stuff straight from the jug. Barton had just snorted and grabbed a bagel off the counter before turning to leave, mumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, “basic bitch” under his breath.

“Hey, no judgement,” Darcy said, raising her hands in a placating gesture. She picked up her own mug and took a small sip. “I’ll pick you some up the next time I’m at the store though...if you want?”

Bucky gave her a shy smile as he measured out a slug of milk into his cup. “Thanks doll, I’d appreciate it.”

“Anytime,” Darcy replied, pulling out a drawer and grabbing a spoon for him.

Bucky plucked the proffered spoon from her fingers, “Thanks, got any sugar?” Darcy hummed her affirmation, before sliding her sugar bowl in his direction. She watched over the rim of her mug in amusement as he dumped spoonful after spoonful of the stuff into his coffee.

“Did they not have diabetes in the 40s?” she asked with a wry grin. Barnes shot her an unamused look before deliberately adding another heaping spoonful. That little shit.

“One of the perks of being a super soldier, sweetheart. I eat what I want without consequence,” he replied, stirring in his sugar with a flourish and taking a healthy swallow of what had to be a sickeningly sweet concoction. This was followed by a deeply satisfied sigh from him that had Darcy contemplating keeping sugary foods and beverages in constant supply in order to hear him make more noises of that variety. Rolling her eyes at him, and a little bit at herself, Darcy grabbed the milk jug and replaced it in the fridge.

“You eaten today?” she asked, eyes scoping out the shelves of her fridge, searching for anything that might be halfway edible.

“No ma’am.”

“Welp, we can’t have that. Rogers would be on my ass like white on rice if he found out.” Darcy firmly closed the refrigerator door. The contents of it were a lost cause anyway. “I don’t have anything for us here, but there’s a really great German sandwich shop about three blocks from here...” Darcy trailed off, her brain catching up to her mouth with sudden horror. “Oooor, we could go somewhere that is not related in any way to the country and people that you fought against and were captured and tortured by for decades. Oh god, I am so sorry. I probably shouldn’t bring up the Nazis. Or Hydra. Or torture. Oh Jesus.” Darcy shoved a knuckle into her mouth before she could spout any more potentially triggering statements and send Barnes into some kind of horrid homicidal flashback.

“The Nazis were shit, but the schnitzel the omas near my neighborhood used to make was good enough to make you weep. I got no problem with a German deli, sweetheart.” Barnes reached a hand out to her before thinking better of it and letting it fall back to his side. Darcy followed the movement with wide blue eyes. “You’re real sweet, trying to protect me from that stuff, but you don’t need to censor yourself,” he continued, running his flesh hand over the back of his neck. “I’m, uh, doing better now. Not so much of a nutcase thanks to Steve and Sam and, well, time...I guess.”

Darcy flashed him a small, but sincere smile. “That’s good, Barnes. That’s really good to hear.”

Bucky gave her a lopsided grin that faded to a wince as a thought occurred to him. “Uh...I uh, have something for you though. About that stuff, in case I go a bit nutty on you. It’s rarer these days, but
it does happen sometimes so…” Bucky ducked his head, hoping to hide the flush creeping over his neck and ears, and disappeared back down the hallway to his room. He returned shortly, flesh hand grasping a small laminated booklet.

“Here,” Bucky said, thrusting the booklet into her outstretched hands. “Sam made it. It’s got instructions on what to do if I...forget who I am, where I am, things like that. Or if I’m having a nightmare. Proper care and feeding of the resident headcase.” Bucky gave a self conscious roll of his shoulder.

Darcy looked down at the stark white cover of the little manual, not entirely sure if she was emotionally stable enough to read the thing right now. She certainly wasn’t going to read it with Barnes standing there looking at her with those aching, wounded eyes. Damn it, he must feel so broken right now. What kind of person comes with an instruction manual?

She pasted an overly bright smile on her face, determined to salvage this afternoon and hopefully alleviate his obvious discomfort. “Well thank you, that’s very helpful of you! I’ll just um, go put this in my room for...uh later.” She sprinted to her bedroom and quickly tossed the manual onto her bed before returning to the kitchen.

“Um, I’m ready to go to lunch whenever you are. Or I guess it’s a bit late for lunch, so linner?” Darcy cringed at herself. Why must she sound like an idiot when confronted with emotional discomfort? Why, oh why?

Bucky nodded, “Yeah just let me grab my jacket...” he trailed off, exiting the kitchen and heading back to his room.

Darcy walked over to her coat closet by the front door, pulling out her favorite wool coat and a much beloved cashmere scarf. Up until a week ago, it had been a mild November, but a cold front had blown through driving the temperatures down and allowing her to finally bust out her, frankly, spectacular winter wardrobe.

But, apparently, not as spectacular as Barnes’ winter wardrobe, hot damn. Darcy gave him an appreciative once over, taking in the sight of him in a double-breasted, dark grey peacoat, leather gloves, and a crimson scarf that did wonders for his complexion. It also was doing wonders for her libido. Seriously, hot damn and god bless winter clothing. She turned and grabbed her purse before Barnes could catch her ogling him.

“Ready to go?” she asked brightly.

“After you, ma’am,” he swept an arm out towards the door.

“Why thank you, Sergeant Barnes.” Darcy bobbed a small curtsy and stepped out into the hallway. Barnes followed behind, patiently waiting for her to lock up and then heading towards the elevator.

“You know, you could call me Bucky, if you want,” Barnes said with a shrug. “After all, I’m pretty much your new roommate for the next couple months. We might as well get friendly.” Darcy quirked an eyebrow up at that statement. “No! Not friendly like...that. Just friends. We can be more casual with each other. No need to call me by my rank, is all I mean.” Bucky gave a low groan and tucked his face into his hands. He really was shit at talking to women these days.

Darcy took pity on him, “I know what you meant...Bucky, We can be friends.” She gave him a sweet smile and a gentle pat to his forearm, fingertips lingering over the rough fabric of his coat. Bucky looked down at her small hand draped over his arm. Gentle human contact was still such an oddity to him. Sure, Steve touched him all the time, but that was Steve. Having someone touch him...
without the intent of causing him pain was still a bit of a revelation and a shock to his system every time.

He must have been staring for too long, because Darcy began to slide her hand away with a look of discomfort. In a move that was smoother than the desperation he felt, he gently caught her hand in his own, tucking it into his elbow like the gentleman he used to be. He lightly clasped his hand over the top of hers before switching his gaze to her eyes. The wide, genuine smile that spread across her face had his heart racing and his blood singing in his ears. He tugged her gently out into the crisp November air.

“Friends,” he said firmly, a soft smile playing across his lips.
And They Were Roommates

Chapter Summary

Some food, some feels, some flirts, some much needed cleaning.

Chapter Notes

I don’t know how I survived before ladyaudiophile became my beta. Literally this entire chapter was trash until she swooped in and turned it into something worth reading.

Originally, Darcy planned on having them sit down in one of the cozy booths of the deli to enjoy their sandwiches. That plan was swiftly nixed as she watched the tension gather between Bucky’s shoulder blades and his breathing tick up a notch.

The deli was small and adorably quaint, but there were multiple exits and few clear sightlines and enough people milling about that she knew Bucky wouldn’t be able to relax and enjoy his meal there. She smoothly asked for their sandwiches to-go while checking out and then maneuvered him into a corner to stand and wait for their order. Bucky’s breathing began to slow once he had a solid wall to his back and Darcy standing partially in front of him like a human shield. He still wore the tension between his shoulders and his eyes continued to dart from exit to exit, but he looked less like he was about to bolt.

Darcy peered over her shoulder and Bucky locked eyes with her for a second before giving her a tight-lipped smile and nod of gratitude. She had hoped she had been subtle enough with her maneuvering to keep him from realizing she’d noticed his rising panic. It seemed a rather private thing to notice, especially between two people who’d only just begun to extend the bonds of friendship. He was an ex-spy-sassin though, and she was hardly the authority on being sneaky, so it didn’t really surprise her that he’d figured out her intentions. At least he seemed thankful and not too embarrassed by her help.

The front door of the shop burst open with a flurry of frosty air and a large group of boisterous diners flooded into the deli. Bucky jerked, upper body twisting to face the perceived threat, and Darcy felt him dart a hand out to grab a fistful of her coat low at her back. Moving slowly and trying to catch his eye, Darcy turned to face him and lifted a hand to rest on his chest. He was breathing hard again and glaring daggers at the overly loud patrons, but when her hand made contact with his chest he immediately snapped his eyes to hers.

Darcy swallowed hard, giving him a strained smile before taking a deep, deliberate breath in through her nose and then slowly letting it out. She raised her eyebrows expectantly at him and repeated the deep breathing. Bucky’s eyes quickly roam ed over face before he caught on to her meaning and began breathing in tandem with her. She responded with a gentler smile and rubbed her palm soothingly over its place above his heart.

After a dozen or so deep breaths, Bucky visibly relaxed enough to lift his head and break the incredibly intense eye contact they had going on. Once she felt the fist at her back cease to shake and
she was sure he wasn’t going to start murdering anybody, Darcy let her hand drop and turned back to watch the front counter for their sandwiches.

Bucky’s hand remained fisted in her coat. He knew he should probably release her but he was having a hard time staying in the present, and focusing on the single point of connection was really the only thing keeping him from snapping. He closed his eyes and took another breath through his nose, letting the rest of his senses filter out and focusing on the way the muscles of her back gently shifted under his knuckles. She swayed slightly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, obviously impatient for their order to be ready.

He took a few more breaths before allowing each of his senses to blossom back into awareness. It was a technique that Sam had taught him early on in his recovery, to shut down all the input and focus on one thing until he could open up to his other senses. It almost always allowed him to quell whatever flashback or panic his body was trying to push at him in response to overstimulation. Once he’d gotten his mind and body settled, he briefly considered what Darcy must be thinking about him right now. He’d just told her not twenty minutes ago that these episodes of his were rare. She probably thought he was a liar and a loony now, Jesus.

His thoughts were interrupted by their order finally being called and Darcy pulled away from his grip to head towards the counter. He followed behind her as she swept up their sandwiches, turning to him with a smile before shoving his sandwich into his hands and ushering him out the door.

“I thought you said you would read the manual later,” Bucky commented once they’d ambled a few paces down the sidewalk.

Darcy had already started to dig into her sandwich as they’d walked so she gave a garbled, “whaa?” around what should probably have been an embarrassingly large bite of sandwich.

“Back in the deli...moving slow, helping me breath, making me feel safe...did you read that in the manual?” he asked shyly.

Darcy swallowed. “Oh. That. No, no I didn’t even open it before we left...I was mostly just working on instinct, I guess?” Darcy shrugged and took another bite, this one slightly less grotesque in size.

“Oh. You’ve got impressive instincts then. I guess Steve did a pretty good job picking out a babysitter for me after all.” Bucky avoided her eyes and looked down at the sandwich in his hands, absently picking at the wax paper wrapping.

Darcy stopped in her tracks, reaching out a hand to gently grip his forearm, a line of concern etched between her brows. “Hey, hey, I know I joked about being your babysitter last night, but you’re not a child that needs constant supervision and care. I know that. You’re just a man... a man who’s been through some admittedly heavy shit, but a human being like any other.”

Darcy drew a quick breath and tried to place as much sincerity behind her gaze as possible as she continued, “Can I give you some advice, from one human being to another?” Bucky eyed her intently before giving a curt nod.

“We all need help sometimes, Bucky,” she said quietly. “Everybody, no matter what they have or have not gone through, needs support from another person or people from time to time. You’re not weak or broken or...lacking in any way just because you need help sometimes. I’m your friend, remember? Being there for you when you need it? It’s what I’m here for.”

He just stared at her, not sure how to respond, mouth opening and closing a few times before he breathed out a soft, “Okay.”
She gave him a tender smile and a quick squeeze to his wrist before turning and continuing on down
the sidewalk. Bucky looked down, blinking rapidly to push back the emotion swelling in his chest.
His head snapped back up when he heard her clear her throat a few feet ahead of him.

Deeming it high time for them to break away from their emotionally laden conversation, Darcy gave
him a wink and a cheeky grin. “You coming home with me or not, soldier?” His responding grin
was exactly what she was hoping for.

“I dunno doll, what’s in it for me?” he replied, strolling towards her with what she would call a
panty-melting prowl.

Darcy pointed a finger at his sandwich. “A hot meal and a warm bed, what more could a soldier ask
for?”

Bucky lifted an eyebrow and his current smirk tilted towards lascivious. “A warm bed, huh?”

Darcy sniffed primly. “A warm bed, Barnes. Not my warm bed.”

Bucky chuckled lowly. He fell into step beside her as they headed back to her apartment and started
peeling the paper from his sandwich. The divine smell of it hit him, his gut suddenly clenching with
hunger. The satisfied groan he gave after taking his first bite had Darcy staring at him with rapt
attention. He swallowed down the bite and licked a bit of sauce that had squirted out onto the thin
skin between his thumb and forefinger. He looked up in time to see Darcy’s eyes following the
motion. They both froze as her eyes met his, a blush blossoming over her cheekbones and throat.

Oh, thought Bucky, oh! A wide, knowing grin stretched across his face before he flicked his tongue
back out across his skin. Darcy reacted with a sharp inhale.

“You sure you’re not offering your bed?” he asked slowly, drawing the syllables out over his tongue.

Darcy huffed and gave a little stomp before marching off down the sidewalk. “Shut up and eat your
damn sandwich, Barnes,” she tossed over her shoulder.

Bucky threw his head back with a laugh that bubbled pleasantly up from his gut and then picked up
his feet to catch up to her.

Darcy nibbled at her sandwich around a very self-satisfied smile and crossed “make Bucky Barnes
laugh” off her mental checklist for the day. Damn, she was good. She hadn’t even been completely
awake for more than a couple hours and she’d already accomplished her mission of the day. Sure,
the deli had been touch-and-go there for a minute, and he’d definitely 100% caught her creeping on
him, but overall she’d call it a win. Bucky was currently ambling beside her, munching in
companionable silence, loose-limbed and the most relaxed she’d seen him since...well, maybe ever.

Yeah, definitely a win.

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The rest of the weekend passed quickly and without incident. Darcy puttered around her apartment
for most of it, doing her general baseline cleaning. This usually consisted of doing laundry and
tidying and dusting all the surfaces she could reach...and praying no one noticed the thick layer of
dust on everything just beyond her fingertips.

Bucky had spent most of the time quietly reading on her couch or disappearing into his room as she
worked. It was...nice. She was surprised to find that they orbited each other easily and his presence
in her home was not as intrusive as she assumed it would be. He seemed to be fairly self sufficient,
not demanding attention or expecting her to entertain him. He even paid for most of the takeout they ordered as she hadn’t made it to the grocery store yet. Best roommate ever.

Darcy was hopping up to dust the top shelf of her bookcase when she felt Bucky come up behind her. He plucked the cloth from her hands, giving her an eye roll and proceeded to dust all the spots she never could. It was great to have his help, but also slightly embarrassing, especially when the copious amounts of dust sent him into a sneezing fit.

“Jesus, Darce, when was the last time you cleaned up here?” he asked between coughs.

“Uh...never? It’s too high up for me to reach...or see, so I just pretend it’s not there and hope for the best.” This was said with a shrug and a guilty smile.

“You never heard of a footstool, shortstop?” Bucky arched a brow now that his fit had, thankfully, passed.

“You know, I have, actually,” she said, lips pinched tight with faux displeasure. “But I refuse to use one. It would be like admitting there is something wrong with my size. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with me, I am a goddess and an absolute delight.” Darcy gave an imperious shake of her head and flipped a few curls over her shoulder.

Bucky’s eyes flicked up and down her frame, sending tingles up her spine. “I don’t know about the ‘delightful’ bit, but you are pretty easy on the eyes.”

Darcy stuck her tongue out at him, “I’m definitely a delight, Barnes, and don’t you forget it.” She shoved at his shoulder, “Now back to work. It’s time you started pulling your weight around here.” He gave her a saucy grin and opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by the insistent tones of the Beastie Boys’ “Intergalactic” blaring from her phone.

“What the hell is that?” Bucky asked.

“It’s Jane! One sec,” Darcy said holding up a finger and pulling the phone from her pocket. She put the phone to her ear, “Hey Jane, how is my favorite astrophysicist in the whole wide world?” she chirped brightly.

Jane gave an indelicate snort. “You better not let Erik hear you saying that, you’ll hurt his feelings.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Yeah well he hurt my retinas with his deep seated aversion to pants, ergo you are my favorite.”

Jane deadpanned, “Aw Darcy, love you too,” and then continued with genuine emotion. “I miss you. That’s why I’m calling actually. I need a girls night.”

Darcy snorted. “You need a girls night because Thor is gone and you are one lonely hombre when he’s out of town, don’t think you can slip one by me. I know all.”

Jane clucked her tongue. “Okay, yes, Thor is gone and I am a little lonely, but I do actually miss you, you know. You are my best friend.”

“I miss you too, Jane,” Darcy said with a grin. “You provide the wine and snacks and I’ll bring the movie and hot gossip.” She glanced at Bucky’s back as he dusted off the top of her television before adding, “I, uh, could use a girls night too, actually. But only one bottle of wine tonight, I have work in the morning and it’s an actual grown up job where they frown on Monday morning hangovers.”

Jane sighed. “Oh, alright. I miss when you were an intern and belonged to me so it was no big deal
“We were usually both hungover, Jane. I didn't have to show up until you were well enough to
scientist, too.”

“I know, it was great. See you at 8?”

“Sure thing, see you then.” Darcy hung up with a pleased sigh.

It really had been such a long time since she'd had a girls night with her friend. She loved her new
position as a Stark employee—the pay and benefits alone were incredible—but she often missed the
simplicity of working for Jane. Tonight was going to be just what she needed, and the perfect
opportunity to update her friend on the status of her new friend and roommate, one James Buchanan
Barnes.
Darcy and Jane have a boozy heart to heart.

As the afternoon progressed into evening and they sat down to a quick dinner, Bucky could feel an anxiousness simmering under his skin. The thought of spending time in her home without her was...unsettling, for some reason that he wasn’t particularly keen to name. He tried to expend the restless energy thrumming through him by disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling his portable arsenal. It was enough to keep his mind engaged and away from any uncomfortable topics, but his body wasn’t cooperating. After his third trip of uneasy pacing around her living room, Darcy waved a hand at him to get his attention.

“Hey Scowly Face, you doing ok over there? You’re gonna wear holes in my carpet with all that pacing.”

Bucky looked away from her, shamefaced. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just...keyed up, I guess,” he said with a shrug.

“Oh,” Darcy responded. “Do you need to go running or lift weights or something? That’s a thing you and Steve do a lot, right? Because of all the supersoldierness?” She flapped her hands, the gesture encompassing the width and breadth of him in one go.

“That’s not a bad idea actually,” Bucky thought to himself, and told Darcy as much. Darcy dug an electronic key card from a pile of miscellaneous odds and ends sitting in a bowl on her entryway table. “Here. If you take this to the top floor, there’s a pretty extensive gym up there for residents. I’ve never personally used it, but it looked ultra fancy when the sales lady was giving me the grand tour.”

Bucky took the card she handed him and tucked it into his back pocket. “Thanks, Darce. I’m sure that’s why I’m so twitchy. Me and Steve are usually at the gym at least once a day. The serum seems to have made us antsy unless we’re regularly beating the crap out of something or someone. Go figure.”

Darcy squinted her eyes in an assessing gaze. “You’re sure that’s the only reason? Would you rather I not go see Jane tonight?”

Nervousness clenched in his gut at her words, for whatever reason. “Nope. I’m fine. You enjoy yourself at Jane’s.”

Darcy gave a soft hum and then went over to her extensive collection of DVDs, plucking one carefully from a haphazard stack, before shoving it into her purse. “Alright,” she said, grabbing her coat and scarf. “I’m headed out then. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, probably after midnight, but I’ll try to come in quietly so I don’t wake you up. Spare key’s hanging by the light switch in the kitchen if you end up going to the gym. I’ll, uh, see you later.”

“Later, doll. Have a good time.” Bucky leaned against her open front door, waiting to shut and lock it behind her.
She gave a nod and absently blew him a kiss over her shoulder before making her way down to the elevator, already mentally cataloging all the things she wanted to talk to Jane about. Bucky shut the door with a quiet click and turned to face her empty apartment. It was odd not having her there. It felt...quieter, but that wasn’t quite the right word. They hadn’t really talked all that much over the weekend, but just having her there, bright lips and eyes, colorful and often clashing outfits, made the quiet recede. Now that she was gone, the charm and warmth of her home quickly evaporated.

*Right, he thought, enough of this mopey bullshit.* He went to his room and dug out clothes he could work out in. He briefly considered wearing a long sleeved shirt and glove to hide his prosthetic, but decided against it, figuring her gym would likely be empty at this time of night. From what he had seen of the other residents, they appeared to be mostly pasty, accountant types anyway. A far cry from gym rats.

He dressed quickly and booked it upstairs, eager to work off whatever it was that was making him so restless. Hopefully he wouldn’t end up breaking any of the gym equipment.

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“Janie!” Darcy threw her arms around the slight woman as soon as she had the door open enough for her to barrel through. “How the heck are you??”

“Oh god, I’m so miserable it’s pathetic,” Jane said with fervor, hugging her back fiercely. “Thor is gone and is going to be gone for ages but I’m not allowed to know the exact amount of time because apparently that knowledge is above my clearance level. Excuse me, but what the hell? My boyfriend is a thousand year old alien demigod. I think that affords me some pretty fricking high clearance.”

“I see you’ve started in on the wine without me,” Darcy dryly commented.

Jane took no notice of Darcy’s interjection and carried on with her tirade. “And, on top of all that, I can’t even distract myself with work at the moment! All my projects are in observational stages, which is normally fine because, hey, I love observing and collecting data. But! Stupid Stark with all his stupid money hired me these really great interns who actually know what the crap I’m talking about, no offense Darce—”

“None taken—”

“So!” Jane continued without pause, “they keep doing all the minor stuff that I normally handle and now I’m left waiting around and bored as hell and, just...ugh! This is all Tony’s fault. He flew off with my boyfriend and left me with a bunch of really helpful helpers.”

“Yeah,” Darcy drawled, “what an asshole.”

Jane glared at her friend, sticking out her tongue with all the grace and maturity afforded by her thirty years of life. Darcy just laughed and smacked a kiss to her cheek before pulling her over to sit next to her on Jane’s loveseat.

Jane had an open bottle of wine resting on the coffee table in front of them, surrounded by packets of various junk foods ranging from salty to sweet. They knew how to keep their girls’ nights very, very classy.

Jane poured them each a glass while Darcy picked out a snack cake to munch on. “So,” Jane started, “enough about my woeful existence. What’s new with you?”

Darcy mentally parsed her words as she chewed, knowing that Jane’s reaction to her harboring a reformed assassin might be met with reluctant acceptance. Or completely disproportionate violence.
Jane had a deep protective streak that, when coupled with her infamously short temper, could prove quite volatile. Right, best not start with that.

“Not a whole lot at the moment. Especially with the Avengers out of town. I was prepping for a big press conference for later this week. The media have been beating down my door for info on that big showdown with Mister Sinister last month, which, by the way, who the hell comes up with these villain names? That one’s almost as bad as Doctor Doom,” Darcy said with a roll of her eyes. “Anyway, with all of them gone now, I'm going to have to cancel all of it without: 1. Being able to give a replacement date and 2. Giving away the fact that ALL the Avengers are gone indefinitely and leaving the city vulnerable.”

Darcy paused as she considered what she’d just said. “Never mind, I lied. I have a shit ton going on at the moment. Hurray!” She sunk her head into her hands and mumbled into her lap, “Tomorrow is gonna be a fucking nightmare trying to sort this all out.”

Jane clicked her tongue and patted her sympathetically on the back. She picked up Darcy’s glass, shoving it into her hands. “Here,” she said. “You deserve a drink.”

“Why yes I do.” Darcy followed up the statement with an inelegant slug of wine.

The two women continued to snack and chat, reveling in sharing the little aspects of their lives that so often got left out of phone calls and quick lunch breaks at work. The longer they talked, the more settled Darcy felt. She’d never really had any female friends until she met Jane. She’d been pleasantly surprised to discover just how centering friendships between women could be when cattiness and ego were set aside. Trust and support flowed between the two women like electricity through a live wire, lighting them both up from the inside out. When they were both mildly buzzed on wine and pleasant conversation, Darcy decided it was time to broach the topic of her houseguest.

“So,” she started, clearing her throat. “I have some of that hot gossip that I promised.”

“Ooh do tell!” Jane leaned forward in earnest.

Darcy let out a nervous titter. “Heh, well you see, I may or may not have temporarily taken in a friend of Steve’s as a roommate. Temporarily.”

“Oh?” Jane flicked an eyebrow up. “Is he good looking? I bet he's good looking, all of Steve's friends are.”

“Ok yes, he's a total babe, but he's got...you know...some serious baggage.” Darcy winced at the look in Jane’s suddenly alert eyes.

“Who exactly is this friend-of-Steve, Darcy?” Suspicion colored Jane’s voice. Damn her superior intellect.

“Ummmm,” Darcy trailed off, avoiding eye contact.

Jane gave a semi threatening, “Darcy.”

“James Barnes,” she replied in a pinched voice.

Jane’s mouth popped open in uncharacteristic shock. “JAMES BARNES,” she cried. “You mean James Buchanan Barnes, he of the metal arm and outrageously high kill count!?”

This was met with a sigh from Darcy. “One and the same, Jane.” Darcy braced herself for a tirade from the other woman as the tone of the conversation was definitely tipping into the “violent” side of
Jane's emotional scale.

“Have you lost your mind? Do you want to be murdered in your sleep by an unstable psychopath?!?”

A spark of offense on Bucky’s behalf shot through Darcy's gut. “Hey! He is not a psychopath! Have you not watched any of the interviews I've been doing for the last 8 months?” She met Jane’s eyes with a pronounced scowl. “He is a good man! The hell that he’s gone through, how hard he’s fought to crawl out of it and rebuild his own mind from the mush that Hydra turned it into? He does not deserve your ire or your name calling, Jane Foster.” Darcy ended her statement by crossing her arms across her chest and glaring a hole through Jane's forehead. If she’d been a little more sober she probably would have recognized the hypocrisy of what she was saying, considering her own near identical reaction when Steve had initially brought Bucky over.

The two women eyed each other silently for a moment until Jane let out the breath she'd been holding. “Ok, Darcy. I'm sorry I upset you, I wasn't trying to. It was kind of a shocking revelation though?” She peered at her friend with tender eyes. “I love you Darce. I worry about you and I would be devastated if anything bad ever happened to you.”

“I know Janie, I love you too.” Darcy uncrossed her arms to pull the other woman into a tight hug. “Just give the guy some grace, okay?”

Jane hummed and nodded, stroking her fingers lightly through Darcy’s hair a moment before asking, “So, have you snuck a peek at him naked yet, because he’s pretty easy on the eyes for a nonagenarian.”

Darcy jerked back from her friend, smacking her lightly on the arm. “Jane! He is a guest in my home! I'm not going to invade his privacy and ogle his goods whenever he's not looking!”

Darcy paused, a sly grin creeping up her face before continuing, “I did, however, get Steve to strip naked for me before he left on his super secret evil fighting trip.”

Jane gasped, soft brown eyes going wide with shock. “You what? Why didn't you start this evening with that?!”

Darcy dissolved into gasping giggles before sobering and telling the other woman the whole, frankly brilliant, tale of Steve's desperate plea and subsequent nude repayment.

“Darcy, you are a fucking genius.”

“That's what I said!” Darcy crowed with glee.

“What did Barnes think of that whole...thing,” Jane asked.

“Oh Janie, that was the best part! He thought it was hilarious! I've never seen a man lose it as hard as he did. At first, I thought he was choking or something, it was painfully obvious that it had been a super duper long time since he'd laughed like that. Which is kind of heartbreaking,” Darcy ended on a melancholy sigh.

“Yeah, it is,” Jane replied softly. Then, with mild urgency, “Where is Barnes now?”

“At my apartment, I assume.”

“By himself?” Jane asked, slightly appalled.

“Yes, by himself. He's a grown ass man, he can take care of himself for a couple of hours,” Darcy
huffed with a roll of her eyes.

“Yes, but you’re the only friend he has right now. Stateside anyway. What if he gets lonely?” Jane looked at her with those big, brown doe eyes.

“I...” Darcy faltered. She really didn't have an answer for that.

“Call a cab,” Jane said with sudden certainty, corking their wine and scooping up glasses.

“What? Why?” Darcy asked Jane’s retreating back as she moved the glasses to her kitchen, a distinct wobble to her stride. When she came back around the corner, Jane was stowing a fresh bottle of wine into her tote.

“Because,” she drawled, scooping the remaining snacks into the overly large bag as well, “we’re going back to your place.” This statement was accompanied by a firm nod.


“Because we’re having girls night with Bucky, that's why. For godssake, you just told me the man hasn't laughed properly in 70 years. If anyone could use a night of fun, it's him.”

Darcy smiled up at her friend, delighted in this turn of events. “Janie, are you adopting Bucky into our Circle of Friendship?”

“Yes. I am.”

“God, I love you.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Jane huffed impatiently. “Call a cab.”

Darcy plucked her phone from her pocket and both women and Jane's large goody bag were clambering into a taxi within the next twenty minutes. A speculative look crossed Jane's face.

“Does Bucky still have his long hair?” she asked as the cab carried them down the street.

“No, he's cut it recently. It looks a bit like his style from his Howling Commando days, but a little longer in the front.”

Jane pursed her lips in mild displeasure. “Hmm, that's too bad, you know how I feel about long hair on men.”

“Yes. I do. The things you have said about that are things that my virgin ears will never be able to unhear.”

Jane gave a snort of laughter. “Yeah, yeah, I know. I was just hoping we'd be able to braid his hair for girls night, really get into the spirit of things, you know?”

“Yeah...we can still ply him with wine and have a pillow fight in our nighties, though.”

Jane gave a bark of laughter. “If by nightie you mean my old flannel pajama pants from grad school, then yes. Definitely.”

“Alright!” Darcy pumped her fist in the air in triumph. “I was mostly considering Barnes in a nightie, but whatever.” At that, both women lost their composure, letting off a cascade of slightly buzzed giggles. Okay, very buzzed giggles.
Darcy was so pleased that Jane had decided to plant herself firmly on Team Bucky. The man could use more friends, and between the two women...well, he wouldn't know what hit him.
Bucky raised his hand to unlock the door to Darcy’s apartment when he was stopped by the unexpected sound of two women laughing within. Two fairly drunk women, it sounded like, one of whom was definitely Darcy. He tried very hard not to think about why her voice had become so easily recognizable to him so quickly. Bucky glanced at the watch on his wrist, she was much earlier than he had been expecting and he certainly hadn’t been planning for company. Best approach with caution, then.

Bucky eased the door open silently and crept slowly down the front entryway, pausing where the wall ended and opened up to her living and dining room.

“...and then, the fucker had the balls to say ‘you sure you’re not offering your bed.’”

A gasp, and then, “No!” Peals of feminine laughter rang out.

“Shut up, Jane! It’s not funny! God, I was mortified!”

Alright, Bucky thought, time to stop lurking and make his presence known before he overheard anything incriminating from the tipsy women. He rolled around the edge of the wall, pushing off and walking towards the two seated on Darcy’s couch. At his appearance both women gave him matching wide-eyed stares of shock. He quickly took stock of Darcy’s flushed cheeks and rumpled pajamas before turning his gaze to the other woman. Vague recognition stirred. He was fairly certain this was the astrophysicist that Thor was constantly yammering about. Jane, his memory pushed forward. Yeah, her name was Jane. Or my lady Jane, based on his conversations with Thor.

The woman in question reached her arm out to lightly smack the back of her hand against Darcy’s thigh. Without change in expression or taking her eyes off him, Jane muttered out, “I see what you mean about the sexy murder-strut.”

That stopped Bucky in his tracks. Did she really think he looked murderous right now? He was trying so hard to appear tame and non-threatening so as not to frighten their guest. Some things were just too deeply ingrained, he guessed. Shame colored his features and he self-consciously tucked his prosthetic behind his back.

In the moment after Jane spoke, Darcy looked at her friend in horror and then launched herself at the smaller woman, slapping a hand over her mouth. “Jane! Oh my god, shut up!” This outburst was immediately followed by Darcy retracting her hand with a look of disgust, wiping her palm across
Jane’s purple pajama pants. “Gross, Jane. Real mature.”

Jane tipped to the side, overcome with giggles and, based on the mostly empty bottle of wine sitting on the coffee table, not a small amount of drunkenness.

Bucky looked to Darcy, who seemed the more sober of the two. Ish. “What happened to girls’ night?”

Darcy ran her teeth over her bottom lip, looking up at him shyly from under dark lashes. “We, uh, we thought maybe you’d like to join us? For girls’ night shenanigans?”

“I’m flattered doll, but I don’t think I have the required parts.”

“Oh pish posh,” Jane spoke out, straightening up from her reclined position and flapping her delicate hands about. “It’s not about the parts, Barnes. It’s about the spirit,” she said with the kind of wise solemnity that only outright intoxication can produce. “You have the strong spirit of a girl, and are therefore qualified.”

“Thanks...I guess,” Bucky replied, face scrunched in confusion.

“You’re welcome,” Jane nodded magnanimously.

Darcy facepalmed hard and groaned into her hand. “What she means, Bucky, is that we thought you’d like to drink wine with us and..uh, hang out. Chat. Have fun?”

Bucky glanced at the empty bottle sitting out. “What wine?” he asked with a sardonically arched brow.

“That was your fault,” Jane piped up. “We came looking for you, but you were kinda busy beating the crap out of a punching bag. It was like, waaaay hot but also waay scary SO we came back down here to wait for you. But, you stayed up there for so looong. Who the crap goes to the gym for hours? Like, more than one hour. Several hours. So many hours...” Jane trailed off, glassy eyes staring into the distance in horror at his workout regime.

Darcy hissed lowly into her palms. “Oh my god, Jane!” Which seemed to bring the other woman back into the present.

“Right! So, we decided to wait for you and we started talking and then Darcy pulled out this super depressing bo-”

Jane was abruptly interrupted by Darcy pulling her back into her chest, one arm wrapped around Jane's middle and the other wrapped firmly around her mouth.

“We got thirsty,” Darcy shouted out, eyes wide in alarm. “We got very very thirsty,” she hissed, turning to glare at her friend.

Jane's face flushed beneath Darcy’s hand. She nodded emphatically and gently pulled out of Darcy's manic embrace. “Yeah. Thirsty,” Jane confirmed.

Bucky narrowed his eyes at the women, but let the obvious lie slide. If they didn't want to tell him, well hell, it wasn't his business anyway.

Darcy sighed in relief at his acceptance of her blatant lie. The two hadn’t planned to go near the bottle since they’d already hit their predetermined quota at Jane’s place, deciding to leave the entirety of the second bottle for Barnes and his supersoldier metabolism. That plan had been quickly upended
when Darcy had told Jane about the booklet Sam had made for her. Jane had poked at her until she'd fetched it from her room and the two women had opened it up to read together. She was actually really glad that she didn't have to read it alone, to be honest. The weight of it had been pressing at the back of her mind for the last two days but she had been too chickenshit to actually read it yet. With good reason. Three pages in and she and Jane had both reached for the bottle in Jane's tote. There was no way in hell she was gonna tell Bucky that, though.

Darcy was giving him an odd look, causing Bucky to glance down at himself. Sweat was still trickling down his back and stomach, making the thin fabric of his shirt cling to him in dark splotches. Not exactly looking his best at the moment...or smelling his best, he thought, nose wrinkled in disgust.

“Right, if I'm gonna join you dames, I'm gonna need a shower first,” he said. He gave the women a calculating look and added, “You two start chugging water. You've got work in the morning and I'm not gonna be the one dragging your hungover ass out of bed, Lewis.”

This was met with a mock salute and a “sir, yes sir,” from Darcy.

“That's what I like to hear,” he replied over his shoulder, sauntering off down the hallway to shower and change. Dear god, what had he just agreed to?

He bundled up fresh clothes, tucking them under his arm and heading into the guest bath. He could hear hushed voices and more giggling from the kitchen, but it sounded like they were getting water as instructed. Good. They'd thank him in the morning. He got to work undressing, quickly and efficiently stripping himself of his sweat stained clothes. His eyes automatically lost their focus, skittering away from his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He still had difficulty looking at his own body, the scarred and twisted flesh a constant reminder of what Hydra had made him into, how they had used him. His face was, more or less, unchanged and its reflection didn't give him much pause anymore, but the rest of him...he just couldn't handle it.

He'd tried a few times before, scoping out his reflection or looking directly at himself where metal met flesh. Every attempt had ended with him succumbing to full on panic attacks, naked and keening, balled up inside his own bathtub with Steve screaming for him to open the bathroom door.

He would gladly go to his grave before he let Darcy witness that, so he kept his back to the mirror and his eyes focused on a middle distance as he stepped into the spray of the shower.

His movements slowed, letting the hot water cascade down over his scarred shoulders and back. He took his time with this, eyes closed and savoring the warmth and solitude.

One of his favorite things to experience after coming out of Hydra's control were the showers. The seemingly endless supply of hot water and privacy were his particular brand of heaven. Even before Hydra and the war, he'd grown up in a poor neighborhood, with plumbing that was unreliable and aging even then. A hot shower was virtually unheard of. And after that...well he'd had 70 years of the same post-mission regimen. Report to medical for assessment and wound care, then to tech for repair and maintenance. After that he was stripped, hosed off and disinfected--usually in some bare bones concrete cubicle by empty-eyed guards--then redressed and finally put in cryo. Not exactly his idea of a good time.

It still sometimes surprised him to see that the water at his feet was clear and soapy. So different from the sluggish brown rivulets that used to puddle beneath him, tainted by blood and sweat and grease.

Bucky stayed beneath the water long after he had scrubbed the sweat from his body, letting the heat soothe and center him, taking deep breaths of humid air. Maybe that's why he liked showers so
much. They were the polar opposite of the cold, arid climate of cryo.

Bucky shook those thoughts from his head and turned off the spray of water. He dried and dressed himself quickly and then strode out to join the ladies waiting for him in the living room. Their heads popped up simultaneously at his arrival, turning to him with identical expressions of mischief. Maybe the long shower had been a bad idea, giving them ample time to plot and scheme unhindered. He fought the sudden urge to cross himself, vestiges of his Catholicism rising to the surface in response to whatever devilry they had flitting behind their eyes.

“Buckster! Baby! Glad you could join us!” Darcy shrieked, her voice just this side of too loud for the setting. “You ready for us to rock your girl world?” Before he could respond, she continued, “We’ve got snacks, we’ve got games, we’ve got three sips of wine and a bottle of spiced rum in the pantry!” She ticked off her list on her fingers as she spoke.

Jane accompanied the statement with a “whoop,” and a fist pump. “There’s also nail polish! Every girl deserves a damn good pedicure at least once in their life, even the spirit girls!”

Mother Mary and all the saints, this was way above his pay grade. “Ok ladies, simmer down. I’m all yours.” He wondered how big of a mistake this would be as he sat cross-legged on the floor beside them. Based on their elated shrieking, probably pretty big. “Ok, so what’s first?” He looked to Darcy expectantly, as she seemed to be the ringleader.

“First things first, you need to eat this,” she said, pushing some kind of plastic wrapped goody into his hands.

“What is it?” he asked, with a decent amount of dubiousness coloring his voice.

“It’s called a Ho Ho, don’t question it, just eat it.”

He eyed the packet warily, but ultimately submitted to Darcy’s will. Much to his surprise, it was actually pretty damn good. He reached for another package, to the delight of his companions.

“Told you he had a sweet tooth,” Darcy said to Jane, her full lips twisting into a smug smile.

Bucky gave her an unimpressed look. “That’s enough outta you, kid,” he said around his mouthful of cake. “What’s next? Games?”

“We were gonna get you drunk on rum before we got to the games part,” was Jane’s helpful response.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I think you two broads have had enough alcohol for all of us. I’ll stick to the Ho Hos and water.”

The two women acquiesced to his better judgement without argument, deciding it was best to pick their battles when it came to the supersoldier. Besides, rum was unlikely to affect him any more than the water would.

“Okayyy then, on to the games. First up! Cards Against Humanity!” Darcy pulled a black and white box out from under her coffee table, motioning for him and Jane to sit closer to the table. It was, apparently, her favorite game, appealing to her deeply irreverent nature. She quickly explained the rules to him and got to work divvying up the white cards and declaring herself Card Czar.

They played a few rounds of the game, taking turns trying to pick the most disturbingly hilarious combinations. There were a lot of current cultural references that he didn’t quite understand and
incredibly crude phrases that had him coughing and blushing. The women found that almost as funny as the game itself, calling him Grandpa Buck after about the fourth or fifth round. Despite all that, the game was quite funny. He found himself roaring with laughter often. The ache in his gut was a pleasant reminder of nights when he’d gathered around a card table with the other Commandos, jaw-jacking and laughing at one another. It was a peaceful feeling, having this kind of friendship. He was suddenly struck with a deep gratitude for these two women who had so effortlessly folded him into their friendship.

Darcy ended up winning the card game, which was no surprise to anyone. Her wicked sense of humor was pretty legendary amongst her friends and acquaintances. Or, really, anyone who had spoken to her for more than 5 minutes.

They moved on to good old fashioned poker after that, betting against each other using Darcy's assorted bottles of nail polishes. Bucky was surprised to find out that Jane, even soused, had an impressive poker face. She had repeatedly wiped the floor with him and Darcy.

“What the hell, Foster?” Bucky barked out. He’d just lost the purple bottle of ‘Don't Provoke the Plum!’ that he’d grown attached to.

“What?” Jane asked with a beatific grin. “How do you think I managed to pay for clothes and food during grad school? I can’t tell you how many sexist astrophysicists I cleaned out over the years. They never expected a girl to have any poker skills. Idiots.”

Darcy gave a horrified gasp. “We should have played strip poker!”

“Oh no, why didn’t I think of that,” Jane lamented, a moue of disappointment on her face.

“There’s still time...” Darcy trailed off, eyeing Bucky speculatively.

Bucky’s eyes darted between their faces, panic rising up in his chest and souring his gut. He knew Jane’s skills now, he’d be down to his skivvies by the end of three hands. The thought of being exposed to these two kind and beautiful women was enough to make him nauseous. They were whole and good, never had their bodies used in contradiction to their wills. How would they look at him after their untainted eyes had mapped out the sins of his past that marred his flesh?

*He couldn’t...couldn’t let them see...let them know...*

Something of his panic must have shown in his eyes. Darcy ran her knuckles lightly across the back of the fist clenched at his knee. “Let’s play something else, though. Jane’s embarrassed me enough for one night, don’t you think?” Her wide blue gaze held a tenderness and understanding that instantly settled the churning in his stomach.

He gave a slow nod and took a steadying breath. “Yeah. I’m not about to be suckered into another poker game with that card shark of a woman. She already took my plum polish, I won’t let her have my dignity on top of that.” He gave what he hoped was a convincing smile.

Darcy smiled gently back and pulled her hand back into her own lap. The loss of warmth shouldn’t have shot a spark of disappointment through him like it did.

He had been very tactile as a young man. The thrill of running his hands over silk stockings had been unparalleled. But it had been a long time since he could be considered a young man. Or even just a man.

He didn’t like to touch or be touched by anyone anymore, with the exception of Steve, who he trusted implicitly. Darcy was now, inexplicably, added to that list. Something in him trusted her and
sang out with bliss at even the smallest of touches from her delicate hands. He really wished he could talk to Steve about this confusing development.

While he’d been moping about in his head, the women had decided to move on to the pedicure portion of the evening. Darcy had Jane’s feet in her lap, leaning over them in deep concentration. Her full bottom lip was tucked into her teeth, blanched white where her front teeth indented the soft flesh. He watched as she carefully layered a pretty shade of pale green to Jane’s toes, all the while chatting happily with her friend. By the time Darcy finished, Jane had finally succumbed to the late hour and her inebriation, softly snoring with her head tilted back on the seat cushions of Darcy’s couch.

Darcy chuckled softly at her friend before closing the polish and rising out of her crouched seat on the floor. “I can’t leave her like this, she’ll have a terrible crick in her neck come morning. She’ll be cranky enough as it is, best not add to it,” Darcy muttered softly to Bucky. “Would you mind helping me get her on the couch?”

Bucky nodded, scooping Jane up into his arms and settling her on the couch. Darcy grabbed the knit throw blanket off the back and stretched it across her friend. Jane rolled a bit, snuggling into the softness of the blanket with a contented sigh that was, honestly, damned endearing from a grown woman.

Darcy must have agreed. “They’re so sweet when they’re asleep. Like little angels,” she whispered.

“What, children?”

“No, scientists. You should see Banner when he’s passed out after a Hulk bender. Looks like a little cherub, rosy cheeks and dark curls and everything.” Darcy gave a heartfelt sigh. “So adorable.”

Bucky chuckled quietly. “I’ll let Banner know the next time I see him.”

“Oh, he knows. I told him the first day we met.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Of course you did, doll.” He paused for a moment and ran a hand through his hair. “So, I take it girls’ night is over?”

Darcy’s face scrunched up in disappointment. “Yeah, I guess. I was hoping Jane would paint my nails tonight though.”

“I could do it...if you want,” Bucky asked shyly.

Darcy’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “Really? Didn’t realize that was in your skillset, soldier.”

“Steady hands, doll. If I can break down and reassemble a Dragunov SVD in twenty-seven seconds flat, I’m pretty sure I can handle painting some pretty dame’s nails.”

She flushed attractively under his gaze, “Yeah, okay, charmer.” She gave a quick roll of her eyes and picked up a bottle of lemon yellow polish, then tugged him towards her bedroom. “Come on, I don’t wanna wake the baby.”

Up until then, Bucky had yet to go in Darcy’s room. He looked around, taking in the chaos of color and memory laden odds and ends that covered her walls and the flat surfaces of her furniture. “Bit of a pack rat, huh?”

“Shut your face, Barnes. This is my sacred space. No criticism allowed,” she said sourly.
He didn’t reply to that, just plucked the polish from her hands and swept a hand out to gesture at her room. “Where do you want me?”

Darcy’s mouth popped open and a strange look crossed her features. “Um, the bed’s fine,” she said with a strangled voice. She clambered up on top of her coverlet, sitting up against her headboard before sticking her feet out and wiggling her toes at him. Bucky took a seat at the foot of her bed, one leg crossed in front of him and the other dangling off the side. He hunched his shoulders a bit, not sure how to go about reaching for her foot. Should he ask for permission first? Would that be weird? It was just a foot. Was he overthinking this? He looked up to see her staring at him with apprehension. Shit, she must think he was a complete weirdo.

Partly on impulse and partly in panic, he ran a finger up the sole of her foot. She jerked her foot back and instantly broke into giggles. “Hey! None of that, Barnes! No tickling!”

His face cracked into a sunny smile, relieved that the awkward moment had passed. With more confidence than he really felt, he reached forward and pulled her foot into his lap. “No promises, doll.” He gave her a quick wink and then went to work, opening up the polish and coating her nails with a steady hand.

He hadn’t been joking about his skill with his hands, and the resulting pedicure was probably the best she’d ever had. They chatted quietly as he worked, the topic of conversation ranging from favorite books to pleasant anecdotes about their mutual acquaintances.

“You electrocuted him?! You electrocuted the God of Thunder,” he asked in disbelief.

“Tasered him, yeah. He was being ultra threatening, stumbling around and yelling at Mew-Mew. I thought he was gonna hurt Jane! What would you have done?” Darcy gave a helpless shrug.

“Shot him, most likely. Or stabbed. Depending on what weaponry I had on me at the time and the distance between us.” The sentence rolled off his tongue, without thought, as he twisted the cap back onto the polish. Darcy was uncharacteristically quiet, her lack of response drawing his eyes up to her. She looked to be a bit shell-shocked by his frank answer, so he crooked one corner of his mouth up in an apologetic grimace and began to gently dig his thumbs into the fleshy arch of her foot.

Darcy gave a low groan, her eyes rolling back in her head, and sank down into the pillows on her bed. “You have thirty minutes to stop that,” she threatened. She closed her eyes and let loose a sigh of contentment.

“That sounds like an empty threat, sweetheart.” Bucky grinned and rolled his knuckles over the heel of her foot, enjoying the way her face shone with bliss. He worked quietly, letting his hands mold the muscles and tendons of her feet, pressing his care and appreciation for the woman into her soft skin.

Eventually, her face and body went lax, her chest rising and falling gently with sleep. He carefully untangled himself from her legs and bed. Trying not to jostle her too much, he scooped her to his chest, pulling her covers out from underneath her and settling her back down into her bed. He brought the coverlet up to her neck, letting the knuckle of one finger graze lightly against her chin. He plucked her glasses from her face, folding them and placing them on her nightstand before turning back to face her.

She was so beautiful it almost hurt him to look at her. Soft skin and dark brows… He suddenly found himself brushing a metal thumb over her right brow, then twisting his hand to push back a stray curl from her forehead. He withdrew his hand slowly then turned and marched brusquely out of her room, switching off the light and closing the door as he went. Best not let her catch him being a complete sap over her sleeping form. He was liable to get slapped for getting fresh with her.
He’d deserve it, too. Hands like his? They were too drenched in blood to ever earn permission to touch her the way he might want.

He crawled into bed, twitching the blankets over his suddenly freezing body and settling into the softness of the mattress. He fell asleep with the image of Darcy floating behind his eyes and the hand that had touched her face tucked protectively against his chest.
Food and Friends

Chapter Summary

Like the title says, with a little surprise at the end...

Chapter Notes

bless my sweet beta ladyaudiophile, and betsyfangirl for her invaluable input. Without them, these characters would be insufferably cheerful.

“Wakey wakey eggs and bakey.”

Darcy cracked her eyes open blearily, registering the overly enthusiastic super soldier standing over her. “There better be actual fucking bacon, Barnes, or I’m going to lose my shit.”

“Yes ma’am, went to the corner grocery early this morning for supplies. I thought you could use a proper breakfast after last night’s activities. Jane’s already at the table. Halfway through her second plate, too, so you might want to get out there before she eats your share.” He smiled brightly at her. He was definitely enjoying her abject misery, she could tell. The bastard.

Darcy checked her digital clock and groaned. It was absurdly early to be awake after such a late night...but admittedly perfect timing if she was going to eat, shower, and be at work on time. Thankfully Bucky’s insistence of her chugging at least three glasses of water before bed had alleviated any major hangover symptoms...but she was suddenly hit with a mighty need to pee. Darcy kicked the covers off her legs with a touch more force than was strictly necessary and headed to her bathroom, flipping Bucky’s stupidly cheerful face the bird the whole way there.

Bucky thought her ire was hilarious and chuckled all the way to the kitchen. Asshole. He was disinvited from future girls’ nights if he kept this up. A few minutes later, Darcy joined Jane at the breakfast table, plopping down into her chair and piling her plate high with fried eggs, bacon, hash browns, and toast. The smell was delightful and the fare tasted twice as good as it smelled. It was almost enough to make her forgive Bucky for being such a little shit. Almost.

She dug in, savoring each bite with closed eyes and soul on fire with food-bliss. That is, until she looked up to see Bucky standing beside her with a mug of coffee forgotten in his hand and a strained expression on his face. Oh god, was she making weird noises? She was totally making weird food-gasmic noises, wasn’t she?

After a moment, Bucky blinked out of his stupor and leaned over her to set the coffee on the table beside her plate. Oh Bless him, he was definitely forgiven now. She gave a small hum of pleasure at the first sip of the perfectly brewed coffee.

“I see you and Lana are on better terms now,” she commented as Bucky settled into the seat across from her.
“Like you said, I just needed a little finesse.” He gave her sweet smile and then began to demolish his own heaping plate of food.

Darcy turned to officially greet Jane, now that she had a bit of food and caffeine in her system and was regaining her ability to be an actual human. She found her friend peering intently at her, eyes flitting back and forth between her and Bucky, with a thoughtful tilt to her eyebrows. Darcy decided to ignore whatever Jane was thinking about. If she had something to say, she would have said it. It was too early to be considering what could possibly be flitting around inside that brilliant head of hers.

“Good morning, Jane. You sleep okay?”

Jane gave a hum of assent. “Yeah, you really have the best couch for crashing on.”

“Of course. It’s perfect for post benders of both the science and traditional kind.” Darcy grinned around a bite of her toast. Jane just rolled her eyes and took a swig of her coffee.

“So,” Darcy began, eyes roaming between her two friends. “What’s the plan for today? Do you both want to ride in to work with me?”

“Ugh, what’s the point,” was Jane’s disgruntled response. “All I’ll be doing is wandering around telling all the interns how good a job they’re doing and watching them do all the things that I want to do.”

“Jane dear, pouting is not a good look for you. Go to work with me. You need the paycheck, I’ve seen your student loan payments.” Darcy patted a sympathetic hand on Jane’s shoulder.

“Fine. I need to borrow your clothes though, I didn’t think to bring anything besides pajamas last night,” Jane replied.

Bucky snorted. “That’s because you were likely fairly soused by the time you left.”

Jane gave Bucky a soul-searing glare followed by flipping him the bird. Jane was not especially charitable in the mornings, hungover or not.

“Children, no fighting at the breakfast table. What about you,” Darcy asked, turning to face Bucky. “You planning on coming to the tower with us today?”

“Um yeah, I think I will. I’d like to get a workout in at the tower gym. The one here is nice enough...but I’m afraid I might break something if I’m not careful. All the equipment at the tower is reinforced for us. Plus I could use some time at the gun range.”

Jane gave a small eye roll. “Yeah, it’s probably been, what, four days since you shot a gun? Don’t want you to get rusty, old man.”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at Jane. “If you don’t use it, you lose it. You kids always take your youth for granted. At my age, it takes time and dedication to master a skill. You’d be wise to remember that.” He then sanctimoniously bit down into a marmalade covered piece of toast, reminding Darcy very much of her own crotchety grandpa at that moment.

Jane met Darcy’s eyes over the table, eyebrows raised. She just shrugged in return, a crooked smile in place, and went back to finishing her breakfast.

Within the hour, all three were set to go and followed Darcy down to the underground garage beneath the apartment building to fetch her car. She didn’t usually use it, preferring to stick to
walking or public transportation. But with two tagalongs today, one of which was an ex-assassin that got nervous in crowds, Darcy felt that driving them to their destination was their best bet.

The drive to the Avengers tower was frustrating as only a journey through New York City traffic can be, but passed quickly enough, allowing them to arrive exactly on time to begin the work day. The trio hopped on the elevators together before splitting off to go to their own floors. Darcy braced herself for the shitstorm she knew was awaiting her, taking a deep breath and then pushing the door open to the offices on her floor. She was immediately met by her assistant, Brandon, who began firing off all of the pending events on the agenda for the day. When he’d finished his update, she brought up the fact that they’d need to cancel the press conference set for that week, wincing slightly as she spoke. Brandon looked down at his Starkpad for a moment, cursing softly under his breath.

He looked up at her with determined gray eyes. “Not a problem, I’ll clear your current schedule, reschedule those appointments for later in the week, and then line up calls with all the heads of the national and local news stations that were expecting to be at the press conference. Give me, say, an hour? Then I’ll forward you the updated schedule.”

Darcy breathed a sigh of relief. “May Thor bless you and all your descendants, Brandon Fitzgerald.” He really was the best assistant a girl could ask for, calm in a crisis and capable to a fault.

Brandon gave her a dry smile. “You’re too kind,” he deadpanned. “See you in an hour.” He turned abruptly, heading towards his small private office that was tucked next door to her huge private office. Like obscenely huge. But what do you expect when Tony Stark, the definition of obscene, personally offers you a position at his company?

Darcy marched forward into her own office, cracking her neck and flexing her fingers before sitting down at her desk. She started up her top-of-the-line Stark desktop computer and started in on what was likely to be an exhausting day.

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She’d been right. It was an exhausting day, to the nth degree, especially when factoring in her late night. She’d been so consumed with talking down grumpy media assbutts--while simultaneously keeping the Avengers extended absence a secret--that she had completely skipped lunch. That was alarmingly unlike her. She always made time for lunch, no matter how busy. Her stomach agreed, growling threateningly at her as she checked the time. Ugh, it was already 6pm.

Deciding she was officially done with this hellish workday, she plucked her phone out of her purse. After checking a text from Jane informing her that she’d already gone home for the day, she dialed Bucky’s number.

After several rings Bucky picked up spouting, “Hey, Darce,” breathily at her.

“Are you breathing heavily? What are you doing? Benchpressing a train car?”

Bucky laughed. “No, not a train car. Just got done running a few miles on the track.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “How many miles is ‘a few’?”

Bucky paused a moment. “Uh...thirty or so?”

Darcy nearly choked on her own spit. “Crap on a cracker! Are you serious?? There’s something deeply wrong with that. Go shower and change, Barnes. No more exercising for you.”

“Yes ma’am,” he chuckled. “If you’re done working, I can meet you in the lobby in ten minutes.
Then I thought maybe we could head to that corner grocery near your house? Your fridge and pantry are really only stocked for breakfast now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sounds perfect. See you soon, Barnes.” With that, Darcy hung up and began packing away her things and headed down to the lobby to await her friend.

True to military form, Bucky stepped off the elevator into the lobby exactly ten minutes after they hung up. His cheeks held a light flush—either from his run or from his shower—and his hair was still slightly damp, curling heavily against his scalp in some places and sticking out in big fluffy floops in others. Darcy bit back a smile and restrained her sudden urge to ruffle his hair into further dishevelment. It was just so damn cute!

Bucky cocked his head to the side and offered her his arm. She took it with good grace and allowed him to escort her down to the parking garage.

“So, how was work?” he asked, once they’d settled in her car and set out into traffic.

“Ugh, I can’t talk about it. Not without becoming violently ill...or just plain violent.”

“That bad, huh?” He gave her a look of sympathy.

“Yes. But the worst of it is out of the way, and it actually leaves the rest of my week pretty light on work. All I need is a full tummy—heavy on the carbsand a bubble bath and then I’ll be able to put this whole, horrid day behind me.” Darcy heaved a heavy sigh that was quickly followed by a shockingly loud growl from her aching stomach. Darcy glanced down and then at Bucky. “I forgot to eat lunch,” she said in the most pitiful voice she could muster. Which wasn’t very hard because she really did feel pretty damn pitiful at the moment.

“Oh you poor thing, we can’t let that stand,” Bucky responded, voice placating and simperingly sweet. He gave a soft laugh and then, in a more serious tone, “I’ll make you dinner when we get back to the apartment. Something carb heavy, scout’s honor.” Bucky held up his fingers in the traditional Boy Scout salute.

Darcy arched a brow in surprise. “You can cook?”

“I made you breakfast, didn’t I?”

“Breakfast foods don’t count. A monkey with a spatula could make breakfast foods.”

“Did you just call me a monkey?” Bucky asked, swiveling to fully face her.

Darcy smirked at him. “Well if the spatula fits...”

“You’re gonna be feeling real contrite after you eat what I’m making for dinner. Pop may have been Irish, but my Ma was born in a little town near Florence. She taught me the ins and outs of a proper Italian kitchen.” Bucky crossed his arms in front of his chest, challenging her and her nonsense presuppositions about his cooking. Monkey, indeed.

Darcy gasped and gave him what was probably the closest human approximation of the hearteyes emoji.

“Eyes on the road, Lewis. Can't cook for you if you're dead in a ditch.”

“I'm pretty sure there aren't any actual ditches in the city,” she retorted with a smirk.
“Don’t sass me, young lady. I’d hate to have to put you over my knee and spank you,” he said, using his best grumpy-old-man face.

Darcy bit down on her lips, trying to will away the blush that was slowly rising up the back of her neck. She huffed and gave him some well honed side-eye before muttering, “Dirty old man!”

Bucky didn’t respond so she spared a glance at him while they were stopped at a light. To her utter delight, he was bright crimson and speechless. She couldn’t help it, she busted out in a peal of wicked giggles at his distress.

Bucky grunted and muttered, “I didn’t mean it like that,” under his breath and turned away from her to look resolutely out his window.

“Calm down, grandpa, I’m only teasing.” She took her hand off the wheel to briefly squeeze his forearm, forgetting that it was his mechanical arm until she felt the definitive lack of give underneath the pressure of her fingers.

Bucky hummed in reply, but stayed silent, lost in his own thoughts. The tension had, thankfully, faded from his posture and he was no longer sullenly staring out the window. His blush continued to fade until there was only the barest hint of pink across his cheekbones.

The moment had definitely ended on an awkward note, but they arrived at the grocery store shortly after so their discomfort was swiftly swept aside in favor of the hustle and bustle of shopping to meet the nutritional needs of a man with very strong opinions about certain foods.

“James, we do not need a third box of HoHos, buddy,” Darcy sighed with exasperation.

Bucky pointed at a spot on the shelf behind her head. “What’s that over there?”

Darcy turned to inspect whatever food of the future was confusing him currently. When she saw what it was, her eyes squinted in suspicion. “I’m pretty sure they had canned corn back in your day, Bucky,” she said, turning to face him. Bucky was giving her a look of innocence that sent her bullshit radar pinging into overdrive. Her suspicions were confirmed when she looked into her cart to see that, yep, the little shit had placed the third box in behind her back.

Really, he was a grown man, if he wanted to eat his way to diabetes, then who was she to deter him? She sighed, rolled her eyes to the heavens, and pushed the cart to the next aisle.

The next half hour was spent pleasantly meandering through the quaint little grocery store. Darcy had found the place a few weeks after she’d moved into her fancy, big-girl apartment and she’d absolutely fallen in love with it. It was one of those Mom and Pop joints, so it was small and generally more costly than a big name store, but it had an old world charm that suited her aesthetics. Plus the owners were the sweetest little old Colombian couple who had some stellar coffee bean connections and provided her with the best grounds in the tri-state area. She would give up half her hefty Stark paycheck each month on the coffee alone. It was just that incredible.

Bucky seemed to really like the place as well. It had been where he’d gone for their breakfast foods early that morning, and the owners had waved at him in friendly recognition when they’d walked in that evening. Bucky had confided in her that he had been drawn to the store instinctually, pulled by the similarity to the stores that his mother had frequented when he was a boy. The world had changed so much since he’d been young. It was places like this that gave him a pleasant ache of familiarity, much like being around Steve or cooking the meals his mother had taught him.

When they’d returned to the apartment, Bucky laden down with three bags to every one that she
carried, he had made good on his promise to cook for her. And he really had not been lying about his Italian culinary skills.

“God Bless your mother and the infinite wisdom she had when she decided to teach you to cook,” Darcy groaned around a bite of the gorgonzola and porcini mushroom risotto he’d made for them.

It was a simple, quick meal to make—which was a lifesaver to Darcy's aching belly—and it tasted a bit like heaven and Disney World all rolled into one. Bucky smiled around his own bite of risotto, cherishing the familiar flavors.

When he’d first started his recovery from Hydra’s abuse and memory wipes, there had been so very little that he could remember of his life before he fell. Bits and pieces of his friendship with Steve, the softness of his mother's kid gloves that she only ever wore to Mass and that had been a wedding present from his father, the smell of his father’s breath—peppermints and pipe tobacco—it all formed a hazy, patchy space in his memory. As time had passed, pieces of his memory had begun to fall into place, one of them being the time he spent with his mother cooking. And with those came the recipes she'd taught him. He thought there must have been something about the muscle memory of it all that allowed him to recollect them so clearly. He might not always remember the exact moment of her teaching him a certain dish, but he could remember the proper weight of flour in his hands, the exact time to leave a sauce simmering, the perfect shade of golden brown when cooking garlic and onions in his skillet.

He'd written out the recipes as they’d come to him, keeping them in his journals with all the other tidbits that were starting to fill the haziness of his memory. He'd be damned if he forgot them again. So he committed them to ink and paper, hoarding them and treasuring them, and often weeping for the things that he might never be able to place on those pages. There was very little that his mother had given him that he had left, the recipes being the only tangible thing, so sharing them with Darcy was...cathartic, intimate, and not a small amount of heartbreaking.

But mostly it was just...nice. And the hums of pleasure that Darcy kept making were doing really great things for his ego.

***

The next couple of weeks passed quickly, November soon fading to December. Darcy and Bucky fell into an easy pattern together, riding back and forth to the tower on weekdays, alternating who made dinner--or bought takeout--and generally enjoying each other's company.

Jane visited often and her visits became noticeably more frequent after she ate Bucky's cooking one night. They even had a semi-traditional Thanksgiving between the three of them. Bucky had provided most of the cooking, with Darcy taking charge of desserts. Jane had offered to bring something but that idea had quickly been shut down by Darcy. She'd been burned by Jane's cooking before, quite literally. She still had the scars to prove it.

With December having started in earnest by this point, Darcy decided it was high time to start putting up her Christmas decorations. Bucky was kind enough to help her out, hanging tinsel and stringing lights up on the highest branches of her fake fir tree.

She wouldn't let him put the star on top though. It was her favorite part and she'd always swallowed her pride and stooped to using a kitchen chair to reach it. That was unnecessary this year, seeing as how Bucky had immediately knelt to the ground and offered the top of one beefy thigh as a step stool. And, well, he was already in position, so why not take the offered boost? So she'd gingerly stepped up onto his leg, one hand planted on his shoulder, before straightening up to place the glass star at the tippy top of her tree. She tried very, very hard not to pay attention to the heat and pressure
of his hand on the back of her thigh, holding her steady as she worked.

She had just taken his hand and was stepping down when Shave and a Haircut was rapped out on her front door.

“You expecting company, doll?” Bucky asked, taking in her puzzled expression.

“I don't think so...” Darcy trailed off thoughtfully. And then, with sudden clarity, “Oh shit!”

Bucky looked at her in alarm, conspicuously reaching for his sidearm tucked at his back. Darcy’s eyes widened and she raised her hands up before hissing, “Nononononono! It's just my sister! I forgot she was coming. Stand down, Cujo.”

She watched as he withdrew his hand and loosened his posture, settling back into what was a somewhat less terrifying version of himself. “Should I hide?” he asked, his eyes wary and unsure.

“What? No! Just wait here while I, uh, answer the door.” She watched as he rose from where he was still kneeling on the floor and tucked himself away into Darcy's recliner, a strange mix of apprehension and expectancy flitting over his features.

Her sister gave out a second, impatient knock that urged Darcy to the front door. She unlocked it and swung it open to reveal a woman who could have been Darcy's twin if it wasn't for the fact that she was about half a foot taller and considerably less busty.

“Darcy!” The other woman surged forward to pull her into a tender hug.

Darcy smiled and sank into her sister’s embrace, careful of the sleeping infant strapped to the older woman's chest. “Angie, I've missed you,” she murmured fervently into her sister's neck. “And how is the sweetest little baby girl in the whole wide world?” Darcy cooed at her niece, stroking the soft cap of dark hair at the top of the sleeping infant’s head.

“Sleeping. Finally. I think Violet screamed the whole drive up here. People always say, ‘Oh, babies love car rides, puts them right to sleep,’ but people are dirty, filthy liars,” was her sister's vehement response.

“Yes they are, Ange.” Darcy patted her shoulder in sympathy. Glancing over her sister's shoulder, she asked, “Where’s Rob?”

“He's waiting in the car. He thinks the only way to keep me from taking three hours to drop Vi off and go over all her stuff is if he keeps the car running.” Angie rolled her eyes, but then gave a mildly guilty grin. “I, uh, may have a slight case of separation anxiety. I know she's in good hands with you though. You ready for babysitting duty, little sis?”

Darcy's eyebrows had begun to slowly rise up her forehead as her sister had spoken. “Uhhhh....”

Angie's eyes tightened into slits. “Did you forget that you're keeping her tonight?? Come on, Darcy, we planned this weeks ago!”

Yeah and then she'd had a supersoldier dumped on her doorstep and her brain had gone a bit mushy ever since.

“No!” Darcy cried, plastering an enthusiastic smile on her face. “Of course I remembered! It's gonna be great! I'm gonna get to have twenty-four hours with the cutest baby girl that ever existed...” and one spysass supersoldier. Oh shit.
Oh shit.
Adventures in Babysitting

Chapter Summary

Bucky is the Grandpa Baby Whisperer Supreme

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who has given this fic so much love, both first time readers and o.g. readers alike. I read every comment and cherish every kudo and bookmark. Bless you all!

Side Note: none of this is canon compliant past CA:TWS. I screw around with some elements of AoU and that's about it. Just assume Steve and Sam eventually brought Bucky in after the events of the Winter Soldier and he's just been chilling at the Tower with everybody.

Angie bustled past her younger sister, chattering all the while about all things baby Violet: feeding times, favorite songs, bedtime routine, where everything was located in the diaper bag, how to heat breast milk, how to set up the portable crib...and on and on. Really, the kid wasn’t even 4 months old yet, how could she possibly need this much stuff? Darcy just smiled and tried to remember as much of the influx of baby wisdom as she could.

Angie kept up her monologue until she popped around the corner into Darcy’s living room. “Oh,” she said in surprise. “Hello, I didn’t realize Darcy had company.” She shot Darcy a very familiar interrogative look, before adding under her breath, “incredibly chiseled company, at that.”

“Angie! Allow me to introduce you to my temporary roommate, James Barnes. James, this is my big sister, Angie, and the sleeping angel is her daughter, Violet.” Darcy swept her arm out between him and her sister, presenting them to each other with a nervous flourish.

Bucky rose smoothly from the recliner, a hesitant smile fixed in place, before extending a hand out to Angie. “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

Angie arched a brow at Darcy over the “ma’am” thing, but took his hand in a firm shake. “Well, it’s nice to meet you too. I don’t suppose you happen to have any experience in infant care?”

“No ma’am, not that I remember, anyway,” he answered, regret slightly coloring his voice.

Angie tilted her head to the side at his admission. Darcy swallowed a groan. She knew that look. Her sister was about thirty seconds away from figuring out-

“You’re Bucky Barnes, aren’t you?” she exclaimed, snapping her fingers at the epiphany.

“I am,” Bucky said lowly, a blush rising up his neck.

Angie peered at him for a long moment, taking in every aspect of him and making a face of deep
consideration that reminded Bucky a bit of the way his Ma would size up any new playmate that he’d bring home. Must be a mother thing.

Angie clicked her tongue, having finished whatever assessment she was making. “You’ll be careful with Violet?” she asked.

Bucky nodded, keeping his eyes locked to the concerned mother’s.

“You will not allow harm to come to her in any way.”

“I won’t hurt her. I’ll keep my distance, if need be.”

Angie nodded at that, satisfied with the response. Darcy just watched the exchange with a mixture of horror and disbelief. The older woman’s eyes slid to Darcy for a moment before meeting Bucky’s, a hint of that mother’s steel gleaming through again. “And Darcy? Can you make the same reassurances for her?”

“Angie,” Darcy interjected sharply, a bit incensed at the turn the conversation between her sister and her friend had taken. The two of them didn’t even react to her outburst though, still caught in the intensity of their conversation.

Bucky swallowed hard, but refused to break eye contact. “I promise,” was his only reply, but even Darcy could hear the heavy sincerity and solemnity in the intonation. It sent a strange tingle up her spine and a chill in her gut. Winter Soldier, indeed.

Seemingly satisfied with his responses, Angie slipped back into her normal, sunny disposition, as if their solemn showdown had never happened. She prattled on about basic infant caretaking for a few more minutes before gently slipping Violet out of the carrier and restrapping her to Darcy’s chest. Violet squirmed a bit before settling down into the softness of Darcy's bosom with a sweet, little sigh. Shit, that was cute. Darcy could practically hear her own ovaries screaming at her.

Angie smiled at the pair of them, stroking one hand over her daughter's hair and the other over Darcy's curls. “Thank you again for this Darce. It’ll be so nice to spend time with just Rob. Sleep through the whole night, sleep in the next morning, have sex that isn't sandwiched between nursing and naps.”

“Okay, ew. I don't need the sordid details of your sadmom sex life.”

Angie laughed lightly, pressing a kiss to her baby sister’s cheek. “Just you wait. One day you, too, could have all the joy of a sadmom sex life. And I will laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh-”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Go bone your husband and leave me alone,” Darcy replied, pushing her sister resolutely out the front door.

When she wandered back into the living room, Bucky was nowhere to be found. He wasn’t in any of the other common areas, but she noticed the door to his bedroom was shut, a sliver of light shining out from beneath it into the hall. She briefly considered going to talk to him and maybe trying to draw him out, but decided against it. Maybe he needed privacy after the unexpected intrusion. Or maybe babies grossed him out? Either way, she wasn't going to judge him or invade his space if he needed it. Darcy made her way to the recliner Bucky had recently vacated. Might as well take an afternoon nap with Violet because who knew how much sleep she’d be getting that night.

She kicked the legs of the recliner up and leaned back, relishing the way Violet squirmed and resettled herself against her chest, huffing and smacking her tiny lips. The warmth of the little bundle nestled against her soothed Darcy into a heavy slumber as well.
Darcy was having a pleasant dream about dancing with a handsome, dark haired man when she was pulled out of it by the unhappy squalling of her niece.

“Oh hey, princess,” Darcy said groggily. “Did you have a good nap?” Darcy rose from the chair, bouncing on the balls of her feet and making soft shushing noises at the unhappy infant.

She waltzed over to the kitchen and starting prepping a bottle. “Oh sweetheart, I bet you're starving, huh? Let's get you a little schnack-ums.”

Violet’s crying kicked up a notch for a moment while Darcy got her out of the carrier and positioned her in the crook of her arm. As soon as Darcy presented the bottle, Violet quieted and began eating in earnest.

“Oh good job, sweetheart. We're nice and happy now. Well, you are. Auntie Darcy is pretty hungry, too,” she cooed at the infant.

“I could make you something if you're hungry?” Darcy startled and turned to see Bucky in the kitchen entryway.

“Oh! Hey, there stranger. Yeah that'd be great, if you don't mind?” Darcy smiled encouragingly at him.

Bucky maneuvered around her and began pulling pots and pans out and various ingredients for a simple vodka sauce and began boiling water for the penne to go with it. Darcy watched him work, unsure how to pull him out of the emotional funk he was obviously in. Well, blunt force had rarely failed her in the past, why stop using it now?

“So, what was with the disappearing act? I kinda thought you'd be my brother-in-arms with this whole child-rearing business.” Darcy leaned a hip against the counter, trying to catch his eyes.

He avoided her attempt, keeping his focus on the cloves of garlic he was peeling, but he did give her a shrug and a curt response. “I was trying to avoid any...accidents.”

Oh boy. He was in full scale, self-loathing, mopey mode. Darcy was having none of that bullshit today.

“Oh, you should have said something,” Darcy replied in faux innocence. “Diapers these days are sooo much better than the cloth ones people had to deal with back in your day. Diaper accidents are now few and far between, thank Thor. Put that down as a win for the future, eh?” She moved to knock her shoulder against his, but he sidestepped her and gave her a look of frustration.

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“That’s not what I meant, and you know it, Darcy. It’s not a good idea for me to be around Violet,” he bit out sharply at her. Then, with his face twisted in a heartbreaking mix of shame and despair, “What if I hurt her? What if I lost control, forgot where I was and accidentally killed her?” His eyes darted between his open palms and the tiny, pink face peeking out from Darcy’s arm. “I’ve got so much innocent blood on my hands already...I-”

Darcy cut him off, her gut souring with anger. “That’s bullshit, Barnes. I have yet to see you lose control in the last few weeks that you’ve been here. You’re not some dangerous, mindless beast that has to be kept locked away!”

“You think I’m not dangerous,” Bucky gasped out in disbelief. Then a thunderous look crossed his face and took two steps towards her, invading her space and towering over her with menace flitting
through his eyes. “How can you be so stupid to think that I’m not dangerous?” he hissed at her. “I
could literally kill you with my bare hands, you and Violet both, and no one would ever find the
bodies.”

Darcy fought the urge to step back. She recognized a game of chicken when she saw it, and there
was no way in hell she was going to back down and help prove whatever stupid point Barnes was
trying to make. She tilted her chin up, putting steel in her spine and her gaze before gritting out,
“Bull. Shit.”

Bucky jerked his head back in surprise at the fire in her response, but Darcy pushed into the space
he’d made. Two could play at the intimidation game, Bucko. “I’m calling bullshit, Barnes. And,
believe it or not, I’m actually genius-level intelligent so you can suck it with your ‘stupid’ comment. I
never said that you weren’t dangerous. I know full well how dangerous you are.” She pushed further
into his space, backing him slowly towards the far wall of her kitchen. “You forget that I’ve seen
your entire file from Hydra. Unfiltered. Unredacted. I know every kill you made and the exact way
you did it. Hell, I’ve even seen the pictures! You think I don’t know you’re dangerous?” She snorted
in derision before continuing. “What I said, was that you weren’t a dangerous, mindless
beast.
You’re hella dangerous, but you aren’t mindless. Not anymore. You’re no longer the weapon to be
armed and pointed at someone else’s target. YOU make the decisions now. You pick the target.”

Bucky’s back hit the wall, and still she pressed forward, raising her free hand to press firmly to the
center of his chest. She softened the anger from her gaze, but retained the steely resolve, bolstering it
with sincerity. When she spoke next, her voice was tender but strong. “I know you, James Barnes. I
know what kind of man you truly are. And I know that you would never willingly pick me or an
innocent child as the target of the violence that was burned into you.”

She paused for a moment, letting her words sink in and watching the emotions flitting across his face.
Pain, fear, disbelief, despair, and finally, hope. The fight drained out of her at that soft glint of hope
in his eyes. Gods, what a mess. She released his gaze and let her forehead slowly thump forward to
the center of his chest, replacing her hand which had drifted to his side and was rubbing soothing
swipes up and down his ribs. She could feel him shaking beneath her.

“Breathe, Barnes. Just breathe. It’s alright.”

He did as she suggested, his chest rising and falling under the weight of her head. She turned her
face to check on Violet who was still tucked in her arm, and rested her ear and cheek to his sternum,
listening to thump of his heart slow. After another long moment, she stepped back to look at him. His
blue eyes seemed a bit watery around the edges and she was decent enough to pretend she didn’t see
it. She took a steadying breath before giving him a small, easy smile. “Well. I think that’s enough
manpain for one day, don’t you?”

He nodded and lifted one corner of his mouth in what could probably be considered a smile if you
squinted really hard. Darcy weighed her options for a second and then made a decision that she
hoped would end up being the right one.

“Bucky, you go sit on the couch and I’ll finish making dinner.”

He nodded again and turned to make his way out of the kitchen but Darcy reached a hand out and
cought his elbow, “Oh and take Violet with you.” She swiftly, but gently, transferred the baby into
his arms, ignoring the alarmed look on his face, and was pleased to see that his instinctive reaction to
being surprise handed a baby was not to drop said baby. She helped him position Violet comfortably
into the elbow of his flesh arm, and handed the half full bottle to his left hand.

“Better shove that bottle in her mouth before she starts screaming again.” Bucky looked up in
distress but was quick to follow her instruction. Violet took the bottle greedily, making hungry little slurpy noises that would have been horrifying coming from an adult, but was just so damn adorable when coming from a baby. Kinda like cellulite. Not so cute on her adult thighs, but really damn cute on Vi’s chunky baby thighs. Unfair.

Bucky stood in the kitchen feeding Vi for a minute, swaying gently from side to side and watching the infant like she’d explode at any moment. When no babysplosion occurred, he looked up at Darcy with a dazed but brilliant smile.

Oh, holy crap. Abort, abort, abort. Her ovaries were waaaaay too into the look that Barnes was giving her. Shut up, you pervy bastards, Darcy shouted internally.

She gave a strained smile and gently shoved Barnes out to the living room. “Go. Sit. Snuggle. I’ll call you when dinner's ready.” She turned towards her stovetop and got to work, picking up where Bucky had left off.

The sauce was simmering and she was transferring the drained pasta back to the now empty pot when she heard the low timbre of Bucky’s voice followed by a peal of giggles from Violet. Darcy peeked around the corner to see that Bucky was in the recliner, one leg crossed over the other, with Violet tucked into the bend of his knee, sitting up and facing him. He was murmuring something rhythmic to her and simultaneously tiptoeing the fingers of his flesh hand up her tummy before booping her softly on the tip of her button nose. After each boop, Violet would let loose another set of giggles, and Bucky would beam at her.

It was some of the fluffiest, schmoopy-est, most adorable crap that Darcy had ever seen in her life. She was afraid if she watched him for much longer she’d get pregnant from the sheer cuteness alone. Oh my Gods, what was wrong with her? She’d been spending way too much time with the God of Thunder and Fertility--emphasis on the fertility part--if she was jonesing this hard for a baby after a mere few hours of taking care of one.

Darcy ducked her head back into the kitchen to check on the sauce and definitely not because she was about three seconds away from dragging Barnes to her bedroom and demanding he knock her up. She gave her head a much needed shake and swirled her wooden spoon through the sauce a few times before taking a careful taste. Mmmm, perfection. She turned the burner off and was pulling plates down out of her cabinets when she heard a strangled shout from Bucky that was followed by an even louder bout of laughter from Violet.

“Help!” Bucky called out to her.

Darcy darted out of the kitchen in alarm, only to find that Bucky’s distress was caused by an obscene amount of spit up trailing down his shirt and dribbling off her still-laughing niece’s chin.

Bucky looked at her with wide, semi-terrified eyes. “Don’t just stand there! Get me a towel or something!”

Darcy would like to say that she immediately jumped to action and helped her friend who was admittedly in desperate need, but the truth of the matter was that she completely lost it, dissolving into hysterical giggles on the floor.

“Shit, are you kidding me with this, Lewis? Stop laughing, ya punk!”

Bucky’s outburst did nothing but send her into another fit of laughter. It was probably another five minutes before she could even attempt to respond to his needs. She chuckled all the way to the diaper bag, grabbing the box of wipes and returning to the messy pair. She made quick work of Violet and
then began wiping as much of the mess off Bucky as she could.

“Welp, that’s as good as I can manage. You might want to go change clothes before dinner though,” she said, nose wrinkling in mild disgust. “You smell like a frat house bathroom after a kegger.”

Bucky pinched his lips in dismay and handed her the mighty spitup maker. He stood and then sheepishly admitted, “I forgot you’re supposed to burp them. After they eat, ya know? And then all the tickling...” He looked down at his ruined shirt, shaking his head in disgust.

Darcy’s laughter started back up, causing him to shoot her a dirty look and stalk off towards his bedroom. Darcy looked down at Violet who was letting off intermittent gurgling and giggleing. “Oh yeah, me too, honey. I thought what you did was hilarious!” Darcy ducked down to smack a series of kisses over the baby’s fat cheeks and strolled back towards the kitchen to finishing plating their meals.

Dinner was delicious and went without a hitch, though Darcy did have to learn the ancient art of eating with one hand and cradling an infant with the other. She may have dribbled a bit of sauce across Violet’s feet, but it could have been worse so she counted it as pretty good for a first timer.

After they’d finished eating, Bucky offered to clean up the kitchen and wash dishes, so Darcy settled on the living room floor with Violet and played a few rounds of peekaboo, read a couple books, played a little pat-a-cake, and rounded off the evening’s entertainment with a thrilling retelling of the first time she went to summer camp using Violet’s stuffed animals as puppets. She warmed another bottle of milk to top Vi off for the night, and started the process of getting the little princess to sleep. When her little eyelids finally fluttered and stayed closed, Darcy gently set her into the crib she’d set up at the foot of her bed and turned on the recording of soothing ocean waves that Angie had included in the diaper bag. She tiptoed out of her bedroom and closed the door softly, listening for a moment to see if Violet would stir. When the silence persisted, Darcy breathed a sigh of relief and rejoined Bucky in the living room.

“We did it!” she cried quietly, pumping a triumphant fist in the air.

Bucky was stretched across the couch, back against the armrest, working on a book of crossword puzzles like the old man that he was. He looked up at her briefly with a distracted smile. “Mhm, we did.” He was quiet for a moment and then, “What’s a four letter word for ‘a car service often summoned by...smartphone’,” he asked, face screwed up in confusion.

“Uber? U-B-E-R.”

Bucky hummed and penned it down. Darcy settled into her recliner and cracked open the book she’d started recently, thumbing through the pages until she found the place where she’d left off. They both enjoyed the silence for a while, breaking it ever so often to give Bucky help with the pop culture questions. It was a peaceful hour and she soon found herself dozing off in her chair. After catching herself nodding off for the third time, Darcy sat up and stretched her arms up over her head, stifling a sudden yawn.

“I think I’ve had about as much excitement as I can handle,” she said to Bucky with a wink. “I’m headed to bed, see you in the morning Buck.”

He hummed and nodded absentmindedly at her as she passed, not taking his eyes away from the puzzle he was currently working on. Darcy was inordinately delighted to notice as she passed him that he poked his tongue out between his teeth when in deep concentration. What a cutie.

Darcy snuck into her bedroom, undressing and putting on her pjs in the dark, before slipping into her
bathroom to finish readying herself for bed. Despite her nap earlier, as soon Darcy's head hit her pillow, she was out like she'd been hit by a semi. Unfortunately, she'd been out for what seemed like mere minutes when she was awoken by Violet’s insistent wailing. Darcy groggily reached for her glasses and checked her clock. She'd been asleep for about four hours instead of the brief minutes that it felt like.

She rolled out of her bed and reached for her decidedly unhappy niece. “It's ok baby, I know, let's go get you something to eat.”

She tucked the infant to her shoulder, shushing her and hoping they wouldn't disturb Bucky. Violet settled slightly, only giving a hiccuped cry every few minutes. Darcy made her way to the kitchen fixed a bottle and tucked it into Violet's mouth. Baby Vi seemed pleased with the offering, half closing her brown eyes and sucking away at the bottle. Darcy carried her to the living room and plopped down on her couch, leaning her head against the back and dozing lightly while her niece finished eating. When she’d emptied the bottle, Violet popped off with an unhappy bleat, pulling Darcy sharply from her light sleep. She tossed a burp cloth over one shoulder and settled Violet onto it, patting firmly and rhythmically over her little back. After a few minutes she was rewarded with a belch worthy of a trucker.

“Good job, sweetheart. Let's get you back to bed now.” Darcy shifted the infant back down into the cradle of one arm and began to lightly bounce her, but to no avail. Violet started to emit low whimpers that quickly escalated to full on ear-piercing wails of unhappiness. Darcy changed her diaper, tried burping her again, undressed her, redressed her, wrapped her in a blanket like a baby burrito, she bounced her, rocked her, and still she could not get Violet to stop crying.

By the time Bucky wandered sleepily out into the living room, Darcy was desperately researching baby soothing methods online and about thirty seconds away from joining Violet in bawling her eyes out.

“No, I think Vi is broken! I've tried everything and I still can't get her to stop crying!” Darcy was not ashamed to say that a few tears might have started to leak from her eyes.

Bucky reached out to rub Darcy's back in soothing circles. “It’s alright, honey. Babies just get like that sometimes,” he told her. And then to Darcy's complete surprise, he plucked the screaming baby from her arms and curled her against his chest. Violet kept screaming, but it was somewhat muffled into the hollow at his throat. With her safely tucked against him, Bucky made his way to the kitchen and turned on her faucet, adjusting the temperature and then stoppering the drain when he'd got it to his preference.

Almost instantly, Vi’s wails cut off and were replaced by soft, ragged breathing. Her little eyes went wide, eyebrows comically arched on her forehead for a long moment before she finally relaxed against the soft towel and Bucky's flesh hand that was tucked under her shoulders. Darcy let out the
breath she'd been holding and watched in awe as the tiny, angry hellion of a few minutes ago turned into a happy, cooing bundle of naked joy once more.

“How in the hell did you know how to do that?” she asked in shock.

Bucky gave a soft chuckle before answering, “I used to do the same thing for Rebecca...my sister.” His eyes canted to the middle distance, memory and sorrow stirring in their depths. “She was a lot younger than me. I was 15? Maybe 16 when she was born, and Pop worked long hours so it was up to me to help Ma when Becca was born. She was so small...and angry. Grumpiest little baby, couldn't hardly get her to stop crying. The docs called it ‘colic’ back then, but that was just a fancy word for ‘she's fussing for no good reason’.” His mouth quirked up into a half smile. “Poor Ma, she used just walk and walk around with her at night, trying to calm her, until finally we figured out Becca was part fish. Happiest kid in the world once she got dunked in a bucket of water.”

Bucky gave a delighted laugh at a new memory that pushed forward. “Ma said it was because she was eager for her baptism, that she cried because she was ready for the sacrament. It seemed more likely to me that she was part seamonster.” Bucky focused his eyes back down to the happily cooing baby in his hand. “I bet you're part seamonster too, aren't ya sweetheart,” he crooned to her, niggling a fingertip into her ribs and eliciting a giggle.

Darcy was pleased to see that he hadn't even seemed to notice that he'd tickled Vi with his mechanical hand. She watched man and baby smile ridiculously at each other for awhile until Violet let loose a huge yawn.

“Ah there it is, babydoll. I knew those sleepies were in there somewhere. Just had to go swimming to find 'em,” he cooed at her. Then, to Darcy, “Hey, doll, grab that other towel, please?”

Darcy gathered the towel in her arms, stretching it over her chest for Bucky to place Violet on. She gathered the ends of the towel around the baby, drying her quickly and fetching a fresh diaper to put her in. When she was dry and diapered, Bucky reclaimed her and began redressing her in the soft footie pajamas she'd been wearing. Violet let loose another wide yawn and her eyes began to give a telltale droop. Bucky tucked her against his chest with her little face nuzzled into the side of his neck and then began to sway gently from side to side, slow dancing with Violet across the tile kitchen floor.

“You got any music you can play in here? Something real soft and slow?”

Darcy nodded, pulling out her phone and opening up Pandora. Scrolling through her stations, she grinned and clicked on her 40s jazz station. The soft strains of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet started up, playing the opening notes of “La Vie En Rose.” Bucky’s head snapped up, recognition flashing on his face, as he altered his swaying to match the beat of the song.

“I...I know this song,” he said, head canting to the side as he listened as Armstrong began singing in his distinctive style. “The words though...the words are wrong.” Bucky’s brow furrowed in confusion for a moment before suddenly clearing.

And then--holy Thor--to Darcy’s absolute shock, Bucky began to quietly sing over the words, but in perfect French. Darcy could have been knocked over by a leaf in that moment, with her jaw popped open and eyes wide with disbelief. He noticed her reaction and gave her a wink and began to sing out with confidence. He’d obviously had no professional voice training, but Bucky sang in a warm, gravelly baritone that was pleasantly in tune and doing really funny things to her insides. He continued to sway in slow circles across her kitchen floor, singing sweetly into Violet’s ear and thumping her lightly on her diapered tush to the beat of the song. Within minutes, Vi was out cold,
snoring lightly against the side of his neck. He sashayed gracefully out of Darcy’s kitchen and down the hall to her room, where he tenderly laid Violet down and, still humming softly, backed slowly out of the room and shut the door. He returned to the kitchen to find Darcy watching him with something that looked a bit like awe.

“Marry me,” Darcy breathed out.

Bucky snickered lightly. “Aw, I’ve seen that look before. You’ve got baby fever and you’ve got it bad. Likely to marry anybody just to get your hands on one of those little darlings.” He jerked a thumb behind him in the direction of Darcy’s room.

“Ok yeah, you’re probably right, but I don’t see any other men hanging around my apartment, so it’s all on you, buddy.” Darcy looked around her kitchen, making her point about the lack of options.

Bucky laughed and gave her a bittersweet grin. “Sweetheart, you don’t wanna marry me or have any baby that was mine. That’s baggage that a sweet thing like you doesn’t need in her life.”

Darcy wasn’t sure how to respond, taken aback by the sudden change in tone that the conversation had taken. Before she could gather her thoughts, Bucky leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to her forehead, cupping his right hand to the back of her neck. Darcy closed her eyes at the pressure and the closeness and the perma-sadness radiating off him.

And then he was gone, heading to his room and shutting the door behind him. Darcy sighed, suddenly exhausted, and made her way to her own room, slipping softly between her sheets and falling into a restless sleep.

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The Sunday morning sun rose relentlessly, beating light into her closed eyes and waking the infant sleeping at the foot of her bed. Violet woke up happy though, thank the lord. She lay in her crib gurgling and chattering at herself for a few blessed minutes while Darcy tried to get in just a tiny bit more shuteye.

Violet eventually let loose one sharp cry, but before Darcy could get up to grab her, there was a light knock on the door. She invited Bucky in, calling to him through the door. He peeked his head around the door, then moved in fully to place a steaming mug of coffee next to her on her bedside table. Darcy thought she might actually cry.

“Morning sunshine, thought you could use some coffee after last night.” He smiled at her briefly before turning and retrieving the cranky infant from her crib. “And good morning to you, little one. Bet you could use some breakfast libations as well.” He then pulled a bottle of milk from his back pocket and tucked the nipple into her mouth. Violet instantly quieted except for the soft gulping sounds coming from her throat.

He turned to Darcy after a moment. “I’ll go make us some breakfast. You can either sleep a bit more if you want or come on out. Either way, I’ll take over babysitting for a bit so you can get a break.”

The smile on her face was actually making her cheeks ache a bit. “James Buchanan Barnes, you are the biggest, sweetest, sap I’ve ever met.”

Bucky held a finger to his lips, “Shhh, that’s a secret. Don’t go telling anyone. I have a very terrifying reputation to uphold.” He grinned and winked at her, blue eyes twinkling brightly in the early morning sunlight.

After he turned to leave, she mumbled under her breath, “Winter Soldier, my ass. More like Summer
Softy.”

Despite the fact that he was halfway to her kitchen already, he seemed able to hear her and let off a startled laugh. Damn, his hearing was super de duper good, then. She’d need to take this information into further consideration the next time she decided to engage in much needed “me time.” Yeesh, that had some astoundingly embarrassing possibilities.

Darcy propped herself up on her pillows and began to slowly sip her coffee. When her mug was finally empty, she felt mostly human again, so she stumbled over to her bathroom to change and pee and make herself look and smell at least halfway decent. When she’d finished, she joined Bucky and Violet in the kitchen.

He was seated at the table, Vi in his left arm, fork piled high with eggs in his right hand, reading what looked like an honest-to-god, Sunday paper.

“Good Morning, Grandpapa Barnes, where in the hell did you find that relic?”

Bucky returned her shiteating grin with a look of distinct unamusement. “Don’t be petty, sweetheart. They still sell them at the grocery store.” He went back to reading and eating while she grabbed a plate and filled it with assorted breakfast fare.

After a few minutes of munching, Darcy turned to Bucky. “I gotta ask, where did you learn the French version of La Vie En Rose?”

Bucky gave her a saucy grin. “Impressed you with that one, didn't I? It got real popular when me and the Commandos were running around Europe, hunting down Hydra. Dernier had a big thing for Edith Piaf, used to sing it all the damn time. After a while, the rest of us picked it up by association. I betcha Stevie could sing it word for word, too.” He shrugged his shoulders and went back to eating his breakfast.

“I was impressed, actually. You have a beautiful voice, Bucky. I wouldn't mind hearing it again sometime,” Darcy admitted to him. Bucky looked up at her, eyes wide, before ducking his head in embarrassment.

Seriously? What a cutie.

The day passed quickly, with Bucky and Darcy taking turns keeping Violet healthy, happy, clean, and fed. Bucky seemed to have finally gotten over his self-consciousness with Violet after the influx of memories the night before had reminded him just how good he was with babies. Which was good, because there were a few moments throughout the day when Darcy was definitely out of her depth. They made a good team, her and Buck, and she was a little sad when their time as surrogate parents ended that evening with the return of Angie and Rob.

Angie bustled into the apartment with her usual cheerfulness, rushing Bucky and scooping her sleeping daughter from his arms. “Oh my sweet baby, I missed you so much. I swear to god, you got bigger while we were gone. Don’t you think she looks bigger, Rob?” Angie looked up to her husband who had ambled in behind her.

“Oh, yes definitely,” he said, rolling his eyes good naturedly. He stepped up beside his wife to kiss his daughter on the crown of her curly, brunette head. Rob McKenzie shared Violet’s brown eyes, but the brunette curls were all Angie. Rob had sandy-blond hair that often stuck out in odd directions from his habit of running his hands through it, usually in response to his wife’s antics. He was a gentle soul though, warm and steadying where Angie was bright and energetic. The two were a good match, balancing and bettering each other in equal measure.
Rob turned to Bucky, sticking his hand out and shaking the other man’s firmly. “Sergeant Barnes, it’s an honor to meet you, sir. Thank you for taking such good care of my girl.”

Bucky met the other man’s obvious admiration with unease, a flush burning over his ears. He ran a hand through his hair and mumbled a reply. “Of course. She was an angel.”

Darcy snorted. “Don't let Bucky lie to you. She's a little hellion that looks like an angel. She has some kind of demonic agenda against sleeping at night, apparently.”

“Did she do the thing where she won't stop crying in the middle of the night? I would have told you about that except, you know, I didn't want you to refuse to take her.” Angie shot her sister a guilty grin.

Darcy met it with a glare and a groan. “Of course you didn’t. Thankfully Bucky is the baby whisperer to end all baby whisperers. He got her back to sleep in like ten minutes.”

Angie and Rob looked at Bucky with matching faces of amazement. “How the crap did you do that, man?” Rob choked out.

Bucky shrugged self consciously. “I just gave her a bath in the sink. Warm water calmed her down enough to get sleepy again and then I danced with her a bit until she was out.” He tucked his hands in his pockets and gave another shrug.

Angie turned sharply to her younger sister. “Marry him. I don't care who he is, you need to marry that man.”

Darcy busted up with laughter as Bucky's flush from before spread over his cheeks and down his throat. “I know, right,” she giggled out.

“Alright, cut it out. I'm old enough to be your grandfather, for godssake,” he griped.

“Yeah, but you don't look it,” Rob interjected, giving Bucky the once over.

Angie cackled and pulled her husband in for a heated kiss. “Alright, lover boy, back to the car. No more flirting with the elderly.” She threw a wink at Bucky over Rob’s shoulder before leading her husband to Darcy’s front door where Violet’s assortment of baby accoutrements was stacked. The two sisters hugged their goodbyes and then Darcy leaned down to smack a kiss to one of Vi’s fat baby cheeks. Rob pulled her into a bear hug, and thanked her again for giving them some much needed time off, before turning and waving goodbye to Bucky.

With their goodbyes finished, the McKenzie clan filed out, making Darcy promise to come home for Christmas and bring her new elderly friend, much to Bucky’s surprise. Darcy pressed the door shut behind her, leaning heavily against it and looking up at Bucky. “I don't know about you, but I'm gonna go take a nap for the next three years.”

Bucky grinned at her, following her towards the bedrooms. “I've done that before actually. Waking up is hell after sleeping that long. I wouldn't recommend it.”

“Har har, smartass. I'll see you at dinner time then. You're buying me a shit ton of soul food when I wake up.”

Bucky gave her a saucy salute and, “yes ma’am,” then ambled down the hall to his own room to pass the everloving fuck out. They say war is hell, but war ain't got nothing on a four month old baby.
Monday morning dawned bright and early. Darcy Lewis, however, did not.

*Shitshitshitshitshit*, she was so late. Darcy scurried at her classic navy blazer, trying to get the buttons done up in the right order while simultaneously cursing the babysitting hangover that had caused her to sleep through not one, but three alarms, putting her into the Defcon Three level of lateness. Who knew that infant care could be so thoroughly exhausting? Well, probably every new parent throughout history, but whatever. *Shit and hell*, where the frickety frack did she put her ID badge?

Darcy rummaged around the various piles of miscellaneous crap that she kept in her room, finally recovering the badge from underneath a pile of quasi-clean work clothes from the prior week. Geez, she really needed a system of organization. Maybe she’d let Bucky have a go at her room. He was like a robot when it came to efficient organization. Darcy quickly scanned her mess of a room, eyes lighting on several pairs of underwear and bras of questionable cleanliness. Yeah, on second thought, nevermind. Maybe she’d just ask him for some robo-organizing tips. But not right now, because *oh my god she was so late*!

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she raced out of her room and into the kitchen to dig out a bagel from the pantry, stuffing it into her mouth with all the grace and elegance she’d been blessed with since birth (i.e. none.) She slid to a halt in front of Lana, preparing to brew up a cup (hey, she might be late, but she was useless without coffee) when she noticed a steaming travel mug of coffee sitting on the counter next to the brewer.

Darcy picked up the cup and yelled out the kitchen entrance, “Yo, Barnes, this coffee for me?”

“Yes, noticed you were running a little behind this morning, thought you could use the assist,” he shouted back from the vicinity of her living room. For not the first time, Darcy thanked her lucky stars for providing her with such a thoughtful roommate. She grabbed the coffee and exited the kitchen to join Bucky in her living room.

“So, so late, Bucky,” she sighed, pausing when she caught sight of him sitting on her couch. “Though not as late as you, buddy.” Bucky was nursing a cup of coffee, still decked out in flannel pajama pants and a hunter green henley, with an impressive case of bedhead even by her standards.

“I take it you’re not joining me for my morning commute.”

Bucky grunted in the affirmative. “Violet kinda took it out of me. Thought I’d take a day of rest...and research.”

That piqued her interest. “Oh? What kind of research?” she asked while slipping on her less than
practical, but utterly beautiful, red, patent leather Louboutins. Seriously, praise be to the Stark payroll. And Pepper Potts, Darcy’s personal work-style idol.

Bucky rolled his neck on his shoulder, stretching out the tension there before answering. “Taking care of Vi...brought back a lot of stuff for me about Rebecca.” He paused for a moment, eyes tracking the lines of her ceiling in thought. “I know she isn’t...alive. Steve told me when he brought me in, but he didn’t give details and I didn’t have it in me to ask yet. But I’d like to know now. Find out how she turned out, what she did with her life. Hell, she might have some kids and grandkids running around somewhere.” He let out a slow breath and brought both hands to cradle his mug before finally meeting her eyes. “I just...I gotta know, ya know?”

Darcy hummed and nodded. “Ok, well, you need anything, you let me know. I can probably get access to records that the general public can’t, if you need it.” Bucky gave her a curt nod and a murmured thanks. With that, she tucked her keys into her purse and headed down to the parking garage. Even sans a passenger, there was no way she was riding the subway in these heels.

During the commute, Darcy couldn’t help but mull over Bucky’s decision. This was a good thing, right? Bucky exploring aspects of his past, things he’d missed out on. Maybe it meant he was ready to make peace with all of it, everything that he’d lost or had stolen from him. She truly hoped he found family from the experience as well because Bucky was inherently a people person. Even if Hydra had beat and burned it out of him for seventy years, it was still there at the core of him. She could see--having tracked his progression of mental health since he’d been brought in a little over a year ago--how much faster he’d healed just by being surrounded by people willing to help him. Despite the anxiousness and paranoia that crowds and strangers still gave him, she could see that he truly blossomed when surrounded by people he knew and trusted. If this research project invited a few new family members he could love and trust into his life, well, in her opinion, that was time well spent. She sent up a silent prayer to Thor, Frigga, Odin, and even Heimdall that Bucky would find what he was looking for that day and then urged her car out into the flow of traffic.

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By the time Darcy had returned her car to the underground garage of her apartment building, it was well past dark and her feet were well past enduring her painful, if exquisite, heels. The red t-strap heels were safely tucked under her arm as she dragged herself down the hallway to her apartment door.

Mondays were almost always like this, leaving her wrung-out and working late. She was one of the few Stark employees who absolutely refused to mix her work and home life, leaving PR issues to pile up over the weekend and having to deal with them on Mondays. Despite the increased workload, she had no regrets. Weekends were sacred. What kind of corporate monster would she be turned into if she allowed herself to succumb to answering emails over the weekend? Yeah, no thank you. She still had her soul and looked forward to never losing it to The Man. She’d work late for ALL the Mondays if it meant she got to keep her weekends to herself.

She was, however, relieved to have the exhausting day come to a close and maybe spend a couple hours decompressing with a bottle of wine and conversing with a handsome nonagenarian. She always did enjoy her time with the elderly.

She was surprised to find when she stepped into her apartment that it was totally dark and seemingly empty. Generally Bucky was waiting for her in the kitchen with steaming plates of pasta if she worked late and he hadn’t gone in with her that day. Tonight there was no tell tale smell of deliciousness wafting through her home or bright lights streaming from her kitchen.

She moved further into her home, stopping at the end of the wall that separated the entryway from
her living room. She called out a tentative “Hello?” into her apartment and was startled when she saw a body shift in the dark of her living room. After the initial pounding of her heart, her eyes finally adjusted enough to the dark to see that the person lounging on her couch was, in fact, Bucky and not a faceless Bad Guy.

_Jesus,_ he nearly gave her a heart attack. She stepped closer to where he sat with his arms stretched out across the top of the couch, head leaned all the way back. For a moment she thought he’d fallen asleep there, (why else would he be sitting in the dark?) but readjusted her conclusion when she saw that the city lights outside her window were reflecting off a significant amount of wetness on his cheeks.

_Oh shit, this was bad._

Sitting in the dark and crying never bode well for anyone, whether it be a traumatized super soldier or a teenaged girl.

_Crap crap crap, approach with caution. Do NOT tip the obviously emotionally unstable assassin into further instability._

She moved closer to him, standing about two feet behind and a bit to his left, keeping in his peripheral but also making sure to keep the couch between them. Sure, he could hop over the top of it and strangle her to death in four seconds flat, but she’d left her purse (and taser) by the front door with her shoes, and a couch shield was the best she could do under the circumstances.

“Hey Bucky,” she said softly, creeping closer to the couch but still staying to his left and within his field of vision. “Everything okay, buddy?”

Bucky took a deep, shuddering breath before letting his eyes drift open to stare at her ceiling. “Nope,” he replied, voice thick with tears and likely alcohol based on the three empty bottles of rum sitting on her coffee table.

_Oh boy, this was way bad. Like, cataclysmic bad._ “Is it about your sister?” Bucky gave a curt nod, a shudder passing through him. “Do you...do you want to talk about it?” she asked hesitantly.

Bucky shrugged his shoulders, “Not much to talk about. Started researching this morning. Found her death certificate right away. No name change to wade through; she never married. Never had kids. She...god, Darce, she was sixteen when she died.” He’d begun to shake in earnest the longer he talked, his body vibrating with barely contained despair.

Darcy reached her left hand out, hesitating for a moment, before planting it on his left shoulder and firmly anchoring him to herself and the couch and giving him what small comfort she could. He let a sob out at her touch, rolling his head to pin her hand and wrist between his shoulder and cheek.

He stayed like that, attempting to calm his breathing enough to continue, his stomach quivering with the effort. “There’s more,” he said thickly. “She...she didn’t just die, she—god, she was _murdered._” Darcy gasped sharply at the revelation, her stomach clenching with dismay and grief for her friend.

After a moment, he continued quietly, “I looked up the police report. She’d been targeted on her way home from her after school job. They found her body shoved behind a dumpster in an alley, like yesterday’s garbage. Report said it was payday and the guy that did it had been watching her for a while, per his confession. They caught him trying to pawn the necklace that I gave her when I enlisted.”

Fresh tears slid down his cheeks, slowly running over her wrist and fingers. “But the worst part,” he
continued. “The worst part is that it was my fault.”

Darcy shook her head fiercely, finally finding her words. “Oh no, Bucky--honey, that’s not true. How can you even say that?”

Bucky let out a bitter laugh, shifting forward out of her grip and leaning his elbows across his knees. “Because it is true, Darcy,” he said over his shoulder. “You wanna know why she had that after school job?” He didn’t wait for her to answer, barrelling on to his point. “It was because I was dead... or may as well have been. Pop had been dead for years when I went off to fight the goddamn Nazis, and Ma got a bad case of pneumonia that first winter I was at basic. Her lungs didn’t work quite right after that. So with me and Pop dead and an ailing mother, who else was going to be the breadwinner? Of course it had to be Rebecca. But if I hadn’t been such an idiot, chasing after Hydra, pretending to be some kinda...some kinda hero with the fuckin’ Commandos--” Bucky cut himself off. He realized he’d been shouting at the end and Darcy didn’t deserve to bear his wrath.

He sunk back against the couch, leaning his head back and sighing in relief when she replaced her hand on his shoulder. “I could have gone home, you know,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper and colored with shame. “After Steve rescued me and the 107th from Hydra. I was all cleared to be honorably discharged. Coulda gone home, got a job, taken care of Ma and Becca. Maybe even got married and had some kids. But I...I didn’t. I kept thinking that Steve needed me to watch his six. I mean, I’d been doing it for so long, the thought of letting Steve run around Europe without me, doing God knows what, with his usual cavalier attitude towards parachutes and well thought out plans...I couldn’t leave him. I couldn’t leave my brother. But I was so stupid. Stupid enough to think we were invincible, that the Nazis and Hydra and death couldn’t touch us.” Bucky paused, his thoughts flitting behind his eyes, sorting themselves into knots and whorls of discontent and pain.

“But it did. I fell from that train and Steve tried to kill himself on that fucking plane and nobody was left to keep my family safe. God, Becca must have felt so alone. So scared. And now all I can think about was that she was so young and she was hurt and killed and I wasn’t there to stop it and I should have been.” Bucky reached his flesh hand up to lace his fingers with hers, his left arm coming down around his middle and his knees pulled up to his chest, essentially curling himself around the point of contact between them.

He began to cry with a brokenness that Darcy had never witnessed from a grown man before. He wept and shook with the gut-wrenching power of his despair. It was almost childlike, the way he sobbed without control, alternating between wails and incoherent pleas for forgiveness from his long dead family. It shattered her heart, stopping the breath in her chest with a bone deep ache. How could the world be so endlessly cruel to this one man? She drew closer to him, tightening her grip on his fingers and lifting her free hand to twine into the hair at his crown. She stood there with him for a long while, weathering the storm of his sorrow with him and soothing her fingers repeatedly through his hair.

Some time later, his crying began to slow, his breathing returning to mostly normal with only the occasional wet hiccup. Still she stroked her fingers through the soft strands of his cropped hair. His head lolled back against the couch, his red-rimmed eyes meeting hers as she leaned over him before he closed them on a sigh.

Slowly, so slowly, Darcy pulled her fingers through his forelock, stretching it out to its fullest extent and then allowed her fingers to drift down to the soft skin of his brow. She dragged her fingertips over the skin there, smoothing out the the furrows before circling over his temples, and then slowly allowed them to skim over his cheekbones, his eyebrows, down the blade of his nose, skipping lightly over the crest of his lips, and finally, pressing from the dimple in his chin and gliding up along
the edge of his jaw. She repeated the circuit, tracing the edges of his face with the lightest of touches, until his breathing was slow and even and the spasms in his chest had completely subsided.

She thought he might have gone to sleep if it weren’t for the firm grip that he still had on her left hand while the right continued it’s soothing progression. He eventually broke the silence that settled over them.

“Thank you,” he rasped softly, eyes still firmly closed. “For...for staying with me. Letting me talk. For this,” he said, jutting his chin towards the hand that was sliding down past his jaw again. “Feels...nice. Comforting.”

Darcy hummed quietly in the back of her throat, before answering. “My mother would do this for me when I was upset or exhausted or if I was having trouble falling asleep. She was always so good at comforting me.”

Bucky shifted an eyebrow up slightly. “Was?”

Darcy nodded slowly, even though he couldn’t see it with his eyes closed. “Yeah. She, uh, she died. It’ll be two years ago on the 23rd.” She swallowed hard around the pain of the memory.

Bucky opened his eyes, the city lights reflecting off the irises, and looked up at her. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” he murmured. The heartbreak and empathy in his eyes was too close and too real for her to deal with so she gently ran her thumb over his eyelids, encouraging them to close. He seemed to understand, and didn’t attempt to reopen them once she’d passed over the silky skin there.

“What happened?” he asked, gentleness infusing the rawness of his voice.

Darcy didn’t talk about her mom. Couldn’t talk about her and her death for months afterwards, not even with her family. And even now, it hurt her to address it, but she felt like maybe Bucky needed to hear about it. Maybe he needed to share in someone else’s sorrow for a little bit and maybe she could help impart some of the wisdom she had gained through her own loss.

She drew a slow, fortifying breath. “She got sick. Breast cancer. She went through six months of chemo and radiation and they told her she was cancer free,” Darcy paused, steeling herself for her next words. “But it came back within a couple months, worse than before and it--it just ate her up, from the inside out.” Darcy’s own breathing grew shaky and a few tears slipped down her cheeks into his hair.

“But I didn’t know that at the time. I didn’t know how bad she’d gotten and how quickly. I was just starting in my position at Stark Industries and I was so selfish and focused on myself and I never seemed to find the time to come visit her and then all of a sudden it’s December and Dad is calling me and telling me I need to come down and say goodbye to mom, that she wasn’t doing so well and that he didn’t think she was going to make it and I...and I...” Darcy tried to stem the flow of words that had tumbled forward, taking in a measured breath before continuing.

“So I flew straight home, stayed with Dad and Angie and Rob at the hospital for almost two weeks and she just...wasted away before our eyes. She went from this still vibrant, cheerful, incredible woman to, to something else entirely. She couldn’t speak coherently, became so easily confused. But the worst was that she was in so much pain. Even heavily sedated, she would moan in agony while she slept, no matter how much morphine they gave her. And there was nothing I could do. I felt so helpless. I can remember sitting with her, listening to her breathe and each breath was a struggle, but I couldn’t stop listening, couldn’t stop myself from counting each one, wondering if it would be the last.”
Darcy stopped to swallow hard past the ache in her throat, leaning her head back on her shoulders, and letting the waves of grief crash over her for a moment. Bucky stayed silent, letting her process her thoughts, rubbing his thumb soothingly over the back of her hand.

“When I finally got the call that mom had passed, I was back at my parents’ house sleeping. And I felt...relieved that she was no longer in pain, but my heart ached for my mother, and I couldn’t stop crying. But the biggest emotion that hit me, by far, was shame.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed in confusion, but he remained silent. “I was so ashamed of myself,” she continued. “Ashamed at how selfish I had been, how easily I had squandered the last months of her life on stupid, meaningless nothings that I used to justify not visiting her every damn weekend. For a long time after mom died, I hated myself. How could I have been so stupid to let any moment I could have had with her pass me by?”

She let the heat in her voice dissipate for a moment, before pushing forward. “But eventually I realized something, Bucky. Yes, I could have visited Mom more frequently and I would have realized just how bad she was doing...but Mom could also have told me. She could have asked us to visit her, told me and Ange that she needed us to be with her. But she refused! She wouldn’t tell us a damn thing about anything, about what the doctors said, or how she felt, or the fact that she’d stopped responding to the cancer treatments. She wouldn’t tell us that they had started her on clinical trials, and even those hadn’t worked. Hell, she even swore Dad to secrecy, wouldn’t let him share a single bit of her reality to us. Wouldn’t let him try to get us to come visit because she was so scared to admit that she was, in fact, dying.”

Darcy parsed through her next words carefully, trying to sort them into the wisdom and point that she was trying to make to Bucky. “It took me a long time to realize it, but missing out on her last months of life...wasn’t my fault. But it wasn’t hers either. There was no one to blame. Not me or Mom or Dad. People we love die sometimes, but it doesn’t make it our fault.” She gripped Bucky’s hand tight, pressing her meaning and her fingers into him.

“Rebecca died...but it wasn’t your fault,” she whispered emphatically. “Our lives are not a series of cause and effect based solely on our own choices. It’s an amalgamation, an intricate...tapestry of our decisions and the decisions of those around us, weaving together and reacting to one another. Could you have chosen to take the honorable discharge? Yes. But Steve could have gone home, too. Could have stopped fighting Hydra on the front lines and used his expertise to help train others to properly fight in his stead. Rebecca could have decided to take different paths home or asked someone to walk home with her or avoided alleyways or carried a knife on her. Your mother could have volunteered to walk home with her. The bastard that hurt her could have made the decision to pick someone else or go hang himself or walk in front of the closest bus. But the fact of the matter is, everyone, including you, made the choices that they did and ended up with the only available outcome based on those combinations of decisions.”

Darcy and Bucky were both breathing hard at this point, the emotion of her words pulling at their lungs. “But--” Bucky began in protest, but Darcy cut him off.

“No. No buts, Barnes. When Steve made the decision to keep fighting, it was because he thought it was the best thing to do at the time. When you decided to follow him into battle, despite your honorable discharge, did you, or did you not, think that fighting by Steve’s side was the right thing to do in that moment?” Darcy peered down at him, tilting his chin up so that he had to make eye contact. They stared at each other for a moment, the heaviness of the question hanging between them like vine-ripened fruit.

Eventually, Bucky swallowed and nodded. “Yes. Yes, I thought I was doing the right thing. I
thought that Steve needed me more. That as long as I was fighting, I was keeping my family safe from Hydra and the Nazis and keeping them fed with my army wages.” He blinked away fresh tears that were a mix of sorrow and the beginnings of relief.

Darcy smiled gently down at him, pleased that she’d been able to make the point she’d been aiming for, pleased that he was finding some of the acceptance and peace that she’d struggled so long to find on her own. She leaned down towards him, resting her forehead on top of his before speaking again.

“That’s all we can do, honey. Each day we have to make the decisions that we think are best, based on the limited knowledge that we have in that finite amount of time. We’re only human, we can’t know the path of every choice we will make, so we do the best we can to make the right decision and hope that those around us are doing the same. When I made the decision to stay focused on my new job, I thought I was helping to make the world a better, safer, more accepting place for the Avengers. I knew Mom was sick, but she’d already beat it the first time and I thought the second round of chemo would be no different. It was a foolish assumption, but she didn’t give me any information to the contrary. So I thought Iron Man and the Avengers needed me the most at that time. I thought I was making the best decision based on the limited information that I had. And then when everything went down the way that it did, hindsight being 20/20 and all that, I had to figure out how to give myself grace and forgiveness. We’re only human, Bucky.”

Her words resonated through him for a moment, etching themselves onto his heart and flooding him with forgiveness and peace. He was stunned at her insight and how quickly she’d been able to help soothe the deep ache, the impotent rage, the utter hopelessness that had been dogging him since his discovery of the details of Rebecca’s death earlier that morning. She’d been able to ease the hurt that not even three bottles of rum had been able to make a dint in. Gratitude surged through his chest at the thought of how kind Darcy was, how gently she had led him to the beginnings of self-forgiveness and peace. God, what a woman.

Darcy shifted then, pulling away from his forehead and straightening to stand over him again. He momentarily tightened his grip on her hand before she could pull it from his grasp. “Thank you,” he whispered to her. And then again, with more weight, “Thank you, Darcy.”

She gave him another of her patented sweet smiles, full lips pressing up the apples of her cheeks at the corners, eyes bright and kind. And then she was pulling out of his grasp and coming around the couch. She halted in front of her stereo that was sitting on a low shelf against her wall, squatting down and scrolling through her iPod docked there. She selected something on the small screen that lit up her face in profile and a soft melody began strumming through the speakers of the stereo system. She tilted her head to the side for a minute, listening to the song and making sure it fit the mood she was hoping to create. Bucky watched as she nodded her head in satisfaction and slowly rose from her crouch, her knees creaking subtly as she moved. She drifted towards the couch, moving slowly to the rhythm of the music, before coming to a stop directly in front of him, her knees brushing gently against his.

Bucky held his breath for a moment, wondering at the contemplative look on her face, full bottom lip tucked neatly behind her teeth. She continued to sway to the music in front of him, fingers grazing his knees as she moved, causing his heart to beat rapidly inside his chest with each casual brush. Finally, she reached a hand out, palm up, and looked him in the eye.

“Dance with me?” she asked softly, sweetly.

Bucky sucked in a breath but reached for her hand anyway, curling the metal fingers over her warm flesh ones. “I don’t think I know how. Not anymore.” He bit his own lips at the nerves suddenly bristling in his gut.
Darcy chuckled quietly. “That’s alright. We can just sway together, maybe? And hold each other? I think after everything we’ve shared today it might be good for us to just...hold one another. The healing of human touch, and all that,” she said with a nonchalant flap of her hand, a slight blush riding high on her cheeks.

Bucky had to admit, holding her kind of sounded like heaven. So he did. He let her pull him from the couch towards the middle of the living room, let her loop her arms around his ribs, palms flat against his shoulder blades and her cheek pressed to his heart. She was warm and soft and kind and everything he needed in that moment so he let his own arms drift around her, holding her to him and guiding her into a gentle side to side shuffle, much like what he’d done to soothe Violet the other night.

The song was slow and steeped in a feeling of melancholy, but it had a soothing, cathartic essence to it too. It had started out with a single, smooth male voice, but had been joined by a second male voice halfway through, the voices suddenly layering together and the music crescendoing into a guitar solo.

Underneath the music, Darcy sang along in a high, clear voice, “With every mistake, we must surely be learning...”

He let her voice highlight the lyrics to him, her emphasis pulling at his attention and causing an entirely different ache in his heart. Eventually the song came to a close with the two male voices crying out in wordless chords of sorrow that resonated with his own grief over the death of his baby sister.

As the last note faded, he reached for her hand, tugging it from his back, and spun her in a slow twirl before pulling her gently back into his arms for a tender hug. He rested his chin on the crown of her head, the soft curls tickling softly at his throat.

“Thank you, Darcy,” he said on a sigh. He felt her arms tighten around his ribs briefly in response. There was some unspoken signal between them and they both pulled away from each other at the same time, hands dropping to their sides and a small amount of awkwardness filling the space between their bodies.

Darcy rubbed absently at the side of her nose. “So, uh, I don’t know about you, but all this emotional crap always makes me hungry. You wanna order some pizza or something?” She looked up at him with eager eyes.

He snorted. “Yeah, you know me, Darce, I’m always hungry. Especially after I’ve sobbed my guts out like a goddamn kid in front of a gorgeous dame. That’s always good for working up an appetite,” he said sarcastically, trying to brush through some of the lingering embarrassment of being so broken in front of her with a bit of humor.

“You have to stop hanging around women and babies all the time. We’re starting to erode your staunch, emotionless masculinity. You’re gonna need Steve to hurry up and rescue you from all this estrogen,” Darcy replied, pulling her phone out of her pocket to place their order.


Darcy paused her order entry to look at Bucky, her jaw open in shocked amusement. “No way! Really? I’ve never seen Steve cry. Like, ever. And I was with him when he had to have a bullet dug out of his calf one time! Not a single tear was shed!”
“Physical pain doesn’t do it for him, it’s the emotional stuff that gets him going. He’s a real sneaky shit sometimes though, so he’s probably hid it from you a few times. You just have to look at his face real close, though. His cheeks get real flushed and his chin’ll get a little wobbly. Show him one of those cute puppy videos and watch his face. He’ll be fighting back tears, I promise you.”

Darcy gave a delighted little laugh and returned her attention to her phone to finish typing in the order. With their order successfully placed, the two sat down on opposite ends of her couch and started up one of the movies that Darcy had compiled onto a list that she’d titled “Things That Bucky Must Watch Immediately Or He Shall Be Forcibly Removed From The Circle of Friendship.”

Within thirty minutes, their pizzas arrived and they settled back in, munching and decompressing from the overly emotional evening. The movie was light and entertaining, filling them both with laughter and flushing the last bit of sorrow from their bones. When it finally ended, their hunger and hearts were fully sated and they found it easy to drift to their own rooms, slipping into their beds and quickly succumbing to dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, a few notes:


2. The song that Darcy plays for Bucky is "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" from the Across the Universe Soundtrack. I would highly recommend playing it while you read that section. Also, the lyrics give me so many Bucky FEELS!

3. The movie they watch is Monty Python and the Holy Grail because it is funny and stupid and the least serious movie ever made.

4. Darcy's mom and that entire experience is based entirely on my own mother and what she and our family went through. SO this chapter was mostly catharsis for me, but I hope that it served a purpose to the story and not just to my heart. Please be kind in critiquing this chapter.
The Lewis Family Post-Nightmare Recovery Routine

Chapter Summary

Here, have some more angst. With some low-key flirting at the end to soothe your wearied soul.

Chapter Notes

Come find me on tumblr- holdmecloseandfast.tumblr.com

Wind speed: 7 kph

Temperature: 34 °C

Humidity: 87%

Incline to target: 48°

The data analysis pouring in from the cybernetic sensors is automatic, but unnecessary. The Asset’s skills as a marksman are not needed today.

Mission parameters: Eliminate target, hand-to-hand. Avoid indications of a professional hit. Avoid detection. No witnesses. Remove valuable and/or distinguishing items once the target has been eliminated. Place the body out of immediate sight, but easily accessible to local law enforcement. Get to extraction point unapprehended. Return to safe house and handlers for eval and maintenance.

The Asset has been watching the target from its rooftop perch. The target’s pace is slow, without purpose. Obvious non-combatant.

Mission Report on Target-

Sex: Female

Age: 16

Height: 160 cm

Weight: 48 kg

Hair color: Brunette

Eye color: Grey

Name: Irrelevant

The small female draws closer to the alley that The Asset has staked out as the ideal spot to dispatch
the target. The Asset leaps over the edge of the building, knees bending with the impact, landing in near silence. Peering around the corner, it can see the female approach, eyes downcast, hair tied back in two long braids.

Target Assessment-

Combat Skills: None
Awareness Level: None
Weapon placement: N/A
Threat Level: None

The Asset pulls back into the shadow of the alley. It will wait for the target to pass. The braids are convenient. It can grab them with the metal hand and pull the target back into the alley to cover the mouth with the flesh hand. Reassessment...Grab with flesh, cover with metal. Metal is not susceptible to teeth. Two breaths, and then the target is in place. Another breath, the target is apprehended. Another breath, the female is pressed against the alley wall, mouth still covered, no noise, no witnesses.

Assessment...

Female is too small. Too young. Ten, not sixteen. But it is the right target. The bone structure is right, but it is covered by softness that isn’t present in the picture from the Report. And the eyes...wide, grey eyes. So familiar. He can remember...

No. It remembers nothing. Target verified. Dispatch immediately.

The target screams under its hand, but the sound is too muffled to draw attention. The Asset draws its knife, slicing through the soft flesh at the target’s throat. Blood and viscera are witnessed. Target is limp, breathing has stopped. Mission accomplished.

Or.

No.

The target screams under its hand, but the sound is too muffled to draw attention. The Asset releases the braids to place its hand at the target’s throat. Squeezing, squeezing, crushing the trachea. Target is limp, breathing has stopped. Mission accomplished.

But. No, that was wrong.

What did the police report say? Broken neck?

The target screams under its hand, but the sound is too muffled to draw attention. The Asset releases the braids to place its hand at the back of the target’s head. Quick twist, bones snap, spinal cord is severed. Target is limp, breathing has stopped. Mission accomplished.

It stuffs the body behind a dumpster. Out of sight, giving the Asset enough time to be overseas before the smell draws attention. It pulls the small purse from the body’s shoulder, tucks the wad of bills in the pocket of its black tactical pants. Mission parameters call for distinguishing items. Nothing in the purse. No bracelets, rings, hair pins, earrings. There is a necklace. Engraved. Useful. The Asset removes it and places it into its pocket as well.
Parameters met, return to the handlers.

The Asset keeps to the shadows, creeping through back alleys until full dark descends and it can move more efficiently to the extraction site. The dark helps to conceal the blood spattered across its face and hands and chest.

No. That was wrong. No blood. It had been strangulation.

Hadin’t it?

Or.

Broken neck?

Why was the target the wrong age?

The report said sixteen but his memory of her was of a child. Memory...why did he remember her?

The grey eyes, like his mother. His mother? Why couldn’t he remember?

Remember...Remember...Re-

“Rebecca!”

Bucky reared up out of his bed, his legs tangling in the sheets and causing him to pitch forward onto the floor. His throat was raw, his tongue tasting like blood and half forgotten horrors. He knew he’d been screaming in his sleep again, the violence of his past coming back to haunt him. He hadn’t had anything this vivid in a long time and the nightmare startled him with its clarity and intensity.

But the dream itself...was it a dream? Or...or...?

Bucky began to shake violently at the thought. Nausea rose up in him and he choked and coughed, trying to keep the contents of his stomach where they belonged. His already ragged breathing ticked up a notch and his heart raced along with his thoughts. Nightmare or memory, nightmare or memory?

So wrapped up in his own head, Bucky wasn’t aware of the presence of another person hesitating at the threshold of his room, until the person cleared their throat. Startled by the sound, he jumped to his feet, deftly retrieving the knife that he kept tucked between his mattress and the box springs, and shifting into a battle-ready stance.

“Whoa! Bucky, it’s just me!”

Darcy. It was Darcy. Thank God.

The knife fell from his fingers, clattering to the floor, and he sank back down to sit on his bed. He ran his hands through his hair, letting them drift over his face to scrub away the sleep and dampness of tears before looking over to where Darcy still stood.

“Hey, sorry about that. Didn’t mean to scare you,” he murmured. He watched Darcy cross her arms over her chest, one hand idly rubbing over her elbow.

“Yeah, um. So, according to Sam, I need to verify some things with you? Before approaching?”

Post nightmare protocol? Well, Sam was nothing if not thorough. He nodded his assent and waited for her to begin her questioning.
“Do you know who you are?” she asked. He nodded.

“Do you know where you are?” Again, he nodded.

“Do you know who I am?” Her voice cracked, either in exhaustion or some emotion unknown to him.

“How could I ever forget a peach like you, Darcy?” He tried giving her a charming grin, but was fairly certain the effort fell flat. She didn’t seem to notice though, barreling on through with her questioning.

“Oh thank god,” she sighed. “Final question: Can I pretty please come over there and give you the biggest hug of your life without you going all stabby on me??” She made a stabbing motion with her left hand in emphasis.

His bark of laughter seemed to be enough assent for her because the next thing he knew she was bounding across the room and chucking her arms around him, her body colliding with his with enough force to knock him back into the headboard.

“Whoops! Sorry, sorry, too much power,” she gushed in his ear, but her grip on him didn’t loosen, much to his relief. She knelt on the bed beside him, pulling him so that his shoulder was fit snugly against her chest and leaned her forehead against the side of his head. They stayed like that for what seemed like an hour but was probably closer to a few minutes. He let her embrace soothe and settle him, matching his breathing to the soft exhales tickling his ear.

Eventually, she pulled away from him, sitting back on the bed and letting her arms rest across the tops of her knees.

“Soooo, you had a nightmare...” She let the statement hang between them, eyebrows raised comically in expectation.

Bucky sighed. He hated talking about his nightmares. Digging up the horrors and half formed memories that his brain had concocted to torment him with was one of the worst aspects about going to therapy...but the results spoke for themselves. If Darcy was willing to listen, then he ought to share, shouldn’t he? His therapists said he should open up more to his friends, let them help with his healing and cognitive reconditioning. Talking about this nightmare, though...he was terrified that it would be a confession instead of a therapeutic effort like she expected.

Would she run, when she found out what he might have done? Would her gentle features harden with disgust? Would she shutter away the soft warmth of her soul, leaving him cold and aching again?

Bucky swallowed hard around the nausea that rose back up. She deserved to know. And maybe he deserved to be cast away by her. His sin must be confessed and he would leave it to her judgement whether or not he'd be granted punishment or absolution. Decision made, Bucky cleared his throat to speak.

“I, uh, I dreamed I was the Soldier again. Emotionless. A weapon.” He turned his face away from Darcy, unable to meet the sympathy shining in her eyes.

“I was on a mission. Had to take out a hit on a civilian target...” Bucky's throat closed up and tears stung his eyes. He could feel more than hear Darcy's sharp intake of breath. When she laid a soft hand across his metal forearm, he looked up into her eyes. Some self-flagellating aspect of his character needed to watch her grow cold towards him when he revealed the last part of his dream.
Deep breath. Count to three. Let her have it...

“It was Rebecca. I...killed her...over and over in the dream. She was so small under my hands but-but I...the Asset didn't care. Just ended her life, tore through my Becca like tissue paper--” Bucky cut himself off, the ache of the dream and the hurt of his sister's loss still so fresh. He'd only found out about her death a few days ago, was still mourning her, and now his scrambled brain was making him relive the horror of it.

He shuddered and fresh tears fell. He met Darcy's eyes for a moment, then in a tight voice barely above a whisper, “Darcy...I think...I think it was me. I don't think it was just a dream, I think Hydra had me murder my--” he couldn't continue. He couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't look at her anymore. Couldn't watch her look at him like the monster he was.

But then—

Two small arms snaked around him, and he was being crushed to Darcy's small frame. She was mumbling something over and over in his ear, but the rushing of his blood and burning of his shame roared over them, scattering the syllables and turning her words to incoherency. Eventually his mind settled and he could still hear her chanting soothingly into his ear.

“It wasn't you, it was just a dream.” Over and over, she spoke the words to him, like a prayer or a plea.

“No,” he croaked. “You don't understand, Darcy,” he pulled back from her, looking at her fully. “They...Hydra, they fucking thrived on hurting me. This is exactly the sick shit that they love.” He pulled out of her arms and began pacing in tight, rigid circles beside the bed, scrubbing his hands through his hair. His voice dropped into a tight cadence, his words infused with bitterness so sharp he could taste it.

“'Let's make the Asset murder his friends and family, let's strip him of his humanity and leave him with nothing. Look at how they recognize him and then see how they scream when he murders them!' It’s exactly the kind of twisted shit the higher ups were into! They always did love testing the obedience of their favorite pet!”

Bucky abruptly turned away from where Darcy sat stock still on his bed. He slammed his fists against his thighs and fought to regain control of the rage that was boiling up in him, chest heaving and legs quaking with the effort.

Darcy began to speak quietly then, her voice shaking slightly. “Bucky, no, babe, I promise you, it wasn't you. They caught the guy that did--”

“A plant. A patsy. Someone to take the blame and keep anyone from questioning it,” he cut her off sharply.

He heard her huff abruptly and was surprised to hear the irritation coloring her next words. “If you would let me finish! It wasn’t you, the guy they caught was responsible, and I know this because you had been in cryo in a warehouse out in the ass-end of Romania for six months when she died!”

Bucky turned sharply on his heel. “What?” he asked her numbly.

He watched the irritation leak out of her, replaced by resignation and maybe a small amount of guilt. “I looked up the dates in your Hydra file. Checked and double checked the timelines. On the day she died, you had been in cryo for half a year already. And wouldn't be pulled out for another three months. Hydra used the Nazi record keeping system. Very efficient, very thorough.”
“So I, I didn't kill her? It was just a dream?” A shard of hope struck between his ribs and lodged itself in the vicinity of his heart.

Darcy stretched her fingers out toward him. “It was just a dream, Bucky,” she affirmed softly.

A breath. And then the shard exploded, relief flooding his systems. He fell to his knees, a puppet cut from its strings, and felt her join him on the floor. Hands fluttering over his shoulders, more soft words and soothing absolutions.

Oh, thank God, thank God! He already had so many sins, but this one was not his. He came back to himself slowly, vaguely aware that this was the second time that week that he'd found himself blubbering in Darcy's arms. God, he was turning into one of those men that got weepy in their old age. That thought and the relief still coursing through him mixed strangely in his gut, pushing forward out of him with a giggle that tinged on hysterical. The first laugh drew another and then another until he was consumed, the strength of his laughter causing him to tip over and fall prone to the floor. Darcy gave a squeal of surprise and followed him, seeing as how her hands were still looped around his shoulders. She landed on top of his chest, wiggling and writhing, trying to work her hands out from where they were trapped beneath his shoulders.

She worked one hand loose enough to smack him lightly on the shoulder. “Hey! Cut that out,” she admonished, but her voice lacked any real heat. He shifted his weight a bit to release her other hand, but the perturbed look on her face did little to quell the serious case of the giggles he'd acquired.

She dropped back on her heels and watched him for a moment, amusement passing lightly over her features. “Something funny?” she asked. “Or is this an early sign of dementia, grandpa?”

Bucky sighed and rubbed the heel of his palm into his eyes, the laughter petering out as he did. “It might be, doll. Mostly, I just think it's relief.” She hummed in understanding and patted him lightly on the shoulder.

He watched her face for a moment, a thought pulling to the front of his mind. “What made you go looking? What made you think to check if, if...if i'd been the one who did it?” He saw her wince slightly in the darkness before answering him.

“I dunno. It just seemed the sort of thing that they'd make you do. Especially after knowing what they had you do to the Starks...And once the idea came to me, I couldn't let it go. I had to know.” She took a steadying breath, eyes boring into his. “If I’d found anything that indicated you were...involved, in any way with her death, I would have told you, I promise you. But there was nothing to find. You weren’t even on the same continent, let alone conscious...so I didn’t say anything. I guess I should have, and we could have avoided all this nightmare fun. I hope you’re not angry with me for prying--”

“No, not at all. I’m thankful. If you hadn’t gone looking, I would still be living with the thought that I’d hurt my baby sister. Thank you for finding the answers for me, Darcy. I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you would take the time to help me.” He wished he had the guts to touch her face. It was right there, a smile pressing back into the softness of her cheeks. His fingers twitched in their desire to reach out and test the texture of her skin, to see if it was as smooth and pliant as it looked.

She leaned forward over him where he still lay on the hardwood floor, and for the briefest moment he had the absurd thought that she might be leaning in to kiss him. He squashed down the flare of disappointment when she merely tucked her hands under his armpits and made to pull him to his feet.

“Come on, Sarge,” she grunted under the strain of moving his bulk. “Let’s get you back in
bed, we’ve gotta get up in three hours for our road trip and I’m making you drive for the first leg so I can take a nap,” she said.

He groaned, but assisted her efforts and let her pull him to his feet. The horror of his nightmare had made him completely forget about their holiday plans.

They would be driving six hours down to her sister’s place in Virginia to spend Christmas and New Year’s with the McKenzies and Darcy’s father. He had assumed that Angie’s invitation to bring him for Christmas had been out of politeness and not a serious offer, so he’d been slightly shocked when Darcy had started to go over their road trip itinerary earlier that week. When he mentioned his hesitancy to accept the invitation, she just looked at him like he’d started speaking in pig latin and then continued on with her itinerary as if he hadn’t spoken at all.

Once he was standing, Darcy pushed him down onto the bed by his shoulders and began to straighten the bedding back out. Before laying down, he retrieved the knife he’d left on the floor and placed it back in its sheath under his mattress. When he had settled back down into the bed, lying comfortably on his back, she pulled the covers up over his chest and then began to literally tuck the blankets in around him, starting at his feet and making her way up to his rib cage.

“You having fun there, sweetheart?” he asked, one brow lifted sardonically.

“Shush, I’m giving you the Lewis Family Post-Nightmare Recovery Routine. It’s scientifically proven to create sweet dreams for the standard four year old little girl. The tucking is essential in keeping away any more bad dreams.” Her fingers jutted into a particularly sensitive spot along his ribs, causing him to jump and squirm away from her reach.

“Hey! Watch it, Lewis, that tickles!”

“Poor baby,” she deadpanned and re-tucked where his squirming had dislodged the blankets, careful to avoid the ticklish spot lest her hard work be undone again.

She really had done a thorough job on him. He felt like he’d been stuffed into a warm, fabric cocoon. He could definitely see the post-nightmare appeal. The bed dipped next to his side and he felt the warmth of her press into him from where she sat on the edge of his bed.

“So, uh, what exactly does the Lewis Family such-and-such entail?”

Darcy held up a hand, ticking off the steps as she went. “Step One: Full Body Tuck. Step Two: Verbal Reassurance.” She paused in her list to look intently at him. “You are handsome and brave and smart. You are kind and sweet and gentle. No one will hurt you ever again. I will not let them. You will never have to hurt anyone again. Unless they are a bad guy and really, really deserve it, but even then, it’s still your choice. Because you are a good person who deserves good things and you smell really nice all the time. Also, your cooking is balls-to-the-wall amazing. Shhh, stop laughing, you’ll mess up my tuck job.” She waited a beat for him to settle.

“Boon, step two complete. Next is Step Three: Physical Reassurance with Musical Accompaniment.” She began to lean towards him, her body inching closer and for a moment his brain completely blipped out. But then she was singing to him, hands gently running through his hair and tracing the lines of his face like they had the other night.

Jesus, this was heaven, he was sure of it. He just seemed to melt under this woman’s hands. It took everything in him not to start purring like a goddamn cat every time she touched him. Her touch, combined with the soft, clear tones of her voice worked like a charm, loosening the latent tension in his body and soothing the frayed edges of his mind. He closed his eyes briefly when a fingertip
crossed one of his cheekbones and it was a struggle to reopen them. Her song ended and he blinked slowly at her a few times.

“What’s next?” he asked sleepily.

She shot him a wicked grin and rose to stand at the edge of the bed. She planted one hand beside his shoulder and the other dead center on his chest, leaning slowly forward until her face was inches from his.

“Step Four: Kiss Goodnight,” she said, eyes lit with mischief.

Fuck. Bucky felt his heart rate skyrocket, blood singing through his veins and lighting up his nerve endings. Anticipation pricked along his spine and it took all of his sniper training to keep still and not surge up into her. So he waited and watched. And waited. And the whole while that shit-eating grin of hers just got wider and wider as she watched him. Just when he thought he might explode with nervous energy, she began to pull back, straightening up and away from him.

“Goodnight, Barnes,” she said in an overly sweet voice, lightly patting the center of his chest. He was so befuddled by the sudden release in tension that she was almost to his doorway before he realized what had happened.

“Hey!” he shouted, jerking up in his bed. “Where the hell is that kiss, Lewis?”

She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, the curls bouncing and sliding across her back in a way that was much too appealing to his already overloaded senses. She licked her lips, drawing his eyes to the sly grin planted there before she responded. “The fourth step has only been used in studies on four year old girls. There is no data on whether or not it proves effective in bad dream removal when applied to the elderly.” She arched an eyebrow, an obvious challenge.

Well, guess what, babydoll, Bucky Barnes never did back down from a fight.

“No time like the present to find out,” he growled, the edge and tone of his words bubbling up from some forgotten place in his memory that used to charm the hell out of the dames he used to run with.

Darcy just threw her head back and laughed.

She was laughing at him, the little shit. Here he was trying to flirt with this woman and all she could do was laugh. Damn, he must be rustier than he thought.

“You’re a tease, you know that, Lewis?” he barked at her, but it held little bite. He crossed his arms over his chest and was only marginally ashamed to admit that his lower lip may have stuck out a bit. Just a little.

Darcy rolled her eyes at him. “Oh my god, Barnes. Are you seriously pouting right now? Maybe you are a four year old girl. It would definitely explain all the recent crying and the obsession with Disney movies.”

Bucky jabbed a finger in her direction. “Hey now, you’re the one who made me start watching those movies. I can’t help it if Beauty and the Beast is a goddamn cinematic masterpiece.”

Bucky watched as Darcy steadied herself against his door jamb, her beautiful face crinkling up into lines of mirth. He couldn’t help the smile pulling at his own mouth. Seeing her like this, so happy and open and shining, it was a thing of beauty and he felt blessed to just be near enough to witness it. In that moment, he had never envied Steve more for his ability to draw.
He wished he could capture the exact curve of her cheek as she laughed, the way her pale throat moved and shone in the moonlight.

“Barnes, you’re staring.”

Bucky jerked, heat rising up the back of his neck. “Yeah, well, um,” he hemmed and hawed. “I was just, um, waiting for you to finish laughing so I could ask you to close the door and leave me the hell alone. I’m old. I need my beauty sleep.” He scowled at her, giving her his best grumpy-old-man face.

Darcy looked at him with faux discomfort. “Eesh, yeaaah, I wasn’t gonna say anything, but now that you mention it...fine lines and wrinkles are a real problem for a lot of men your age...”

Oh! That little stinker. Bucky reached back for a pillow, slinging it around, only to hit the door in the exact spot that Darcy’s head had been a millisecond before she’d pulled it shut after her saucy little remark. He could hear her cackling to herself all the way down the hallway and into her room. Bucky rolled onto his stomach, groaning and punching his pillow into a more comfortable shape before collapsing down onto it. He closed his eyes tightly and let loose another quiet groan, the tendrils of exhaustion already starting to pull at him.

What in the hell was he gonna do about that woman?
Despite the interruption to their sleep the night before, Bucky and Darcy both rose to their alarms without hesitation. They shook off their tiredness with ease, the excitement and anticipation inherent in road trips and holiday celebrations alike bubbling up and brushing away any exhaustion in their wake.

Darcy nearly collided into her roommate when she rounded the corner to her kitchen. He was plating out a quick breakfast of bacon and eggs to tide them over until they reached their lunch destination that she had specifically placed on the road trip itinerary. There was an authentic little pho place in Middle-of-Nowhere, Virginia that she was dying to introduce Bucky to.

Darcy slid into her seat, immediately picking up a piece of bacon and crunching away happily.

Ah bacon, the best of meats.

Darcy looked up from her plate to see Bucky leaning over the kitchen sink rinsing off the pan he'd used to scramble the eggs, dark jeans pulled tight across his rear and thighs.

Ah bacon, the second best of meats.

“Lewis, you're staring,” Bucky tossed casually over his shoulder, not even bothering to look at her or stop his rinsing.

Darcy let out an embarrassed squeak and dropped her eyes back to the safety of her bacon. She tried to will away the creeping flush sweeping over her cheeks but to no avail. Bucky turned in time to see her charming blush before she dropped her head.

Good, he thought to himself. He didn't usually stoop to calling out women who ogled him, but she'd earned it after the little stunt she'd pulled the night before, the minx. In fact, when he'd woken up that morning, he'd decided that a little retribution would be good for her, so he'd be spending their holiday vacation tormenting her mercilessly. She wasn't the only person in that kitchen who knew how to be a tease.

A devious gleam lit his eyes as he sat in his chair across from her, leaning back and stretching out his legs beneath the table until his ankles grazed hers. Darcy's eyes popped up immediately at the subtle touch, giving Bucky a wide eyed stare. He deliberately held her gaze for a few breathless moment before dragging his teeth slowly over his lower lip. Hook, line, and sinker, she fell for the bait, her eyes dipping to his mouth to follow the movement. Maybe he wasn't so rusty after all.

“Good morning, doll. How did you sleep?” Bucky asked, a smug smile tugging at the edge of his mouth.

Darcy shrugged, swallowed, and took what he thought might be her first breath since he’d brushed his legs against hers.
“Um, I slept fine. Well, besides the part where you woke me up….which is fine, totally fine! You can wake me up any time you need my help, of course. I would never hold that against you.” Darcy let off a spout of nervous giggles. “Uh, but yeah, the parts before and after that I slept, um-”

“Fine?” Bucky’s eyebrow twitched up in amusement.

“Well, that, Darcy finished lamely.

“Good to hear it, sweetheart. And it's good to know that you're so...willing…to help me whenever I might need you in the middle of the night.” Bucky was laying the smolder on thick and damn if it wasn't working, too. Bucky was delighted to see Darcy's mouth pop open in bewilderment, her usual onslaught of verbiage momentarily stoppered by his blatant innuendo. It took a considerable amount of self control for him not to snicker at her vindictively.

Deciding he should probably have a small amount of mercy, for the moment anyway, Bucky sat up in his chair and turned his attention to his own breakfast, eating in silence as if the whole exchange had never happened. No need to lay it on too thick or all at once. This kind of sweet torture was best meted out in small increments over time until the recipient was thoroughly worn down and ready to make a move. And really, that was his long game.

Bucky had woken that morning with an entirely new sensation running through him. Well, maybe not new, but new to him since Hydra had got a hold of him. He wanted Darcy, and he was nearly knocked breathless by the realization. Sure, he had recognized from the beginning that she was easy on the eyes, but this was something more than just acknowledgment of a pleasant aesthetic. He hadn't realized just how much he wanted a kiss from those plush lips until she'd suggested it. But she hadn't followed through, which was...confusing, but also vaguely exciting. She seemed to be attracted to him, but she'd been unwilling to kiss him. So he would wait for her to make the first move; he wouldn't force his desires on her in any way. But that didn't mean he couldn't have fun flirting shamelessly while he waited for her to either make a move or reject him entirely.

Whether or not anything happened, though he sincerely hoped she wanted him too, he was still just so thrilled to have rediscovered this aspect of himself after so long. Hydra had done their damndest to neuter him when they’d shaped him into the Winter Soldier, at least psychologically. They'd, thankfully, left him physically intact, though he doubted it was out of the goodness of their hearts. He could only assume they would have tried breeding him out eventually, once he passed his prime as an asset. His altered genetics were just too damn valuable.

In any case, waking up with his body aching to be touched and Darcy's name ghosting over his lips had been both a welcome change from how he usually woke and the biggest surprise of his post-Hydra life so far. For nearly three years he had been resigned to the fact that he would never desire women as he once did, thinking his sexuality was one of the many things he'd never get back from Hydra. Finding out that he was wrong about that had him feeling downright giddy. It was a damned Christmas Miracle. In fact, he'd briefly considered marching his ass to the nearest Catholic church and dropping onto his knees in prayer. Glancing down at the generous tenting of his bedsheets, he had quickly reconsidered. Perhaps another time.

With the reawakening of his sexuality, certain aspects of his personality had also started to awaken. Specifically, the cocksure attitude of his youth and the memory of how to tease and tempt a pretty lady. Which had ultimately spurred his master plan to tempt one Darcy Lewis within an inch of her sanity over the next two weeks.

It was a damn good plan.
Within the hour they hit the road, bags loaded into the back of Darcy's violently blue Ford Fiesta, which she had nicknamed “The Blueberry” due to its color but also because of some tv show that she insisted he needed to start in the near future.

Darcy loaded the backseat with various snacks and drinks, including two boxes of Ho-Hos per his request, and pulled up their destination on her gps for Bucky. They got about 10 minutes into their drive before Bucky swerved into a Walgreens and ran inside for an actual folded map of the eastern seaboard, mumbling viciously under his breath about “damned machines taking over everything” and “lazy futuristic sonsabitches can't even read a damned map anymore.” He'd returned to the car in short order, taking a couple minutes to pore over the map before pulling out of the parking lot and continuing on to the correct route.

Darcy kept her mouth shut, but only barely, and a few muffled chuckles still escaped her throat. Bucky ignored her as best he could and concentrated on finding his way to the highway that would take them most of the way to their destination.

Darcy fiddled idly with the radio for a few minutes, eventually landing on a jazz station, and promptly conked out. She had warned him the night before, so he wasn't too surprised when she spent the first three hours of the trip snoring softly against the window. He chuckled to himself at the sight of her. She really was an adorable little thing.

The drive went fairly smoothly for him except for the occasional light traffic. Nothing too hindering, though, and the roads were clear of ice or snow since it had been a couple weeks since the area had gotten any snowfall.

All-in-all, it was a pretty relaxing morning. Handling the vehicle with ease, his mind was allowed to wander a bit in the quietness of the car. He couldn't help but think of Darcy and everything that entailed. The excitement, the anxiety, the easy camaraderie that he hoped he wouldn't ruin. Because, even though he desired her, he wanted more than just the softness of her flesh. He wanted to...well, go steady with her, if he was being honest. But that was apparently an outdated phrase and an increasingly outdated practice. And it wasn't like he even had any experience with that kind of monogamy. He'd rarely gone on a date with the same woman more than once back when he was young. How the hell was he supposed to figure it out now?

He decided it was best to place that worry on the back burner for the moment. Besides, she might end up telling him to take a flying leap, so it wouldn't end up being an issue in the first place. He'd come to that bridge if they got to it.

He really hoped they got to it.

Darcy woke with a jolt to the closing of a car door. She swiveled her head, stretching out the kinks in her neck and taking in her surroundings. They appeared to be stopped at a gas station somewhere in Podunk, USA and Bucky was fiddling with the gas pump. She stretched and stifled a yawn, deciding this would be a good time for a quick potty break and prayed that the bathrooms weren't completely horrendous.

She took a glance at the back seat. Yeah, better replenish the snacks while she was at it. Bucky could really put it away when he wanted to. Steve had warned her that she’d need to make sure he ate, but maybe he had been trying to feed Bucky the wrong things? Probably protein shakes and bars, which is what she usually saw Steve ingesting. Gag her with a spoon. Life was too short for that healthy
Darcy hopped out of the car, fluttering her fingers at Bucky and crossing the parking lot to the dismal little building. The bathrooms were not the worst she'd used, but she still made sure to touch as little of the bathroom fixtures as possible. After taking care of her necessities, she meandered down the few aisles that shelved the available snacks, getting an assortment of salty, sweet, and chewy goodies.

By the time she made her way back to the car, Bucky had finished filling the gas tank and was leaning casually against the passenger side door, arms folded across his chest and legs crossed at the ankle. The morning sun was glinting brightly off the sliver of metal peeking out between his glove and sleeve and lighting up the amber undertones in his hair.

Damn, if he wasn't one of the most beautiful men she'd ever laid eyes on. Especially with the way he was watching her cross the parking lot, wide blue eyes following each of her movements, tongue gently worrying at his full lower lip. If she wasn’t mistaken, there was a hunger in his eyes...and not just for the bag of snacks she had a death grip on.

A perversely delightful anticipation stirred in her stomach in reaction to the way he watched her. This new side of Bucky had made its first appearance when they'd gotten up that morning, and she was digging it to an extreme degree. She put a little more sway in her hips and let her own tongue linger over her lips. She had started their little game with that “goodnight kiss” business last night, she damn well wasn’t going to quit right as things were starting to heat up.

Thinking over her actions the night before, she really couldn't say what caused her to tease him like that. Maybe she wanted to make him laugh, or maybe she wanted to leave him with something to think about that would drive out any further depressing thoughts. Or maybe he was a wonderful man who happened to be devastatingly beautiful and she'd wanted to flirt her ass off because, hey, she was only human. Who knew? It was a mystery.

Whatever her reasoning was, she couldn't help but preen just a little bit at the subsequent results. The changes in Bucky’s behavior had been subtle, but highly desirable. As in, he was acting as if she was highly desirable. Her flirting last night had kicked off a dance between the two of them, and with each step they pushed the other closer and closer to...some kind of precipice.

But who would make the first jump?

In a normal situation, it would be her, hands down. Darcy Lewis, like all the women in her family, was incredibly astute when it came to reading people. She knew whenever someone was attracted to her, and not just in the casual “that's a nice rack on that chick” way. She always knew when the dance had begun and she was not the kind of woman to wait around for the other person to make the first leap.

But this dance was with Bucky, a partner who had gone through a living nightmare, with all the scars, both physical and psychological, that that implied. Ultimately, she decided she would go at his pace, let him lead the dance, and when he was ready, she would follow him over the edge.

Darcy felt a sinister little smile pulling at her lips as she watched the good Sargeant’s eyes track the movement of her hips, watched as the steady rise and fall of his chest seemed to catch and stutter for a minute. She continued her journey to him, pushing into his space till they were nearly chest to chest.

She looked up at him from under her dark lashes, turning on the full smolder. “Here, Sarge,” she breathed, pressing the bag of goodies into his hands. “You looked hungry.” She was thrilled right
down to her Captain America toesocks to notice the nervous bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed thickly.

She turned quickly and flounced off around the car before he could recover his senses, but was stopped before she could get the driver’s side door all the way open. Bucky's metal hand popped into her field of vision, catching the door at the top, and was followed shortly by his flesh hand appearing near her waist, the car keys nestled in his palm.

“You might need these, sweetheart,” Bucky said lowly, lips brushing against the shell of her ear and warm breath stirring her curls. Darcy thrilled at his closeness, swaying back slightly and making contact with his chest. Her lips curved of their own accord into a wicked grin when she saw his hand twitch at the contact.

“Thank you,” she purred, artfully retrieving the keys and allowing her nails to drag lightly over his palm as she did. Bucky flinched, his chest and abdomen jerking against her back. She pulled away from him then, watching him from the corner of her eyes as she slid in place behind the wheel, satisfaction coiling low and tight in her gut.

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Darcy was pleased to see that Bucky loved her chosen lunch destination as much as she did, maybe more, based on the three separate meals that he ended up eating before they left. His appetite had definitely kicked up exponentially since he'd started living with her.

They made good time after leaving the restaurant, arriving on the outskirts of Charlottesville, Virginia in a little over an hour. The small college town was covered in a thin layer of snow, giving the whole place a quaint, picturesque feel. It was Christmas incarnate, down to the lights strung up over the red brick buildings of the campus.

Darcy had been absolutely enchanted the first Christmas that she'd spent at her sister’s townhome right off the edge of the campus. Her sister had started her professorial career there nearly five years ago and she honestly hoped Angie never taught anywhere else. It was just such a gorgeous little town and college. Whether covered in snow and fairy lights, exquisite fall colors, white and pink blossoms of spring, or exhibiting the sprawling green lawns of summer, it always filled Darcy with a sense of peace and wonder. Especially since she'd moved to the city and had been fairly deprived of all things quaint and Mother Nature-y.

As they drove through town, Darcy took a moment to point out some of the buildings of the area that held particular historical significance. She noted the way Bucky's eyes lit up whenever she mentioned some aspect of the pervasive Jeffersonian architecture.

“You know, my Pop used to take me around the buildings of New York like this. Teach me about the design of them and such. He worked construction on the Chrysler building when I was growing up,” Bucky's eyes glazed with happy memory for a moment. “He was so proud when they finished it, took me and Ma to the grand opening. He used to tell me, ‘tallest building in the world, Jamie! Your old man made history!’ Of course, a year later they finished the Empire State Building.” Bucky let a laugh escape, “Pop was furious, it was the funniest thing you ever saw. He kept waiting for the next skyscraper to come along to work on that would surpass the Empire...but he died before there ever was. We both did,” Bucky finished quietly, some of the mirth draining from his features.

“1970.”

“What?”
“The Empire State Building was surpassed by the World Trade Center in 1970. The Twin Towers...those are gone now, though.” Darcy trailed off, the painfulness of that moment still very present to her American psyche.

Bucky nodded solemnly. “I read about that, 9/11. I've never seen anything like it...and I've lived through some pretty sick shit. Did you lose anyone?” he asked gently.

“No, thankfully. But so many people did. Pepper lost her older sister.”

Bucky's brows shot up in concern. “I, I didn't know that.”

“Not many people do, she doesn't like to dwell. But it changed her.” Darcy’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, pushing back at the swell of sorrow for her friend and mentor.

Bucky hummed in acknowledgment and then was quiet for a moment, watching the snow lined streets pass. “What is it now?”

“Hmm?” Darcy pulled herself from her thoughts.

“What is the tallest building now,” Bucky clarified.

“Oh. Ummm, I think it's a building in Dubai, I can't remember what the name is though.” Darcy shrugged.

“I think I'd like to see it, someday.” Bucky snorted, “If I ever get the clearance for international flight, that is.”

Darcy gave him a wry grin. “Yeah, I bet it's hell getting through security with that metal arm.” She leaned over and pinched at his metal wrist and gave him a quick wink.

Bucky looked at her strangely for a moment before returning with his own grin. “Maybe if I had my trusty babysitter with me, they'd let me through without much fuss?”

“You asking me to go to Dubai with you, Jamie?”

“Ugh, I shouldn't have let that slip. I take it back now. You can stay in the states. I'll take Rob with me, he seems the respectable sort that gets through airport security easy enough.”

Darcy stuck her tongue out at him. “Yeah, and he's got that huge man-crush on you, which can't hurt.”

Bucky snorted. “Don't let Angie hear you say that, she might not let him go with me.”

“Nah, Ange isn't the jealous type. She's good at sharing.” Darcy wiggled her eyebrows at him ridiculously. “And speaking of Angie and Rob, we’re here,” she said, parking in front of a nicely sized red-bricked townhouse.

The house was sandwiched between two similarly sized homes, each bearing the typical Jeffersonian style: triangular pediments above the doors, white trim, windows framed with decorative shutters. The only variation to the long strand of townhomes was the gradient shades of red brick and the different colors each front door was painted. Rob had chosen a pleasant dark green that complemented the rich-red brick of their home.

As it was Christmas, there was a rather ostentatious wreath hanging and covering nearly half of the front door. Angie did not know how to do things by halves, and went particularly bananas during the
holidays, as was evidenced by the enormous wreath and abundance of fairy lights covering the front of their home.

Bucky stepped out of the car, stretching the kinks out of his muscles after being balled up into Darcy’s tiny vehicle for so many hours. He looked up at the copious amounts of blinking multicolored lights adorning the McKenzie home.

“Very...festive,” he said dryly.

Darcy, who was beginning to unload their bags from the trunk, glanced up and snorted in response. “Oh god, you’re in for a real surprise if that is what you categorize as festive. Just wait till you get inside...and keep a wary eye out for errant strands of mistletoe.” She ducked her head back down into the trunk before he could catch the teasing gleam in her eyes.

Having pulled the remainder of their luggage out, she slammed the trunk closed and was turning to grab her bag off the curb when her face smacked into a wall of muscled man flesh. Dang, for an old guy, he sure could move fast. His hands came down around her shoulders to keep her from falling flat on her ass.

“Steady there, doll. Didn’t mean to sneak up on you,” he said around an easy grin. Bucky’s hands lingered on her for a moment before sliding down her arms and then reaching for both of their bags. Lifting one suitcase laden arm, he gestured to the front door, “After you, ma’am.”

“Why thank you, good sir. Such a nice young man, carrying all that luggage for little ole me,” she drawled in what was the worst southern accent Bucky had ever heard. Probably.

“Oh, you know me, Ms. Lewis. Ever the gentlemen,” Bucky said. This was followed by a wink and some obscenely attractive movement with his tongue that was as panty-melting as it was effortless. And about as far from gentlemanly as a person could get.

Geez, Louise. Bucky Barnes had game. She knew that, had read about his talent with women in pretty much every history book she’d read in school, but knowing from a book and knowing from personal experience were two entirely different things.

Okay. Time to be honest with herself. She might be out of her depth here.

“Right. A gentleman. So the only reason you let me go first was out of respect and not because you wanted to finally get a good look at the view,” she threw over her shoulder, wiggling her hips a little to emphasize her point.

From behind her, she heard Barnes’ voice sink to a lower octave. “Oh, darling, if you think these eyes haven’t already scoped out and memorized every single dip and curve of that ‘view,’ then you’ve really not been paying attention.”

Darcy swallowed hard and tried to suppress the shiver that ran down her spine. She was apparently unsuccessful, if Bucky’s dark chuckle was anything to go on. Damn him. A sly grin stretched across her face. Yeah, she was undoubtedly out of her depth here, and she couldn’t be more thrilled.
On the First Day of Christmas...

Chapter Summary

My true love gave to me: 1 asshole sister who couldn't keep her evil machinations to herself.

Or, that one time that Angie decided to play matchmaker.

Angela Lewis McKenzie was many things to many people. Adoring and enthusiastic wife to Rob, affectionate and doting mother to Violet, accomplished and much beloved professor to hundreds of students, and an author of three books that had all been met with critical acclaim, thank you very much. Angela Lewis McKenzie was all these things and more, but what she had never been and could never be, was anybody's fool.

So when her darling little sister waltzed into her home followed by the ever attractive Sergeant Barnes, Angie could practically smell the ramped up attraction between the two.

It had been there when she'd first been introduced to Barnes, make no doubt about it. Angie couldn't help but notice the way Barnes watched Darcy, intuitively orbiting her like she was the blesséd sun and he a man in the depths of winter. Which was an appropriate analogy, considering. It had worried her at first, to see a man so tormented and notorious looking at her sister the way he had, but she trusted Darcy's judgment as much as she did her own. And within a few moments Angie had been able to cut to the heart of him. He might be a dangerous man, but he was not a selfish one. He would put the lives of her daughter and her sister above any of his own wants, if necessary.

But this attraction was leaps and bounds above what she'd witnessed earlier that month. Something had shifted between the two. They were now two suns, locked in each other's orbit, slowly circling and coming closer with each rotation. And what would be the end result of such an inevitable collision? And would it be too much to ask for a front row seat because, damn, it was sure to be highly entertaining.

Perhaps they could use a little, ahem, shove in the right direction? Should she meddle? No. It would be wrong, or so Rob would say. But Rooooobbbb, no one likes a buzzkill. So shush, inner voice of reason. Angie, it's time to put her matchmaker pants on. Starting with...hmmm, so many options… oh! Forced cohabitation. Yes. That one.

“So,” Angie began, plastering an innocent smile on her face. “Dad is going to be staying in the main guest bedroom, so the two of you can camp out on the trundle bed in the office. If you'll follow me, Sergeant Barnes, I'll show you where to put the luggage.”

She motioned for him to follow her, but he seemed rooted to the spot with a sudden case of ants-in-the-pants. Ooh, what if this was one of those old-timey proprietary hang ups? Cute.

Wait, no, Darcy seemed squeamish too, that was unlike her.

“Um, Ange, I can sleep on the pullout couch in the den-”

“Nope! No it's broken!”
“It is?” Rob asked, oblivious to subtext, as was usual.

“Yes, dear, it is. Don't worry Darcy, you've already been living together for over a month now, it'll be exactly the same, but with fewer walls.” Angie brushed past them with an air that brooked no room for argument. She was pleased to see that it was as effective on nonagenarian supersoldiers as it was on her occasionally rowdy college students. Darcy might be giving her pointed glares of promised pain, but Barnes followed her like a docile lamb, the sweet boy, and Darcy inevitably followed.

“Here you are,” she said, gesturing at the appointed office/bedroom. “Darcy can show you how to pull out the trundle bed and where the bathroom is. I've got fresh towels sitting out on the vanity for you. If you need anything, let me know. I'm gonna go, um, make cookies or something. I'll leave you two alone to fight out who wants to be on top and who wants to be on bottom.” Ok that last comment would likely get her in trouble with Darcy, but the blazing flush on Barnes' face and the awkward little shuffle of his combat boots was too cute and 100% worth the verbal lashing she would assuredly receive from Darcy later.

She dashed out into the hall, snapping the door closed on the two lovesick baby chicks, who had the combined age of nearly 130, but that was neither here nor there. They needed all the helpful mama-bird shoving they could get.

Now all Angie needed to do was update her darling husband so he wouldn't muck up her genius plans for holiday entertainment. And maybe hang up some more mistletoe? Yeah. Good plan. More mistletoe, for sure.

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“That's, uh, that's a small bed,” Bucky said, apprehension coloring every word. “There's no way we can both fit on that...I'll sleep on the floor.” Bucky's eyes dropped to the ground, searching for the ideal location to set up his bedding.

“Bucky, you know that there's a second twin mattress that pulls out underneath, right?” Darcy asked. She leaned over and pulled the wooden drawer out from underneath the top mattress in demonstration.

His sigh of relief was palpable. “Oh, yeah okay, that makes more sense. I thought Angie wanted us stacked together on the bed like pancakes.” His cheeks pinked further and he gave a slight one shouldered shrug.

Darcy chuckled and began pulling her clothes out of her suitcase to stack neatly in the empty chest of drawers beside the bed. “So that's why you went so red when she mentioned the top and bottom thing, eh?” She had her back to him but she could hear his feet shuffle against the carpet.

“Uh, yeah,” Bucky responded, clearing his throat.

Darcy bit back on the smile pulling at her lips. Having finished putting her things away, she decided it'd be a good time to take a shower, and told Bucky as much.

“It's the door down the hall on the right, for future reference,” she said, bundling some fresh clothes under her arm. “Make yourself at home here, I'll be out in a little bit.”

She turned to leave but paused with her hand on the doorknob. “Just for the record, I would have definitely been top pancake,” she tossed over her shoulder and then made a quick getaway to the bathroom before he could retaliate.
As she disappeared around the corner, Bucky was suddenly bombarded with the image of her hovering over him, eyes closed and mouth wide in ecstasy. It was an admittedly seductive vision that she'd planted in his brain and he was suddenly weak in the knees at the very thought of seeing her like that. Or maybe he was just exhausted from the emotionally hellish week and difficult night before. Or both. Yeah, definitely both.

In any case, a nap sounded good to him right about then so he stripped out of his boots, jeans, jacket and button down until he was left standing in his undershirt and boxer briefs. He then turned off the lights and crawled in between the soft cotton sheets of the top mattress. Darcy might like being on top for recreational purposes, but in this case, it was likely safer for her to be on the bottom bed. If he got caught up in another nightmare, he'd feel better if she had an easier escape route and could get to the door unimpeded.

He must have drifted off at some point, because the next thing he knew, the evening sun was shining through the bedroom window and he could smell something cooking in the kitchen. His stomach gave a tremendous growl at the delicious scent. Well, best go join the living.

He had his pants halfway up his legs when there was a light knock on the door and Darcy’s head immediately popped around the edge.

“Hey, Bucky you awa--” Darcy cut herself off and they both froze. Bucky watched as her blue eyes widened, tracing the visible flesh of his muscled thighs and a bit north of there, too, if he wasn't mistaken.

“You. Uh. Pants. You don’t have pants on,” she stuttered and then her brain seemed to have caught up with her body and her eyes instantly twitched up to meet his. “Whoops, so sorry,” she gushed breathlessly, and slapped a hand over her eyes for good measure.

Bucky couldn't help but grin when he saw her peeking through the cracks in her fingers. “If you wanted a show, sweetheart, all you had to do was ask,” he drawled, pulling his jeans smoothly and slowly up the length of his thighs, hopping a bit at the end to get the material over his backside.

Darcy made a noise that he was pretty sure only dogs and his supersoldier ears could hear, turned bright red, and dashed back down the hall to the safety of the kitchen. He couldn't help the carefree laughter that bubbled up out of his chest, nor could Darcy wipe the naughty smile from her face as she rounded the corner into her sister's kitchen. Angie, who was sometimes too perceptive for Darcy's preference, noticed the blush and smile combo as soon as she locked eyes on her.

“What's with the face, Darce? You look like you just got an eyeful of attractive, naked man.”

*Oh damn it, that was spot on, don’t give it away, don’t give it away*

“Oh my GOSH! *Did* you catch him naked?? Whatdidyousee?” Angie practically squealed.

“None of the exciting bits, unfortunately,” came Bucky’s warm baritone.

From behind Darcy, a hand settled briefly on her lower back, lighting up her spine with sharp prickles of awareness, and then Bucky stepped around her and planted himself on one of the stools at the bar that attached at one end of the kitchen counter.

“So, what’d I miss while I slept, Rob? Any wars this time, or just women gossiping about a poor, unsuspecting man caught in his unmentionables?”

Rob, who was bent over a pan of sautéing vegetables, snorted and nodded his head at Bucky. “What do you think? These are Lewis women. Practically deviant from birth, the both of them. If you're
sleeping in the office with that one,” he pointed at Darcy, “and you value your virtue, you had better strap on your chastity belt before bed.”

Both sisters responded to Rob’s comment with identical expressions of offense, which nearly sent Bucky off his chair in laughter.

Angie’s look of offense faded to one of speculation. “Is he always this cute when he laughs?”

“Oh definitely.”

Angie gave him a once over and an appreciative hum in response.

“That’s enough out of you, woman,” Rob teased his wife, pointing at her with his rubber spatula. “You leave that poor man alone. It’s bad enough that your little sister has it out for him. You’re both going to give him a heart attack.” He gave both women a stern look and turned back to his cooking.

“Thank you Rob, it’s nice to see that somebody in this house knows how to respect their elders,” Bucky said, aiming his own stern glance at the women.

Rob nodded. “Yeah, of course. I also prefer not to share.” He narrowed his eyes at his wife for a short moment and then followed it with a smirk and a wink when she came up behind him to wrap her arms around his middle.

“You may not like to share, but I do,” she growled, nipping at her husband's ear. Rob responded with something that Darcy's ears couldn't pick up but that had her sister giggling like a schoolgirl and Bucky's cheeks turning pink.

“Ok, Angie, for the love of God, keep it in your pants. At least when you’re in the common spaces. Oh, and Rob, just a heads up, but Bucky has insanely good hearing. Like, can hear bad guys whispering from 80 yards away, good. So, uh, dirty talk with your wife after we leave, or something.”

Rob ducked his head down, turning red up to his hairline. “S-sorry about that, sir. Won't happen again.”

From behind him, Angie gave a dramatic sigh. “I guess that means no Christmas or New Year’s nookie for us then…Ouch! Robert, don't you poke me! We're married, we have a baby. It is not a secret that married people have holiday sex. I'm sure they did that in the 40s too.”

Bucky had recovered from his embarrassment enough to reinsert into the conversation again. “It's true, Rob. In fact, I was apparently a Mother’s Day present to my Ma. It took me a while to figure out how Mother’s Day was in May, but I was born in March, but let me tell you, that was an unwelcome revelation when it finally clicked.” Bucky shuddered slightly. “I always wondered why Pop would get that gleam in his eye when Ma would say that.” Bucky made a face, his tongue sticking out in distaste.

The kitchen filled with raucous laughter, to Bucky's delight. It felt good being surrounded by laughter and family, even if they weren't his own. There was a comfort about it that he found familiar and peaceful. His own home growing up had always been filled with the same kind of laughter and warmth, and he was grateful for these new people who had pulled him into their holiday festivities.

The laughter in the kitchen was suddenly cut through by a high pitched wail coming from the master bedroom. Angie pecked her husband on the cheek and disappeared down the hall to retrieve her daughter, returning within moments with a now happy baby.
Violet squirmed and chewed happily on her mother’s necklace until she caught sight of Darcy and gave a joyful squeal. Darcy made a similar sound in return.

“My sweet princess, I missed you!” She made grabby hands at the infant and took her from Angie’s arms, twirling in a little circle with Violet clutched to her chest.

Bucky slid from his chair to sidle up to Darcy and her niece. As soon as Violet caught sight of Bucky, she beamed at him and reached out her chubby little arms for him. The smile that lit up his face in response was nearly blinding.

“I see how it is,” Darcy grumbled and handed over the little girl. “I’ve been replaced as the favorite.”

Bucky chuckled and snuggled Violet into his chest. “How’s my best girl today? You miss me?” he asked, tickling her chubby neck rolls. Vi smacked her lips and made a concerted effort to clap her hands at his greeting. She wasn’t quite successful but he praised her efforts anyway.

“Uncle Buck, you’re on baby duty while we finish dinner. There’s too many cooks in the kitchen, y’all go hang out in the den. You too, Darce. Keep them both out of trouble.” Angie flicked her little sister on the rear with a dish towel and set to work on pulling ingredients from the fridge.

Darcy tucked her hand into Bucky’s elbow and pulled him towards the living room. “Come on, old man, let’s get you set up on the recliner before a hip goes out.” She reached down and patted him gently on the joint. And if her fingers lingered a bit longer than necessary, well he wasn’t going to be the one to point it out.

Bucky folded himself into the corner of the leather sectional that took up most of the room, flipped the recliner up, and propped Violet up against his knees so they could talk to each other properly. Darcy watched the two quietly interact with each other. Her ovaries were instantly at it again, doing their damndest to convince her that pregnancy was what she really needed at that moment.

Doing her best to ignore their whispered lies, Darcy sat down next to Bucky, tucking her knees to her chest and leaning oh so casually into his side. For a breathless moment, their eyes met and she felt sure he would lean in at any second to kiss her. He was so warm and close and his eyes shone with happiness, surely, surely he’d close those last few inches and-

A firm knock on the front door startled the pair, causing them both to jerk back in surprise. From the kitchen, Angie called out, “Darce, that’s probably Dad, can you get the door for me? My hands are covered in raw chicken!”

Darcy closed her eyes with a groan. So close. Dammit. She unfolded herself from Bucky’s side and called back a quick affirmation to her sister before heading to the front door. As soon as she had it open, she was swept up into her father’s steadying embrace.

“Darcy Grace, my little girl, how have you been, kiddo?” her father asked, the deep timbre of his voice muffled against her hair. She gave him an extra squeeze and pulled back to get a good look at him.

“I’ve been great, Dad. I’ve missed you, though. How’s the shop doing? You get that new hydraulics system set up?”

“Oh yeah! Works like a dream, lifts up to 12,000 lbs lickety split. It’s been great, especially with that new warehouse they built down the block. I’m the only auto shop in town that has a system that can handle the tonnage on those delivery trucks. The shop made enough this last year that I should be able to finally pay off the house.” Pride shone on Paul Lewis’ rotund face, making his blue eyes
Darcy’s answering smile was just as bright. “That’s really good to hear, Dad. You know I worry about you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Paul waved away her concerns. “I’ll be alright. Too old and stubborn for anything too terrible to happen to me. You’re the one I should be worrying about. Living in that big city full of criminals, a young woman all on her own.” A sly look crept into her father’s eyes. “Although, the way Angie tells it, you’re not exactly all on your own now, are you?”

Darcy groaned. “Does Angie always have to tell you everything about my life?”

“Yes, because she’s your big sister, she adores me, and she inherited a little bit of that gossip streak from your mother.” Paul’s voiced dipped to a lower decibel. “She said he was coming for the holidays, is he here? You know he was always my favorite Commando, I had all of his collectables as a kid.” The eagerness on her father’s face was damn near adorable, she had to admit.

Paul Lewis was not a tall man, coming barely an inch taller than his younger daughter and several inches shorter than his elder. Despite his short stature, he was built like a brick house, layered with beefy muscle from years of hard labor working at his auto shop. He had the same bright blue eyes that both his girls had inherited, and once upon a time he’d had their same brunette curls, but those had started to disappear around the same time that the little pot belly had developed around his middle. Despite his age, he still had the cherubic appearance that her mother had fallen for when they’d met in high school. The excitement of meeting a childhood hero only served to deepen his look of boyish charm.

Darcy rolled her eyes at her father, but took his hand and led him to where Bucky sat waiting in the living room. Upon their entrance, she noticed the stiff set of his shoulders and the momentary look of apprehension on his face before he swept it away in favor of a polite smile that almost, but didn’t quite reach his eyes. Bucky stood gracefully, hoisting Violet onto his waist and extending his hand out amiably to Darcy’s father...who looked like he was about 30 seconds from passing out with excitement.

“Dad, shake the man’s hand. And breathe, for godssake.” Darcy resisted the urge to facepalm herself. “Dad, as you know, this is Bucky Barnes. Bucky, this is my father, Paul Lewis. He’s not a lunatic, he’s just in love with you.” Bucky’s polite smile grew a little wary and forced when Paul took Bucky’s hand into both of his meaty paws and shook it vigorously.

“It’s an honor to meet you as well, Mr. Lewis. You have a wonderful family and have raised two lovely daughters.” Bucky’s eyes swept over Darcy’s face for a moment.

Paul beamed with pride at his comment and threw a quick wink to his youngest. “They are pretty sweet, ain’t they? And please, call me Paul.”
“Of course, and call me, Bucky.”

The look of adoration that her father was giving Bucky was bordering on creepy and she was starting to worry that he wasn’t breathing again. Okay, time to break up the old man lovefest.

“Hey Dad, aren’t you going to say hello to your granddaughter?”

“My what-now?” her father asked dazedly, before snapping to attention. “Oh, my Violet! Hello, sweetie, come over here and let Pop Pop see how big you’ve gotten!” And with that, Paul Lewis returned to functioning like a normal human being, scooping his granddaughter from Bucky’s arms and sweeping down the hall to greet the rest of the family in the kitchen.

Darcy tilted her head back on her shoulders, heaving a deep sigh. “Well, that was embarrassing.”

Bucky chuckled, “No need to be embarrassed. I’ve had a lot of older guys that come up to me like that since I’ve been back. And even when I was fighting Hydra, we’d meet a lot of little kids that would look at us like that. I guess you never really get used to the hero worship. Well, except for Morita, he ate that shit up.” Bucky was quiet in thought for a moment. “Well, I guess there were some perks to the hero worship,” he said with a wolfish grin. “There was almost always a few pretty dames willing to...show their appreciation and do their part for the war effort.” Bucky winked and Darcy snorted and rolled her eyes.

“Okay, Romeo, I was going to tell you that you were my favorite Commando, too, when I was in high school, but I’ve changed my mind. Steve is the favorite now.”

“Oh come on, darling, don’t be like that,” Bucky pleaded, lower lip pulled into a pout. Darcy briefly considered biting that lip in reprimand but decided there were other, more subtle, ways to punish a man.

“Alright, I concede, you can be my favorite again.” The tilt of her one-sided smile should have been the first red flag for Barnes, but he was too pleased with her revelation to notice.

Bucky gave her a shy smile. “So was I really your favorite when you were younger?”

Hah, he’d left her the perfect opening to dole out his punishment. “Oh. Yes. Very much so. Junior year, we had a whole section of curriculum that was just about the Commandos. You were all I talked about for months after. In fact, for my birthday that year my friends pitched in to get me a really great gift.” Darcy started to slowly back away from him, stopping to lean against the living room entryway. “Want to know what it was?” she asked, eyelashes batting coyly against her cheeks. Bucky smirked and nodded.

Giving a soft hum of amusement, she replied, “A matching Bucky Barnes bra and panty set. It was navy with decorative buttons. To match your jacket.” She traced her hands lightly across her breasts. “Your sniper rifle was emblazoned on each cup,” she said softly, slowly. “And a close up of your face was printed across the ass,” she said, locking eyes with him and then turning to saunter off down the hallway to the kitchen, giving him an unhindered view of her rear for any potential visualization needs he may have. Based on the look on his face before she left, she briefly wondered if she should worry about sending him into cardiac arrest.

Bucky stood frozen in place as she disappeared around the corner, mouth opening and closing like a landed fish starving for oxygen, his heart pounding furiously in his chest. Was this a heart attack? Was he having a heart attack? He felt like he might black out for a minute. Wait no, that was just decreased blood flow to his brain in favor of...other areas. Shit, he’d better sit down for a minute and calm the fuck down before someone saw him out of sorts.
Bucky sank shakily down into the recliner, elbows landing on his knees and head in his hands. He focused on using his sniper breathing, consciously slowing the furious beating of his heart and waiting for the lust thrumming through his veins to settle. *Holy hell.*

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Bucky eventually rejoined the Lewis-McKenzie clan in the kitchen, helping Darcy set the table, as dinner was almost ready. They took turns brushing against each other as they passed with plates and utensils, with a lingering look here, and soft touch there. It was the most glorious suffering either one of them had ever endured.

Dinner was a boisterous affair, delicious and warm and enjoyed by everyone. Darcy and Bucky seemed to decide on an unspoken, temporary truce in their little war, which allowed them to focus on the conversation around them.

Letting the burning awareness of Barnes’ presence fade, Darcy settled into the comfort of spending time with her family. They had always been close, but losing her mother had brought them all that much closer. The loss of such a beloved woman had irreversibly tightened the fabric of their relationships, forcing them to lean on each for strength and comfort. It had taken a while for them to come out from under the pall of grief that her mother’s absence had left. Even now, she knew that the two year anniversary of her mother’s death later that week would be a hard day. Hard, but not overwhelming like it once was. They would have each other and they wouldn’t drown in their sorrow.

And this year Darcy had Bucky to lean on as well. It hit her with sudden clarity just how important he had become to her in such a short time. She cherished his friendship, knew that he would be there for her on that day. Knew that he would be willing to comfort her on any day, for any reason. It filled her with a kind of warmth that she was unfamiliar with but found endlessly pleasant nonetheless.

Her contentment must have shown on her face because Bucky’s eyes suddenly met hers from across the table. There was a questioning look there behind his eyes, but her contentment was echoed in his face in the way his eyes crinkled at the edges and his smile pressed into the apples of his cheeks. It was a quiet moment between them, completely missed by the other diners, and it held none of the heat that their more recent interactions had held, nor the stilted shyness of their earliest moments together. It was a simple peace that settled over them for a few short minutes until they were swept back into the conversation taking place around them.

When dinner and dessert had been consumed and the conversation had died down, Angie suggested that Darcy and Bucky take over dishwashing while the rest of the family retired to the living room. Darcy could tell it wasn’t an idle suggestion by the wicked sparkle in her sister’s eyes. She was up to something. Probably the same something that had her currently bunking in the same room as Barnes. She had tried to question Angie’s motives earlier while he had slept, but was met with faux innocence and the impenetrable Lewis will. She was fairly certain that Angie was playing matchmaker, which was a tad invasive since she was a grown woman now, but would have been welcome if it had been any other man that she was attracted to. But this was Bucky, and she’d already decided the best course of action was letting him make the first move. The fact that her sister was trying to force his hand was not in line with the plan. If Angie kept this up, she’d have to have a little heart to heart with her meddling big sister. She really didn’t want to because it felt impolite for her to talk about Bucky’s needs like that. His issues were not a topic for gossip, nor a subject that she would broach lightly with anyone, including her sister, but she would do it if she had to in order to protect him from being pushed into something that he wasn’t ready for.
All these thoughts played through her mind as she and Bucky worked alongside of each other, with him scrubbing and her rinsing and drying. They were quiet, content to enjoy each other’s presence in silence, bellies and hearts full after such a pleasant evening. When the final plate had been dried and put away, Bucky turned to face her, leaning his hip against the kitchen sink. Darcy mirrored his actions, folding her arms across her chest and beaming up at him.

“You’re good people, you know that? The Lewises and company. Being invited into all of this, I…” Bucky broke off, choked up with sudden emotion. Darcy reached a hand out, stroking along his shoulder and down his arm, but stayed quiet, allowing him to work through what he was feeling. Bucky took a steadying breath. “I didn’t think this would be something I’d ever get to experience again, you know?” He looked at her helplessly, a line appearing between his brows.

Darcy leaned into the balls of her feet, preparing to wrap him in a thorough hug, when her sister and brother-in-law popped back into the kitchen.

“Well would you look at that, Rob,” Angie chuckled. “I don’t think my kitchen has been this spotless since Vi was born.” Her eyes darted to the ceiling above them and a sly grin lit up her features. “Oh! And what’s that hanging up there? Do my eyes spy a bit of mistletoe?” she asked with poorly hidden glee.

Bucky froze, unsure of how to handle this entrapment. Darcy was glaring daggers at her sister, her nostrils flared out in rage. Doubt and worry clawed at his stomach. He didn’t want to push her, and she certainly didn’t seem eager to be kissed at the moment. Better to make an excuse and a quick exit.

“Um, Angie, I don’t think that would be appropriate-”

“Don’t be silly, Barnes, it’s Christmas and it’s tradition, give the girl a kiss!” Angie clasped her hands in front of her. Her eagerness would have been adorable if it weren’t so damn awkward for him and Darcy at the moment.

Darcy looked back up at him, and he could see the apology there in regards to her sister’s behavior. At least she wasn’t glaring at him the way she had been at Angie. And earlier on the couch...he was almost certain she’d been about to kiss him. So maybe she wouldn’t be completely offended if he…?

Bucky leaned forward, grasping Darcy’s shoulders gently. He could hear the sharp hiss of her gasp when he brushed his mouth softly over her cheek, lingering for a long moment before flicking the tip of his tongue out for the barest taste of her skin. He immediately pulled back afterwards, watching the way her mouth popped open in shock and her eyes darkened.

From the opposite side of the kitchen, Rob snorted and cut off his wife before she could needle the two further. “Come on sweetheart, Darcy got her kiss, now leave her alone.”

Angie sighed, but realized when she’d been beaten and made a hasty retreat after her husband. But not before smacking him on the ass and letting him chase her back down the hallway.

Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face. “They always like that?”

“What? Sickeningly in love? Yeah, it’s gross. You’d think having Violet would have put the kibosh on their shenanigans, but, alas, they only seem to love each other more.” Darcy made a gagging noise.

Bucky laughed, “Yeah, I can see that.” He slowly shook his head and then offered his arm to her. “Shall we join your family in the living room? Your father mentioned that there may be a Scrabble
tournament after dinner, whatever that is.”

Darcy smiled and tucked her hand into his arm, “Oh sweetheart, you’re about to get taken to school. Brace yourself, we’re all competitive in this family.”

Bucky gasped, “No! I would never have guessed!” She stuck her tongue at him and poked him in that ticklish spot on his ribs. His resultant giggle was *deeply* gratifying.

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Darcy had not been lying when she said they were competitive. Bucky could think of three separate occasions where he had prepared himself to break up an imminent brawl that night. There had been wild accusations of cheating, actual cheating, below the belt insulting and some of the most colorful language that he’d heard since being in the army.

At one point, as the two women were verbally assaulting each other, Paul had looked at him and shrugged apologetically. “They’re a mechanic’s daughters, what can I say? Their mother tried her damnedest to raise them up to be sweethearts but they’ve always favored me.”

Darcy turned on the man, pointing a finger into his face, “Don’t even pretend like you’re above all this, old man. *You* were the one that was trying to convince us that ‘flustrated’ was an actual word!”

“Damn it, it is a word! I don’t care what the damn dictionary says, it’s colloquial! It counts!”

“According to what rule book?” Angie demanded, causing Violet, who had been contentedly nursing until that point, to jerk a chubby little arm in surprise.

After that, the family dissolved into further argument until Violet began to cry in exhaustion and the adults decided it was time to head to bed. The small group dispersed, each going to their respective bedrooms.

Bucky shuffled awkwardly around the room for a bit, gathering fresh clothes and mumbling about needing a shower. After he made his departure, Darcy undressed and put on her most comfortable pajama pants and t-shirt. She briefly considered wearing something more...provocative, but she was still wrung out and reeling from the brief, but sensual, kiss that she’d received earlier.

And what a doozy that was. Who knew a kiss on the cheek could be so toe-curling? Well, most cheek kisses didn’t usually include the tiniest bit of tongue, but whoo buddy, wasn’t that a nice little addition?

She settled herself onto the bottom mattress, tossing and turning until she could find that sweet spot of comfort. She lay there quietly, going back over the highlights of the day. And the issue of Angela being a pushy butthole. She’d be having that little chat with her in the morning, she’d decided.

Bucky crept back into the dark room then. His hair hung wetly against his scalp and she could smell the scent of his body wash rising off his water-warmed skin. He was dressed in his usual flannel pajama pants and t-shirt. She briefly considered wearing something more...provocative, but she was still wrung out and reeling from the brief, but sensual, kiss that she’d received earlier.

He lay on his back, breathing slowly and listening as she synced her own breaths to his. He smiled and rolled onto his stomach, hesitantly reaching a hand down and finding where her fingers rested on her pillow in front of her face. His metal fingers ran lightly over the joints of her hands, circling and
tracing her knuckles and each digit of her fingers. The cold sensation and tenderness of the gesture sent shivers down her spine.

“Thank you,” he said on a gentle sigh, before pulling his hand back up to tuck into his chest.

Darcy smiled and hummed, content to continue to lay there quietly. The long day began to settle on her like a heavy shawl and she was soon swept onto the distant shores of slumber.
On the Second Day of Christmas...

Chapter Summary

My true love gave to me: Russian Snuggles, which are the same as regular snuggles, but more threatening.

Chapter Notes

I really want to thank you all for the patience you've had and for commenting on this fic all over again even though you'd already done that when it was originally posted. I don't always get time to respond to your kind messages but I read and cherish every single one of them. <3333

Much love to ladyaudiophile and Betsy for their beta-ing and overall badassery.

Come be my friend on tumblr and scream at me about all your feelings on everything wintershock or MCU or just whatever has you in your feelings at the moment.

As far as sisterly heart-to-hearts went, it was probably one of the least argumentative talks that the two women had had in many years.

Darcy cornered her older sister in her bedroom the following morning while the men made breakfast in the kitchen. She hopped into bed next to Angie, who was currently stuck nursing Violet. It was the perfect entrapment. Nothing like having a baby attached to your boob to keep you from running away from an ass-chewing from your baby sister.

Angie met her complaints with resistance, initially, but as Darcy explained her reasoning for taking things slow and not pushing Bucky, Angie's features firmed into lines of contrition.

“Sorry, Darce. I see what you're saying, I'll butt out,” Angie said, reaching over to hold her baby sister’s hand. “He’s such a sweetheart of a man, it’s easy to forget that he carries so much damage. I didn't even think about the fact that autonomy is something that he was brutally deprived of for nearly a century. I guess I got carried away with the secondhand high of young love.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Oh my god, Angie, we’re not in love. Stop being so dramatic.” Angie’s lips pinched into a thin line, the skepticism clear on her face, but refrained from arguing with her sister.

“Should I apologize to Bucky for being pushy?”

Darcy paused to consider. “No, I don't think that's necessary. I think it would be more hurtful for him to be reminded of his...vulnerabilities than if you just backed off with the matchmaking.”

“You care about him quite a bit.” It wasn't a question.

“Yes. I do.”
“You sure it isn't love?” Angie arched a brow in good humor.

Darcy resisted the urge to shake her sister, but only barely and mostly because she was holding an infant. Instead, she sunk into her sister's side, leaning her head onto Angie's shoulder.

“I'm sure,” she sighed. They were quiet for a moment before she continued. “For now anyway,” she said lowly, voice barely registering above a whisper. Angie just smiled and kissed Darcy on her forehead. They were quiet for a long time after that, enjoying the stillness of the early morning.

Rob came in some time later to announce that breakfast was ready, only to find the two women deeply asleep with his infant daughter snoring lightly between them. Rob ambled back down the hallway to get Bucky's attention, gesturing for him to follow and placing a finger over his lips to signal Bucky to keep quiet. The two men crept back down the hall to the master bedroom and Rob stepped back to show the other man what had happened to their women.

“You ever see anything so damned adorable?” Rob whispered.

Bucky smiled and made to answer but paused when he heard Violet whimper in her sleep. He watched as Darcy instinctively reached out in her sleep to her niece, pulling the little girl closer to her chest and nuzzling her face into the curls at the crown of Violet's head.

Bucky couldn't help the visceral reaction to the sight and the sudden bright mental picture of Darcy snuggling with another baby that looked eerily like himself. Shit, he must really have it bad for this dame if he was daydreaming about her having his children. And getting kind of teary-eyed about it to boot.

Rob clapped him lightly on the shoulder, shooting him a look of sympathy. “Just try to remember how little sleep you got when you guys kept her. And the spit up. It helps the baby fever pass if you focus on the downsides of parenthood.”

“I didn't realize that men were susceptible to baby fever,” Bucky chuckled.

“Almost everybody is susceptible at some point or another,” Rob explained, motioning for Bucky to follow him back to the kitchen. “It's our human biology, it's always out to get us. ‘Make a baby,’ it says. ‘Carry on the human population, it'll be fun,’ it says. Which, ok yeah, being a parent is kind of mind-blowingly amazing, but god is it hard.”

“Just wait until your tough-as-nails daughter decides to up and marry a comic book illustrator. Now that’s hard.” Mr. Lewis had woken and made his way to the kitchen while the other men had been spying on the girls. He sat at the bar, squat body wrapped in a bathrobe and eyes twinkling with good humor over the rim of his coffee cup.

“Paul, it's hard to take you seriously when I've seen you cry after I gave you that autographed copy of the first Commandos issue.” Rob came around to kiss the older man on the top of his balding head. “If this comic book illustrator didn't have such great connections, you would never have gotten your hands on Bucky's autogra-” Rob stopped mid sentence to look up at Bucky. “Well, never mind then. I guess you've got better access to him now. I'm useless to you again.”

Paul gave a hearty chuckle at his son-in-law’s expense, as Bucky looked on in confusion.

“I don't remember signing any comics?”

“That's understandable,” Rob replied. “The issue that I gave to Paul was signed by you back in the 40s.”
Bucky hummed thoughtfully. It seemed strange that there was a piece of himself, the man he had been before Hydra’s influence, that was still floating around in present day. “I think I’d like to see that sometime,” he said softly.

Paul smiled at him gently. “Of course, anytime you like.” The seemingly older man placed his hand on Bucky's shoulder with a quick squeeze. “Anytime you need.”

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The days leading up to Christmas were some of the most carefree and enjoyable ones that Darcy had experienced in some time. She hadn’t realized how much pressure she'd been under since coming to work for Stark until she was home with her family without a care in the world.

The fact that it was her favorite time of year was just the cherry on top. She enjoyed getting to participate in their family holiday traditions again for the first time since her mother had died.

That first Christmas had been two days after she had died, and the family had been too preoccupied with her mother's failing health most of the month of December to even really remember the holiday. Christmas Day came and went, forgotten in favor of all-consuming grief and funeral arrangements.

The second Christmas had been as hard as the first, maybe more so because the reality of their loss had fully set in, and the absence of her mother’s presence was conspicuous to the point of pain. They had tried, but overall it was a dismal affair.

But this year, they were all in a better emotional state. They still missed her mother dearly, but their grief was not enough to overshadow the joys still left to the living. Having Violet there, who was Darcy’s mother’s namesake, added tremendously to the joyful balance. Nothing like a baby’s laughter ringing through a home to lighten the burden of a weary heart.

With the joyous Christmas spirit returned to the Lewis-McKenzie family, it was unanimously decided that all the old traditions be vigorously reinstated. There was Christmas music playing at all hours of the day, gingerbread house making, sugar cookies baked and iced, last minute shopping done with abandon (because procrastination was another of their traditions), and one evening was spent driving through the suburbs and looking at all the Christmas lights. On the anniversary of the elder Violet’s passing, the whole family, including Bucky, piled into Angie's Suburban and drove to Richmond to see the Nutcracker Ballet, which had been a favorite of Violet’s. Some tears had been shed by the end of the evening, but the sting of loss was softened by the balm of family and friendship.

Bucky had been reluctant to join in on the festivities too much, feeling like he would be intruding in some way. The whole family was having none of that and made a point to include him in everything. Once he felt like he wasn't being an invader to their family traditions, he loosened up and thoroughly enjoyed himself. He particularly enjoyed that sugar cookie business. Although, all his cookies seemed to disappear before they could be decorated. One of the best things about the future was the abundance of sugary things.

He had also, much to his surprise, thoroughly enjoyed the ballet. The dancing was impressive and the music beautiful, but the best part was sitting next to Darcy and having her grab his hand and squeeze whenever the dancers performed a particularly spectacular move. Even under the sound of the orchestra he could hear her little gasps of delight and spent as much time watching her eyes light up with wonder as he did actually watching the performance.

When they'd gone to bed that night, she'd reached her hand out to him again, but this time in comfort instead of wonder. The day had been long and mostly joyful, filled to the brim with the love of her
family, but now as she lay on the little mattress in the quiet of the night, she couldn't help the grief that welled up inside of her.

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks and she tried to keep her breathing steady so as not to alert her bedmate. But that was a labor in futility. Besides being a naturally observant man, his super hearing could pick up even the tiniest hitch of her breathing and she was pretty sure he could smell the salt in her tears.

“Darcy?” She heard the mattress shift as he moved his bulk closer to the edge. She couldn't really bear to speak at the moment so she reached out blindly, her hand connecting with a clink against his shoulder. She felt the plates shift under her fingertips, followed the movement down until he caught her hand in his.

He held her hand, resting on her pillow, much like he had that first night, while she sobbed softly into the cotton pillowcase. At some point he'd disentangled from her fingers and she expected him to pull away and roll over, but he simply shifted to reach out and stroke her hair and face the way her mother had always done.

It was a bittersweet thing; both a relief to experience it again, with Bucky knowing just how special it was to her, but also painful because the fingers sweeping across her wet cheekbones were cold and hard and didn't have the warmth and texture that she so desperately missed. But it was a kindness all the same and soothed her in new ways. His touch centered her soul and calmed the storm of her sorrow until she succumbed to the sleep pulling at the edges of her mind.

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Darcy wasn't sure how long she had been asleep when she was awoken by a muffled shout from Barnes. It was nearly pitch black in the room, so it was probably still very late.

This wasn't the first time she'd woken to Bucky calling out in his sleep. Usually it was a fairly quiet shout, sometimes a groan or a whimper, and then he would resettle and sleep peacefully again. This nightmare, however, was apparently a doozy and it was not letting him go.

She lay there, waiting for him to settle down, but the longer she waited, the more disturbed he became. It was becoming increasingly obvious that somewhere inside of his head he was being tortured. Brutally.

The shouts muffled into his pillow grew in number, followed by whimpering that broke her heart. When he started desperately whispering "nyet, nyet," over and over again and writhing violently in his bed, Darcy decided that he was probably not going to drift back to easy sleep anytime soon and she should probably get her ass to another room before she got it handed to her on accident by a zonked out Winter Soldier.

Ok, Darcy, stealth time. Super stealthy escape, move very quietly, do not under any circumstances wake the sleeping Russian bear.

She was on her back and started to scooch slowly across the mattress so she could get to the floor and then army crawl her way to the door. Keep low, better weight distribution, less likely to make the floor creak. Good plan, right?

No, it was a terrible plan.

As soon as she made to wiggle one ass cheek in the direction of the edge of the mattress, of course the springs creaked and then Darcy was being covered by about 200 lbs of pissed off supersoldier.
He had her hips trapped between his knees, both her wrists caught in his right hand above her head and his left hand gripped in her hair, tilting her head back and leaving her neck exposed. Darcy had the inane thought that it would have been kind of sexy if it wasn't so fucking terrifying.

Bucky was in her face, eyes boring into hers from only a few inches away. She could hear him breathing heavily and his teeth creak under the strain of his clenched jaw. Almost immediately he started berating her in what she guessed was probably Russian. And, by the sound of it, probably using all the swear words with some murdery ones thrown in for good measure. *Shit, shit, fucking shit!*

*This was not covered in the goddamn manual, Samuel Thomas Wilson!*

Trying to regain control of her reactions, Darcy focused on breathing slowly and calming her heart rate. Whatever flashback he was going through, she'd just have to snap him out of it. Easy peasy, lemon squeezy, right?

Shit, if she lived through this she was going to make Tony give her a raise for being such a badass.

Bucky was in the middle of a litany of Russian death threats, she assumed, when she had calmed herself enough to speak. “Bucky,” she said slowly, trying to infuse the word with calm. “Hey honey, it's me, Darcy, and I'm gonna need you to let me go.”

Bucky jerked his head back in confusion, then shot her a glare and asked her a question, still in Russian. Not helpful.

“Hey buddy, I'm not sure what you're trying to ask me. Uneducated American here, they don't really teach us anything besides English.”

“American?” The word sounded strange in his mouth. Probably because he said it in a Russian accent instead of his usual Brooklyn twang.

“Yeah, I'm American. My name is Darcy Lewis, I'm American and I'm your friend. You're James Buchanan Barnes, you're my friend. You're safe with me.” Bucky watched her, confusion still rampant in his face and the still-tight grip of his body on hers. Moving slowly, she twisted her wrist in his grip enough that she could run her index finger gently along the small bones in his wrist and across the knuckles of his pinky. His eyes shot to the gentle touch, the confusion thickening in his features. She pinched the tip of his pinky finger slightly, shaking it a bit and cleared her throat to regain his attention. “Hey Bucky, it's just me, it's just Darcy, I'm not gonna hurt you.”

The gentle touch, so bizarrely counterintuitive to him, was what finally broke the hold of his nightmare.

“Darcy?” he asked with a shallow gasp. The pain and disbelief in his voice almost broke her, but the return of his Brooklyn Boys accent had her heart thumping hard in relief.

“Yeah, babe, it's me,” she said with a smile.

As soon as she said it, Bucky loosened his aggressive hold on her and collapsed down into her softness, releasing her hair and hands to wrap his arms around her in a horizontal bear hug.

This close, she could feel him shaking so hard it was making *her* teeth rattle. When she felt dampness start to pool at her collarbone, she knew that he was crying in earnest. She shushed him, bringing her arms up around his broad shoulders, and held him to her tighter, pushing her fingers into his hair with one hand and rubbing soothing circles over his back with the other.
“Oh God, Darcy, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.” His breath shuddered against her neck.

“Shh, it's ok Bucky. Everything's ok. I'm safe...we're both safe.”

He clutched her to himself tighter and it nearly broke her heart. She pressed her face into his hair, muttering soft and tender things, hoping to soothe some of the aching in him. The weight of him pressing her into the mattress was just beginning to strain her breathing when he shifted to the side so that only his head rested in the crook of her neck, an arm thrown across her middle, and his heavy thigh braced across the top of one of hers. She adjusted her hold on him, then settled back into soothing the stiff muscles of his back.

Eventually he calmed, his shaking easing off and the tears drying on his face and her neck. He tensed, preparing to extricate himself from her and her bed but she tightened her arms around him and crossed her leg over to pull his hips back down. He sank back into her with a relieved sigh.

She hummed in sleepy contentment, nuzzling her nose into his hair, and fell asleep nearly instantly. She almost missed the way his lips pressed gently, once, to the soft skin of her throat.

Almost.
On the Third Day of Christmas...

Chapter Summary

My true love gave to me:

An awkward awakening, a snowball fight, one asshole father, and an apology/invitation.
It's Christmas Eve, hurray!

Chapter Notes

Paul and Angie are not the only assholes....

It's me. I'm the asshole.
Love you! Have fun! Goodbye!

What exactly is the standard operating procedure when confronted with waking up next to a super soldier, ex Hydra assassin, and all around excruciatingly beautiful man? Darcy’s personal response to the situation was to roll back over and pretend like it wasn’t happening because it was just too damn early and she was trying to be a decent sort of person that didn’t take advantage of people in their sleep. She was trying, despite her deepest desires, to be a good person. Her altruism was made all the more difficult because someone was apparently both a blanket thief and a heat seeking missile. She would scooch a few inches to her right, creating just a smidgen of space, and Bucky would follow her right across the mattress, arms and legs creeping around her like vines. Really sexy, muscley vines.

She had made her way to the edge of the mattress and was teetering there, valiantly determined to not get grabby and reach out to Barnes for “balance,” when Bucky’s metal hand slipped under her shirt, flexing over her rib cage and brushing the underside of her breast. Darcy gave a startled yelp and lost her battle with balance, tilting over the edge of the mattress and falling the scant few inches to the floor.

Bucky’s eyes popped open in alarm, which only heightened when he witnessed Darcy staring up at him in disarray, her mouth and eyes wide, and his hand up her goddamn shirt. What the hell?!

Bucky jerked his hand back, embarrassment and shame clogging up his throat. What was wrong with him? First he nearly killed her last night and now he was practically assaulting her in his sleep? Panic rose in his chest; he needed to get out of there and fast.

He tried to stammer out an apology as he leapt out of the bed, grabbing at random bits of clothing from his suitcase and making a hasty retreat to the bathroom down the hall. He flexed the fingers of his left hand and tried very hard not to commit the sensory data of Darcy’s soft skin to memory. Intimate knowledge not freely given was knowledge undeserved.

Darcy lay there in a daze, ass and torso still on the floor with her legs propped on the edge of the
bed. What the hell had just happened? She should definitely not have yelped. Or fallen off. She should have been cool about Bucky and the Traveling Hand of Sexy. It wasn’t like it was unwanted. Sure, she would have preferred he’d been conscious and that soulful intensity focused on her while his hand slowly slid under her-

Stop that. Focus.

Right, it wasn’t unwanted, she would have preferred a conscious decision—but not a big deal because she was super into it, just a bit surprised and, um, chilly. He’d looked so horrified when he’d fled from the room, like he’d just been told he was responsible for assassinating Santa Claus. She’d have to talk to him when he got out of the shower. Let him know that she wasn’t offended or felt violated. Just surprised, maybe a little turned on, but no harm done. She was cool. It was cool. Super cool.

Darcy rolled to her knees with a groan, rising up to get dressed and start her day. She waited for Bucky to return from the shower but when twenty minutes passed and there was still no sign of the man, Darcy decided the conversation could wait until after breakfast.

She made her way to the kitchen and was greeted by her father, who was slicing up thick strips of bacon to go into the skillet. She pressed a kiss into his cheek and started pulling ingredients for pancakes out of the fridge and pantry. They worked silently together—neither one of them were morning people—and sipped on their respective cups of coffee as they saw to breakfast. They were soon joined by Rob, and then a little later by Angie and Violet. Pancakes and bacon were served and eaten, but still there was no sign of Bucky. She’d heard him exit the bathroom while she was making the pancake batter, but he’d gone to their room and not yet reappeared. Having finished her own breakfast, and running low on patience, Darcy padded to their room on bare feet. She knocked lightly on the door, waiting this time for an invitation before she popped her head in.

“Good morning, Bucky,” she said brightly. “There’s pancakes and bacon waiting in the kitchen whenever you’re ready.”

Bucky, who was curled up on his bed and scribbling in a notebook, gave her a sullen grunt.

“Not hungry,” he said, not even bothering to look up at her. Well, looked like Broody Bucky was on the menu for the day.

“Yeah, um, oookay. Well, if you change your mind…”

Bucky hunched his shoulders up, nodded at his notebook, and continued to ignore her. Darcy resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“Um, about this morning,” she started. Bucky flinched but she kept going. Rip it off like a bandaid, right? “So, I’m not mad about...that. I know you didn’t do it on purpose. And I know last night wasn’t on purpose either.” She bit her lip and rubbed her palms nervously over the front of her thighs. Bucky still wouldn’t look at her and only seemed to curl into himself tighter.

This is going wonderfully, she thought.

“Okay, so, I’ll leave you alone to do...whatever it is that you’re doing.” She didn’t wait for his response, closing the door behind her and heading back to the kitchen to rejoin her family.

Angie, in a characteristically observant move, caught sight of the look on her face and pulled her into a corner to question her.

“Is everything ok, Darce?”
“Yeah,” Darcy sighed. “Bucky’s just a little moody today for, uh, reasons. I’m going to let him brood for another hour or so, but if he doesn’t come join us after that I’m gonna go snap him out of it.”

Angie’s eyes danced with amusement. “Oh? And how do you plan on doing that?” she asked.

Darcy chewed on her lower lip, eyes bouncing around the room in indecision until they landed on the snow piled up on the kitchen window pane. A wolfish grin lit up her face at the sight.

“Did it snow last night?”

Angie’s forehead scrunched in confusion at the non sequitur. “Yes. We got four inches of fresh powder. Why do you ask?”

Darcy smirked. “You’ll see.”

***

It had been exactly an hour and a half since Darcy’s conversation with her sister. She knew, she’d timed it. And yet Bucky still hadn’t shown his face.

What was a girl to do when her handsome roommate/potential romantic endeavor wouldn’t come out of his bedroom and was missing out on all the Christmas Eve fun?

Get angry?

No. She got creative.

Which was how Darcy found herself creeping down the hallway trying to sneak up on a super powered individual, armed only with a slowly melting ball of snow gripped in her gloved hands. She’d reached the bedroom door and was debating whether or not knocking was required and if that would be enough to ruin all her hard work being stealthy. The decision was taken away from her when Bucky called out to her from behind the door, telling her she could come in and that he was decent.

Yeah right, she thought. He could be dressed head to toe in a damn hazmat suit and still be considered indecent.

She tucked the snowball behind her back and eased the door open, peeking in to check out the enemy terrain. Bucky was still sitting in bed--reading this time--but still refusing to look at her.

Excellent...

Darcy bit her lip, flicked her arm out, and let the snowball fly. It smacked Barnes in the face with a satisfyingly wet plop, and then dripped down the front of his hoodie and jeans. His head snapped up, mouth open in shock, as Darcy bent double in laughter. When she heard his book hit the bed with an ominous thud, she looked back up to see he had brushed the snow from his pants and was slowly unfolding himself from the bed.

The menacing smile on his face and the tension in his body sent both her libido and her fight or flight response into high gear. She should probably talk to a therapist about that. But right then she was too busy hauling ass to think too deeply on her potential kinks.

Darcy raced back down the hallway with Bucky’s heavy footsteps hot on her heels. She skidded around a corner and busted out the front door and down the porch steps before Bucky finally caught
up to her. He tossed her to the ground, scooping up handfuls of snow and rubbing them into her face and hair.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, Lewis. Rule number one of war, sweetheart,” he crowed with glee, shoving another handful of snow down the back of her shirt.

Darcy squealed and twisted away from him, taking off across the yard and scooping up her own ammunition, turning to hurl snowball after snowball in Barnes direction. “What makes you think I can’t finish this?” she shouted out to him, hurling another well aimed snowball for emphasis. He dove behind the dogwood tree in the front yard, dodging her aim and started rapid firing snowballs back at her.

Darcy leapt and slid, trying to make her way to some form of cover. Eventually she made it to the brick mailbox and entrenched herself, scooping up snow and lobbing it over her head at random. Snowballs kept sailing over her head and landing inches from her or splatting along the edge of the mailbox. When the onslaught of snowballs died off suddenly, Darcy became suspicious. She peeked around the corner to see Barnes sneaking around from the side, intent on circling around and coming at her from the right.

_We’ll see about that, Buck-o._

Darcy made a break for it, darting out to claim the dogwood he’d just vacated. She was halfway there when a snowball fired from his metal arm caught her right in the eye.

_Shit, that stings._

She stumbled, going to her knees and covering her eye with her hand. She looked up to see Bucky struck with horror and followed by instant remorse.

_Good, time to use her acting skills to crush the enemy._ She gave a small whimper and the next thing she knew Bucky was kneeling beside her, hands hovering uncertainly over her.

“Darcy! I’m so sorry! Are you ok? Shit, doll, let me look at it.” His blue eyes burned with concern and Darcy almost felt guilty about playing him. Almost. All’s fair in love and war, right?

Darcy gave a (fake) sniffle and nodded at him, allowing him to draw her hands away from her face so he could examine her “injury.” She oh-so-casually reached her left hand out to lightly grasp his belt loop, pretending to use it to steady herself in the snow. He didn’t seem to notice, too intent on examining the state of her eye. _Perfect._

She slowly dipped her other hand into the snow near her knees, and then, fast as she could, pulled his waistband out and shoved the handful of snow down the front of his pants.

_Oh, would you look at that. The commando went commando, how fitting. And convenient. For snow wars purposes. Nothing else._

Bucky let loose a startled shout, scuttling back from her in a crab walk before jumping to his feet and doing what looked like an ants-in-your-pants dance, wiggling his hips and legs in order to move the snow to less sensitive places.

_Could someone asphyxiate from laughing too hard? Darcy thought she might be about to find out._ She was bent over in the snow, completely losing her shit.

_“YOU!”_
vengeance and he was coming for blood.

Darcy leapt to her feet, sprinting across the yard as fast as her legs could carry her, which wasn’t nearly fast enough because Barnes was able to dart around her, coming at her from the front. He lowered his shoulder like a linebacker, scooping her up by the legs and tossing her over his shoulders before she could even turn and switch directions.

“Hey!” she shouted, the blood rushing to her brain making her slightly lightheaded. “Put me down, Barnes!” Darcy squirmed, kicking her legs as best she could.

Bucky didn’t say anything, just hitched her more firmly up his shoulder and tightened his grip on her legs. Her nose bumped painfully against his backside at her wiggling. His perfect, firm, round backside that was just begging for someone to sink their teeth into-

“Ouch! Lewis, did you just bite my ass?!”

Darcy broke out into wicked giggles, but choked off when she felt Barnes reach up to swat at one of her butt cheeks and then felt the sharp sting of a recipricatory bite on the other cheek.

“Hey! That hurts!”

Bucky made a growling noise in his throat and Darcy felt the pressure of his teeth sink just a little further into her ass cheek. *Oh! That bastard.* She began wiggling, trying to break his hold on her, but was unsuccessful. She guessed it was time to fight dirty then, if that’s how he was going to play it.

Darcy reached both hands up to attack the tickle spot on his ribs with abandon. Bucky immediately dropped his hold on her to protect his sides, only for Darcy to slide to the ground with a solid thump. She looked up at him a bit dazed, wiping snow from her face and hair, and then they both seemed to snap back into action at the same moment. She tried to scramble to her feet, almost getting off the ground, but fell to her belly when Bucky dove and gripped her ankle in his hand.

She twisted in his grip, leaning back on her elbows to assess the situation. Any way she looked at it, it was obvious that she was losing. Badly.

“You,” Bucky growled at her, slowly crawling his way up her body, “are trouble.” The length of his body pressed her heavily into the snow and she could feel the cold dampness starting to sink into her clothes. She was surprisingly very warm despite that.

Bucky was practically nose to nose with her, their breath misting and mingling in the frigid air. Something devious took over her brain and she bit her lower lip, looking up into his eyes.

“Am I?” she asked breathlessly, and then slowly rolled her hips up against his.

She watched closely as the blue of his eyes receded in favor of the pitch black of his pupils. A barely-there *fuck* fell from his lips, and Darcy was certain he wasn’t even aware that he’d spoken. A girl could really get used to that kind of power. Just call her Empress Darcy, Dictator Supreme.

That would have been the absolute perfect time for him to kiss her.

*Come on, Bucky, you can do it,* she urged him silently. *Make a dishonest woman out of me.*

She held her breath in anticipation, their eyes locked together, both waiting for the other to make just the slightest move towards the other. She was about three seconds away from breaking her promise and pulling him down to her when a male throat was cleared from the vicinity of the front porch.
“Darcy, Sergeant Barnes, you’re both a bit underdressed to be playing in the snow, don’t you think?” Paul Lewis crossed his arms over his belly, shooting Bucky a stern glance.

**Father, nooooo!**

Bucky immediately jumped off her, looking like he’d been caught with his pants down with the farmer’s daughter. Well, mechanic’s daughter.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Lewis,” Bucky sputtered, keeping his eyes low and skirting around her father into the safety of the house. As soon as Bucky was out of range, Paul’s look of consternation melted into one of uninhibited glee.

Darcy narrowed her eyes at her father. “You did that on purpose,” she said, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

“Yes,” her father replied, popping the “p” at the end of the word and rocking back and forth on his heels. For a an old man, her father was as much of a little shit as she was.

“Paul Lewis, how dare you, you wicked old man!”

“Oh come on, Darcy! There’s only so many opportunities I have left to mess with potential suitors.” Darcy groaned at the use of the word “suitors,” sinking back into the snow. “Besides, when am I ever going to get the chance to mess with a national icon again? Let me enjoy my old age, dammit!”

“I thought you wanted my love life to flourish, father dearest. Weren’t you un-subtly hinting at wanting more grandkids the last time you called me? Hmm?”

Paul’s attention perked up at that. “You planning on having Barnes’ kids sometime soon?”

Darcy growled and rolled up from the ground, brushing snow off her backside. “No. Not at the moment,” she replied delicately. “But I wouldn't mind practicing.”

Her father clapped his hands over his ears. “I’m gonna pretend like I didn’t hear that.”

Darcy patted him on the back and took him by the elbow to lead him inside. “Yeah, that's probably for the best.”

***

Bucky spent the rest of the day vacillating between shooting Darcy heated glances and avoiding eye contact with her father at all costs. Her father, the butthead, took great pleasure in pretending he was harboring a grudge against Bucky, giving the poor man some of the wickedest glares she’d ever seen from her father. When Bucky made to sit next to her on the couch after dinner, the look he shot Bucky was hard enough that it prompted the other man into an about face, sending him retreating back down the hall towards the bedrooms.

Angie watched the entire interlude with suspicious eyes. Setting down the book she’d been reading, she turned to her father. “Daddy, what the hell is wrong with you?” she asked sweetly.

“He’s an asshole, that’s what’s wrong with him,” Darcy growled between gritted teeth, arms crossed furiously in front of her chest.

Paul Lewis laughed in the face of his daughters’ ire. He cared not one whit. He was having the time of his life torturing that poor boy.
“Dad,” Angie scolded, “you’re gonna give the guy a complex. Another one!”

Paul sobered somewhat at the thought. “You think so?”

“Yes,” hissed Darcy. “Between you and Angie, you are going to ruin him! Don’t you like him? Hmm? Don’t you want him to come back and visit?” She glared at her family members. “Honestly, you should both be ashamed of yourselves.”

Her father and sister exchanged matching looks of guilt. Darcy glanced over at her brother-in-law, who was absentmindedly sketching in his notebook with one hand and contentedly stroking Violet’s tummy with the other. “Rob, you’re the only decent person in this family.”

“I know,” came his toneless reply. She’d told him many times before.

“What about Violet?” Angie asked with some affront.

“When she stops shitting her pants and throwing up on people, she will be considered fully decent. Besides, I can’t make a full judgement of her decency until she’s talking.” Angie shrugged and made a “fair enough” face.

Turning back to her father, “Dad, seriously though, I think you’re hurting his feelings. You need to stop dicking around and go apologize, ok?”

Paul sighed, “You’re right, darlin’. I’ll go make nice.” He extricated himself from the couch, bending to kiss his younger daughter on the top of her head.

Such a smart girl. Kind, too. Like her mother.

“Thank you,” she replied, relief saturating the words.

***

Bucky was reading on his bed when he heard Mr. Lewis’ slow trod coming down the hallway. He winced just thinking about the man and the way he’d caught him practically defiling his daughter in the front yard, in front of God and everybody. No wonder the man seemed to despise him now. He was a good father, he wouldn’t be ok with his daughter fraternizing with a previously brainwashed assassin with an astronomically high kill count.

When Mr. Lewis’ footsteps stopped outside his door and there came a soft knocking, Bucky’s stomach swooped and pinched uncomfortably. The man was obviously here to set him straight and tell him to stay the hell away from his daughter. Bucky wasn’t going to, but he really wanted the other man’s goodwill and trust. He wasn’t looking forward to becoming an outcast to the Lewis family. There was little he could do other than face the music, so he called for the other man to come in.

Instead of the hateful expression Mr. Lewis had been wearing all day, the look on his face was...embarrassed? Guilty? Some combination of the two. It filled Bucky with apprehension and sent his senses into a higher awareness. He began involuntarily collecting sensory input from around him—the sound of Paul’s shoes on the carpet, Violet snuffling in her sleep from the living room. He could smell Paul’s deodorant and the remnants of dinner on his breath. His eyes caught each tick of movement from the other man’s body, the light seeming to sharpen in the room and time slowing as he absorbed everything.

“Son, listen, I’ve come to apologize.”
“Wait, what? And just like that his brain snapped back into place and started comprehending at a normal rate of awareness. Well, normal for him.

“Did you...did you hear me?”

What? Oh, yeah, he was supposed to respond. “I, yeah, um, but...what? Why are you apologizing?” he stuttered.

Mr. Lewis sighed and came to sit opposite him on the bed, hopping a bit on his short legs to reach the mattress. “I know you think I’m angry at you because of whatever it is that’s going on between you and Darcy--no, don’t interrupt, I’m not blind. I can see there’s something there. Whether or not you’ve acted on it is another matter, in any case it’s none of my business--but what I’m trying to say here, is that I’ve only been pulling your leg today. I’m not really angry, I was just being an asshole and playing a little joke on you.”

“So you’re not mad...at me?”

“No.”

“You’re not here to tell me to stay away from your daughter?”

Paul threw his head back and roared with laughter. “Oh, son, if you think I have a say in who that woman does or does not spend her time with, then you’re not as smart as I thought you were. Have you met Darcy? Nobody tells that girl what to do. I learned that lesson a long time ago.” Sobering, he added, “And I also learned to trust her judgement. Her and her sister’s, both. Those girls have a sixth sense about things, about people. And I trust them both implicitly. Besides, even if she hadn’t already given you her seal of approval, it’s easy to tell you’re a good man, Barnes. A bit tattered at the edges, maybe, but you got a good heart.” Paul reached one of his meaty paws out to clasp Bucky on the shoulder.

At the touch and the look in Paul’s eyes, Bucky was suddenly reminded of his own father, and it touched on some tender part inside of him that would always be the small boy seeking the love and approval of his father. He couldn’t help the tears that welled up in his eyes then.

Paul, though he’d never had a son of his own, took the tears in stride. He was a man prone to crying himself and never could understand why so many men felt it to be a shameful thing. Though shorter and stouter than Sergeant Barnes, he tucked the other man into his side as he had many times to his own children when they needed comforting. Bucky seemed to crave the embrace, the poor kid. How long had it been since another man had shown him this kind of kindness, he wondered. Maybe not since he was a boy.

Paul suddenly felt like a real schmuck for the way he’d treated Bucky all day, and told the kid as much. Bucky laughed wetly and assured him it was alright.

He really was a good man. And a good match for Darcy. Paul certainly wouldn’t be averse to having a World War II hero and an Avenger as his son-in-law. Just think of how his poker buddies would react when they found out.

Paul pulled out of the embrace, thumping Bucky on the back as he went. “Well, now that that’s all taken care of, how would you feel about joining me for Midnight Mass tonight?”

Bucky tilted his head in shock. “You’re Catholic? Darcy never mentioned that.”

“Yeah, Irish Catholic. Tried to raise the girls that way too, I don’t think much of it stuck though.” Paul gave a helpless shrug.
“I, yeah, I’d love that.” Bucky beamed at the seemingly older man. It had been so long since he’d even stepped foot inside a church...but as a boy and young man, his family had always gone to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. When he was little, being woken up in the middle of the night had been a bit of an adventure, mixed with the anticipation of what Christmas morning would bring. The memories were fond and the idea of going with Paul filled him with a lovely, wholesome kind of excitement again.

Paul smiled back at him and impulsively reached out to ruffle Bucky’s hair before hopping off the mattress. “Alright, well I’m not as young as I used to be. I’m going to take a nap until it’s time to go, otherwise I’ll be getting rapped on the knuckles by one of the little old ladies for falling asleep.”

Bucky laughed, memories of his own knuckles being abused for the very same reason floating to the front of his mind. It was nice to know that some things never changed.

“We’ll leave at 11:15 so we can get good seats,” Paul said with a wink and a smile and then made his way out the door and down the hall for his pre-mass nap.

Not two minutes later, Darcy peeked into the room, knocking lightly on the open door before stepping inside. “I heard laughter...what was that about?” she asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Bucky chuckled. “Just making plans with your old man to go to Midnight Mass.”

“Oh. Really?” Darcy’s eyebrows scrunched together in confusion.

“Yeah, that surprises you? I grew up in a Catholic home. Went to mass for most of my life, before I was enlisted. Confession, too, though probably not as much as my mother would have wanted me to.”

“Well, I mean, I knew that. I guess I just didn’t expect, after everything that happened to you, that religion would be something that still meant anything to you.” Darcy shrugged.

Bucky was thoughtful for a minute. “Yeah, I guess I can see how you would think that. But a lot of the tradition of it reminds me of happier times. Of being a kid and getting into trouble with Steve, having our backsides whipped by the spindly old ladies with sharp eyes on the back pews. The hymns and the Lord’s Prayer...I dunno, it just all reminds me of when I was a kid, reminds me of my family.” Bucky shrugged. “And, even after everything that happened to me, the war, and Hydra, all of that shit, I still believe in God.”

Darcy’s eyebrows shot up on her forehead. “Seriously?”

Bucky chuckled, “Yes, seriously. If there wasn’t a God, a….loving Father watching over me, how would I ever have come to meet you? I survived so many things that killed other good men of my generation. I survived terrible things that should have killed me or broken me and aged me past repair, and yet...here I am,” he gestured at himself. “Starting new, young and free and...well, not whole, but putting the pieces back together. I have Steve back. I have Sam and the others. I have you. Your family.” He was quiet, just staring into her eyes and making her heart pound.

“So many good things and people that I would likely have never met, never known, never...cared for. So I have to think that God’s still watching out for me, still loves me and wants me to have a happy ending of sorts.” Bucky gave her a self-conscious little half-smile and a one shouldered shrug.

Darcy peered up at him, something akin to dazed awe in her eyes. “Wow, that’s...wow. James Barnes, you are too good and pure for this world.”
Bucky gave her a face-splitting grin, nose scrunching adorably, and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Lucky you, huh?”

Darcy stuck her tongue at him and smacked him on his chest. “Come on, choir boy. Let’s go make cookies for Santa.”

Bucky’s ears perked up at the mention of cookies and Darcy couldn’t help her snort of laughter. It looked like Barnes would be playing the role of Santa this Christmas and eating up all the milk and cookies. She briefly wondered if she’d be able to convince him to don a Santa costume when Violet got a little bit older. Oh, he was such a softy, she totally could. She didn’t think too hard on the fact that her brain had seamlessly added Bucky into all future Christmases with her family. No time for *that*, there were cookies to be made!
The Christmas Special

Chapter Summary

Lots of presents. Lots of them. Angie is a little shit again. But it works out ok for Bucky.

Chapter Notes

Y’all a big shoutout to ladyaudiophile, the original book lady. Without her help, Christmas would literally not have come. She is an angel and seriously just the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At precisely 6:13 a.m. Darcy's eyes snapped open of their own accord.

*Christmas morning. It was Christmas morning!* 

Darcy kicked the covers violently off, bounding out of bed and scrabbling to find her robe and slippers. She shot out of the bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen. As was the norm for Christmas mornings, Darcy was the first person awake, so she cheerfully started a pot of coffee brewing. After finishing that task, she began the process of making breakfast for her whole family.

As she worked, her eyes kept traveling to the doorway, impatiently waiting for everyone else to get the heck out of bed already. There were presents to be opened, dammit! She'd kind of hoped that her less than stealthy departure from her room that morning would have been enough to wake Bucky up so he could keep her company, but he hadn't even stirred. He’d come in late last night so maybe he needed his beauty sleep?

Darcy had woken the night before when Bucky had crept back in a little after 1 a.m. He'd said a quick goodnight to her father, before shutting the door and ambling over to the corner of the room where he had his duffel bag. She'd watched silently as he pulled pajamas out and began stripping down to his boxer briefs. She knew she should have closed her eyes but, hell, it was technically Christmas morning and she was counting this as a little present to herself. Merry Christmas, indeed. As he’d donned his pajamas, he began to sing Christmas hymns under his breath, which was about fifty shades of adorable.

She’d closed her eyes when he approached the bed, feigning sleep as he gingerly stepped over her to get to his own mattress. She’d listened to him toss a bit, trying to get comfortable, and then fell back asleep to the sound of him humming “O Holy Night.”

Darcy's eyes glanced at the digital clock above the microwave. Twenty minutes had gone by and still no sign of her family. *Come on people, butts out of beds!*

She waltzed over to the portable speakers where her iPod was docked and playing Christmas music softly in the background. She eased the volume up a bit to just below deafening and then returned to her breakfast making. If she banged the skillet a little harder than necessary against the stovetop, it was definitely a complete and total accident.
“Good morning, Darcy,” Angie grumbled, stumbling blearily into the kitchen. “How is it that you are at your most sadistic on Christmas morning? I feel like Jesus would be offended by that.”

“Angie,” she exclaimed brightly, “you're awake! Good morning! Merry Christmas!” Darcy bounded across the kitchen floor to wrap her sister in a tight embrace, arms flung around Angie's ribs and nose buried in her neck. Darcy breathed deep. Angie smelled like home and her childhood. And a little bit like spit up.

Angie reached around the shorter woman to grab the coffee cup waiting on the kitchen counter for her. She took a sip and patted her little sister on the top of her head. “You're lucky you're so cute.”

Darcy released her sister and went back to cooking, a beatific smile on her sleep rumpled face. “Yes, I know. Help me with breakfast?”

Angie rolled her eyes. “Sure Darce, anything for you.”

It was another half hour before the rest of her family trickled into the kitchen in various states of awareness. Of everyone there, only Violet seemed to match Darcy in enthusiasm for the day, but that was how she greeted most mornings. Bucky, however, was still in bed, the bum.

“He shoulda taken a pre-mass nap, like me. Only way to survive Christmas morning with Darcy.”

Darcy ignored her father. “I'm gonna go wake him up,” she said with a decisive nod of her head. “Aren't you supposed to avoid doing that?” Angie asked. She was sitting at the bar nursing Violet and trying to scoop eggs into her mouth without dropping them on her baby’s face. Which was made all the harder when Vi would intermittently shoot out a fat little hand, attempting to wrest control of her mother's fork.

Darcy waved a hand at her sister’s concerns. “As long as I do it from a distance I'll be fine. B-R-B, family.” She scooped up a bag of marshmallows from the pantry and then took off down the hall in search of her favorite roommate.

“Buuuuckyyyy, wakey wakey,” she called. She pushed the door open slowly and peered in. He was curled up in his bed, arm thrown over his face and dead to the world.

“Bucky! Wake up! It's Christmas!”

He stirred beneath the blankets, groaning and rolling onto his stomach.

“No, get up! Up up up!” She opened the bag of marshmallows and started pelting him in the head with them.

Bucky growled and shoved his head under the pillow. “No, go away,” he mumbled into the mattress.

“JAMES Buchanan Barnes! Get. Up!” His head popped grumpily up from beneath his pillow, so she aimed a marshmallow right at his pretty face. At the last second, Barnes snapped his teeth around the sweet, giving her a smug grin around the marshmallow before sinking back underneath the protection of his pillow.

Hah! Like that would stop her. She got a running start and then launched herself up on top of the bed, swinging her legs to straddle his hips and sitting heavily on top of his backside. She started drumming on his back and singing “The Little Drummer Boy” at the top of her lungs.

“How can someone so small be so damned annoying? You're worse than Steve!” He pulled the
edges of the pillow tighter around his head.

*Time to go for the jugular.* Darcy dug her fingertips into his tickle spot without mercy. That tickle spot was turning out to be pretty damn useful in her dealings with the man.

He began kicking and wiggling underneath her, berating her through gasping giggles. “Stop! STOP. Hah….hehe-- Darcy, please, God, let me LOOSE you devil woman!”

“No thank you,” she singsonged cheerfully.

In a really skilled move that she should probably not have been so surprised by, Bucky reached behind his back, grabbing her by the wrist and twisting underneath her until he was facing her and could gain control of the other wrist. “I said stop, you wicked woman! Jesus!”

“Yes! Jesus! Exactly,” Darcy exclaimed, joyfully trying to break Bucky’s hold on her wrists. “Let us celebrate his birth! In the living room, with presents!”

In another slick move, Bucky pulled her arms out taut in front of her, wrapped one ankle around her calf, and tilted his pelvis up. She instantly lost her balance and teetered to the side. Bucky followed her over, switching their positions so he was on top of her and nestled between her legs. A dirty little smirk lit up his features before he dipped his head to growl in her ear, “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather celebrate in here with me, instead of in the living room with everyone else?”

*Oh shit.* That was cheating.

“Well, I’m pretty sure that’s kind of sacrilegious, but hey, I’m game if you are.” She had hoped her response would have come out a little more sultry than squeaky, but what can you do? Voice modulation is hard when there’s a bona fide war hero trying to seduce you.

Bucky pulled his head up, his mouth quirked into a smug smile and then the tip of his tongue poked out to drag his lower lip over his teeth. He released her hands and her gaze and sank down into her softness, pressing her heavily into the mattress, his face nuzzling into the tops of her breasts and his hands coming down to tuck under her thighs.

Darcy held her breath, waiting for his next move.

She waited.

And waited.

And then, he let loose a gentle snore into her cleavage.

“You rat bastard! Wake up!” She started smacking him about his back and shoulders, uselessly thrusting up her hips and attempting to dislodge him.

Bucky chuckled against her neck. “No! You’re the best pillow I’ve ever slept on.”

She stopped her assault on his person to glare down at him. “I hate you.”

He lifted his head to meet her eyes. “Aw honey, don’t be like that.” He gave her his best puppy dog eyes.

Damn, those were some good puppy dog eyes. They could rival Steve’s, even. Though Bucky’s had a naughty, pleading edge to them that Steve’s definitely didn’t.

Okay, time to change tactics. She molded her face into something resembling sweet and innocent,
drawing her hand up to stroke through his tousled mess of bedhead. “Don’t you wanna know what Santa brought you?” she asked, bat...
At long last, Darcy’s family made their way to the living room. Angie and Rob settled on the loveseat with Violet between them, Paul planted himself in the recliner, and Bucky and Darcy set up shop side by side on the floor in front of the sofa.

As was tradition, Darcy hopped up to take on her role as “Santa,” pulling down the stockings from the fireplace to hand out to everyone. Bucky watched as she practically vibrated with excitement as she began pulling out the presents from underneath the tree, darting across the room to hand everyone their gifts.

The rest of them began to dig into the sweets that had been stuffed in the stocking, waiting for Darcy to finish her task before they moved on to unwrapping their gifts. Bucky had created a considerable dent in his candy stash when Darcy stepped to the middle of the room, clearing her throat to gain everyone’s attention.

“Ahem, so, I know the rest of you know this but for Bucky’s benefit I will now go over the unwrapping rules.”

“You have unwrapping rules?”

“Yes, now shush and listen up. Okay, in this family, we take turns opening presents so that everyone gets to have their chance to be the center of attention while they open all their gifts in one go. This year we will take our turns opening the gifts in order of oldest to youngest. We alternate oldest to youngest and youngest to oldest each year. It used to be youngest to oldest every year, but some people voiced complaints.” Darcy shot a not so subtle glance to her sister.

“Let me guess, you were the one who came up with the rules,” Bucky chuckled.

Darcy gave him a “butter wouldn’t melt” smile. “Yes. I did.”

Paul clapped and rubbed his hands together. “Alright then, age before beauty, guess I’m going first this year.”

Bucky made a sound of protest. “Technically, I’m significantly older than you, Paul.”

Paul jabbed a finger in Bucky’s direction. “You may be older but you stayed beautiful, so it don’t count. Can it, Barnes, and let me go first.” He shot the other man a smile and then started tearing through the wrapping paper on the first of several large boxes.

Bucky watched as Paul pulled seemingly random bits of what looked like metal car parts of varying sizes from the boxes he unwrapped, his smile growing wider and wider with each opened box. Paul looked up at his daughters and son-in-law in wonder. “How did you three find these? I’ve been trying to track these parts down for years.”

“Darcy has excellent connections, Dad.” Angie winked at her little sister.

“That’s code for ‘Darcy made Tony track them down in exchange for Mom’s brownie recipe,’” Darcy pointed out. Turning to Bucky, she explained that her father had been restoring a rare American muscle car over the years ever since she was a little girl, and with these last few parts he’d finally be able to finish it.
Paul leaned over to snatch up his last gift from the floor. Bucky watched nervously as he opened up the box, pulling out copy after copy of Avengers, Commandos, and Captain America comic books, each with an individualized note and Bucky’s signature.

“I, uh,” Bucky nervously rubbed the back of his neck, “I wasn’t sure what you’d like, but I figured you could add it to your collection.”

Paul grinned at him, “It’s perfect! Thank you, Bucky. Can’t wait to show this to the guys next poker night, they’ll never believe it!” he crowed with genuine delight.

Bucky smiled and bit his lips, eyes shyly dropping to the ground. Darcy glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, bumping softly into his shoulder. “Your turn, Sarge. Let’s see what you got.”

He looked to his own small pile of gifts, one from the McKenzies, one from Paul, and a third from Darcy. He pulled the gift from Paul into his lap, peeling the paper from the small box and cracking open the lid. He dipped his left hand in, pulling out a beautiful, delicately hand-carved, mahogany rosary. The beads slid across the metal surface of his palm with a little warm clinks. Bucky was touched by the beauty and thoughtfulness of the gift.

“It’s beautiful, Paul. Thank you.” He beamed at the other man, who waved it off.

“Buddy of mine likes to make ‘em. Thought you’d appreciate it since no one else in this family does.” Paul’s eyes darted between his daughters in accusation at the end.

Angie, who ignored her father’s jab, lit up with glee, pointing her finger at the fairly large box next to him. “Do that one next! It’s from me and Rob. Well, mostly me. Okay, only me. I just slapped Rob’s name on it.”

Rob glared at his wife. “Way to sell me out, Ange.” She merely shushed him, and gestured for Bucky to continue.

He made quick work of the wrapping, busting open the top of the box to pull out...a tube of Bengay? Bucky’s face scrunched in confusion, but set the pain relief cream to the side and began pulling the rest of the contents out of the box. Next came a large orange tub with “Metamucil” emblazoned on the side. This was followed by a magazine featuring an elderly couple with “AARP” written across the top. Everyone else in the room had broken out in giggles after he’d pulled out the Metamucil stuff, their laughter ratcheting up with each successive object he brought forth. It wasn’t until he pulled out the package of adult diapers that everything clicked for him.

It was old man shit. Angie had bought him a great big box of old man shit.

He shot her and Rob an irritated glare which only served to make her laugh harder and Rob throw his hands up in a “hey don’t look at me” gesture. When he pulled out the sample pack of Viagra, which he had seen advertised on tv (oh the miracles of the modern world), he threw the package at Angie’s head, who snatched it out of the air before it could make contact.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Angela. Everything still works just fine, you harpy!”

This was met with more laughter from the assembled adults. Except for Darcy, who muttered, “That’s good to know,” under her breath and sent Bucky into an impromptu coughing fit.

“You got one more gift in there, Barnes,” Angie gasped between giggles.

Bucky leveled an unamused glare at her and reached into the box to pull out whatever fresh hell the woman had concocted. He pulled out a cylindrical, metal, battery-powered...something. It fit in the
palm of his hand and had a button on the side and some kind of flexible tip. The rest of the room had 
broke out laughing again when he’d pulled it out, but had quieted down a bit while he’d been 
puzzling over the device. He glanced warily at the packet of Viagra still clutched in Angie’s hands.

Turning to Darcy, he awkwardly cleared his throat. “I, uh, I don’t know what this is. Is this like…” 
he trailed off, dropping his voice to a nervous rumble, “...is this like a sex thing?!"

You could have heard a pin drop during the collective intake of air from the occupants of the room. 
Darcy’s own eyes went wide, a smile of disbelief stretching across her face. And then the spell broke 
and the room descended into near deafening levels of hysterics.

Over the sound of the others, Paul shouted out, “It’s a nose hair trimmer! I’ve got the same damn 
one!”

Bucky blushed up to his hairline and sunk down where he sat. He’d never been so embarrassed in 
his entire life. Probably. He couldn’t remember large sections of it, so he might be missing 

Darcy gave him a pitying look. “Oh honey, it’s okay.” She slid next to him, pulling him into an 
embrace and kissing him high on his scruffy cheek, sending a shock of dizzying warmth to his belly. 
He couldn’t help the little smile that tugged at his lips. The embarrassment was definitely worth it if it 
meant he could get pity kisses from Darcy. When he looked up, Angie caught his eye with a smug 
twitch of her eyebrow and a wink so quick he almost missed it.

“Thank you so much, Angie. Such a thoughtful gift,” he drawled, voice dripping with sarcasm. She 
blew him a cheeky kiss in response.

Darcy, who still had her arms around him, shook him vigorously by the shoulders. “My turn, my 
turn! Open my gift!”

“Alright, alright. Hold your horses, doll,” he chuckled.

Darcy reached around him to grab the last box and shove it into his arms, watching him with eager 
eyes. He rolled his own eyes at her enthusiasm, but he couldn’t quell the shiver of anticipation at 
finding out what she’d gotten him.

He pulled the top of the box off, sifting through the layers of silvery tissue paper until his fingertips 
brushed against fine leather. It was a book of some sort, that much he could already tell, and in a 
deep purple that was the same exact shade of a ripe plum. Freeing it from the box, he read the script 
embossed on the front.

With a shaking hand, he traced the letters, reading them out under his breath as he went, “Barnes 
Family Recipes.” He cracked open the cover, finding page after page of neatly organized recipe 
cards. Most were blank, waiting for him to copy down what his mother left to him, but a few had 
been painstakingly filled in Darcy’s neat, flowing handwriting. All of the recipes that he’d shared 
with her over the last couple months, she’d remembered and written them down exactly as he’d made 
them. He turned to face her, tears welling up in his eyes. “How? How did you remember all of 
these?”

Darcy tapped a finger to her temple. “Photographic memory, babe.” She reached out to the book in 
his lap, flipping to the third page in. “Um, I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of adding 
some of my Mom’s favorite recipes. I know these are supposed to be your family’s recipes, but I 
thought I…”
Bucky quickly placed his hand over hers. “Darcy...I, I don't know what to say? It's perfect. I love it.”

Darcy smiled up at him, a little teary eyed herself now. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” he replied softly, tugging her hand until he'd pulled her fully into his arms, kissing her temple softly. The kindness of her gift knocked the breath from his lungs. It was a melding of his past and his present, a memorial to the family he’d lost and a reminder of the family he seemed to have gained. It meant more to him than he knew how to fully express.

When he finally pulled back from their embrace, the rest of the Lewis family were staring at them, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Searching for a bit of levity, Bucky spoke up, “Do your Christmases always include this much crying?”

Angie was quick to step in and support his efforts to lighten the mood. “Only when Darcy doesn't get her way.”

“Angela, don't be absurd,” Darcy replied huffily. “I always get my way.” She clapped her hands in determination. “Alright, enough of this blubbery. Rob, you're up!”

Rob set to work unwrapping his own gifts, meticulously running his fingers under the paper to loosen each piece of tape. It nearly drove Darcy nuts with impatience, but he paid her no mind, going about in his careful manner, avoiding even the smallest tear to the deep red paper. After unwrapping each box, he would fold the perfectly intact paper and place it gently to the side, before moving to lift the lid off.

Rob had grown up in a fairly poor household and had been trained from a young age to keep the paper in good condition so his mother could reuse it for the next year. He had always complied with his mother's wishes, but he would have done so even if she hadn't requested it. He loved the bright colors and beautiful designs of wrapping paper. He loved that something so pretty could also hold so much promise inside of it, so he'd never had the heart to tear through it as if it meant nothing.

“Pretty things should not be so carelessly broken,” he'd told Darcy the first Christmas he'd spent with their family and she'd complained about his fastidious gift opening. She'd rolled her eyes, finding him a bit obtuse at the time.

As Darcy's eyes briefly roved over Bucky's face, she thought maybe she finally understood what Rob had meant.

The first gift Rob opened was an expensive set of Prismacolor markers from Paul. Rob started to protest the nearly $500 gift, but Paul waved away his concerns. The shop really was doing well these last few months.

Rob paused to hug his father-in-law, thanking him for the gift, before opening up Bucky's. He stared at the open box, his face initially filled with confusion, before suddenly rearing back and laughing like an insane asylum tenant. Angie leaned over to peer into her husband's lap, then aimed a glare at Bucky, flipping him the bird for good measure.

Darcy watched the exchange in bemusement. “Buck, what did you get him?”

“Oh just a classic marital advice book,” he snickered.

“It's ‘Taming of the Shrew,’” Angie burst out indignantly.
Rob finished opening his gifts, unwrapping the presents from his wife and then his daughter. The first was a set of hardbound, personalized sketchbooks and set of Copic multiliner pens. The second was more of a gag gift from “Violet.” Angie had bought and personalized a coffee mug, that declared “World’s #1 Dad” on the side in puke green lettering and on the opposite side had a picture of a passed out Rob lying on the floor while Violet chewed happily on one of his discarded moccasins.

The reveal of the second gift had been met by laughter, with the exception of Rob. He stared woodenly at the mug for a good two minutes, his hands gently cradling it, before blinking up at his wife through tear-filled eyes. “I love it, Ange. I love it,” he whispered, pulling his wife to press a soft kiss to her lips.

Angie, for her part, seemed a bit bewildered at her generally stoic husband's reaction. “Wow, having Violet has really made you soft, honey,” she replied, returning his kiss with another.

“Having little girls will do that to a man,” Paul gently interjected, sending a wink and a nod to his son-in-law. Rob chuckled and nodded his agreement, brusquely scrubbing the tears from his eyes.

“Where’s my gift from you, Darcy?”

“I gave you and Ange a joint gift. I was gonna let you guys thumb wrestle for the right to open it, but we both know Angie cheats anyway, so I went ahead and put it in her pile.”

“Yep, that sounds about right,” Rob replied. Then, turning to his wife, “alright, my love, you’re up.”

Angie made quick work of her gifts, opening a lovely pendant from her father that had been a favorite of her mother's, a day trip to a swanky spa in Richmond from Rob and Violet, gift cards for a maid service and babysitting service from Darcy, and another book from Bucky. This one was titled “Meddling: On the Virtue of Leaving Others Alone” and had been slung at Bucky's forehead with impressive speed, though not so impressive that Bucky couldn't catch it before it hit its mark.

At last, Darcy was allowed to open up her presents. Bucky had never seen anything so damned adorable and simultaneously terrifying in his life. The woman practically vibrated with excitement and she appeared to be on some kind of weird power trip, relishing in both the attention of the entire room and the fact that they'd been required to present her with tribute. He was suddenly hit with the realization that this woman, though wonderful, should never be put into a position of absolute power. Unless it was over him. He'd happily bend to the force of her will.

She'd opened the first gift, an assortment of blazers and skirts from Banana Republic and a hand knitted scarf from the McKenzie family, and immediately launched into an impromptu fashion show, donning the crisp fabrics atop her rumpled pajamas, and strutting her, frankly ridiculous, stuff down an imaginary runway. She’d finished off her outfit with the teardrop pearl earrings from her father that had once belonged to her mother.

Though he thoroughly enjoyed Darcy’s antics, with each passing moment a wave of anxiety and anticipation began to build beneath Bucky’s skin. He wasn’t sure how she would respond to his gift, though Angie had assured him that Darcy would love it. When Darcy’s hands finally reached for the box bearing his name, his stomach clenched painfully with nerves. He had gotten her, as he had with everyone, a book, though this one did not have the teasing humor associated with it that the others did. Inspired by their mutual love for Beauty and the Beast, he had purchased a commemorative book that featured the art and making of the movie.

Darcy’s bright blue eyes lit up with delight as she briefly flipped through the smooth, richly colored pages of the book. “Bucky it’s beautiful, thank you,” she said cheerily, stretching her hand out to
gently squeeze his forearm.

Bucky gave a tight smile in return, clearing his throat nervously. “There’s, uh, there’s more.” Darcy glanced under the tree and her eyes flit to him in confusion when she didn’t find any presents hiding there.

He held up a finger calling, “hold on, doll” as he made a hasty exit to the McKenzie’s garage. He returned a moment later, carrying what must have been an incredibly heavy wooden chest in one arm and setting it with a significant thud in front of Darcy. He stepped back, hands anxiously clasped behind his back and breathing shallowly through his nose while she inspected the chest.

She quirked her head in confusion and amusement before taking a closer look at the cedar chest in front of her. She ran her hand over the smooth surface, taking in the sheer beauty of it. It was stained a deep, rich red and had to have been handcrafted, featuring intricate carvings and wooden inlays in a lighter stain. The thing must have cost Bucky a fortune, as this kind of craftsmanship was almost unheard of in this day and age. At that thought, a sneaking suspicion entered Darcy’s head and was soon confirmed when she discovered the “J.B.B.” carved delicately into the lower left corner of the chest. Darcy’s head snapped up to face him, her mouth gaping as she tried to remember how to formulate words.

“Look at that, Barnes. You’ve done the impossible,” her sister jested. “You’ve struck Darcy Lewis speechless.”

Darcy wasn’t even aware of her sister’s interjection, too focused on the gorgeous man who was standing before her, adorably worrying at his lower lip with his teeth. “Bu-...Bucky, did you make this?”

A crooked little grin lifted his cheek. “Yeah, my Pop taught me a few things when I was growing up.”

A “few things” was a bit of an understatement. His grandfather had been a master carpenter back in Ireland and had dutifully shared his knowledge with Bucky’s father, who in turn taught him. His father had hoped he would be able to make a living with it and open his own furniture store someday, but there was quite a bit of prejudice against Irish immigrants in those days and his father had been forced to take up work as a common construction worker, despite his gift. It had been a heartbreaking realization to his father, but he’d shared the knowledge with his own son in the hopes that one day Bucky might be able to live out the dream that he could not. Of course, the war had shot that dream all to hell, but he thought perhaps he could still honor his family by sharing this gift with Darcy.

“Oh my god, Bucky, this is gorgeous. When did you even have time to make it?” she asked, incredulity tightening the pitch of her voice.

“Um, it took me a few weeks. I made it in Tony’s shop at the tower while you were working.” He gave a self-conscious shrug.

Understanding seemed to light up her eyes for a moment. “Oh my god, I knew I smelled something like nail polish remover when you got in the car last week! You said I was imagining things.”

Bucky snorted and raised a hand in his defense. “Well, technically, it was turpentine and varnish, so I wasn’t really lying.” He paused, taking a steadying breath and then, “So...do you, do you like it?”

Darcy stared up at him in disbelief and then found herself leaping over the chest and launching herself at the large, and thankfully strong, man. He caught her effortlessly, pulling her close to his
chest as she wrapped him up entirely in all four of her limbs. “Dear god,” she mumbled into his shirt collar, “I’ve never even seen anything so beautifully made in my whole life, let alone been gifted it. Jesus, Bucky, I don’t just like it, I love it!”

He breathed her in, relishing in the feel of her adoration and his own relief. “That’s not all, you need to open it, doll,” he murmured into the soft skin below her ear. Darcy let go of him with a piercing squeal, dropping to the ground and scrambling around until she was kneeling in front of the chest again. With reverence, she slowly lifted the lid, letting loose a small gasp at the contents.

“Crap on a cracker, Barnes. Did you just “Beauty and the Beast” me? Did you just give me my own damn miniature library? That first book makes so much more sense now. Oh my god, I love you, you ridiculous sap.” Darcy’s brain caught up with her words in time for her to see a breathtaking smile break across Bucky’s face. Her own face turned a rather astonishing shade of scarlet and she ducked down to quickly inspect the dozens of hardback books that were neatly stacked inside the trunk. She ran her fingers along the spines, reading the titles to herself and waiting for her blush to fade before she faced him again.

“This is...I can’t... Bucky,” she stammered, unable to express how deeply he had touched her.

He gave her a tender smile before dropping to his knees beside her and lightly squeezing her fingers between his. He pointed out a few of the titles as favorites of his when he’d been a young man and explained that the nice lady at the bookstore had helped him pick out the rest, along with the books that he’d gotten for the rest of the family. That poor woman, he thought, she’d been so patient and helpful while running around and doing her best to fill his vague requests. He ought to send her a thank you card before they left town.

“That explains why you left us at that cafe for so long while you went into that bookstore. Angie and I were taking bets on whether or not we’d find you passed out in the puzzles section with all the other old geezers.”

“You think you’re funny don’t you, Lewis.”


Bucky bit back on a shy grin, watching her through his thick lashes, and laced his fingers through hers. They both came down with a serious case of the googly eyes until Violet interrupted them with a happy screech.

The attention of the adults in the room immediately turned to the infant and it was deemed high time that the little princess got to open her gifts. As Violet had neither the hand-eye coordination nor the attention span to unwrap her gifts, Rob did the honors while Angie held up each of the gifts for the little girl to see. She received numerous teething toys, darling outfits of every shade of the rainbow, several educational toys, and a couple of bedtime books. Darcy had given Violet a copy of “Goodnight Moon,” a choice that was inspired by the fact that she was currently reading the author’s autobiography.

Bucky had decided on a copy of “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” for the little girl. Really, it had been the inspiration behind his entire shopping trip at the bookstore that week. He had gone in specifically for the book when he’d had the lamely belated realization that Christmas with Darcy’s family implied presents were necessary for her family. Thankfully, last minute shopping seemed to be a tradition with the Lewis-McKenzie clan, and no one thought it strange that he needed to do some shopping as well. He’d decided on Violet’s gift first, thinking that she would be the easiest to shop for, and he had been right.
Growing up as he had during the Depression and the child of two immigrant parents, money was
tight and books were considered a luxury. The only book that he’d owned as a little boy was a well-
loved copy of “The Tale of Peter Rabbit.” He had adored the story and had deeply fond memories of
reading it to his little sister when she was born. When it came to deciding what to give Violet, he
could think of nothing more precious than the book that he had so loved.

Once he’d picked it out in the little local bookstore, he had been hit with the realization that he could
have likely afforded every single book in the store now, thanks to Stark’s payroll. It was such a
foreign thing for him to have access to those kinds of funds, but he was thrilled that he now had the
opportunity to give Darcy’s entire family something so precious to him as brand-spanking new
books. Which then led him to his idea to fill the chest he had made for Darcy with as many books as
he could fit in it. He knew how much she loved to read, how she’d hunker down into her battered,
leather recliner at home and disappear into a world all her own for hours. He’d watched her lose
herself to many a book over the last couple months.

He had also been inspired by that Disney movie she had shown him. When she’d first played
“Beauty and the Beast” for him, he couldn’t help but draw parallels between the story and their
situation. A kind, beautiful, intelligent woman is forced to live with a monster indefinitely...yeah,
how could he not see the similarities there? But the monster had won the girl in the end, wooed her
with literature and by finding the gentleness within. Perhaps...perhaps he could do the same?

With the way she kept looking at him and idly stroking her fingers over the intricate carvings on the
chest, he warmed with the feeling that he might have succeeded.

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With the morning gift-giving officially over, the Lewis-McKenzie family members dispersed to tend
to various matters. Those who were still in pajamas went to change, Angie went off to nurse Violet
and lay her down for a nap, the living room was tidied, and Rob and Darcy began preparing
Christmas Day lunch. It was looking like it would be a veritable feast this year, especially
considering that Bucky would be contributing a few of his mother’s dishes as well. Most of the
dishes had been prepped the day before and only needed to be popped in the oven for a couple of
hours. Within an hour, the house was beginning to fill with some truly delicious aromas.

Having been shooed out of the kitchen--Darcy had imperiously declared that there were too many
cooks--Bucky found himself settling into the overstuffed couch next to Mr. Lewis. Paul had his eyes
 glued to some football game or another and Bucky assumed the other man hadn’t even noticed his
arrival until Paul cleared his throat and addressed him.

“You know, that chest you made looks a bit like the bridal chest that my grandmother got as a
wedding present from my grandfather. Are you making some kind of statement in regards to Darcy’s
marital status?” he asked bluntly.

There didn’t seem to be any judgment one way or the other in Paul’s tone, so Bucky took that as a
good sign. It didn’t stop the blush that rose up to pink his cheeks, but at least he didn’t feel like he
was about to be shot. “I, uh, no. No I wasn’t. I’m not.” He scratched awkwardly at his collar. “It
kind of turned out like that on accident? I wasn’t trying to, but when I finished it I realized I had
essentially recreated my mother’s hope chest. I didn’t even remember the thing until I saw the
finished product and all these memories of her keeping her linens and embroidery in it came flooding
back.” Bucky shrugged and smiled tightly, not sure how Paul would react to the information.
“Huh, that must be a strange thing, having all this stuff floating in your subconscious, unaware of it until you accidentally recreate it.” Mr. Lewis sank back into silence, seemingly reabsorbed into the football game. Bucky thought the conversation was over until Paul suddenly spoke up again, his eyes never leaving the television screen. “I’m glad you got that memory back, kid. And it doesn’t matter much to me what you did or did not mean by it, but I just gotta tell you, that was a beautiful thing you did for my Darcy. I’m thankful for you.”

Bucky sat in silence, unable to respond over the unexpected lump in his throat. When Paul didn’t say anything else, Bucky turned away to watch the game blindly, buzzing over the way Paul had spoken to him. For a man that seemed so uncomplicated and down to earth, he could be utterly disarming. He shouldn’t be so surprised though. Darcy was the exactly the same.

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Christmas Lunch, like the rest of the day, was a joyous and raucous affair. Everyone ate entirely too much, and absolutely no one gave a rat’s ass about the amount of calories consumed in one sitting. In fact, Angie had had the ingenious idea to dig out a pair of her old maternity pants with a spandex panel instead of a button or zipper to wear to lunch in order to provide the most comfort while stuffing herself silly. As Darcy thumbed the top button of her own pants open after her second piece of pie, she couldn’t help but let out an envious little sigh. Next year she was buying and bringing her own pair of maternity pants, dammit.

Bucky, on the other hand, seemed capable of devouring twice as much food as everyone else while still remaining as svelte and hard-bodied as ever. His metabolism really was just absurdly unfair. Which is why Bucky was tasked with cleanup duty while everyone else got to go sleep off lunch in their respective bedrooms. The man had merely chuckled, declaring that he was happy to help, and rose from the table to set to his work, flexing the whole way to the kitchen to prove just how perfect of a specimen he was. Probably. She may have imagined that he was gratuitously flexing out of spite, but that was irrelevant.

Bucky had been cheerily scrubbing at dirty dishes for about half an hour when Rob wandered up beside him, his sketchbook tucked neatly beneath his arm and his hands stuffed in his pants pockets. Bucky had been humming softly as he scrubbed, but abruptly stopped when he took notice of the other man. Rob peered conspicuously behind himself before turning back to Bucky with a mischievous grin.

“I know you think all me and Angie got you for Christmas was old man jokes, but I, uh, I made you something that I think you might actually like,” he said, pulling out the sketchbook and opening it up. Rob flipped through the pages, coming to a stop when he found what he was looking for, and held up the page for Bucky to peer at.

What he saw nearly knocked the breath from him and it certainly made him a bit weak in the knees. Rob had drawn a near perfect likeness of Darcy, her eyes alight with mischief and her perfect mouth stretched wide into a wicked smile. There was snow stuck to her hair, which was a wild mass of tousled curls, and the pinks of her cheeks indicated that she had been recently exposed to the cold. She looked utterly divine, an impish spirit of ice and snow, beautiful and wicked and completely perfect. Bucky stared at Rob with incredulity. “Is this from when we played in the snow yesterday?”

Rob’s thin lips stretched into a pleasant smile. “Indeed, it is. The way you were staring at her all day yesterday, I kept thinking, ‘Take a picture, Barnes. It’ll last longer,’ so I decided to make you one
A soft chuckle startled from Bucky’s chest and he reached out to gently trace a finger over the drawing. “It’s beautiful Rob, can I keep it?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course you can. Merry Christmas, Bucky,” Rob replied, then carefully pulled the page from the binding of the sketchbook. He offered to stow it into Bucky’s suitcase since he was busy washing dishes, and Bucky gratefully accepted, sure that Rob would do a better job of packing away the precious illustration than he ever could.

As the younger man turned to leave the kitchen, Bucky called out to him softly, “Merry Christmas, Rob. Thank you for letting me join you and your family. I...this is the best Christmas I’ve had in...a very long time.”

Rob gave him a bittersweet smile, tentatively reaching out a hand to clasp him on the shoulder. “You’re welcome here anytime, Bucky. Merry Christmas.”

Chapter End Notes

Ladyaudiophile was kind enough to spend HOURS compiling a list of all the books that Bucky got for Darcy, which I added as an extra and can be found in this series under 50 Books to Give Your Lover.
New Year, New You, Bucky Barnes

Chapter Summary

It's going down, for real.
That's all I'm saying.
Happy New Year!

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your continued love and support, you gorgeous people! Seriously, such sweet readers, your comments are my bread and butter.

All my undying love and thanks to ladyaudiophile for stepping up to be my kickass beta and correcting all my shit. She deserves all the money and the awards and the love. Real talk.

All the baby books in the world could never really prepare a man for the raising of two daughters. Paul Lewis could attest to this. He and his wife started out on the journey of parenthood with all the dew-eyed hope that was expected of a young couple deciding they were ready for a family. Hah, as if deciding to do something actually had any relevance to being prepared for it.

When it came to his girls, though, Paul was sure they went above and beyond what could be expected when having children. They were both brighter than he could have ever hoped for, being not particularly a studious man himself, but they had inherited his penchant for mischief. Their intelligence and impishness combined rather potently and he found himself constantly confronted with predicaments that required him to step in and discipline them as children. Which was a Herculean task when a man was trying his damndest not to bust into red-faced hysterics at their hijinks.

His girls certainly kept him laughing and always on his toes. Yep, the curveballs started early and they just kept coming. He certainly never expected his little Darcy to bring home a stray superhero and ex-brainwashed assassin. He was absolutely positive that none of the baby books mentioned anything like that. Paul briefly considered writing one that contained his own personal parenting experiences. If anything, it would at least be a good laugh.

As far as curveballs go, Barnes had turned out to be a decent sort. Maybe a little skittish, but Paul had encountered very few young men that didn't get like that around his girls at first. They could be...overwhelming, but in the most spectacular way.

Packing up his suitcase into the back of his old Camry (it wasn't the best looking car, but the gas mileage was much gentler on his wallet), he took a moment to gather up his thoughts, tucking them away into his heart to examine later when he was back home. He hated having to leave, but time, tide, and car repair waited for no man. That time of year was particularly busy for him due to the
regular collisions caused by the inclement weather, so he would have to miss ringing in the new year that night with his family.

He took a moment pull his daughters and granddaughter into a fierce hug, pressing kisses to three heads of soft curls, breathing in the scent of them. Despite being grown now, his babies still smelled like they did when they'd crawled into his lap to take a nap, or share a snack, or to seek comfort for a childhood hurt. He didn’t even try to stop the tear that slowly leaked down his cheek.

Letting go of his girls, he turned and said his goodbyes to Rob, pulling the taller man into his own tight hug. He loved the boy like he was his own, loved how tenderly he cared for his eldest daughter. A good man and a good fit for his Angie.

Lastly, Paul turned to Sergeant Barnes. It was a very strange thing to meet your childhood idol. It was even stranger that Paul looked like he was 30 years Barnes’ senior and that the man stared at his daughter in a way that made Paul think he should start airing out his father-of-the-bride tux. Fortunately, he had learned to embrace the strange years ago when Angie had gone through her reptile phase as a toddler and started collecting various snakes and lizards from their yard.

Bucky stuck his hand out, intending to send Paul off with a respectful shake. *Hah, not in this family,* Paul thought to himself. He used Bucky’s hand to lever himself onto his toes and reach the taller man’s shoulders and then pulled Barnes into a hug. He smacked Bucky on the back a few times in masculinity-affirming affection and then pulled back to kiss him full on the mouth for good measure. The shock on Bucky’s face was completely worth it.

Bucky was still standing there at the curb shell-shocked when Paul Lewis’ little grey Camry rolled off down the street and around the corner. The women made a quick escape to the warmth of the house, chuckling all the way up the walkway, so Rob was left to deal with the poor man.

Rob reached over to him and took his arm in a show of solidarity. “They are an incredibly affectionate family. You get used to it...eventually,” he said, pulling Bucky around to start the trek back up to the house. He was sympathetic but he wasn’t going to stand out there freezing his ass off forever. Not all men were pumped up on cold-defying superjuice.

“He do the same to you when you first met?”

“Yes. Angie calls it the ‘Kiss of Approval’ and it is a hard won prize. Welcome to the club, Bucky. Lucky us, eh?”

Bucky chuckled, his blue eyes sparkling in the crisp December air. “Yeah, lucky us.”

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“Are these necessary, doll? Your sister insisted.”

Darcy glanced up from the pot of chili she was stirring, only to completely lose her shit at the sight of Barnes in one of those kitschy pairs of sunglasses that people wore to New Year's Eve festivities. This particular pair was a vibrant blue with blinking LED lights along the edges and in the style of the infamous Kanye shutter glasses. Barnes looked beyond ridiculous and still dead sexy at the same time. A man of many talents.

“Yes. Those are *absolutely* necessary. Angie made the right call.” She bit back on the grin that was
trying to break free.

Bucky pushed the glasses to the top of his head so he could level the full wrath of his glare upon her. “I look like a goddamn idiot.”

“I haven’t a clue what you mean, dear. You look positively stunning in those glasses,” Darcy replied, using her best Tim Gunn impression.

“Oh yeah?” Bucky challenged, strolling over to her with deliberate swagger and stopping just close enough to rest a hand on her hip. With the other, he reached up to flip the glasses back down over his eyes. “Tell me doll,” he said, flicking his tongue across his lips, “do they make me look pretty?” He blinked his deep blue eyes at her, his dark lashes falling and rising heavily behind the blue glare of the glasses.

“Mmm, so pretty,” she breathed, eyes flitting between the absurd glasses and the full pout of his mouth. So close, so stinking close. Why wouldn’t he kiss her already, she thought, with not a small amount of desperation. Seriously, she was only human, how much patience was she required to have in this situation? Maybe she was being punished. Yeah, this was definitely punishment for some sin in a past life or something. She suddenly felt a striking kinship to Tantalus, the poor schmuck.

Taking a slow, steadying breath through her nose, she turned back to her pot of chili, sweeping the wooden spoon through a few more times, trying to ignore the fact that Bucky still had his hand low on her back and was steadily moving closer. “Wanna taste?” she asked, lifting the spoon and blowing lightly on the contents.

As she turned to present Barnes with the spoon, she thought she heard him mumble, “God, yes.” There was a fleeting glimpse of confusion when she lifted the spoon up towards him, followed by understanding. “Oh, the chili.”

Darcy quirked an eyebrow up in smug recognition of the same tortured gleam in his eyes that she’d been sporting for days. “Yes, Jamie, the chili. Unless you see anything else in this kitchen that needs to be tasted?”

Darcy watched mercilessly as Bucky stumbled and stuttered his words for a minute. Checkmate, Barnes. She pushed the spoon into his hand. “Here. You taste and give the pot a few more stirs. Add any seasoning you think it needs. I trust your judgment. I’m gonna go get my party attire on.” She gave him a gentle pat on the cheek and sashayed out of the kitchen, sliding her sock-covered feet across the tile as she went.

She really did need to get ready, anyway. They were all invited to a New Year’s party at the home of one of Angie’s colleagues. It was a potluck, hence Darcy’s chili recipe being dusted off, and casual, but a shower and a cute blouse were still necessary before they could head over.

Bucky made protests earlier that day about his invitation, worried that being around that many strangers would trigger him into a murder spree or panic attack. Angie had assured him that it would be a smallish gathering, and they were bringing Violet so they’d have a built in excuse to leave early. Rob had promised him that they’d only stay an hour, tops. Bucky had reluctantly agreed when Darcy had slipped her hand in his, assuring him she’d stay with him the whole time.

She had decided the guy needed to live a little. He couldn’t avoid strangers for the rest of his life. There were 7 billion people on the planet and he knew only the tiniest percentage of them. The odds were against him if he thought he could avoid new people forever.
The party had gone...well, not spectacular, but nobody had died and Bucky hadn’t had a panic attack, so it was technically a successful venture. Except for the fact that Darcy had spent most of the time fending off overly interested grad students from Bucky, or Brandon, as they had decided to keep his true identity on the D.L. The name change and the Kanye glasses had gone a long way in hiding his identity, but there wasn’t any way of hiding the fact that Bucky had a body like Adonis and the kind of bone structure worth weeping over.

And, by god, those liquored up grad students had it out for him. There was one in particular that Darcy thought she was going to have to beat away with a baseball bat. She might have fantasized about it a bit, the vision of smacking the willowy redhead across her perfect teeth playing on loop. At first, Bucky was disconcerted by all the sudden attention, but when he noticed the way Darcy’s smile held a gleam of menace to it and her normally lax posture was stiff, he instantly relaxed as he recognized the signs of female jealousy. It became a very entertaining evening after that. There was definitely a possessive edge to the way she touched him whenever any of the overly attentive party goers would get too close. At one point, there was a redhead that he thought was going to be disemboweled by the iciness in Darcy’s eyes alone.

The woman really couldn’t take a hint, flaunting cleavage that was too large for her slender frame and too firm to be anything but store bought. She also had some of the grabbiest hands he’d ever seen, finding excuses to touch his shoulders and chest frequently, even though Darcy was quite obviously tucked into his other side, his arm draped over her shoulder and hers gripped possessively around his hips.

With each offending touch, he could see the blush of anger rising up Darcy’s pale throat, the outrage clear in her wide blue eyes. While he enjoyed seeing Darcy’s bit of a jealous streak, this woman was getting dangerously close to turning his girl into a murderer, so he stepped in and did the honorable thing: lied through his teeth.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, ma’am, but I think I should go get my lovely wife a drink now.”

The redhead’s face had pinched in disdain and she briefly glanced at their ringless fingers. “Your wife? I don’t see any rings,” she directed at Bucky, continuing her pattern of ignoring Darcy’s existence.

“No time to buy any,” Darcy interjected through gritted teeth. “We eloped. One of those things where the sex is so maddeningly passionate that you just know they’re The One. Anyway, if you’ll excuse us, it’s getting a little warm in here so I’m going to need my husband to take me out to the car now and help me out of these clothes. With his teeth. Have a nice night, Pamela.”

“It’s Stacey.”

“Okay,” Darcy replied, infusing as much bitchiness as she could muster into her plastic smile.

She dropped her grip on Bucky’s hips to slip her hand into his back pocket, grabbing his ass and using it to lead him over to where Rob and Angie were showing off their infant daughter to anyone who wandered close enough. Bucky flinched at the way her fingers dug into his ass through the denim in a rage-fueled death grip, but thought it best not to comment on it.

Angie glanced away from her daughter in time to notice their approach, both brows lifting in concern
at Darcy's expression. “Time to go?” she asked.

“Yep,” was Darcy's terse response.

“Oooookay,” Angie said, turning to their hosts. “Thanks so much for inviting us, we had a great time, but we ought to get this little one to bed.”

With some hugs and a few waves at various members of the party from across the room, they made a quick escape to the car. Rob and Angie occupied the front seats, while Bucky and Darcy sat in the back with Violet strapped into her car seat between them. Angie knew better than to comment on her sister's foul mood, and instead turned on the radio to something soothing and bland to fill the tense silence of the car.

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, smiling in the dark of the car. He waited maybe five minutes to allow Darcy to cool off a bit before turning to her with a cheeky grin. “With my teeth, huh?”

“Shut your pretty mouth, Barnes, or, so help me, I will make you walk the rest of the way home.”

Bucky's full-throated laughter was his only response.

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It was three minutes to midnight and he and Darcy were the only two people in the house still awake. Violet had been asleep in Darcy's arms for nearly half an hour while her sleep-deprived parents had passed out in an exhausted pile on the couch two hours earlier.

The two of them sat on the floor with their backs leaned against the bottom of the loveseat, watching the televised festivities in Times Square. It certainly had changed since he'd been a young man, the chaos of the event ratcheting up to a level he would never have even dreamed of. Even the ball that was going to drop was a chaotic swirl of color, the advanced technology of this decade making the iron and wood ball he'd seen lit as a boy look like a relic.

It technically was a relic, though, he supposed. As was he, for that matter. Glancing at Darcy in the darkened room, he watched as the shifting colors of the tv screen reflected entrancingly off her pale skin. For once, he didn't mind being a relic so much. He felt like maybe he appreciated the benefits of this decade far more than someone who was born to it. Everything was more intense, every experience held more promise. It was a good feeling.

Angie let out a soft snore, catching the attention of her younger sister who snorted and rolled her eyes. “Pathetic, they couldn't even make it to 10. They're gonna miss out on their midnight kiss.”

“People still do that?” Bucky asked, eyes roving her face with curiosity.

“Kiss at midnight? Of course. Why, you think you might get lucky?” Darcy asked quietly so as not to disturb her niece. Despite the teasing tone of her words, her eyes glowed solemnly in the soft, shifting light of the television.

Bucky leaned into her, lifting his arm to drape over shoulders, one thumb stroking idly across her bare upper arm. Their gazes locked together in a seemingly unending moment of stillness and potential, their breathing slowing and deepening with the heat passing between them. In the background, Bucky could hear the crowds begin the ten second countdown. He smirked at her,
drawing closer with each passing second.

Three

Two

One

He grinned impishly at her, his mouth bare inches from hers, but before she could tilt her chin up to meet him, he ducked down and planted a smacking kiss to the top of Violet’s sleeping head. He pulled back quickly to judge Darcy’s reaction, smirking at the dazed confusion flitting across her features. Thinking back to the night she’d robbed him of his goodnight kiss, he gave a smug tilt to his head before speaking. “Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it, doll?” he said with a wink.

Bucky had expected more teasing from Darcy, threats of bodily harm, laughter, anything other than how she actually responded.

She gave him a tight smile, jerking her head down to hide the fleeting disappointment there. “Yep. It sure is,” she said lightly. “Happy New Year to me.”

Then she was pulling away from him, her face and posture closed off and lacking the warmth that he’d grown so familiar with. She rose carefully to her feet and walked the short distance to the master bedroom. He watched her disappear into the room for a moment, before returning sans Violet. She scooped up the dirty glasses that were scattered about the living room, refusing to look at him, and made a quick retreat to the kitchen.

Oh fuck. He’d messed up. Gone too far, pushed too hard. He’d thought that she was having fun with their flirting. Thought that she wanted him….so what the hell had that been all about? Bucky sat there in the dark, brain scrambling for purchase on any idea that made sense. She’d looked so disappointed in him, like he’d personally let her down with his teasing.

Could...could the reason that she hadn’t made the first move be because….no. Surely not? She was the kind of woman that didn’t wait around for something she wanted. She went out and got it. But maybe...maybe she’d been waiting on... him?

Oh fuck.

Oh fuck.

Of course she was waiting for him to move first. This was the same woman that he’d seen rant for forty minutes on CNN about how Hydra had stripped him of his mental and physical autonomy, her outrage pouring out of those perfect lips like a soul-cleansing fire. And that was before she’d ever even met him.

With something like steel settling into his spine, Bucky rose from his place on the floor, fists clenched in determination and stomach flipping with anxiety. God, he hoped he was right or he was about to make the biggest fool of himself. Worse than the nose hair trimmer thing. Oh god.

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When Barnes’ hulking frame suddenly filled the kitchen entryway, Darcy looked up from where she
was rinsing a glass in the sink. Taking in the tension rolling off his entire body and the way his eyes were set in grim determination, Darcy thought it best to gently set the glass in the sink and turn to face Barnes head-on, because he was either about to murder her or kiss her senseless. Both scenarios called for one’s full and prompt attention.

Raising her hands in front of her in a defensive or possibly placating gesture, Darcy spoke his name in a gentle tone. That seemed to snap him out of whatever trance he’d been under that had kept him stockstill in the doorway. She wasn’t entirely sure if that was good or bad, because the next moment he was moving straight towards her, murderstrut on full and terrifyingly sexy display.

She backed up in sync with his rapid approach until her hips hit the kitchen counter. Within moments, he was directly in front of her, pressed against her from hip to knee. His hands darted into her hair, fingers curling against her scalp as he brought his forehead down to rest against hers, their eyes simultaneously closing and noses slotting next to each other. Okay, not murder then. He seemed to be going with option number two. That seemed like a stellar option. Spectacular, really. Kisses and no murder, what more could a girl ask for?

Darcy’s already labored breathing quickened with the rush of desire and adrenaline in her system. She lifted her hands from where they were trapped between their chests, running them up the long line of his neck until they settled on either side of his head, thumbs resting at the juncture of jaw and cheek. She scraped her thumbs across the stubble there, feeling him shiver under the light touch. She could feel his warm breath fanning out over her mouth in short, labored bursts that matched her own. It was the perfect moment for him to tilt his chin that last little bit to bring their lips together, but Darcy counted her rapid heartbeats as they slipped past without any further movement from him. It was then that she noticed he was trembling from head to toe.

“Hey Bucky, honey, whatcha doing?” she asked without breaking from her position against him, her eyes still tightly closed. Her tone was lighthearted, meant to set him at ease. It had the desired effect, causing a light chuckle to escape from his lips and brush across hers.

“I was thinkin’ about kissing you, sweetheart.” His cocky tone couldn't quite cover the gentle tremor in his voice.

“Hmm, you know I generally encourage thoughtfulness, but in this situation I think action would be preferred.”

He hummed his agreement, but still seemed to be frozen to the spot, shaking even harder than he was a moment before.

“Um, Bucky, I can’t help but notice that you are shaking like a leaf. Is everything ok, buddy?”

She felt his fingers curl tighter into her hair and he nodded against her. “Yeah...just, just a little scared.”

His admission had Darcy's eyes popping open in surprise and pulling away from him to look at him properly. “Scared? Of what?” she asked in mild alarm.

Bucky shrugged his shoulders self-consciously, eyes still tightly closed and brow wrinkled slightly in shame. “Dunno. Scared you don’t...don’t want me.” His blues eyes finally opened, the painful insecurity shining in them causing Darcy’s breath to catch in her chest.

She gave him an encouraging smile and tugged playfully at the short hairs at the nape of his neck. “Of course I want you, Bucky.”
“Really?” His shy smile had her stomach doing gold-medal worthy acrobatics.

“Uh, yes, really. For godssake man, have you seen yourself in a freaking mirror lately?” she teased.

His metal hand twitched in her hair and the smile slipped a bit from his face. “Ah no, not lately. Not without a full blown panic attack, anyway.” He pulled her closer to him, burying his face into the soft skin of her neck, not quite ready to see her reaction to his confession.

Darcy’s eyes widened in shock and dismay, but then fluttered closed at the sensation of his eyelashes brushing the sensitive skin of her throat. “Um, okay, we’re...we’re going to put a...thing, a pin, that’s the word I’m looking for, a pin in that heartbreaking revelation and come back to deal with that at a later time because, oh my god that’s awful.” She felt him nod in agreement against her, but he didn’t say anything further.

“So, just to be clear, I do want you, James Buchanan Barnes, very very much. Okay?” Again she felt him nod against her and his shaking had stilled for the most part but still… “Okay, why aren’t we kissing already?” she asked bluntly, her patience having finally run out.

Bucky groaned and pulled out of her warmth, releasing her completely to run his hands through his hair. “Because...because, I can’t remember the last time I kissed anyone. Literally. I know that I probably kissed a bunch of dames back before I was the Soldier, but I can’t fucking remember them or how I did it!” His eyes darted around the kitchen, an edge of desperation seeping into his voice. “Hell, I feel like some 14 year old kid again that’s never even held hands with a girl, let alone kissed one. What if...what if,” his voice dropped off to a whisper, eyes wide with unchecked horror, “What if I’m bad at it?”

Well shit, that was both sad and adorable at the same time. Darcy reached up to gently untangle his hands from his hair, smoothing out the wild strands before placing her hands on either side of his face as they had been earlier. He kept his eyes to the floor, his cheeks coloring slightly with embarrassment.

“Bucky. Look at me, sweetheart.” She waited for him to lift his eyes to hers before continuing. “It’s okay. It’s all gonna be okay. You’re not gonna be bad at it, I promise. And even if you are, I am an excellent teacher and you are a notoriously quick study. Plus, I’m counting on that whole muscle memory thing to kick in at some point.” She waggled her eyebrows lasciviously at him, followed by a saucy wink.

He smiled meekly at her in return. “You make a good point,” he replied, bringing his forehead to rest against hers once more.

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“I usually do,” she murmured, and then she was pushing up onto her toes and pressing into the softness of his mouth.

It was....sweet and warm and chaste and maddening all at once, but it could not be categorized in any way as “bad.” Bucky must have agreed if the way he was practically purring against her was any indication. She smiled against his lips, feeling an answering smile form on his. She stayed still, breathing him in and letting him lead the pace, relishing in the gentle kisses he began to press along the planes of her face and down the column of her throat.

He must have been able to feel her pulse pounding furiously beneath his lips, and she gave a sharp gasp when he opened his mouth to just barely scrape his teeth across the skin there. When he darted his tongue out to take the barest taste of her, she couldn’t help the quiet moan that pushed past her lips.
Bucky froze at the sound, pulling back suddenly, his eyes roving over her flushed face. A look that was a mixture of awe and raw need flitted through his eyes and was suddenly replaced by what Darcy could only describe as pure and total self-assurance. A slow, knowing smile tilted up the corners of his soft lips.

That was the only warning Darcy had before the full force of the man who had once been Sergeant James Barnes, notorious panty-dropper and all-around stud, was unleashed on her. She congratulated herself on calling the whole muscle memory thing for maybe a millisecond before her brain blipped out of service completely in response to the way Bucky was suddenly moving against her.

His mouth crashed to hers again, graceless and heated, but oh how it made her want to curl herself around him fully. Bucky seemed to agree, reaching his hands down behind her thighs to abruptly haul her up against him. She wrapped her legs at his waist, arms scrabbling for purchase around his shoulders and in his hair as she used the new height to take control of the kiss. The taste of him on her tongue was damn near intoxicating, the slide of his teeth over her lower lip sending the nerve endings in her spine into a sparking frenzy.

He let her lead for a while, let her take and touch and pull at him in ways that he’d forgotten existed. Oh, but god did he remember them now. He remembered how to give and give to a woman until he’d wrung himself out in pursuit of her happiness. Remembered the quivering joy of a woman well-pleased.

He remembered how to take, too. Remembered how it felt to have a beautiful dame want to give to him in return. And now here he was, with this incredible woman wrapped around him and panting into his mouth and pulling at something inside of his chest that had his heart quaking with the power of it.

For a moment he was overwhelmed and needed to regain control of what was happening, needed to find that centered feeling of knowing what he was doing again. He walked forward a few inches until he was pressed to the kitchen counter. Gently, he settled Darcy onto it, tugging under her knees so she was flush against him before returning his hands to her hair. He pulled back from her searching mouth, catching her gaze and giving her the briefest smile before tilting his head back down to hers and gentling the pace that she had set.

His mouth moved slowly over hers, tongue dipping between her lips to drag teasingly against hers. This was heaven, this languid tasting and touching, engulfed by Darcy’s scent and warmth. He never wanted it to end. Jesus, he might even lo-

“So does this mean I can tell Angie that y’all are officially a thing?”

Bucky froze at the sound of Rob’s sleep thickened voice. He’d been so completely engaged in Darcy that his supersoldier senses hadn’t even tipped him off to the other man’s presence until he’d spoken from behind them in the kitchen entryway. Darcy’s eyes went wide in good humor and mild embarrassment, ducking her head to press a groan into the center of his chest. “Uh, yes, we are. If Darcy’ll have me?” he asked uncertainly. Darcy tilted her head back to blow him a kiss and a wink. He took that as a yes.

So did Rob. “Thank god. Angie’s been pestering me about inviting you two on a double date to some dance thingy before you leave for New York.”

Darcy peered around his shoulder, eyeing her brother-in-law with barely contained enthusiasm. “A
dance thingy?"

"Yup."

"A double date?"

"Yup."

Darcy glanced up eagerly at Bucky, bouncing lightly atop the counter, hands folded in front of her chest in a pleading gesture. He rolled his eyes, but eventually caved and nodded his assent. She released a high-pitched squeal, tossing her arms back around his shoulders and pulling him into another kiss.

"Right. Okay, I totally get why you’re so against Angie’s penchant for P.D.A."

Darcy smiled against Bucky’s mouth, reaching behind his back to flip her brother-in-law the bird before returning her full attention to the gorgeous man wrapped in her arms.
Chapter Summary

Kissing, feelings, kissing, pillow fight, interrogation, kissing. Picks up right where the last chapter left off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky was not prepared for how all-consuming kissing Darcy Lewis would be. The woman was intense, to say the least.

Needing a moment to breath and collect his thoughts, he reached up to gently disentangle her hands from his hair, sweetly kissing each of her palms before tucking them to his chest. He inched his chest and hips back a bit, but not far enough to dislodge her from where she was still seated on the kitchen counter. He tried to grasp the unsteady stream of thoughts and sensations overwhelming him, breathing deeply, slowly to find some kind of order to the chaos she had unleashed in him. There were some things that he needed to say, needed to hear, first and if he didn’t do it now, Darcy was sure to kiss him into total oblivion.

He opened his eyes, finally feeling at least partially calmed, only to see her face shining up at him with open desire. The hunger in her eyes, the soft glistening of her kiss-roughened lips, the way the pale skin of her chin and throat pricked with red in response to the scrape of his stubble….well, he was only a mortal man.

He dove back into her, releasing her hands to grip the back of her head, his other hand coming up under her knee to pull her flush against him, using that leverage to grind himself against her. She was making these delicious little whimpers in counterpoint to the rocking of his hips, sounds that he just knew he’d be playing in the back of his mind every night for the rest of his life.

When he felt her clever little fingers dip into the waistband of his jeans, the shock was enough to snap him out from beneath the haze of lust. Jerking his hips away from her, he released his grip on her, clinging to the edge of the counter at either side of her hips and breathing raggedly into the space he’d created between them.

“Darcy, please, I gotta, I gotta stop,” he gasped out. He let his head drop down, afraid to see her reaction to his weakness.

“Is everything ok?” She began stroking her fingers through the soft strands of his hair.

“No. Yes! I just need to, uh, Sam calls it ‘checking in.’ I need to do that. With you. I gotta talk things out, doll, before I get lost in all this.” He tilted his face up to meet her gaze, relieved at the lack of judgment there.

She smiled, tracing the shell of his ear. “What do you wanna talk about?” she urged gently.

He leaned into the touch like a cat. A very large, very lethal cat. “I need us to be on a level playing field. I need to know what I mean to you, what this,” he said, gesturing between them, “means to
you. I'm too fucking old and mentally unstable to be unsure of what it is you need and want from me.”

“Is this your complicated way of asking what my intentions are?”

“Yes,” he chuckled, “essentially. This kind of...relationship...I have more to lose. Even more to gain. But I have to know what the parameters of this are. I don't want to risk screwing things up.”

Darcy nodded, dropping her hands to his and pulling them so that they were clasped together in front of her. She cleared her throat, and then began speaking in a truly terrible English accent. “Mr. Barnes, you have bewitched me, body and soul—”

“I can tell when you're quoting things, even if I don't understand the context,” he deadpanned.

“Shhhhh let me finish.” Darcy placed a hand over the smile quирking up the corner of his mouth. “Where was I? Oh yes, bewitched. You must fetch the priest at once. Let us be wed and start our life together far away from this place. I shall bear you many children and you shall make sweet love to me until the wee hours of the mornin- hey! Don't you mfgmf mmfn fguh.”

Bucky had clamped his own hand over her mouth to stem the flow of inanity. It painted an enticing picture for him, though, even if she couldn't possibly be offering him those things. “If you can't be serious about this, Darcy, I can always go back to the party and find that redhead. What was her name? Sheryl?”

Darcy leveled a glare at him. “Don't you fucking dare, Barnes.”

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, not even attempting to hide the smug expression on his face. “Alright then, be serious. Please?”

Darcy sighed and rolled her neck on her shoulders, trying to shake loose the nervous tension that was swiftly collecting there. “Alright. All cards on the table?”

He nodded.

“Okay. Okay. Emotional honesty time. I can do this. I'm a mature adult who can talk about my mature adult feelings. No problem. Ummm, so all joking aside, what I said before isn't entirely untrue.” At the surprise in Bucky's eyes, she rushed to clarify her statement. “Nonono, not the marriage or babies part. Well, maybe. Someday. But in the here and now, I care about you, deeply. To put it into Old Man terms, I want to be your girl, your only girl. But replace girl with woman, because, look at me. I am fully grown. But yeah, so I want something exclusive with you? Which should be obvious after the redhead incident. Because wow I am normally not that possessive or bitchy but that harlot really brought it out in me, you know? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You're adorable when you ramble.”

“I'm adorable all the time,” she spouted, then ducked her face into her hands with a groan.

She had worked hard over the last few years to keep a lid on her incessant inner monologue’s frequent penchant for transitioning into her incessant outer monologue. When you were a badass, working woman with minions and frequent appearances on national news networks, it was best to keep some thoughts to yourself. It was just her luck that it would return with a vengeance when she most needed to be perceived as a somewhat mature person with a decent grasp on her emotions.

Bucky pulled her into his arms, tucking her head securely under his chin. “Yes you are, Darcy.” He ran a soothing hand over her back, allowing her time to compose herself.
Fat chance of that, her thoughts and hormones were spinning at a breakneck speed through her body, making it difficult to pick up on a single line of thought. *Oh hell,* she decided, *just pick at random and see where it takes you.* “And you? What is it that you want from me?”

Bucky shrugged with feigned nonchalance. “I want whatever you’re willing to give someone like me.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean ‘someone like you?’”

“Come on, Darce. I’m not exactly the cream of the boyfriend crop. My issues have issues, all shoved neatly into nearly a 100 years worth of baggage. You have to admit, I’m a risky choice. So if you want to be, uh...casual with me, keep your options open for a better...something, then I can accept that.” It might damn near kill him, but he’d respect her choice. He would *always* respect her choices, whatever they might be.

Darcy could only stare at him, jaw slack with disbelief. “Are you *fucking kidding me? I just* told you that I’m like two dates and a shared bubble bath away from being a thousand percent in love with you and you respond with that? NO. I do *not* want to ‘keep my options open,’ you unequivocal dumbass. Now, drop the self-sacrificing horseshit and tell me what you *actually* want. You wanted honesty from me and you got it, the least you could do is return the favor.”

With pounding heart and shaking hands, he reached up to hold her face, thumbs brushing the length of her cheekbones. “I want you, Darcy. I just want you,” he whispered, his breath ghosting across her lips with his closeness.

“I can work with that.” The charming grin that lit up her face and pressed her cheeks firmly into his palms sent his thoughts spinning in a new direction. With a matching smile, he closed the short distance between them to press his lips tenderly to hers, consumed with sudden happiness that bordered on the unbelievable.

They lingered there, their lips sweeping and sliding gently together, occasionally interrupted by affectionate nips from Bucky and lighthearted giggles from Darcy.

“Oh-my-god-Rob-wasn’t-lying-you’re-really-making-out-on-my-kitchen-counter.”

Darcy heaved a longsuffering sigh, searching the heavens for patience. “Hello, Angela.”

Bucky turned to level a disapproving glance over his shoulder. “*Goodbye, Angela,*” he grit out, before scooping Darcy into his arms and trudging down the hall to their room, kicking the door closed behind him. Angie’s delighted cackles followed them the whole way. He leaned against the door, head thumping quietly against the wood. This goddamn family, they were going to drive him up the wall. Including Darcy. Especially Darcy, who was still wrapped tightly around his middle and leering at him from beneath those thick, dark lashes.

“So...is this the part where you throw me onto the bed and show me how they did it in the 40s?”

Bucky thunked his head back against the door a bit harder this time with a low groan, then, with an inordinate amount of determination, pushed off the door to walk briskly over to the trundle bed. He released Darcy to bounce softly on the mattress, but placed a stilling hand on her shoulder when she reached to pull him down with her. With his other hand, he pointed an accusing finger in her face. “You. You sit there and behave yourself. I’ve got more I need to say and I can’t do it if you keep touching me.”

With that, he straightened and crossed the room, putting a good six feet between them before turning
back to Darcy. Deliciously rumpled Darcy. He dropped his head into his hands, trying to scrub away the insistent desire simmering under his skin.

“Bucky, what is it, babe?” The genuine concern in her voice and clear blue eyes was enough to settle him.

“I…I know that I had a reputation as a, as a...ladykiller back before everything. But maybe you could...if we could...take things slow? I don’t want to disappoint you, Darcy. I want nothing more than to please you like you deserve, but, but, but,” he stammered, searching for the words to describe the emotions reeling inside of him. “I just- I can’t. Kissing you, touching you is...it’s like coming home and being turned inside out all at once. And I’ve been trying for so long, scrabbling for....control, to quiet everything in my head. But when you touch me I keep unraveling and, don’t get me wrong, it feels so damn good, but it’s fucking terrifying.” He looked at her with pleading eyes, begging her to understand, to not be offended or hurt or think he was some pathetic asshole who didn’t know what the fuck to do with a woman once he had her.

He was shaking all over again and it broke Darcy’s heart into little jagged pieces. She suddenly burned with the need to reassure him, to give him everything he needed, to wrap him in a blanket and feed him cookies and straight up murder anyone who ever tried to hurt him ever again. That wasn’t a practical course of action at the moment, so she settled for using her words instead. “Babe, we can go as slow as you need. I’m in no rush. Well, okay, that’s not entirely true, because holy lord you are delicious, but I care more about your mental health than my...um, desires. So yeah. Slow. Yup, that’s us. Slow and steady wins the race, eh?”

“You’re really okay with that?”

“Yes. Now can I touch you again? I promise to keep it PG and purely for emotional comfort and not for sexy things.” Darcy emphasized the “sexy” with a ludicrous waggle of her eyebrows.

Bucky couldn’t help but laugh. “Sure, doll,” he said, opening his arms wide in welcome.

Darcy took the opportunity to hop off the bed and rush headlong into his chest, flinging her arms around his middle and burying her face into one unfairly perfect pectoral. She held him gently swaying, until she felt his tremors calm and his heartbeat slow to a reasonable pace.

She pulled back a bit to look him in the eye. “I’m sleeping in the other guest room from now on.”

Bucky blinked in confusion, not sure where this line of thought had come from. “Okay?” Darcy pulled away from him, gathering her pajamas into her arms and the pillow she’d been using that week. “Look, pal, I am a generous woman of the highest caliber, but there is no way I’m getting in bed so close to you after all this. I can’t handle that much unbridled sexual tension. I will lose my fucking mind and probably jump you because I can be a weak, weak woman when sleep deprived and hopped up on hormones. And I just promised to behave myself and not jump you...so away to the other bedroom I go.”

She nodded her head decisively, eyes glued to the door, and marched past him with as much resolution as she could muster. She had one hand on the door handle when she felt the cool metal of Bucky's hand slip around her other wrist. In the next instant, he had spun her around and pinned her to the wall, kissing her within an inch of her life. She dropped her pillow, she dropped her pajamas, and she was fairly certain she dropped several IQ points because when he pulled away from her she seemed to have forgotten the entirety of the English language. Except for the curse words.

“Holy shit,” she muttered, woodenly accepting the pillow and clothes that Bucky had scooped back up for her.
He gave a sinful bite to his lower lip before leaning in to whisper into her ear. “Goodnight, Darcy. Sleep well.”

“Bucky Barnes, how dare you, you evil bastard. I'm trying to behave myself for your benefit!” She used her pillow to start liberally applying a few good smacks about his head and shoulders.

Beneath her onslaught, Bucky began to giggle and squirm, making the barest effort to fend off her attack. “What? I was just trying to reward your patience by giving you sweet dreams!”

Darcy huffed and gave him one last solid whack with the pillow. “If you have to deny me the nookie, then you don't get to be a fucking tease, Barnes!”

Bucky raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay! I’ll behave myself, too, I promise. I’m sorry, Darcy, that was the last time.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes at him, but couldn’t hold on to her ire for more than a fleeting second. Not when his hair was all rumpled from her assault and his cheeks were flushed with merriment. Stupid, adorable, supersoldier boyfriend. She couldn’t stop herself from planting a last kiss to his supple mouth, but it was a gentle, little thing that held none of the heat of their earlier kisses. “Goodnight, asshole.” She tugged teasingly at the hair at the nape of his neck and pulled away to quickly escape the room before anything more torrid could take place.

This was turning out to be a most promising start to the new year, Darcy decided, snuggling down into the covers of the guest bed, trying, and failing, to squash the idiotic grin that was creeping across her face.

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Darcy woke slowly the next morning to the realization that she was definitely not alone in the guest bed. Upon opening her eyes, she was greeted by blue eyes almost identical to her own hovering expectantly over her by mere inches.

“Jesus! Angie what the fuck? Are you trying to give me a coronary?” Darcy rolled out from beneath where her sister was leaning over her, giving her enough distance to wedge her foot between Angie's thigh and the mattress, effectively shoving the other woman off the bed.

Angie was unperturbed, rising swiftly to pounce on her younger sister, both literally and figuratively. “Soooooo,” Angie began, grasping Darcy by the shoulders and shaking her excitedly, “are you guys together now? Is he a good kisser? He looks like he'd be a great kisser, that mouth, geez, looks so soft! A great place to sit, amiright?”

Darcy groaned, cursing the day she was born into this batshit crazy family. “Angie, please, no. I haven't even had coffee yet,” she whined.

Angie was merciless, her baby sister's pleas falling on deaf ears. She began bouncing up and down on the mattress, taking Darcy with her as she still had a grip on her shoulders. “Darcyyyyyyyyy, I'm an old married woman now, I must live vicariously through you and your epic romantic adventures.”

“Oh please, you and Rob still bang like bunnies, don't even try to pretend like you're not off gallivanting on your own weird romantic adventures.”

“Shhhhh, just answer me these questions three and I'll let you pass the Bridge of Death.”

“Is there coffee on the other side?”
“Of course.”

“Oh god. Fine. Fine. Ask your three questions, bridgekeeper.”

“So you guys are definitely together now, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is he a good kisser?”

“Oh my god, yes. So good. Like unbelievably good, especially for a 90 something year old dude.”

Angie responded with a happy squeal and another shake of Darcy's shoulders.

“Stop that, you ass. Ask your final question so I can get the hell out of here.”

“Are you happy?” Angie asked, tone sobering with her sincere interest.

Darcy couldn't help the waiver of emotion that crept into her voice when she responded. “Yes. I'm very happy.”

Angie smiled sweetly down at her baby sister, finally releasing her death grip on Darcy's shoulders only to scoop the younger woman fully to her chest, burrying her face into her neck. Darcy responded in kind, wrapping her arms around her sister and smacking a kiss to her cheek.

“Love you, Darcy. Go get your coffee, you earned it.”

Darcy wriggled out from her sister's embrace. “Damn skippy, I earned it. Interrogating people first thing in the morning is an international crime, I'll have you know,” she shouted over her shoulder as she made her way down the hall, where she promptly ran into a solid wall of muscle.

She bounced back and would have landed on her ass if Bucky hadn't reached out and caught her by the elbows. He gave her a slow once over before dipping his head to press a lingering kiss to her temple. “Good morning,” he said softly as he pulled away.

“Good morning, Bucky,” she replied, just as tenderly.

“Oh my god guys, you two have the dopiest grins on your faces right now. Get out of my hallway, you twitterpated idiots.” Angie was stuck behind them, a sardonic lift to her eyebrow and hands planted on her hips.

Darcy reached behind her without looking, pinching the nearest hunk of skin she could reach on her sister. She was met with a sharp hiss of pain from Angie and then instant retaliation in the form of a firm swat to her backside. Darcy made to return the assault on her sister, but the wench squeezed past them and made a hasty retreat to the safety of the kitchen.

Bucky just watched the whole exchange with sleep-dazed eyes and an amused quirk of his brows. Shaking his head, he reached out to pull Darcy's hand in his, lacing their fingers together, and led her to the kitchen and the promise of hot coffee.

Angie waited until the new couple had been properly fed and had enough coffee in their systems to be considered relatively alert before she began asking them about a double date.

“Rob said he told you about the double date. Did he tell you about the double date idea? It's a great idea.”
Darcy smiled with genuine excitement. “Yeah! He said something about dancing too. I thought it sounded fantastic.”

“Of course you did. It's like every high school fantasy you ever had has come to life. I'm pretty sure it's the whole premise of that short story you wrote.”

Bucky felt Darcy stiffen beside him. When he looked down at her, her cheeks were steadily reddening and she was sending fierce glares at her sister from over the rim of her coffee mug.

“Short story?” he asked, suddenly intrigued by Darcy's reaction.

“Oh she didn't tell you about that? What was the title of it again, Darcy? ‘My Perfect Date With Commando Barnes’ something like that, I think?”

Bucky turned to Darcy, eyebrows raised high on his forehead in delight. “Oh really? That sounds like an excellent read. Please tell me more, my dear friend Angela.”

Darcy was stuck between shooting pleading glances at him and withering glares at her sister. The glares were accompanied by a myriad of obscene and violent gestures.

Angie ignored the non verbal death threats. “You know, I bet I could find it. It's probably in the attic somewhere. It's a truly thrilling read, all about how Darcy meets a handsome stranger in a smoky European dance hall during World War II. They dance, they kiss, they fall in love, but alas he must leave her at the end of the night to go fight Hydra with the rest of the Commandos. He promises to return for her. Eventually he does. It takes many months and a grueling climb from the bottom of a ravine, but the burning strength of his love for her allows him to return to his beloved. I think they go live on a farm and have an obscene amount of children in the epilogue.”

Darcy groaned and slunk down in her chair, not stopping until she'd slid onto the floor, curling into the fetal position and trying to hide underneath her robe. Surely embarrassment this keen would imply a swift and painless death?

Bucky threw back his head, delighted laughter bursting from his chest. Wiping a gleeful tear from his eye, he sunk down on the floor next to his sweetheart, attempting to draw her out from her hiding place. “Darcy honey, look at me.”

“Nooo, go away and let me die in peace.”

“I can't do that, not now. But... really? You wrote about us being together?”

Darcy moaned in misery. She was going to fucking murder her sister. “I was sixteen, okay? I hadn't had a boyfriend yet, I was sad and horny and had a stupid crush on a stupidly handsome and tragic historical figure, so sue me!”

“Darcy, baby, please come out from beneath your robe and look at me, please?” Darcy gave a whine and a whimper but eventually peeked out from her pocket of misery. Bucky swept her frazzled hair back from her face, giving her a small smile.

“Don't be ashamed, sweetheart. It's a good fantasy. I wish that I'd met you in a dance hall. Wish that I'd been able to crawl out of that ravine and back to your arms, instead of being captured. Hell, I'd even take the farm and overabundance of children.” He grinned at her, tilting her chin up so he could kiss her sweetly. “But the here and now works too.”

“Yeah, yeah, you big, dumb softie. Help me off the floor,” she grumbled.
“Gladly,” he replied, tucking her into a bridal carry and setting her back into her seat.

“Aww, see Darcy? All’s well that ends well.”

“Shut your facehole, Angie. You are dead to me now.”

“Okay but you’re still coming on the double date?”

“Yes, but only because Bucky will be there and all dressed up. He's good eye candy.”

“Preach,” Rob interjected from where he was stirring a pan of eggs, raising his spatula in emphasis.

“Robert, he's my boyfriend now, you can't keep flirting with him.”

“Look Darcy, it's not flirting. I am an artist, I appreciate art in all forms. He,” he said, jabbing the spatula in Bucky’s direction, “is a work of art.”

Bucky smiled serenely as he bit into a piece of marmalade-covered toast, preening a bit under the praise.

“Yeah, okay, just so long as you don't try to draw him like one of your French girls,” Darcy grumbled.

Bucky’s brow crumpled in confusion. “I don't know what that means.”

Angie leaned over the bar to pat his forearm. “It's best you don't, dear.”

Chapter End Notes

If you look at the other works in this series, you will see the short story Darcy wrote. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it as the teenaged version of myself. It's so bad y'all which makes it so good for the soul. Please please go read it.
Angie’s date idea was originally sparked by the gracious invitation from one of her TAs to a fundraising dinner. Never one to let a hard-working assistant down, or miss an opportunity to play matchmaker, Angie had purchased four seats to the UVa Ballroom Dance Club’s Annual Gala about thirty seconds after Darcy had confirmed that Bucky would be coming for Christmas. She had been assured by her TA that it would be a romantic event. A candlelit dinner accompanied by performances from club members, followed by an open floor for those already familiar with the dance styles and free lessons for those who were not.

She had planned for the event to be the last weapon in her matchmaking arsenal if Darcy and Bucky proved to be stubborn about acting on their blindingly obvious attraction to one another. She was actually quite relieved that she wouldn’t need to use it anymore to push them together. Now she would be able to properly enjoy the evening with Rob. Very convenient. She did love a good tango.

Bucky was not quite so thrilled about the evening when he discovered that his current wardrobe was dreadfully under-equipped for the more formal setting of the gala. Rob had kindly offered the use of one of his suits, but that idea was quickly nixed. The two men may have been similar in height, but they were definitely in entirely different weight classes. Bucky couldn’t get Rob’s slim cut suit pants
more than halfway up his meaty thighs before the seams starting giving off ominous creaks.

After that, it was decided that suit shopping was unavoidable. The suit Bucky ended up picking out wouldn’t have met Tony Stark’s standards, but the deep navy brought out his eyes and was tailored enough to still show off his spectacular build. Darcy found the navy jacket rather reminiscent of his Commando uniform and some small part of herself that would always be a teenager swooned at the sight.

Darcy was also woefully unprepared for the gala’s dress code, but was quite happy to spend an afternoon dress shopping in Richmond with her sister. Well, she wasn’t particularly pleased with Angie coming with her initially. Darcy was still pissed beyond belief that her sister had spilled the beans about her self-insert historical fanfiction to Bucky. The entire car ride to Richmond, Darcy verbally eviscerated her older sister for her betrayal of childhood confidences.

Angie took it like a champ, quietly waiting out her sister’s wrath as she steered their car smoothly down the highway. This was not the first time Darcy had launched into a full blown tirade against her. She knew it was best to wait until the younger woman had said her (often lengthy) piece before attempting to defend herself. Darcy seemed to be finally losing her head of steam by the time Angie pulled into the parking spot in front of the shopping center they’d chosen to visit.

“Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?” Darcy asked indignantly.

Angie paused to unbuckle her seatbelt so she was unhindered when she turned to face Darcy. Pulling her face into her sternest professorial expression, Angie held two fingers up in front of Darcy’s face. “Two words, Darcy: Greg. Leibovitch.”

Her younger sister instantly paled and ducked her head. “Okay, point taken.”

“Thank you,” Angie replied in smug satisfaction. The saying was true after all. Revenge really was a dish best served cold. Even if it took twenty years to get it.

“Besides,” Angie continued sweetly, “Bucky found it very endearing so I don’t know what you’re so mad about. It’s not like he found it strange and repulsive and decided to make a damn song about it that the whole school sang for three years straight. I watched him sit on the floor and kiss you because of it. Really, you should feel indebted to me for earning you that pity kiss.”

“Okay, okay! Got it. Your situation was much worse and mine turned out great. Can we please go spend a bunch of my money now?”

Angie brightened and practically leapt from the car. She made decent money as a professor but it was nowhere near the Stark bankroll. She was looking forward to Darcy treating her to a few nice blouses and dresses that weren’t limited to nursing viable options. There was a limit to how many blouses with secret-panel-boob-windows that one could wear before one felt like a goddamn dairy cow.

Their shopping trip turned out to be very fruitful, with both women returning home with a variety of lovely pieces to supplement their wardrobes. Darcy had even been able to find a royal blue cocktail dress for the gala that had a nice flared skirt to allow for dancing and a boat neckline to avoid any potential wardrobe malfunctions. It was probably best that she not flash the faculty and students while shaking her stuff on the dance floor.

Darcy’s choice of dress for the gala was further affirmed when she walked into the living room and was met with a thorough once over from an impeccably dressed Sergeant Barnes. The man rose gracefully from his seat to saunter his way to her with a look in his eyes that was playing havoc on
her nervous system. He stopped when he was a few inches from her, reaching his flesh hand up to
rest against the side of her neck, thumb tracing along the edge of her jaw and flicking at the teardrop
pearl dangling from her ear. Her name slipped from his mouth on a sigh.

“See something you like, soldier?”

“Yes ma’am.” Bucky grinned at her then leaned in to press a kiss to her throat. “You look like a
dream, doll.”

“Mmm, you don’t look so bad yourself, Sarge. You should wear monkey suits more often.”

Bucky’s face scrunched in mild disgust. “No thanks. I prefer clothing with a little more give. Makes
for better range of motion and more places to conceal...um, things.”

Darcy arched an eyebrow at him. “Exactly how many ‘things’ do you have currently concealed on
your person, Bucky?”

He shrugged sheepishly. “Five? Give or take.”

“Five?? Christ, how many do you normally carry?”

“...More than five?” He flashed her a strained smile.

“Yeesh. Well, at least I know the bad guys will never get me if I’m with you.”

Something cold hardened in the depths of Bucky’s eyes, giving the blue an icy edge. “They
wouldn’t live to regret it,” he menaced with a bit of a growl rising in his throat.

Darcy soothed a hand over his left arm which was giving off little menacing whirs and growls of its
own. “Easy there, Cujo. Heel.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, letting the tension drain from him and bent to sweep another quick kiss to her
neck. Straightening, he offered his arm to her, escorting her to the coat closet where Rob and Angie
were already bundling up and chatting with the babysitter the nanny agency had recommended. The
young woman was bouncing Violet cheerfully in her arms, listening intently as Rob went over her
bedtime routine.

With everyone properly dressed for the cold and the babysitter prepped for the night, they made their
goodbyes to Violet and traipsed out to the street to load into Angie’s SUV.

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The UVa Ballroom Club certainly knew how to throw a gala. The Jefferson Ballroom of the Omni
hotel had been luxuriously decked out in soft shades of blue and purple mood lighting with dozens of
large circular tables situated around a spacious dance floor. Each of the tables was beautifully set and
decorated using fresh cut flowers. It was simple yet tasteful and Darcy couldn’t help but snap a few
pictures as they were seated at their table.

The dinner went very well, with both couples thoroughly enjoying the entertainment provided during
the meal. Darcy noticed that Bucky was particularly attentive to the dancers, his sharp eyes following
each and every move, committing the steps to memory. She kind of hoped he was planning on using
those moves later when the dance floor opened up, but she’d gone into the date knowing that the only person she might end up dancing with would be her sister. Or potentially Rob, if he could tear himself away from Angie for a moment.

As it was, her brother-in-law’s eyes were practically glued to her sister at the moment, tracing the graceful arch of Angie’s neck and the way her hands fluttered as she spoke. It was a fairly common occurrence to find Rob watching his wife like this. Darcy had grown used to it over the years, marking it down as Rob’s way of committing moments when he found her sister particularly lovely to memory. There was almost always a new portrait or sketch hung in his office a couple days after these events. Honestly, it was kind of adorable.

As soon as dinner was over and the dance floor was opened up, Rob pulled his wife to her feet, artfully spinning her into a tight embrace before escorting her out to dance among the other couples.

“Rob’s got moves. Wasn’t expecting that,” Bucky commented with some surprise.

“His mom ran a dance studio when he was a kid, so he picked up a few things over the years.” Darcy watched her sister and brother-in-law for a few moments, soaking in the feeling of a full stomach and a content disposition. When her eyes slowly tracked back to Bucky, he was watching her with a wide grin, something sneaky shifting behind his gaze.

“What?” Darcy asked, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Nothing. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure,” Darcy replied, her suspicion rising further at his obvious deflection. “I’ll take a glass of wine.”

“Red or white?”

“Surprise me.”

Bucky gave her a wink and a smirk and crossed behind her, fingers trailing across her bare back, to head to the opposite side of the ballroom where the open bar was. He returned a few minutes later, placing her glass of wine down in front of her with one hand and placing his cold metal fingers across the bare skin of her back. Leaning low, he brushed his nose up the length of her neck before whispering softly into her ear, “What’s a sweet kid like you doing in a hellhole like this?”

Hellhole? She thought the ballroom looked rather delightful—

Oh.

Oh no.

Darcy froze in her seat, distant recognition and a sinking horror suddenly drenching her bones. She knew those words.

“Bucky.” Her voice came out high and tight, pinched with dread. “Please tell me Angie didn’t let you read my stupid story. Please.”

Bucky sank into his seat next to her, leaning his elbow against the table and dropping his prosthetic hand to her knee. “Nope. She didn’t.”

Darcy felt the tension seep out of her. “Oh thank god.”
“I may have gone on an intel-gathering mission in the attic while you were shopping though.” He gave her his patented shit-eating grin.

“What!”

“Come on doll, you can’t dangle that kind of information in front of an ex spy and not expect me to go snooping.”

Darcy’s eyes nearly bulged from her skull, a mixture of fury and embarrassment firing a blush along her throat. “Did you read the whole thing? Oh my god, how did you even find it??”

“Super-spy skills,” Bucky replied. At her snort of disbelief he elaborated. “It was in the great big box labeled ‘Darcy’s Crap.’ And yes, I did read it. The whole, beautiful thing.”

Darcy folded in half at the waist, groaning into her lap. “Noooo, noooo, no God, why? Why is this happening to me? Am I being punished? Is this God punishing me for being a bad Catholic?”

“Yes. It is. He told me last week when I was praying at Mass, like a good Catholic boy.”

Darcy flung her fist out blindly, punching weakly at a meaty bit of supersoldier thigh. He didn’t even flinch, the bastard. He did catch her wrist though and gently pulled her upright again. He stroked his fingers softly across her wrist, a joyous grin lighting up his evil bastard features.

“Darcy, it was...better than I ever could have imagined. I loved it. Oh God,” he broke off, suddenly overcome with laughter. “Baby, it was just so bad.”

Darcy’s face dropped into her hands. “I know,” she moaned, her face now fully red, and yes, it was definitely the ugly, splotchy kind. “Jesus, we have to break up now and we haven’t even finished our first date yet.”

Bucky suddenly snapped to attention at her words, leaning towards her and eyes wide with alarm. “What? No, Darcy, honey please don’t do that.”

“Yes, I have to. How can we be in a relationship if I can never look you in the eyes ever again?”

Bucky let out the anxious breath he’d been holding, relief flooding his gut. It was a joke. She was joking. Thank god. He reached out to her, needing to touch her and reassure himself that she still wanted him. He pulled her so that she was seated sideways on his lap, wrapping one arm around her hips and pulling her hands from her face with the other.

He began pressing kisses into the soft skin of her neck, murmuring fervent apologies into her ear as he went. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have snooped. Please don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry. I’m mortified.”

His lips twitched against her neck. “Well don’t be that either.” He pulled back, waiting for her eyes to finally meet his before continuing. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I loved it. Was it corny and ridiculous? Yes. But it was also incredibly sweet. And great for my ego.” Darcy whacked him on the shoulder at the last comment. He chuckled and caught the offending hand, kissing the knuckles one by one.

“It’s also a good feeling to know that you chose me before you ever even met me.” He smiled shyly up at her, worrying gently at his lower lip.

“Don’t get too excited. I was a teenager at the time. My frontal lobe wasn’t fully developed yet.”
Bucky snapped his teeth playfully at her neck, pinching a bit of her rear until she was squirming in his lap. “Don’t sass me young lady. Or I really will spank you this time.”

“Oh no,” Darcy pleaded, clasping her hands in front of her. “Anything but that!”

Bucky chuckled and nuzzled his face into the crook of her neck, rubbing soothing circles over her hip. Darcy rested her cheek against his head, shifting to wrap her arms around his shoulders and tapping a foot to the beat of whatever song was playing.

Bucky breathed in the sweet scent of her skin before shifting to speak softly in her ear. “You know, you got a few things right in your story, but most of it was very, very wrong. I definitely would have wanted to make you mine after one evening, but I wouldn’t have waited over a year to do it. I certainly wouldn’t have left you standing outside a smoky dance hall at the end of the evening.” He paused, making sure he had her full attention and then dropped his voice into a timbre that he remembered using as a young man. “I would have taken you back to my bed, pressed my name into your skin with my tongue over and over until you were absolutely, unmistakably mine.”

Darcy shivered in his lap, her pulse quickening beneath his lips. “I thought you said you weren’t going to tease me anymore, Barnes.” Bucky couldn’t help his self-satisfied smirk when he heard the slight quiver to her voice.

“I know, sweetheart, but I wanted to make you feel better after being such a nosy jackass and embarrassing you.”

Darcy shifted on his lap. “Yeah well I’m feeling something.” She leaned back to glance pointedly at his crotch. “Hello Private Barnes, I appreciate the salute.”

Bucky flushed and tightened his grip on Darcy until he could hide his face in her neck again. “Okay, well that part backfired,” he mumbled.

“I’m not sure ‘backfired’ is the right word. ‘Mutinied’ seems more accurate.”

“Stop wiggling, you’re making it worse.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. This must be so embarrassing for you.” Darcy gave another series of deliberate wiggles of her hips, acting as if she was dancing along to the bouncy music playing throughout the room.

Bucky groaned into her throat. “You’re a devil woman, did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Don’t dish it if you can’t take it.” Darcy bounced once more for emphasis on the last word, giving a truly evil smile at his answering whimper.

Bucky dug his fingers into her hip and thigh, hoping to stop the torturous wiggling. Darcy took pity on him, stilling her movements and patting the back of the hand digging into her leg.

“Truce?” she asked.

Bucky nodded sharply, his breath stuttering across her chest. “If you wouldn’t mind, doll,” he panted.

Darcy gave a dark chuckle, settling into his chest and humming quietly to the music. When Bucky had calmed and collected himself, he gave her backside a gentle tap, signaling to her that she could return to her own seat.
Rob and Angie returned to the table shortly thereafter, winded and a touch giggly for two people who were supposed to be respectable adults. Darcy raised a knowing eyebrow at her sister’s slightly rumpled dress and the smudge of lipstick peeking out from Rob’s collar.

“Look’s like you two have been having fun.”

Angie gave a satisfied sigh. “Rob is just the best dancer.”

Bucky didn’t miss the way Rob flushed and cleared his throat, shooting his wife a warning glare. He snorted and rolled his eyes. Tormenting their men was apparently a family trait. Hoping to save Rob from further embarrassment, Bucky took the opportunity to stand and hold a hand out to Darcy.

“Would you care to dance with me?”

Darcy blinked up in surprise. “Are you sure? We don’t have to if you can’t remember how…”

He gave her a cheeky wink. “I always dance with the prettiest girl in the room.”

“Are you ever going to stop quoting my stupid story to me?”

“No. Never.”

Darcy cursed the day she ever wrote that awful thing, but took Bucky’s hand anyway. He pulled her into his side and led her to where the other couples were starting the first few steps of a mid tempo waltz.

He gently guided her into position before pausing to ask, “Do you know how to waltz?”

Darcy nodded. “Rob taught me a couple of the basic dance styles. Can you waltz?”

“I used to. Watching the performances tonight helped shake some of that stuff loose in my head. I’m hoping that trying it will help shake the rest out.”

“Here’s to hoping,” Darcy said, and then grew silent in concentration as Bucky began to lead her into the dance. The first few steps were…awkward, with him scrambling to remember and her trying not to lead, but eventually they hit their stride. Once he’d regained his footing, Bucky was able to lead her confidently through the steps, guiding her gracefully across the floor.

It’s an exhilarating thing to dance with a man who knows not only how to dance, but how to lead. Lots of men can dance, have rhythm and knowledge of the steps, but so very few actually know how to move a woman across a dance floor in such a way that it feels effortless. It was a firm grip, a measured understanding of where the woman’s feet would fall next. A hand to the waist, not to anchor her to the floor but to buoy her, taking the burden of her weight so that she might glide across the floor with breathtaking ease. A knowledge of how to signal their partner with the lightest of touches so that the woman is never left guessing which way he would take her. With a man like that, a woman could confidently follow him anywhere and with joyous abandon.

This was a lesson that Darcy was taking great pleasure in learning that evening. Dancing with Rob had never even come close to this, whether it was due to his lack of skill or a lack of connection between the two of them, she didn’t know. But whatever had been missing, she had definitely found it now being swept across the floor in Bucky’s arms.

He led her through a few more songs, switching to a less structured sway or two-step if it was a song that fell out of the ¾ time of a waltz. Darcy didn’t mind, appreciating the break in concentration and just happy to watch the way his eyes were lit up with joy at a forgotten skill.
He gently spun and dipped her, bringing her up with a kiss at the close of one song, when the rapid fire beating of a drum set and brassy tones of a trombone heralded the start of another. Bucky’s head instantly snapped up, recognition dawning in his eyes.

“I...I know this song!” He couldn’t quite contain his excitement at the flood of memories that the music stirred in him. He pulled Darcy to him again, moving his feet in a series of fast paced twists. Darcy tried to keep up but was utterly lost.

“Bucky,” she squealed between peals of giggles. “What the hell are you doing??”

“It’s called the lindy hop, sweetheart. Ain’t it grand?” he crowed, spinning her first one way and then the other fast enough to make her dizzy. “Just move your feet like this.” He demonstrated a few steps for her and she did her best to mimic but ended up losing her balance and crashing into his chest.

His exuberance had drawn a bit of a crowd and the attention of some the instructors who had been giving lessons nearby. One of the lady instructors stepped forward, tapping Bucky on the shoulder.

“You’re pretty good at that, sir. Mind if I cut in?” The girl couldn’t have been more than twenty, short and with a sweet, heart-shaped face and brown eyes that bounced eagerly between the couple. Bucky glanced at Darcy, waiting for her permission.

She couldn’t help but laugh at his hopeful expression. “Yes, please. Before I embarrass myself further trying to keep up with him!”

Bucky pulled her in close to press an enthusiastic kiss to her lips, shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it to her, and then loosened his tie a bit before turning to his new dance partner. “Come on, kid. Let’s see what you got,” he said, reaching for the little blonde’s hand.

He wasted no time pulling the girl back into the dance. She was obviously familiar with the style and fell into the breakneck pace of the song with ease. Darcy watched in delight as Bucky spun and twirled across the floor with the blonde, twisting and turning in symmetry. At one point he began tossing the girl into the air in a series of moves that looked both terrifying and a hell of a lot of fun. At the final screaming trill of trumpets, Bucky spun the girl over and around his shoulder and then back down into his arms, dipping her almost to the floor, before pulling her back to standing with a jerk.

This was met with a round of applause from the other dancers and bystanders, including Darcy who was bouncing on her toes with exuberance. She’d never seen anything so amazing in her whole life and couldn’t believe that old man had so many tricks up his sleeve. Those history books hadn’t been lying.

Bucky ducked his head with a shy grin at the attention, turning back to the girl to thank her for the dance before sidling over to his best girl who was hovering at the edge of the dance floor. Darcy pounced on him as soon as he was in range, pulling him down by his tie to give him a thorough kiss.

Bucky blinked at her owlishly. “What was that for?”

“For being amazing and cute and sexy and amazing! You have to teach me how to dance like that.” He just laughed, shaking his head. “I tried! But you foisted me off on some other dame.”

“Bucky, there was no way I could learn how to do that dance at that tempo. You have to start me out on a slow song.” She poked an accusing index finger into his chest.

“You may have a point,” he said, then bent his head to kiss her again. The heady feeling of having
her in his arms along with the triumph of having impressed her with his talent was a potent mix that left him feeling giddy and a bit lightheaded. Perhaps that’s why he didn’t notice the couple that was steadily careening towards the two of them from the dance floor. The couple, who had obviously been taking liberal advantage of the open bar, made a wide, sloppy spin that made them crash into Bucky and Darcy.

The full momentum of the other people, coupled with Bucky’s heavy frame, had Darcy tumbling backwards into one of the tables which instantly tipped under their weight. Darcy slid to the floor with Bucky on top of her, glassware and china coming down with a horrendous crash all around them. She snapped her attention to Bucky, worried that he might have gotten cut by the debris, but when she looked up into his face where he was hovering over her, she knew instantly that something was horribly, horribly wrong.

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Bucky jerked at the endless boom and crash of heavy German artillery. The neverending quake of the earth startled his stride as he ran over land, eventually knocking him to the ground. He rolled into a nearby trench hunkering down into the earth and sucking in air, eyes clenched tight against the hell around him.

They all told him that war would be glorious, that enlisting was the honorable thing, that he would be lauded a hero. He didn’t give two shits about being a hero, and, despite everything, he still knew enlisting was the right the to do, but there was nothing remotely glorious about this goddamn cesspit.

War wasn’t the pretty thing that had been painted for him. It was the constant smell of shit and blood and brain matter mixed with mud and the tangy metallic taste at the back of his tongue that he could only assume was fear. It was watching men be torn apart. It was gore and death and terror and shaking under the weight of your own guilt. But it was not glorious. It was never that.

Bucky’s eyes jerked open at the sound of gurgled moaning coming from ten yards to his left. He turned his head to see Private Nelson laying flat on his back, blood and dirt spattered across his face, eyes bloodshot and streaming. Bucky ran over to the kid, pulling him up to sitting and wiping some of the mess from his face.

Nelson was a little redheaded guy from Phoenix, barely eighteen, and the sole provider for his mother and three sisters. He was a tough kid, but scared shitless, like they all were. He didn’t deserve to be in this hell, and Bucky wasn’t gonna let this kid get killed out here, not if he could help it. He’d always had a soft spot for strays and runts.

He shook the boy, trying to break him out of his disorientation. “Come on, Nelson, get it together! How the hell am I supposed to fuck that pretty older sister of yours if you’re not alive to introduce us?”

At the taunt, light returned to the kid’s eyes and color came back a bit to his already pale face. The boy took a swing at Bucky, glancing off his shoulder with about as much strength as a kitten. “Don’t you fuckin’ dare, Barnes, you asshole.”

“That’s right, buddy, you tell me what’s what.” He began patting the man down, searching for any injuries that might not have been obvious. “I still outrank you though, so watch your language, ya
Bucky was in the middle of his inspection when he felt a warm wetness seep into the knee of his pants where he knelt in the dirt. He looked down to see the dark, rich red of arterial blood pooling on the ground, staining his pants and creeping up along the fabric on Nelson’s inner thighs. The rate of blood loss implied substantial damage to both femoral arteries. The kid would bleed out in a matter of minutes, long before a medic could ever reach them.

Choking back on a sob, he frantically searched around for something to stem the blood flow, but came up short. Nelson was quickly losing consciousness, so he did the only thing he knew to do. He held the kid’s hand and talked to him. He was pretty sure that Nelson wasn’t really comprehending any of it, but he kept his tone smooth and easy, talking about anything and nothing and pretending like the barrage of artillery fire wasn’t still raining down all around them. Nelson’s eyes stayed locked on his, his breath coming in labored gasps until they sputtered out completely.

A low moan of despair escaped from Bucky’s chest, but there was nothing left for him to do. He made the sign of the cross over the boy, sending a desperate prayer to God to watch over his soul and the lives of the family he left behind. He couldn’t look away from the kid’s eyes, they stayed wide and staring in death. He knew he should close them, break his grasp on the boy’s fingers that were already growing cold and gently slide them shut, but he couldn’t. Couldn’t let go, couldn’t help, couldn’t look away, couldn’t breathe.

God, he couldn’t breathe in this hell!

Nelson’s face began to shift and waver in his vision oddly, his brown eyes fading to blue and then back again, bright shock of red hair darkening to chestnut.

He blinked, trying to shake the strangeness away. The sounds around him began to stretch and bend, the cacophony of warfare shifting to a rhythmic booming that was incongruous to a battlefield and more common to a dance hall.

Nelson’s mouth popped open, shouting Bucky’s name from first thin dead lips and then plump, red ones.

Bucky!

Bucky!

Babe, it’s Darcy.

Darcy? What the fuck was Darcy doing in the middle of German-occupied Italy?

Wait, that was...she wasn’t here. And neither was he.

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With a jerk, Bucky’s memory popped into place, awareness of his surroundings blooming into his conscious mind. He was breathing raggedly, still kneeling protectively over Darcy, red wine drenching his knee and her lap where someone’s glass had toppled down on top of them. Shattered glass was spread like a halo around them and a flurry of waiters and gala attendees were standing nearby, watching him with wary eyes as he trembled under the weight of his memories.
“Bucky, honey, are you with me?” Darcy placed a hesitant hand on his heaving chest.

Breathing heavily still, he rose quickly to his feet, hauling her up with him with a little more force than he’d intended. She stumbled into his chest, clinging to him for balance. Angie and Rob appeared in the crowd, pushing through to stand around the two of them.

“What happened, are you both okay?” Angie asked, concern clear in her tone.

Darcy nodded, keeping her eyes on Bucky. He couldn’t handle the weight of her gaze and was hit with the desperate need to escape. To run and hide like the broken coward that he was.

“I have to...I have to go,” he gasped out, turning abruptly for the exit.

Darcy’s hand shot out, clasping around his wrist. “Bucky, wait, please, just talk to me. I can help.”

He shook her hand off with more roughness than he intended, but the rising panic in his chest was telling him that he was a ticking time bomb and he needed to get the hell away from all these people before he completely lost his shit and somebody got hurt.

“No,” he bit out sharply, then took off at a run for the exit, not stopping till he’d reached the parking lot.

Rob reached out to pull Darcy into a hug, soothing his palms over her upper arms. “Give him a few minutes to collect himself and then I’ll go talk to him, okay?”

Darcy nodded at her brother-in-law, feeling numb and lost.

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Bucky stomped through the lines of parked cars, coming to a halt outside of Angie’s car. He resisted the urge to punch his fist through the passenger side door, settling for cracking his forehead sharply against the window.

Well this evening sure had been shot to shit real fast. He was such an idiot, thinking he could do this, go out on dates, be the man he once was. One little mishap and his fucked up brain had him writhing in a flashback, scaring the shit out of everyone around him. Fuck! What if he’d gotten violent? What if he’d shot someone, or stabbed them? What if he’d hurt Darcy?

Bile rose in his throat, his gut clenching in fear and self-loathing. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t be like this around her. He thought that she would be safe with him, that he could let his guard down enough to let her in, to love her and let her love him back. What a fucking joke. He must have been delusional to think he could ever have something as whole and beautiful as Darcy. Being with her was going to get her hurt or worse, and he couldn’t live with that outcome. He’d rather die broken-hearted and alone than have her be with him and end up getting killed. It was better if he ended things now, before they got too deep. Cut things off cleanly so she wouldn’t be as hurt by him ending things.

He was startled out of his dark thoughts when the car alarm chirped and the interior lights sprung on, signaling that someone had unlocked the car. Bucky turned to see Rob slowly approaching him, a bottle of water clutched between two hands.
“Get in the car, Bucky. It’s fucking freezing.”

Bucky nodded, woodenly climbing into the passenger seat. Rob climbed into the driver’s side a couple seconds later, gently pushing the bottle of water into Bucky’s hands before starting the car and blasting the heater. The two men sat quietly while Rob waited for Bucky to finish the water. When he drained the last drop and crumpled the plastic into a tight ball, Rob turned to speak to him.

“That did not go according to plan.”

Bucky gave a sharp bark of bitter laughter. “No. Not really.”

“Are you gonna talk to Darcy about what happened or keep pushing her away?”

“I’m ending things with her.” Bucky’s chest tightened with the admission. “She’s not safe with me.”

“Well that’s the stupidest fucking thing I’ve ever heard,” Rob said, voice calm and even.

Bucky’s head whipped around to face the other man, disbelief shining from his eyes. “Are you serious? Did you not see what just happened? I got knocked over and my brain decided to send me back to a trench in fucking Italy, watching some kid die from German artillery fire. You don’t think that constitutes a good enough reason to leave Darcy alone? What if I’d thought she was the enemy? What if I’d tried to kill her? I’m a fucking nutcase! And sometimes, I get the feeling that I’m gonna be that way until the day I die. How the hell am I supposed to subject that woman to something like that? She doesn’t deserve it. Doesn’t deserve to be stuck with me.” He slumped back in his seat, crossing his arms tightly across his chest.

“Seems to me like that decision should be up to Darcy,” Rob commented lightly.

“Are you kidding? Her judgment is compromised when it comes to me. She sees me too much as her childhood crush. Sees me as the man I used to be and not the one I’ve been made into.”

Rob gave a heavy sigh, scrubbing his hands over his face. “Maybe, maybe not, but you can’t keep pushing her away.”

“Even though I could accidentally kill her?”

“Look man, that’s a shit argument. Hell, even I could accidentally kill Angie if I had a nasty case of PTSD, and I don’t even have super-strength. You’re thinking about this all wrong, it’s not about how much of a danger you present to Darcy. Almost every man is a potential danger to most women, by virtue of the fact that we’re generally stronger. Physically, anyway. The only dividing factor between which of us is and isn’t a danger to women is the content of our souls. You got a fucked up brain, Barnes, but your soul is solid.” Rob reached across the center console place his hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

“And you know what else? A lot of guys have fucked up brains just like yours and they go on to live long, happy lives with wives and kids and nobody gets hurt.”

Bucky started to protest that his brain was a particularly gruesome flavor of “fucked up” but Rob shot him down again.

“Yeah, okay, your damage is a lot more twisted than most, but the results are the same. Flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety attacks, paranoia, depression, a whole gamut of fun brain malfunctions. Pretty much every soldier that’s seen combat comes back home suffering from at least some of those things. My step dad certainly did, but that didn’t stop him from loving the hell out of my mom and me.”
Bucky watched Rob in the low light of the dashboard, thoughts swirling sluggishly through his overwrought brain. “Your step dad was a soldier?”

Rob nodded. “Yeah, he fought in Vietnam. Have you read up on that war yet?”

“Briefly, yes. It looked like it was pretty nasty.”

“Yep, pretty much. It was a real clusterfuck. And it messed my step dad up real bad. He was only eighteen when he was drafted, just a kid, and the things he saw, the things he did...they haunted him when he came home. So many of the guys that came back from that one were messed up afterwards. For a long time, he couldn’t handle all of the mental shit, lived in the bottom of a bottle most days. Until he met my mom.” Rob smiled, memory playing behind his eyes.

“He fell in love with her, got sober for her, but he was scared that he’d hurt us, either physically or emotionally, so he kept pushing us away. Then two of his buddies from his platoon shot themselves in the same damn weekend. He went to both their funerals and the biggest thing that he noticed was how both men had pushed and pushed away their family and friends until they’d been left all alone. And the loneliness and the pain grew so large that pulling the trigger seemed like the only option left.” Rob shook his head, sorrow pulling at the lines in his face.

“It scared Dad shitless, and he decided right then and there that he was done pushing us away. Called my mom and proposed to her over the phone from three states away, because you know what he realized?” Rob paused, making sure Bucky was looking him in the eye when he drove the point home. “He realized that pushing people away, being alone, only made the demons louder. You don’t get better by yourself Barnes, you need people. People who will love you and support you, no matter what. It’s the only way you’ll ever get better.”

“Didn’t your step dad worry about accidentally hurting you, still? Killing you in his sleep?”

“Oh sure, but my mom was a tough lady. You better believe she slept with a knife under her side of the mattress for the entirety of their marriage.”

“That didn’t bother her? Having to take...precautions like that?”

“Not really, no. She always said the trade off was exponentially greater in my Dad’s favor. I’m fairly certain Darcy would say the same about you.” Rob paused, considering his next words. “If it’d make you feel better about being with her, maybe you could convince Darcy to keep a weapon on her at all times that has a little more punch than her taser. If she can kick your ass when you get a little twitchy, you wouldn’t have to worry about her so much.”

Bucky stared at Rob, thoughts clicking happily into place. “That might....that might actually work. I’d certainly be happier knowing she could keep herself safe if I became a threat.”

“See?” Rob said, cheerily smacking Bucky on the shoulder. “All you needed was a little creative thinking. You guys can hash out the details together later, after you’ve explained to Darcy where your head was at and apologized for shutting her out.” He raised an eyebrow at Bucky, daring him to contradict him.

Bucky nodded sheepishly. “You’re right. I need to go talk to her. Need to apologize.” He took a slow breath, hesitating a moment before continuing. “Can I ask you a question first? About your step dad?”

“Sure, go for it.”

“How long did it take for him to get back to normal?”
Rob let out a bark of laughter. “Never. I said being with us made him better. I never said it made him normal. He was a paranoid son of a bitch until the day he died, but he was still the kindest, most wonderful man I’ve ever known. I couldn’t have asked for a better father.”

Bucky looked heartbroken at the revelation, sinking into to the seat dejectedly. “So there’s no hope of me ever being like I used to.”

Rob gave him a sympathetic smile. “To tell the truth? No, probably not. Your Hydra damage aside, you were still a soldier in a bloody and gruesome war. No man comes back from war unbroken. Dad used to say that it shattered a man, fighting like that, and you spend the rest of your life putting the pieces all back together. The more people you have in your life, the more hands you have to help you piece yourself together and the faster the work goes. But still, at the end of the day, it’s inevitable that you leave tiny pieces of yourself scattered all over that battlefield. Pieces that you can never get back. So you move forward with your life, make new memories and relationships to fill in the missing pieces. And sure, you become a tattered, cracked, mish-mash of a man, but at least you’re whole. Not normal, not by any stretch of the imagination, but still whole.”

Bucky stared at Rob in silence for a full minute, mind reeling with the other man’s words, before he broke. He began shaking and silent tears slowly made a trek down his cheeks. He cupped a hand roughly over his mouth, trying to hold back the sobs that were threatening to break loose. Rob leaned into him then, pulling him into a hug with a strong arm around his shoulder and a hand stroking softly across his hair.

“It’s alright, man. Let it out. This shit is heavy stuff. If you can’t cry about it every once in awhile it just makes it hurt worse.”

Bucky let out a sound that was half choked laughter and half sob. After a while, he pulled away from Rob, his tears finally ebbing. He dashed the wetness from his face with the back of his hands, sniffing a little as he regained his composure.

Rob patted him one last time on the back. “Alright, I’m going in. I’ll send Darcy out and you guys can talk things out a little. Go ahead and text me and Ange when you guys are done and we can head back home.” He stepped out from the car, closing the door partially before ducking his head roughly over his mouth, trying to hold back the sobs that were threatening to break loose. Rob leaned into him then, pulling him into a hug with a strong arm around his shoulder and a hand stroking softly across his hair.

Darcy and Angie were huddled together at the table, heads bowed together over the wine stain on her new dress and scrubbing desperately at it with club soda. He sent Darcy out to the car with a brief explanation and then sank into the chair next to his wife.

Angie leaned into his side, glancing a kiss across his cheek. “Is he gonna be okay?”

Rob smiled sweetly at his wife, running a thumb over her full bottom lip. “Yeah, babe, I think he is.” Then he lowered his mouth tenderly to hers.

Chapter End Notes

Darcy’s dress, click the ‘Royal’ fabric swatch. So blue!

This is a decent video to show you what the Lindy Hop looks like.
This is another good example of the Lindy Hop that isn't quite so campy as the 40s footage.

The song that Bucky and Tiny Dancer dance to, it's so fast!
Apology and Road Trip 2.0

Chapter Summary

Pretty much what the title says. With some fun stuff thrown in the mix. "Fun stuff" is code for kissing. Just so you know.

Chapter Notes

Alright kiddos, thank you so much for all your love and support. I can't begin to describe how grateful I am for all your lovely comments.

Once again, all my love to ladyaudiophile for being the best beta to ever beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky wasn't sure what to expect when he spotted Darcy crossing the parking lot, her gloved hands twisting together and her face pinched and downcast. Even as sharp-eyed as he was, he couldn’t quite get a read on her expression and the uncertainty of the moment spiked through his gut and sent his heart skittering in his chest. He’d been a complete ass and he owed her an apology, but the prospect of facing her anger or hurt was an altogether terrifying prospect.

He rolled the joints in his wrists, listening to the creak and pop of tendons from his right and the low hiss of hydraulics from his left. When Darcy was a few feet from the car, she finally dragged her eyes from their diligent survey of the cement. Sitting in the dark as he was, it was unlikely that she could actually see him in the cab, but he dropped his eyes to his lap anyway, unable to face her troubled gaze.

Bucky twisted his hands together in his lap, waiting for the clunk of the driver’s side door opening. He was startled when his own door opened and he was suddenly enveloped in the soft warmth of Darcy’s arms, her hair flying around to catch at the stubble on his jaw. She buried her face in his neck causing him to flinch when her frostbitten nose found its way into the warm skin of his throat.

She’d planted herself sideways on his lap, hauling herself up into the cab without second thought and leaving the door gaping open. Bucky reached around her, tucking her feet and legs carefully into the car before shutting the door and enclosing them into the dark, warm space of the car. He hesitated a moment before wrapping his own arms around her, his left arm settling around her shoulders and his right hand sliding along the wool fabric of her coat where it hung at her hips.

She pressed a small kiss to his throat before mumbling “Are you done being a dumbass yet?”

A chuckle that was more relieved sigh than actual laughter rumbled up from Bucky’s chest. “For this specific instance, yes. In general, probably not,” he admitted.

“I expected as much. You may be a wonderful man, but you’re still a man. Dumbassery is somewhere on the Y chromosome, I’m sure of it.”
“That sounds about right,” Bucky said, grinning into her hair before sobering and pulling her back from him. “I’m sorry, Darce,” he said softly. “I shouldn’t have been so harsh with you. Or run from you like that. Next time I’ll let you help me. I promise, I won’t run from you again.” His right hand drifted up, settling against her neck, and his thumb began tracing slow circles behind her ear.

Darcy leaned into the touch, a small, sad smile pulling at her lips. “It’s okay if you have to run sometimes, Bucky. I know it was only because you felt threatened by all those strangers. It’s understandable. It’s even understandable that you’d need space from me every once in awhile. That’s normal for anybody when they’re upset. I’m not expecting you to keep me close every moment of every day now that we’re together. Space is good for both of us. The only promise I need from you is that when you’ve had the space you need, you let me back in. Don’t keep me at arm’s length for too long, because I...I want to help. Even if I can’t fix whatever is wrong, I can at least support and comfort you as best I can. Promise me that you’ll let me be that for you? Promise me you won’t push me away."

Bucky’s fingers tugged at her neck until she was resting her forehead to his. He nodded against her, breathing in her scent slowly. He lifted his head to press a kiss to her forehead. “I promise,” he murmured, his lips grazing against her skin. Then his lips swept over the lines of her brow and along her cheekbones, finally settling against her mouth for a languorous kiss that had them both breathing hard by the end of it.

“Wow. James Buchanan, you do not mess around with those apology kisses,” Darcy commented when some of her brain function returned.

Bucky smiled and ducked his head to place hot, open-mouth kisses along her throat, sucking and teasing at the tender skin. Darcy hummed her approval, tilting her head back and to the side to allow him fuller access. His lips and tongue traveled up to the curve of her ear, his teeth nibbling along the edge until he came to her earlobe. He pulled the lobe between his lips, tugging lightly at her dangling earring before releasing her to whisper darkly into her ear.

“Wanna fool around?”

Darcy jerked back in surprise, locking eyes with him. “Are you kidding? What happened to going slow? I’m not having sex with you for the first time in my sister’s car, James Barnes!”

Bucky bit down on a grin, looking up at her with an appealing gleam. “I wasn’t suggesting that. There are...other things we could get up to.” He lost the fight to keep his grin at bay, his lips spreading into a toothy smile as his flesh hand found its way beneath her coat to rub against the skin of her knee.

“Oh.” Darcy’s eyes lost their focus with each rotation of his palm. “Oh.”

“You already said that.”

Darcy snapped out of her daze, smacking her hand across Bucky’s shoulder. “Bite me, asshole.”

“Okay,” Bucky said with an agreeable shrug, then ducked in to nip at her throat.

Darcy squealed and swatted him away again. “Be have yourself, Sergeant Barnes. This behavior is highly unacceptable from an esteemed officer of the United States Army.”

“I’ve been granted honorary discharge, sweetheart. I can do whatever the hell I want.” He growled into her neck, causing a cascade of giggles from Darcy, who squirmed away from the tickling sensation. Bucky’s hand slid a little higher up her leg, inching beneath the fabric of her skirt.
“Besides,” he continued, “Rob said I could.”

“What!?” Darcy scrambled back, indignant.

“He said no to car sex, but gave me the go ahead on ‘heavy petting.’” He shot her a toothy grin.

“Oh no. No way, José.” Darcy drew her knees up, twisting to crawl gracelessly into the driver’s seat, accidentally kneeing Bucky in the groin as she went.

He huffed a low groan. “Watch it, sister. You’ll damage the goods.”

Darcy struggled to fold her legs down under the steering wheel while simultaneously trying to untwist her coat where it was tangled around her. “Good. Plotting with my damn brother-in-law, there is something kinda skeevy about that.” With a final jerk, she was able to right her coat and sit properly in the driver’s seat.

Bucky, who had seemingly recovered from his grievous wound, replied, “Hey, there was no plotting on my part. Rob just mentioned it as he was leaving. I’m merely taking advantage of the situation. Or trying to.” He leaned towards her over the center console, his hand finding its previous position on her thigh again and his lips searching out hers.

Darcy put her hand up, effectively blocking his mouth from reaching hers, and clamped her other hand over his wrist to stop his wandering hand. “No thanks, buddy. I’d rather not have my family that aware of my love life. The last thing I need is to ride home with Rob and Angie while the whole car smells like sex and candy.”

Bucky’s eyes brightened. “There’s candy?” he asked with unchecked excitement.

Darcy groaned. “Of course, that’s what distracts you from trying to seduce me. If only I had a bag of Skittles to toss out the window. I’d probably never see you again, since you love sweets more than me.”

Bucky grinned and took the hand that was against his mouth in between both of his palms. “Aw, don’t be like that, Darcy. That’s not true at all.” He pulled her hand to his mouth again to kiss her knuckles like a gentleman, melting her heart just a little. “I love you both equally.”

Darcy scoffed, pulling her hand from his and retrieving her phone from her jacket pocket. “I’m calling Angie. I’ve had enough of you, you little shit.” She tamped down on the little thrill of excitement at hearing him say that he loved her. Okay, it was in relation to sweets, but still. It partially counted.

Bucky leaned in one last time, placing a sweet kiss against her cheek while she made her phone call, and then got out of the car to climb into the backseat. As soon as she hung up, Darcy joined him in the back, studiously ignoring him until he reached across to take her hand in his, lacing his cold, metal fingers through her warm flesh ones.

Darcy glanced at their joined hands and then back up into his blue eyes, losing herself for a moment as they both smiled stupidly at the other. The spell of their idiocy was broken by the sound of the McKenzies’ return. Darcy bit back on her silly grin, turning her head to gaze out the window as Rob pulled the car out of the parking lot.

Rob’s eyes met Bucky’s in the rear view mirror. “So, did you guys kiss and make up?” he asked, his bland tone belying the mischief flitting in his eyes.

Bucky snorted as Darcy huffed out, “None of your business, you perv. I expect this sort of behavior
from Angie. I thought you were one of the good ones, Rob.”

“Normally, yes,” he said, then added sagely, “but bros before hoes.” He met Bucky’s eyes in the mirror again, nodding at the other man in a show of solidarity.

Darcy and Angie made matching sounds of disgust while Bucky just looked confused.

Rob nodded again, this time to himself. Score one for Robert McKenzie, rescuer of evenings and supporter of romantic liaisons.

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Post Christmas packing was always a bit like playing tetris, Darcy thought. Sure, all your clothes fit neatly in your suitcase and your suitcase fit neatly into your car beforehand, but with the addition of presents, things got...tricky.

“No, you can’t put it in that way, you need to turn it on its side.”

“It is on its side.”

“No, the other side.”

“I’m sorry, did you want to be the one manhandling the luggage?”

“Bucky Barnes, don’t you sass me. We both know you have the superior upper body strength for this. If you’d just listen to my directions, you wouldn’t be having any problems.”

Darcy crossed her arms over her chest, scowling at Barnes and tapping her foot impatiently against the snow covered curb. Bucky turned his back to her, grumbling under his breath and rearranging the suitcase she’d been instructing him on how to position. He rotated it onto its right side, eliciting a hum of pleasure from Darcy.

“There you go, babe. I knew you could do it. Now kind of tuck it up against the back of the seat. Perfect! I’m so proud of you,” Darcy cooed at him.

Bucky straightened from the trunk of the car, stretching the stiffness from his back and tilting his head back to stare up at the bright blue of the cloudless sky.

“Dear Lord,” he began, clasping his hands in front of his chest. “What did I ever do to deserve this bossy woman? Have I not taken enough orders to last me a lifetime? You had to go and stick me with this devil woman? It’s not my fault I couldn’t go to Mass for seventy years. I was brainwashed!”

“Can it, James. I’m the best damn thing that ever happened to you, and you know it. You ought to drop to your knees and praise God for allowing you to be my luggage lackey.”

Bucky turned to her, edging carefully across the snow covered ground until he was standing in front of her, an evil little smirk in place. “Yes ma’am,” he replied, sinking to his knees. He reached for her gloved hands, sandwiching them between his. “Dear God, thank you for sending me this woman. This mild-mannered, sweet-tempered, demure woman, whose single goal in life is to please me and make sure all my needs are met. Amen.”
Darcy ripped her hands from his and took a step back. “It’s finally happened. You’ve completely lost your damn mind. Steve is going to be devastated.” She clicked her tongue sadly with a pitying look.

Bucky crept closer to her, still on his knees. “That’s right, baby. I’m stark, raving mad.” He then proceeded to growl at her, emitting the occasional bark and chasing after her across the yard on his knees, hands stretched out into claws as he attempted to snare her in them. Darcy giggled and backed away from him, hopping just out of reach every time he made a lunge for her.

“You’re going to ruin your pants if you keep this up,” she squealed.

“Yeah, but you can always sew patches on for me when they tear. Just like my Ma always would for me and Pop.”

Darcy snorted. “You really have lost it if you think I know a thing about sewing. I don’t even know where to buy a needle! And even if I did, I’d probably just end up poking myself!”

Bucky finally got close enough to sling his arms around her hips, pulling her tight to his chest. He looked up at her, resting his chin on her belly, smiling triumphantly. “I’ve got something to poke you with.”


“Alright, alright. I swear to God though, if you yell ‘PIVOT’ at me one more time, I am going to...to...”

“To what?” Darcy challenged.

“I dunno, but you’ll regret it!” He scowled up at her.

Darcy bent at the waist, clasping his face in her hands and kissing Bucky on the tip of his nose. “If you get everything packed without any more fussing, I’ll reward you.”

“Oh yeah? What do I get?”

Darcy tapped her finger thoughtfully against her chin. “Hmmm, you know those cheesecake brownies that Angie made yesterday?”

Bucky’s eyes glazed over, his tongue lolling out of his mouth slightly. “Yes...”

“You be a good boy and do what I say without whining, and I’ll smuggle out the rest of them to take with us on the trip.”

Bucky’s eyes lit up with boyish charm as he leapt from the ground. “Yes ma’am,” he called enthusiastically, practically running back to the car to finish packing. Darcy rolled her eyes and followed him to resume her role as luggage coordinator. Hey, somebody had to be the boss, why not her? She was really, really good at being the boss.

***

With luggage finally tetris-ed into the trunk and cheesecake brownies successfully hidden away in the glove compartment, Darcy and Bucky made their goodbyes to the McKenzie family. They were
both enveloped into warm hugs and promises to visit soon and Violet was passed between the two so they could get their last minute baby snuggles before they hit the road.

Bucky held the little girl in gentle hands, curling her to his chest and nuzzling his face into her soft baby curls before hoisting her up so he could speak to her eye-to-eye. “Goodbye, little one. You be a good girl while I’m gone.” Violet smiled and gurgled back at him, reaching out to grip his chin in one chubby fist.

Angie watched the exchange, elbowing her little sister and coughing out something that sounded a lot like “father material.” Darcy elbowed her back with a scowl.

“Okay babe, time to go. Hand over the baby before her parents decide to ship her off with us.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side, still chatting with the little girl. “That wouldn’t be so bad. We get along swell, don’t we Vi?” Violet screeched happily at him and he turned to give Darcy a look that clearly said, “I told you so.”

Angie stepped forward to reclaim her baby. “Unless you start lactating in the near future, I suggest you leave her with us until she’s a little older.”

“Fair enough,” Bucky replied, handing the little girl over to her mother. As soon as Violet left his hands, her face scrunched up and she began emitting a rather pitiful wail.

“Oh, baby girl, it’s gonna be okay. We’ll see him again soon,” Angie cradled Violet to her chest, bouncing and shushing her.

Bucky looked at the little girl, brow furrowed with distress. “We can’t leave now,” he said, turning pleading eyes to Darcy.

She took his hand in hers, tugging him towards the car. “She’ll be fine, babe. Ange will stick a boob in her mouth and she’ll forget all about us. Besides, some of us have actual jobs that we need to get back to.” Darcy shuddered just thinking about the pile of emails sitting in her work inbox.

Bucky deflated, letting Darcy pull him to the driver’s side of the car. He ducked into the cab, pushing the seat further back to fit his longer legs and turning the ignition as Darcy climbed into the passenger side. They both turned to wave one last goodbye to the McKenzies before Bucky pulled away from the curb and headed towards home.

Once they had gotten down the road a ways, Darcy pulled out her laptop with a groan, turning on her mobile hotspot and pulling up her inbox. She winced as it updated, pinging with streams of new emails. Oh hell, she might as well get started on this madness while she was stuck in the car. Maybe she wouldn’t be quite as swamped when she returned to work the following day.

She began the slow processing of working through her emails, organizing them by what was most urgent and what could wait for later in the week. Thankfully, Brandon had returned to work the day before, so she was able to actually make some progress even though she was out of the office. The man was a freaking life saver. She made a note in her calendar to give him a nice fat bonus for his birthday that was coming up in April. Plus a homemade cake. Everybody loves cake and money on their birthday.

Darcy was muttering over a particularly persnickety correspondence with some rich busybody that was demanding the Avengers make an appearance at her upcoming gala or her husband, the CEO of one of the larger local news stations, would be publishing some unattractive bullshit about an undisclosed member of the team. Yeah right, bitch. Darcy Lewis doesn’t cave to spoiled rich women
that think they can blackmail her. She shot off an email to Brandon, updating him on the situation and asking him to contact Friday about cracking down on the people who had access to her work email. This fruit loop should never have been able to get through to her in the first place. It was likely that palms were greased at some point, she thought with distaste.

Darcy was unaware of how loud she was grumbling or how hunched her shoulders were until she felt Bucky run his big, warm hand over the back of her neck. She closed her eyes at the gentle sensation, consciously uncoiling the tightness of her muscles as he kneaded the tension along her neck and shoulders. He dug his thumb into a particularly tender spot and she let out a low hiss, letting her shoulders drop just a little bit more before rolling her head from side to side.

“Better?” he asked, eyes still glued to the road.

Darcy hummed and smiled, leaning her head back to rest on his hand. “Yeah. Thanks. Dealing with assholes makes me kinda tense.”

“Need me to kill anybody?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she grumbled. “I’ll let you know in a couple days.”

Bucky chuckled and rubbed his thumb tenderly across her jaw. She turned her head slightly, catching the pad of his thumb with a kiss, causing his lips to twitch up into a lopsided smile.

Darcy returned to perusing her emails, handling a few more minor crises before deeming herself done for the day. The rest could be handled when she was back at the office. She turned off the hotspot and her laptop, slipping them into the backseat and reaching up to stretch out the tension in her lower back. Bucky’s eyes trailed over, following the way her breasts pressed against her cardigan as she stretched.

“Eyes on the road, soldier.”

He smirked, but did as he was told, hands tightening slightly on the steering wheel. “You getting hungry? I’m thinking we should stop to eat soon.” His pronouncement was punctuated by a growl from his stomach.

Darcy snickered and nodded her agreement. “Sounds good to me.”

They made a quick stop in some tiny town in Maryland, choosing the first decent looking establishment they could find. The food wasn’t the best Darcy had ever eaten, but it was enough to whet their appetites and the service was fast. They were back on the road in under an hour, with Darcy taking over driving.

Bucky sprawled out in the passenger seat, pushing it as far back as it would go and laying it near flat. He tucked one arm under his head, reaching the other across the console to hold Darcy’s hand as he drifted into a light doze.

He jerked awake some time later when Darcy laid into her horn. “Watch it, asshole! Stay in your own lane!” she shouted, pulling her hand from Bucky’s to flash some rather colorful hand signals at the other driver.

“Everything okay?” he asked, tilting his seat back into an upright position.

“Yeah. Just New Jersey drivers. Freaking crazy people.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Even back in my day they couldn’t drive worth a shit.”
Darcy grinned and reached over to pat his knee. “Tell me more about the good old days, grandpa. Did you have to walk to school uphill both ways?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. And usually hauling Steve’s sorry ass the whole time. That kid hated going to school.”

“Why? Too many bullies?”

“Nah. Just wasn’t very interested in most subjects except art and civics.”

“Really? I always assumed he was the brains while you were the brawn.”

Bucky’s nose flared a little in irritation. “See, everybody always assumes that. But I’m the one that almost always had straight A’s in every subject. Especially any of the math classes.”

Darcy glanced at him, eyebrow arched in disbelief. “You were a math whiz?”

“Damn straight, I was. Still am.” He jerked his head in a self-affirming nod. “I was the sharpshooter for the Commandos, one of the best in the army at that time. And that was when we had to work with long range rifles that didn’t have all the fancy equipment to compensate for the Coriolis effect or calculate wind speed and trajectory.”

“The Corio-whatnow?”

“Coriolis. When you’re shooting over a thousand yards or so, your bullet is traveling long enough that the rotation of the Earth affects your bullet trajectory. It causes your target to move just a bit off center, causing you to miss. Unless you can calculate the yardage and time the bullet will travel, factoring in the amount the Earth will rotate in that time period. And then adding in how much the bullet will drop due to gravity as it travels along its trajectory.”

Darcy stared at the road ahead of her, mouth gaping in shock. “So...so, you’re saying that you can do split second trigonometry, in your head, in order to shoot people from over a thousand feet away.”

“Yes.”

“Holy fucking shit. I think I need to pull over.”


“Because I need to make out with you right the fuck now.”

Darcy swung her car into the closest exit ramp, pulling off the access road and parking on the grass before scrambling over the console and into Bucky’s lap.

Bucky eyed her as if she’d suddenly lost her mind, grasping her by the shoulders as she made a lunge for his face. “Doll, what the hell?”

“Barnes, you just admitted to me that you are a math genius. I am woman enough to admit that that makes me tingle in certain places. Now let me kiss your face.” She tried to push closer to him, but Bucky’s grip remained firm on her shoulders.

“I...what... really? Math is what gets you all hot and bothered?” he asked incredulously.

Darcy whimpered pitifully, nodding her head and trying to break from his hold. “I like smart boys.”

Bucky shook his head and smiled in disbelief. “You’re nuts, you know that, Darcy?”
She nodded absently, eyes locked on the way his lips were moving as he spoke. She bit down sharply on her own bottom lip, glancing up with pleading eyes. Bucky snorted and shook his head, but pulled her into him to give her a chaste kiss.

It wasn’t enough for Darcy. She twisted in his lap, properly straddling him and gripping his head in her hands. She tugged at his hair, tilting his head back and pulling a satisfying moan from his mouth. She took the opportunity to tug his lower lip between her teeth, sucking and soothing at it with her tongue. Bucky’s gasp in response to the sensation was utterly sinful.

His hands, which had been resting at her waist, darted around to grasp her ass, jerking her down as he rolled his hips up into her. They both groaned at the motion, and Darcy’s head momentarily lolled against Bucky’s shoulder. She turned to nibble at his throat, tasting and teasing him as she went.

Bucky cleared his throat. “Sine squared theta plus cosine squared theta equals one,” he growled lowly into her ear.

Darcy flinched, digging her fingers tighter into his scalp and shoulder. “Oh god,” she moaned.

“Tangent squared theta plus one equals secant squared theta,” he mumbled, followed by a hiss as she ground down particularly firmly against his lap.

She drew her lips up to his mouth, unable to take anymore of his smartboy dirty talk, kissing him breathless. She had him writhing underneath her, throat emitting alternating whimpers and groans with each roll of her hips and tongue, when they were interrupted by a loud clunking against the passenger side window.

Darcy turned her head to identify the sound, while Bucky remained in a lusty haze, jerking back when she realized what had hit the window. “Oh shit, Buck, it’s the fuzz!”

“What?” Bucky murmured, reaching out to try and pull her back down to him.

Darcy slapped his hands away, gripping his chin and turning his face so that he could see the state trooper who was standing just outside their vehicle, one hand on his hip and the other held up against the window in a fist.

“Oh fuck!” Bucky yelped, sitting up straight and nearly dumping Darcy onto the floorboard. The trooper tapped against the glass again then motioned for them to roll down the window.

Darcy slapped her hand out to press the button and lowered the window, clearing her throat and running the other hand through her mussed hair. “Good afternoon, officer,” she squeaked.

The trooper repressed a wry grin at her disheveled appearance and obvious nervousness. “You kids having car trouble?” he asked.

“Uh, no. Not exactly. Just needed a little, um, break. You know, we’ve been driving for a while, thought a uh pitstop would be prudent.” She gave him her best news-hour-smile, full of shiny white teeth and feigned honesty.

“Uh huh.” Officer Cockblock did not seem to buy the story. “Well, you two should really be on your way. This can be a high traffic area and you shouldn’t have your car parked here unless there’s an emergency. Wouldn’t want you to cause an accident.”

“Right you are, officer. We’ll just be on our way now. Thank you!” Darcy started to scramble off of Bucky’s lap and back into the driver’s seat. She started the engine and sent the officer a friendly, 100%-compliant-please-don’t-arrest-us wave. The trooper just rolled his eyes and walked back to his
patrol car.

Darcy pulled off the roadside, setting the car back into the flow of traffic and merging onto the highway. They’d gone less than a mile down the road when Bucky broke the tense silence of the car with gut-busting bouts of laughter. Darcy couldn’t help but join him.

Chapter End Notes

The math scene was inspired by this post.
A Change in Pace

Chapter Summary

Just read it. Trust me.

Chapter Notes

Y’all things are about to get crazy. That's all I'm saying.
Thanks again to the ever delightful, pocket angel ladyaudiophile.

After their run in with the law, they made good time getting into the city. The Blueberry was parked and the luggage unpacked and distributed to the proper bedrooms by late afternoon, giving Bucky enough time to run to the corner grocery to restock the kitchen and get what he needed to make dinner.

Before leaving, he paused to hold Darcy for a couple breaths, inhaling the smell of her shampoo and treasuring the fact that he could hug and kiss her anytime he desired. He swept a half dozen smooches over her hair and face, only stopping when she waved him away with warm hands and laughter in her voice.

“Get out of here, Bucky. I’m going to get hungry soon and you know how awful I can be when I’m hangry.”

He affected a pout, jutting his bottom lip out absurdly. “Trying to get rid of me already? Doll, I’m hurt.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and pressed her palms to his chest, guiding him backwards to her front door. “Go. Food. Now,” she grunted, opening the door and pushing him out into the hall.

Bucky ducked his head back in the apartment to sneak attack her lips, darting back from her and down the hall before she could further reprimand him. She leaned against the doorway, a content sigh escaping her lips as she watched him make his way to the elevator.

“Hate to see you go, but love to watch you leave!” she shouted at his retreating back. He paused mid-step, turning his head to glance at her over his shoulder, his brow furrowed in confusion as he tried to suss out her meaning.

Darcy flicked her eyebrow up, then deliberately dragged her eyes down the length of his body, stopping to leer at his denim covered backside, licking her lips with exaggerated intensity. Illumination lit up his face a second before he turned fully to face her, strutting back to her with purpose.

“Oh no you don’t,” Darcy cried, hands splayed out in front of her to ward off his advance, but it was no use. He swept her up into his arms, pressing her back against the door jam and pulling her legs around his waist so that he could kiss her senseless. It took maybe half a second for her to reach a
senseless state. He was really hitting his stride with remembering how to kiss. Damn. Just, damn.

Bucky suddenly released her, letting her feet fall back to the floor and stepping back from her with a cheeky grin. “Something to remember me by.” Then he spun on his heel and marched back down the hall, hopping on the elevator and out of sight, leaving Darcy dazed and breathless against the door.

She shook her head gently, heading back inside and wandering to her bedroom to start the slow process of unpacking her luggage. It wasn’t usually a slow process, but her mind was just the tiniest bit distracted at the time, making it difficult to do simple things like organize or unfold clothes or unzip her suitcase.

She’d just about got her things all put away nice and tidy when she was interrupted by a knock at the door. Oh, Bucky had been faster than she was expecting, she thought. Darcy practically skipped to the front door, opening it wide as her face shone with joy at his return, only to fade when she saw that it was not, in fact Bucky, but some random white guy she’d never met.

“Oh, hi, can I help you?” Darcy asked politely.

The man gave her a bland smile, nodding his ash blond head as he answered, “Yes ma’am. I’m here to do some maintenance work on your apartment.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here to do some maintenance work on your apartment.”

“Um, okay, normally I get an email when there’s a scheduled maintenance visit.” Darcy’s brow scrunch in mild confusion, but she stepped back, letting the man pass into her entryway.

The man hummed, “Ah, yes, extenuating circumstances today, suspected gas leak, needed to be taken care of right away. You understand.” He made his way further into her apartment, heading towards her living area.

Darcy followed behind, arms crossing over her chest. “Yeah, I guess. Where’s Mr. Kalashnik?” Darcy asked.

The curmudgeonly little old Ukrainian man had been the maintenance man for her building since before she’d moved in. He wasn’t much for conversation, but damn, that old man could fix just about anything. And once she started plying him with baked goods during his visits to her home, his disposition brightened considerably. Well, he’d stopped scowling and mumbling Russian crankily under his breath while he worked. He was getting up there in age though, so she hoped he was alright.

Mr. Whitebread’s face went slack before he pasted another polite smile on his thin lips. “Ah, he’s ill today.”

Liar, whispered a small voice in the back of Darcy’s head. Something was off about this guy, she could just feel it. He was too...boring. He had the kind of features that would easily blend into a crowd, neither handsome nor unattractive enough to elicit undue notice. Average height, average build. The kind of person that your eyes would glance over if you saw them, leaving no impression or memory of them ever having been there in the first place. And his smile…it was just... wrong.

“Um, actually, if you could come back at another time, that would be great. Now isn’t really good for me,” she said, trying to keep her tone light but firm. If this guy really was shady, she needed to get him out of her apartment asap and without him picking up on her suspicion.

White boy’s bland smile turned sharp. “No,” he said simply and then made a lunge for her.

Darcy yelped and jumped back, hip-checking the edge of her couch. She spun with the impact, but
used her momentum to get around the arm of the sofa, using it to block the path of the asshole that was most likely trying to kill her.

*God, where was Bucky when she needed him?*

She stumbled back as Eminent Danger stalked slowly after her around the edge of the couch, her hands scrabbling for purchase on something, *anything*, she could use as a weapon. The first thing she landed on was one of her throw pillows which was not helpful at-fucking-all. The guy didn’t even flinch when it bounced off his stomach. The next thing she landed on was the thick hardback novel she’d left out on the coffee table. She chucked it at his head as hard as she could, a grim satisfaction pinging in her gut when the edge caught his forehead, breaking the skin and causing a satisfying gash on his pale skin.

Her satisfaction was fleeting. The injury only served to piss the bastard off, his cheeks flushing and nostrils flaring in irritation. He ceased his torturously slow pursuit, opting instead to run at her headlong, hands outstretched into claws. In a blind panic and with blood pounding in her ears, Darcy turned and grabbed the small, wooden side table sitting at the end of her sofa. She raised it and swung it into his chest, using his own momentum to increase the impact, hoping to god it would be enough to down him so she could escape out into the hallway.

No such luck. The thing splintered across his chest and ribs, knocking him off kilter to stumble over her coffee table, but he was up and after her in less than a second. Within two of her racing heartbeats, he had her by the hair, tossing her into her sound system where it was tucked against her living room wall. The glass cabinet that housed it shattered with the force of her weight. Shards of glass dug into the exposed skin of her hands and arms as she tried gain purchase and keep from toppling to the ground.

Her attacker seized her by the throat, tossing her around to slam her back and skull down onto her coffee table, using his weight to bear down on her neck. *Fuck fuck fuck*, she was running out of time. She dug her nails into his hands and arms, trying to break the stranglehold he had on her. She kicked her legs out at him weakly, trying to think past the pounding in her skull and the various spikes of pain throughout her body, but he easily dodged her efforts.

She could feel her lungs screaming for air, the edges of her vision blurring. Goddammit, why had she never taken those fucking self defense classes from Nat? Stupid. She was so stupid. And now she was going to die because she hadn’t wanted to wake up early and sweat.

Darcy’s limbs grew achingly heavy, the strength slowly sapping from her body as she looked up into her attackers soulless, dishwater grey eyes. He smiled at her, a sickly thing that made her want to vomit. Like hell was she going to let this dickhead be the last thing she saw on this earth. She shut her eyes tight, focusing on the thrumming of her slowing heartbeat pounding in her ears, pulling the faces of her family, of Bucky, from her memory as she descended into unconsciousness.

There was nothing but the pressure at her throat, and then, between one heartbeat and the next, the pressure was gone. Her lungs filled with air in a choking gasp, her hands rising of their own volition to stroke at the tender flesh of her throat. She rolled to her side, landing on her hands and knees beside the coffee table, coughing and sputtering as she tried to suck in enough air to calm her oxygen-starved lungs. Her heart thudded heavily in her chest, blood roaring through her ears as her body tried to regain equilibrium.

It took her a minute for her choking spasms to stop, allowing her mind to clear somewhat. She jerked her head up when she heard the crunch of drywall caving in. Bucky was standing in front of her, legs spread wide in an attack stance, his back to her and his attention on the assailant, who had apparently been thrown off of her and across the room into her wall. *Go, Bucky, go. Kick his evil ass.*
Blondie staggered back onto his feet, shaking plaster off his shoulders and returning his focus to the supremely pissed off supersoldier standing across the room from him. Bucky started advancing on the guy, keeping his body angled so the other man could never get a clear line of sight on her.

Bucky probably had about fifty pounds of muscle over this guy. The asshole should have been pissing himself by this point. Instead, that smug, leering smile returned to his face and he calmly began speaking in what sounded like Russian to Darcy’s untrained ears.

Bucky’s head jerked back, his spine straightening and his shoulders tensing as he slowed his advance. Oh shit, Darcy thought. If those weren’t some of his trigger words then she’d eat her maroon beanie. Her mind skittered to what she could remember of Bucky’s treatment in regards to his triggers. From what she could recall, therapy and an assist from some Stark and SHIELD hybrid mind-whammy machine had put the kibosh on all of those. God, at least she hoped they had, otherwise they were royally fucked.

Smug Jerkwad reached the end of whatever trigger phrase he was spouting off and Bucky stopped in his tracks. Tension trembled across his body as he hunched in on himself and then, with a guttural moan and a violent shake of his head, he resumed his approach.

Smug Jerkwad became Scared Jerkwad real fast after that. He started in on a new phrase, this time in German, no longer lingering on the syllables with perverse pleasure as he had with the Russian phrase, but spitting it out as fast as his mouth could move.

If anything Bucky increased his speed in response to the phrase. Jerkwad changed tactic, turning to run back towards her front door, only to have Bucky catch him by the throat and rip him back into the living room. His metal hand clenched around the other man’s throat, holding him above the ground by a good foot and a half. Evil Asshole gripped both hands around Bucky’s arm, legs kicking and swinging like a suspended marionette.

Darcy watched as the man released one hand from Bucky’s arm, reaching for a weapon concealed at the small of his back. Before he could even get his hand halfway around his waist, Bucky had slipped a knife from somewhere in his jacket. He flipped it once in his hand, adjusting his grip so he could plunge the knife into the soft, unprotected flesh just below the other man’s sternum, angling the knife up to slice through his diaphragm and pierce his heart.

Bucky jerked the knife back out, flipped it again to change his grip, and lowered his metal arm so he could reach behind to slide the blade between the man’s vertebrae at the base of his neck, severing his spinal cord.

The man immediately went limp and Bucky released him without a second thought, letting his lifeless body hit her living room floor with a wet thump. He turned towards her sharply, eyes darting over her face and body where she was still huddled by her coffee table. He seemed to be doing some kind of assessment on her person, but she wasn’t really sure.

The man looking at her now was not one that Darcy had met before and the ice in his eyes and the passiveness of his usually expressive mouth were unsettling, sending shards of ice into the very marrow of her bones.

“Bucky,” she croaked, extending a shaking hand out to him. It was a plea or an invitation, or some combination of the two.

At the sound of her voice, some of the coldness left his features, allowing a touch of warmth to come back to his eyes. “Yeah, I’m here Darcy.” He reached for her hand, helping her to her feet and pulling her into his arms.
The embrace was shorter than Darcy would have preferred and he didn’t melt into her the way he normally did, holding himself tensely against her instead. He stepped back, eyes grazing over her again as he made a secondary inspection of her wellbeing. Seemingly satisfied, he turned abruptly, returning to the body bleeding out on her floor.

*Shit,* she was never getting her deposit back now.

Bucky bent over the body, rifling through various pockets before pulling some identifying papers from one of the guy’s pockets. “Definitely Hydra,” Bucky mumbled.

Darcy nodded numbly, watching as Bucky rose swiftly to tread down the hallway, disappearing into his room. Leaving her alone. In the living room. With the dead guy.

All things considered, Darcy was significantly less freaked out than she had assumed she’d be if faced with a dead body. Really, her main concern was how much it would cost to replace the carpeting in her apartment. The blood and gore was a bit much, but she’d seen the Winter Soldier’s handiwork before when she’d gone through his file. It could have been much worse.

But beneath all that, the guy was fucking Hydra, and she was glad the fucker was dead. After all they had taken from Bucky, the thought of one of those assholes barging into her home and trying to recapture him….if the bastard wasn’t already dead, she was mad enough to kill him herself.

Bucky took that moment to return to the living room, his huge black duffle bag slung over his shoulder. He set the massive thing down on her coffee table with a heavy thump, unzipping it before glancing at her with a considering gaze.

“How good are you with firearms?” he asked firmly.

“Uh, I mean, I know what one looks like,” she shakily replied.

Bucky muttered a few choice curses under his breath as he dug around in his duffle. He found what he was looking for and motioned for her to come closer. “You saw where I stabbed him in the chest?”

“Yup. Hard to miss it.”

“Good. Someone comes at you head on, put the blade in where their sternum ends, angle it up and slightly to your right. Hopefully you hit the heart, at the very least you’ll clip a lung and puncture the diaphragm.” He pressed his fingers into the soft skin of her abdomen in demonstration, then drew his hand around to her back an inch beneath where her ribs ended. “Kidneys are here, stab upwards and twist.” He tapped the inside of her thighs. “Femoral arteries here. Slice across, to the bone if possible.” He reached up to gently brush his fingers across the abused skin of her throat. “Carotid arteries are here.”

He paused, chewing on how he wanted to phrase his next words. “If someone attacks, you keep slicing and stabbing until they stop. Don’t stop until they’re on the ground and not moving.” He stared into her eyes intently. “Even if it’s me.”

“Bucky, no, I can’t-”

“Yes. You can. And you will. Or I cannot, in good conscience, be with you. I need you safe. You understand me?” He laid a heavy hand on her shoulders, the weight of it pressing her solidly to the floor as his eyes pleaded with her.

“Okay,” she breathed. He raised a skeptical eyebrow at her lukewarm response. “Okay,” she
repeated a little more strongly.

Bucky nodded his head sharply and returned to rummaging in his bag, pulling knife after knife of various shapes and sizes from its depths. He began strapping them to her body: two tucked at the small of her back, a short, stubby one hooked between the cups of her bra to hang against her abdomen, one giant bastard strapped around her right thigh, and one final blade secured along her left side between her rib cage and arm.

It was just her luck that the first time he took her shirt off, neither of them had the time nor inclination to enjoy the experience. What a waste.

When she’d tugged her shirt and coat back on, gingerly avoiding the shallow cuts running along her arms and hands, she turned expectant eyes to Bucky. “What now?” she asked quietly.

“We run.” He hoisted the bag to his shoulder, reaching out his flesh hand to her. She took it, grasping his fingers tightly despite the stinging pain of the cuts in her hands, following blindly as he tugged her through her apartment and out the door, heading to the elevators at the end of the hall.

He pressed the button to take them to the garage and watched as the metal doors closed them in. Darcy examined the stoic lines of his face, her mind a swirl of questions.

“There are more coming?” she asked. It seemed the most pertinent question to ask.

“Yes,” he confirmed brusquely. “That agent was likely only sent in to see whether or not the triggers still worked so they could judge how much manpower they’d need to bring me in. He was expendable.”

“I don’t think he got that memo,” Darcy quipped.

Bucky’s mouth quirked up into a facsimile of a smile. “No. Probably not.” The smile faded. “I don’t know how they got the intel on me staying with you. There’s either a leak in information or it’s connected with whatever mission the other Avengers are on. Either way, we need to get the fuck out of dodge and let Steve know what’s going on.”

“Where do we go? Stark Tower? SHIELD facility?”

Bucky shook his head. “With the team gone, going to the Tower would just be a good way to get a lot of innocent people killed. They know the triggers won’t work now. They’ll be bringing in the big guns. And if there’s an information leak, the most likely culprit is someone within SHIELD. For now, we get out of the immediate area as soon as possible and try to get ahold of the team. You have your Stark phone on you?”

She nodded, pulling the slim mobile from her back pocket.

“Good, text ‘protocol 87188’ to Jarvis.” She did as he asked, fingers flying over the keyboard as the elevator dinged, announcing their arrival to the underground garage. She made to step out, but Bucky motioned for her to stop, pulling his sidearm from his waistband and peering around the open doors of the elevator.

His eyes swept briskly over the expanse of the garage a couple times before he silently directed her to follow him out. She reached out to curl two fingers into one of his belt loops, the thought of being separated from him causing panic to well up in her throat.

They made their way to the closest, nondescript sedan they could find with a fairly dark window tint and Bucky had the thing unlocked and running in a hot minute. He tossed the bag in the backseat,
motioning for her to get in. She got settled in the seat, buckling up and pulling her phone back out of her pocket.

Bucky held his hand out for the device. “Nuh uh. We don’t know if they’ve got that thing tapped. We need to ditch it.”

Darcy tucked it protectively to her chest. “I need to send one more text to Jarvis. You’re not the only one with fancy protocols.” She tapped in the message lightening fast, and then handed it over to Bucky, who promptly crushed it in his left hand and tossed the remains out the window to the garage floor.

“What was your protocol command?”

She chewed worriedly on her lower lip. “Alerting my family that I’m going into hiding, but I’m safe and will contact them when I can. It also sends an alert to Pepper so she can reallocate my work duties in my absence. It was part of the requirements for getting the PR position.”

Bucky hummed his approval and turned his focus to the fading evening light as they pulled out of the garage and onto the street. He kept his speed steady, heading deeper into the city in the hopes of being lost in the sea of cars heading home from work. His alert eyes darted from mirror to mirror watching and waiting for suspicious vehicles that might be tailing them.

Darcy watched him, his unnatural stillness ratcheting up the unease in her gut. She was sore and tired and hungry and terrified and the urge to move was near maddening. The adrenaline in her system was screaming at her, railing against the slowness of traffic and the stillness of her body. She should be running, she should be hiding, and yet there she sat in the passenger seat, feeling exposed to the world and the dangers lurking in the shadows.

Her teeth began to chatter, her muscles vibrating with pent up energy and low blood sugar. Bucky’s eyes shifted to her momentarily and he reached a hand out to run his palm over her knee, trying to reassure her. She gave him a tight smile, trying to communicate her appreciation for his concern.

“I’ll keep you safe,” he murmured.

“I know,” she responded just as softly, placing her injured hand atop his and brushing her fingers lightly over it.

He squeezed her knee once more, then withdrew his hand to place it back on the steering wheel. They drove in silence for a few more minutes until Bucky suddenly tensed, face going dark in anger.

“We’ve picked up a tail,” he grunted through clenched teeth. Darcy dug her nails into her thighs.

“What do we do?” she asked, alarm tightening her voice.

“Stay calm, try to shake them. Try not to get fucking shot.”

“Oh good, something easy.”

Bucky snorted but didn’t reply, focusing on angling the sedan through traffic without alerting the other vehicle to the fact that he’d clocked them. Darcy was expecting some kind of high speed getaway, a voice in the back of her head shouting out for Bucky to drive freaking faster, but he kept to the sedate pace, keeping with the flow of traffic. He made smooth lane changes, slowly adding cars in between them and the vehicle following. When they got closer to the heart of the city, Bucky was able to coast through a yellow light, leaving the Hydra tail stuck at the light, six cars back. Bucky continued on, driving down three city blocks until he could no longer spot the tail in his
mirrors, turning down a side street and parallel parking behind yet another nondescript sedan.

Within seconds, he had the door jimmed open, moving them and his bag into the new vehicle and hot wiring it in under a minute. They continued their journey through Midtown, then went zigzagging back through Hell’s Kitchen before heading towards the Lincoln Tunnel and crossing the Hudson.

They reached the outskirts of Newark when Bucky’s pants began trilling loudly. He reached down to fish the sat phone that Steve had left them out of his pocket, pulling it to his ear.

“Steve,” he greeted simply.

“Bucky! Jarvis contacted me, said that Hydra was making a play for you. Are you alright? Where’s Darcy? Where are you?”

“We’re both fine. Had to take out one of their agents in Darcy’s place. You may want to have Jarvis send in a clean up crew.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Had to shake a tail as well. I think they had her apartment bugged while we were at her family’s place in Virginia for Christmas. They knew as soon as we got back and cornered Darcy when I left to grab groceries.”

“You spent Christmas with her family?”

“Steve, not the time for this discussion,” Bucky responded through clenched teeth.

“Right, yeah, sorry. Where are you headed now?”

“Out of the city, preferably off the grid.”

“You suspect an intel leak.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, either someone in SHIELD or working at Stark Tower keeping eyes on us, saw me leaving with Darcy, connected the dots.”

“Fuck. Look, Buck, I wish we could come back and protect you guys but...this mission. I...it’s pretty fucked up. I can’t say much but...a sect of Hydra, they, they...shit, they’ve been experimenting on kids. We can’t pull out now, not when we’re so close.”

Bucky’s gut clenched with nausea, memories of the experiments he’d been subjected to overlaid with images of helpless children taking the place of where his body should have been. He swallowed hard on the bile rising up his throat, trying to regain awareness of his surroundings. He felt Darcy graze a warm palm over his thigh, helping him focus on the world outside of his broken mind.

He breathed deeply through his nose before responding to Steve. “Stay with the mission. I can handle getting us to safety. You...you get those kids out. Stevie, you gotta get those kids out.”

“I know. We will. Do you have a safe house you can get to?”

“All the safe houses I have are Hydra ones. I’m not sure where we’ll go but I know how to disappear even without a safe house. It took you two years to find me after all,” Bucky teased. Steve chuckled darkly on the other end of the line.

Darcy, who had been listening intently to the conversation, suddenly swiveled her head to face
Bucky, snapping her fingers together to get his attention. “I’ve got a place we can go. It’s on the northern border of Pennsylvania, tucked away in the Allegheny Forest. Isolated, private land with a fully equipped cabin and most likely surrounded by a fuckton of booby traps.”

Bucky raised a curious eyebrow at the last statement and Darcy was quick to clarify. “It was Rob’s paranoid-as-fuck step dad’s bug out spot. I’ve only been there twice, but if you can get us to Bradford, Pennsylvania, my photographic memory can get us the rest of the way there.”

Bucky nodded at her and returned to his phone conversation. “Hey Steve, I think we’ve got a place to go. I’m not sure on the exact coordinates, but I’ll get them to you as soon as I have them.”

“Alright Buck, keep yourselves safe.”

“Will do. You do the same.”

The men made their quick goodbyes and Bucky hung up the phone, flipping it into an empty cup holder.

“Hey sweetheart, do you think you can reach back and find my map? It should be somewhere in my bag.”

“Sure, no problem.” Darcy unbuckled and twisted in her seat, unzipping the nearest half of the bag and sifting through the cluttered contents. Gun, gun, knife, zip ties, switchblade, underwear, gun, book... aha! Maps.

She pulled the folded map from the bag, waving it triumphantly above her head before unfolding it and refolding it to show the roads running through New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania and handing it to Bucky. She pointed out where Bradford was, watching as his eyes scanned the map, silently deciding the best route for them to take. Having made his decision, he steered the car towards their destination.

They made a quick stop to bandage up Darcy’s arms and hands and grab some food on the western outskirts of Newark before continuing on to the series of back roads that would get them to Bradford. It would extend their journey by a few hours, but Bucky wasn’t willing to risk the surveillance cameras at the toll booths.

Darcy took a couple advil for the throbbing in her arms and neck, leaning her head back against the seat and finally letting some of the tension of the afternoon seep out of her. The loss of adrenalin and her full stomach had her succumbing to exhaustion within seconds of closing her eyes.
Darcy Lewis: Master Mechanic

Chapter Summary

The journey to the safe house/cabin in the middle of freaking nowhere.

Chapter Notes

Hello again! It is I, your resident asshole, here to bring you another chapter and apologize (sorta) for the whiplash some of you may be experiencing. We are now entering the "adventure" section of this story, where Bucky and Darcy will be featuring as a badass power couple, taking on Hydra and blowing shit up, literally and figuratively. Do not worry, fair readers, the fluff is not gone, I promise. It is just now sandwiched in between violence and badassery. Have faith, this is all part of the plan and has been since I decided to turn this into a multi chap fic. Hope you enjoy this update!

Once again, all thanks and praise to Ladyaudiophile and her unending patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy was pulled sluggishly into consciousness by the point of pressure that was shaking her knee. A spike of underlying panic rose to the surface causing her to shout out in protest and automatically swing her fist at whoever was trying to attack her.

Her fist connected with flesh and bone a split second before her eyes popped open to see Bucky rubbing at his jaw and looking mildly surprised.

Realization over what had happened dawned on Darcy and she lurched forward to soothe her own hand over his jaw, hissing when the cuts on her hands stung with the contact.

"Bucky, I'm so sorry! I thought I was being...I thought the guy...I, I-" Her words cut off with a shuddering gasp and a rushing in her ears, the memory of the last 24 hours crashing down around her. She was fairly certain she was having a panic attack and she could one hundred percent confirm that they sucked ass.

"Oh my god, that guy was gonna kill me, holy fuck," she moaned between harsh gasps of air. "Ohgodohgodohgod, I watched you kill someone." She turned wild eyes to Bucky, who looked as if he wanted to curl in on himself and disappear, but she was too caught up in the madness of her mind to notice his discomfort. "Like, what the fuck? He was alive and then he wasn't and you sliced and diced that fucker like an overripe tomato!" She dragged clawed hands through her hair, pulling her head down to rest against her knees. That's what people who are having panic attacks are supposed to do, right?

Fuck, fuck, what was her life?

She focused her eyes on an ugly brown stain that marred the floorboard of the (stolen, for godssake) car, trying to slow the rapid inhale and exhale of her breathing to something that wouldn't make her
pass out. She’d fought Dark Elves, she could handle a little panic attack.

It was an unbearably slow thing, but she fought for control over her mind and body, pushing hard at
the ugly memories and focusing on that fuck-ugly stain with every fiber of her being. As with
anything she put her mind to, Darcy came out victorious, pulling herself out of the panic attack
through sheer force of will and deep breathing exercises.

She rose from her bent position shakily, testing herself to see if she really was in the clear. She was
about halfway to sitting up fully when the image of the Hydra agent bleeding out onto her floor
flashed in front of her eyes. It took every ounce of her self control for her to scramble out of the car
to vomit on the grass by the side of the road instead of there on the floorboard. She hunkered there
on her hands and knees, fingers digging into the soil as her stomach emptied itself. Eventually she
was down to dry heaving and coughing up bile. Lovely.

The heaving subsided and she sank back on her knees, exhaustion rolling over her like a wave
despite the fact that she'd just slept for hours.

She felt a light tap at her shoulder and turned to see Bucky holding a bottle of water out towards her.
She took it graciously, swishing out her mouth and splashing her face before drawing a few sips,
which her stomach thankfully kept down.

She swallowed a few times, trying to get rid of the sticky feeling in her throat before clearing it and
addressing Bucky. “Where are we? What time is it?” she took a moment to take in their
surroundings. From what she could tell, they were in the middle of some kind of junkyard in the
middle of the night.

“Somewhere called Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Just after 10.” His answer was curt, some undercurrent
of tension lacing his tone that sent worry scurrying through Darcy's gut.

She pushed aside her concern to ask, “Why are we in this...junkyard?” She looked around them at
the rows of rusting and broken down cars strewn in between random piles of even rustier spare car
parts.

“Our car’s likely been reported stolen by now, we need a new ride. Preferably one that no one will
miss.”

Darcy squinted her eyes at the heaps of scrap around them. “Are you suggesting we get one of these
pieces of crap running? With no tools, no jack, and rusted parts?” she asked incredulously.

He shrugged, his eyes muted and his tone dull when he responded. “I've done it before.” He turned
abruptly back to the car, opening her door for her and then stepping around to get in the driver's seat.
She rose from the ground, dusting off her pants and clambered into her seat. As soon as she had her
door closed, Bucky drove to the very back of the lot where the cars with the most atrocious damage
were sitting, unlikely to be touched again before they’d disintegrated completely into piles of rust and
rubber.

He parked their stolen sedan between two pickups that had seen better days and probably part of the
LBJ presidency, then hopped out, shouldering his duffle and trudging back along the rows of the
metal wasteland.

Darcy was baffled at his coldness, and stumbled after him, struggling to keep up with his brisk pace.
“Hey, Bucky, slow down. Not everyone was born with mile long legs, buddy.” He merely grunted,
but slowed his pace some.
She reached out to grasp his arm, “Bucky, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Keep your eyes peeled for anything that looks serviceable,” was his brusque response and then he was marching forward again.

Darcy resisted the urge to smack the back of his pretty head and make him talk to her. She had promised to give him some space when he needed it. For all she knew, this could be his way of decompressing from going into Winter Soldier mode and he just needed a little time to adjust. Plus, they were technically on the run so maybe now wasn’t the best time for a heart-to-heart. But if his attitude wasn’t in check by the time they were back on the road, she was definitely having words with Grumpy Cat Barnes.

Having decided to ignore Bucky’s less than pleasant attitude, she followed behind him, head swiveling left and right, trying to distinguish one useful heap of metal from the hundreds of useless heaps of metal in the near pitch black of night with only the aid of a flashlight that Barnes had fished out for her.

At last, they came to a row that looked promising. The cars were older, but seemed to be less damaged. They’d most likely passed their prime in some form or another and repairing what was broken would have cost more than what the piece of junk was worth.

Darcy liked pieces of junk that other people found worthless. Those were the best treasures to find once they’d been given a little lovin’. Her dad had taught her that lesson over the many years spent helping him in his garage.

She came to nearly the end of the row when she spotted it, the blue paint faded to nearly silver and the slim moonlight lighting up the white hardtop. She crept closer, cracking the hood open and smiling to herself at what her flashlight illuminated. She puttered around under the hood for a few minutes and then checked the underside of the vehicle to get an estimate on what was wrong.

“Bucky, I’ve found her,” she said, crawling out from under the car, just as he called out to her from the opposite row. She slammed the hood back down to see what he wanted, stomping up to stand beside him.

He stood beside an older model truck that someone had slapped a new paint coat on, a hideous “classic” color combination of red-orange and white. He reached his hand out, patting the hood. “This one,” he grunted.


“What’s wrong with it?” Bucky asked, a hint of irritation coloring his words. “It’s got four wheel drive, good suspension, the engine looks pretty clean. The only issue is the rear axle is bent, but I can straighten that out by hand.”

Darcy’s indignation at his ignorance was enough to allow her to completely ignore how incredibly sexy the thought of Bucky fixing a bent axle with his bare hands was. “Okay, because you were frozen for the majority of the 70s, I’m gonna let you off the hook for that one, but, son, you bout to learn today,” she jabbed a finger in his chest and then stepped back to gesture at the vehicle. “This one,” he grunted.


“What’s wrong with it?” Bucky asked, a hint of irritation coloring his words. “It’s got four wheel drive, good suspension, the engine looks pretty clean. The only issue is the rear axle is bent, but I can straighten that out by hand.”

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A muscle twitched in Bucky’s jaw, but he swept his arm out in an “after you” gesture and fell into step behind her. When he saw the ugly old thing she’d picked out, his nose wrinkled in disgust. “This? This is what you chose?” He cut his eyes over to her, his entire expression questioning her sanity.

“Yes, I did.” She gave him a quelling glare which, well, it didn’t really have much impact on him but whatever. She was still right. “This is a 1976 Chevy K5 Blazer Cheyenne with a 350 gas engine that will not produce a metric fuckton of carcinogens every time we hit the accelerator. It also has four wheel drive and, if you’ll notice, a paint job that doesn’t scream ‘look at me, look at me! Subtlety is just the worst!’ Honestly Bucky, I thought you were supposed to be a spy?”

Bucky’s eyes flashed in annoyance and she was fairly certain he growled just the tiniest bit in his throat. “What needs fixing?” he grumbled lowly.

“Needs two new tires, new shocks, brake pad replacements, new injection pump drive gears, and of course a tank of gas, possibly a new battery.” She gave her most winning smile.

Bucky merely sighed and rolled his eyes in response. “Let’s get to work.”

Darcy squealed in excitement (she just really loved winning arguments okay? So sue her) and then pranced off to track down the parts they needed.

It took a few hours to scavenge all they needed, including an older set of tools for Darcy to use on the engine that were left rusting in a forgotten toolbox, but eventually she had the Blazer fixed up to her liking. Despite the harrowing day leading up to their midnight scavenger hunt and rebuild, and the dire circumstances of being a Hydra target, Darcy felt herself loosening up as she worked. The subtle joy of fiddling with and fixing up a car was something that she’d definitely inherited from Paul, and just the smell of the Blazer’s engine grease was taking her back to the easy days of her childhood. Her high spirits made working alongside Bucky easier since he was still brooding in full force.

Her mood was so vastly improved that when Barnes laid out beneath the truck and hoisted one side of it up by the might of his metal arm, she was able to fully appreciate how mind-blowingly attractive the action was. She might have drooled on her shirt just a little, if she was being honest.

Bucky jerked his head to level a glare at her, the tendons in his neck popping out with exertion. “You planning on changing this tire anytime soon?” He gritted out.

“Oh. Right. Sorry!” Darcy ducked her head and started the process of replacing the rear tires. She made quick work of it, to Bucky’s relief, and at long last the Blazer was ready.

Bucky rolled out from underneath the truck, dusting off his backside and flexing and recalibrating his prosthetic. He stuck his flashlight between his teeth and ducked into the cab to hotwire the engine. Darcy sent up a silent prayer to the God of Carburetors and watched the engine for any flickers of life.

“Come on, come on, come on. Be a good girl for mama and start,” she cooed, fingers lightly tapping across the front bumper. The Blazer responded with a series of grinding whines and then, finally, roared to life. Darcy let out a triumphant whoop, slamming the hood down and hopping around in a tight circle as she literally sang her own praises. “Darcy is the best of mechanics! No engine can defy me! I know all. Every metal part shall bend to my will!” she trilled, shaking her fists at the frigid night sky.

She stopped her dance of self-worship when she noticed Bucky leaning against the open driver’s
door with a judgmental brow lifted. Whatever, haters gonna hate. She was too elated to care about Mr. Wrong Side of the Bed. She took a running leap at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and screeching into his ear, “We did it!” and proceeded to cover his grumpy face with ecstatic kisses. Bad attitude be damned, she was celebrating!

Bucky froze under her onslaught for a couple dozen kisses and then his hands were coming up to frame her face, bringing her lips to his with bruising force. Darcy gave a surprised bleat and then smiled against the furious press of his mouth. He melted into her then, his lips softening against hers and moving with a lazy hunger. She took the opportunity to wrap her legs around his waist as he moved to lay her across the rumbling hood, pulling her coat to the side to kiss down her neck and over the tops of her breasts where they were peeking out the top of her v-neck t-shirt. She shivered at the contact and the chill of the air as it touched the damp spots on her skin where his mouth had been.

A hot puff of air brushed across her flesh as he let out a sigh, the urgency bleeding out of him as he sank down into her, burying his face between her breasts as his thumbs soothed circles into the sliver of skin between her jeans and her shirt.

Darcy looked down at the top of his head. “You okay down there, kiddo?” she asked. When he didn’t respond, she poked his shoulder. “Did you suffocate? Don’t tell me the girls are murderers now.”

Bucky’s responding chuckle sent shockwaves across her breasts, sending them jiggling and pulling a huff of laughter from Darcy. Bucky raised his head, his eyes sparkling up at her in the moonlight and a sweet smile playing at his luscious mouth.

“There he is,” she murmured. “There’s my Bucky.” She brushed her thumb over his brow, down his cheekbone and across his lower lip. He puckered his lips against her thumb and then snapped at it playfully.

“You wanna tell me what’s been going through that pretty head of yours?” she asked him.

He sighed, looking away from her briefly, before nodding and pulling her upright. “Yeah, but let’s get on the highway first. The longer we stay here, the more likely we are to be caught. Sitting still is making me antsy.”

Darcy hummed in agreement and let him help her off the hood. He hopped in the driver’s seat and waited for her to clamber up into the passenger seat before putting the vehicle in gear and easing out to the main path out of the junkyard.

When they had passed the first mile marker on the highway, Darcy turned expectant eyes on Bucky and cleared her throat. “Okay, spill it, Barnes. What was with the bad attitude?”

Bucky chewed on his lower lip, eyes scanning the road. “I...When I woke you, you were terrified of me.” He tried to bite back on his words but they came tumbling out anyway. “You thought I was attacking you and you were sobbing and talking about how I...how I... did what I did to that Hydra agent and you looked so small and scared of me and you’ve never looked at me that way before and I thought that, that, that it was too much for you, that I was too much and you wouldn’t...want me anymore.” His words petered out and the steering wheel creaked under the strain his clenched hands were putting on it. “I was scared and angry at myself for...being me.” He clicked his teeth closed, jaw twitching as he swallowed hard.

Darcy stared at him wide-eyed and trying to process the rambling string of fear and doubt and worry that he’d unleashed upon her. No wonder the guy had been so cranky, bottling up that much anxiety
wasn’t good for anybody.

“Are you, are you gonna say anything back?” he asked hesitantly, glancing at her from the corner of his eye.

“Yes! Sorry, just trying to unpack all of...that.” She unbuckled and slid across the bench seat, tucking herself into his side to rest her head on his shoulder. “Firstly, definitely still want you. No worries there, Jamie-boy.” She arched up against him to peck him on the cheek. He turned his face into the touch, mouth quirking in a half smile.

She settled back into his side and brushed her left hand over his thigh, picking at the outer seam with her thumb nail. He dropped his flesh hand from the wheel to cover hers, the warm weight of it soothing the frayed edges of her nerves. “Secondly, I feel fully justified in freaking the fuck out earlier. That was a traumatic experience, so I’m allowed to lose it just a little. But I was never scared of you. Okay, maybe I was a little scared right after you killed that guy and your eyes were dead and cold and I thought maybe he’d triggered the Soldier after all, but as soon as I reached for you, you broke out of whatever headspace you were in and I knew I was safe with you.” She paused to take a much needed breath. “But when I freaked out in the car and was talking about watching you kill that guy, my issue was never with you. I wasn’t losing my shit because I’d seen you do something like that, I lost it because I have never seen a person die via stabbing before. I’ve seen the aftermath, but never watched it happen and it was...jarring.”

She raised her eyes to his face, her gaze tracing the furrowed ridges of his brow and the way his mouth tensed at the edges. “I wouldn’t change anything, though. That asshole was going to kill me. Going to take you back to Hydra where they’d break you and hurt you again and there is no way I could ever let that happen. I am 100% glad that shitstain of a human being is dead, don’t you doubt that. If I looked at you with fear in my eyes, it was because of what was going on inside my head at the time, reliving seeing a man die. It was never directed at you, you have to know that.” She laced her fingers gingerly through his, raising his hand to brush her lips across the back of it. “Okay?”

She felt him heave a deep sigh, tension leaking out of him with the breath, and he raised his arm over her shoulders to pull her in closer. “Okay,” he muttered into the top of her head.

They rode in pleasant silence for a few miles as Darcy’s eyes grew heavier and heavier. She felt Bucky nuzzle his nose into her hair and his warm breath against her scalp. “It’s late and it’s been a hell of a day, sweetheart. Get some sleep. I’ll keep you safe,” he murmured, his voice a warm rumble in her ear.

“Mmm, okay,” she agreed, nodding sleepily. She was out cold before they’d gone another mile.

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“Darcy. Darcy, wake up honey. I need that genius brain of yours,” Bucky spoke softly into her ear, stroking her upper arm, trying his damndest to wake her as gently as possible. He’d learned his lesson last time. No knee shaking.

Darcy turned her face, nuzzling into his shoulder and chest. She gave a low groan and slung her arm across his middle, fingers tugging at the hem of his shirt. “I don't wanna,” she whined. “Find another genius.”
“Oh but I'm sort of attached to this one already, you see?” He smiled down at her as she tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

“Oh yeah?” she teased.

“Yeah,” he replied, then dipped his head with the intention of giving her a kiss but was stopped by her hand flitting up to block him.

“Hah, nope. Not till we've both seen the business end of a toothbrush. I adore you Bucky, but we're not to the makeout-with-morning-breath stage of our relationship yet.”

“Really?” he asked, lifting an incredulous eyebrow. When she didn't budge, he rolled his eyes and sighed. “Alright, fine. You awake enough to get me to the cabin?”

“We’re in Bradford? How long did I sleep for?” She swiveled her head to peer out of the windows of the cab. They were parked at a gas station she recognized as being set just outside of town.

Bucky nodded. “About six hours.”

“Oh geez, no wonder I feel so stiff.” She pulled out of his embrace to stretch and crack her back.

“No wait, that might be because of the knives digging into my back and side. Do I really need five knives on my person at all times? Don't you think that's a bit overkill?”

Bucky pursed his lips and considered her question. “Is it just the three that are bothering you?”

“Yes, the boob one doesn't dig into anything bony and neither does the thigh one. Also, the boob and thigh ones are way sexier.” She ran her hand over the blade at her thigh, licking her lips and giving him a slow wink.

Bucky chuckled and helped her out of her jacket, lifting up the back of her shirt to unstrap the knives sheathed at the small of her back and against her ribs. He took the opportunity to run his metal fingertips along the ridges of her spine, raising goosebumps across the soft skin of her back.

She peered up at him over her shoulder. “Having fun back there, Barnes?”

Bucky hummed, his lips upturned in an impish grin, and brushed his flesh hand against her this time. The swing from cold to hot had her shivering under his touch, her eyes half closing as he kneaded the tense muscles of her abused back. When she'd turned to complete putty in his diligent hands, he slid her shirt back down and slipped her jacket over her shoulders. “Better?” he asked.

“Yes, much.”

“Good. Can you put that memory to work now?”

“Yessir, budge over,” she said, crawling over his lap to take over as driver. He scooted out of her way and buckled himself into the passenger side.

Darcy got her bearings, drawing out a mental map of the small town and the winding county roads that would lead them to Rob’s property. A half hour journey over teeth-rattling dirt roads and she eased Big Blue (as she had dubbed the Blazer) up to the front gate to the McKenzies’ private property.

The entrance was nearly hidden where it was tucked back away from the side of the road, a rusted gate stretching between two ancient beech trees and almost entirely covered in dead underbrush. Bucky hopped out of the cab and ambled over to the gate, knocking off the light dusting of snow that
covered the latch. There was a heavy padlock running through the latch, but his prosthetic made quick work of tearing it off and he started pushing the gate out of the way, ripping underbrush clear as he went until the way was clear for her to pass through. He shut the gate behind them and hopped back into the cab, dusting his hands off on the front of his jeans.

If Darcy remembered correctly, the dirt road wound in and around the property for about a mile before they came to the cabin. She eased on down the road, careful of potholes as Big Blue wasn’t the gentlest of rides on rough terrain. They had to stop a few times for Bucky to pull fallen trees from the path. Some were huge and watching the way Bucky’s back flexed and strained under their weight was...pleasant, to say the least.

The cabin, when they finally made it, was just as shabby as she remembered. When Rob had first inherited it, he had been unaware of its existence until the reading of his stepfather’s will. Even his mother hadn’t known about it, so he and Angie were both quite intrigued by it, deciding to take the first long weekend that came up to go out and inspect the property. They’d brought an inspector with them, who’d confirmed that, while the traditional log cabin exterior was ugly as sin, the infrastructure of the house was in excellent condition. The McKenzies had originally planned on making a summer project out of remodeling the place and turning it into a private getaway, but soon after, they discovered they were pregnant with Violet and all plans for renovation had been put on the back burner. Especially after Rob had come across a pile of claymore landmines tucked into a back closet. They’d noped out pretty quickly after that.

Good thing Darcy’d brought a demolitions expert.

They both clambered out of the car, stretching out kinks and aches from the long journey. Bucky hoisted out his ever present great big bag of murder and underwear and traipsed up the front steps of the cabin. He dropped his bag by the door and made a quick circuit around the immediate perimeter before busting the lock and leading Darcy inside. He made a thorough sweep of the place and seemingly deemed it a worthy place to hunker down.

“So what do you think?” Darcy asked, pulling her jacket tighter against the frigid temperature inside the cabin. In the perpetual shade of a mix of huge beech and hemlock trees, the cabin was even colder than the outside air, which had the advantage of a bright, cheery sun and open sky.

“It's damn near perfect, tree coverage blocks the cabin from aerial view, remote, quiet enough for me to hear anyone approaching, and the property isn't in either of our names. Good work, Lewis.” He clapped an approving hand over her shoulder, like she was a lower ranking officer in his command.

She swayed a little under the force of the gesture, turning to him with a raised brow and a mock salute. “Thanks, Sarge.”

He just winked at her in return, leaning in to sneak a quick kiss to the underside of her jaw.

Darcy let out a soft sigh of pleasure. “If you think it's perfect now, wait till you see the stash of claymores in the back closet. I don't know if they're duds or not, but there's a whole crapton of them.”

Bucky froze against her and then jerked back suddenly, turning on his heel and marching off down the hall with a look on his face that could only be described as “kid in a candy store” or, more accurately, “Bucky in a candy store.”

“Have fun,” she muttered at his retreating back and set to work gathering firewood from where it was stacked out behind the house. She started building a fire in the stone fireplace that was the center structure of the cabin and, unfortunately, the only source of heat for the whole house, because this
place was as off the grid as a paranoid old ‘Nam vet could get it. No heat, no AC, no gas. The place barely had electricity. There was an old wind turbine that Rob’s stepdad had put in that supplied the often finicky electricity. She was just thankful that the place had its own well and running water. There was no freaking way she’d be peeing in the woods anytime soon.

Having gotten the fire started, with only minimal cursing and one splinter, Darcy dusted her abused hands carefully on the front her pants and crossed to the kitchenette to take inventory of foodstuffs. The fridge was completely empty save for three bottles of beer and half a jar of jelly, leftover from the last time her family had been there. The pantry was in better condition, stocked fairly well with an assortment of canned goods, three boxes of mac and cheese, some ramen, and what looked like four boxes of ammunition stacked in one corner. Nothing like lead for breakfast, eh Papa McKenzie?

She couldn’t be too critical of the crazy old bastard, may he rest in peace. His paranoid forethought was saving their bacon at the moment.

She wandered through the rest of the cabin, taking inventory of other necessities and creating a running shopping list in her head as she went. Eventually she came to the back bedroom, peering in to see where Bucky was. She could just see the tread of one black combat boot sticking out from the little walk-in closet door and he seemed to be humming quietly to himself.

Darcy knocked on the doorframe (surprising the guy with the landmines was always a bad idea) and moved to the edge of the closet. Bucky was seated on the floor, surrounded by stacks of claymores, fiddling with one of the devices in his lap, happy as a clam.

“If you blow us up, I’m gonna be pissed.”

He gave her an unamused look. “I’m a professional, Darcy. I’m not going to blow us up.”

“You’re a professional that’s been awake for around…” she paused to do the math in her head, “thirty hours. That doesn’t give me a lot of confidence in your abilities.”

Bucky shrugged. “I can stay awake for days if I need to without it impairing my abilities.”

Darcy blinked at him, trying to process what he’d said. Shaking her head, she replied, “Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.” She placed her hands on his shoulders, tugging at his jacket. “Come on, babe. You need a nap. There’s no need to run yourself ragged.”

Bucky sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face, the idea of sleep suddenly sounding irresistible. He placed the claymore in his lap off to the side and stood to exit the closet, closing the door firmly behind him. “Uh, maybe don’t go in this closet without me?”

Darcy snorted. “Yeah, no problem. I enjoy keeping all my limbs attached, thanks.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth a look of horror slid over her face. “Not that there’s anything wrong with not having all your limbs!”

Bucky watched as she squirmed and blushed and couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled out of his chest. Her head fell into her hands, hiding her flaming face from him. He reached for her without thought, tugging her into his chest and wrapping himself around her. He dipped his head to nuzzle into the side of her neck and face. “You sure are cute when you have your foot in your mouth.”

Darcy groaned and pinched his belly. Sort of. It’s hard to get a good grip on rock hard abs. He didn’t even flinch, just chuckled in her ear and started placing hot, open-mouthed kisses along her throat, his tongue soothing over the tender bruises on her skin. The mixture of pleasure and pain had her hissing and moaning into his ear, her hands fisting low at this shirt. She started tugging at the
material, pulling it up his belly but his hands came down around her wrists, pulling them from his shirt and bringing them up to wrap around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her up against him so they were eye to eye.

“You could use some sleep, too.” He dropped his eyes from her face, tracing over the mottled blues and purples at her throat, and then glanced back up at her shyly. “Would you lay with me? For some strange reason I don’t really want you further than arm's reach,” he said with a wry grin.

“The feeling’s mutual,” she murmured, resting her forehead against his.

He smiled and briefly brought his mouth to hers in a chaste kiss while walking them towards the bed that was tucked against the wall. He set her gently on top of the old quilted coverlet then crawled up beside her, tucking her back into his chest and curling himself around her. He reached behind him to throw the coverlet over top of them and then buried his nose in her hair, letting the soothing scent and warmth of her in his arms settle over his bones and send his mind adrift into slumber.

Chapter End Notes

If there are any inaccuracies in regards to anything car related, I apologize. I did my best to research and be as accurate as possible, but at the same time I was bored to tears so I may have made a couple of errors. Sorry!

Big Blue.
Darcy’s eyes snapped open in irritation from the frustrating dream she’d been in the middle of. She’d been chasing after the most delicious looking burger she’d ever seen in her life, getting within grasping distance of it only to have it leap thirty feet away. When her stomach gave a very audible growl, the nature of her dream made a little more sense. Holy quarter pounder with cheese, she was starving. And sweaty.

Despite the near freezing temperature in the back bedroom, being surrounded by Bucky’s overwhelming body heat had her sweating her butt off. The guy put off heat like an electric blanket. It didn’t help that she was fully clothed and still had her thick winter jacket on. She swiped a damp strand of hair out of her face and started the process of disentangling herself from various muscled limbs. She’d just about gotten out from underneath one massively heavy thigh, only to have his arm snake around her middle and pull her back into his vice-like grip.

She was too hot, hungry, and irritated for this snuggling crap. She wiggled harder, huffing and puffing as she attempted, again, to remove herself from his embrace. Bucky gave a little whine in the back of his throat and tensed his muscles, effectively stymying her efforts of escape.

“No,” he mumbled into her hair. “Mine.”

Darcy sighed and rolled her eyes. Dammit, she was hungry enough she was contemplating gnawing his other arm off just for something to fill her aching belly. She poked him in his side, twisting in his arms to face him.

“Bucky, let me go.”

“No.” He didn’t even open his eyes. Just muttered at her and sank deeper into sleep.

“I need to eat.”

No response. She poked him again.

“I’m starving. And sweating my ass off. I’m like thirty seconds away from taking my clothes off just to get some relief, you human oven.”

The teeniest smile crept over his face, though his eyes stayed tightly closed. “Definitely not letting go then,” he mumbled.

Darcy grumbled lowly, cursing the stubborn, handsome jerk. Time for the big guns. “Barnes, don’t make me tickle the shit out of you, cause I’ll do it. You know I will.”

Bucky groaned, but opened up the cage of his arms and legs, rolling onto his back and sprawling out across the bed.

“Thank god.” Darcy muttered, sitting up and sighing in relief at the rush of cold air against her overheated body. She turned her head to stare down at her tormentor. He was already snoring softly. Looked like she’d be dining alone. She smoothed her hand down the top of one of his thighs and slid off the bed.

Once in the kitchen, she set a pot of water boiling to make a packet of ramen and rekindled the fire while she waited. She peered through the little window above the kitchen sink as she ate her noodles, watching as the sun sank below the horizon. It certainly was a peaceful place to visit, if a bit rustic.
for her taste. Still, it could be worse. At least she could still take a hot shower, which was first on her
to do list once she’d finished eating.

Darcy tilted her head to sniff one armpit. Yeah, wow. Definitely first on the list. It was then that it hit
her that she had brought zero clothes with her. She groaned and gave a little stomp of her foot. The
idea of getting clean just to put on the same grungy clothes she’d been wearing for a day and half
was horribly unappealing. Yeah, no. She’d just borrow some of Bucky’s clothes. Surely he had
something she could borrow in that enormous bag.

The bag in question was still resting against the front door where Bucky had left it earlier. She knelt
down and unzipped it, noting that the thing was definitely big enough to hide at least one body in,
which was slightly morbid, but whatever. From what she could tell, it seemed to be loosely
organized from left to right, starting with tools of badassery, then clothing and toiletries, followed by
entertainment items and at the very far right end was a smaller black bag. Out of curiosity, she
grabbed at the handles, leaning back on her heels to tug it out of the larger bag, losing her balance
and falling to her ass when it finally pulled free.

She righted herself, pulling the smaller bag into her lap and unzipping the top to find...women’s
clothing? Sports bras and cotton panties and yoga pants and a variety of sedately colored athletic
tops. Plus a pair of sneakers, a pair of jeans, a jacket, and a couple of dark colored blouses. Hell,
there was even a small toiletries bag that had deodorant, a toothbrush and toothpaste, travel size soap
and shampoo, and a small assortment of pads and tampons. Unless Barnes had a tendency to wear
women’s clothing that was entirely too small for him, the bag was obviously all meant for her, seeing
as the clothes were all in her size and the toiletries were all brands that she used.

Weird.

She briefly wondered how long he’d had a bug out bag ready for her (and how the hell he’d known
her sizes and preferences) before gathering up a fresh set of clothes and the toiletries bag and heading
to the bathroom.

The bathroom was a cramped and ugly thing, but the showerhead had spectacular water pressure that
could pound away the most knotted of muscles and the tub was fairly clean considering the lack of
use over the years.

Darcy stood under the thunderous spray for a solid twenty minutes, doing nothing but leaning against
the tile wall and letting the hot water soothe at all the little aches and cuts that riddled her body.
When she felt the water starting to cool, she hurriedly scrubbed her hair and body, ignoring how the
soap stung her hands and arms. She was able to shut the water off just as it was getting to an
uncomfortably chilly temperature, hopping out to pull a towel from the linen cabinet under the sink
and wrapping herself in the fluffy, if somewhat musty smelling, softness.

She dried herself off quickly, then wrapped her hair up in the towel while she brushed her teeth and
slapped on some deodorant. She stood staring at herself in the little mirror above the sink, wincing at
the ugly bruising on her throat. Lucky it was scarf season because otherwise there was no way she
could go grocery shopping with her neck looking like that. The memory of Agent Dead Guy
choking the life out of her floated up unbidden, souring her stomach and making her drop her eyes to
the sink drain. She focused on breathing through her nose and studiously ignored her reflection,
hurrying to finish brushing her teeth and then dressing.

When she stepped out of the bathroom she felt like a new, slightly damp, woman. She ran her fingers
through her wet curls, trying to undo the snarls as best she could, and peeked in the bedroom to
check on Bucky. Still out cold, the poor baby.
She ambled back down the hallway to the fireplace and added another couple of logs, then sat cross-legged on the circular rug in front of it to help dry her hair. She let the peacefulness of the evening settle over her. The only sound in the cabin was the softly crackling fire. So peaceful, so relaxing, so quiet.

She hated it.

She was never one for peace and quiet, so she went back to Bucky’s bag and pulled out one of his crossword puzzle books. That kept her occupied for maybe thirty minutes and in that time she’d completed five or six of the puzzles. She tossed the book aside to grab one of the paperback novels he’d brought. The first was one she’d read already, as was the second, the third book was a biography on General Patton (yawn), and the fourth and final book was an honest-to-god masters level math textbook. Darcy groaned and reached for the first book again and carried it back to her spot in front of the fire.

She flopped down on her belly across the rug and cracked the novel open. She read for a few minutes and then shifted to sitting cross-legged when her elbows started going numb. Eventually her butt started protesting the new position, so she stretched out on her side, which of course started irritating her hips after ten minutes. Finally she rolled to lying flat on her back with her book held up over her head, trying to concentrate on the words instead of the way she was slowly losing feeling in her hands. When the book slid from her numb fingers to land on her face, she gave up trying to read entirely, childishly snapping her heels against the floor and letting off a frustrated moan.

“It sounds like you’re dying there, sweetheart,” came a masculine voice.

Darcy snatched the book from her face. “I am dying. Of boredom! There is absolutely nothing to do in this godforsaken place. I need television! I need internet access! This place is the worst! Oh, don’t you look at me with those judgmental eyes, James Barnes. You grew up without any of that stuff, you’re used to living in a technological wasteland.” Darcy turned her nose up at him, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the ceiling.

“I may have some ideas of how to keep you entertained.”

Darcy didn’t even need to look at him to know he was giving her that devilish smirk. She turned her glare on him, extending one accusing finger towards him. “You brushed your teeth yet, Romeo? Go take care of that first and then we can talk about entertainment.” She returned her glare to the ceiling, listening to his boots stomp around to the front door as he snatched up his toiletries bag and stomped back down the hallway.

A few minutes later she heard him returning from the bathroom and was opening her mouth to spout off something snarky when she was suddenly completely covered by a very large, very male body. “Well hello there soldier, what are you doing down here?”

“Gonna kiss you till you forget your own name.” Bucky gave her a positively sinful smile, mischief and firelight sparkling in his eyes.

Darcy scoffed. “That is highly unlikely, I have a steel trap mind. I forget noth-” She was cut off by Barnes’ mouth crashing down on hers and one of those thick thighs sliding between hers. He gave a pleased hum in the back of his throat when her hands slid up into his hair. He slipped his arms underneath her, one wrapping under her shoulder blades and the other cradling her head.

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It was getting easier all the time, being with her like this. What did Sam call it? Exposure therapy? Something like that. Every time he kissed her or touched her or just being near her...thoroughly. Or maybe it wasn't so much that he was still in control, but that he was learning to embrace letting go when he was with her, learning not to be so afraid of the chaos she inspired in his mind and heart and body.

Whatever it was, he wanted more.

His grip tightened in her hair, tipping her head back so he could soothe kisses over the bruising on her neck. Every time he saw them, guilt spiked through his gut. He knew she would never blame him, but it felt like his fault all the same. He hoped he could make it up to her with the caress of his mouth and the gentleness of his hands.

He ran the tip of his tongue slowly up the length of her neck to nibble and suck at her earlobe, his body aching pleasantly with every gasp and moan he coaxed from her. Drawing his mouth back to hers, he pulled her luscious bottom lip into his mouth, rolling it gently between his teeth. The action had her bucking up against his thigh, her eyes shut tight against the sensation and damn if it wasn't the most gorgeous thing he'd seen in a century.

Bucky couldn't help the smile that crossed his face or the way his hand slid down to cup that perfect ass, lifting her hips and pressing his thigh between her legs, giving her the pressure and contact she was craving.

When she started calling on deities of various religions, he knew he was on the right track. He captured her mouth again, reveling in the hot, wet slide of her tongue against his, the way her fingers tugged almost painfully at his hair. He trailed his flesh hand back up her body, pausing at the soft skin of her hip that was peeking out between her shirt and yoga pants. He traced his fingers back and forth along the skin, working up the courage to slide his hand up beneath the fabric, only to have her grip his hand tight and shove it up under her shirt.

It was but a few heated moments later and she was bare to him from the waist up and drowning in his touches. He trailed his lips and teeth over her, using them along with his hands to map out every inch of delicate skin. The contrast of his hot mouth on her and the cool metal of his hand was damn near unbearable, and when he started trailing that hand down her stomach to linger at the top of her yoga pants Darcy thought she might lose her mind. He was merciful and, at her express urging, did not linger there for long.

It was a beautiful thing to watch a woman come undone beneath him. Darcy was no exception, but she was definitely the most exquisite. The way her skin flushed so prettily across her chest, the shaky press of her thighs around his wrist, the way she writhed under him and bit against her full, pink mouth. The way she said his goddamn name, like he deserved to be touching her like this, like he'd earned it. It was the single most heady experience that he could remember.

When she was trembling and sated, he rolled to his side next to her and stroked her hair back from her forehead with his flesh hand, leaning down to brush his nose against hers. “You alright?”

Darcy just hummed and nodded, a wide grin lighting up her face as she arched her back and stretched the tension from her arms. She snuggled back into his warmth, enjoying the way the heat of the fire played across the skin of her back and the rough glide of his palm along her spine as her breathing finally slowed. Glancing up at him with heavy eyes, she asked, “And what about you?” She trailed a finger down the front of his shirt until he caught her by the wrist, bringing her hand up to brush his lips across her palm.
He shook his head slowly, something akin to fear in his eyes. She gave a small, disappointed sigh, but nodded, stroking light fingers across his cheek. She'd give him time. As much as he needed.

The peaceful moment between them was interrupted when Bucky's stomach gave a terrific grumble. His face scrunched up adorably. “Um, guess I'm a little hungry. Sorry.”

Darcy chuckled and nipped at his chin. “If you carry me to the couch, wrap me in a blanket, and put some more wood on the fire, I promise I'll forgive you for interrupting cuddle time to make yourself something to eat.”

Bucky grinned back at her, scooping her up into his arms. “Deal.”

He settled her onto the couch, scrounging up a quilt from the linen closet and tucking it around her before tending to the fire. With the buzz of his A+ entertainment still thrumming through her system and the warmth surrounding her, Darcy dozed on the sofa while Bucky tended to his dinner. She stirred slightly when he came to sit at one end of the couch, lifting her feet to rest in his lap, but she soon slipped back into that cozy half awake half asleep haze.

She felt him jiggle her foot lightly just as she was slipping deeper into sleep. “Hey. Hey, baby. Do ya still remember your name?”

She scrunched her face up, trying to make sense of his words through her addled brain. “What?” was her intelligent response.

“Guess not,” Bucky replied, as pleased with himself as she'd ever seen him.

Darcy’s sex and sleep muddled brain whirred slowly back to life, trying to figure out what the frickety frack he was on about. She peered at him through slitted eyelids as she considered his words. When realization dawned, her eyes snapped wide and she kicked out an indignant foot into his ribs. “Yes, I remember my damn name, Bucky!”

“Oh really? I've yet to hear you say it. Seems the only name you’ve been able to say is mine.”

Darcy flew up from where she was reclined against the couch, launching herself at him to tickle at his sides mercilessly. In between high pitched giggles and huffing laughter, he gripped tightly at her ankles, digging his fingers into the soles of her feet in retaliation. She jerked against him, kicking her legs and trying to escape his torment, only to fling herself half off the couch. Her legs were still trapped in his lap along with the quilt that pulled free from her torso, leaving her hanging upside down and bare from the waist up. She was fairly certain her breasts were doing their best to smother her.

“Help!” She squeaked, fluttering her hand towards Bucky.

“I don't wanna. I'm enjoying the view.”

Darcy growled in frustration. “Why are men so obsessed with breasts?”

“Oh no, it's not that. It's just funny to see all the blood rushing to your head. You're about three shades away from turning a nice purple.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, glaring daggers at him until he sighed and reached down to pull her into his lap.

He tucked the blanket back up around her shoulders and kissed the top of each breast before enclosing them in the blanket as well, looking up under dark lashes at her.
“Don't get too attached to them, babe. I'll probably have a reduction in a few years.”

“What?” Bucky’s brows rose.

“Breast reduction surgery,” she clarified. “They may look amazing but they're heavy as all hell and they've been giving me back problems out the butt since I was 14. Not to mention the damage to my shoulders from the evil that are bra straps.”

A look of concern passed over his face and he brought a warm palm down to rub between her shoulder blades. “If they're causing problems, why haven't you gotten the surgery already?”

“Eh, for a long time it was lack of funds and now...well, I dunno. It’s a big decision, and I guess I'm a little bit freaked out at the idea of changing my appearance so much.” She shrugged one shoulder with a self-conscious little tick of her lips.

“You shouldn't be. You'd look gorgeous in any shape, doll. But don't worry about all that, just do whatever keeps you happy and healthy.” He brought her into both of his arms then, resting his cheek against her forehead.

She poked at his belly. “So you wouldn't mourn their loss?”

“Not really, I don't think. Just so long as you don't do anything to change that perfect backside.” His hand dipped low from where it had been between her shoulder blades, sweeping down to grab a handful of perfection.

Darcy jolted in surprise at his grip on her rear and then cooed into his ear. “So Bucky Barnes is a confirmed ass man?”

Bucky hummed a distracted affirmation, his focus on the warmth and give of her supple ass in his hand. “Love ‘em,” he muttered. “And yours is the best. Looks like an upside down heart.”

Darcy cracked up into giggles. “Like a what?”

“An upside down heart,” he reiterated. “You know…” he trailed off, pulling her up to straddle his lap so he could trace the lower curves of her cheeks, up and out over the flare of her hips and sweeping back in to the narrowing of her waist, his fingers meeting at her spine. “Upside down heart.” He looked up at her with a sweetly earnest expression that had her breaking into more giggles.

“You precious, darling man. Bless your heart!” She leaned down to pepper a series of kisses over his cheeks and brow.

“Okay, now you're just making fun of me. I can tell.”

“Maybe just a little bit.” She sent him her best Cheshire Cat grin.

He glared at her until she tilted her head at him playfully, the motion causing the firelight to accent the bruising at her neck. The glare faded from his features then, regret shadowing his soft eyes. He reached up to brush lightly against her skin, fingers tracing the edge of a particularly nasty looking bruise.

She recognized the look in his eyes for what it was and grasped his wrist in both of her small hands. “I'm alright, Bucky. Nothing a little concealer can't cover up.”

“You almost died, Darcy. If I'd gotten there even a minute later…” he shook his head sharply, trying
to dislodge the unwelcome imagery. “How did he even get you in a chokehold like that? Why didn't you use your training?”

Darcy's gut sank with guilt at his words. “Ah, yes, my training. The, uh, mandatory physical training that all Avengers and close associates must go through. That training, that I am technically legally required to complete. That training?” She worried at her bottom lip, giving him a wan smile.

“Darcy…” he growled out. “Please tell me that you haven't been running around New York with a giant fucking target on your back with zero self defense skills.” His words came out clipped and sharp, barely contained anger simmering under the surface.

She gave a nervous chuckle. “Well, hah, about that...you see I'm not super into the whole ‘exercise’ thing per se and um yes technically I'm supposed to be trained for all that but I bribed Tony with cookies to sign off on my paperwork saying I did it, and before you get angry at Tony, in his defense Pepper had him on a juice cleanse at the time and the guy would have sold out his own mother for a chocolate chip cookie but yeah no never actually had any training and um never thought it was super necessary since I'm not exactly a superhero or anything and just assumed I'd be overlooked by any...potential...bad guys?” She trailed off, her voice pitching higher with nerves at the thunderous expression on Bucky's face.

“Darcy. Grace. Lewis,” he spat through gritted teeth. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

He stared at her with incredulous steel blue eyes. “Not only are you an integral part of the team, you also hold personal weight with each and every one of the Avengers! I'm 85% certain Natalia assassinated a guy at a bar that tried to drug your drink once! They all adore you and if anyone with ill intentions caught wind of that...you'd be one of the first hostages taken. And that's not even taking into account the fact that your goddamn gorgeous face has been on every news channel in the country over the last year. Did you really think that your safety was so unimportant?!” By the end of his tirade, he was breathing heavily, his cheeks flushed and nostrils flared.

Darcy had crawled out of his lap fairly quickly after he'd started his rant, scooching to press her back against the opposite arm of the couch. She clutched the blanket tighter around her shoulders. It was never fun getting a dressing down, it was even worse when you were half naked and knew the other person was right. Dammit, she hated being wrong.

She took a steadying breath, trying to think how best to approach the subject of her apology. “Well I know that now,” was what ended up coming out, and she fought the urge to facepalm herself.

He looked at her with a mixture of anger and disbelief before hauling himself abruptly off the couch. “I'm going to do a perimeter sweep,” he said curtly, heading to the back bedroom and returning a few moments later with a stack of claymores. His jaw jutted with irritation as he stomped out the front door, slamming it behind him.

“Bye babe, have fun with your explosives,” she muttered to herself and then flopped back down on the couch with a groan. Why was she such an idiot sometimes? Damn, damn, dammity damn.

She searched for her t-shirt on the couch, locating it half underneath her ass and tugging it free. She pulled it roughly back on over her head deciding not to bother with a sports bra and instead opting to find a thick pair of socks to wear because she was tired and going the fuck to sleep.

She stuffed her feet into a warm pair of wool socks she filched from Bucky's bag and stole one of his hoodies as well. The back bedroom was sure to be freezing without his body heat this time and she couldn't sleep if she was cold. She gathered up the quilt she'd been wrapped in, along with a wool blanket from the linen closet, and headed to the queen sized bed they'd slept on earlier.
She pulled the covers back, making sure the sheets were in decent enough condition to sleep in. They were clean, if a bit musty, and there were no bugs or critters hiding in the sheets. She counted that as a win, crawling between the cotton sheets and throwing the two extra blankets over the coverlet, snuggling down and curling up on her side.

Was it a tad early for a normal person to be going to bed? Maybe. But fuck it, she'd had a batshit crazy last couple of days, nearly died, had been kissed and stroked until she’d seen stars, followed by a lecture that she actually kinda sorta maybe perchance deserved. She was fucking done with this day. And with that, she closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.
The creaking of the floorboards was what finally pulled Darcy from the light, miserably cold sleep she'd been in. The digital clock on the bedside table announced that it was a little after one in the morning and the numbers cast a greenish glow over Bucky where he stood in the doorway.

He shuffled from one foot to the other, hesitating a moment before deciding to creep closer to her and the bed.

"Dude, what are you doing?" she stuttered out.

Bucky jolted in surprise before sheepishly running a hand through his hair. "I could hear your teeth chattering all the way in the living room. Wanted to come check on you."

"Yeah, no kidding, it's fucking freezing. Get in here and be my space heater, Barnes," she commanded, her body violently trembling as she spoke.

"You sure you want me to?" His hangdog expression was a little overkill, she thought. She'd roll her eyes at him if she wasn't shivering so hard she was having trouble focusing them.

"I'm too cold to care. Just get in the bed and we can talk when I'm warm."

As soon as he settled into the covers, Darcy could feel the heat radiating off his body from several inches away. She tucked up against his heat, tangling her legs in his, burying her face into his chest, and shoving her hands up under his t-shirt to curl into the heat coming off his belly. "Sweet Christmas," she groaned as Bucky jerked and let out a yelp.

"No wonder your teeth were chattering. You're ice cold, honey." He brought his arms around her, tucking her even tighter to his chest and rubbing his palms up and down her back and arms.

When she found herself suitably toasty with full feeling in her extremities and a cessation in the full-body tremors she'd been previously enduring, she tilted her head back to look Barnes in the eye. "On a scale of 'mildly irritated' to 'let's go bury land mines,' exactly how angry with me are you at this time?"

"I'm not angry, Darcy. Just disappointed that you would think so little of your own safety and importance," he replied softly.

"Oh god, have you been taking 'disappointed dad' lessons from Steve?" she groaned, thunking her
forehead to his chest.

He smirked against her hair. “Who do you think he learned it from? I've been giving him that same
damn speech since we were kids.” Bucky gave a short groan of horror. “Dear god, I have a type.”

“What? Small and feisty?”

“No. Kind and brilliant, but with zero regard for their personal safety. Between the two of you, I'm
gonna have a coronary. I'm an old man, my heart can't take it.” He placed his hand over hers where it
was already resting over his heart.

“Don't pretend you don't love the excitement of stepping in to save our bacon and retaining the ‘I
told you so’ privileges.”

“I do love the ‘I told you sos.’ And I'm pretty fond of your bacon.”


Bucky made a disgruntled noise in the back of his throat. “I'm gonna stop telling you things if you
keep making fun of me for it.”

She arched up to press a kiss to his collarbone. “Sorry,” she said and then dropped her voice to
nearly inaudible, “not sorry!”

“I can still hear you, Darcy,” he said, pinching playfully at her rear.

“I haven't a clue to what you are referring, Sergeant Barnes,” she cackled, wiggling against him and
away from his lecherous hands. She snaked her arms around his neck, playfully tugging at the
strands of hair at the crown of his head and leaning in to kiss him sweetly. He must have showered
while she was sleeping because she could smell the subtle scent of his bar soap and shampoo. Some
mixture of honey and citrus layering over the god-given scent that was 100% Bucky.

He sighed into her kiss, rolling onto his back to pull her atop him. She tipped her forehead to his, just
breathing him in, and then with one last press of her lips to his, she pushed back on her forearms to
peer down at him solemnly.

“Babe, I am sorry for taking my safety so lightly. Believe me when I say that I've learned my lesson.
Thoroughly.” She grimaced and ran a hand over her throat in demonstration. “As soon as we get
back and have all this sorted, I'm marching my butt straight to the self-defense classes. I'll even take
some extra instruction from Nat.”

“It wouldn't hurt to take some lessons on using firearms as well.”

“Uh, let’s take this journey one violent discipline at a time. Let me master kicking ass with my body
before we add in weaponry.”

“If used properly, your body can be considered a weapon.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow at him, giving him a slow once over. “Maybe your body,” she muttered.

He chuckled and pulled her close to his heart, rolling them back to their sides. “Yours too, with time
and proper instruction.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his lips quirking up into a smile against
her skin when she let loose a loud, jaw-cracking yawn. “Go back to sleep, Darce. I'll stay to keep
you warm.”
“Mmm, you better. ‘Night, Bucky.” She murmured, already half asleep at the suggestion.

“Goodnight, doll.”

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“Good morning, doll!” Bucky chirped cheerily in her ear.

Darcy groaned, turning a bleary eye to the digital clock. “Barnes, 5am is not morning. What is wrong with you? Go away.” And with that she promptly rolled over onto her belly, crooking one leg and pushing her butt up slightly.

A large hand came down to slap her rump firmly through the layers of blankets, causing one surprised blue eye to pop open. She turned her head on the pillow so she could give him an affronted glare and slice at him with her sharp tongue only to be beaten to the punch.

“Oh good, you're awake,” he said from where he was kneeling over her at the edge of the bed. Fully dressed, she might add. What the hell?

He tossed a bundle of clothes at her, patting her rear one last time, and then clambered off the bed to head towards the door. “Get dressed,” he called over his shoulder. “Breakfast is in ten.”

What? What was happening? It was nighttime for goddsake.

Darcy decided to ignore Bucky's prompting, pulling the covers up over her head and snuggling back down into the mattress. If he wanted to start his day at 5 in the morning, far be it from her to stop him. But like hell was she going to join him. She'd get up when she was good and ready.

Bucky had a differing opinion on what “good and ready” meant, as it turned out.

Exactly ten minutes later, he returned to the bedroom smacking the bottom of an empty pot with his prosthetic hand and making an absolutely unholy racket. Darcy flew up into a sitting position, clutching at her furiously pounding heart.

“What in the name of all things sacred are you doing?”

Bucky dropped his hands, the pot dangling innocently by the handle in his flesh hand. “I'm waking you up. I thought that was obvious?”

“Yes, but why?” Darcy whined.

“You promised me you'd learn how to defend yourself. Training starts today.” He arched an eyebrow at her, just begging her to try and argue with him on this topic.

Darcy just stared at him. “But it's...it’s not...it’s still nighttime.”

“Consider me your new commanding officer, Sergeant Barnes. Day starts a little earlier in the army, sweetheart.” He crossed his arms over his chest, pot still in hand and feet planted solidly against the wood floor, the very picture of immovable will.

Honestly, the whole “commanding officer” thing would definitely be ringing her bell if it weren't for the fact that he was using it to get her ass out of bed instead of into it. Maybe she could change
“You always make a habit of finger diddling your subordinates?” She crossed her arms underneath her breasts and lifted a saucy brow.

Desire darkened the cool blue of his eyes as he stalked towards her. He lifted one knee to rest on the mattress, leaning in until he was mere inches from her face. His eyes darted down to her mouth and then back to her eyes, a slow smile pulling up the corners of his soft mouth.

“Only when they say please.” His mouth lingered dangerously close to hers, but before she could grab him he leaned back out of reach, tossing her clothes into her lap again and walking back towards the door. “Get dressed,” he commanded, leaning against the doorframe with his back to her. “We’re going running.”

Darcy groaned. No. Fucking running was the absolute worst. People kept telling her about the “runner’s high” but in all the years she’d been alive she’d never experienced such a thing. It sounded like a bunch of cultish bullshit in her opinion.

“Look Sarge, if you wanted to give me a workout, I’m sure you could help me work up a decent sweat right here with your hands and your mouth and your c-”

“Darcy. Behave yourself, woman. I’m not changing my mind so stop torturing me. Please?”

Darcy glared a hole in the back of his head but eventually relented. “Fine.” She ripped his hoodie and her t-shirt over her head in one go, snatching up the sports bra off the bed and pulling it on. “Go grab me another bra. If we’re running, I’m gonna need two or I’ll end up knocking myself out.”

Bucky choked out a surprised laugh but ambled off to the living room to retrieve what she needed. She had on the athletic pants and was stuffing her feet into her socks when he came back, a sports bra dangling from his metal fingers and running shoes hanging from the other. She took both from him and finished dressing in record time, more interested in getting warm than avoiding exercise at that point.

When she’d finished, he grabbed her hands, hauling her off the bed and leading her towards the little breakfast table set in one corner of the open kitchen. He sat her in front of a steaming bowl of what looked like canned soup. Darcy wrinkled her nose.

“Trust me, doll. They fed us way worse when I was in the army. We’ll go to town today for a grocery run after we’re done with your training.”

Darcy grunted and shoveled a spoonful of soup into her mouth. It wasn't the worst thing she'd ever tasted but it certainly wasn't bacon and eggs. “I don’t remember enlisting,” she mumbled with a pointed glare.

Bucky cheerily ignored her complaint, dipping down to peck her on the cheek, hands settling on her shoulders and briefly rubbing some of the tension from them. He wandered off to rummage through his bag and wash the handful of dishes that were piled up in the sink while she ate her breakfast. She didn’t eat much of it. She wasn’t all that hungry since her body was still screaming at her to go back to sleep.

When she’d finished, Bucky pushed her hands into a warm pair of military grade gloves. They were too big for her small hands, but considerably warmer than going without. He also pulled a black beanie onto her head, tugging it down over her ears and carefully tucking away loose wisps of hair that hung in her face. She let him dress her, sitting like a lump of sullen lead.
“You’re pretty cute when you’re pouting, Lewis.” He zipped up her jacket and then ran his thumb over her full bottom lip that was definitely jutting out more than was strictly necessary.

Darcy leaned away from his touch and rose from her seat, giving him a wicked case of side-eye. “I gotta pee. And brush my teeth.” She squeezed past where he was still kneeling in front of her chair, narrowly escaping the game of grab-ass Barnes seemed interested in playing.

She smacked his hands away, backing quickly towards the bathroom. “No. No bacon for you, Barnes.”

Bucky’s eyes lit with challenge, his muscles tensing like a cat about to pounce. Darcy’s eyes widened at the change in his demeanor and she turned tail and ran flat out to the bathroom, slamming and locking the door just in time. Hah, take that, asshole.

Bucky chortled and called to her through the door. “At least your instincts are good. It’s probably the only thing that’s kept you alive this long!”

“Go away!” she shouted, but the heat in her voice couldn’t quite cover her pleasure at his somewhat backhanded praise. That’s right, buddy. She might have muscles like a wet noodle, but she was sharp enough never to be caught off guard. Can’t learn that on a wrestling mat.

Darcy took care of her necessities and then exited the bathroom, pulling her gloves back on as she went. She was halfway to the living room when she realized that Barnes was nowhere to be seen. It was then that two arms came down around her, trapping her arms to her sides and lifting her feet a few inches above the floor.

Bucky’s warm voice rumbled in her ear. “Instincts mean nothing unless you have the skills to back them up. That is something you can learn on the mat.”

Oh crap, she must have said that part out loud.

She wiggled futilely against him, but his arms were as immovable as steel bands. Well, one steel band and one vibranium. He chuckled warmly at her efforts, bringing his lips down to kiss and suck lightly at the juncture of her shoulder and neck.

Darcy went limp, recognizing when she’d been properly beaten and gave in with good grace. The blow of the loss was significantly lessened by the way Bucky’s hot mouth was moving over her skin.

“Does this mean we’re going back to bed?” she gasped out hopefully when he sucked at a particularly sensitive spot.

“Mmmm, no,” he hummed against her. “Just getting you warmed up. It’s important to get your heart rate up and your muscles stretched out before running long distances.”

“Oh?” she muttered, eyes rolling back in her head. “Fascinating.”

He smiled against her and lowered her gently back to the floor. He loosened his arms around her, sliding one hand low over her belly, fingers skimming lightly over her pubic bone before settling high at her inner thigh. He pressed against her leg, urging her to widen her stance on the floor and then brought his metal hand to nudge gently at the small of her back until she was bending over, her pert ass pressing appealingly back against him.

His hands settled at her hips, thumbs massaging at the tendons there that were pulled tight. “Perfect,” he rumbled low in his chest, and then stepped abruptly away from her. “Stretch out those hamstrings,” he chirped, swatting her rear in approval and causing her to sway forward slightly to
catch herself on outstretched arms.

“What?” she exclaimed, blood rushing to her face due to her inverted position.

“You heard me. Don't want you pulling or tearing any muscles. Stretch ‘em out.” He gave her his most winning smile.

“No good, dirty rotten, shit-eating, son of a motherless goat,” she muttered, bending into the burn of her taut muscles. She went through a few basic stretches that even she knew, and then stalked over to the rug in the living room, dropping down to the floor to start a basic sun salutation. Yoga was one of the few “exercise” type activities she enjoyed on occasion.

Bucky sat at the kitchen table, watching as she moved through the poses, his eyes darkening with each rotation. Darcy glanced up at him from where she was pushing up into upward facing dog.

“See something interesting, Sergeant?”

“I don't know what the hell you’re doing, Lewis, but it is damn near pornographic.”

“It just looks that way to you cause you're a dirty old man who hasn't seen any action since World War II.”

“I believe the rug you are currently violating would tell a different story.” He quirked an eyebrow at her.

Darcy suppressed a teeny smirk, trying to channel her inner zen when she responded, “I believe I was the only one to see action on this rug because somebody was being shy.” She arched her own eyebrow at him as she lowered herself into a plank, watching as his cheeks pinked and his eyes danced away from hers.

When his eyes stayed averted and he didn't respond to her teasing, she finished her routine and rose from the floor. She went to stand in front of him, hands going to either side of his face. She kissed him sweetly, softly, her lips moving over his with a tender mercy she hoped he understood.

“The minute you're ready to end that dry spell, you let me know. Until then, I'm content to let you defile me however you want on every solid surface of this cabin. K?”

Bucky swallowed hard and nodded.

“Good,” Darcy said with a toothy grin and a firm pat to his jaw. “I think I'm all warmed up now. Let's get this suckfest over with.”

She turned for the front door with Bucky on her tail. She hunched her shoulders against the biting wind that tore at her exposed skin as soon as she opened the door, the sky still an inky black. She whimpered and turned to look at Bucky with pleading, pitiful eyes.

“Get moving, Lewis. It’ll help with the cold.” He swatted her backside, effectively pushing her out the front door and onto the porch.

“Hey! No! You don't get to touch the bacon anymore. If I have to suffer, so do you!”

“Tell you what, doll, if you really want me to keep my hands to myself, then you start running and we’ll play a little game of keep away. We’ll only run for half an hour, unless I catch you. Every time I catch you, you have to run another ten minutes.”
“No, no, no I don't like this game.” She back away from him, hands stretched out to ward him off.

“Ready…”

“No, come on Bucky, there's no way I can outrun you-

“Not with that attitude. Set…”

“Please, I'm gonna end up having to run until I drop dead!”

“Hey, I don't make the rules, sweetheart.”

“That's not true! You literally just made them!” Darcy's voice went shrill.

Bucky gave her one last wolfish grin. “.... Go!”

Darcy squeaked and turned, stumbling over her feet before breaking into a dead run down the dirt road leading away from the cabin.

She listened to the steady thump of his boots against the thin dusting of snow on the ground behind her, keeping a consistent gap between them. He didn't even seem to be trying to catch her, just keeping a nice smooth jog.

“Make sure not to stray off the road, hate to see one of those gorgeous legs blown off.”

Darcy yelped and skidded to a halt in the middle of the road, eyes darting to moonlit shrubbery on either side. She yelped again when Bucky's hands suddenly made a grab at her backside.

“Keep it moving, soldier! That's another ten minutes!” He took off jogging down the road again, not even turning around when she started flinging insults at him.

“Better start running, soldier, or I'm upping the penalty to twenty minutes! And you shouldn't talk about a man's mother that way, Lewis. Have some goddamn manners,” he called out.

Ooh, that motherfu -

“If I have to come back and get you, you're gonna regret it.” The bastard didn't even sound out of breath.

With a huff and a stomp of her foot, Darcy took off running again, her breathing already turning ragged. When she finally caught up to him (really, how the fuck did he get that far with so little effort?) she threw a weak punch at his arm.

“You...cheated!” she gasped out.

“Can't cheat when you make the rules. Besides, it was a lesson in focus. And there should be a 'sir' in there somewhere when addressing your superior officer.”

Darcy stumbled over a tree root, barely righting herself before she could fall over. When she'd gotten her feet back under her, she turned to him with a glare. “Yes, sir,” she gritted out.

Bucky glanced over at her from where he was easily keeping pace. “That's more like it. Get out ahead of me again, no lollygagging!”

Darcy gave a feral growl and pushed her already burning legs to pull out ahead of him by about ten feet.
They kept a steady pace until Darcy inevitably grew too winded and had to stop, only for her rear to be tapped by a wandering supersoldier hand. It was the absolute suckiest game of tag that she'd ever played.

She didn't even have any music to listen to while she ran. Fuck her, this whole thing was awful. But she had made a promise. And she'd keep it, even though she was sorely regretting it.

He ran her from the cabin to the front gate and back again, over and over until the sun rose in the sky and her legs finally did give out and she stumbled towards the ground. Strong arms came down and around her before she could face plant into the snow, lifting her up and flipping her into a bridal carry.

Darcy’s lungs seized, trying their damndest to get oxygen to her screaming muscles. She went limp against him, her head lolling onto his chest as he carried her back down the road to the cabin.

“I...hate...you... so much ...right now,” she forced out between gasps.

He bussed a kiss across her sweaty forehead. “I know, baby. I can live with that though. I'd rather you hate me and be able to make it out alive if you're ever attacked again,” he murmured, his voice a warm caress in her ear.

She nodded, nuzzling her face into his shoulder. “Please tell me we’re finished.”

“We’re finished. For now.”

“Oh god,” she moaned, causing Bucky to chuckle into her hair.

“We’ll work on weight training tomorrow. And then the day after that we’ll start going over basic self defense moves. Then running again. Rinse, wash, repeat.”

Darcy gave a half sob, half moan. “You’re a bad, bad man, James Barnes.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” There was only the barest hint of bitterness in his tone as he stomped up the steps of the front porch.

“One time I tried to make a voodoo doll out of the hair from Angie’s hair brush. I lit it on fire and dumped it in a trash can out behind Dad’s shop. There were flammable things in there. Things went boom. I lost both my eyebrows and it took a month to grow them back.”

Bucky stared down at the woman resting listlessly in his arms and then threw his head back with a roar of laughter. The power of it forced him to lean against the front door, eventually sliding down to land on his ass with Darcy still cradled in his arms.

“Sweetheart,” he wheezed, brushing tears from his eyes, “that’s the best thing I’ve ever heard in my life. How old were you?”

“Seven.”

He dissolved into another round of laughter, his whole body shaking with his mirth. “God, remind me to send our kids to boarding school before they turn seven,” he sighed.

Darcy’s face split in a wide grin. “Oh, so we’re having children together now? I was unaware that that was on the agenda. Should I start picking out wedding dresses or are we going the nontraditional route?”
Bucky sobered up, eyes going wide and ears turning a spectacular shade of red. “That’s not-” Bucky cleared his throat, “I wasn’t implying that...I mean, not that that is unappealing, I’m just saying-”

“Calm your tits, Barnes. I’m just yanking your chain. We gonna sit and freeze on the front porch forever or were you planning on taking me inside?”

Bucky blinked slowly at her, distinctly unamused by her teasing. “I oughta make you walk, you wicked woman.”

“That’s a bad idea. I’m pretty sure I’d just fall over.”

Bucky grunted and rose to his feet, opening the door to the cabin and carrying Darcy to the couch. He set to work getting a fire started for her while she peeled off the layers of sweaty outer clothes.

“Well I smell horrible. I’m gonna go take a show-WHOA!”

Bucky’s head snapped around to see Darcy down on all fours, halfway to the bathroom. “Darce, you alright?!”

“Yup, just got a severe case of jelly legs,” she called from her crouched position.

He moved to her side, rubbing low at her back. “Do you want me to carry you?”

“Yes please. Just lay me out in the bathtub and leave me to die.” She sank all the way to the floor, allowing the cold hardwood floor to soothe her heated cheek.

“I can’t do that. I’m fully invested in your well being now.”

“You should reconsider your investment decisions. My body is broken now. Put me out to pasture. Stick a fork in me, I’m done,” she mumbled miserably into the floor.

“I’m a believer in the old adage ‘you break it, you bought it’ so I think I’ll keep you around a while longer. Come here, you big baby.” He scooped her back into his arms, making his way to the tiny bathroom and sitting her down on the edge of the bathtub.

He eyed her in consideration. “You think you can stand long enough to shower?”

“Nope.”

“Bath it is then,” he said, leaning over to open up the tap. He let the water run over his hand until it reached a comfortable temperature and then stoppered the tub. “Need some help outta those clothes?” he asked, gesturing vaguely at her and trying to come off as helpful and not lecherous.

Swing and a miss.

Darcy arched a brow, a knowing smile curling her lips. “Not really. If you wanted to see me naked, Sarge, all you had to do was ask.”

He met her gaze in challenge. “Alright then. I’m asking.”

“What’s the magic word?” she sing-songed.

Bucky crept the scant few inches to her side, his hands settling at her waist as he leaned in to whisper in her ear, “I can recite pi to the first 150 decimal places.”

“Hmmm, yep, that’ll do the trick. Help me outta these pants, Sergeant Barnes.”
“Much obliged, ma’am,” he smirked, thumbs tucking into the waistband of her athletic pants. She gripped the edge of the tub, lifting her backside so he could slide the fabric down her legs.

He tossed her pants into a corner then turned his rapt attention to her bare legs, hands skimming over the creamy skin of her thighs. She purred at the contact, head rolling back on her shoulders as his hands slid up the length of her body.

His fingertips caught at the hem of her shirt and he peeled the fabric from her sweat dampened skin. Next came her sports bras, which she graciously helped him with. Soon she was bare before him except for a pair of soft cotton briefs. He brushed fingertips along their edge, low on her belly, watching as the muscles of her stomach twitched in anticipation. He drew his tongue over his lips, his breath coming out in a stuttered rush.

“So now you start breathing heavy? You couldn't have done that while we were running and made me feel like a little less of a schlub?” She tilted her head at him, looking down to where he knelt between her thighs.

He grinned at her wickedly. “Sorry.”

“Hah, I don’t buy that apology for one-.. oh!” Her voice petered out as Bucky leaned forward to lick a stripe from her bellybutton to the bare skin between her breasts, his tongue doing a clever little flick at the end of its journey.

“You were saying?” His hot breath fanned out across her skin, his hands settling low at her hips, fingers digging into her ass to keep her balanced on the edge of the tub.

“Mmm, I forgive you,” she breathed.

He made a pleased sound in the back of his throat and leaned forward to drop a kiss to the valley of her breasts, then patted at one hip. “Alright, doll. Think you can stand long enough for me to get these off you?” He crooked a finger into the plain cotton panties.

Darcy frowned down at her poor, overused legs. “Yeah, probably.” She gripped tight to his shoulders and hoisted herself up, legs quaking precariously under her weight.

Bucky swallowed hard, a slight flush rising on his throat that had nothing to do with the warm steam billowing out of the tub. He steadied her against his side, rising up higher on his knees to wrap an arm around her hips. His free hand he drew up the length of one thigh, his fingers sliding underneath the thin cotton. He was a little embarrassed at how much his hand was shaking when he gripped the little scrap of fabric and tugged it down towards the floor.

Heart thudding furiously in his chest, he let his hand and eyes wander slowly up the entirety of her, completely bare before him. Fuck, he didn’t deserve this. Darcy was so pretty and sweet, soft in all the best ways, looking down at him with those kind blue eyes. It was too much, so he turned his face into her belly, eyes shut tight against the swooping feeling in his chest, and tried to focus on breathing, hoping she wouldn’t notice the way his arm was whirring furiously around her waist.

Fingernails scraped lightly at his scalp and to the nape of his neck, and then her hands kneaded at the tension between his shoulders. Her voice filtered down to him. “Come on, Barnes, you haven’t even gotten to see the back half yet. It’s the best part.”

He chuckled into the soft flesh of her stomach and her muscles jerked a bit from the tickle of his scruff. He sucked a steadying breath through his teeth and then smiled up at her. He rose up from his kneeling position to stand, careful to keep her from falling and then turned her slowly away from him.
to face the tub.

“You’re right. It’s definitely the best part,” he said thickly, his hand moving to cup her gorgeous backside of its own accord. Holy shit, he didn’t think he’d seen a rump so gorgeous that hadn’t been scientifically engineered in a lab.

“That’s right, Barnes. This ass was a gift from god, not from some German scientist’s funky Kool-aid. Take that, Captain Tightass!”

Bucky blushed furiously at his slip of tongue. “I’ll make sure to pass that message along to Steve.”

Darcy sniffed primly, eyeing him over her shoulder. “See that you do.” Her legs gave a particularly violent shake and Bucky’s hands darted out to grip her elbows and hoist her against himself. “If you’re done checking out the goods, I would very much like to lie down in that tub now.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” he said, nipping lightly at her neck. He helped maneuver her trembling legs over the porcelain edge of the tub and lowered her gently into the steaming water.

She hissed and sighed as the hot water spread out over her aching muscles, leaning back against the chill of the porcelain. She scooched her butt down enough to dip her head fully under the water and then popped back up, slicking her wet hair back and brushing water from her eyes. She gave a sigh of ultimate contentment and opened her eyes to see Bucky kneeling beside her and staring at her with hungry eyes, lips parted just enough to see his tongue working against his teeth. It sent a sliver of heat straight to her gut.

She watched as he extended a hand towards her face, the metal digits sweeping over her cheek and lips and then resting at her chin. He leaned in to kiss her then, sweeping his tongue across her top lip and sucking it into his mouth. She groaned into his mouth, the feel of his flesh hand darting into her hair sending her heart skittering in her chest.

“You’re gorgeous, Darcy,” he whispered against her mouth. “So beautiful.” He leaned back on his heels, his eyes drinking in every detail of her face.

She smiled sweetly at him, extending her hand to cup his face. The little droplets of water that clung to her hand slipped down his face to hang at his jaw like shed tears. She brushed the wetness away with a slightly apologetic glance and then sank back against the tub, exhaustion cresting over her like a wave. Her eyelids felt weighted, sliding down over her eyes without her permission.

She felt Bucky’s hands recede from her person and her eyes opened, disappointment shining in their depths, only to relax when she realized he was lathering up a washcloth for her. She closed her eyes again, sighing deeply at the first soothing sweep of the cloth over her neck and shoulders.

He scrubbed at her skin with firm but gentle strokes, soaping her up while simultaneously massaging the tension from her body. He took his time, making sure to cleanse every inch of skin, even running the cloth between her fingers and toes. The last action had her jerking her feet from his slippery grasp with a surprised giggle, momentarily waking her from the relaxed stupor he’d put her in.

He even washed gently at the apex of her thighs with only the slightest teasing. She’d popped an eye open at the action, raising a brow at him. His only response was a wink and a rakish grin before he returned to his task.

The absolute best part was when he went to wash her hair. She damn near fell asleep right there in the tub, his fingertips massaging shampoo into her scalp. This was almost better than sex, she thought. Almost.
She must have dozed for a few seconds because the next thing she knew, a pair of lips were pressing into her forehead and a warm voice was speaking lowly in her ear. “Darcy, sweetheart, you awake?”

“Mmmyeah,” she muttered thickly. She heard his quiet chuckle and then the gurgling of the drain as he pulled out the stopper. When the water got low enough, strong arms came down around her shoulders and under her knees and suddenly she was being lifted up and out of the tub. He sat her down on the closed lid of the toilet, wrapping a towel around her shoulders and using another to wring out her hair.

He left her slumped on the toilet for a quick minute to retrieve clean clothes for her. He dressed her, huffing out laughter at her uncooperative leaden limbs.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

“S alright, honey. I ran you ragged this morning.”

“And made me run in the dark with land mines,” she pouted.

“There weren’t actually any land mines by the road. I placed those elsewhere.”

Darcy’s eyes went wide in betrayal. “So you did cheat!”

“Just the first time,” he said around a shiteating grin.

“You fucker,” she muttered, reaching out to backhand him. He easily dodged the blow and her hand landed weakly in her lap again.

He picked it up, pressing kisses to the inside of her wrist. “Is that any way to talk to your superior officer? I oughta make you run another ten laps.”

Darcy gave a pitiful groan and tilted forward to melt against him. “Please, god, no.”

The bastard just laughed and lifted her fully clothed body to his chest, wrapping her legs around his waist and carrying her out of the bathroom. He brought her to the couch, laying her gently against the cushions and covering her in a thick blanket. She watched him with heavy eyes as he stoked the fire and added a few logs.

He knelt down beside her, pushing damp hair from her face to kiss her cheek. “I’m going to make the grocery run. I’ll be back in two hours or less. If I’m not, call Steve on the sat phone and have him get his ass here asap, alright?” His voice brooked no room for argument.

Darcy blinked and nodded at him dumbly. He leaned back in to kiss her full mouth and then made his way out to the Blazer. The faster he got this done, the better, considering the last grocery run he’d made had not gone so well. He tugged his jacket tighter around him and paused to put his gloves on, hiding away the telltale glint of metal.

He made it to town in record time, ignoring the jolting of the elderly shocks on Big Blue in favor of getting down the dirt road faster. He found the tiny little supermarket, tossing the essentials and perishables and a few other items he thought Darcy might like into his cart. When he’d finished his shopping and checked out at the, thankfully, automated machine (small talk was not his strong suit, he avoided overly friendly checkout girls like the plague) he had enough foodstuffs to last them for at least three weeks. The less they made appearances in town, the better.

He made a quick stop to gas up the Blazer and grabbed a few things from the hardware store and was back on the road. He tried to drive a bit slower on his way back, not wanting to wreck the
cartons of eggs he’d just bought, but each passing minute brought a keen ache in his chest and a need to see that Darcy was alright.

His foot edged down on the accelerator.

When he pulled up to the cabin, he grabbed his sidearm, exiting his vehicle to make a slow rotation around the house, making sure none of his jury-rigged alarm systems had been disturbed and then crept up to the house to peer in the window. From his spot he could see Darcy still on the couch, conked out and drooling onto the sofa cushions. He bit back on the laugh that was pushing at his throat and took his first easy breath since leaving her a little over an hour ago.

He tucked his pistol into the holster at the small of his back and tromped back out to unload the car. He brought the groceries in as quietly as he could, setting them on the kitchen table between trips to the car. When he had everything unloaded, he stripped off his jacket and gloves and went to work putting everything away. He was pleased to see that none of the eggs had cracked during his journey, though there was one loaf of bread that was a bit more squished than he would have preferred. Oh well, it’d still taste fine. It was worth it for the peace of mind of being by Darcy’s side sooner.

With everything put away, he decided to wash out the ancient coffee pot and get some coffee brewing. Within seconds of the percolator bubbling and gurgling, Darcy rose straight up from the couch, turning her head with laser focus to the machine. He watched as she rolled herself onto the floor, standing on wobbly legs to hobble over to the kitchen cabinet, pulling down a coffee cup and pulling a kitchen chair out to sit directly in front of the brewer where it sat on the kitchen counter. She watched the coffee intently, breathing a sigh in relief when there was enough to pour into her mug.

She scuttled back to the kitchen table, dragging her chair behind her in one hand and clutching the cup of coffee protectively against her in the other. She sat. She sipped. And then she let out a long, explicit moan that had his pants fitting a little tighter.

He shook his head out of the gutter and busied himself with his own cup of coffee, dumping in sugar and creamer like it was going out of style before sinking into his chair next to hers.

Darcy reached out to pat at the back of his hand, muttering out, “Glad you made it back alright.”

“Yes, I could see that you were just eaten up with worry at my absence.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and took another sip of her coffee, a teensy smirk lifting the edges of her lips. He chuckled and took her hand in his, lacing their fingers together and enjoying the simple peace of being together.
Well. It was official.

Darcy was going to die.

Darcy was going to die right there on the toilet like Elvis.

There was no way around it. She would have preferred a more dignified end, but her asshole trainer/boyfriend had destroyed her legs and now she couldn't get back up again after her morning pee.

She should have just stayed in bed, dammit.

She should have hopped in Big Blue and hightailed it out of there the moment Bucky even mentioned running.

Maybe if she sat there long enough her legs would go numb and she wouldn't feel them when she tried to stand. That seemed like her best option.

It was either that or rolling off the toilet and onto the floor, and even then she'd still have to figure out how to stand up eventually.

Fucking Bucky, this was all his fault. He was permanently banned from seeing her naked ever again. And fired. Definitely fired. Natasha could train her when she got back stateside.

Darcy took a moment to gather her courage and strength, gripping tightly to the ledge of the sink, and leveraged herself off the toilet. She was actually kind of proud of herself. She didn't even cry despite the fact that it felt like her legs had been dipped in lava. She glanced down to where her pajama pants and underwear were wrapped around her ankles.

Fuck 'em, she wasn't bending back down to get them. She put most of her weight on the sink and stepped out of her pants, washed her hands, and hobbled her way back to bed. She opted for flopping down face-first and straight-legged and just rolling until she was fully on the bed, pulling the covers as she went until she was a nice toasty burrito of soreness and regret.

Bucky had been thoughtful enough to bring a space heater home from the store the day before so she'd actually slept well that night. One point in Barnes’ favor. Of course, with the heater to keep her...
warm, he'd insisted on sleeping out on the sofa, claiming safety reasons and to guard the front door.

Whatever. She was sore and cranky and didn't want to snuggle his stupid muscles anyway.

She could hear him puttering around in the kitchen, humming softly to himself and presumably making breakfast. Lifting her head, she could just see his back and profile through the partially open bedroom door.

She bit back on the grin that his cheerful domesticity was causing. He was lucky he was so pretty, otherwise she probably would have tazed him by then. It also helped that he’d let her actually sleep in that morning. Of course, if the dark circles under his eyes were any indication, he may have had a rough night and needed the extra hours as well.

Darcy settled back into her pillow, listening to the chirping of happy little forest birds and watching the thin winter sunlight streaming through the window slowly creep across the bedroom floor. She dozed for a while longer until she felt the bed dip at her side underneath Bucky’s weight. She kept her eyes closed, refusing to acknowledge his presence, even when he stroked a hand through her hair.

“Darcy, babe, you awake?” His voice was pitched low and gentle, a tender caress in her ear.

She struggled with the urge to give in to his sweetness right away. She needed to make him suffer her wrath at least a little bit. It was only fair since she was in agony and it was all his fault.

“Darcyyyy. I made breakfast, beautiful. The good stuff this time. Bacon and eggs and toast and sausage. Lotsa protein to strengthen you up.” He reached out and gripped at her thigh only for her to jerk under his hand with a sharp cry of pain.

“OW shit! Motherfucking, OWwww, goddammit Barnes, don’t touch me!” She yowled ferociously at him.

Bucky pulled his hand back as if he’d been branded, jumping away from her and the bed, his hands raised to his shoulders in surrender. “Darcy what’s wrong? What’d I do?” he cried out.

Darcy, who was now sitting up and glaring at him, her hair a mess around her livid features, pointed an accusing finger at him. “YOU. You are what’s wrong! You broke my damn legs, James Barnes. You have crippled me with your wicked plans to train me!”

Relief, followed by amusement, passed over Bucky’s features. “Oh. Is that all? I thought my arm malfunctioned for a minute and I’d broken something. It’s just a little muscle soreness, Darce. You’ll be fine.”

Darcy stared at him, incredulous. “It’s...it’s just...it’s just a little muscle soreness? Are you fucking kidding me right now? Bucky, I can barely walk! This morning I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life on the toilet because my legs hurt so bad I couldn’t stand back up! You pushed me way too hard yesterday! Don’t you dare act like I’m being a baby about this!”

With a placating gesture Bucky came to sit next to her on the bed. “Darcy, honey, we only ran six miles at most.”

“SIX MILES?? YOU MADE ME RUN SIX FUCKING MILES, YOU SADIST?? NO WONDER I FEEL LIKE I’M GONNA DIE!” She reared back and punched at his shoulder, only to hiss in pain when she, belatedly, realized she was aiming for his metal arm.

Bucky reached out with both hands to soothe his fingers over her abused knuckles. “Darcy, six miles
isn’t even a third of the distance I’d make the Widows run when I was training them in the Red Room. I think you’re overreacting a little bit.”

Two things occurred to Darcy at that moment: One, she was going to murder him for that “overreacting” comment. And Two, she was starting to get an inkling of why he was being so nonchalant about the rigorous level of training he was putting her through.

“Bucky,” she started, her sweet tone layered with menace. “Weren’t the Widows all pumped up on superserum White Russians?”

Her tone had his hair standing on end, warning bells sounding in the back of his head. “Uh, yeah, they’d been dosed with something similar to what me and Steve got. That’s why I only had you run a fraction of the distance that they did.”

Darcy closed her eyes and pinched at the bridge of her nose. “Sweetie,” she hissed. “Pick a smaller fraction. When was the last time you trained with or around a person that was not either already in peak physical condition or pumped up on superserum, hmm?”

Bucky chewed at his lip in thought. “Uh…”

“I’m gonna go ahead and guess ‘never’ is the correct answer, so let me break it down for you. Non-superheroes can’t go straight from ‘only ever running to catch a bus they’re about to miss’ to running six miles nonstop. Normal humans do not work that way! If I’d run for just one mile yesterday, that would have been pushing me. And if you’re thinking about starting me out lifting fifty pound weights then you got another thing coming because you are going to end up seriously injuring me unless you readjust your expectation of my physical abilities, okay?”

He blinked at her slowly as his gut sank. “Darce, I didn’t realize...I’m, I’m so sorry.” He reached tentatively for her, relieved when she allowed him to pull her to his chest.

“For a genius, you can be kind of an idiot,” she grumbled into his chest.

He barked out a laugh. “Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

“Hey, Bucky?”

“Yeah, Darce?”

“Just so you know, if you ever accuse me of ‘overreacting’ ever again, I will taze you in the balls, capice?”

Bucky went eerily still under her, his breath coming out in short, labored gasps. She pulled back to look at him, shocked to see the strain on his face.

“It wouldn’t…be the…the first time that’s happened,” he uttered through clenched teeth.

Darcy could tell he was teetering on the edge of some ugly memory and leaned into him, brushing her hand over his forehead and cupping his cheek. “Hey, Buck, it was just a joke. I won’t hurt you. I’ll never hurt you.”

He turned into the touch, giving one last full body shudder and then his breath came whooshing out of his lungs. She pulled his head down onto her shoulder, stroking over the the short hairs at the nape of his neck while his breathing evened out.

“You okay, buddy?”
“Yeah, I’m alright,” he muttered, turning in to place a kiss to her neck. “Sorry for being a jackass and not listening to you and pushing you too hard.”

“I forgive you. And I’m sorry for threatening you with physical harm and sending you into what looked like a super duper unpleasant memory.”

Bucky huffed a laugh across her collarbone. “Yeah, that was a new one that I really wish had stayed forgotten. Hydra certainly had some sick fun with me back in the day.” He pulled out of her arms, reaching to hold her hands between his.

“I don’t want to pry, but do you need or want to talk about it?”

Bucky grimaced but nodded. This particular memory was relevant to their relationship and she had the right to know. He blew out a breath and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“Really, to explain it properly, I need to tell you a little bit about my time in the Red Room.” He glanced at her concerned blue eyes, gathering courage that he wasn’t sure he even had anymore. “I’m not clear on the dates but at some point Hydra loaned me out to the Russians to train their Red Room operatives, the Widows.”

Darcy nodded, letting him know that she was tracking.

“I taught them to fight, hand-to-hand, weapons training, and so on. Uh, but uh, as you know, one of the trademarks of the Widows was their training in...seduction.” He bit at his lips, wincing at the admission.

Darcy arched a brow, “Did you teach the Widows how to seduce a man?”

Bucky snorted. “No. That’s not how they used me...I...um, I played the role of their mark.”

Darcy stared at his deeply uncomfortable expression, blinking slowly until something clicked.

“Wait a minute...are you saying that the Widows honed their sex skills on you?”

“Yes,” he cringed.

“So...you’ve fucked all the Widows?”

Bucky’s eyes darted to his lap. “Yes,” he murmured.

Darcy gasped in sudden realization. “So you’ve fucked Nat?”

“Yes,” he breathed out, shame coloring his cheeks and neck.

“You…. lucky son of a bitch. Damn, I’m not gonna lie, I’m kinda impressed. I mean, if I had that floating around in my head I’d be off taking cold showers every thirty minutes.”

Bucky’s head whipped up. “You’re not disgusted with me?”

“Dude. You were brainwashed and studded out. Not exactly something you were in control of. I totally get why the whole lack of consent might give you a panic attack.”

Bucky shook his head and made a dismissive motion with his hand. “The sex wasn’t what I remembered. There was an incident with Natalia...she was my best pupil. The very best of the Widows and we...our relationship strayed from strictly teacher and student. It’s a hazy time for me, but from what I can remember, the bits and pieces that were still... me inside, they may have even
loved her. Our keepers found out and we were both severely punished.” He grew quiet, lost somewhere in the horrific past. “I could hear her screaming...I ended up killing quite a few of the Red Room supervisors trying to get to her.” He heaved out an unsteady breath, Natalia’s screams still echoing in his ears.

Darcy reached for him, soothing her palm up and down his arm. “Oh, babe, I’m so sorry.”

Bucky’s mouth twitched into something between a grimace and a smile and shrugged. “It was a long time ago. But they sent me back to Hydra after that. The idea that their pet dog could develop feelings, enough to disobey my handlers, greatly concerned them and the higher ups decided that desire was not an urge that they could afford to keep in me. So they beat and burned and electrocuted it out of me just like they had to the rest of my humanity.”

Darcy watched as Bucky’s eyes glazed over with tears and lifted a hand over her mouth in horror. “They’d uh, they’d stimulate me, bring in women or show me pictures, things like that, and any time I’d, um, react...they’d hurt me. Over and over, they’d get me hard and then torture me until I stopped responding to anything stimulating. For a while after I escaped and before Steve brought me in, I’d flinch every time I saw a scantily clad woman. I couldn’t watch a tv because of all the fucking beer commercials with half naked women. It took a while, but I stopped expecting pain when I’d see that stuff. Desensitized to it I guess.” He trailed off, blushing furiously and avoiding Darcy’s eyes.

Darcy’s voice shook with anger. “What the fuck? Fucking, Hydra, man. Bucky, I want you to train me now just so I can go on a Hydra murdering spree. Oh my god, those sick bastards!’ She then gasped, a realization hitting her. “OH my god! Angie’s Christmas gift! I’m SO SORRY. Oh god! How did you stay so chill about it!?”

Bucky snorted at the look of sheer terror on Darcy’s face. He gripped her shoulders, leaning in to kiss her. “It’s alright sweetheart. I’d gotten over my case of Hydra-induced E.D. by that point. No harm, no foul.”

“Still, I feel awful for exposing you to my dickhead sister.”

Bucky gave a full throated laugh. “Don’t be. I like Angie, she’s fun and can be sweet when she’s not being a dickhead.”

“Hey, that’s almost the exact quote I gave for her page in her senior yearbook!”

Bucky tilted to the side until he was giggling into the mattress. “I’m sure she loved that.”

“Oh, yeah. It went over really well.” She smiled down at him where he was laying on the bed, stroking her fingers through the softness of his hair as her expression sobered. “Thank you for telling me all that. I know it couldn’t have been comfortable for you to share. Is...is that why you didn’t want me to touch you...before?”

Bucky closed his eyes and nodded while his fists clenched against the coverlet. He curled himself around where she was sitting in the middle of the bed, tucking his forehead against her knee. “Sorry,” he mumbled so softly she almost didn’t hear it.

“No, don’t apologize for that Bucky. It’s not your fault and I already agreed to take things slowly with you. It’s good to know why, though, it’ll help keep me patient.”

Bucky peeked up at her with one eye. “You? Patient? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Darcy stuck her tongue out at him and darted her fingers to niggle into his ribcage. He jerked away
from her hands, gripping at her thigh in his effort to escape. His inadvertent grip on her had her squealing in pain and flopping back on the bed.

“Oh shit, sweetheart! I forgot!” He sat up, hands hovering uncertainly over her, not sure how to help her without hurting her.

“It’s fine,” she moaned. “Just leave me here to die. Tell my family I love them. Give Jane all my plaid shirts. Burn the porn collection under my mattress.”

Bucky lost it, tears of mirth leaping almost immediately to his eyes. “Woman, you certainly have a flare for the dramatic,” he chuckled once he’d regained his ability to speak. “You oughtta let me give you a massage. It’ll help rub the soreness out and then we can ice your legs and get you some pain meds.”

“Nooo, it hurts when you touch them. This is all just a ploy to feel me up. You can’t fool me, Bucky Barnes.”

“Well, I’m not saying I won’t enjoy it, but it really will help you, honey.”


Bucky chuckled and tugged the blankets out from around her, effectively pulling her out of her blanket burrito. He stared at her bare legs, blinking slowly before meeting her eyes. “Darce, what happened to your pants,” he paused and tilted his head to peer under the hem of the shirt she’d stolen from him, “...and underwear?”

“Don’t you judge me, James Barnes. I abandoned them in the bathroom so I wouldn’t have to bend over to pull them back up.”

Bucky closed his eyes and bit back on the laugh that was struggling to escape at the mental image of her choosing nudity rather than risk the pain of bending her legs. He took a calming breath through his nose and helped ease her onto her stomach. He started out at her shoulders, trying to get her to relax instead of tensing up in anticipation of pain. The looser she was, the less painful it would be for him to work out the soreness in her legs.

He worked his way down, digging his thumbs into the muscles lining either side of her spine before gliding his hands up and over the globes of her ass and coming down to press into the tender flesh of her upper thighs. Darcy hissed and let loose a stream of curses, tensing under his hands but remaining in place through strength of will alone.

“I’m sorry, Darce, I promise this’ll help,” he said, pressing more and more firmly into her muscles with each passing stroke of his hands.

Darcy moaned pitifully into the mattress, the feeling of his hands working out her soreness was a strange mixture of pain and pleasure that teetered just a bit too far into painful to be comfortable. “I hate you, James Barnes. I hate you so much right now,” she choked out between grit teeth.

He grimaced but kept with his work, slowly but surely breaking up the tension in her thighs, moving down to her calves, and then back up again. When he dug his knuckles into the thick muscle of her ass, she shrieked and nearly came up off the bed.

“Oh shit!” she squeaked, settling back down into the mattress and flinching with each roll of his wrist. “Oh fuck me sideways on a rubber raft,” she practically sobbed into the mattress.

“A rubber raft? Really? I assumed our first time would be somewhere a little more romantic...but if
inflatable watercraft is what does it for you…”

“Oh, go to hell, you smarmy bastard. You’re enjoying this way too much,” she spat out.

“Maybe a little,” he admitted, leaning forward to drop a kiss to her bare ass. “Can’t help it. I’m a bad man, Darcy.”

“Yeah, I’m figuring that out, you little shit.”

Bucky just chuckled to himself and kept up his work. It was an excruciatingly slow process, but eventually the way his hands were digging into her muscles tipped from pain to mostly pleasure, and she groaned in relief at the rapidly lessening soreness.

Until he flipped her over and started the process all over again on her front half. Dammit, she would be tempted to throttle him if it weren’t for the fact that it was actually helping her. The way his eyes went gentle in apology and the kisses he dropped randomly along her legs helped a bit too.

Bucky patted gently at her hip. “Better?”

“I guess,” she grumbled, not quite ready to admit that the pain had been worth it.

Bucky's smirk indicated that he saw right through her. “Let me get you some water and a couple Tylenol.”

He disappeared into the kitchen and returned to press a glass of water and two little pills into her hands. She swallowed them down quickly, set the glass on the bedside table, and collapsed back on the bed.

Bucky's fingers brushed lightly over the top of her thighs, his gaze intent and thoughtful. He flicked his tongue out over his lips and met her eyes. “You know, Darce, I was thinking about maybe kissing you better.” His fingers slid higher to slip under the hem of his shirt where it lay against her upper thighs, tripping over to tease the sensitive skin between her legs. “Do you think that’d make you feel better?”

Darcy's eyes went liquid, her face going lax as her hips made helpless little thrusts against his hand. He slid the rough pad of his thumb against her, forcing the air from her lungs and sending her heart beating frantically against her ribs.

“I asked you a question, Darcy. It's rude not to answer,” he admonished, withdrawing his hand to cross his arms over his chest and earning him a one eyed glare from his girl.

“Yes!” she spat out, reaching up to grip at his arms. “Come back. Kiss it better!”

“Such terrible manners, Darcy. I’d put you over my knee and spank you right this minute if you weren't already so sore.”

Darcy arranged her face into some semblance of contrition, batting her dark lashes at him. “Bucky, would you be ever so kind as to kiss me better? Pretty please?”

“Of course,” he smirked, climbing onto the bed and parting her thighs to kneel between them. “Little bit of manners goes a long way,” he teased, and then he was sinking down into the mattress and shifting her legs over his shoulders.

His mouth hovered over her while he held her eyes, the heat of his breath curling against her and sending frisson up her spine.
“Hope I remember how to do this right,” he murmured, a hint of genuine concern in his tone.

Darcy reached down to stroke softly at his cheek, a small smile gracing her lips. “I'll tell you if you fuck it up.”

He rolled his eyes. “Gee thanks, you're real swell, Darce.”

She smiled down at him, her nose crinkling adorably. “Anytime, pal. But in all seriousness, you do your thing and I'll let you know what works for me and what doesn't...and we’ll go from there, yeah?”

Bucky bit his lips and nodded, then lowered his head to kiss at the juncture of her thigh, smiling against her when her knee gave an involuntary jerk. Darcy sighed in contentment when he finally moved to kiss her where she wanted him.

The scent and taste of her flooded Bucky’s senses, sending his thoughts spiraling. God, she was just so good. Her heart and her brains and her voice breaking as she whimpered out his name, it was all so completely, perfectly good. He had had so few good things in his life and the thought that she was one of them and that she even wanted to be there with him had him groaning into her heat and his hips stuttering against the mattress.

He traced his name into her soft flesh, something he'd learned as a young man. This time though, he did it to brand her, to press his name into her skin as a promise to Darcy that he was hers and a promise to the whole damn universe that he wouldn't squander this gift that he'd been granted.

His movements were reverent, an intense worship of her body and it had her panting and pleading for release beneath him. He hummed against her, his flesh hand sliding up her stomach to hold her firmly in place as she bucked against him. Her legs tightened around his shoulders and tears gathered at her lashes until she was falling apart with an ecstatic wail.

She came back to herself slowly, disjointed sensations filtering in out of order. Wetness on her cheeks, numb lips and fingers and toes, silky strands slipping through her fingers, warm calloused fingers trailing over her other palm, lips pressing kisses up the length of her body, and the heavy weight of Bucky settling into the cradle of her thighs.

“You okay there, kid?” He brushed back the sweaty strands of her hair that stuck to her forehead, placing a soft kiss to her brow.

She gave a quiet hum of affirmation. She opened her eyes to see him peering down at her, adoration shining out of the soft blue. She lifted one impossibly heavy hand to cup his face, wiping shamelessly at the traces of her desire that shone in his stubble, running her thumb over his lower lip and then pulling him down to kiss her slow and sweet. His hands cradled her face like she might break, thumbs sweeping up to brush away the tears that slid over her temples and into her hair.

“Am I forgiven for running you ragged?”

“Mmm, yes. Definitely.” she murmured, eyes half-lidded.

Bucky chuckled darkly. “So I guess I didn't fuck it up too bad then, huh?”

She arched a brow at him. “Really? Fishing for compliments? I would think that's beneath you, Sergeant Barnes. Or have you lost all your supersoldier observational skills?”

“C’mon baby, give my ego a little stroking. It needs it.”
“Hah! Not likely. There's only one thing on you that needs stroking and you've already marked that down as off limits for the time being.” She raised a suggestive brow at him and rolled her hips up against where he was straining against his pants.

Bucky's smug face dropped to her shoulder at the action, mouth hanging lax and a long, low groan escaped his throat.

*Not so smug anymore, eh?*

“Shut up, Lewis,” Bucky grunted, rolling his hips into her firmly. A little too firmly for her over sensitized body.

Darcy yelped and jerked her legs up, attempting to to still his hips by digging her heels into the back of his upper thighs. It was an unnecessary action, however. As soon as he'd her sound of discomfort he'd stopped moving.

He lifted his head. “Sorry Darce, got a little carried away,” he said, slight chagrin bunching his shoulders.

Darcy soothed her hands between his shoulder blades. “It's alright. Just, you know, give me a little recovery time.” Her smile was soft and her eyes held that bone deep exhaustion that can only come after satisfaction of earth shaking proportions.

He returned her smile and they gazed at each other in that stupid way that people who've fallen head over heels for each other do. He was so gone for her and he didn't even know when it had happened. Maybe from that first moment when he'd seen her be a true little shit and shysted Rogers into giving her a peep show.

“Damn, I bet breakfast is cold now,” Darcy pouted, twirling a lock of his hair over her index finger. “I can always make more, if you want.”

Darcy's eyes lit with interest. “I mean, I'd hate to be a burden and I would make it myself but I'm very concerned that my body is completely useless now, for a variety of reasons, so if you wanted to do that for me I wouldn't be opposed to it.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and rocked back onto his knees. He placed a kiss to the inside of each of her knees and then slid off the bed, folding the blankets back over Darcy.

“You rest up for a bit and I'll call you when breakfast is ready. I know having the best orgasm of your life can be an exhausting experience.” His self-satisfied smirk wasn't diminished even slightly by the pillow suddenly flung at his head.

“Yeah. Definitely don't need that ego stroked, Sarge.”

He exited the room with a chuckle and Darcy enjoyed the view before flopping back on her pillow with a satisfied sigh.

Ho-ly shit.

Well. It was official.

Darcy was going to marry that bastard.
Darcy picks up some skills.

Bucky gave her exactly three days to recover proper use of her legs before he made her run again. He, thankfully, cut down her running distance to the short stretch to the front gate, which was just about a mile, and sweetly carried her piggyback to return to the cabin. It was still running and it still sucked but at least she wasn't about to die.

He refused to budge on the five am wake up call, however. He tried to explain that it was a practice in self discipline but Darcy thought that was a load of bullshit and Barnes was secretly a sadist under that “sweetheart” persona.

He also started her on weapons training, despite her avid protests.

“Barnes. No. A gun? Really? Can’t you just teach me how to kill a man with my pinky or something?”

Bucky, who was organizing his travel set of weaponry on the kitchen table, arched an eyebrow in displeasure and didn’t even look up from the Glock he was repositioning when he answered, “I’d prefer you kill a man long before he gets within range of any of your appendages. That means you and guns are gonna get real familiar.”

“Okay but what if I shoot myself?” Darcy folded her arms over her chest.

“Really?” Bucky asked with an unamused tilt of his head.

“Yes, really. It’s a valid question.”

“Well, one, I wouldn’t let that happen,” he said with a sigh. “And two, I’m not even letting you near a loaded gun for at least the first two weeks.”

“Then what are all these guns doing out? Am I just supposed to look at them for two weeks? Meditate. Become one with the pistol, Mr. Miyagi?”

“I said you won’t be handling any loaded weapons. These,” he said with a sweep of his hands, “have been unloaded, checked and double checked, and are perfectly safe for you to handle.”

“Oh. Righteous,” she said with a bob of her head and then grabbed the biggest handgun on the table with both hands, eyeing down the sight and swinging around to face Bucky.

Bucky ducked and moved faster than she could follow, gripping her hands and pushing up to point the barrel of the gun up towards the ceiling and away from his face. “Jesus, Lewis! Watch where you point that thing, woman! And get your finger off the trigger!”

Darcy watched in wide-eyed shock while Bucky gently removed the gun from her hands.

“But...you said they were all unloaded?”
“Yes. And they are. But you always treat a gun as if it’s loaded and you never point it at anything that you can’t live without. My pretty face better be included on that list. It’s a habitual mindset that will prevent you from shooting yourself or someone else unintentionally. Even if you’ve checked the mag and chamber twice, and know that it’s unloaded, it’s sloppy to get complacent with your weaponry and it will get somebody killed. Do you understand?” He eyed her intently, his free hand coming down to settle warmly on one of her shoulders.

She swallowed and bobbed a nod. “Yeah. Sorry. Don’t point guns at the pretty faces. Got it.”

She slumped into one of the kitchen chairs, her heart rate slowing back down to normal.

“And keep your finger off the trigger until you’re aimed and ready to fire. Lack of trigger discipline is a one way ticket to shooting yourself in the damn leg when you draw your weapon.”

“Cool. Cool. No touchy the trigger. Got it. What’s the next lesson, sensei?” She looked up at him expectantly as he sank into his own chair next to her with another sigh.

“Next lesson is don’t touch anything until I tell you to touch it.”

“I shoulda known you’d be a dom,” Darcy muttered, an irreverent little smirk pulling at her lips.

“Okay, sure. Whatever that means. Just so long as you do exactly what I tell you while you’re handling my gear.” Bucky tried to turn back to his assembly of weapons but paused as Darcy dissolved into a fit of giggles, sliding sideways in her chair.

“I’m sorry, was something I said funny? If you can’t be serious, Lewis, I’ll send your ass back outside to run another mile.”

That sobered her up quickly. She sat upright in her seat, spine straight and eyes focused and serious on his.

“Thank you, doll. Now listen up and pay attention.”

Bucky spent the rest of the morning familiarizing Darcy with each of the weapons he’d laid out, having her memorize their names and specs, and then teaching her how to break them down, clean them, and reassemble them.

Bucky looked on with pleasure as Darcy finished reassembling a Ruger LCP, her nimble little fingers doing an even better job than he could with his larger hands on the tiny pistol. “Good work, babe.” He leaned in and dropped a kiss to the top of her head. “From here on out, after our workouts I want you to break all these down and reassemble them. I’ll start timing you after the first couple days. You’ll be cleaning them once a week as well and then when we actually start shooting them you’ll be cleaning them daily.”

“Okay, Mr. Miyagi. Wax on, wax off. Awesome.”

“You know I can’t understand a thing you say about 35% of the time, right?”

“Oh I know.” She grinned at him, rising from her chair to plant a kiss on one side of his jaw and gently pat the otherside.

Bucky gave a small sniff, his nostrils flaring slightly. “You smell like gun oil. I shouldn’t find that alluring, but I definitely do.” His hand slid around her waist and drifted down to cup her behind.

“It’s probably some leftover Pavlovian effect from messing around with all those Widows, you dirty
old man,” she teased, her tongue peeking out from between her teeth.

“What, you jealous, Lewis?” His lips twitched as he suppressed a grin.

“Oh, duh. I’ve seen Nat naked. I’d be an idiot not to be jealous.”

Bucky’s eyes softened. “Darcy, there’s nothing to be jealous of. That was literally decades ago and I legitimately don’t remember much about our relationship. You’re gorgeous and perfect and everything I’ve ever wanted,” he murmured.

Darcy snorted in disbelief and then threw her head back with an unholy cackle. “Dear God. Bucky, I appreciate the pep talk but that’s not what I meant, buddy. I’m not jealous of her, I’m jealous of you. If Nat had ever found her way into my bed, I would not be kicking her out any time soon, you know what I’m saying?” She waggled her brows for emphasis, hands sliding up his chest while he stared at her slack jawed.

“I...I don’t know what to do with that information,” he muttered, eyes staring off into the middle distance.

Darcy patted his chest and pulled out of his embrace with a chuckle. “Put it in the spank bank and move on with your life. Specifically, move on with your life by making lunch, because I’m starving.”

Bucky blinked rapidly a few times and then gave himself a full body shake. “Yeah. Lunch. Yeah. Good idea. Food.” He marched over to the fridge, opening it and staring inside of it blindly.

Darcy watched him, leaning against the kitchen counter with her arms folded across her chest. When he still hadn’t moved to grab anything, Darcy cleared her throat. “You gonna actually pull any food out or are you still stuck imagining Nat’s head buried between my thighs?”

Bucky’s head whipped around, a scandalized look on his face. “Well I am now?”

Darcy sauntered up to him, squeezing in front of him to start pulling sandwich fixings out of the fridge. She bent at the waist, feigning looking for the mustard on a lower shelf as her rear brushed across the front of his jeans. She glanced pointedly down at him as she straightened back out. “Let me know when you’re ready for me to help you out with that,” she said softly with a flutter of lashes and then went to work putting together their lunch.

Darcy held back a giggle at Bucky’s resultant groan and the sound of the fridge closing.

“I’ll...I’ll be in the shower.”

Darcy didn’t even turn when she called out to his retreating form, “You need any company?”

She heard his boots stop their stomping across the floor and she could have sworn that he swallowed audibly.

“Not, uh, not this time.”

Darcy had been expecting the answer so it didn’t hold the sting of rejection that it could have. Still, it wasn’t in her nature not to be a snarky little turd when opportunity came knocking.

“Okay, babe. Just don’t get mad at me if you come out of there blind and with hairy palms.”

Bucky grumbled something that sounded a bit like, “why is God testing me today?” and then trekked into the bathroom, snapping the door shut behind him.
Darcy bit down into her sandwich around a smirk as the first low groan seeped out from beneath the bathroom door.

***

His girl was the best. The absolute best. Bucky couldn't help but be impressed with how well she was picking up on everything he was teaching her. Sure, she whined incessantly about his training regimen but she tackled each task with a dogged determination that he couldn't help but admire. And despite her apparent abhorrence for physical activity, she was surprisingly athletic.

The first day that they'd started working on her hand-to-hand skills, he'd been pleasantly surprised at how quickly she picked up the movements. She didn't have much strength behind her movements but that would develop with time and repetition. She was rather brilliant at picking up the technique of each move he showed her by the end of each session. Her motions were near flawless, though they lacked the force to be effective quite yet. Still, she was damn good at learning his trade and he found himself needing to pleasure her after most of their sessions. As a reward. Because he was a kind and benevolent taskmaster. It surely had nothing to do with the way her body undulated around his in that skin tight athletic wear women wore in this decade.

Right.

***

January quickly passed into February as they continued to wait out the radio silence from the rest of the Avengers and staying put was starting to wear on both of them, despite the distraction of Bucky Barnes' Introductory Course on Badassery.

And yeah, the results were pretty stellar. She'd never been what could be considered “hard-bodied” but with about a month and a half of rigorous workouts she was definitely on her way to getting there. Darcy was pretty proud of the skills she was picking up and the first time she was able to get the drop on Bucky, the look on his face was pure gold and made all the pain worth it.

She chose to disregard the fact that Bucky had been in the middle of pouring a hot mug of coffee when she attacked and was therefore more concerned with keeping both himself and Darcy from being scalded to properly defend himself. He chose to disregard her cheating as well. She'd need to use every advantage if she was ever actually attacked, including fighting dirty.

He told her as much, kissing her cheek and swatting her on the ass after rising from the floor, his mug of coffee still miraculously full without a single drop spilled. Darcy was convinced it was because of some kind of voodoo magic or something.

Or, you know, a super soldier cocktail.

Even as pleased as she was at her new skills with both hand to hand combat and her increasing accuracy with a variety of supermegabadass firearms, she was still getting restless. She missed the internet, dammit! And music! And other people besides her extremely attractive boyfriend!

Don't get her wrong, she loved spending time with Bucky. He was incredible and hilarious and sweet and sexy and a lot of other really fantastic adjectives but come on, there's only so much “togetherness” a couple can endure without spending time with other friends before a girl loses her damn mind.

The combined boredom, cabin fever, and sudden awareness of all the little irritating tics that human beings possess had Darcy's teeth on edge. Bucky, of course, seemed absolutely at peace with their
entire experience, staying calm, cool, and collected every moment of every hour. Like a freaking cyborg. She knew that was an unkind thought and would definitely flagellate herself for it later, but at the moment she was too busy listening to the dead silence of the cabin that was only interrupted by the soft, metallic tapping of Bucky’s fingers against his glass of water as he sat reading his newspaper. She suddenly deeply empathized with the Cell Block Tango ladies.

Darcy's eyes narrowed as they focused on the percussive movements, her ire rising with each successive clink.

With a violent huff of air through her nostrils, Darcy slapped her half finished crossword puzzle down on the table, rising from her kitchen chair and stomping over to snatch up his Dragunov from where it was leaning against the edge of the fridge.

“Where are you headed?” Bucky asked, eyes pulling up from his paper with mild concern.

“Out,” was her stiff reply.

A proper worry line appeared between his brows. “Everything alright?”

“Yup. Just feel like blowing some shit up.”

His brow quirked up at that. “Do you want one big explosion or a bunch of smaller ones? A claymore would probably be more cathartic if you need to blow off steam. I'll need to teach you how to set it off safely, just give me a second to grab my jacket.” He made to rise from his chair.

“NO!”

He paused, both eyebrows lifting to his hairline. “No?”

Darcy took a slow, even breath. It wasn't his fault that she was going nuts. “Yes,” she said succinctly, “I would prefer lots of smaller explosions. Alone.”

His chin jerked up in understanding. “Ah. Getting tired of me already?”

She deflated a little at that, and approached him where he sat, lifting a hand to grip his chin. “Yes,” she admitted, but softened the honesty with a lingering kiss. “I just need a little space.”

He wrapped a hand around the wrist near his chin, thumb stroking over the pulse point there. “I understand completely. I was this close to murdering you last night after listening to you crack your jaw continuously for an hour.”

Darcy looked mildly affronted. “I do not do that!”

Bucky scoffed. “Baby girl, you know I adore you, but you absolutely do, and it took everything in me not to render you unconscious.”

Darcy's jaw dropped with an indignant squawk. “But you were completely chill last night! Like a flipping robot!”

“I'm a spy and an assassin, sweetheart. Masking my emotions and executing impulse control are part and parcel of that line of work.”

“Well maybe next time be a little more transparent. It makes me feel better about myself as a person to know that you’re just as easily irritated as I am.”

“So I should knock you out next time?”
Darcy stuck her tongue out at him, releasing his chin to pat sharply at his cheek before slinging the Dragunov over her shoulder and grabbing a box of ammo from the little stockpile by the front door. “Have fun with your paper, old man. I’ll be back in time for dinner.”

Bucky’s eyes swept appreciatively over her weapon laden figure. “I’m assuming you want me to have something tasty ready for you when you get back?”

“Yes, my darling little housewife. If you wouldn’t mind.” Darcy blew him a kiss and exited the cabin with a final wave. She traipsed out through the woods on a little path that led east from the cabin for half a mile before it butted against a clearing that ended in a little rise in the land. They’d been using the space as a makeshift gun range, practicing using the various firearms Bucky possessed to hone her new marksmanship. She had pretty good aim, but she needed to work on drawing her weapon. She tended to be a bit slow on the draw, though her technique was above reproach. Of course that was when she was working with handguns and was drawing from holsters placed in various places on her person where the possibility of accidentally shooting herself was significantly higher.

Which is why she’d grabbed the Dragunov. She much preferred the large rifle that was designed to be set up and in place long before the target was in the vicinity. She liked being able to take her time, getting the rifle perfectly positioned, settling into place on her belly, and pulling the trigger after long moments of consideration and concentration. Slow and steady breathing and then the smooth pull of the trigger, followed by the pop of the rifle and the thunk of bullet lodging itself into wood.

Darcy had never expected to find so much peace and enjoyment from firing a weapon but there was something very appealing about it to her now that she’d picked up some capability with it. It might have been the focus on breathing and being mentally present, like some kind of violent version of meditation. Plus the the explosion of wood splinters when she hit whatever tree she was targeting at the time was wildly cathartic.

She spent a solid hour plunking away at tree trunks and large rocks marking the hillside. At one point she heard the sound of Big Blue’s engine turning over. She spared a thought, guessing that Bucky was headed to town to pick up extra groceries, before returning her attention to the small granite outcropping she’d been aiming at. Time eked past at the same measured pace as her breathing and by the time the sun began to slink low in the sky, she felt more at peace and the irritation that had been buzzing under her skin had fully subsided.

She packed up her gear and carefully picked her way back down the path to the cabin. The view was rather picturesque, she had to admit, with the banks of pure snow and the smoke curling up from the chimney. The smell of whatever Bucky was cooking wafting through the air added a note of further enticement and she unconsciously picked up her pace, a content little grin playing at her lips.

She blew back into the kitchen with a burst of frigid air, her hair whipped into riotous curls and her cheeks and nose pinking with the cold. She greeted him with her sweet, wide smile that she seemed to save just for him and it warmed him all the way to his toes.

Bucky grinned back at her, watching as she unloaded her gear by the door and practically skipped to his side. Before he could greet her, she threw her arms around his waist, her little hands niggling under his thermal shirt to press against the warm skin of his back. He jerked and yelped at her freezing fingers, trying to wiggle away from them, only for her to cling tighter to him with an impish laugh.

“I see you’re in a better mood,” he grumbled into the crown of her head.
She made a content little hum in the back of her throat and nodded against him. “Who knew gunpowder and lead could be so soothing? Well, maybe Miranda Lambert.” She pulled back to press her cold lips against his considerably warmer ones. “When's dinner ready? I'm starving.”

“Soon.” He punctuated the statement with a kiss to the tip of her nose. “You should have just enough time to break down and clean your rifle.” He gave her a pointed look that brooked no room for argument.

She rolled her eyes but set to the task, settling on the floor in front of the fireplace. If she was going to play Cinderella Rambo she was at least going to be warm while she did it. The temperature outside was dropping rapidly and dark clouds were gathering on the northern horizon. It looked like a cold front and heavy snows would be moving through overnight. She sighed at the thought, knowing it would probably spell a night of abject misery and frozen toes.

Dinner was predictably delicious and Darcy pushed away her empty plate with a deeply satisfied sigh, leaning back in her chair to prop her feet into the chef’s lap.

“Bucky, you’re the best wife I’ve ever had.”

The housewife in question snorted into his chicken scallopine as he shuffled a forkful into his mouth. “You should see me with a feather duster.”

“Technically, I have.”

“Yeah, but was I wearing nothing but my stockings and pearls at the time?” he asked around a bite of chicken.

Darcy tilted her head in thought, the vision playing in her head was surprisingly enticing. Quite enticing, actually.

Bucky snapped his fingers in front of her face, drawing her attention to the present. “You get lost?” he asked around a droll little smile.

“Yeah, got stuck on imagining those thick thighs in a pair of real deal silk stockings.” She ground her heel into the top of one his thighs, a low growl rumbling from her throat.

Bucky ducked his head, an adorable grin creeping across his face and the tiniest hint of a blush on his cheeks. She chuckled at his reaction and eased her feet off his lap to scoop up their dirty dishes and begin the cleanup process. She hummed quietly to herself as she scrubbed various bits of cutlery and dinnerware, her lips turning up at the corner when Bucky joined her at the sink with a bump to her hip, dish towel at the ready.

They worked in tandem until Buck swept his rag over the last dish with a little flourish. “So,” he began, “I went to town while you were out.”

“I’m aware. I heard you take off in Blue.”

Bucky raised an impressed eyebrow. “Atta girl, Darce. Your situational awareness is improving.”

Darcy gave a saucy little curtsy and a tip of her head. “Why thank you. I do try.”

“I may have gotten you a present while I was in town.”

“A present?” Interest sparked in her blue eyes.
“Mhm, it’s under your bed.”

An excited squeal was all that lingered as Darcy took off like a shot to the bedroom, skidding to her knees to peer under the bed. She sneezed a bit at the swirl of dust she kicked up from rummaging beneath the bed, but her hands quickly landed on some kind of...boxy...thing. She pulled it out to get a better look at it.

“Oh. My. GOD! Bucky! Where did you even find this relic?”

His soft chuckle brushed past her ear as he sank to his knees beside her. “A real nice lady in town was having a garage sale. She said it plays music? On these?” He leaned over to pull out a small cardboard box from under the bed that was stock full of old cassette tapes, the perfect accessories to the circa 1983 boombox that Darcy was now staring at in total bewilderment.

“Bucky...I’m pretty sure this thing is older than me…”

“Yeah but it still works! Even picks up radio stations. Besides, we both know you have a thing for antiques.” He winked at her and then tugged her to her feet, grabbing the boombox from her hand and making double time to the living room where he plugged the ugly old thing into the nearest outlet.

Darcy watched in delight as he sat on the floor fiddling with the device in his lap, trying to remember the woman’s instructions from earlier. She’d been kind enough to give him a crash course on it, blushing and making a self-deprecating remark about how old it made her feel to have to teach “such a nice young man” how to use the outdated technology. Bucky had let her believe her misconception. No need to inform the nice lady that he was actually old enough to be her grandfather.

He let out a whoop of triumph when he finally landed on an FM radio station, adjusting the antenna until the song blaring through speakers came out strong and free of static. He turned to Darcy with an enthusiastic smile and a gesture to the device sitting on the floor between his legs.

“Darcy Grace Lewis, I present to you: entertainment!”

Darcy pinched her lips between her teeth, but it wasn’t enough to contain the laugh that came barreling out of her. “C’mer, old man, so I can thank you for your gift,” she said between chuckles.

Bucky rose quickly to his feet, his body colliding with hers where she stood in front of the fireplace. He scooped her close to him, mouth finding hers and fingers tightening in her hair and across her ass. She met him with the same heat, her hands pushing up into the hair at the nape of his neck, her nails scraping across his scalp prompting a warm hum of approval from his throat.

He finally pulled back to pant softly against her lips, “So, you like it?”

Darcy huffed a laugh, adoration shining out of her as she smiled up at him. “Yeah, babe, I love it. Thank you.” She nudged the tip of his nose with hers, her eyes closing briefly until she drew back with an inquisitive brow. “Does this mean you’re finally gonna teach me how to do that fancy old man dancing?”

“Damn straight. Hold on to your bloomers, sweetieheart,” he said with a blade-sharp grin.

“Dude, I haven’t worn bloomers since I was three.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Well hold on to me then.”
Darcy bit into her plush bottom lip. “I think I can manage that,” she purred, her arms tightening around him and her chest pressing enticingly into his.

He arched a brow at her and then repositioned her hands, putting them into proper dance form, with a significantly larger space between their bodies. She gave him her most innocent smile, and scooted an inch closer. Bucky just rolled his eyes and went with it. What else could he do?

The rest of the evening was spent pleasantly teaching different dance styles to one another. Their recent floorwork during training ended up being quite helpful in teaching them how to anticipate the other, so Darcy was Lindy-Hopping with the best of them in under an hour. In return, Bucky picked up the Running Man and the Robot exceedingly quickly. The irony was not lost on him, but he endured Darcy’s snickers with patience and good nature, only getting the slightest revenge when he tossed her in the air, over one shoulder, and dropped her down into a dip that had her legs in the air over his back and her head swinging an inch from the floor.

Darcy’s own revenge came in the form of some good old fashioned bump and grind lessons when she happened across a convenient pop station. The dance lessons ended pretty quickly after that with Darcy seated on the sofa, pants tossed over the back of the couch and Bucky kneeling between her thighs, hands expertly teasing her and whispering hotly into her ear.

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Despite how delightfully toasty the evening had ended, Darcy had hit the nail on the head when she predicted that the night would be miserably cold.

She rolled over, burrowing further into the covers, but it did nothing to alleviate the bone deep chill that permeated the bedroom. The poor little space heater couldn’t even begin to keep up with how sharply the temperature had dropped.

Darcy turned over once more, glancing at the digital clock and groaning at the late hour. From the other side of her bedroom door she could hear the thud of Bucky’s feet on the floor, followed by the crack and hiss of wood being added to the fire.

Right, enough of this crap. She was going to get warm, by supersoldier or by fire, but either way, she wasn’t staying in that icebox of a bedroom a second longer. She gathered up every single one of the blankets that she’d piled up around her and stomped out to the living room.

“Alright, listen up Barnes. I’ve had enough of this separate sleeping situation. I need your body heat to survive at this point so you’re gonna have to get over your fears of sleep-murdering me and let me bury my icicle toes into your warm spaces. Capiche?”

Bucky stared up at her sleepily from his prone position on the couch, blinking slowly and trying to sort through the onslaught of words he’d just been doused in.

“I...okay?” he muttered, shaking his head in confusion.

“Budge over,” Darcy commanded, burrowing into his side and making good on her promise to stick her cold bits into all his warm bits. He jerked and shot her an exasperated glance, but said nothing at her intrusion.

After about five minutes of maneuvering around on the couch and trying to find a comfortable position for the both of them, Bucky sighed and extricated himself from Darcy and the couch. He disappeared into the back bedroom, only to return a couple minutes later carrying the entire mattress under one arm, setting it down with a heavy thump between the couch and fire.
“Go get all the blankets from the linen closet,” he instructed as he began piling their pillows onto the mattress.

“Why? This should be enough to keep me warm now that I’ve got you and the fire.”

Bucky’s eyes sparkled in the dim glow of the firelight and a slow, boyish grin spread across his face. “These will keep us warm. The others will be for infrastructure.”

“Infrastructure?”

“Yes ma’am,” he affirmed. “We’re building a fort.”

Darcy’s mouth popped open in surprised delight, and then she was up and at ‘em, collecting and compiling every blanket, sheet, towel and vaguely rectangular shaped cloth item in the entire cabin.

The initial design of their fort was quite extensive and fairly sturdy, despite the building materials. Of course, it was hardly practical for actual sleeping purposes, so it was eventually taken down and reformed into more of a “nest” design. Both architects were quite pleased with the final product, and were even more pleased to be snuggled up next to the other person.

Bucky was spooned behind Darcy as they lay in their little nest watching the fire pop and hiss, the flames fluttering in that mesmerizing manner that fire has. She delighted in finally being comfortable now that she had the warmth and comfort of his presence behind her. His fingers dragged lightly up and down her upper arm, his head propped up on his metal hand.

He watched her for a long minute, enjoying the feel of her and just appreciating the moment. “You know, I don’t think anything could make this blanket fort any better. We have absolutely outdone ourselves,” he murmured into her ear.

He felt her cheek press up against his lips as she smiled. “I dunno, a nice hot mug of cocoa would be pretty heavenly.”

“I can’t help you there. It wasn’t on the grocery list so we’re S.O.L. for now.”

“Oh well. Que sera sera, and all that.” Darcy went quiet and then rolled to face him, obviously chewing on some idea or another. “Actually, I can think of something a lot better than hot cocoa,” she said hesitantly.

“Oh?”

“Yup...maybe a glimpse of some half or fully naked supersoldier?” She smiled sheepishly at him.

“You miss Steve that much, huh?” Bucky deadpanned and then laughed as Darcy began punishing him with little pinches to his stomach.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know,” Bucky muttered, trapping her treacherous fingers between his hands. His breathing grew shaky and he steadied his forehead against hers as he seriously considered her request.

She’d been so patient with him, so kind and understanding. And never pushed him, let him take the lead with every step of their relationship. He could do this, couldn’t he? Hell it should be easy, just strip bare for her, let her look at him, touch him. She deserved to get what she wanted. And maybe he did too, because of course he wanted to be able to let her look at him, to touch him. But that level
of intimacy, letting *her* give *him* pleasure, was a tad daunting, especially when he thought about all the things he’d done in his life that made him entirely unworthy of her gentle little hands on him. Even before he’d become the Soldier, he’d done some damn horrific things as a soldier for the U.S. Army and then again as a Commando.

But by some unfathomable amount of luck, she seemed to want *him*. Despite his past and his sins, she wanted him all the same and Darcy was a dame that deserved every damn thing that she ever wanted in her life. And he absolutely wanted to be the one to give her those things. All of them. For as long as she’d let him.

So he took a deep breath, closed his eyes tight, and nodded against her. “Okay…” he said softly, and then again more firmly, “Okay.”

“Really?” she squealed, delight and surprise shining from her eyes, making her look just the teeniest bit unhinged.

“Yes, you sex-crazed lunatic. I’ll let you get a look at the goods. Might even let you touch if you can be a good girl and sit still and *quiet* while I do this.”

Darcy hastily jerked her head in a nod, making the motion of zipping up her lips. Bucky leaned down to drop a kiss to her sealed lips and then disentangled himself from the nest, rising to stand in front of the fireplace, his back to her and bracing himself against the mantle with both hands.

Darcy watched as he took a shuddering breath, his head hanging down between his outstretched arms until he suddenly dropped them, his fingers going to the hem of his shirt and pulling it quickly up and over his head. The fabric dangled from his fingers for a second and then his hand seemed to spasm, clenching and then flexing, releasing the thermal shirt to drop to the hardwood floor.

He paused in his undressing, forcing deep, even breaths through his chest. With his back to her and standing in front of the only light source in the room, he was cast mostly in shadow but the line of tension between his shoulders was still visible and so tight that Darcy worried he might snap and break apart. She desperately wanted to go to him and soothe him with her touch, but she would keep still unless he asked for her, so she pulled the blankets tighter around her and remained sitting cross legged on the mattress, her back planted solidly against the base of the couch.

Even shadowed and despite his obvious discomfort, she could see how beautifully sculpted his back was, the ropes of muscles crisscrossing beneath smooth skin, broken only where the joint of his metal arm was violently grafted to his back and shoulder. The wicked scarring did nothing to diminish the beauty of him. If anything, it only heightened her desire to touch him and she dug her fingers into her thighs to keep from reaching for him.

He was still for a moment more and then he turned to face her. He kept his head ducked, his overgrown hair having gotten just long enough to hang in his eyes and curl slightly past his ears. Darcy had the fleeting thought that she’d need to cut his hair soon and then all thought of any kind was swept from her mind when his fingers went to the drawstrings of his pajamas pants. He undid the ties with slow, but precise movements and then tucked his thumbs into the waistband and shoving them down over his hips to fall to his ankles, leaving him bare to her. He did an awkward little shuffle to step out of them and then finally raised his eyes to meet hers.

Darcy let out the breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, her eyes breaking from his to flit over every plane of his body and then back again to the piercing blue of his gaze. She’d seen several naked men before, but she’d never seen a man this *bare*. There was a vulnerability to his nakedness, in the way he held himself and the shine of his eyes, like he wasn’t just showing her his skin, but cracking himself open and letting her look at all the darkness of him, the sins that had been written
across his skin for nearly a hundred years. He broke her heart and made it beat and swell all in the same breath and she choked on something that was half sob, half sigh, her arms unfolding to reach out towards him to beckon him closer.

Bucky came to her without hesitation, sinking to his knees on the mattress in front of her and letting himself fall into her embrace. Her arms looped up around his shoulders, squeezing him tight as she muttered soft words of comfort and tenderness to him and he thought maybe this was what it felt like to be loved by a woman, really loved, but shied away from the thought before it could take root too deeply. He couldn’t risk being wrong about that and she hadn’t said the words so he wouldn’t assume...but it felt an awful lot like love. And he knew he was in love with her, his kind, funny, shit-stirring little hellion. He’d come to that conclusion slowly and then all at once during the last couple months and now the words pressed and bounced on his tongue, but he snapped his teeth over them and swallowed them back. Not now. Not yet.

“Bucky,” her soft voice murmured in his ear. “You seem to be thinking pretty hard about something...care to share with the class?”

He clamped down on the panic of being outed and answered with what was only half a lie. “Not sure what to do next.” He turned to hide his face in the soft crook of her neck and shoulder, tightening his arms where they were wrapped like steel bands around her back. He felt feather light touches of fingertips along his spine and shivered at the contact.

“I may have some thoughts on that, actually. If you wouldn’t mind handing over the reins a bit?”

The fingers at his back kept their languid stroking, but the heat lacing her voice was starting to blend with her touch and sparking a rather pronounced reaction from his body. “I trust you, baby girl,” he eventually replied on a sigh. “What did you have in mind?” He lifted his head from her shoulder to meet her eyes, momentarily losing himself in the way the dancing firelight reflected in the depths of those wide, honest eyes that had become so captivating to him. God, he loved her.

She leaned into him, closing the scant few inches between their mouths to kiss him deeply and gently. She pulled back with a slow, lazy grin, eyes still half closed as if she was savoring the very taste of him. Her eyes fluttered open suddenly, piercing him with wicked intent. “Lay back, please.” She loosened her grip on him, placing her hands on his shoulders and guiding him back and down onto the mattress.

He lay back obediently, trying to remember how to do that breathing thing that humans needed to live. It was a damn hard thing to remember when a woman as beautiful as his Darcy was sitting next to him, eyeing him up and down with a sly little tilt to her head like she was envisioning all the ways that she was going to devour him. She sat tilted to one side, her weight balanced on one hip and the palm she had planted firmly into the mattress. Her other hand was free to wander along his body in haphazard loops and swirls, the pattern chaotic and dizzying and utterly arousing. His stomach shivered with anticipation when she swept her middle finger in a lazy circle around his belly button and then in smaller, successive circles following the trail of hair beneath it.

When her hand palmed the length of him, he knew it was coming, but that did nothing to lessen the shock to his system. He jerked and a helpless moan pulled from his throat at her touch. He felt her lower herself to his side, snuggling close to him and propping her head on her elbow.

“Is this okay?” she whispered.

His eyes, which he must have closed at some point, snapped open to see her staring down at him intently, her teeth worrying at her full bottom lip. “God, yes,” was the only coherent response he could come up with before he darted his metal hand into her hair to pull her to him so he could kiss
her deeply. Her soft lips parted for him, her tongue darting into his mouth to stroke along his in time to the long, slow strokes she was making with her hand. He groaned into her, his hips snapping up off the mattress to meet her hand.

He could feel the triumphant little smirk she was wearing before he could see it and for once in their relationship he did not give a flying fuck that she was one-upping him and had no desire to compete with her. Honestly, he had no desire to do anything except lay there and let her stroke him until his eyes rolled back in his head and he either died, or came, or both.

Darcy had other plans however, which became abundantly clear to Bucky when she started kissing a wet trail down his neck, to his chest, and then over the soft flesh of his abdomen. When the light bulb went off for him about her intentions, he very nearly had a heart attack. At the very least he had some kind of out of body experience that culminated with the first hot, wet swirl of her tongue over him. It was all downhill from there. He lost all composure and semblance of dignity as she brought him to a shaking, pleading mess of a man within seconds. And he could not have been happier about it. Her mouth as it worked around him had him calling her name with a hoarse shout and coming hard in what was, to be honest, an embarrassingly short amount of time. She didn’t seem to mind though, gracing him with a satisfied smirk.

His head fell back against the mattress, breathing hard as his throat worked, trying to find his voice again. He focused on calming his breathing, releasing his death grip on the mattress on either side of him, barely registering the fact that his fingers had definitely torn through the fabric at some point.

“Darce...that was...you...I... oh my god,” he muttered incoherently when he’d finally regained some control over his breathing. He still wasn’t making any damn sense, but at least he was capable of speech again.

A happy little chuckle bubbled up from Darcy’s throat and she planted a smacking kiss to his cheek. “Glad you had a good time, buddy.”

Bucky responded with a dazzling smile that was only slightly dampened by the fact that he couldn’t seem to keep his eyes open. “Jus’...give me a second to...calm down and then I’ll take care of you sweetheart,” he muttered, rolling to his side to cuddle up to her, burying his nose into her neck and insinuating a heavy thigh between hers.

She chuckled and threw her arm around him, her fingers dangling to sweep back and forth over his spine. “Oh no you don’t, Buck. It’s four in the morning and I’m exhausted. We’re both going to sleep.”

Bucky made a soft whimper of protest into her skin but Darcy shook her head. “Go to sleep, Bucky. I promise I’ll still be here in the morning,” was her soft reply.

He huffed a deep, slow breath into her neck before reaching behind him to throw a few blankets around them both, acquiescing to her better judgement and the post-coital sleepiness that was settling into his bones. She’d promised she’d be there in the morning.

The last thought he had before sleep overtook him was that he very much wanted to someday hear her promise to be there for every morning for the rest of his life.
That One Time Steven Grant Rogers Ended Up on Darcy Lewis' Shitlist for Three Months

Chapter Summary

Lumberjacking, old man jawjacking, and various other kinds of jacking around.

The shift in their relationship after that night by the fire was...subtle and still somehow earthshaking. Maybe it was earthshaking just because Bucky was suddenly, after being untouched and unable to be aroused for sixty years, finding himself in a near constant state of being touched and aroused courtesy of one truly spectacular brunette with some kind of vendetta to get him off as frequently as possible.

“Darcy,” he gasped out as his heart rate began to slow again. “I think that’s the best wake up call I’ve ever gotten.”

A cheshire cat grin lit up her face as she kissed a line back up along his hip, crawling up his body to settle into his side. She pulled the blankets back up around them, snuggling into his warmth, to ward off the chill of early morning that permeated the bedroom.

That was another shift in their relationship, it seemed. Since that night by the fire, he’d slept next to her in the bedroom, keeping her toasty warm and frequently satisfied. Reclaiming his body and sexuality for himself seemed to be doing a world of good for his anxiety. That and all the blow jobs, probably.

He was more open with her now, physically speaking, letting her touch him whenever and wherever she desired, and had taken to wearing significantly less clothing when they were indoors. Self defense training had gotten quite distracting now that he seemed to be in the habit of sparring with her while shirtless.

Of course, she had eventually been forced to even out the playing field, stripping down to her sports bra and compression shorts during their matches. She got in so many more hits on him after she made that call. So many more hits.

Darcy ran her foot along his calf, smiling into his shoulder. “You’re welcome. I aim to please.”

Bucky hummed softly in agreement. He was very pleased. They snuggled quietly together for a while, long enough for him to notice the way her breathing was starting to slow. The hand that lay across her hip gripped her tighter and shook her a little. “Hey, no going back to sleep. Just because you just blew my mind doesn’t mean you get to slack on your running. Up and at ‘em, Lewis. Get dressed,” he said with a smack to her rear.

Darcy groaned and rolled away from him, begrudgingly sticking one leg out from underneath the covers into the cold air. “You’re the worst,” she muttered, but made her way to the dresser to pull out her running clothes.

Bucky folded his arms behind his head, smirking up at the ceiling for a few seconds until he let out an “oof” when his pair of running shoes landed heavily on his stomach. Darcy stood with her hands on her hips, brow raised expectantly and foot tapping the floor impatiently. He rolled his eyes and
hopped out of bed to dress and join her for breakfast and their morning run.

Their days fell into a similar pattern, starting with a three mile run now that Darcy’s body was adjusted to the increase in cardio. This was generally followed by sparring and a communal shower which Bucky very much enjoyed. He particularly enjoyed having her scrub him clean from head to toe. Something about the intimacy of being handled so tenderly warmed the cockles of his grumpy old man heart.

Their afternoons were generally spent honing her weaponry skills and then pursuing whatever form of entertainment the two could come up with out in the middle of nowhere. The radio helped, as did Bucky’s newfound comfort with nudity. They hadn’t quite worked up to full blown sex, but they were still quite good at providing a pleasant distraction for the other person.

They’d also stumbled upon another form of entertainment when the last of the firewood had run out and Bucky had gone to chop down a whole tree to replenish it. Apparently, Darcy had a thing for the way he swung an axe and made a habit of following him out into the woods to watch as he lumberjacked his way into her panties. They had quite the stockpile of firewood stacked against the side of the cabin now...and yet Darcy was adamant that he add to the woodpile on a regular basis. Imagine that.

“You’ll thank me when we get hit by the next blizzard,” she told him around the apple she’d just bitten into, her eyes tracking the bunching muscles in his bare back while she leaned against a neighboring tree.

Bucky paused in his swing of the axe, settling it on the stump he’d been splitting wood on and leaning against the handle. “You really think we’ll get hit with another blizzard? In the middle of March?” He wiped at the bead of sweat that was rolling down his forehead. In the midday sun, the temperature was probably hovering in the low fifties. They hadn’t even built a fire in the last three days, and yet here he was, busting his ass chopping wood for this woman. Again. It’s a good thing she usually followed these woodchopping excursions with various rewards. Naked rewards.

“Hey, you never know. There could be a freak cold front. And then you’ll be super glad I made you chop all this wood.”

“You know, you could help me with this. Swinging an axe is great for building upper body strength.”

Darcy straightened away from the tree she’d been leaning on. “Oh, would you look at the time,” she said, glancing down at her bare wrist. “Gotta go see a man about a horse, Barnes,” she called over her shoulder, making a hasty retreat back towards the cabin.

“Pussy!” Bucky shouted after her.

“Yep. I’ve got one. And if you make me chop wood, you’ll never see it again!” She didn’t even look back at him, just kept her swift pace back up the worn forest trail.

Bucky shook his head and chuckled before turning back to the wood stump and swinging the axe into it, lodging it firmly in the stump until the next time Darcy got a hankering to see him doing manual labor.

He stomped up the front porch of the cabin, knocking the mud from his boots before unlacing them and setting them by the front door and stepping inside. Darcy was leaning against the kitchen sink and staring out the window. He sidled up next to her to wash his hands at the sink, drying them on the front of his tac pants when he’d finished. Darcy’s eyes followed the motions of his hands,
chewing thoughtfully on her apple.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked, tossing her apple core into the trash can in the cabinet under the sink.

Bucky raised a brow. “Sure, about what?”

“Why do you wear your pants like that?”

He glanced down at himself, forehead wrinkling. “Like what?”

“Like... that.” She waved her hand over his abdomen where the waistband of his pants rested. “Like waaaay high. Above your belly button.”

He stared at her, not sure how to respond. “Because...that’s how pants are worn?” Surely she knew this?

“Uh, maybe back during the war, Grandpa, but nowadays men wear their pants lower. Like, a lot lower.”

Bucky’s eyes widened in dawning comprehension. “Really?!! You mean I’ve been suffocating my nads for years now for nothing??”

“Dude. You didn’t know?” Darcy bit back on a grin.

“No, I didn’t know. I just assumed that the new style was to have the inseam run higher. I didn’t realize they’d just dropped the waistline! I thought all the young people just stopped caring about having room for their balls to breathe! Stop laughing, Darcy, it’s not funny! Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Well to be honest,” she gasped out between giggles, “I didn’t realize it until you started going around shirtless all the time...but then it was kind of hard to miss.”

Bucky dropped his face into his hands with a groan. “I am an idiot.”

“Hey, if it makes you feel any better, pretty much every guy over the age of fifty is right there with you in the Moose Knuckle Club. Including Steve.”

“Moose knuckle?” he asked, lifting his face to eye her in confusion.

“Oh, here,” she muttered, placing her hands on his shoulder and guiding him to sit at the kitchen table. She stuck out the knuckles of her index and middle fingers to gesture at his crotch. “Moose knuckle.”

He glanced down to see what she was referring to. “Oh my god,” he groaned when he caught her implication, blushing up to his hairline. He dropped his head to moan miserably into his hands until a thought occurred to him and his head popped back up.

“Wait a minute, how long have you been eyeballing Steve’s...moose knuckle??” He narrowed his eyes at her.

Darcy scoffed and smacked the back of his head. “It’s not like that, asshole. He’s tall and I’m short. Sometimes my eyes just kind of settle at crotch level when I’m not paying attention and then when I tune back in, I’ve got an eyeful of supersoldier crotch. It’s actually kind of an embarrassing thing to happen. You should feel bad for me.”
Bucky rose from his seat, arms crossing over his chest and moving into her space to glare playfully down at her. “You sure that’s all it is? I did witness you finessing him into getting buck naked for you within the first ten minutes of meeting you for the first time.”

“Oooh, Bucky. Sounds like somebody is jealous.” She crossed her own arms, grinning up at him with the devil in her eyes.

“Can’t be jealous of something that already belongs to you, sweetheart,” he replied with an answering smirk.

“Oh really? That’s how it is? You think you own my ass now?”

Bucky stepped in closer to her with a low growl at the back of his throat and unfolded his arms to grab her rear with both hands, pulling her up hard against his body. “Yes,” he breathed and then he was kissing her for all he was worth.

Darcy met him with enthusiasm, her hands sliding up to tangle in his hair and pressing her breasts tightly against his bare chest. His fingertips kneaded at the muscles of her ass as he began to trail open-mouthed kisses along her throat and across the top of her breasts.

Some wicked, shit-stirring part of her brain prompted her to take that moment to moan obscenely, tightening her fingers in his hair and then whimpering, “Oh, Steve!” into the top of Bucky’s head.

He froze against her, head coming up slowly to lock eyes with her. “Woman. Don’t trifle with me. Am I going to have to show you who you belong to?” he threatened, the growl of his voice sending her stomach flip-flopping and her core throbbing.

She flashed him her most devious smile. “Only if you can catch me first,” she hissed and then took off like a shot from his arms. Bucky grinned, his eyes lighting up. Nothing like a little game of tag to get the blood flowing.

He chased her around the edge of the kitchen table, dodging back and forth along the edge until she broke away to dash to the other side of the couch, with him hot on her heels. She rounded the couch, making for the front door, but Bucky cut her off, forcing her to backpedal towards the kitchen table again.

She was maybe two steps away from the table when she felt his hand come down around her wrist, using her momentum to spin her until her back collided with his chest and his arms came down around her front to secure her to him.

“Gotcha,” he smirked, nosing at the line of her jaw. “Guess that means I get to show you who’s boss now.”

“And how do you expect to do that? Give me a salary and micromanage my every move?”

He huffed a laugh into the side of her throat. “No, I was thinking more along the lines of bending you over the kitchen table and fucking you until you can’t remember how to say anything besides my name.”

Air rushed into Darcy's lungs with a sharp gasp. This was a very new thing. A very new, very enticing thing. She turned slowly in the cage of his arms, cocking a brow at him as she met his gaze.

“Is that what you really want or are you just trying to drive me crazy?”

Bucky bit down into his lower lip, a coy little smile tugging at the edges of his mouth. “You're already crazy. But yes, that's what I want.” He leaned closer to kiss along her jaw and drag his teeth
over her earlobe before whispering darkly, “that's what I really, really want.”

“Shit. Yes. Awesome,” Darcy gasped and then started removing her clothes in a manic flurry. She wasn't entirely effective in her excited state, but Bucky was gracious enough to assist her in undressing both of them while backing her towards the kitchen table.

By the time he had lifted her bare ass onto the table, they were both stripped naked and panting, a mix of excitement and nervousness tightening their muscles and heightening every sensation.

Bucky leaned into her, one hand at the back of her head pressing her firmly against his mouth and the other tucked behind her knee, pulling her core against him. He could feel the heat and slickness of her already, the way she was pressed right to him, and the sensation made him groan into her mouth, his chest vibrating against hers with the neediness of it.

“Darce, wait, we gotta…” he panted, losing his trail of thought as she swiveled her hips slowly against him. He tried again. “We need, shit, doll I need to go grab a rubber.”

“Got you covered, babe,” she murmured, kissing along his collarbone and wrapping her hand around him where he was bobbing against her belly button.

“Oh, ah, okay, great,” he muttered, too caught up in the way her hand was stroking him. “Fuck,” he hissed when she teased him against her core, rocking her hips in a slow, excruciating rhythm. Close, he was so close to where he wanted, needed, to be. All the blood must have completely left his brain after that because he could have sworn he started hearing a ringing in his ears.

“Buck,” Darcy breathed, pausing in her torturous teasing of him.

“Yeah?”

“What's that noise?”

Bucky blinked, trying to concentrate on her words but that damn ringing was...oh fuck.

With a groan, Bucky turned his head to where the sat phone was sitting in the windowsill above the kitchen sink. Darcy followed his line of sight and then made her own low groan of discontent, a grimace falling into place over her features.

“Steven,” she growled.

“Yep,” Bucky snapped. “That cockblocking motherfu--” he cut off with a strangled noise. Pointing a finger at her nose he muttered, “You stay put,” and then stalked over to snatch up the phone, consciously having to make sure he didn't crush the plastic beneath his fingers.

He mashed the accept button and jammed the phone to his ear with a clipped “Yes?”

“Uh, Bucky? It's me, Steve.”

“Oh, I'm aware, Steven. What the hell do you want?”

“Geez, Buck, what crawled up your ass and died?”

“Nothing, punk. Why are you calling?”

“We're stateside again. Just dropped the team off at the Tower and fueled up the quinjet. Me and Nat are headed your way. We'll be touching down in half an hour. Grab your gear, we're taking you back to the Tower.”
“The Hydra threat has been handled?”

“Pepper ferreted out the mole who'd been passing intel to Hydra from the Tower. SHIELD still hasn't gotten a handle on who's been spying on you. Figures. Pepper is more competent than an entire government organization. You'll be safe enough at the Tower now that we're all back.”

Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face, relief flooding through him despite his ire at being interrupted. Not having the threat of Hydra hanging over his head would probably serve to make any sex they had in the future an even more pleasant experience.

“Alright, Steve. See you in half an hour.”

“See ya soon, Buck. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Yeah. No kidding.

The men hung up and Bucky turned back to the beautifully naked woman still perched on the kitchen table.

“I take it sexy time is going to be postponed.”

“Yep. Unless you're comfortable with Steve and Natalia getting first row seats to me pounding you into the table.”

Darcy tilted her head in silent contemplation and then shook it in the negative. “No, better not. The first time should be a bit more private, I think. We can do some of the more exhibition-y stuff after we’ve firmly established our sexual relationship.”

“Glad to see we’re on the same page,” he deadpanned, kissing her cheek and helping her off the table to retrieve their discarded clothing.

All in all, they had very few belongings with them so it didn't take much time to pack everything up in Bucky’s bag and hike to the only clearing large enough to hold the quinjet. And then it was just standing in a field waiting, leaving ample time for Bucky's brain to start fucking with him.

Being trapped in their little bubble of isolation had allowed their relationship to flourish quite nicely, if he said so himself, but now they were being thrust back into the real world. The real world that was populated with other people. And their opinions.

He wanted Darcy, wanted to be with her, date her, and he was becoming more and more confident in his ability to be a good match for her with each passing day….but he wasn't sure the rest of the team would agree. He hadn't seen them in so long, and he felt like he'd changed so much since then. He just hoped they could see that and wouldn't try to intervene in his relationship.

He wasn't particularly worried about Steve finding out. The kid would probably be ecstatic and maybe a bit suffocating in his encouragement of his and Darcy's new relationship. Steve could be a handful like that when he was happy about something.

The rest of the team were nice enough, but not overly trustful of him with the exceptions of Thor and Sam. Sam had spent enough time with him in therapy and hanging out being assholes to one another to build trust, and Thor just seemed to instantly trust and like everyone. Bucky guessed Thor could afford that kind of freely given friendship when he knew he could flatten anyone that betrayed it with one hand tied behind his back.

Natalia still watched him with wary eyes. There was too much history there. She'd seen firsthand
what the soldier could do and she was unlikely to ever completely forget it.

Tony was the same, though for different reasons, but Bucky understood. Coming clean to Tony about the hit on Howard and Maria had been an ugly affair, but he deserved it and Tony deserved the answers only Bucky could give him. There weren't any hard feelings between them now per se, but there was a distinct frigidity to any of their interactions. He didn't blame Tony though. The kid had every right to hate him, even just a little bit.

Bruce didn't seem to have an opinion on him one way or another. He mostly kept to himself anyway. Clint was...well Clint was fucking crazy, but a helluva good time to be around. They didn't have a strong bond of trust between them, but there was a level of understanding. Mind controlled marksmen kindred spirits and all that.

Darcy had relationships with all of them however, and they all adored her to varying degrees. He didn't see it being very likely that everyone would be 100% peachy keen with his involvement with her. Of course, he didn't give two shits what they might have to say about it, he was hers until she decided she didn't want it that way, but strife between teammates did not make for a cohesive battle unit.

He chewed at his bottom lip, worry lines furrowing his brow and flexing his cybernetic hand with nervous energy as they continued to wait.

Darcy reached out, clasping the metal between both of her hands. “Hey, you okay?”

Bucky swallowed and glanced away from her. “Yeah. Just not sure how well received certain, ah developments will be with the team,” he replied, gesturing between their bodies in emphasis.

She patted the back of his hand, clicking her tongue at him in sympathy. “It’ll be alright. Steve’s probably going to do that pain-in-the-ass, excited-puppy thing. And I can handle Nat. Once we get those two on our side, ain’t nobody gonna be talking shit about us.” She winked at him, leaning up on her toes to pop a kiss on his cheek.

He gave her a wan smile, hoping she was right.

The roar of engines sounded overhead, signaling the arrival of the quinjet. They both tilted their heads back, watching as it lowered to the ground twenty yards in front of them, the wind buffeting their bodies as it landed.

The loading ramp began to lower and he felt Darcy's hands tighten around his when Steve appeared, stomping his way down the ramp on weary legs.

Steve, not one to miss the details, locked eyes on the point of connection between their hands before meeting Bucky's eyes, an inquisitive tilt to one of his blond brows.

Well, Bucky thought, here goes nothing, and then he stepped forward, leading Darcy to greet his oldest pal and whatever else the future held for them.
Darcy didn't notice the way Steve's eyes had flitted to their hands. She was too distracted by the conflicting emotions of wanting to beat him over the head for his terrible timing and conversely wanting to wrap him up in a blanket because...yeesh the guy had obviously been through some shit over the last few months. He was, thankfully, all in one piece but it looked like that piece had been tossed into a trash compactor, freaky killer eel alien included.

She released Bucky’s hand to run the last few yards to launch herself at Steve, her arms scrabbling up around his shoulders and relief flooding through her at his safe return. She felt him sigh into her hug, wrapping his own arms securely around her middle for a quick squeeze before setting her back down on her feet with an affectionate smile.

“Darcy, glad to see you're still in mint condition.”

“I wish I could say the same to you, buddy. You look like you could use an ice pack or twenty.” Darcy's eyes flickered over his form, cataloguing the series of minor (mostly) injuries he was sporting.

“Yeah, well some of us were busy kicking Hydra ass while others were holed up playing house in the Love Shack.” Steve smirked and slung an arm over Bucky's shoulders. “Buck, I leave you for a few months and you go and seduce the babysitter? Typical.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, shoving playfully back at Steve and pulling Darcy back to tuck into his side. “Yeah yeah. Can it, punk. You told me to play nice, didn't you? Well, I played real nice,” he purred around a devilish grin. Darcy gave a squawk of indignation, smacking the back of her hand over Bucky's stomach.

“That's enough out of both you assholes. If you're gonna talk about me, please have the decency to do it behind my back.” And with that, she stomped up the ramp to go locate Natasha.

Darcy found her seated in the cockpit, preparing the aircraft for take off and closing the ramp as the two men stumbled in. Darcy was glad to see the other woman didn't look nearly as bedraggled as Steve, but she still wore the signs of battles hard fought.
“Nat!” Darcy shouted, rushing over to attempt to throw herself in the other woman's lap for her own hug and thorough once over. Natasha held up a single finger, her eyes focused on the series of dials on the dashboard, maneuvering the jet back up into the air. Darcy stopped in her tracks, waiting the brief seconds while the redhead got the craft up to altitude and then switched over to autopilot. The other woman removed her harness with nimble fingers and then rose gracefully from her seat to immediately wrap strong arms around Darcy.

“Malen’kiy sestra,” she murmured into Darcy’s hair on a relieved sigh, before pulling back to stroke gently at her face. “I've missed you.”

“Missed you too, Nat. I'm glad you and the team are alright and back in one piece.”

Natasha gave her a patented enigmatic smile before her eyes slid to focus over Darcy's left shoulder to where the two men were chatting quietly. Her head tilted and a perfect auburn brow rose as her focus returned to Darcy's face, a considering and somewhat amused look on her face. Darcy opened her mouth to question Natasha on the strange look but the other woman cut her to the chase.

“You look stronger, Darcy. Did having your ass handed to you by a Hydra agent finally get you to take self defense seriously?”

Darcy puffed up slightly in offense at Natasha's smirk, and then she dropped down to sweep her leg behind the other woman's knees. The Widow anticipated the move, jumping with the force of it and flipping backwards to land back on her feet behind Darcy, dropping to the floor and trapping her in an arm bar faster than Darcy could blink.

Darcy relaxed into the position to keep from hurting herself and tapped Natasha on her thigh to signal her request for release.

Nat obliged with a rare wide smile. “Well done, Darcy. But you need to work on not telegraphing your moves so much.”

“That's what I keep telling her,” Bucky butted in as he and Steve drew closer to the two women, a smug smile residing on his face. Steve made an awkward little motion of reaching for Natasha, but aborted the action and instead folded his arms across his chest, letting her rise to her feet on her own.

Darcy, who was still flat on her back, craned her neck up to stick her tongue out at Bucky. Natasha rolled her eyes and extended a hand out to her, helping her to her feet and dusting off her back.

“Still,” Nat added, “most Hydra goons wouldn't have picked up on it. You've done well for yourself, Darcy.” She preened under the other woman's praise.

Natasha turned her keen gaze to Bucky, eyeing him silently before speaking to him in a soft purr. “Thank you for taking care of Darcy in my absence, James. You’ve trained her well.”

Bucky gave a sharp nod and cleared his throat to respond but was interrupted when Steve swayed heavily into him. Bucky turned to his friend, catching him by the shoulders before he could fall to the ground.

“Steve?” Bucky asked in alarm. “What's wrong?”

Steve shook his head sharply and regained his footing. “‘M fine, Buck. Stop mothering me,” he grumbled, pulling out of the other man's arms.

Bucky's face pinched in annoyance. “Obviously the fuck you aren’t. You look like shit, Rogers, and you almost passed out just now. When was the last time you ate? You been getting enough sleep?
You look like you haven't slept in about four years.”

Steve's jaw clenched and his hands went to his hips. “Dammit, Bucky I told you I’m fine. I can function just fine without you hovering over me. Besides, me and Nat ate on the way here.”

“And what about rest? You been sleeping enough?”

“Yes, you ass. I’ve been sleeping plenty,” he groused, sounding every bit the defiant little boy being confronted by his mother.

“He hasn’t slept more than three hours at a time for the last two months,” Natasha smoothly inserted.

Steve glanced at her with a look of betrayal while Bucky turned to him with renewed ire. “You what now? Are you trying to run yourself into the ground?? Jesus, just cause you're big now doesn't mean you can neglect your health, Steven Grant Rogers!”

“Look, Buck, can we talk about this later? There's some stuff I need to tell you.” Steve's eyes went a little cagey and he shuffled his weight from one foot to the other.

“Nope. We’re not talking about anything until after you've had a fucking nap,” Bucky snapped, one hand on his hip and the other pointed at one of the seats lining the wall of the quinjet.

“Listen Bucky, I really do need to catch you up on what happened while we were gone. We discovered some...stuff that is pertinent to you.” Steve looked up at him with those sincere blue eyes, a dash of guilt glimmering in their depths.

That stopped Bucky for a second as he considered what intel Steve could have and how deeply it could potentially fuck him up further. He scrubbed a hand over his face with a sigh before asking, “Is there anything I can do about the intel while we’re en route to the Tower?”

“No,” Natasha responded before Steve could. Bucky glanced at her and nodded.

Turning back to his stubborn friend, he laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. “We’ll talk back at base. For now, rest while you can, Steve. Please?” His voice softened.

Steve sighed, glancing at Natasha before finally nodding and letting Bucky push him towards one of the seats. He dropped heavily into one, leaning back as much as he could and crossing his arms over his chest. The others watched him shift uncomfortably in the seat a few times until Bucky rolled his eyes and went to sit next to his friend, bolstering Steve up on one broad shoulder and crossing his arms.

Steve sighed in relief and snuggled into Bucky's side, his blond head resting on Bucky's shoulder, looking for all the world like two puppies cuddled together.

“Shit that's cute,” Darcy muttered. Bucky's eyes snapped open to fix her with a glare before shutting again.

Steve shifted a few more times against Bucky until he poked him in his side. “Sit still, punk,” Bucky muttered and then started crooning softly in some language Darcy couldn't identify. The reaction in Steve was almost instantaneous, the weary lines on his face smoothing as he finally settled into sleep.

“It's Gaeilge.”

Darcy turned back to see Natasha watching her closely. “What?”

“Oh,” Darcy replied, her eyes wandering back to the two men. She could just see it, two boys, sons of immigrants and the best of friends. One tall and strong and dark while the other was small and sickly with hair like the sun, snuggled together while the frail one struggled to breathe through wracking coughs and the strong one sang him the lullabies of his motherland.

Natasha’s voice cut into her thoughts. “He used to sing it in his sleep.”

Darcy’s eyes snapped to the redhead, whose own eyes were intent on the men and held some glimmer of emotion that Darcy couldn't quite catch before it was swept away.

Natasha met her gaze, a small smile playing at one corner of her mouth. “Come on. We have things to talk about,” she said softly, taking Darcy by the hand and leading her back up to the cockpit.

Natasha sank smoothly into the pilot’s seat while Darcy slumped heavily into the copilot seat beside her, kicking her feet up to rest on the dash. Natasha watched her movements with sharp eyes, her expression neutral. Darcy tried not to fidget under the other woman’s gaze but it was difficult. If Nat ever needed to get info out of her, she would crack like an egg. No torture necessary, just those cold, calculating eyes.


“Right,” Darcy replied, sucking in a lungful of air.

Natasha chuckled lowly. “Relax, Darcy. Why are you acting as if I’m about interrogate you?”

“Um, because you are?”

The other woman snorted and somehow made the sound seem delicate. “It’s not an interrogation. But I do have...concerns.”

Oh boy. Darcy steeled her spine. She loved Nat, she really did, but she wasn’t going to let the other woman stomp all over her relationship with Bucky just because she knew him back in the day when he was deep in Murderbot Mode.

“How long have the two of you been together?”

Starting with the easy questions, then. Darcy could definitely handle this one. “Since New Years,” was her prompt response.

“Your family knows? Knows who he is and that you are together?” Nat’s voice stayed cool and emotionless.

“Yup. The whole fam loves him. My dad is probably going to start begging for grandkids any day now.”

That response finally got a reaction from the redhead. Well, as much of a reaction as Nat ever gave. So an arched brow and a slightly amused smile.

“Interesting. Has he had any flashbacks while around you? Nightmares?”

“....yes.”

“And how was that handled?”
“Nobody got hurt, if that’s what you’re asking. He snapped out of it fairly quickly. It’s partially why he started training me, I think. So I can protect myself if he loses his grip on reality and things go sideways.”

Natasha looked pleased. “Good. He’s being smart about you.”

“I don’t know if it’s so much smart as it is being terrified of himself. And you expecting the worst from him is not exactly helping, Natasha.” Darcy leveled a stern look at the other woman. “He’s so much better than when Steve brought him in. Hell, he’s better just since Steve dropped him off at my place. Hasn’t had a single issue in a couple months.”

Natasha’s lips flattened, but she made no comment.

“He’s a good man, Nat. Despite everything that has happened to him, everything that was done to him, he’s still a good man.” Darcy’s voice was soft, but held an edge of urgency. She needed her friend to understand.

Natasha turned her head away from Darcy, eyes scanning the horizon. “I know,” she replied, her voice almost a whisper. There was a rare tenderness to the cadence of her voice and a sheen to her eyes that made her seem so much younger than she was.

Darcy reached a hand out to squeeze lightly at the other woman’s forearm. At the touch, Nat returned her gaze to Darcy’s with a reticent smile.

Natasha was quiet for a moment. “No matter how many times they erased him, no matter how they twisted him, he still sang the songs of his boyhood in his sleep.” She paused. “I think that’s why I…” She shook her head, blinking away the memory, smiling apologetically at Darcy.

“It’s alright, Nat. I know about...all that. He told me.”

Natasha’s brows rose in surprise. “He remembered?”

Darcy hummed and nodded. “Some of it, yeah. I don’t think he’s got too many of the details...but the big stuff came back to him.”

The redhead nodded and dropped her eyes to where her hands sat folded together in her lap. “Is he gentle with you? When you’re together?”

Darcy looked at her in confusion, her brow wrinkling.

“Sex, Darcy. I’m talking about sex. When he’s with you, does he remember to keep his strength in check?”

“Oh,” Darcy breathed, a blush rising up over her cheeks. “Heh, well, um, we haven’t exactly cleared that hurdle quite yet. We’re taking things slow. For, um, reasons.” Darcy shook her head. “Not that it’s really any of your business, Nat...but, why do you ask?”

“When James was...” she trailed off, eyes darting to gage Darcy’s reaction, “with us, he could be...rough. Rougher than was strictly necessary.” Darcy inhaled sharply through her nose, but otherwise stayed quiet, allowing the other woman to continue. “I don’t know if that is because that’s how he was instructed to treat us, or if that is just his nature, but either way, if we had not been enhanced as we were by our own serums, we would have been...harmed.” Natasha’s gaze grew sharp and a bit of the Widow slipped through. “You, malyshka, are not as indestructible. I don’t want to see you get hurt.” Natasha laced her fingers through Darcy’s, giving her moment to let the information sink in.
“Whoa,” Darcy breathed. “Heavy.” Natasha nodded in agreement. “I don’t...I don’t think that’s going to be an issue. He’s pretty gentle with me in, um, other aspects so I’m not worried. The man that you were with and the man he is now are two very different people, Nat.”

The other woman jerked her head in a nod. “I trust your judgement. If you say he is careful with you, then I won’t worry.” She gave Darcy a brief, tender smile before her expression clouded and a hint of menace rose to the surface of her features. “However, should he forget himself, I will rip off his balls and hang them on my wall as a gentle reminder.”

“That’s a gentle reminder?” Darcy asked with wide eyes.

“Yes,” Natasha replied, her smile saccharine and terrifying all in one.


“Mmm, see that you do.”

Darcy stared off at the horizon, still processing their conversation. Damn, being friends with ex assassins could get super intense. Natasha seemed to have settled back into her normal neutral emotional state however, the redhead’s gaze returning to the windshield. It appeared that the interrogation was over. And she’d only threatened Bucky once. That had to be a good sign, right?

Having seemingly passed whatever verbal quiz that Nat had just put her through, Darcy’s thoughts strayed to other subjects and recent revelations of her own.

“So, how long have you and Steve been together?” she asked smugly. Turnabout’s fair play, and all that.

“We’re not,” was Natasha’s smooth reply, without even a slight waver to her inflection.

“Ah see, you’re such a good liar, Nat, that I would totally have bought that if it weren’t for the fact that you decided your lover of choice should be the man with the worst poker face on the planet.”

Natasha clicked her tongue on her teeth in irritation and rolled her eyes. “Damn it, he is terrible at being inconspicuous.”

Darcy snorted. “Seriously. I could tell within the first five minutes of being on the plane. He kept looking at you with the clenched Jaw of Freedom™ and the Earnest Eyes of Unwavering Honesty™. Soooo, how long have you two been…” Darcy gave a series of crude hand gestures which earned her a thoroughly unamused look from the other woman.

“We’re not doing whatever that was. We had sex once a couple months back. It wasn’t what you think it is.”

“Well, clarify for a girl, would ya.”

Natasha sighed and gave Darcy a pretty wicked side eye, but seemed to cave. “While we were over there...there was one day that was...well it was horrific. Steve was having a hard time with it and I...well, even I was affected to an extent so that should give you an idea of how nasty the situation was. He needed something to take his mind off all of it.”

“So what? You guys had a rough day at work and made it better with comfort sex?”

“Yes. Essentially.”
“What was so bad that the Widow needed to be comforted?” Darcy asked with genuine concern. She’d never seen anything ruffle Nat’s feathers. Never.

The other woman inhaled deeply and then released it slowly before answering. “We were in Sokovia ferreting out a Hydra agent by the name of Wolfgang von Strucker. He was part of Hydra’s experimental science division, but it seems that he had gone a bit rogue. When we got there, the stuff we found, the experiments he had been working on were, for the majority, off the official books and unsanctioned by Hydra. The intel we had on him was therefore incomplete and we walked into a nasty clusterfuck. Real nasty.” Nat grew quiet, collecting her thoughts. “He had some kind of sick thing for experimenting on children.” Darcy’s stomach clenched and soured at the words.

“We...when we got there, we were able to take out Strucker and the goons working for him easily enough, but the kids...most of his experimentation involved trying to turn these children at the facility into powered individuals. He’d been messing with mutant DNA, Inhuman DNA, even got his hands on Loki’s scepter and was using that to create powered children.” Natasha swallowed hard, turning to face Darcy fully. “Darce, by the time we got there, we only found two survivors. A pair of twins who Strucker had been successful with. They were terrified, had been tortured and torn apart and put back together over and over to achieve his goals. But, god, they at least survived. The rest...we found dozens and dozens of kids, of varying ages, who hadn’t survived the experiments but Strucker had...he’d kept their bodies preserved in life support containers. They were brain dead but he wouldn’t let their bodies die, just so he could continue to study the effects of his work.” Natasha swallowed hard at the bile rising at the back of her throat at the memory.

“Fuck,” Darcy whispered in horror, tears collecting at the corners of her eyes.

“Yeah. Steve was the one to find them. All those little bodies, mangled and murdered and not even given the dignity of death...I think it broke something inside him. It’s why he hasn’t been sleeping. I think he keeps seeing their faces when he closes his eyes. I know I do. We had Bruce come in, make sure there was nothing we could do to save them. Brought in the local authorities, tried to make positive IDs on the kids, but all of them were either orphans or homeless or both. Forgotten children. When we realized there was no one to claim these kids, Steve had to make the call to turn off the machines and let their bodies finally die in peace.” There was a long pause and then, “The youngest we found couldn’t have been more than three,” Natasha murmured.

Darcy was crying in earnest now, and she rose from her seat to curl into Natasha’s lap. “Oh god, Nat. That’s so fucking terrible.”

Natasha idly ran a hand through the younger woman’s hair. “Yes, devochka, it was. It is. And I could see how hard it was for Steve. Can you blame me for taking him to bed that night?”

“No, no I can’t,” she snuffled, burying her face into Natasha’s soft, red curls.

They sat like that for a few minutes while Darcy shed tears into the other woman’s shoulder, mourning for the little ones that had been hurt so badly. Why was it always the women and children that suffered when evil men sought glory?

“Are you alright?” Natasha asked, stroking softly along Darcy’s back.

She nodded, pulling away and scrubbing at her face. “Yeah. I’m okay,” she answered thickly, crawling off Nat’s lap and returning to her seat. “When we get back, the whole team is getting scheduled for mandatory therapy. For at least six months.”

“That might be wise,” Nat responded with a twitch of her lips.
“What about you? Are you alright?”

“Yes, Darcy. Nothing that vodka and a good fuck couldn’t cure.”

“Oh so it was good, eh?” Darcy asked, elbowing Nat in the ribs.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Have you no concept of discretion?”

“Nope!” Darcy declared cheerfully. “So it was good though, right?”

Natasha’s eyelashes gave a peculiar little flutter as she muttered a soft, “Yes.”

Darcy’s eyes narrowed at the response. “Then why was it only the one time, hmm?”

“Because Rogers is the type to get attached. And that is a bad idea.”

“Well, in case you haven’t noticed, it seems that ship has sailed for him. He looks pretty smitten.”

Natasha’s nostrils flared in irritation and she let loose a brief stream of what Darcy assumed were Russian curse words.

“I don’t see why it’s a bad idea though,” Darcy interjected when the other woman fell silent.

“Especially with Steve. He’s like the poster boy for perfect husband material.”

“Marriage is an archaic ideal that does not fit with my lifestyle,” Nat rattled off in a bored monotone.

“Meh,” Darcy replied, flipping her hand through the air as if to wave away Nat’s objections.

“Doesn’t mean you guys can’t be together. And don’t you give me that ‘love is for children’ bullshit, Natasha Romanoff.”

“It is for children, Darcy.” Natasha’s tone remained bored, but Darcy could sense the barest hint of sadness in the way her eyes crinkled at the corners. Most people would miss it, but Darcy was getting better at reading the other woman the longer they were friends.

“Yeah. It is. But it’s also for everyone else too, you bitter old woman,” Darcy scolded.

Nat scoffed, but otherwise didn’t respond. Darcy grew thoughtful, chewing over her next words carefully before speaking. “Not...not every relationship will be like what you had with James. Nobody is going to punish you for loving Steve,” she murmured softly.

Natasha’s head snapped around to face Darcy, her eyes cold and the barest hint of anger sharpening the features of her face. Her eyes bore into Darcy’s, but she refused to back down, and suddenly the tension drained from Nat’s posture and she broke eye contact, sinking back into her seat with a sigh.

A strange look passed over her face and Darcy thought it might be the softest she’d ever seen Natasha look. Sensing a rare opening, Darcy pressed further. “It’s okay for you to want more for yourself, Natasha. This isn’t the Red Room. It’s not even SHIELD. If you can let go of the past, you have the opportunity to find just a little bit of happiness in the present. I’m not saying you should marry the guy...but if you want him, maybe you should consider letting yourself have him?”

“Are you trying to tell me I can have nice things?” Nat teased lightly.

Darcy huffed. “Yep, pretty much.”

Natasha grinned and then grew sober, thinking over Darcy’s words. “I will...consider what you’ve said, sestra.”
Darcy nodded. “Good. Whatever you decide, though, do it quickly. You need to clarify things with Steve, one way or the other.”

Natasha groaned and dropped her head into one hand, rubbing at her temple. “This would be easier if he wasn’t so sappy.”

“The best things in life are very rarely easy,” Darcy replied, channeling her best inner fortune cookie.

Natasha responded with a seriously unamused side eye and a tap to Darcy’s shoulder. “ Strap in, Darcy. We’ll be landing soon.”

Darcy glanced out the windshield to see that, sure enough, the New York skyline was now visible, and began strapping herself into her seat. Natasha shifted, flipping off the autopilot and assuming control of the jet.

Tony’s shining monument to himself came into view, a reminder of the people that waited within and the explanations still to come. Well, two Avengers down, all the rest to go. Easy peasy, right?

Right?

Chapter End Notes

Yep. I’m playing fast and loose with some of the Age of Ultron aspects. Maximoff twins are victims and not volunteers. And no Pietro dying! None of that bullshit.
When the Other Shoe Drops

Chapter Summary

Hold onto your butts! Some questions are answered. Not all of them though.

Chapter Notes

Another reminder that this is not AoU compliant in the slightest nor is it CACW compliant.
Thank you all for sticking with me through this mess. I love you all and I'm so grateful for your love and comments and the fact that you even took the time to read this hot mess of fluff and angst and smut all mushed together.
All thanks and love to my babes, LadyA and Betsy.

TW: very, very brief reference to rape. Nothing graphic, mentioned in passing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next two hours were a flurry of activity and reconnecting with the outside world. Thank god for Pepper Potts, the most capable human being on the planet.

The crisply dressed woman greeted them at the loading bay, somehow remaining untouched by the gusts of wind that the jet engines kicked up. Within ten minutes she'd ordered Steve and Natasha to the medical wing for a myriad of tests and had ushered Darcy and Bucky to an unused conference room.

The first hour was spent making phone calls to her friends and family, updating them on her situation and safety. There was quite a lot of relieved crying all around for those calls.

At one point, Jane and Thor burst into the room and Darcy was scooped up into a pair of spindly arms. Jane made a few blood oaths of revenge against every Hydra agent on the planet as she clung to Darcy, shaking with the intensity of her rage and relief.

Thor joined them in their hug when Jane's vows of revenge petered out into hiccuping sobs, wrapping his massive arms around both women and easily lifting them both a good foot in the air.

"James," Thor rumbled cheerily. "Join me in comforting the women."

Well, it's good to see that gossip traveled fast in the Tower, Darcy thought to herself.

Bucky gave a weak smile and held up a hand in mild protest. This did not suit Thor, who briefly set the women back down to reach out and jerk Bucky into the hug circle by his upper arm. He had no choice but to wrap his arms around the tear-sodden women, rolling his eyes when he felt Thor's arms come back down around and lifting all three of them up into the air.

It was kinda nice if he was being honest. Thor had very soothing muscles.
Darcy giggled against his chest where she was wedged between him and Jane, shooting him a quick wink of solidarity. He supposed that now that he and Darcy were together he would have to get used to extensions of affection from some of the more, uh, exuberant members of the team.

Thor finally released them all, pulling Bucky aside to speak quietly with him while Darcy and Jane caught each other up on the happenings of the last few months. Bucky wandered back over to them a few minutes later, looking pale and a bit green around the gills. Thor clapped a heavy hand over his shoulder, a wide, bright smile on his princely face that did nothing to belie the fact that he'd obviously just given one hell of a shovel talk. Or potentially a hammer talk.

Other than that, the demigod seemed nothing but thrilled at their new relationship. And, of course, Jane had seen the signs months before they'd even acted on their feelings, and she now wore the smug smile of someone who was used to being proven right and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Pepper bustled into the room then, glancing up from her Starkpad to see that Jane and Thor had arrived. “Thor, Dr. Foster,” she greeted them with a kind smile. “It's good that you're here, I was just about to inform Darcy that Steve is calling everyone together for a team meeting in the common room to discuss the events of the Sokovian mission.”

Thor nodded, his features darkening at the memory of what they'd seen and Jane placed a gentle hand on his forearm, bearing him up with the small, tender touch.

“Darcy, I hate to send you back to work immediately, but your expertise is needed. The details of the mission are no longer considered confidential and a report needs to be provided to the press as soon as possible.” Pepper glanced at Bucky where he was standing off by the floor to ceiling windows, looking out over the city. She cleared her throat delicately and continued. “Also, in light of your current relationship with Sergeant Barnes, Natasha has informed me that it would be wise for you to be there as support.” Bucky's head swiveled around at the mention of his name, his eyes bouncing between the two women.

“Yes, of course,” Darcy replied. “Do you think you could have someone send up my Starkpad?”

“I'll send Brandon up with it right away.”

“Thank you, Pepper.”

“Of course, Darcy. If there’s anything else I can get you, please let me know,” she replied politely and then turned on her impeccable heels and headed back out the double conference room doors.

Thor clapped his meaty hands together. “Well, it seems we are needed. Shall we, Jane?” he asked, extending his forearm. Jane rolled her eyes and tucked her hand into his elbow.

He then turned to Bucky and Darcy with a wide smile. “James, Darcy, let us join the others in the common room where we shall share many tales of our victories,” he boomed.

Darcy snorted and waved the other couple on. “We’ll be there in a minute, big guy.” Thor dipped his head and ushered Jane through the double doors, leaving Bucky and Darcy alone in the room.

Bucky still stood over by the window, his hands folded demurely behind his back, staring out over the city. She made her way around the table to join him, leaning her head against his shoulder and soaking up what was probably the last bit of peace they'd get for a while. She could feel the tension thrumming through him as soon as she touched him. She raised a hand to cup his cheek and pull him down to her in a kiss. He followed her direction but his lips were chaste on hers and even with her eyes closed she could sense that he wasn't really with her in the moment. Which was entirely
Darcy maneuvered them around until she had him walking backwards into the conference table, pushing him down to take a seat on it and then clambering up to straddle his lap. That certainly got his attention.

“Darcy, what--”

“Shh, you're thinking too hard,” she replied, running her hands up to bury in his hair. She pulled him roughly to her mouth, demanding entrance and sucking his bottom lip between hers. Bucky groaned and slid his hands up over her thighs to settle on her hips, pulling her down hard against him.

“Darcy,” he whispered reverently when she began trailing a line of kisses down his throat. She nipped and sucked at him until she was sure she’d completely distracted him from the shitstorm that was parading through his brain.

She gave one last sweet press of her lips to his jaw and then leaned back in the cradle of his arms. “No matter what happens in that room, no matter what intel Steve has to tell you about, no matter what the others have to say about us, I'm with you, Bucky. I'm with you. Okay?” Her blue eyes bore into his, a beacon of hope and light in the midst of the treacherous storm of his thoughts.

He nodded, bringing his hands up to cup her face, pulling her close so that he could drop light kisses over her temples and eyelids. She sighed into the gesture, clinging to him for all she was worth before pulling back and climbing down off him and the table. “Come on, babe,” she said, holding her hand out to clasp at his metal fingers. “Let’s go face the music.”

He gave her a sad little smile and let her pull him to his feet, straightening his clothes and adjusting himself in his pants. Hopefully that would sort itself out by the time they reached the rest of the team. The last thing he needed was to greet everyone while sporting his cock at half mast.

Darcy tittered behind her other hand at his awkward situation, the unrepenting minx that she was. If things hadn't been so stressful he would have liked to lay her over the table and teach her a lesson and--

Those thoughts were not helping his situation.

They walked hand in hand to the elevator, riding up to the top floor that held the private residential suites that Tony had reserved for members of the team. The murmur of tired voices filtered down the hallway from the open entrance to the Avengers’ common area and, from what Bucky could tell, he and Darcy were the last ones to arrive.

Great. Just great. Nothing like walking into the room and instantly being the center of attention.

Darcy smiled up at him in encouragement and lead him through the opening. As was predictable, the room fell silent at their appearance and Darcy tried to project an unaffected air as she tugged at Bucky's hand and brought them to sit on the only available space left. Which wasn't much.

There was technically only one seat left on one of the couches, so she prompted Bucky to sandwich in between Steve and Natasha and then she sank to sit on the ground, her back propped against Bucky's legs. She could feel the tension rolling off of him in waves, so she reached back to grab his hand and place it on her shoulder, leaning her cheek onto it and rubbing gentle circles into the metal plates.

The plates shifted restlessly and then she felt his hand sweep up to rest on her neck, his thumb pressing into the tense muscle at the base of her skull. She couldn't help the smitten little smile she
made at his gentle touch.

During their quiet exchange, the attention of the room had drifted away from them and the rest of the team had returned to their conversations. Other than the normal awkwardness of informing a group of friends that a new couple had formed in their midst, none of the other team members seemed all that interested in their relationship, thank god.

Darcy’s main concerns had been Steve, Nat, Clint and of course Tony. Steve and Nat, for obvious reasons, but that had gone surprisingly smoothly. Clint and Tony, however, had appointed themselves as honorary big brothers to her, with all the annoying, over-opinionated input in her love life that those roles entailed. And on top of that, Tony had the whole “you murdered my parents when you were brainwashed” thing against her boyfriend, so yeah, she was a tad nervous about their reactions.

But to her utmost relief, Clint kept his mouth shut, though he was definitely glaring a hole into Bucky’s forehead and scraping his thumb over one of his arrowheads with an undue amount of menace. And even Tony was keeping his opinions to--

“Okay, are we really going to ignore the giant elephant that just waltzed into the room and is currently canoodling my employee on my couch?”

Scratch that. Looked like Tony would not be keeping his opinions to himself today.

His outburst was met with a chorus of groans and Steve growled out his name in warning. Clint stayed silent but Darcy didn’t miss the bro-nod of solidarity he directed at Tony. Darcy felt Bucky stiffen behind her, his hand jerking and squeezing just a little more firmly into her skin.

“Tony, I’m not sure that’s any of your business,” came Bucky’s soft, level reply from behind her.

That’s right, honey. You tell him!

Tony’s eyes darted between her face and his before he scoffed at Bucky’s remark. “Jesus Barnes,” he replied snidely, “didn’t anybody tell you porn isn’t reflective of real life? You’re not actually supposed to diddle the babysitter.”

Steve jerked up in his seat, grinding out Tony’s name between his teeth at the same time that Sam called out, “Hey man, that’s not okay.”

Tony rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest where he stood leaning against the bar. “Seriously though. Raise your hand if you think this is a terrible idea? Hmm?” He raised his own hand and was joined by Clint almost immediately. The rest all stared at him stone-faced. He clicked his tongue and groaned. “Come on guys, do none of you care about Darcy at all? Them being together is just going to end with him killing her. Either on accident or--”

“Tony, if you finish that sentence, god help me, I will break your fucking face in,” Darcy growled, her body trembling with rage as she rose slowly to her feet. She stalked forward until she was standing directly in front of him, anger boiling in her gut and fire simmering under her skin. “He’s not that man anymore. You know he’s not that man anymore.” Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper, but the rage and menace infusing the words was enough to make Tony step back a pace and swallow nervously.

“Darcy, I just don't want to lose you, too.” His eyes were pleading with her but she’d had enough. He was speaking out of turn and from a place of ignorance.

“Do you think that I’m an idiot? Do you think that I would needlessly endanger myself for a man?”
She gave a short, humorless laugh. “This topic is not up for further discussion. Are we clear?”

“Darce, just think abou--”

“Are we clear, Anthony?”

“I--” Tony looked around helplessly, searching out support but finding none. He visibly deflated and muttered out, “Yeah, we’re clear, kid,” and not quite meeting her eyes.

Darcy gave a satisfied nod and turned on her heel to return to her seat but stopped halfway across the room to address him one last time. “Oh, and some food for thought: Bucky was the one who saved me from that Hydra agent that was strangling me in my apartment. Bucky was the one who got me out of the city and kept me safe for three months. Bucky was the one who’s been training me to defend myself because someone was comfortable with selling out my safety for a box of cookies. Maybe you should think on that for a while, Tony Stark.” And with that final cutting remark, Darcy collapsed directly into her boyfriend's lap, her arms coming around his shoulders and her head leaning against his.

Tony stared at her, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water until he finally shut it, a blush rising up his neck and a distinctly ashamed glint in his eyes.

Good. He was being an ass. He should be ashamed. She stared him down, her face stern and eyes unblinking until she felt Bucky turn and kiss gently at the skin beneath her ear.

“That's enough, sweetheart,” he muttered low enough that only she could hear. “He's learned his lesson.”

She supposed he was right. Tony certainly looked like he was drowning in his own guilt and the guy already did that enough as it was. Darcy finally relented, softening her posture and blinking away the anger from her eyes, turning a small, forgiving smile to Tony.

He gave his own small smile back with a dip of his head. “Sorry, kid. You know I love you.”

Darcy's smile grew brighter at the rare apology and even rarer declaration of affection. “I know. Love you too, ya big butthead.”

Her pronouncement was followed by a throat clearing and a gentle knock to the open doorway of the common room. “Um, Ms. Potts sent me to give Ms. Lewis her Starkpad?” Brandon announced uncertainly, his eyes bouncing nervously around to the occupants in the room.

Darcy shot up off Bucky's lap with a delighted squeal and launched herself at the poor man, gripping him by the shoulders and shaking him. “Brandon! God’s gift to PR agents! How the heck are you?”

“Uh, I'm great. And really glad you're not dead, by the way. No one remembers Fajita Fridays when you're not there.” He smirked and glanced around the room again before dropping his voice to a whisper. “Did I just hear you call Tony Fucking Stark a butthead?” His eyes went wide in wonder.

“Yes, you did.” There may or may not have been a hint of smugness to her response. Brandon pressed the Starkpad into her hands to cover the subtle high five he'd given her and then made a hasty exit.

Darcy glanced at the screen, opening up the blessed bit of technology and repressing the urge to smack a kiss to the surface. Oh, how she'd missed this baby. She fiddled with the log-in process and got her note taking application up and running. “Alright,” she said, looking up from her screen to address the room. “Let's get this debrief started. Who wants to start off Super Depressing Sokovia
Storytime?

Natasha snorted and commanded Jarvis to pull up the intel files they'd compiled prior to the mission and began the process of relaying the information to Darcy. After that, each of the Avengers gave their own reports of events and their individual participation in the dismantling of Strucker’s operations.

Next in the line up for discussion was what was to be done about the twins. It started as a discussion, anyway. It turned into an all out civil war about twenty minutes in with part of the team adamant that the best place for the twins was on the team, another group was of the opinion that they should be studied and a reversal of their powers be sought after so they could go on to live normal lives, and a third faction was wary of their association with Hydra and concerned with whether or not they could be trusted.

“Tony, they are victims! Nobody goes through that kind of hell by choice!” Steve's fist came down on his thigh with a thud, his anger barely controlled.

“Really, Cap? That's pretty ironic coming from you considering you waltzed right in to Erskine and Dad’s supersoldier machine.”

“That's different and you know it,” Steve growled, Index Finger of Righteous Indignation™ extended fully and pointed directly at Tony's chest.

From his perch on the back of one of the sofas, Bruce cleared his throat. “Tony,” he began, his voice cutting through the tension despite his soft spoken nature. “I read their files. They were abducted off the streets and forced to undergo horrendously painful experiments. They’re just kids and I don't believe they are a threat to us. In any case, what was done to them was without consent and if it is in our power to do so, we should try to undo Strucker’s work. They deserve to go on to lead normal lives.”

Steve shook his head firmly. “And expose them to further experimentation? Wouldn't you risk harming them further? I still think the safest hands are our own. They can join us, help us. Surely, out of all of us, they have the most to gain from fighting against Hydra.”

“Steve, they're just kids,” Bruce restated, pinching the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses. “You're wanting to send children off to war now?”

“They're not like American children, Bruce,” Natasha chided softly. “They have known war since birth. It is not quite so traumatic when it's all you've ever known. Besides, they are older than I was when I graduated from the Red Room.”

Darcy did some quick mental math while further debate was made over whether or not Nat was a good example of mental stability in children. “Hold up,” Darcy spoke up, her voice cutting through the din of bickering superheroes. “How old are these kids exactly?”

“Nineteen,” Bruce supplied.

Darcy stared at them in disbelief. “Are you serious? Guys, they're legally adults. From the way everyone was talking, I was under the impression that these kids were twelve years old, max.” She was met with blank stares. Obviously these superidiots would require hand holding to understand her point. “I've been listening to all of you argue over the fate of these kids for a half hour now and no one thought to maybe perchance ask the twins what they want to do with their future? They are old enough to enlist in the U.S. military if they wanted to, for godssake. If you want them to join the Avengers then they should be able to be a part of that decision. The same goes for if they should
depower themselves and go move to Bumfuck, Iowa to become corn farmers for the rest of their lives. In any case, they should be in this room.”

Sam Wilson rose from his seat, coming to stand next to Darcy, his easy smile in place and arms crossed over his chest. “Darcy’s right. They ought to have a say in what happens next. They’ve just spent the last who knows how long without any control over anything. We have to be better than that.” He finished his spiel with a nod and a little hip bump to Darcy.

The rest of the group seemed to heed her wisdom and a call was made to bring the twins up from their rooms down on the medical floor. Within a matter of minutes, Darcy got her first glimpse of the two. She had been way, way off with her mental picture of what they looked like. They were definitely nowhere near the prepubescent kids that she'd envisioned. Especially the male. He was 100% full grown and in another life she would definitely have--

Darcy looked up to see Bucky watching her with a smirk and a quirked eyebrow. She blushed and made a helpless shrug. What? She was only human. The kid was fine as hell, okay?

Bucky snorted and returned his attention to the new additions, as did Darcy. The twins were seated on the loveseat that Sam and Clint had vacated. The girl, Wanda, had her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her attention fully on the twisting of her fingers. Her brother, on the other hand, couldn't seem to concentrate on any one thing for more than a second. His eyes bounced around the room from face to face to random piece of furniture and back to another face, all while his left knee bounced so quickly it blurred the edges of the blue scrubs he wore.

Introductions were made between the twins and the rest of the occupants in the room that they'd yet to meet. Wanda was polite and quietly acknowledged Darcy and Bucky while Pietro greeted them with all the smug male bravado that is typical of a nineteen year old boy. His attitude was a nice reminder to Darcy that though he might look grown, he still had a lot of maturing to do. She was suddenly very grateful for her elderly boyfriend and his lack of male posturing.

With introductions out of the way, Darcy gently broached the topic of what the twins wanted to do with their futures. She tried to be impartial as she detailed the options that were on the table and made sure they knew that they were allowed to provide a fourth option if one occurred to them. The twins were silent for a long moment after Darcy finished speaking until their eyes met and they began talking over each other all at once in what sounded like some kind of Russian variant. There were quite a lot of hand gestures and eye rolls between the two. It rather reminded Darcy of some of the arguments she’d had with Angie over the years.

Darcy leaned over to whisper in Bucky’s ear. “Any idea what they’re saying?”

Bucky shook his head and shrugged. “It’s...similar to Russian but not enough for me to understand them. Though I’m pretty sure Wanda just called Pietro a fairly unflattering bit of pig anatomy.”

Darcy bit back on the smile that was threatening to break loose. Yeah, definitely reminded her of Angie.

A couple more minutes of bickering and one slap to the back of Pietro’s head later and Wanda was turning to the rest of the room. “Would it be possible for us to think it over for a few days before we give you an answer?” she asked in her soft, gravelly voice.

“Of course,” Darcy was quick to respond. “Take as much time as you need. Just know, we will all support you in whatever decision you make, okay? And if anyone gives you a hard time about anything you give me a call.”
Wanda flashed a grateful smile that actually reached her eyes. “Thank you, Darcy.”

Darcy waved her gratitude away with one hand. “It’s nothing, hon. If you two would like to return to your rooms, I think we’re done here for now?” Darcy glanced around the room to see if any of the team had any objections. Finding none, she continued, “And once the medical team has given you a clean bill of health, we’ll make sure to set you up in one of the swanky apartments on the team’s residential floor.”

Tony made a small sound of protest but quelled under the arch look that Darcy gave him. The twins thanked her, rose from their seat in eerie synchronicity, and made their way back out of the common room where a couple nurses were waiting to escort them back down to their floor.

Darcy took a look over her notes before saying, “Well, I think we’re done here. I should be able to have an official press report ready to publish by tomorrow morning. Until then, I think all of you need to go to bed.” Her statement was met with a few chuckles and a couple groans of agreement.

“Actually, Darcy...Natasha and I have a few things that we need to discuss with you and Bucky before we do that.” Steve replied softly beside her. Not soft enough to keep Tony from overhearing, however.


Steve glanced at Bucky and then over to Tony and then at the rest of the team, who had stopped in their exodus from the common room. “Well, yes. But it’s kind of a private matter.”

“Private matter, how?” Clint piped up from the other side of the room.

“Steve and I received a flashdrive from an anonymous source while we were working with the local authorities. They claimed it had been mailed to them several weeks back with no return address and only “Strucker” labeled across the front. Once we called them in for their assistance and Strucker’s name came up, they handed it over to us to deal with. When we opened it up we found several files that pertain to James,” Natasha clarified, her expression even more closed off than usual.

“And what? You two were just going to keep that info to yourselves? We’re supposed to be a team, dammit,” Tony bit out, exhaustion and anger sparking in his red-rimmed eyes.

Natasha’s eyes slid to where Steve sat on the other side of Bucky. “It wasn’t my call to make.”

“Oh no, of course it wasn’t. Only Rogers would be obsessed enough with Barnes to jeopardize the rest of the team in favor of keeping his old pal’s secrets.”

“Tony, it doesn’t affect the rest of you, alright? It’s a sensitive matter that none of the team has any right to know about.” Steve’s jaw clenched and his pale skin began to flush with anger.

Stark gave a sharp smile. “Oh sensitive is it? Kind of like how the fact that he murdered my family was sensitive and you didn’t have the guts to tell me the truth for months? Kinda like that, Rogers?” The bags beneath Tony’s eyes seemed to grow darker against his paling face and his left eye began to twitch subtly.

“Damn it, Stark! This isn’t the same thing! It has nothing to do with you, it affects you in no way whatsoever. You just have to trust me on this!” Steve shouted, rising to his feet to peer down at Tony who was now standing toe to toe with him.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest, his voice pitched low as he glared up at Steve. “And how can I trust a man who keeps secrets from his teammates? From his friends?”
Steve opened his mouth to answer but was stopped when Bucky reached around where Darcy sat in his lap to grip the back of Steve’s calf. “Steve,” he uttered softly, “he has a right to know. They all do. You can’t have a team of people that keeps secrets from each other. That’s how Hydra was able to infiltrate SHIELD in the first place. They need to know.”

Steve looked down at his friend, his blues eyes pleading with the other man. “Buck, no, they don’t, I promise.”

Bucky shook his head. “Sit down Stevie. It’ll be alright. Just tell us all what you learned and let’s get this over with.”

“I--” Steve’s eyes darted to Natasha but she merely nodded. The air went out of him then and he sank back into the couch. Nat unfolded herself from her seat like a cat, walking around the back of the couch and pulling a USB drive from her utility belt. Darcy didn’t miss the way Natasha’s fingers grazed along the back of Steve’s neck as she passed behind him or the way Steve froze under the touch, his eyes falling closed before fluttering back open.

Natasha addressed JARVIS, requesting that he pull the info off the drive and project it up on the wall where everyone could see and where she could manipulate the data. The first thing she pulled up for everyone to look at was a grainy, technicolor photo of several men in lab coats and a few in large, wire framed glasses that gave Darcy the sense that the photo was taken sometime in the 80s. In the center of the group of men sat Bucky, bare to the waist and staring dead-eyed into the distance. From her knowledge of his personnel files, she knew the chair he sat in was the one that was used to wipe his memories and the sight of it curdled her stomach.

Underneath her, she could feel Bucky start to tremble slightly and she snuggled in tighter to him. He sighed and wrapped his arms around her to pull her in and tuck his face away into her hair, breathing her calming scent in a slow, steady rhythm until his tremors stopped. Natasha waited quietly, watching the two of them with a keen eye until he lifted his head and gave her a brief nod.

She returned her attention to the screen, pointing out one man in particular. “This is Wolfgang von Strucker. Until we received this data, we were unaware that he had any connection to the Winter Soldier. Obviously, this photo and the contents of this USB have changed that...and it’s also shed some light on why a devoted Hydra agent would go against orders.”

She next pulled up what looked like photocopied letters of correspondence between Strucker and various upper level Hydra agents along with what looked liked passages from Strucker’s journal. “From what I’ve translated, it appears that Strucker had some concerns with the Soldier’s behavior and the more and more frequent wipes he and his medical team were having to make in order to keep him compliant. He feared that at some point James would break his programming and they would lose their Asset permanently. As they no longer had the superserum formula used on James, Strucker felt the best way to replicate the Asset if he was ever lost to them, was to use his DNA to create another. He was under the impression that the serum could be genetically inherited.” Natasha paused to let the information sink in for everyone in the room. She was met with horrified eyes and not a small amount of muttered cursing.

Darcy felt Bucky stiffen and his hand clenched at her hip a little harder than was comfortable. “You mean,” he began hoarsely, clearing his throat before continuing, “you mean, this asshole wanted me to-to breed?”

Nat’s eyes were apologetic as she confirmed his statement. “Yes. He felt that producing several offspring that could be raised within Hydra’s influence and conditioning would eventually produce several Assets that would be unfaillingly loyal to their cause and would eliminate the need for the constant memory wipes or the possibility of them breaking conditioning and disappearing. He stated
that you were a flawed Asset because the years spent prior to becoming the Soldier had ‘warped your soul beyond repair’ and made you, at your core, the antithesis of what Hydra stood for.”

“Fortunately,” she continued, “the higher ups that he reported to found his ideas to be ridiculous and an expensive waste of time. They had no desire to wait two decades, spending money and resources in order to raise a new batch of Assets that they had no assurances would actually inherit the superserum. Strucker persisted in his petitions for several more years until he was removed from his position on the Asset’s medical team and was sent to oversee other operations.”

“Well thank fuck for that,” Sam muttered from the other side of the room.

“Indeed. It would not do for James to have children in the clutches of those monsters,” Thor agreed.

Bucky’s stomach clenched and twisted at the thought of anyone’s children being torn apart the way he had and he nearly vomited when the mental picture of a group of toddlers, all with Darcy’s curls and his mouth, waltzed through his mind. He closed his eyes tight against the image and only opened them when he heard Darcy’s sharp hiss of pain. His eyes snapped open to see that he’d been gripping her hip too tightly and he immediately loosened his grip, massaging the bruised flesh and muttering an apology into her ear. She pressed a kiss to his forehead but slipped off his lap to take up Nat’s vacant seat on the couch beside him. Still close enough to hold him, but less likely to end up with more bruises.

“Buck, there’s…there’s more,” Steve commented, pulling Bucky’s attention back to the rest of the room and the sick shitshow that was his entire fucking life.

Natasha pulled up more journal entries, dated in the late 2000s. “Even though he was no longer working on the Winter Soldier project, Strucker still wouldn’t drop his idea, and began playing with the idea of not only having several Assets that shared James’ supersoldier DNA but potentially turning them into powered individuals. His theories were the basis of all the experimentation he was doing in Sokovia,” she finished.

Steve’s large hand came down to rest on Bucky’s shoulder and the full impact of Natasha’s words sank in. “So...so you’re saying that all those kids he killed and tortured...it was because of me? He wanted to make more, better versions of me?”

“No, Bucky. Not because of you. Hydra is the only one to blame for all of this.”

He wished he could take comfort in Steve’s words, but he was too busy trying not to vomit to heed him much. “Jesus, fuck,” he cried out, rage and horror crawling like spiders through his chest.

Natasha’s cool, clear voice cut through the chaos of his mind. “James, I need you to focus. I’m not finished.”

A desperate, humorless laugh escaped his throat. Of course, there was more. There always was.

“From the records he kept at the compound and information on this flashdrive, it appears that he decided to start his off-the-book experiments around the time that you disappeared and Hydra was exposed. His journal entries indicated that he felt he would be met with gratitude once his experiments were successful and he was able to present a...viable product to his superiors. He started out using children off the street as….well the best description would be lab rats, I suppose. He didn't want to risk killing your...progeny in the process. So he murdered at least several dozen orphans in the process until his recent success with the Maximoff twins. Thankfully we received the intel on a large Hydra compound in his location before he could proceed with his plans. However, we’re now starting to think that the information was actually fed to us by the Hydra agent within SHIELD.
We’re fairly certain Hydra got wind that Strucker was going against orders and that James had resurfaced. They fed us the intel in order for us to take care of an irritating dissenter and to give them an opening to regain their Asset while the rest of us were away.” Natasha’s words dwindled and she grew quiet, her eyes locking with Steve's in some kind of silent conversation.

Bucky watched the exchange and a feeling of dread, more than he ever thought possible, slithered through his gut. Natalia didn't shy away from anything. Her hesitancy to continue could only be a terrible omen.

“There's something else, isn't there? What aren't you telling me?” His voice sounded hoarse and hollow in his own ears.

“Strucker’s plans were twofold. To produce a viable offspring from you and to create powered children. He was successful on both fronts. A child was successfully conceived and was born July of last year. Your child.”

“No.” The word sprang from his lips and fell like lead. “No, that's not possible.”

Natalia and the rest of the room looked at him with something like pity. Even Tony looked sorry for him, and something in their gaze sparked a flood of anger in him. “No! You don't understand. It is not possible. I haven't-- I couldn't...I wasn't with anyone when the kid would have been conceived!”

Steve tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, a blush inching up his pale throat. “Um Buck, there’ve been some changes in how people can make babies now. Advances in science and so on. Don't necessarily have to be present for the conceiving so long as there's a doctor and a lady and uh...a sample.” Steve cringed and Bucky only stared at him, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

“A sample? What the fuck does that mean?”

Steve blushed even darker but was saved from saying anything when Darcy cleared her throat beside him, drawing his attention to her face. She locked eyes with him and then dropped her eyes pointedly to his lap. He stared down at himself for a few seconds until it clicked.

“Are you fucking kidding me?! What the fuck is wrong with this century? Jesus Christ.” Bucky shot to his feet, agitation in every line of his body as he paced back and forth in front of the couch. “How did he--? How would that even--? I don't remember giving--” his voice broke off and he was met with silence until Nat spoke up.

“A sample was likely collected while you were either sedated or cycling out of cryo. He worked with you during the 80s and into the 90s when in vitro fertilization started gaining recognition and popularity. He likely stored samples with the same cryo technology that Hydra had been using for years on you in the hopes of one day being able to use it.”

He felt sick again. Sick and dirty and so horrified to find out that Hydra had indeed raped him in every sense of the word and now he had-- there was-- he was a father. He was a fucking father and the realization hit him so hard his knees buckled.

After that, he thought he might have gone a little bit mad. The world blurred at the edges, sound distorting and his vision twisting and warping like he was on a drunken carnival ride. He was vaguely aware of muffled voices shouting in distress and a pair of small, cool hands pressing at his cheeks... and then nothing.

When he came back to himself, he was wedged into a ventilation shaft, his face wet and his hands still shaking.
He must have bolted in his daze, gone to ground and hid until his scrambled brain could create some kind of order in the chaos. And the chaos was still there, but it swirled in the background, forgotten in favor of a dogged determination to achieve a single goal.

He climbed out of the shaft, regaining his bearings and returning to the common room. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed since he went AWOL, but now there was only Steve, Nat, and Darcy in the room. All three sat huddled around the bar of the kitchen that was tucked into one corner, sipping various beverages of various strengths. Darcy's eyes were red rimmed and he could still see the sheen of tears on her face.

Steve and Nat both snapped their heads up as soon as he stepped foot into the room, their superhearing picking up on him instantly. Steve half rose from his seat, mouth opening to speak to him but Bucky held up a hand to silence his friend.

There was only one thing he needed to hear right then. Only one thing that mattered to him in that moment.

“Steve. Where the fuck is my kid?”

Chapter End Notes

No one get too angry with Tony for being a butt, please. He needs a nap and like a whole lotta therapy.
Furthermore, no one get too angry with me for being a butt, please. I, too, need a nap and a whole lotta therapy. Obviously.
“Latveria.” The word is out of Darcy’s mouth in an instant. After crying so long, it dragged out of her throat like ragged shards of glass. She swallowed against the discomfort, rising to her feet and approaching Bucky slowly with outstretched hands, giving him space to bolt if he needed it.

“She's in Latveria,” she repeated, her voice only slightly smoother.

Bucky's bloodshot eyes snapped to hers. “She? My kid...it's a girl?”

She nodded, watching as the man she loved dropped his head into his hands with a strangled moan that sounded like “a little girl.” Her heart ached for him. She wanted to hold him close and kiss him and tell him it was going to be okay but he'd pushed her hands away earlier, bolting from the room like a frightened animal. She’d come to him when he was ready this time.

He raised his head from his hands on a shaky inhale, his blue eyes searching hers. He said her name in a broken whisper and then reached towards her, the invitation obvious as it was heartbreaking.

She ran to him, leaping into his arms and letting him raise her off the ground, her arms clasped around his neck as tight as she could make them. His arms around her ribs crushed her to him almost to the point of pain and then loosened enough to let her breathe comfortably.

“I have to find her, Darce. I have to get her away from them,” he uttered into her hair, his lips brushing against her ear.

“I know, baby. I know. I'm gonna help you get her out.”

Bucky dropped her to her feet rather suddenly, his hands coming up to cup her face. “What, you're gonna storm the castle with me, sweetheart?” he asked around the tiniest glimmer of a grin.

“Yup.”

He huffed a laugh but his eyes went wide in disbelief when he realized she wasn't joking.

“Darcy. No ma'am,” he scolded. “You're not getting anywhere near a Hydra compound. Me and Steve and whoever else on the team wants to come are gonna get her.”

From behind her, she heard Steve shuffle his feet and clear his throat. “Actually…”
Bucky's eyes snapped to Steve's. “You won't come with me?” There was a soft hurt to those words, a betrayal newly realized.

Steve sighed, his whole body curving inward in pure exhaustion. “Buck, Darcy, come sit down. We’ve got strategy to discuss.”

Bucky's eyes narrowed as he glared in tight suspicion, but he gripped her hand and led her back to the bar that she’d been previously sitting at. They took their seats and Bucky made a show of wiggling down into his.

“There. I’m sitting. You wanna tell me why the fuck you don't want to come help me rescue my child from the clutches of Hydra? Why you aren't willing to save the infant daughter of your oldest friend? Hmm?” His brow twitched up indignantly and his hand clenched against Darcy’s.

Steve looked at him with aching eyes, his voice shaking as he responded. “Buck, I want to. But I can't. Me and the rest of the Avengers, legally, cannot enter into Latveria. We've had some, erm, run-ins with its ruler in recent years and us being there would cause an international incident and potentially get us imprisoned without the U.S. government being able to do a damn thing about it.”

Bucky just blinked at him. “Jesus, Rogers. Can you not go two days without ending up on somebody’s shitlist?” Steve looked well and truly chastised, enough so that Bucky relented for a moment. He scrubbed roughly at his face. “Fuck. What am I supposed to do now? She can't stay there!”

Darcy tapped him on the shoulder. “That's where you and I come in. While the Avengers may have a standing ban, you and I are not technically part of the Avengers. I mean, we’ll still have to smuggle ourselves into the country, but if we get caught the U.S. government is still allowed to come bail us out.” She gave him a bland smile and deadpanned a little cheer, waving her fists like pom poms. “Yaaaay.”

“You're funny, sweet pea, but no fucking way. I can take a SHIELD agent if I need a backup.”

“While they still have a mole in their midst? Sounds like a great way to get shot in the back,” Darcy fired back, her dander rising with each condescending comment out of his mouth.

“Then I’ll go in alone,” Bucky replied between gritted teeth.

She scoffed at that. “Oh right. Great. That way you can get shot at from all sides. Super plan, babe.”

“Darcy…” he growled in warning.

“No! No, you don't get to go galavanting off on your own. You need someone to watch your six. Someone you can trust. And guess what pal? That is a very limited list at the moment, so you better suck it up and face the fact that I am coming with you whether you like it or not!” She was full on shouting by the end of her speech and he rose up out of his chair to glower down at her.

“No,” he growled, his face inches from hers and his eyes cold and hard.

You could cut the tension in the room with a knife as the two of them glared at each other. Good thing Natasha was so good with knives.

“Ahem,” she cleared her throat delicately. “If you could both stand down for a minute.” She crossed her arms over her chest, an unamused brow lifted as she waited for them to separate and give her their full attention.
“James,” she began, pinning him in his seat with that cold, Widow’s stare. “Let’s entertain the idea that you sneak into a less than friendly country alone, per your usual methods, take out every Hydra agent at the facility, and are successful at retrieving your child. Then what? Are you going to sneak out of the country the same way you snuck in, holding on to the undercarriage of a freight truck? With a baby strapped to you? Or, let's suppose you get to your daughter but once you have her you are ambushed by unknown forces. Are you planning on holding her in one arm while shooting with the other?” Bucky made to interject but snapped his lips closed at the look Natasha gave him.

“This is not a simple extraction, not when you add in the fact that your target is an infant. You're going to need milk and diapers and warm clothes and things of that nature. She's going to cry. There is no way to be a ghost in this situation. Which is why you need a partner. Someone who can watch your back and who can help you look inconspicuous. Because this is not going to be a quick snatch and run. It's going to take some planning and traditional travel and fake travel papers and IDs. It's going to take time, but it is the safest way to go about this.”

Bucky didn't say anything, just exhaled raggedly through his nose, his left hand clenching on the countertop while he glared daggers at the redhead.

“James, use your head. You know I'm right.” Her tone was softer, less brutal, but it stung him all the same.

He dropped his eyes to the granite countertop, trying to calm the screaming voice in his head telling him to steal a quinjet and go now.

“It's also why you need Darcy.”

Bucky's head snapped back up at that, the scowl returning to his face. “No. I already said no.”

“And Darcy has already informed you of your lack of options. She's a good fit for the job. You trust each other implicitly, she isn't on Doom’s radar, she's intelligent enough to lie her way out of most sticky situations and, thanks to you, she's a crack shot with a sniper rifle. A skill that is greatly beneficial to someone raiding an armed compound--”

“But--”

“Not to mention the fact that it is much less conspicuous for a man and a woman to be traveling with an infant than it would be for you to be on your own.”

Bucky’s head swiveled between the three people sitting around him, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to voice his argument. “No! Just...no! There is no way in hell that I'm going to bring the woman I...I care about most in the world on a mission that might get her killed! Three months of shooting at tree stumps does not an agent make, Nat! Have you lost your mind?”

Steve came around the island to settle a heavy hand on his shoulder, pushing him back into the chair that he hadn't even realized he'd stood up from. “Buck, we’ve been going over the schematics and personnel files of the compound that she's being held at while you were….busy. It's a small operation and poses a minimal threat, particularly if Darcy stays at a distance and snipes for you. She'd be perfectly safe. Mostly.”

Bucky stared up at the man. “Ah Stevie, not you too?” he whined.

To his right he heard Darcy snort. He turned his head to fix her with a perturbed stare. “Something funny, Darcy?”

She hunched her shoulders and gave him a sheepish grin. “Sorry. I think my brain is tired and getting
loopy enough to start making jokes.”

He crooked a brow up at her in expectation.

“Uh it was dumb. You just...you just gave the supersoldier equivalent of ‘et tu, Brute’ and my brain thought it was funny but I can see now this is a very tense situation and I really shouldn't be making jokes and it was entirely inappropriate and I'm very sorry please forgive me mmph--”

Bucky took his hand away from Darcy’s mouth when he was sure the flow of words had come to an end, brushing his thumb across her bottom lip and then leaning over to kiss her softly. “It's alright. I forgive you. Maybe lay off the Shakespeare references for a while though.”

She hummed and nodded at him as he pulled away, turning in his chair to see that Steve was looking at him like a kid on Christmas morning with the biggest, dumbest grin on his stupid face.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “For fuck’s sake, Steve. You're acting like you've never seen me kiss a dame before.”

Steve had the good grace to duck his head, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck where a slight flush had started creeping up. “Oh, sorry. It's just been a while since I've seen you this….” he waved a hand vaguely between Bucky and Darcy, the other coming up to cover the jaw cracking yawn he let loose.

“It’s going to take a few days for us to get the op set up properly.” Natasha’s eyes bounced over Steve's sagging shoulders. “I think this would be a good opportunity for us all to go get some rest. And for James to come to terms with the fact that he's going to be taking Darcy with him.”

“Natasha,” Steve objected, “we should be strategizing, figuring out the best way to take the compound with a two man team, looking--”

“All that can be done in the morning.”

“But--” Steve tried to object again but stopped when Nat came around the bar to grip his forearm lightly. She looked up at him with those large green eyes boring into his bright blue ones. “Come to bed, Steven.”

Wait, what? Bucky straightened in his seat as he watched the exchange.

Steve swallowed audibly twice and then nodded. “Yes ma'am,” slipped softly from his mouth, a dazed look in his eyes.

Nat gave a sly smile and led the good captain away by her grip on his forearm, making him look every bit like a fumbling, homeless puppy being taken home for the first time.

Bucky turned his astonished face back to Darcy, only to see her watching the other couple disappear around the corner with a decidedly pleased and partially smug smile on her face.

“Wait a minute, did you know about that? How?”

Darcy's eyes flashed with mischief. “Unlike some people, I am an incredibly observant human being and spotted Steve making cow eyes at Nat within thirty seconds of being on the quinjet.”

“I was a tad preoccupied at the time, Darcy.” He pursed his lips in a sour expression.

She returned his sourpuss look with a chipper smile and a kiss to his cheek as she hopped down from
her chair. “I know!” She moved to stand between his knees, her hands coming down to rest on his wrists. “Enough chit chat,” she added, tugging lightly at his wrists. “Come to bed, James,” she continued with a waggle of her eyebrows. He could tell her lightness was somewhat forced but he appreciated the attempt nonetheless.

“Yes ma'am.” He huffed lightly and pulled her to him, kissing her sweetly for a lingering moment. The kiss was punctuated with a loud grumble from his stomach and it was quickly decided that they would scrounge around in the communal fridge before heading back to Bucky and Steve’s apartment.

When they arrived outside of his door, Bucky cocked an ear and breathed a sigh of relief that Steve and Nat had taken their, erm, activities elsewhere. Thank god. He loved the guy like a brother but he did NOT need to know what Steve Rogers sounded like mid-coitus.

“I dunno, man, I for one wouldn't mind listening in on that,” Darcy muttered as she followed him into the dark apartment.

“You're free to go sleep at Nat’s. The three of you all seem pretty comfortable teaming up against me. Might as well sleep with them while you're at it,” he replied, pursing his lips.

“Oh you're grumpy when you don't get your way,” she teased.

“It's not a matter of not getting my way, it's a matter of being frustrated that you all seem hell bent on letting you get yourself killed.” He crossed his arms over his chest, staring her down.

Darcy could feel her hackles rising. “You really think I'm that incompetent?”

“No, I just think you're inexperienced.”

“I am inexperienced. I know that. But I'm also your only option at the moment. Unless you have any suggestions? Hmmm? Nothing? That's what I thought.”

The two glowered at each other, mirroring each other's stiff, angry postures.

Darcy was the first to break, softening herself and shuffling forward to wrap her arms around him and tilting her head on his chest. It was a little awkward because he still had his arms crossed.

“I'll be okay, Bucky. You’ll keep me safe. We’ll keep each other safe,” she said on a sigh.

He finally relented, arms unfolding to wrap himself around her and cradling the back of her head in one hand.

“What if I can't though?” he whispered. “What if I get you and my-- what if I get you both killed? How could I live with that?”

Darcy turned in his arms to meet his shimmering eyes, wetness threatening to spill forth with each passing moment. “You just have to have faith. Faith in me, faith in you, faith in us. You told me once that you still believe in God. Do you think he is cruel enough to take us from you?”

“No, I don't think he’d do that,” he said softly, bringing his forehead to rest against hers.

“Then have faith. We can do this, we can rescue her. Together.”

Her breath fanned out across his lips and he tipped his chin the last inch to bring their mouths together.
“Okay,” he breathed when he finally pulled away. “Together.”

Darcy’s small hands smoothed down his sides, fingers dipping under the hem of his shirt to pull it over his head. He helped her slip it down his arms and sighed into the kisses she began to press into his chest.

“Darcy,” he murmured into the crown of her head. “I don’t know if I can-- can do this right now. I feel so sick inside. Can we just….sleep? I just wanna hold you and try to sleep.”

She was an angel, he was almost certain of it, because she just smiled up at him, like he’d suggested the best idea she’d ever heard in her life. “Okay, babe. You got anything for me to sleep in?” He kissed her forehead and led her back to his bedroom, pulling out a drawer and handing her a soft cotton undershirt.

It felt so strange to be back in this room after so many months. It had a scattered, abandoned feel to it, like it had belonged to someone else long ago. But maybe he had been someone else. Before Darcy.

Before her kindness and her family and her joy.

He toed off his boots and socks and undid his pants, shoving them to pool on the floor on his side of the bed. He pulled back his coverlet, sinking into the sheets that no longer smelled like home. When Darcy joined him in the bed, cuddling up to his side, her scent enveloped him and he realized she was what smelled like home to him now.

He turned in her arms, scooting down the bed until he could hide his face in her chest, his left hand sliding up to grip the back of her shirt and his right folding to tuck into his chest. Held in her arms, completely surrounded by her, he finally allowed himself to feel the swelling despair that rose up in his chest, unleashing a flood of tears as he sobbed into the soft skin of her chest. She kept him close, her fingers sliding through his hair in slow strokes as she let him wring himself out, riding the waves of his horror and anguish with patience and a steadfast calm that he could cling to.

His body finally gave in to the physical and emotional exhaustion of the day, allowing him to fall into a fitful sleep. Darcy stayed up a while longer, watching over him as he slept. When she was sure he was deep enough asleep that she wouldn’t disturb him, she slipped silently from the bed, padding on bare feet out to the darkened living room. She sank into the overstuffed sofa, staring blindly out of the floor-to-ceiling windows that lined one edge of his living room.

Then, in the stillness of the night, Darcy did something that she had not done since she was a child. She slid off the couch, fell to her knees, and fervently prayed to God. She couldn’t explain what compelled her to do it other than desperation that surely someone, someone, out there was listening and would hear her, would help. The tears started slow, collecting in the corner of her eyes as she pleaded on behalf of the man sleeping down the hall, and then they fell silent and heavy down her cheeks. Her whispered prayers became more and more incoherent the longer she stayed there on her knees, shoulders bent and trying to stifle her sobs with her folded hands.

When she had cried herself out and murmured every plea and heart’s desire that she possessed, she rose to stand on legs grown stiff and shuffled back down the hall. She paused at the doorway to Bucky’s bedroom, watching his chest rise and fall by the dim city lights that shone through his bedroom windows. He was curled tightly on his side on the edge of the bed, hands tucked to his chest, and even in the minimal light she could see the deep furrow in his brow.

Darcy crept over to him, running her thumb over his forehead to smooth the deep worry lines. When his face finally relaxed under her touch, she leaned in to press a gentle kiss to his brow, whispering “Please, God, give him strength,” against his skin. She tiptoed around the bed to get in on her side, slipping silently between the sheets and scooting in closer to wrap her body around his back, her
thighs tucking up behind his and her hand slipping around his middle to rest over his heart. She tucked her face into the space between his shoulder blades, breathing in the scent of his skin and falling asleep to the steady rhythm of his breathing.

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It took the team two weeks to get the op set up and in place. During that interval, Darcy spent most of her time shuffled back and forth between various members of the Avengers getting a crash course on badassery. It was exhausting and she fell into bed each night beside Bucky succumbing to sleep almost immediately, but it gave her a settled feeling in her gut to know that she was doing everything in her power to be the best partner for Bucky that she could be.

As for Bucky, the days passed at a snail’s pace, filling him with an ever present feeling of dread. It broke Darcy’s heart to see him like that, always on edge, his features arranged in a near constant scowl. She helplessly watched as he disappeared further and further behind the mask of the Winter Soldier, his eyes growing cold and his mouth drawn firm in a permanent frown.

It frightened her to see him grow so cold and distant, but she couldn’t fault him for it. Honestly, it was probably the only way he could keep himself from falling apart. So she understood, and she let him be and didn’t try to draw him out from behind the facade, though she desperately wanted to. She would be patient and hope that when they returned with his daughter and this nightmare was behind them, that he would return to the warm, tenderhearted man she knew him to be. And if he didn’t snap out of it by then, then she’d poke and prod at him until he broke out of the frozen shell of the Soldier.

It was almost a relief when Nat made the call that it was time for her to suit up. It was the first time in two weeks that she’d seen a real spark of life in Bucky’s eyes. Sure, it was a murderous gleam, but it was better than the cold, lifeless alternative. The relief lasted all the way until Nat started helping her suit up in the standard issue tac gear and the reality of her situation really hit.

Christ on a cracker. She, a civilian for the majority of her life, was going on a covert mission.

With guns. And knives. And at least 30 lbs of explosives.

Okay, well, Bucky was carrying most of that, but still.

Natasha must have picked up on the subtle panic attack she was having, firmly pulling Darcy’s fumbling fingers away from the zipper of her sleek, black jacket. She finished zipping it for her and then gripped Darcy’s fingers, massaging little circles into the knuckles.

“You’re going to be fine, Darcy. This op is low risk, high reward. As far as ops go, it’s suitable and preferable for a first time field agent.”

“Yeah okay, but do most agents go out in the field after just four months of any real training?”

Nat chuckled and tightened one of the straps across Darcy’s chest. “No, they do not. But they are usually not nearly as crafty as you have proven yourself to be. I’m quite proud of your progress. If you ever get tired of the PR world, you’d probably excel as a full time agent.”

Darcy gave a giggle that was just this side of hysterical. “Yeah, no thank you. I prefer being in places where the likelihood of me being shot is slim to none.”
“The likelihood of you being shot on this mission is also fairly slim,” Nat said, clicking her tongue in dismay. “Another thing you have that most new field agents don’t is the Winter Soldier at your back.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good thing,” Darcy mumbled.

Natasha arched a brow, her lips tightening. “What does that mean? Are you afraid he’s going to relapse and harm you?”

Darcy sighed and rolled her eyes. “No, mom, I’m not worried about that. He’s just been...distant. Won’t really talk to me, touch me.” Darcy shrugged helplessly. “I know he’s caught up in his head about this whole thing and it’s entirely selfish of me to be worrying about our relationship while his daughter is out there in Hydra’s hands but--” Darcy cutoff with a sniffle, forcing the tears and worry back down.

Nat swept a hand over the back of Darcy’s skull, fingers lacing into her hair. She dipped her head to catch Darcy’s averted gaze. “Have you talked to him about this?”

Darcy clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Of course not. He’s got enough on his mind right now, he doesn’t need to worry about my feelings on top of that.”

Nat circled around behind her to start tugging her hair into a tight French braid. “You’re about to go on a two-man mission with him. It’s bad business to go on an op when you’ve got beef with your partner. You need to clear the air before you leave.” She snapped the hair tie around the end of the braid and opened her mouth to say something else, but was interrupted by a firm knock on the locker room door.

Both women snapped their heads up to see Bucky standing in the doorway in full tactical gear, looking fine as hell and royally pissed off. “What’s taking so long?” he demanded. “Wheels are up in fifteen minutes, Darcy.”

Nat raised a brow at his tone and turned to Darcy with a very pointed look before heading towards the door.

“Talk to your girl,” she said as she passed Barnes in the doorway.

He watched the woman slip past him, his brow crinkling in confusion, before turning his gaze to Darcy. She felt a bit like a cornered animal and was internally cursing Nat six ways to Sunday for making her confront her problems. Like some kind of mature adult or something. Dammit.

“What did she mean?” Bucky asked, coming towards her in swift strides, stopping right in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest, barely contained irritation in every line of his posture, making it all the harder for her to voice her concerns.

Darcy fiddled with the buckles on her tac vest. “Uh, nothing. We can deal with it when we get back,” she said, not quite meeting his eyes.

“What did she mean?” Bucky asked, coming towards her in swift strides, stopping right in front of her with his arms crossed over his chest, barely contained irritation in every line of his posture, making it all the harder for her to voice her concerns.

“Darcy,” he rumbled, reaching out to grip her hands in his to stop her fidgeting. “We don’t have time for this. Tell me what’s wrong.”

It was his hand holding hers that finally caused the first tear to spill down her cheek. He was touching her alright, but it was all wrong. It held none of the tenderness or affection she had grown accustomed to. She bit back on the rest of her tears to meet his eyes. “When was the last time you kissed me?”
He shook his head, confused at the turn in conversation. “Uh...this morning? After breakfast.”

Darcy shook her head sadly. “No, babe. I kissed you. You just allowed me to do it. You didn’t kiss me back.”

Bucky blinked slowly at her, a wrinkle between his brows and then his eyes slid to the ground as he processed his behavior over the last few days. When he met her gaze again, it was the softest she’d seen him since that first night back at the tower.

“Darcy,” he choked out, and then lunged for her, bundling her up to his chest and pressing fervent kisses into the side of her face and any other place his mouth could reach. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself up to kiss him fully on the mouth, sighing in relief when he responded instantly to her, opening his mouth to slide his tongue against hers.

He kissed her feverishly, like a man starved, and she returned the heat in kind. It was somewhat awkward, what with all the bulk of their tac gear between them, but the two were so touch starved for each other that they hardly noticed. He backed her up until she was pressed against the locker room’s concrete wall, his hands darting into her hair to loosen the strands from her braid so he could angle her head to give him better access to her neck.

“You better...fix my hair...after this or Nat’ll kill you for-- Ah!-- for messing up her work,” Darcy panted as Bucky worked his tongue and teeth over the soft skin of her throat.

Bucky slowed his movements, bringing his lips to her ear. “Darcy, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Nat’s the one who takes her braids so seriously.”

His breath huffed across her neck as he chuckled. “No, sweetheart, not about that. I’m sorry for being such an ass lately.” He met her eyes, stroking his thumb over her cheek. “I was...it wasn’t fair of me. Can you forgive me?”

Her smile was small and a bit sad when she responded. “I forgive you. Of course, I forgive you. The circumstances...they haven’t exactly been in your favor. Just, maybe, don’t freeze me out? It’s not healthy. For either of us.”

Bucky nodded, his forehead coming to rest on hers and then tilting to bring his mouth back to hers. He kissed her slowly, languidly, tasting her like he hadn’t done in far too long. He slid his hands down over her rear and along the backs of her thighs, parting them and pulling them up around his waist. He needed her closer, needed to feel her surrounding him, needed to press his hips into her, needed to hear her gasp and moan, needed--

“Heh, lovebirds,” Natasha’s voice carried from the locker room entrance. “I hate to break up this party but you’re gonna miss your jet if you don’t get a move on. And you know how Rogers is about punctuality.”

Bucky groaned for an entirely different reason and let Darcy’s legs slip down from his waist. He backed away from her a little bit, keeping his front angled away from Nat and her keen eyes. “Yeah, alright, Nat. Go ahead and tell Stevie we’ll be there in a second,” he called over his shoulder.

“Oh James, no need to be so shy,” she said around a cat-like grin. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Darcy ducked her face into his chest and broke into giggles as a flush slowly rose up the back of his neck. “Shut up, the both of you,” he grumbled. It only served to make Darcy laugh harder and Nat’s grin to grow wider.
Two could play at that game, Natalia.

“Why so eager to see the goods again? Steve not enough for you, little spider?”

Nat’s brows arched in displeasure and her grin disappeared. The woman was not one to kiss and tell and she sure as hell wasn’t one to allow prying into her private affairs.

Luckily for Bucky, he had excellent reflexes, so he was easily able to snatch the dagger that she threw at him before it could make contact with his head.

Darcy sputtered indignantly at her friend, admonishing her for potentially endangering her boyfriend.

“I knew he would catch it,” Natasha replied, sly grin firmly back in place.

Bucky nodded in agreement, causing Darcy to roll her eyes and mutter “Fucking superhumans,” under her breath. Not that that kept them from hearing her words clear as a bell and laughing their stupidly beautiful heads off.

The sound of boots stomping towards them from down the hallway drew their attention to an irritated looking Captain America. Steve stopped short behind Nat, one hand on his hip and both eyes scanning the room with a disgruntled glare.

“You're all late. We were supposed to take off two minutes ago. What the hell are you all doing in here?” He tapped the toe of one booted foot impatiently against the ground, which only served to make the other occupants of the locker room burst into slightly delusional laughter. Stress is a hell of a thing.

Steve's jaw jutted forward as he readied himself to give them all a proper dressing down but was stopped when Natasha's hand slid up his chest to rest across his cheek. “We can make up the lost time in the air. Don't worry so much, luchik. There were things that needed discussing before we left.”

“Yeah, like the fact that you aren’t enough to keep Natalia's attention so she has to watch me and Darce to get her rocks off.”

“Excuse me?” Steve responded, his ears flushing red with either embarrassment or anger.

Nat turned a withering glare on Bucky. “I am perfectly satisfied in my arrangement with Steven, thank you. It's Darcy that had to come to me about the… lack in her relationship.” Nat’s smile was sharp and Bucky's blush was swift.

“I'm missing something, aren't I?” Steve deadpanned.

“Come along, soldier. We wouldn't want to be late.” Nat wrapped a hand around one of the straps across his chest, lifting up on her toes to press a kiss into his cheek. His responding smile was blinding as he followed her back down the hallway.

Bucky took Darcy's hand in his, lacing his cybernetic fingers between her slender, flesh ones, and brought it to his mouth to brush tender kisses across her knuckles. His eyes turned solemn as he considered their immediate future and the soul crushing grief and worry over what they would find. He could feel his mind wanting to shut down, to close out the burn of his emotions and become the Soldier again. The feel of Darcy's other hand coming up to stroke his hair out of his eyes pulled him back into the present with a stuttering breath.

“There he is,” she sighed. “You checked out a little bit there for a second.”
He nodded at her, swallowing quickly and turning his face to kiss her palm. “I can't promise that I'll be able to stop doing that, but I'll keep trying. And it helps when you're there to pull me out of it.”

Darcy's answering smile was sweet and wide and tender. “Good thing I'm not going anywhere then, huh?” She pushed up onto her toes to plant a warm kiss across his cheek, then swept down along his jaw to capture his lips.

He groaned into her mouth when her dexterous little tongue slipped between his lips. “God, I wish we had more time before we left. So I could make up for some of that lack Nat was talking about.”

She hummed pleasantly against him, her lips closing over his bottom lip, sucking at it for a brief moment before releasing it with a soft, wet pop. “It's not so much lack,” she replied, eyes lit with mischief as her hand slid down to palm him through the front of his tac pants, “as it was absence.”

His hips bucked and he gave a guttural groan as she continued to stroke him through his pants. Obviously this was payback for how he'd treated her the last couple weeks. “Woman, you better unhand me. I don't know how long Nat can keep Steve occupied and we really do have to go.”

Darcy didn't reply, or desist her movements, just hummed at him distractedly and kept up those maddeningly slow strokes. When she gave him a particularly firm squeeze, he grabbed her wrist to still her damnable hand while a low growl sounded from the back of his throat. He bent at the waist and used his grip on her to pull her into a fireman’s carry and stalked out of the locker room, his cock pressed shamelessly against the front of his pants and his girl giggling hysterically into his shoulder.

Thankfully by the time he was stomping up the ramp onto the quinjet, his body had decided to settle down so he didn't make a complete fool of himself. Natasha met them with an arched brow at Darcy's position over his shoulder, but made no comment on it, simply closing the ramp and returning to the cockpit to sit next to Steve. Bucky set Darcy on her feet and they both seated themselves in preparation for take off.

The plan was to fly to Romania, landing relatively closely to the Latverian-Romanian border. It would give them time to change into civilian clothes and procure legitimate transportation across the border. With their fake IDs in tow, the crossing would be, hopefully, smooth and once they were successfully across the border, they were to locate the dead drop that one of Natasha's associates had set up for them. There they would be able to retrieve their necessary gear and weaponry for the op.

But until then, all they could do was sit and endure the six hour flight to Romania. The closer they got to their destination, the harder it became for Bucky to keep himself from alternating between blind panic and the icy detachment of the Soldier. When Nat announced that they would be landing within the hour, he reached over and scooped Darcy up into his lap, tucking her head under his chin and closing his eyes tightly against the play of emotion inside of him.

He focused on matching her breathing and heart rate, his thumb resting lightly against the side of her throat to track her pulse. The steady thrum of her heartbeat kept him occupied until at last the quinjet landed and he felt a heavy hand come down on his shoulder, rousing him from the trancelike state he'd fallen into. He looked up to see Steve's bright blue eyes staring down at him, his mouth in a grim line.

“We’re here. It's time.”
The days leading up to the op are stressful ones. I wonder how they will finally decompress??

This chapter is ultra long and I apologize but I couldn't figure a good place to split it up/was too lazy to figure out a good place to split it so here it is, all 9.6k words of it.

Thank you again for all the love, encouragement, comments, kudos, all that jazz. I hope I can keep meeting your expectations as we creep closer to the end of this mammoth of a story....

Many thanks to my beta ladyaudiophile, she is the best! And thanks to my girl Betsy for being the best, most beautifully foulmouthed cheerleader on the planet.

Dread settled like cold lead in Bucky’s stomach, fear dogging his every step and filling his veins with ice. The only thing that seemed to cut through the chill was Darcy’s hot, little hand tucked into his, her thumb tracing light circles over the webbing between his thumb and forefinger.

It had been three hours since they had landed in one of the smaller Romanian cities near the border. It was large enough that it had a hangar for them to keep the quinjet without drawing too much attention, and close enough to the border that their travel time via public transportation wouldn’t be any longer than necessary.

They’d all changed into their civilian get-ups before exiting the aircraft and proceeding through customs. After that, it was a quick matter of finding temporary lodging for Steve and Natasha while they waited on the other couple to complete their mission. It had been decided that Steve and Natasha would remain on the friendly side of the border, ready to rush in if all hell broke loose and he and Darcy needed the assist.

Natasha assured him that it was unlikely that the op would go sideways, but Bucky felt better just knowing Steve would only be a short trip in the jet away if he needed him, international incidents be damned. Steve seemed to be of the same opinion. Natasha called them overly cautious old farts and rolled her eyes at the way Steve had gripped his forearm in solidarity as they gazed intently at each other.

Darcy had laughed and asked if they were planning on kissing and if she could post it to Instagram. Whatever the hell that was.

No one was laughing now, the mood somber as they said their goodbyes to Steve and Natasha at the train station. Steve pulled him into a crushing hug, his big arms coming around his shoulders like a
vice. It still threw him off sometimes when Stevie hugged him and he didn’t end up with a rock hard skull crammed against his ribs and bony little bird arms barely squeezing around his middle.

“You be careful. Don’t do anything stupid,” Steve said sternly.

“Like what? Jumping out of an airplane with no parachute?” Bucky glared at him and Steve had the decency to look somewhat chagrined. “Besides,” Bucky continued, “how can I when you’re taking all the stupid with you?”

Steve’s responding smile was blinding. The punk really loved it when Bucky brought up stuff from before...everything.

It was announced over the station intercom that their train would be boarding soon. Bucky watched Natasha sweep a kiss over Darcy’s cheek, murmuring soft words to her before turning and taking Steve’s hand in hers. Darcy moved over to them, her arm slipping around Steve’s waist as she hugged him goodbye before coming to stand by Bucky’s side.

And now they were sitting in the stiff seats of the train, her hand in his, still rubbing those little circles as they watched the Romanian countryside fly past. It was gorgeous and fully green, as spring had fully descended, and the section of the Carpathians they were passing through was incredible. Or it would have been if his brain had been capable of interpreting any of the information his eyes were feeding him.

The only thing he seemed capable of focusing on was the worry gnawing voraciously at his gut.

When they finally reached the border, an announcement was made that all passengers were required to provide passports for inspection at that time. Shortly thereafter, armed Latverian guards boarded the train and they were forced to wait as the men slowly made their way through the passenger cars.

With each passing moment, he could feel Darcy growing tense, her hands fiddling with the zipper on the light jacket that she wore.

“Stop fidgeting,” he murmured. “You look guilty.”

“How am I supposed to look?” she asked, her voice pitched low and urgent.

“Bored. Tired. Annoyed, even.”

Darcy clicked her tongue, slumping back into her seat with a huff and an eyeroll.

“That’s more like it,” he said around a grin.

When the guards reached them, Bucky handed over their passports, responding to the guard with a polite smile and quiet greeting in Romanian. The guard’s eyes bounced briefly between their IDs and their faces before he handed them back with a bored salutation.

Despite her uninterested affectation, Bucky could feel Darcy’s pulse bouncing erratically against his fingertips and he stroked along her wrist until he felt it return to a suitable tempo. He leaned into her, kissing the spot just behind her ear.

“You did good, sweetheart. Really good,” he whispered.

She cut her eyes over to him, but stayed facing forward, a pleased little smirk tilting up one corner of her mouth. He dipped his head again to drop a kiss to the upturned corner of her mouth.
“You must be newlyweds.”

Bucky looked up to see an elderly woman sitting across from them and wearing a sly smile.

“Yes, how could you tell?” he replied in Romanian, a smile smoothly sliding into place.

“The way she still fiddles with her ring, like she’s not quite used to it yet. And the way you kiss her,” she answered with a dreamy sigh. “I can still remember what that was like. Bet she can’t keep her hands off of you, as handsome as you are.” The woman gave him a salacious once over and a wink.

Bucky flushed and his grin grew genuine. “Ah, she um- we are quite happy, that’s for sure.”

The older woman hummed and nodded, a knowing gleam in her eye.

“What is she saying? Why is she looking at you like she wants to eat you for dinner?” Darcy whispered in his ear.

“She asked if we were newlyweds. And said I was handsome. Said you probably can’t keep your hands off me. Which is true.” He dodged the finger that she’d meant to jab into his ribs, catching her wrist and bringing her knuckles to his lips with a quiet chuckle.

The woman clicked her tongue happily. “So sweet. Your wife is American?”

“Yes,” he replied. “We met at university. She was a foreign exchange student. You know how those things go.”

She nodded heartily. “Oh yes, the allure of the unfamiliar. Very enticing. It is strange that she hasn’t learned to speak the language though.”

_Nosy old biddy._ Bucky made a show of rolling his eyes. “I know. Bless her, she’s brilliant in so many subjects, but cannot for the life of her learn any other languages. She had an interpreter all through university and I’m afraid I’ve spoiled her since.” That part was actually true. Nat had tried desperately to give her a crash course in Romanian pre-op, and had failed spectacularly. Even back when they were staying at the cabin, she’d asked him to teach her some Russian and had been met with similar results. Darcy may have been a genius, but a polyglot she was not.

The woman nodded in understanding. “Some people are just like that. Oh well. At least you know she’ll be able to give you beautiful children. And feed them quite well!” she cackled with a pointed glance to Darcy’s chest.

Bucky felt himself blush to his hairline and the mild irritation he’d been nursing over the woman’s insistent questions was fanned into full displeasure. Their children would be beautiful and brilliant.

_Darcy wasn’t just some pretty broodmare._

Darcy nudged him in the ribs. “What’s she saying?”

“Nothing,” was his curt reply.

“She was talking about my boobs, wasn’t she?”

“How could you tell?”

“People always talk about my boobs. Also, I saw her look at them. Sooo? What was she saying about them?” Darcy raised her brows at him expectantly.
He sighed and tried to consciously stop his blush from deepening. Didn’t work, but dammit he tried. “She was basically saying that we’d...um...make pretty babies. And that you are...fully equipped to feed them.” He cleared his throat awkwardly.

Darcy glanced down at her chest. “Oh,” she said thoughtfully. “Yeah, definitely,” she confirmed and then gave the old lady a wink and a thumbs up.

The woman responded with another round of throaty laughter. “Oh, son, she will keep you entertained for many years to come, I can tell.”

Bucky’s smile grew soft and less forced. “I’m inclined to agree.” His eyes dropped to his right hand, lingering on the plain silver band on his ring finger. It was strange having it there, but the weight of it felt...right in some way. Like it was supposed to be there. And when he had seen Darcy with her ring on for the first time, it had made his heart flutter in his chest in an unfamiliar way.

He must have stared at his ring long enough for the old woman to lose interest in them and drop off to sleep, as his thoughts were then interrupted by the soft snoring coming from their travel companion. It seemed the train had also started up again during his musing, carrying them into Latveria with increasing speed.

He looked over at Darcy to find she was watching him, a glimmer of some emotion flashing behind her eyes. She smiled broadly when he caught her gaze, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

“You’re just too damn cute, Bucky Barnes. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Sure, sweetheart. My Ma used to say it all the time. Usually right after I got into some mischief and had to use my charm to get out of a spanking.”

“Is that what I’m in for? A bunch of tiny Barnes running around being little shits and looking like angels?”

He grinned at the pretty picture she was painting. “We can only hope.” He grew quiet as his thoughts turned towards the child that was waiting for him and his smile faded. “Do you think...do you think she’ll look like me?”

“I dunno, babe. I hope so. As I mentioned before, you’re hella cute.” She reached over to glide her fingers through his hair.

“What if she’s….not normal? What if she’s like me? Enhanced. Or what if Strucker had already started...experimenting on her?” His voice dropped to nearly inaudible with a slight tremble as he swallowed back on the bile in his throat.

Darcy’s hands came up, bracketing the sides of his face as her eyes bore into his. “Then we take her home and we make sure she is treated with kindness and love for the rest of her life. And we deal with the rest as best as we can. Okay?”

Bucky nodded, his breath leaving his chest with a hushed whoosh.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. She’s only eight months old, and the files that we have don’t give any evidence that he had begun any experimentation of any kind. Actually, his notes seem to indicate that he thought that the likelihood of...survival of his experiments increased with age. Like the twins. They were the oldest of his test subjects.”

That knowledge provided some relief, but not much. Even if his kid was totally normal in every way...could he even be a father? He pushed the thought away, shying away from the guilt inducing
implications of it. He'd cross that bridge when he got to it. If he got to it.

Darcy reached over to where his hand rested in his lap, interlacing her fingers with his. Their rings made a quiet, pleasant clink and the sound thrilled through him, sending tingles down his spine and up through his scalp.

Fuck. He was too tired for all of this, the emotional roller coaster that he couldn't seem to hop off of. He always hated the feeling of falling.

His head thumped back against the green upholstery of his headrest and he shut his eyes against the blaring sunlight of mid afternoon, matching his breathing in syncopation with the clicking of the train over its tracks. It took a while but eventually his mind sunk into blissful unawareness and dreamless sleep.

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Bucky woke with a jerk, his body sensing the slowing of the train and bringing his brain to near instant alertness. Between one breath and the next, time slowed as his brain went through a rapid-fire catalogue of his senses and threat assessment. Finding nothing alarming in his immediate environment, time snapped back into place and the short spike of adrenaline in his system dissipated.

It was always jarring when he woke up like that and generally left him cranky and with a headache. He could already feel the throbbing at the base of his skull and the tension coiling down his neck and through his shoulders. Although, that was probably partially caused by the way his head had lolled awkwardly against his seat as he slept.

He rolled his neck from one side to the other, trying to stretch out the tension, and rose from his seat along with the rest of the passengers. He pulled the duffel bag of clothing and toiletries that Natasha had packed for them down from the luggage rack above them, his mind instantly wandering to the tiny cotton sundress and matching booties that were tucked into one corner of the bag.

A gift from Aunty Tasha, she’d told him when he’d spotted them in the duffle. His fingers had slid over the bright blue embroidery that decorated the little white sarafan and it felt so impossibly small. How could a person possibly fit into something so minuscule?

He tucked the bag to his chest, reaching for their elderly travel companion’s bag and handing it to her.

“Such a nice young man,” she cooed, her weathered face breaking out in a riot of wrinkles around her beaming grin as she took her luggage from him, patting the back of his hand as she did so.

He nodded at her, smiling politely, and then moved out into the aisle with Darcy to make their way off the train. The train station included a fairly well equipped food court and Darcy made the call to grab a bite to eat before heading towards their dead drop.

They ate quickly and quietly, Bucky’s eyes constantly tracking the movement of the travelers and the occasional armed guard that wandered through the food court. It was with great relief that he threw their trash into one of the garbage cans near the exits and trekked out into the dying sunlight.

It was full dark by the time they neared the dead drop that Natasha had set up for them. The street they were on was poorly lit and what looked like gray tenement buildings lined either side. He led
Darcy down the side street to their destination per Nat’s directions. The street was empty save for an ugly, beige coupe that was probably the same age as Darcy.

When Darcy realized the intent of his direction, she wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Really? This is what Nat set up for us? I thought she had style.”

Bucky crouched down by the left, rear wheel well, running his hand up under the rusting metal before snagging his fingers on the keys. He tugged them free, jingling them at her in triumph. “Come on, princess,” he said as he rose from his crouch. “Your chariot awaits.”

She rolled her eyes, but followed him around to the rear of the vehicle, watching him as he popped the trunk. Bucky gave a low whistle as he perused the contents inside. “Whoever Nat’s contact is, he did good,” Bucky muttered as he carefully pawed through the myriad of weaponry and explosives that lined the trunk. There were also a couple of backpacks that seemed to consist of mostly survival gear and freeze dried meals. There was one bag that was a bright turquoise that, when he peeked inside, contained diapers, wipes, a canister of formula, and all manner of baby accoutrements.

“Yeah,” Darcy said with some amount of wonder as she fingered an emerald green pacifier. “Four stars for that guy, this is some legit baby stuff.” She snatched up what looked like a rubber giraffe. “This thing is like twenty-five bucks at Babies R’ Us.”

Bucky wrinkled his brow and ran a finger down the neck of the giraffe. “What’s it supposed to do?”

“It’s a teether. Babies chew on them.”

He looked at her with blue eyes blown wide with shock. “Are you kidding me? Twenty-five bucks for a goddamn chew toy? You know what my Ma gave us when we were teething? A fucking stick! That she got off a tree! For free!”

Darcy bit back on a smile. “A stick? Really?”

“Yes. Really. And Rebecca had a habit of picking up rocks and gnawing at them. Ma said it was probably why she was so stubborn.” Bucky ran a hand through his hair, warmth spreading through his chest at remembering another little piece of his past.

“Well, Grandad, we don’t let babies teethe on sticks and rocks anymore.”

“Yeah and that’s why you’re all so damn soft,” he muttered under his breath. Not quietly enough though, if Darcy’s raucous laughter was anything to judge by. “Shh, woman we’re supposed to be inconspicuous,” he admonished, slamming the lid of the trunk down.

She stuck her tongue out at him and made her way over to the passenger side of the vehicle as he lowered himself into the driver’s seat. He started the engine and was pleased to hear it turn over with a steady rumble. Despite its age, it still ran pretty damn well. He patted the dash affectionately and ignored Darcy’s snort. He leaned over her, glancing down her shirt with a leer before popping open the glove compartment and pulling out the map of Latveria that Nat had assured him would be included.

He pored over it quickly and then handed it over to Darcy, put the car into drive and rolled out from the side street to make their way to the main highway leading away from Doomstadt that would take them north to the small city that was closest to Strucker’s compound.

From the intel they’d received, the compound lay on an isolated parcel of land about two miles outside of the city. They planned on finding a place to squat, out in the warehouse district on the outskirts of the city, that would act as a home base while they spent the next few days mapping out
the land, searching for the best location for Darcy to set up her sniping position, scanning for possible booby traps, and tracking the guard rotations. They already had the architectural layout of the compound and with Darcy manning the sniper rifle and the trusty thermal imaging tech that Stark had provided, safely picking off the guards inside the building would be a breeze for Bucky.

That was the plan, anyway.

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“Darcy. Darcy, you need to wake up.”

Darcy felt a firm hand gently shaking her shoulder and she flopped her arm up to slap at the offending appendage. “’M busy,” she mumbled.

“I can see that, but we’re here and you might sleep better if you can lay out flat.”

“I’m not sure a warehouse floor is better than this seat, Bucky.” She yawned and stretched her arms over her head, opening her eyes to blink slowly at their surroundings.

There wasn’t much to see. It was fairly obvious that whatever industry that the large, concrete buildings once held was long dead. The street lamps overhead were shattered, along with the majority of the windows in the surrounding graffiti covered buildings. All in all, the whole area had the eerie appeal of a ghost town...if that ghost town had been born of a capitalist’s wet dream that went astray.

Darcy cracked open her door, the elderly thing shrieking as it swung on its ungreased hinges. She stepped out onto the cracked pavement of the parking lot that was swiftly becoming more field than lot. Bucky popped open the trunk and pulled out a couple handguns and knives which he tucked into various spots on his person. When he’d finished, he crooked a finger at her, called her over to him, and began strapping her down with her own arsenal.

“We’ll check this place out first,” Bucky said, nodding towards the building closest to them. “It’s one of the lesser run down buildings in the area. Hopefully that means we’ll be less likely to run into wildlife inside.”

“Wildlife?”

“Cats, dogs--”

“I like dogs--”

“Snakes and rats.”

“...Fuck. I'm sleeping in the car.”

Bucky chuckled and tugged her by the belt loop towards one of the boarded up entrances at the back, away from the street. “Come on, you sissy. This wouldn’t be a problem if your ma had let you chew on some sticks every once in awhile.”

“Sure. Right,” Darcy replied, keeping a weather eye on any potential creepy crawlies as they came closer to the entrance.
Bucky made quick work of busting into the building, pulling a flashlight from his pocket to light up their path. He swept the room with light and gun from one corner to the next before creeping forward. Darcy followed closely at his heels, her eyes peeled and desperately trying to distinguish whether or not movement in the corners of the room came from wind-rustled debris or from something more sinister.

She nearly jumped out of her skin with a shriek when she felt something scrape the back of her calf, only to find Bucky wheezing with laughter behind her.

“Oh fuck you, Bucky Barnes,” she gasped out with not a small amount of ire.

He sucked in a gasp of air between silent giggles, leaning in to kiss the tip of her nose. “Maybe later. We should probably finish sweeping the building first.”

He sauntered off a few paces only to turn back. “Oh and maybe try not to make so much noise.”

Darcy stomped her foot and swept down to pick up a chunk of concrete that she hurled straight at him. It hit between his shoulders with a solid thunk before falling to the ground with a noisy clatter but didn't seem to even faze the man. He twisted around, one finger to his lips and shushed her.

Darcy narrowed her eyes but followed him silently through the huge room. It was obviously some kind of factory at some point with rows of massive machinery and a conveyor belt system set up throughout the room. It was eerie in its shadow and silence, but thankfully uninhabited by mice or men. Or snakes.

Other than the main factory floor, the only other rooms seemed to be a bathroom on one end of the floor and a staircase on the other end leading up to what was probably an office space. The bathroom was disgusting and Darcy refused to even step foot in it, shutting the door firmly behind Bucky after he'd returned from examining the little room. If there was anything unwanted that was going to be sharing living space with them, Darcy was convinced it would crawl out of that toilet that was surely a direct portal to hell.

The journey up the set of steel steps confirmed the office space theory and proved to be the best spot for them to bed down. It was fairly clean except for a thick layer of dust and even contained a large metal desk and a couple office chairs. Bundled up in one corner were great swaths of canvas drop cloths that weren't too terribly filthy.

With the confirmation that they'd found their base for the next few days, Bucky began making trips to and from the car to bring in their supplies while Darcy set to the task of cleaning up the office somewhat and airing out the drop cloths over the stair rails. She figured she could fold them up and lay them down beneath their sleeping bags to provide a smidge more comfort on the hard, industrial-carpeted floor.

With their gear unpacked and their bedding put together, they sat in the office chairs and snacked on trail mix while they planned out their next moves. They had already decided that when they finally made the move to infiltrate the compound and retrieve the target, cover of darkness would be their best bet.

With that aspect solidified, it left them with needing to do most of their intel gathering of the guard rotations and surveying of the land in the middle of the night as well. Which was just fine for Bucky. He was used to working in the dark. Ghosts don't often appear in daylight after all.

Darcy, with her less than perfect night vision and farsightedness, wasn't quite as confident in her ability to traipse through the woods in the middle of the night but she understood the necessity of it.
It was already nearing dawn when they had finalized their plans so any intel gathering would have to wait until that evening. They stripped down into sleep clothes and crawled into their sleeping bags, listening to the other breathe steadily before they both sank into sleep. Their hands stayed linked between them through the night, their rings sliding against each other as they shifted in their sleep but never fully parted.

Darcy woke well into the afternoon but would have likely slept later if it weren't for the insistent pressure of her full bladder. Without a suitable alternative, Darcy had to resort to squatting inelegantly outside against the building. She wasn't exactly pleased with the situation, as she had always been a staunch supporter of indoor plumbing, but at least the grass in the field/parking lot was overgrown enough that she was afforded some semblance of privacy.

Honestly, she was just glad that she'd been able to pee without dribbling all over her pajama pants.

With her immediate business attended to, she returned to the office and rummaged around in her backpack to find a suitable breakfast from within. The best she could find was some granola bars and beef jerky and decided that would do until Barnes woke up. She was hoping he'd spring for a trip back into the city for a real meal. Maybe. Hopefully.

She sat swiveling back and forth in one of the office chairs as she chewed her way through the beef jerky, watching Bucky as he continued to sleep peacefully. Just as boredom was about to consume her completely, Bucky did that creepy thing where he woke up instantly. No slow fluttering of eyelids, no restless stirring. Just dead asleep and then: boom. Wide awake.

He swiveled his head from his position on the floor and Darcy greeted him with a little wave with the hand holding on to her jerky.

“Morning sunshine,” she garbled around a sizable hunk of beef.

Bucky sat up in his sleeping bag and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Morning.”

He slid out from his bedding, standing to stretch his arms high above his head and then bending at the waist to touch his toes. Darcy gave an appreciate grunt at the impressive flex and give of muscle under the bare skin of his upper body.

“Keep it in your pants, Lewis. I haven't even had breakfast yet,” he said with a tired smirk.

“I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just glad that someone your age can still get around so well. They say maintaining flexibility in the elderly keeps them spry.”

Bucky served her a withering glare.

“Jerky?” Darcy asked, thrusting her snack out under his nose.

He went a little cross-eyed looking at her offering before opening his mouth to bite off half of it. He chewed thoughtfully and stepped closer to her to run his fingers through her hair. She leaned forward with a happy sigh, resting the side of her head against his hip.

“I gotta go powder my nose,” he said when he'd swallowed down the last of his jerky.

“Alright,” she replied, shifting to sit up. “Just so you know, I've claimed the spot underneath that giant lime green graffiti penis, so you had better do your business elsewhere. We may be fake married but I'm still not ready to piss on the same patch of grass as you. Or worse.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust and Bucky threw his head back with a full laugh that she hadn't heard the likes of in far too long. She beamed at him as he kissed her full on the mouth, morning breath be damned,
then he took off down the stairs.

Her hopes of eating at a nearby restaurant were shot down, but Bucky was kind enough to build a
small fire down on the factory floor and boil up some water to make some fairly decent coffee and
resuscitate a couple of their freeze dried meals. She happily munched on some reconstituted huevos
rancheros that weren't half bad while he tried his luck with what looked like sausage, hash browns,
and scrambled eggs. When she asked how they tasted, he'd merely replied, "'S better than what they
fed us in the army," and went back to shoveling it into his mouth.

The rest of the afternoon was spent readying themselves for their intel gathering that evening. As the
sun finally dipped below the horizon, they wolfed down another freeze dried meal and suited up in
their tac gear.

Bucky stumped out the last coals of their fire and silently slung a backpack full of all sorts of military
grade goodies over his shoulder. Darcy followed suit, picking up her own lightweight pack and
double checking the Glock that she had strapped to her thigh.

With a curt jerk of his head, Bucky marched out of the warehouse and into the cool night air. Darcy
appreciated the slight breeze as it played across her face, cooling the feverish feel of her skin beneath
the many layers of her suit. Her gut clenched with nerves as she followed him down the deserted
roadway.

They were a little under two miles from the compound and would be walking to their destination. It
wasn't ideal, but they were less likely to be spotted on foot than they would be in the hideous rust-on-
wheels coupe. They veered off the cracked pavement, cutting through public lands and sticking to
the shadows of the treeline. Bucky kept them moving at a good clip, though not quite running. His
sharp eyes and fast reflexes saved Darcy from tripping over various bits of forest debris on several
occasions with a firm grip to her arm or around her waist. It was somewhat embarrassing for her, but
also necessary if they were going to get near the compound in a timely manner and without her
having to pick splinters out of her palms every few feet. She tried her hardest to stay on her feet
however, keeping her eyes peeled and glued to the path in front of her.

They'd been traveling for close to an hour when Bucky's hand darted into her field of vision, the
back resting against her abdomen and stopping her in her tracks. "We're here," he said, voice just
above a whisper.

Darcy's head snapped up and followed his line of sight to see a six foot high chain link fence
blocking their path a few yards away. Bucky knelt beside her, slinging his bag down in front of him
to dig out one of the fun little scanners that had Stark tech written all over it, literally and figuratively.
He pressed a button along the side and the scanner turned on with a soft whir.

Bucky turned his head to look up at her, his face drawn and grim. "We’ll check out the perimeter
first, see if there are any gaps in the fence, scan for land mines and any other surprises and then go
from there. Stay close to me, keep your weapon at the ready in case we run into any trouble."

Darcy swallowed hard and nodded, pulling her Glock from its holster and keeping the barrel aimed
at the ground and slightly to their left.

Bucky's lips twitched at the corner. "That's my girl. You ready?"

Darcy tried to speak but was stopped by an acute case of cottonmouth, so she resorted to giving him
another nod and sweeping her eyes from left to right and back again. Bucky rose to his feet, slipping
on his pack and then fitting the scanner over his head and pulling up the display screens. His eyes
darted back and forth, reading displays that Darcy couldn't see, and then he began moving slowly
along the edge of the fence. He kept it to their left with a few yards between them and it, focusing his attention on picking up anything that might go boom or alert Hydra to their presence.

Darcy was glad for the slow pace as it kept her from tripping, but at the same time she thought it might be driving her slightly mad. As each minute slipped by with excruciatingly little progress, the tension between her shoulders tightened, as did the knot in her stomach. She kept her head on a swivel, every one of her senses on high alert as they crept along.

It was a very long night.

When they finally finished their circuit and traipsed back to their base, she sank onto her sleeping bag with a bone deep weariness. Her eyes felt dry and gritty, burning every time she shut them, and her stomach roiled with a combination of hunger and nerves. Bucky silently passed her a granola bar and sank into his own bedding. They were both asleep in minutes as the first light of dawn began to creep in through the cracks in the boards covering the office windows.

Despite the strain of it, their first incursion was successful. They were able to conclude that the entire parcel of land was surrounded by the fencing, with only one gated entrance. The scanner had uncovered systematically placed land mines and they'd marked those off on their maps and strategically carved a nick out of a nearby tree at each spot.

They were both pleased to discover that there weren't any sensors along the fence that tripped an alarm system other than a row of pressure sensors that ran underneath the gated entrance and a couple security cameras mounted on either side of the gate.

This left them with the ability to cross into the perimeter on the second night with near certainty that they'd remain undetected and all in one piece. Bucky helped Darcy over the barbed wire that curled menacingly over the top of the chainlink by gripping it with his metal fist and pulling it down and out of her way.

Thus began the second in a string of very long nights.

On the third night, they decided on where Darcy would be setting up her rifle.

The fourth and fifth nights were spent surveilling the building and determining the guard rotations. The sixth night was spent double checking the body count inside the compound with their thermal imaging cameras and familiarizing themselves with the exterior building. The seventh night was spent in silent, tense surveillance again, but was cut shorter than they'd previously done so they could return to finalize their plan of attack.

Darcy chewed at her lips as they went over the entire plan for what felt like the thousandth time. Her eyes were starting to cross and her mind was beginning to wander, much to Bucky's displeasure.

“Dammit, Darcy, I need you to focus!” Bucky barked out sharply, slamming his fist against the metal desktop and causing her to jump.

“I have been,” she uttered calmly, slowly. “I have been focused for hours. We have gone over this over and over and I am as prepared as humanly possible for tomorrow. I promise you, I've got it memorized and know it better than I know the back of my hand but for the love of god Bucky, I am fucking exhausted and my brain cannot function anymore. I'm only human!” Her voice pitched high with anxious tears and frustration, the strain of the past few nights weighing heavily on her.

Bucky's nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. “Fine,” he spat, rolling up the compound schematics they'd been poring over and sliding them into his pack which he zipped closed with a violent jerk.
He rose from his chair and stomped over to his bedding, not even taking the time to change clothes or take off his boots, just laying down stiffly on top of his sleeping bag and crossing his arms over his chest.

Darcy stayed in her seat, just watching him with weary eyes. She blinked hard, pushing away the desire to snap back at him and rising on unsteady legs to slink over to his side. She bent over to wrap her left hand around his wrist, tugging at his arm.

“Come on,” she murmured. When he only glared up at her with disgruntled confusion she tugged at him again with both hands. “Come with me? Please?”

He rolled his eyes but sat up and let her pull him to his feet. She turned away from him, lacing her fingers with his and leading him out to the steps and down on to the factory floor. He followed her silently as she led him up and down the rows of machinery until she came to what she was looking for.

She stopped in front of a massive piece of machinery that had a series of long steel arms hanging at equal intervals over a conveyor belt. She stepped closer, lifting his hand in hers until she could wrap his fingers around one of the arms. The circumference fit perfectly into the palm of his cybernetic hand.

“Break it.” Her words were soft but clear, and a steely glint lit up her tired eyes.

“What? Why?” Bucky's brow wrinkled and he released the metal to cross his arms over his chest.

“Because you're angry and it will make you feel better.”

“I'm not angry,” he denied flatly.

Darcy scoffed. “Yes. You are.”

“Look, I might be frustrated because you were--”

“Hey, buddy, I'm gonna stop you right there. You're not frustrated with me. You are pissed about something. And I know it's not me.”

Bucky snorted and ran his hands through his hair. “What are you even talking about Darcy? I'm not angry!”

“Yes. You. Are!” she practically shouted, stomping her foot in emphasis.

“Darcy...” he growled.

“No! You've been snippy with me all week and getting worse with each passing day, so don't try to tell me you're not fucking angry when I know that you are!” She was definitely shouting at this point.

Bucky gripped his hair at the roots and then loosened a snarl that had her jumping back a few paces. “Okay, YES! I'm angry! Of course I'm fucking angry!” he roared. “Have you seen the shitshow that is my life?” He swung his arms out wide in demonstration. “Fuck, Darcy, I've never been so furious in my goddamn life, but honey, I cannot afford to get angry. Not when we're a few short hours away from rescuing my kid. If I let myself feel it, I'm going to get us all caught or killed or worse! Damn it, Darcy, you can't push me on this! I'm barely holding it together and I need to keep a clear head. So please, please, just leave me the fuck alone!” He finally fell silent, breathing heavily.
Darcy sucked in a sharp inhale and stepped into his space, pushing him dead center on his chest. “Nope!” she barked and then pushed him again, this time using both hands and leaning into it with her whole upper body. “That's bullshit, Barnes. It's too late to try and keep it together. You're already way past furious and if you don't find a fucking healthy outlet for it before then, which is what I’ve been trying. To get you. TO DO!” she emphasized each phrase with another push to his chest until she had knocked him back into the machinery.

He stared at her with eyes wide in disbelief until something dark and ugly swept over his features. His entire body language changed, hardening and turning predatory. He stood glaring at her, breath heaving in his chest and hands curled into claws at his sides. It was enough to shoot ice through her veins and she found her feet moving her backwards on pure instinct.

His eyes tracked her motion and his body shifted as he snarled and for one brief moment Darcy seriously considered the fact that she may have fucked up royally. But before she could blink he had turned his back to her and gripped one edge of the conveyor belt, tearing it from its frame with an unholy roar and the sharp shriek of metal against metal.

Darcy's pulse slowed again while she watched him rip through the massive machine in an almost animalistic frenzy, shredding through the metal like it was nothing more than tissue paper. She watched as he worked out all the hurt and rage that had been bubbling under the surface for weeks now, and probably longer.

Finally, with a heart-wrenching cry, he ripped the base of the machine from the floor, tearing out its steel bolts and hurling the entire thing thirty feet through the air and into another block of machinery. The fire went out of him then and he fell to his knees like a puppet that had its strings cut. His hands curled up to grip the hair on either side of his head as he moaned pitifully. Darcy approached him slowly, joining him on the floor and wrapping her hands around his to gently untangle them from his hair. Tears streamed down his face as he looked down at her with aching eyes.

“They keep hurtling me, Darcy! No matter what I do or how far away from them I get, they won't stop hurting me!” he gasped out sharply.

“I know, baby, I know,” Darcy murmured, her own eyes growing wet as she wrapped her arms around his trembling shoulders. His arms wrapped around her waist and his head dropped to her shoulder.

“I’m so fucking tired of Hydra taking from me. Taking my arm, my life, my memory. Taking my dignity and making me a murderer. Taking my fucking humanity.” His arms tightened around her. “Goddammit I’m so fucking tired of this shit. I thought I was done with all of it, thought it was in the past and maybe I could move forward with my life, with Steve, and with you...and then I find out about my daughter and it’s just one more thing they've taken from me! I'll never know what her first months were like. Fuck! I don't even know if I want to be a father in the first place!” He leaned back on his heels to meet her gaze. “They fucking took that decision away from me too and now I have a kid and what if I can't be a dad? What if I'm shit at it or I'm not father material or-or-or she grows up hating me and--” his panicky words died out when Darcy placed a gentling hand to the side of his face.

“Hey, hey,” she said softly, her thumb dipping into the dimple in his chin. “You can't worry about that right now. We’re here to rescue her, save her, and then burn that fucking compound to the ground. But after that...we’re going to find her the loving home that she needs and deserves. Whether or not that's with us...well we can decide that later. But no matter what, she will be safe and she will be loved.”
Bucky's eyes darted rapidly between hers. “Us?” he whispered, voice thready.

Her lips quirked up in a half smile. “Yes. Us. I'm not letting you do this on your own. I'm in it to win it, Barnes.”

He huffed a relieved laugh and rested his forehead against hers, their eyes falling closed and his hand sliding up to rest against the side of her neck. His thumb stroked lightly at her skin while his breathing slowed and he calmed himself.

“For what it's worth,” she began, “I think you’d make a great dad.”

His answering smile was small and bittersweet. “If you keep saying things like that you're gonna end up getting committed to a nuthouse,” he teased.

She scoffed and smacked the back of her hand lightly against his chest. “I mean it. I really think you'd be wonderful. You're a good man, James Barnes. A kind man.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he groused, rising to stand and lifting her with him. “Come on, crazy lady. Let's get you to bed.”

They stripped down to their underwear, both too tired to bother with pajamas, and crawled into Bucky's sleeping bag. The fit was snug but the emotional upheaval of the night had them both craving closeness.

Bucky lay on his back with Darcy partially on top of him. She had her head propped up on one hand and was tracing the lines of his face with the other. “You seem calmer now. I'm guessing the temper tantrum helped?”

“Yes, yeah,” he groused, rising to stand and lifting her with him. “Come on, crazy lady. Let's get you to bed.”

Bucky lay on his back with Darcy partially on top of him. She had her head propped up on one hand and was tracing the lines of his face with the other. “You seem calmer now. I'm guessing the temper tantrum helped?”

“Is this your way of trying to say ‘I told you so?’”

“It is. But only if it made you feel better.”

He could hear the smile in her voice even if he couldn't see it. He opened his eyes and reached up to run his hand through her hair before pressing at the base of her skull and prompting her to bring her lips to his.

She went gladly, enjoying the soft, chaste give of his lips against hers. When his lips parted slightly beneath hers, she sighed quietly into his mouth, her tongue sliding against his lower lip and then flicking into his mouth to glide against his tongue. He groaned at the contact and the vibration of his chest had her heart thumping heavily in her chest.

Strong hands wound into her hair, holding her tight to him as his hips rolled up into hers. She shuddered and gasped when his thigh came up between hers to press warm and firm against her. He pressed his thigh higher and then rolled them until she was beneath him, his weight held up by his elbows on either side of her head and his hips against hers.

He peppered feather-light kisses over her jaw and cheeks and nose and then gazed at her with an openness that made her dizzy. “Thank you,” he said softly, dipping his head to kiss her chastely. “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet,” she smirked, her hands sliding down to grip his backside and pull him harder against her.

He chuckled and then grew serious, his fingers playing idly with the ends of her hair. “Really though, Darcy. Thank you. For helping me. For, for being here.” His eyes skittered away from hers.
“For understanding what I needed earlier and being...okay with it. I know that couldn't have been pleasant to watch,” he said with a self-deprecating smile. “Thank you for just...for just everything. Everything you've done and said and been. Thank you for being who you are and being kind and brave enough to share yourself with me because god you mean so much to me, Darcy.” His eyes finally met hers again, the sincerity in them stilling the breath in her lungs. “So much,” he whispered.

She felt tears prickle at her eyes. “Bucky, I--” she broke off, not sure what to say, and surging up to kiss him, showing him all the things that she couldn’t express.

He met her with equal verve and she couldn't help the soft whimper she made when he sucked lightly at the tip of her tongue. Between his mouth and his hands and the heavy weight of his thigh between her legs, she was a trembling mess of aching desire in mere moments. When his fingers dipped beneath the elastic of her underwear, he hesitated, pulling away from her hungry kisses. “Darcy...I want...” he paused, uncertain. He cleared his throat and began again. “I know this isn’t ideal...but I want you so badly, sweetheart. I... Please?” His breath was hot on her neck and his lips tripped lightly over the shell of her ear with each word.

“Yes,” she sighed, rolling her hips up. “Please.”

He groaned into her neck and his fingers slid her underwear down her legs until midway down her thighs and she had to help him a bit. She helped him shuffle his own boxer briefs down over his hips before pulling her sports bra over her head and tossing it across the room.

Bare to one another, they settled back together in the sleeping bag, their legs and hearts tangled together. He kissed her deeply, his heart pounding so hard that she could feel the reverberations against her chest, sending a thrill through her that he was so deeply affected by this moment.

He shifted his weight, planting himself between her legs. They both hissed at the contact and Darcy dug her fingers into his back, trying to ground herself and fighting the urge to rush him.

Bless the man, he didn't make her wait very long. They each took a deep, steadying breath in tandem, exhaling when they were fully joined.

“Ah fuck,” he groaned, eyes screwed tight.

She understood the sentiment entirely.

She made a low moan, seeing stars, and briefly lost the ability to breathe. “Finally,” she sighed.

Her eyes fluttered open when she heard Bucky make a strange, strangled noise at the back of his throat. His eyes were still tightly closed and he looked like he was in pain.

“Bucky are you alright?” she asked, concern coloring her voice. She reached up to brush his hair from his forehead.

His tongue darted out over his bottom lip, pulling it into his mouth and trapping it between his teeth. He nodded, keeping his eyes closed still and sending worry gnawing at her.

“Honey, you don't look alright. Please talk to me.”

“I'm reciting pi,” he said through gritted teeth.

Darcy froze. “Uh...what?”

His eyes finally popped open, a blush rising up over his cheeks bright enough for her to see even in
the dim light.

“I’m reciting pi. In my head. So I don’t shame myself in front of you.”

“Shame? Wha-- oh. Oh!” Darcy bit down on the knuckle of her first finger, trying to stem her giggles.

“Shit. You gotta be still, sweetheart, or this isn’t gonna last long,” he grunted, eyes snapping shut again.

“Sorry, sorry!” She focused on keeping every muscle in her body still, waiting for him to relax and open his eyes. She could see his lips mouthing the numbers under his breath and she found it both bizarre and utterly endearing.

She was beaming up at him and fighting to keep a second round of giggles at bay when his eyes finally fluttered back open.

“Hi,” he mumbled, wincing slightly.

“Hey there,” she responded with barely contained delight. “How many decimal places did you have to get to?”

“...Eighty-seven.”

Darcy slapped a hand over her mouth, turning away from him so that she wasn't laughing directly in his face. She cut off in mid cackle when Bucky snapped his hips into her sharply. The laughter died in her throat, replaced by an embarrassingly loud whine.

He stilled again and she was unsurprised to see the smirk gracing his face. She rolled her eyes and pulled him down by his ears to kiss him with unhurried heat until he finally began to roll his hips against her in earnest.

With each stroke, he lavished her with kisses and gentle nips along her neck and chest. It was exquisite and had an undercurrent of emotion that had the muscles in her thighs trembling where they gripped at his hips.

If she were honest with herself, the only way she could properly describe what Bucky was doing to her, with her, was that he was making love to her. It was a phrase that always made her think of the gag-worthy, sappy love stories her mother had loved to watch on the Lifetime channel. But the way he was looking at her, touching her, it was with a reverence that she had never experienced before and it broke her to pieces and put her back together again with every beat of her heart.

It frightened her, the intensity of what was happening between them, but succumbing to it was the sweetest kind of bravery, so she let the need and want and love rise up in her chest and wash over her. When she was so close she could almost taste her release, words filled her throat and spilled out over her lips in a cascade of pleas and cries of his name.

“I know, honey,” he breathed, the low timbre of his words carrying across the delicate skin of her throat.

She felt him grip her left hand in his right, interlacing their fingers and locking their palms together. The body-warmed digits of his metal hand slid down her ribcage and over the swell of her hip, dipping in and under her thigh to catch the back of her knee in the crook of his elbow. She keened as the waves of her pleasure crashed over her. “I love you,” she gasped out, succumbing at last to the blissful whiting out of her mind.
She came back to her senses right around the time that Bucky collapsed into her soft warmth, just barely holding himself up enough to allow her to breathe shallowly. His grip on her leg loosened and her thigh slid down to cradle his hips once more. When they'd both calmed their racing hearts, he gently moved himself to curl along her side, sliding his left arm under her head and keeping their still-clasped hands tucked to his chest.

He stared at her in open wonder and sated exhaustion, pulling her knuckles to his lips. She could feel herself smiling up at him stupidly in her blissed out state but she had no plans to stop anytime soon. She dragged her free hand up from where it had been resting heavily on her belly to thumb at the dimple in his chin and stroke along the edge of his jaw. Light was beginning to pour in through the cracks in the windows, the dim morning light sharpening the blue of his eyes.

“Did you mean it?” he whispered against her knuckles.

She tilted her head in confusion but he elaborated before she could open her mouth to ask what he meant. “When you said you loved me, did you mean it?”

Her eyes widened slightly, the memory of her confession hazy but still there amongst the clutter of her overwhelmed senses. She hesitated before answering, sussing out the depth of her feelings. She wasn't the kind of woman who could say she meant it when she didn't, and he wasn't the kind of man that deserved anything but absolute honesty, so she peered into the depths of herself, deliberate in her search to find anything but truth in her confession before she gave him an answer.

She did love him however, with every bit of her heart, and desperately hoped he felt the same.

She dragged in a lungful of air before nodding and answering him. “Every word. I meant every word.”

His answering smile was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, a joy-soaked marvel that made him shimmer and gleam in front of her. Of course, that could have been partially caused by the tears gathering in her eyes.

“I love you, Darcy. I love you so much,” he whispered fervently, gently wiping away a tear that had escaped to slip down her cheek with the back of their clasped hands.

She released a wet laugh, one of pure happiness and relief. It felt so good to have the words out. Over the past few weeks and even months, they had pressed against the back of her tongue, pushing at her teeth and begging to be released. She didn't want to ever have to swallow them back down again.

And now she never would.

They held each other close, their sweat dampened skin cooling and drying as the sun rose higher in the sky and they finally slipped into the embrace of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

They did the thing! And it only took 150k words! (bless you all for waiting this long, you sweet, precious babies)
Also, the dress that Nat gets for baby Barnes looks like this, but baby sized.
He was done. She was it for him. He'd once been told by a high school friend that you can't judge whether or not a woman is wife material by taking her to bed, but that guy was a fucking idiot because Darcy was everything he'd ever wanted and more and the consummation of their relationship only solidified that.

She was snuggled back against his chest, his sweet woman, her perfect rump tucked up against his lap and her rock hard head underneath his chin.

And she was snoring. Loudly.

Goddamn but did he love that woman. He chuckled to himself and swept an errant curl from her face. She looked so beautiful like this and he couldn't believe how lucky he was that she loved him back….and maybe wanted to make a family together with him and his kid. The thought was dizzying and comforting all at once. He didn't know if he could face fatherhood alone. If that was what they decided to do. He was still uncertain in his suitability as a parent but Darcy's belief in him was a significant confidence boost.

Everything about the woman was a confidence boost. He grazed his fingers down her arm and along the ridges of her ribcage. The way she'd come apart under his touch had been particularly confidence building. His thoughts tripped fondly over his memories from earlier as his cybernetic fingers brushed down over the softness of her belly, tracing idly over her belly button.

She shifted in her sleep, arching away from his fingers and inadvertently pressing her ass against him. He bit back on a groan, his hand flexing against her stomach and drifting lower. He ran his hand up the smooth skin of her inner thigh and nuzzled into her neck, luxuriating in the scent of her.

He brought his hand higher and higher until he was cupping her and just barely brushing his thumb against her. She sighed and shifted in his arms again, muttering something unintelligible, mostly still asleep.

“What was that, sweetheart? Couldn't quite catch it,” he rumbled in her ear.
Her voice was thick when she answered him. “Said you’re a tease.” She turned her head, eyes still closed and mouth seeking his blindly.

He met her searching lips, nipping at her bottom lip and pulling her further from the embrace of sleep and tighter into his. She responded by arching her back and rubbing her ass against him. He rutted against the tease and worked her with his hand more insistently.

“Oh fucking hell, Buck, why are you so good at this?”

“Well there was this...um lady I met in Italy once. She was very informative on a few things.”

Darcy chuckled and writhed under his attentions. “That sounds shady as fuck. What was she, a prostitute?” Bucky froze, his ears and cheeks growing hot.

“Oh my god, she was, wasn't she?” He could hear the delight in Darcy's voice.

“In my defense, I was unaware of that fact until, um, afterwards...stop laughing at me, Darce! She fleeced me! Had to spend every last dollar I had on her. Couldn't afford a pot to piss in for damn near a month.”

“Really? She couldn't have been that expensive,” she chuckled.

His face prickled with heat again. “Ah. I may have gone back. A few times. It was a very educational month.” He was met with further laughter from his girl. “Of which you are the beneficiary, I might add,” he admonished.

She continued to cackle in his arms, her ass jiggling against him in a way that wasn't meant to be teasing but was definitely making him twitch. “Jesus, Barnes, you know that's how syphilis happens, right?”

“I wore a rubber,” he exclaimed, tone slightly offended. He wasn't that stupid. “Besides, I'd had the serum by then. Made me kinda impervious to pretty much all illness.”

“Well thank god for that, you filthy old man,” she chuckled. “You and all your Italian hookers.”

He groaned and dropped his head to the back of her neck. “It was just the one hooker,” he whined. If anything, Darcy only laughed harder.

He nipped at the sensitive skin where her neck met her shoulder in gentle reprimand. She sucked in a ragged breath and reached two slender hands between her thighs, removing his hand and angling him so he could sink into her in one sharp motion--

3.1415926535897932384626433832795028841971693993751058209749...4...4

He drew in a stuttering breath, finally able to focus on the woman in his arms without blowing his fucking load like a damn two pump chump.

“How many decimal places did you get to this time?” She didn't even try to hide the laughter in her voice.

Bucky heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Only sixty. I'm getting better.”

Darcy gave a full throated laugh, tilting her head to the side to kiss him. “I love you, sexy mathboy.”

He tamped down on the overwhelming desire to beam at her, configuring his features into something
resembling a kicked dog. “I love you, too, Darce. Even if you're a mean, mean woman that lives to make fun of me. I'm gonna sic Steve on you someday. He hates bullies.”

Darcy clicked her tongue in dismay. “Ooh, poor baby,” she cooed. “Why don't you stop pouting and start moving? Can't laugh if I'm too busy having a good time.” She tapped a finger to her temple.

Bucky's gaze darkened and his mouth dropped open. “You make an excellent point,” he said with a slow, deliberate roll of his hips. Her eyelids fluttered and she turned her head away from him again, thrusting her hips back to meet him.

He started thrusting at a steady pace. Darcy hummed her satisfaction and reached for his hand, her fingers wrapping tightly around his wrist to guide his fingers to her mouth. She bit down lightly on the digits and then began to stroke her tongue over them in conjunction with the strokes he was giving between her thighs. Heat licked up his spine, the combination of sensations torturous and heavenly at once.

Darcy made a frustrated whine in the back of her throat, drawing his attention to her. “What is it, sweetheart? What do you need?”

“Fuck, I don't know. I need...more. More of...something,” she grunted, irritation sharpening her tone.

He soothed his hand down over her hip, slowing his thrusts and then fully unsheathing himself. She made a slight sound of protest but he shushed her and swept his lips over her cheek. “Shh, don't worry, I'm not done with you yet.” He popped her lightly across the ass and whispered into her ear, “Up and at 'em, Lewis. Be a good girl and go bend over that desk for me, would ya?”

Darcy purred and scuttled out of his arms. “I like where your head is at, Sarge,” she said, bending over to rest her elbows against the metal desk and giving him a spectacular view.

He was staring, he knew he was staring, but he just…couldn't...stop.

Darcy slapped her hand impatiently against the desktop to break the spell he was under, shooting him a somewhat desperate look. He jumped to action, tripping over his sleeping bag on his way to her.

He was gonna do this slow, he really was, but as soon as they were joined and he could see how perfectly his hands framed her shapely rear, he lost all thought of control. His hips reared back of their own accord, setting a punishing pace that had them both gasping out curses and groans. His fingers pressed into her hips with bruising force as he pulled her back against him.

He slid one hand up her spine to twine in her hair, pulling her up and turning her head so he could press fumbling kisses over her mouth and cheeks. With her pulled up close to his chest he was able to slide his other hand around, pressing at her hard and fast until she was wailing into his mouth.

God, she felt so goddamn good but he felt like he was about to come out of his skin, like he couldn't get enough of her, would never get enough of her. Some dark place in his brain allowed a tendril of fear to unfurl inside of him, whispering that this might be the last time they were together, that they could both be dead in a few short hours. Fear turned to dread turned to desperation as he sobbed out and fucked her harder into the desk, as if he could bury himself in her so deeply that nothing would ever separate them.

He was vaguely aware of Darcy slumping down to rest on the desktop and his hands coming up to grip her shoulders as leverage, but the change in position had him slipping even deeper into her as he quickened his thrusts, seeking release. The metal feet of the desk began to slide across the carpet under the onslaught of his strength and Darcy gave one long, high pitched sob before convulsing
around him again and sending him spiraling out into oblivion with a roar.

He blacked out for a few breaths, returning slowly to the realization that he was slumped on top of Darcy, probably crushing her. He pushed up on the desktop with shaky arms and slowly withdrew from her heat. He stroked a shaking hand down her spine, watching the frantic rise and fall of her labored breathing, trying to shake his lingering haze.

Darcy huffed and muttered a long low groan into the desktop. “Oooww, fuck,” she hissed.

Icy tendrils of fear shot through his stomach at the realization that she was very breakable and he was a goddamn monster. He flipped her gently in his arms and scooped her up to his chest. Her eyes remained closed and it sent another wave of panic through him.

“Oh god, Darcy, are you alright? Fuck, please tell me you're alright?”

Darcy’s eyes fluttered open and she hit his chest with the back of one hand with more strength than he was expecting. “Bucky, my dude, chill out.”

“But you-- are you hurt? Did I hurt you?”

Her eyes slipped closed again, a beatific smile lighting up her face. “Lil bit. Totally fucking worth it though. Fuck. I’m gonna have some pretty bruises in the morning.” Her smile never wavered and he didn't know whether he wanted to shake her or sink to his knees and thank god she was unharmed. He ended up doing a little bit of both before laying her gently across his sleeping bag and checking every inch of her for trauma. He could see the beginnings of bruises along her hips and shoulders and a matching set at the front of her thighs from the edge of the desk. Each new bruise he discovered had him adding tallies to the “Bucky Barnes is a Fucking Abomination” column.

“Hey. Stop that,” Darcy admonished, gripping the fingers that had been stroking over the bruising on her thighs. “It's well deserved,” he grumbled, fingers twitching in her grasp.

Darcy sighed and rolled her eyes, rising up to a seated position. She tried to suppress the groan of discomfort from sitting, but his sharp eyes and ears caught it anyway. Darcy jerked him out of his self-hatred death spiral by pulling sharply at the hair at the base of his skull.

“Seriously, stop that. You are ruining this for me.” She leaned in, softening her harsh words with tender kisses. “It's just a few bruises, which I've gotten during sex before. And it was exactly what I was craving. I came twice, for godssake. Don’t you think that if I wasn't having a good time I would have told you to stop?”

“I-I guess,” he stuttered. “Are you sure you're alright?”

She smiled softly, pulling him close to nuzzle her nose against his. “Mmmyes. I am great. Get me some food and help me stretch some of this soreness out and I will be fucking perfect.”

“I love you,” he murmured against her lips.

“I love you, too,” she sighed happily. “Now...about that food? Wanna hook a hungry girl up?”

Bucky snorted and rolled his eyes before rising to his feet. “Yeah, yeah, princess. I'll go get you something to eat,” he muttered, gathering up some fresh clothes.

“Thank you, peasant. I will think of you fondly in your absence.”
“Gee thanks, doll.”

Darcy winked at him and snuggled back down into his bedding, obviously intent on going back to sleep until sustenance made an appearance. Bucky finished buckling his pants and scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck, biting back on an amused grin.

“Uh, Darce, you planning on getting cleaned up before going back to sleep? You're kind of a mess…”

“And whose fault is that, hmm?”

“Sorry,” he said around a smug grin.

She threw her head back in unrestrained laughter. “You’re a fucking liar, James Barnes,” she said, rising to her feet and shuffling over to where they’d stacked several gallon jugs of fresh water and set up a makeshift bathing area. Bucky watched as she wet a rag and ran it over her limbs, hissing at the cold. The water glistened prettily on her skin and ran in enticing rivulets between her breasts and over her--

“Bucky. Focus. Go make us something to eat,” she said, snapping her fingers at him. “I’m starving. And if you keep looking at me like that, we’re gonna have to bone again and this awful, cold sponge bath will have been for nothing.”

Bucky drew a deep breath and turned on his heel, set on giving her whatever she wanted. He was back within half an hour with two white paper bags filled with takeout from the closest restaurant he could find that didn’t look like a one-way ticket to food poisoning.

Darcy had squealed with delight, pleased that she wouldn’t have to endure another freeze dried meal. Bucky had mumbled something about them needing full stomachs before leaving on their mission that night, which was true, but mostly he just wanted to try and atone for the bruises that were starting to darken on her body.

She sat between his legs while she ate, using him as a backrest, still naked as the day she was born. Which was fine by Bucky. Perfectly fine. He took the opportunity to run his hands and mouth over the bruising on her shoulders, pulling her hair up in a bun to keep it out of his way. Darcy hummed and sighed under his attentions, relaxing into the way his hands were steadily kneading at the knots in her back and thighs.

Darcy finished her meal, placing the takeaway carton to the side and slumping back heavily into his chest. She leaned her head back on his shoulder, turning her face to nuzzle into his neck.

“I really am fine, you know.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I just...I got scared, I guess. I lost control and you're so breakable and--” he drew a steadying breath, pulling her tighter into his arms. “I can’t lose you,” he whispered into her hair.

“You're worried about tonight.”

It wasn’t a question but he nodded against her anyway. “S why I, uh, lost it. Couldn't stop thinking about the fact that I’m about to drag you into danger and...I dunno, I just panicked and wanted to…to feel you. Couldn’t get close enough to you.” He turned his face away from her, chewing at his lower lip.

Darcy’s hand came up, her thumb pulling his lip from his teeth and smoothing over it. “Bucky.” She
sighed his name with such tenderness it made him ache inside.

He turned his face back to hers, kissing her deep and slow, bringing his hand up to cup her cheek. “I love you and I love you and I love youody and I could live another hundred years and that wouldn’t change.”

Her eyes fluttered closed and then opened slowly, piercing him with their blue depths. “That was quite the line, James. Gonna give a girl ideas. White dress and suit-and-tie ideas.”

“Wasn’t a line. And I don’t see anything wrong with those ideas.” He smiled shyly at her, fluttering his lashes at her for good measure.

Darcy’s eyes widened slightly, her brows rising. “Oh my stars,” she proclaimed with her best southern belle drawl, hand fluttering dramatically over her chest. “Mr. Barnes, is that a proposal?”

His grin grew wider. “No ma’am. Darcy, sweetheart, trust me when I say this: when I propose to you, there will be no doubt in your mind. You’re not the only one with... ideas,” he growled and then nipped at her chin playfully.

“Oh shit,” Darcy muttered, eyes wide in shock and wonder until something like anger passed over her features. She shifted and twisted in his arms to face him, bringing her hands up to pull him down by the ears until they were nose to nose. “We better not fucking die tonight or I am going to be pissed,” she growled and then crashed her mouth to his.

He smiled against her lips, letting the heat of her kiss crash over him in waves. As far as not-quite-proposals went, this one seemed to be fairly well received.

When things started really heating up, he had to grasp her hands and firmly disentangle himself from her clutches. “Darcy, we need to start getting ready,” he warned. He hated having to stop but his daughter needed them and the time to go was nearly upon them.

Bucky watched the heated daze leave her eyes in favor of the clear-headed sharpness of nerves. She swallowed and nodded, rising to her feet to begin dressing herself. Bucky tried to hastily eat his now mostly cold meal but the dread unfurling in his stomach had him struggling to keep even a few bites down. He stopped trying and went about prepping for the night ahead.

***

The next few hours were a blur of arming themselves and checking and rechecking their gear and plans, followed by the long walk to the compound. It was fully dark by the time they reached their crossing place over the fence. They crept towards Darcy’s sniper post, settling down in the shrubbery and waiting for the change in guards, double checking the body count in and around the building.

The air was fairly warm for a spring night, but Darcy was covered in goosebumps despite it. She couldn’t seem to shake the chill, biting down on her lips to muffle the sound of her chattering teeth.

Bucky, who was laying out on his belly, scanning the surroundings with his night vision binoculars, turned at the sound of her teeth and motioned for her to snuggle up next to him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, trying to rub warmth into her shivering limbs. “It’s just the nerves. It’ll wear off once your adrenaline hits.” Darcy didn’t respond, just nodded and kept her eyes glued to the compound that was sitting in a clearing about three hundred yards away from their position.
Bucky watched the four guards that were loitering outside of the building’s entrance. The men finished their conversation and moved to split up and begin their patrol along each side of the building.

“It’s almost time,” he whispered to Darcy. He glanced at her, mulling over his next words carefully. “Listen, I know you’re here to watch my back but...I don’t want you to have to bear the burden of taking a man’s life unless you absolutely have to. Taking a life, it—it weighs on you, so you wait until the last second. Don’t fire unless you’re certain I’m in serious danger.”

Darcy’s eyes were wide in the dark, shining out of her ghostly pale face. “I...okay.”

He reached out for her face, fingers sliding through her hair and palms resting against her cheeks. He scooted closer to her, bringing his mouth to hers in a hurried kiss, before resting his forehead to hers. “I love you,” he whispered urgently. “Stay safe, stay hidden, stay vigilant. Don’t let what’s happening to me cause you to lose focus on your surroundings.” He pulled back, looking her dead in the eyes. “If anything happens to me, you get out. You call Steve and Nat immediately and you get the hell out of here, do you understand me?”

Darcy’s eyes darted over his face and her tongue wet her bottom lip before she finally nodded her assent. They both looked a little crazed with the way they were looking at the other, eyes roaming and memorizing faces, hands sweeping across cheeks and shoulders and fingers.

Bucky leaned back into her with one final, fervent kiss. “I have to go.”

Darcy swallowed and found her voice. “I know,” she croaked. “I love you, Bucky Barnes. You better come back to me.”

“I will,” he vowed and then forced himself to leave her embrace, hunching down to creep through the underbrush on swift, silent feet.

It was a good fifty feet to the edge of the treeline to where the land opened up and the compound sat. The building itself wasn’t more than a single story office building, something you’d see somewhere on the outskirts of suburbia; flat roof, square shaped, with large tinted windows placed every few feet. Besides the four guards outside, they had clocked about fifteen to twenty bodies within the building, all of which he would need to dispatch of quickly and quietly to prevent back up being called in.

He kept low to the ground, creeping nearly on his belly the long distance to the closest edge of the building, before sprinting the last thirty feet to rush up behind the guard running patrol on that side. He plunged his knife clear through the man’s spine, severing his vocal chords and brain stem in one go. The man went limp and he lowered the body silently to the ground.

He kept his back to the wall, crouched low to creep beneath the windows, and approached the corner of the building. He peered around the edge, clocking two of the guards leaning against the building, chatting and taking an unwise smoke break with their weapons holstered. Oh well, their stupidity was his stroke of luck and both were dead in seconds. He crept back the way he’d come, heading for the last guard that would be in position at the front entrance.

Who wasn’t there.

Bucky swallowed back on the dread that crowded his gut and crept forward to the front entrance. At that moment the comm in his ear crackled to life. “Bucky! Behi-”

Her frantic whisper was too late as a harsh male voice sounded from behind him. “Stop. Hands in the
air and on your knees.”

*Fuck.* Bucky bit back on his panic, his brain flitting over scenarios and outcomes. The guard was too far for him to disarm and too close for him to make a break for it. He sank to his knees, hands coming up into the air, hoping to buy time with his compliance. He could survive a lot, but probably not a headshot. He’d have to try talking his way out of this, at least until he could overpower the other man.

“Look--”

“Keep your mouth shut. You’ve already killed three agents. I don’t give a fuck who you are or what you want. You’re going to die. Hail Hydra.”

He heard the click as the guard racked the slide of his gun, followed by the creaking of the trigger as he began to pull back on it. Bucky winced, waiting for the inevitable crack of the gun and the significant loss of brain matter that he was about to endure. But it never came. Before the guard could pull the trigger all the way back, there was a muffled pop and then the sound of a body slumping to the ground.

Bucky swiveled his head, confirming that the guard was indeed dead on the ground, shot through the head. He drew in a slow breath through his nose. He hadn't wanted this for Darcy.

“You okay, Bucky?” her voice trembled in his ear. He nodded sharply.

“*Fuck,* that was awful--” Darcy’s voice was cut off with the sound of retching.

“Darce, you alright?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Her quiet laugh was shaky even through the comms. “Not even a little bit. But I think I’m done being sick. For now.”

“Good. I need you to focus, sweetheart. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, I’m-I’m good.”

Bucky took another steadying breath, burying his guilt and dragging the guard’s body to the front entrance. He flipped open the scanner that was installed on the left side of the door, placing the dead man’s hand on top of it and waiting for the blinking red lights to turn green. He pushed the night vision goggles he’d been wearing up onto his forehead. There was a click and a thunk and then he was peeking through the door and slowly creeping inside, blinking against the harsh fluorescent lights.

“As soon as the words were out of her mouth, the lights flickered and blinked out, courtesy of more handy dandy Stark gadgetry. In the distance he could hear surprised voices calling out to one another. He snapped his night vision goggles back into place.

“Buck, you’ve got two bodies coming around the corner to your left. Forty feet and closing.”

He tapped the comm, indicating that he’d heard her and backed against the wall, lying in wait for them to pass him so he could slice through them as cleanly as he had the three men outside.
For the next half hour he was a ghost, slipping through the darkness and adding to the number of dead with every passing minute, with Darcy whispering in his ear the location of his next target.

Halfway through his parade of death, his left hand crushed through the throat of yet another Hydra agent. He ducked into a nearby storage closet awaiting his next order.

“Darce?” he whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Could you maybe not hum in my ear while I’m trying to kill people?”

“Dude, this is stressful as shit and Queen always calms me down. Also, ’Another One Bites the Dust’ is literally the perfect song for your Hydra murder spree.”

“Darcy,” he growled.

“I know. Sorry. Lone body approaching from the right.”

Bucky sighed and rolled out from his hiding spot to continue his work. He lost count of the bodies.

“Darce, where’s my next target,” he hissed after he’d gone several minutes without coming across anyone. Anyone living, anyway.

“Bucky...there’s no one left. You’re the only heat signature that I’m picking up on…”

“No. No that’s not possible. You should see her heat signature somewhere in the building. Remember, it’ll be much smaller. You’ve missed it. Look again. She has to be here.”

Silence reigned for a few minutes and then, “Bucky, I’m not getting anything...”

Fear and rage twisted in his chest. “Get the lights back up.”

“What?”

“Get the lights back up. Now. She’s here, she has to be, and I will search every room until I find her.”

“...Babe, what if...what if Strucker sent out word before they brought him down? What if they moved her somewhere else?”

Bucky slammed his fist into the wall, breaking through the drywall with ease. “NO! I can’t- I can’t accept that! She has to be here!” he shouted, panting heavily. His voice cracked and quieted as he pleaded with her. “Darce, if she’s not here then I don’t know how I’m supposed to find her, so she’s gotta be here. So just... please, turn the lights back on?”

“Okay, Bucky,” she finally replied. He could hear the unshed tears in her voice.

The lights flickered back to life, showcasing his bloody handiwork, and he began the slow process of sweeping every single room in that whole damn building, but finding nothing. As panic and despair started to grip him tightly, he began pacing back and forth down the long main hallway that lead from the font of the building to the very back where a giant mural of the Hydra symbol hung proudly on the wall. His brain tilted and whirled through possibilities as he continued his mad pacing, ending each lap with that stupid fucking skull and tentacles staring down mockingly at him.

He paced down the hallway one last time, damn near running, and in a fit of rage he launched his
metal fist through that horrid thing, crushing through the tile and straight through the drywall behind it. He reared back, pummeling his fist into the mural over and over, slowly bludgeoning a hole as big as his waist into it and the wall behind.

Until he noticed something strange.

He leaned in, peering closer at the hole he’d created and what lay behind it.

A door. It was a fucking door.

Triumph swept through him as he called out to Darcy in the comms. “Babe, I think I’ve found her!”

“Wait what? I’m not picking up on anything but you still.”

“I found a hidden door.” His victorious grin was making his cheeks hurt, but he didn’t give a damn. He started ripping away the mural in earnest.

“A hidden door? Seriously? Hydra are all a bunch of flipping drama queens. But that still doesn’t explain why I can’t get a read on anyone.”

“Best guess is Mylar foil insulation,” he muttered as he crawled through the space he'd created to get a closer look at the steel door. He noted a panel installed next to the door and flipped it open, quickly confirming it was a handprint scanner. He turned back to the wall he'd created, spotting another panel that was likely used to lower and raise that section of wall. He didn't have the patience to fiddle with it so he crawled back through the hole in the wall and began stomping back down the hallway in search of the body of one of the higher ranking agents in the facility.

“Bucky! Are you even listening to me?” Darcy's voice sounded shrill in his ear.

“Uh, no sorry,” he said, not really paying attention as he'd found the body he was looking for and began dragging it back to the wall.

“I asked what in the hell you were doing?”

Bucky blinked rapidly. “What do you think I'm doing? I'm getting in that door.”

“What?!”

Bucky jerked and winced, pulling the comm from his ears slightly. “Jesus, Darce, you trying to deafen me?” He pushed the comm back in when he was sure she wasn't going to shriek at him again. “What do you mean, ‘what?’ She's behind that door, so I'm gonna get that goddamn door open.” He grunted and shifted himself and the body he was dragging through the wall, letting it slump to the floor.

“But-but... no. Bucky, I can't see because of that tin foil shit, how am I supposed to warn you?! What if there's fifty men hiding behind that door? We don't even know where it goes to, it's not in the fucking schematics! No! Just no. We’ll come back with reinforcements. I can't let you go in there blind. You need to get your ass out of there now.”

“I'm not leaving without her. If we leave, if we wait for reinforcements, it'll be too late. The next shift of guards will show up and they'll move her.” His voice was low and he tried to keep his tone patient.

“If she's even still here...Get out of there. Now. I can't let you--”
Bucky growled, his temper flaring at her words. “Let me? Let me? I didn't realize that I was yours to command now. She is here! I know she's here! And I'm going to get her, with or without your permission, komandir.” With the last flare of his temper he slammed the palm of the dead agent down onto the panel. There was a high pitched buzz and then the locks on the door unbolted and he turned the handle, nearly wrenching it off in his rage.

“Bucky,” Darcy sobbed in his ear and he paused, instant regret souring his gut. “Bucky, I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean it like that, I'm so sorry, I would never try to-to control you...I'm just so scared-” She cut off with a rather miserable sniffle and Bucky felt even more like a heel.

“I'm sorry too, I know...I know you wouldn't try to...I know. And I know you're scared. But I have to do this, sweetheart. I can't leave without my little girl. Can't you understand that?” His fingers tightened on the handle as he waited for her snuffling to subside.

“...I understand. I just... be careful. I love you. Please, be careful, Bucky. And keep sending me updates or I might lose my goddamn mind waiting out here.”

“I will when I can. I love you too.” He pushed the door open fully, peering past to see a flight of stairs leading down into the ground. He relayed the information to Darcy.

“A secret basement and/or dungeon. That's great. Just great,” Darcy grumbled in his ear.

“Yes. Definitely not in the schematics either. Which makes sense in a way. Strucker probably had to have the plans on file. Wouldn't want the higher ups to know about his sick little side venture.” He stepped on to the first step with a heavy boot, swallowing back the bitterness in his throat.

“Fucking Hydra.”

“You're telling me,” he mumbled absentmindedly, carefully making his way down the steps with gun drawn and hackles raised. “Hey Darce, you wanna give me some darkness? If you can't tell me where they're coming from, at least I'll be able to see anyone before they can see me.”

“On it.”

The lights lining the wall flickered out and he lowered his night vision goggles back over his eyes before proceeding down the steel steps that spiraled straight down from the upper landing. It made him nervous, not being able to see what was around each curve of the stairwell. He stepped lightly, hoping to muffle the sound of his boots, and kept his breathing shallow in order to better hear an enemy approaching.

“Hey babe, remember when I said keep me updated? Yeah you've been quiet too long and I'm slightly panicking. So if you're being quiet to stay hidden, tap the comm once for yes. If you're actually dead and your body is lying broken in the super secret stairwell, then tap twice for no.”

Bucky rolled his eyes but lifted his free hand to tap once at his comm. “Oh thank god,” Darcy gushed quietly in his ear. “Let's keep this yes/no system in place when you have to keep quiet, okay?”

He reached up and tapped once, again. “Okay awesome. This is a great system. I am a tactical genius.” She was quiet a long moment and then, “Soooo, you wearing any underwear under your tac pants?”

Bucky paused on the stairs, frozen in bewilderment. He exhaled quietly through his nose and shook his head. He should have known that this woman would always defy expectation and spit on appropriate black ops behavior. He shook his head a second time and began moving down the steps
again. He lifted a hand to tap twice at his ear, a smirk on his lips.

“Fucking knew it,” she muttered.

Bucky didn't respond. He was a bit distracted, having finally gotten to the bottom of the staircase to be met by yet another door, though this one was wooden and looked like a run of the mill front door from any suburban home in the continental U.S. Knocker and peephole, included.

As there was obviously no one in the staircase with him now, he quietly relayed his discovery to Darcy before he began running his hands along the edge of the door and along the walls on either side, searching for a security panel of some kind, but finding none. He ran his left palm over the surface of the door to sense any discrepancies in the vibrations of the material against his hand but again found none. It was just...a door. A plain, unassuming front door. He palmed the door knob.

The damn thing wasn't even locked.

He took a slow, deep breath through his nose to brace himself and then turned the knob fully and pushed the door open a scant few inches. When nothing exploded, he stooped low and peered in through the crack he made, then pushed the door open a few more inches. Bit by bit, he opened the door on silent hinges until he was able to squeeze through. He found himself crouching through a foyer that opened up into a living area to his right and a kitchen to his left.

It was all very domestic, like he'd stepped into someone's home instead of into the bowels of a Nazi science facility. Bucky swept through the kitchen silently, assuring himself it was empty before moving on to the living room. His free hand brushed over a hand knitted shawl that lay across the back of the sofa, thrown casually by whoever it was that lived there.

He froze and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end as his ears picked up on a soft sound that carried down the hall that was attached to one end of the living room. He drew his weapon up with both hands and crept down the hall, his back to the wall and his pace steady.

“Your breathing kicked up, you find something?”

He reached up to tap at his comm once and then returned his concentration to the rhythmic sounds emanating from the last doorway at the end of the hall. He moved closer, pausing at the threshold and leaning the slightest bit in to peek inside.

It was a bedroom, small and plain, with a queen sized bed tucked in one corner opposite a small dresser and a rocking chair in another corner. A rocking chair which was currently occupied and had been the source of the noises he'd heard.

Sitting in the chair was what appeared to be an unarmed woman. It must have been pitch black for her, sitting in the cave darkness of an underground fortress, but for Bucky she was cast in the greenish glow of his goggles and it gave her a sickly look. She couldn't have been more than forty, and had rather severe looking cheekbones, made all the more harsh by the apprehensive twist of her mouth. Though her features were sharp and her figure slender, it was obvious to Bucky that she'd seen no combat training of any kind. Her hands were too soft and she sat too loosely in her chair to be confused for a soldier.

He was still wary of this unknown woman, but he lowered his gun slightly and stepped closer. Before he could make his presence known, he was met with the guttural syllables of the Sokovian tongue.

“Who is there?” the woman asked. Well, he was fairly sure that's what she asked. His Sokovian
could still use some work. He remained quiet, inching closer to the woman, who in turn stopped her rocking and reached a hand out into the darkness. “Who’s there?” she asked again, though this time in Russian.

Something about the harsh tongue of his old masters rankled him and prompted his reply. “A ghost,” he ground out in Russian.

The woman inhaled sharply, her eyes snapping to the direction of his voice, searching blindly for him. “Soldat,” she muttered under her breath, the syllables filled with fear.

“Da.”

“You are the father, then? You've come for the girl?” Her voice had lost some of its tremble and he witnessed a strange steeliness enter her eyes.

“Da,” he growled with every bit of menace he possessed. He was shocked when his pronouncement was met not with fear, but a glowing smile from the strange woman.

“Oh thank god. I’d given up hope that you would come.”

What the hell?

Bucky paused, not sure how to respond or even how to process her response. “Excuse me? Is this supposed to be a trap?” He stretched his senses back out, listening for any oncoming attack he could have been distracted from.

“No, no!” Her eyes went even wider in the dark, hands splayed in front of her and waving in his general direction. “I'm trying to help her. To save her from this place. Didn't you get the files I sent?”

His brow furrowed in confusion and then, “Wait, that was you? You sent that USB to the Sokovian authorities?”

A triumphant smile spread over her thin lips. “Yes! I did.” Her smiled faded somewhat and her tone slipped into something that would suit a school marm. “Why did you not come sooner, Soldat? I sent that envelope months ago, and at grave personal risk. Do you think so little of your child's life that you would fritter away her days, leaving her to wait in a state of constant danger?”

Bucky spluttered and searched for words, but found nothing coming out of his mouth except for a demand that Darcy turn the lights back on so he could give this woman a proper dressing down for assuming he’d ever leave his kid in danger like she was suggesting.

“Bucky, you wanna tell me who you've been chatting with before I go and blow your last bit of security?”

“A-a-a woman! Some strange woman who claims she is the one that got us the intel on this place and my kid.”

“Anonymous helpful USB sender? I don't buy it. Sounds shady as shit.”

“I agree...but she is either a very good liar or I've lost my touch at being able to read microexpressions. I..I think she might be telling the truth.”

A sigh came from his comm and then Darcy replied, “Lights on in 3, 2, 1.”

Bucky pushed the goggles up his forehead before he could be blinded by the lights flickering back
on. He watched the woman as she blinked furiously, trying to adjust her eyes to the now fully lit bedroom. When her eyes finally landed on him, she gave a slight gasp. He would have missed it if his hearing wasn't so damn good.

“What? What is it?”

She shook her head, an enigmatic smile tilting her lips. “It's nothing. You will see for yourself soon enough…” she trailed off, then tilted her head and gazed at him with thoughtful brown eyes. “You must have many questions for me. I can see the curiosity in your eyes. Your daughter gets the same look. Though hers lacks the suspicion that yours holds.”

Bucky’s breath caught in his throat before the first question he could think of pushed forward. “Are you… the mother?”

She gave a short, bitter bark of laughter. “No. I am not. I don't think that poor girl lived much past the umbilical cord being cut. She had fulfilled her duty as incubator.”

“Who was she?”

The woman shrugged. “A desperate woman. Desperate enough to agree to whatever Strucker told her he was doing.”

“Who are you, then? Are you allied with Hydra? Why did you send that intel?”

“I am no one. Not anymore. And no, I am not allied with that Nazi scum. I am as much a prisoner as your daughter is. I sent that information because I love that little girl and I couldn't bear to let that monster harm her as he planned.”

“Where is she?” His voice trembled and his hand tightened on his gun.

The woman gestured with her head. “Next door. Sleeping in her bed. Would you like to see her?”

Something seized up in his chest and he shook his head sharply. “No. No, not yet. I don't trust you. I need some more precise answers about who you are and what the hell you’re doing here.”

The woman sighed. “Very well. Sit down, Soldat. It is not a very nice story that you are about to hear.”

He eyed her warily and then took a seat on the edge of the bed, keeping his eyes on her the entire time. He watched as she drew a slow breath, her eyes focusing on her hands that she held tightly clasped in her lap.

“My name is Irina and, in short, I am here to serve as a wet nurse and a caretaker to your daughter. Strucker had it in his head that a well-balanced, healthy child should be breastfed and cared for by an experienced mother, though not by the actual mother of the child. Biological mothers tend to rebel when you take their child from them when the child is old enough to begin their Hydra indoctrination.” She glanced at him with a wry twist to her mouth. Cold dread filled his stomach when he voiced his next question. “You said ‘experienced mother’... where are your children?”

“I imagine they are with their father, in whatever shallow grave Strucker decided to put them in. I had three of them. A girl and then two boys. 15, 7, and the youngest was younger than your daughter is now when Strucker and his men came into my home and murdered my loves.” Her eyes were red rimmed, but she met his gaze with unwavering strength.
It felt like the breath had been knocked from him and all he could do was ask, “Why?”

She shrugged. “I met his qualifications as a mother and wet nurse. We lived in the mountains, alone. We could go weeks without seeing another family. It made it easy for him to make me disappear without kicking up a fuss.” She grew quiet, eyes focusing back to her hands that twisted in her lap. “Or perhaps it was punishment. I went to university before I married my husband. Was a learned woman, majored in computer engineering. Joined an anti-Hydra organization. Participated in protests and wrote scathing articles.” She shrugged again, her shoulders slumping and her upper body curving in on itself. “It certainly felt like they were punishing me.”

“How the hell...?”

Irina gave a wan smile and nodded. “Awful, isn’t it? They stormed into my home, ripped my child from my arms, made me watch as they executed my family, then beat me to unconsciousness. When I awoke I was...here.” She gestured at the room around her. “I was here and Strucker was spouting off about how I was about to help mold the next Fist of Hydra or some such nonsense. I was still very disoriented at the time, what with the slight concussion and having just watched my family die, so I didn’t quite pick up on what he was telling me. Not until he ordered one of his goons to bring your daughter into the room and then it clicked for me what he intended when he left me alive.” Her eyes turned hard and she pinned Bucky under the force of her glare.

“They wanted to replace my child with theirs. They expected me to nurse and care for their Hydra progeny and I was furious! How dare they? How dare that awful man try to foist off his infant on me? Did my son mean so little to this world that his death was conscionable? What made the babe in his arms so goddamn important that my son's life meant nothing in comparison?” She was shouting by the end and Bucky winced under her hardened gaze but stayed quiet.

She gave him a measured look and took a slow breath, calming herself before continuing. “Those were my thoughts, that was my rage when they brought her in. In my anger, I decided that I would kill the babe, as soon as they handed her to me. I'd learned first hand that it takes very little effort to break the neck of an infant, and your daughter couldn't have been more than a few days old at that point. So very fragile.” She held up a hand, stopping Bucky from responding. “Soldat, calm yourself. Your daughter is alive and well. If I had killed her, I would surely have died within moments of her.”

“You changed your mind?”

“Yes, of course I did. I had never felt such rage as I did that day, but I am not a murderer. I am a mother. When they pressed her into my arms, I told myself that I was going to do it. I reached for her neck and she was so soft. And then she woke, squalling and red and angry, and I knew that cry. She was hungry. She was just a hungry baby that wanted to eat. It wasn't her fault that she'd somehow ended up in the hands of Hydra. It wasn't her fault my family was dead. She wailed like a little lamb in my arms and all I wanted to do was nurse her. I had already gone so long without nursing my own child, it was a relief to feed her. It calmed us both, though I admit I cried the whole time.”

The woman was beginning to cry again now, Bucky noted. Silent tears slipped down her face and another wave of guilt rose and crested inside him. More people, more children, murdered because of him.

“Bucky?” Darcy’s voice cut softly through the haze of guilt. “You okay? Your breathing is going all...ragged.”

He sniffed and wiped his nose. “Yeah, ‘m alright, sweetheart. Irina, um, the woman, she’s been raising my kid. Strucker murdered her family and brought her here to care for my girl.”
“Oh shit, that's… that's…”

“Yeah.”

“I don't feel so bad about shooting that guy now.”

Bucky snorted and jerked his head in agreement. He could burn all of Hydra to the ground and not feel a single lick of guilt about it.

“Who are you speaking to?” the woman asked, tucking her legs up into her chair and rubbing her hands over her arms.

“My...partner.”

She raised a brow. “Do you always speak to your partner with such a tender voice?”

Bucky ducked his head, not quite sure why he was blushing. “Um, she's also my...um, we’re together.”

“Do you love each other?” she asked bluntly. It took him off guard but he nodded sharply.

“Good. I would not want to hand her over to a man incapable of love. The guards here said you were no longer under the thumb of Hydra. That you'd broken programming and gone running back to Captain America. I had hopes that that was a better indication of who you are as a man than your time as the Winter Soldier.” She smiled softly at him for a moment until some thought occurred to her and her expression soured. “Though I am rather upset that you took so long to retrieve her.” Her arms crossed over her chest and her head tilted to the side, silently demanding an explanation.

Bucky lifted a placating hand and hastily explained the series of events that led him to receiving the info she'd sent.

“Those useless, dog-faced idiots! I should have known the Sokovian police would just toss it aside without even looking at it. Fucking bastards.” She devolved into a long string of Sokovian insults that Bucky couldn't quite follow. “It was my intent for the police to immediately shut down Strucker’s facility there and then attempt to contact you and the Avengers about this compound and your child.”

“Well, apparently, Hydra had gotten wind of the unauthorized shit Strucker was up to and decided to use him as a diversion for the Avengers so Hydra could make a play for me. It was pure luck that the Sokovian police even remembered the file you sent and handed it over to Steve. In any case, I did come as soon as I could. Woulda come sooner but my teammates convinced me that babies don't like sneaking out of the country strapped to the bottom of cargo trucks.”

The woman gave a harsh bark of laughter. “Ah, no, they typically do not care for that.” She paused and then asked, “Are you ready to see her?”

He swallowed back on the lump in his throat and nodded, rising slowly to his feet. He holstered his gun at his side while the woman unfolded herself from her rocking chair. She was taller than he was expecting, almost as tall as he was, and her dark hair was pulled back into a long braid. She beckoned him to follow her and padded on bare feet down the hall back towards the living area, stopping at a closed door to his right. Irina reached out to turn the knob, pushing the door open and stepping back for him to pass through.

“She's a good sleeper, your little girl. If you want to touch her, it's unlikely that you’ll disturb her,” she whispered.
Fear and excitement fought for dominance somewhere in his chest as he paused at the threshold, eyes locked on the woman. Her smile was gentle as she shooed him into the room.

“I'll give you some privacy, if you like? I can go make some tea or something?”

Bucky nodded absentmindedly but his hand shot out to grip her firmly by her upper arm as she turned to go. He leaned in close to her. “Stay in the kitchen. Don’t even think about leaving this apartment.”

She smiled sadly. “And where exactly would I go? I mean you no harm, Soldat. I will stay in the kitchen,” she reassured him. He released her, watching her retreating back until she’d turned the corner and even then he listened for her to start rummaging around in the kitchen before turning to his daughter’s bedroom.

The room was dark save for some kind of fancy night light that played a swirl of constellations across the ceiling. It was rather pretty, as was the rest of the room, decorated in soft blues and purples and it seemed such an odd thing to find in a Hydra compound. He wondered briefly if there was some evil Hydra interior decorator somewhere in the world. One with expensive taste, too. Even from this distance he could tell that the wooden crib nestled into one corner of the room was hand carved from expensive lumber.

He crept a single step closer to the bed and then froze. “Darcy,” he whispered urgently. “She's here...I’m in her nursery.”

“Where's Irina?”

“In the kitchen. Giving me a moment.”

“....And? What's baby Barnes like??”

“I don't know. I'm trying to talk myself up to walking over to her crib.”

“You can do it, babe. I’m right here with you....well, you know, mentally, emotionally.”

He huffed a quiet chuckle. “I know, Darce.” He gave himself two more seconds of hesitation before forcing his feet forward. He crept closer and closer to the crib until he was standing against it, peering down at the sleeping form of his infant daughter.

“Bucky?”

“Oh god, Darce,” his voice cracked and trembled, “she's beautiful.” He reached forward with his flesh hand, tremors running along it, and ran his index finger lightly over the curve of her cheek. Her skin was impossibly soft against the calloused pad of his finger. Warm and soft and so perfect.

The little girl burbled in her sleep and turned towards the heat of his hand. He cupped her chubby little cheek in his palm, his thumb brushing over the dimple in her chin. Same as his.

He withdrew his hand slowly from her face, briefly running his fingers through the ash blonde curls she must have inherited from her mother, because Lord knew all the Barneses were dark haired hellions with a penchant for trouble. She might still have inherited the hellion bit, but the blonde hair certainly gave her an angelic look.

He backed away from the crib and out into the hallway quickly, shutting the bedroom door quietly and sliding down to the floor. He buried his face in his hands as relief and joy flooded through him, pushing tears to spill from his eyes and quiet sobs to shake his chest.
“Darcy, she's perfect. And-and whole and she looks like my sister a little bit and she's--” he broke off with a choked sob and could hear similar sounds coming from his comm. He rubbed his palms into his eyes. “Darcy I love her and I have to keep her, please we gotta keep her.”

“Of course, Bucky. Of course we're keeping her.” He could hear the smile in her voice and it warmed him. “Get our girl, Bucky. It's time to go home.”

He smiled through his tears, his cheeks aching with the joy of it. “Yeah. It is.”
Bangity-Bang pt. 3: The Real Big Bang Followed by a Real Bad Bang

Chapter Summary

We get to know Irina a little better and they all get the hecking heck back to the warehouse.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING OUT THE BUTT FOR THIS CHAPTER:
Brief mention of past self harm.
Attempted suicide.
If you need it, please message me on tumblr requesting a chapter synopsis so you can skip this bit. Take care of yourselves, my loves!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was a very beautiful man, even as he sat crying in her hallway. His bloodshot eyes and dripping nose couldn’t even diminish his obvious good looks. Irina was not all that surprised by his attractiveness. Rybka, her little fish, was one of the loveliest babies she’d ever seen, so it would make sense that her father would be just as pretty.

She lifted the whistling kettle from her stovetop and set it aside and then pulled down two cups from her cupboard, placing a teabag in each. Steam swirled up from her little china teacups as she tipped her kettle over each, suffusing the kitchen with the warm, earthy smell of chamomile. She set her kettle back down on the stovetop and padded back towards the Soldier, pausing a few feet from him and clearing her throat.

“Soldat, the tea is ready when you are.”

The soldier stared at her blankly for a moment, the poor dear. She’d seen the same look of overwhelmed shock and joy on her own husband’s face when he’d first seen their Mina. Fatherhood always took men by surprise, as if children were an anomaly that they couldn’t quite believe in until the babe was right there in their arms. Irina shuffled the bittersweet memory aside before it could start to pierce her heart. Now was not the time for her to dwell on her loss.

The soldier rose to his feet slowly, swiping his strange metal palm over his face and scrubbing the tears from his cheeks. “My name is Bucky. You don’t have to keep calling me Soldier. I don’t do that anymore,” he rumbled in his low timbre.

Irina wrinkled her nose. “Did your mother not love you? That doesn’t seem a very fitting name for the once Fist of Hydra.”

He smiled slightly, showing a flash of straight, white teeth. “She probably hated me some days, I was a little bit of a shit growing up, but she named me James. Bucky is a nickname.”

“Ah. I see. I think I’d prefer to call you James, if you don’t mind. I don’t think I’d be able to call you
‘Bucky’ with a straight face.”

The man gave a full and hearty laugh at that. It was a pleasant sound and it made him even prettier. Good. Rybka would be loved by a father who knew how to laugh properly. Children should know joy like that in their homes. James rattled off a string of English words, likely to his woman on the other end of the device in his ear. Irina was struck with regret that she’d not kept up her study of English once she’d graduated from university. She could still read it fairly well, but listening to him speak, she could only catch maybe every third word. Ah well, soon enough she wouldn’t need to use it.

“James is fine,” he replied and followed her towards the kitchen.

Irina flicked a hand towards where their cups sat on the counter and turned to open her fridge. “Cream? Sugar?” she asked.

James nodded. “Both, please.”

She pulled the cream out and then grabbed the sugar bowl from her pantry, noting the way James sniffed surreptitiously at the cup he’d picked up from the counter. She chuckled and asked, “Still don’t trust me, James? I promise you, it’s not poisoned.”

He shrugged and his lips thinned in an embarrassed little grin. “Old habits?”

She snorted and handed him the cream and sugar with a roll of her eyes. She didn’t blame him though. She’d spent the first three months closely inspecting each delivery of groceries that the guards had sent her. Being under the thumb of Hydra could make you twitchy like that. She watched with some degree of disbelief as he dumped nearly half of her sugar bowl in his teacup.

She wanted to tell him to slow down but she reminded herself that she wasn’t his mother and kept her opinions to herself. But, really. He was going to give himself a mouthful of cavities. His eyes glazed as he sipped as his tea, obviously listening to his woman and then responding in a placating tone that she’d recognize anywhere. Wherever she was, his partner was not a very happy woman at that moment.

When he grew quiet again, Irina set her cup down and asked him, “Something wrong?”

“Yes. Well, no. My girl...she’s getting restless waiting outside. Wants to know why the hell I’m having tea instead of getting my ass out of here.”

“She’s not happy, that’s for sure.”

“An understandable question. I won’t stop you, of course. Please, be on your way if you are ready to go.” She had matters of her own to attend to, after all.

James shifted in his seat, looking somewhat uncomfortable. “Well, there was a few things I’d like to clear up with you first.” Irina tilted her head in acquiescence, waiting for him to continue.

“I’ve been thinking...maybe it would be best if you came with us? The baby, she’s still nursing, right? And you know her best, what she likes, how to put her to bed, her favorite toys, her different cries, her-everything. She doesn’t know us and I don’t know how she’ll do just being carted off with complete strangers and I just--”

She lifted a hand, stopping his nervous babbling. “James. Be at peace. There is nothing left for me here and certainly nothing left for me back in Sokovia. I will go with you.” She paused, thinking over what she’d said. She didn’t like to lie, so she amended, “At least, I will go with you until I know that you and your partner will be able to take care of Rybka.”
James’ head snapped up. “What did you call her?” he asked urgently.

Irina blinked at him. “Rybka,” she repeated. She searched for the words in English. “Little fish,” she said, placing her palms together and making a little swimming motion. “That is not her actual name, of course. But I refused to call her ‘Subject-212’ and she has loved the water since she was very very small. Is everything alright, James?”

The man in question looked like someone had sucker punched him in the gut. He shook his head slowly, clearing whatever distant memories pulled at him. “I...I thought you called her Rebecca. That was my little sister’s name.” His voice grew soft and tender. “She loved the water, too.”

Her heart twisted in her chest and she couldn’t help the hand she placed on his shoulder. “Perhaps...perhaps that is the name you should give her, then?”

James bit at his lips, dropping his gaze to his tea. “I think...yes, I think that would be fitting.” He sniffled and turned his head away from her and she had the good grace to release him and look away.

She gave him a few moments to gather himself and then clapped her hands together. “Well. If we are to leave, then we should start gathering what we will need and be on our way as soon as possible. It is unkind to keep your woman waiting too long and the next shift of guards will be arriving in a few hours. I’d rather prefer to be far from this place when that happens.”

James agreed and they made their way through the apartment, picking and choosing what was necessary for their journey. There wasn’t all that much. Irina was a walking food source, the weather was mild and warm clothing wasn’t particularly necessary. James said he had a good supply of diapers and wipes back at his base. Really all of Ryb-- Rebecca’s needs were easily met with very little to pack. Irina dressed herself briskly, pulling on her most comfortable running shoes.

She’d been surprised when her guards had allowed her to go for (heavily monitored) morning runs around the compound. Apparently, the new Fist of Hydra’s food source needed regular fresh air and exercise for the ultimate sustenance production. Free range breast milk. Joy.

That had ultimately been their downfall, however. They had all assumed that the wife of a poor Sokovian shepherd would be an idiot. They thought nothing of leaving her to wait in the head guard’s office while they went on a coffee break before her run. Fifteen minutes had been all she needed to filch a USB and download as much pertinent information as she could find.

Smuggling the file into the mail cart had been significantly harder, but she’d been blessed with mile long legs and she’d damn well use them for a distraction if it meant that she could get that little girl to safety. It had made her sick to her stomach when she’d overheard the guards discussing the extent of Strucker’s plans and the fate of all those Sokovian children. She couldn’t stand by and let that demon of a man destroy another innocent child. She just couldn’t.

Fully dressed, she packed a small bag with a few days’ worth of clothes. She wanted to burn all of it in a great heap, but she supposed walking into town stark naked might draw more attention than they desired.

She left everything else behind in her bedroom. She didn’t want any of it and she wouldn’t need any of it. She met up with James in the living area where he stood holding the small bag they’d packed for Rebecca.

“I think that’s everything, except for your daughter. If we’re fairly quiet, I should be able to get her into her carrier without her waking. Especially if you help me with the straps.”
James nodded and glanced at the ceiling. “Yeah, I’d rather she was asleep while we’re upstairs,” he said with a shudder.

She reached a hand out to place on his arm. “Even if she woke, she is too young to remember anything she might see. It will be alright, James.”

He smiled wanly at her and followed her back towards Rebecca’s bedroom. They entered quietly and Irina scooped up the carrier where it lay across the top of the rocking chair that was nestled into one corner of the room. She buckled it around her hips and stepped over to the crib, motioning James to follow.

Bending over the edge, she cradled the little girl into her arms and then nestled her against her chest. With James’ help, she pulled the carrier up to cover Rebecca’s back, and Irina slipped her arms through the shoulder straps on either side, with James buckling the straps between her shoulder blades, effectively securing the little girl to her chest.

Rebecca didn't even stir, just slumped into her warmth, one fat little cheek squished to Irina’s sternum, her plump lips parted and drooling slightly. James stared, in awe of his child. He brought one hand up to touch the child but hesitated, glancing at Irina.

“She’s your daughter, James. You don’t need to ask permission to touch her.”

His answering smile was small and a little watery, but he stroked the knuckle of his index finger over Rebecca's cheek, his smile growing larger at the little sigh that escaped her mouth at the touch.

“Come, James. It’s time we were on our way,” she urged gently.

The trip up the stairs was brief, with James leading the way, two bags under one arm and holding out his gun in his free hand. It was an unnecessary precaution. His woman had informed him that no reinforcements had arrived and none of the bodies upstairs had suddenly sprung back to life. But having a gun in his hand seemed to be a strange comfort to him, like a child with a cherished blanket.

Ah well, who was she to judge how a man went about keeping himself sane? She absentmindedly ran a hand over her thigh where she’d carved the names of her husband and children with a kitchen knife during one of those first dark days after she’d been captured. We all have our strange comforts, she supposed.

She was horribly unprepared for the amount of carnage throughout the building as they made their hasty exit. There was a brief respite from the gore as they stopped at the, thankfully empty, office of the head guard. James pulled out a slim black plastic box emblazoned with a large letter “S.” It was likely some kind of external hard drive but far more advanced than anything she’d ever seen. He slapped it onto the side of the computer sitting atop the desk and waited patiently as the box began to give a pretty little light show that equated to the entirety of the computer’s memory being backed up to the box.

When they exited the office and were faced once again with the hallway of bloodied bodies, she froze in abject revulsion and would likely have been standing there still if James had not holstered his gun and handed her the bags, using his newly freed hands to cover her eyes and guide her out of the building. It was through strength of will alone that she did not vomit. It just wouldn’t do to get sick all over the baby.

It was with great relief that she took her first gulp of fresh air as they stepped out of the building at last. Irina was quite finished with having to breathe in the scent of freshly spilled blood. It was an experience that she would prefer to never go through again. James finally removed his hand from her
eyes and his arm where it had been around her back, opting to take back the bags and pull his gun from its holster once more.

He walked at a quick clip towards the forest that wrapped around the property and she did her best to keep up and not jostle the little one too much. They had entered the tree row by a good bit when a small, brunette woman popped up from the underbrush. A small woman with a very large gun. Irina watched as the other woman tossed the gun aside in favor of wrapping both her arms around James as they drew near.

This close to her, Irina could see just how lovely she was. And how petite. “Oh James,” she exclaimed. “You did not tell me that your woman was so tiny! I could fit her in my pocket!”

James laughed and the woman rattled off a bit of English that was entirely too fast for Irina to ever follow. He must have translated her words for the woman, who then turned a very pretty pair of blue eyes on her, slightly narrowed, and hands planted on shapely hips. She said something to Irina, which again she could not follow, and then thumped James on the chest and gestured towards Irina.

“Oh,” he started awkwardly. “She says that you can keep your, um, ‘high and mighty’ comments to yourself? Sorry, I’m not sure she trusts you yet,” he ended lamely with a shrug.

Irina smiled gently at the woman. “Please tell her I meant no harm or offence. I am sorry for upsetting your wife, Soldat. I am not usually so bad at first impressions.” The man blushed a lovely shade of red and shyly explained that the rings were part of their cover.

“For now,” Irina responded. She couldn’t help it. She could see that the two were very much in love and she had always been a sucker for love stories with happy endings. It was a shame that she had been denied the same.

James didn’t respond to her dig, turning to his woman to relay her apology and then making a quick introduction, exchanging names between the women. Irina held her hand out for the woman to shake. “Darcy, hello,” she said in greeting. She couldn’t remember much English but she knew the basic greeting at least. And strangely enough, how to ask “what color shoes does the boy have?” So helpful, her memory.

The other woman reached out hesitantly to clasp her hand and Irina did her best to give a reassuring smile. When they’d released one another, she beckoned Darcy closer and waved a hand over Rebecca’s head. “Baby?” she asked. “Um...look?”

The woman’s face lit up with genuine delight and she nodded and moved closer. Irina bent at the knees so that Darcy was able to peek into the top of the carrier. The shorter woman gave a small gasp and then muttered softly to James, reaching out to stroke her fingers through Rebecca’s soft curls. Tears sprang to the younger woman’s eyes as she glanced between the babe and her lover. It comforted some anxious part of Irina’s heart to see the amount of affection flowing from the woman. Darcy would be a good mother to the little one. Loving and kind. It soothed her to know this about Rebecca’s new family. All would be well for the babe once Irina was gone.

With introductions aside, the two lovers took off back towards the compound, rigging it heavily with explosives. When they returned to Irina and Rebecca, they led her to the chain link fence that surrounded the property, cutting out a section of the fencing so that she could easily walk through. When they had walked perhaps a mile away from the place that had been her home and her prison for close to eight months, James set off the remote detonator he carried with them and a thunderous explosion shook the earth. The two lovers held each other’s gaze, something unspoken passing between them before they returned to their brisk pace.

Irina and her aching feet were greatly relieved when they finally reached the old warehouse that they’d been using as a base. They must have seen how exhausted she was and offered one of their sleeping bags for her to rest in. She’d accepted graciously, carefully unstrapping the carrier from around her and Rebecca. She looked up to see James watching them intently.

“Would you like to hold her?”

“Yes. If that’s alright?” He looked at her with steel blue eyes, chewing the corner of his mouth and breaking her heart all the while.

“Of course it’s alright. Come get your daughter, James.”

He stepped closer and she shuffled the still sleeping infant into his arms, her heart melting at the look on his face when Rebecca turned her little face to nuzzle into the side of his neck. He held her curled against his chest, one large hand supporting her rump and the other rubbing slow circles over her back. Almost instantly he started swaying in the slow side to side that every parent knows.

Irina fell asleep to the sight of a father rocking his little girl for the first time. It was a sight she’d seen before and it cut open wounds that were still so fresh. Her thumb traced back and forth over the names on her thigh. She was thankful for the exhaustion that yanked her into sleep before she could completely break apart.

She woke a few short hours later to the sound of Rebecca’s gurgling laughter. Irina opened her eyes a bit and watched a brief moment as Darcy and James cuddled the little girl between them, making ridiculous faces and voices to get the girl to laugh again. She closed her eyes with a smile and sank back into sleep. Rebecca would be squalling for her breakfast soon enough, might as well get a few more minutes of rest while she could.

***

The following day was a busy one, though they didn’t actually do anything other than talk, with James being the patient translator. Darcy had warmed to her quickly, having deemed Irina a person worth trusting. The other woman seemed a good soul, and Irina would have cherished her as a lifelong friend in another life. It saddened her somewhat to know that their friendship would not last more than a few hours.

Now that she had seen them with Rebecca, had seen what kind of people they were, how they loved each other, she was certain. She knew Rebecca was in safe, good hands so Irina could in good conscience leave her with them and do what she needed. James had told her that morning that a contact of theirs was going to be delivering fake documents for her in two days’ time so they could pass through the border over to Romania. She hated that they were going through all that trouble for nothing.

When Darcy and James left to pick up her papers from the drop point, Irina stayed behind with Rebecca, saying her last goodbyes to the only thing left in this world that she cared about. They were asleep in one of the sleeping bags long before the other two made it back, with Irina curled around Rebecca, her nose buried in those sweet curls, breathing in the last bit of her sweet baby smell.

When Rebecca woke in the middle of the night, Irina nursed her one last time and tried to keep her tears from falling on the little girl. When she was finished, she carefully placed the babe between her
parents’ sleeping forms. They shifted in their sleep, adjusting to accommodate the little one before settling back into a deep sleep once more.

When Irina was sure that they were all three content and in a peaceful slumber, she rose from her bedding. She walked silently on bare feet over to the metal desk where an array of the couple’s weaponry lay neatly on the desktop. She hesitated, not sure which would best suit her purpose, before choosing a handgun that seemed large enough to meet her needs and small enough to fit her hand. She gripped the cool plastic, lifting the gun from the table with nimble fingers.

She turned to look one last time at the sleeping forms of the little family. “Goodbye,” she whispered and then left them behind, slipping down the steel staircase and across the warehouse floor.

She stepped out of the building into cool moonlight. It was a full moon that night, with a clear sky filled with stars. Yakov and the children had loved nights like that, when the moon and stars were so bright that you could see all the world clear as day. The pinpricks of starlight blurred and smeared as she raised the muzzle of the gun to her temple. She would see her loves very soon or she would die looking at something they had cherished. Either way, she was content with her end.

***

Bucky wasn’t certain what woke him, but his mind snapped to awareness. Darcy lay next to him, with his sweet Rebecca between them, both his girls breathing deeply. And drooling. Just a little bit. He craned his head around to check on Irina, only to find her bedding empty. Some feeling of foreboding sank into his belly, prompting him to his feet. When he noticed one of his pistols missing from the desktop, the feeling rose to an overwhelming roar of alarm.

His feet had him down the stairs and halfway across the warehouse floor before his brain had even caught up with them. He stepped out of the building, and could see Irina standing a few yards away, her back to him, staring up at the stars. Her arms hung at her sides and her right hand shook around the gun she had gripped in it. When he saw her start to raise the gun, he broke into a run, the seconds slowing and almost stilling as he attempted to outtrace the ascent of the barrel of the gun towards her head.

He was nearly to her when he flung out his metal hand, grasping the barrel of the gun and shoving the muzzle towards the sky a split second before her finger curled over the trigger. The sound of the shot exploded over the parking lot and he used the force of the recoil to help wrench the gun from her hand.

She turned to him with wide, brown eyes, tears falling heavily now. She was screaming at him in Sokovian then, beating at his arms and trying to grab the gun from his outstretched hand. He tossed the gun as far from them as he could and snatched Irina around her arms when she turned to run after it. With her arms pinned to her sides, she screamed and kicked back at him, her speech finally falling into the recognizable syllables of Russian.

“Please,” she cried. “James, please. Please let me die!” She jerked in his arms and from behind him he could hear that Darcy had joined them.

“Irina, I can’t. I can’t let you do that.” He held her back tighter to his chest, his heart breaking for her. She shrieked in frustration, trying to twist out of his grip one last time before she finally gave up the
fight. Her knees buckled and it was only his arms around her that kept her from falling to the ground. Her screams of pain and rage devolved into gut wrenching sobs of despair.

He sank to his knees with her, keeping his hold on her shoulders but lighter now, merely holding her instead of restraining her. She knelt and rocked in his arms, her shaking hands covering her face, fingers curved like claws and nails digging into her own flesh.

“It hurts, it hurts, it hurts,” she moaned miserably. “My husband, my babies, they’re gone and it hurts so much, James. I cannot live with this anymore.”

He released her shoulders to grip her hands in his, pulling them away so he could look her in the eyes. “Yes you can,” he urged. “I promise you, you can endure this. You just have to keep trying.”

She stared up into his eyes, looking lost and so very fragile. “Why?” she asked. “Why would I want to do that? There is nothing left for me in this life. Nothing.”

“What about Rebecca?”

“She has her own family now. I just want to be with mine.”

“That’s- Irina, no. I know what it’s like, okay? I know what it’s like to have Hydra take everything from you. Your family, your life, your whole world. I have been where you are now, and I promise you, that there is always more to live for.” His eyes traveled up to meet Darcy’s where she was standing a few feet away from them, watching them with alarmed blue eyes. He gave her the briefest smile, hoping it would be enough to reassure her, before turning his attention back to the inconsolable woman in his arms. “Maybe not today, maybe not in this moment, but if you can just survive the pain long enough...if you can endure each day of putting yourself back together, eventually you will find something worth living for again. I promise, Irina.”

She stared back at him, her eyes searching his for a breathless moment until they slid closed and her body slumped forward, shaking with quiet sobs. He let go of her hands to gather her into his chest, rocking her side to side and stroking his palm over the back of her head.

“Come home with us,” he murmured. “There are people there who can help you, like they helped me. Good people who will take care of you, who you can trust. Just, please, come home with us?”

She nodded against his chest and the tight knot of worry lodged there began to loosen. He blinked tears out of his own eyes and then wrapped one arm under her knees and the other behind her back, lifting her up and rising to his feet. He carried her silently back into the warehouse and up the stairs, followed closely by Darcy, and then deposited her into her sleeping bag. Irina didn’t move from the spot, just curled tighter into the fabric of her bedding, her tears slipping soundlessly down her cheeks.

He stepped away from her, nabbing Darcy by the elbow to pull her to the other side of the room. He explained what had happened in a hushed whisper, sweeping the tears from Darcy’s cheeks when she began to cry.

“That poor woman,” she whispered, stepping into his arms and tucking her head under his chin. “We’ll need to keep a close eye on her until we’re back home.”

Bucky hummed in agreement. He was all the more glad that they would be over the border and with Steve and Natasha in a few short hours. Extra eyes and hands would be welcome. For now, he would stay up and watch over the women as they slept.
A short one, I know, but I needed a break after writing that dark of a chapter. It's not my go to writing happy place, but I felt it was true to the character and the trauma she'd endured.
Coming Home

Chapter Summary

The journey back to the Tower.

Chapter Notes

All thanks and love to Lady A. Her patience knows no bounds.

Unless she's at the grocery store, in which case, please do not block the aisles or mistreat the employees because she WILL come after you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Steve had been little, he'd caught pneumonia with alarming frequency and ease. His lungs had always been a bit useless, what with his premature birth during a time when the NICU consisted of just praying the baby didn’t die. His body didn't handle illness very well, which wasn't much of a surprise. The hardest part about getting sick was the way his body liked to swing from dangerously high fevers to disturbingly low temperatures. He'd go from burning up, shaking with febrile seizures, to shivering with chills hard enough to make his brain rattle in his skull, all within a matter of minutes.

Seeing his best friend walk through a crowded train station with his daughter strapped to his chest was a bit like that dizzying sensation of swinging from hot to cold. His brain felt muddled and his skin prickled seeing the soft blonde hair peeking from the top of the...baby carrying thingy that she was tucked into. Hot and cold flashes washed over him in succession, but instead of his lungs trying to kill him, this time it was his goddamn heart.

The organ squeezed and twisted in his chest the closer Bucky got to where he and Nat were standing in the station. Steve hadn't seen his friend look so happy as he did now--with a baby on his chest and Darcy tucked into his side--in a long damn time.

Natasha’s delicate hand squeezed his tightly as she let out a soft huff of laughter. “Crying again, luchik?”

He cut his eyes to the side to give her a glare and blinked back the tears that had indeed been gathering along the corners of his eyes. It was then that Darcy noticed Steve and Nat standing in the crowd. Her eyes lit up and she popped up on her toes to kiss Bucky on the cheek before rushing off through the crowd to make her way to them. Bucky followed behind at a slower pace, carefully picking his way through the mass of moving bodies so as not to jostle his daughter too much. With his now empty hand, he reached out to carefully take the elbow of a tall, slender woman who was shuffling along beside him.

The woman could only be Irina. Bucky had told him about the poor lady over the phone, including the recent attempt to end her own life. She certainly wasn't what Steve was expecting.
He was envisioning a small, frail, weepy woman, more of a Melanie than a Scarlett, but this woman was none of those things. Unlike the soft, short woman he’d imagined, she was all long limbs and sharp lines with curves that were more suggestions than actual sloping lines of flesh. The only thing soft about the woman was perhaps her eyes. She didn’t wear the inconsolable expression he’d been expecting. There were no tears in her eyes, no brows furrowed in sorrow. She just looked like a woman who was very, very tired. Like she could sleep and sleep for days without waking and call it a win. Steve understood the feeling pretty well.

He was distracted from his thoughts about the newcomer by the rapid approach of Darcy. She slammed into him with all her strength and wrapped her arms around his middle, squeezing tight, and then snagging Natasha by the shoulder to pull her into the hug as well. Natasha reacted with one of those put upon sighs that she liked to make when she was pretending like she was above such things as human affection. It was a bald-faced lie. He knew firsthand how much she craved physical contact and human comfort, even if she wasn’t willing to admit it. Not even to herself.

He had enough time to drop a kiss to the tops of both women’s heads before Darcy was stepping away and Bucky was taking her place. It was a little awkward hugging each other around the baby between their chests, but they managed alright, taking extra care not to use too much of their large reserves of physical strength. Mustn’t crush the little squirt.

Speaking of which … Steve craned his head down to get a good look at the baby. Rebecca, Bucky had told him. Familiar grey eyes looked up at him and a fat little fist shot out to grasp at the drawstrings of his hoodie. “She looks like…”

“Yeah. Ma and Becca, I know,” Bucky replied, eyes glued to his daughter's face.

Steve stared hard at his oldest friend. “And you.”

Bucky’s eyes jumped up to his, and a strange smile playing over his mouth. “Yeah,” he said on a sigh.

“Oh my god, you were right.” Darcy's urgent whisper garnered the men's attention as she tugged at Bucky's jacket sleeve. “Bucky, he's doing the chin thing!” She looked at Steve with wide, deeply amused eyes.

“What chin thing?” he asked.

“The wibbly wobbly chin thing when you're trying not to cry!” Darcy practically crowed in triumph.

He folded his arms over his chest. “I do not do that.”

“Yes you do,” Bucky and Natasha replied in chorus, which only sent Darcy into a fit of giggles.

Steve's eyes narrowed. “You're drunk.”

“No, she's soused,” Bucky corrected. “Border crossings involving armed guards make her a little antsy. I made the mistake of suggesting she order a couple cocktails from the dining car.”

“You Eastern Europeans sure know how to make a strong drink,” Darcy hiccuped and thumped Irina, who had been standing stiffly to the side, on the back. Irina blinked owlishly, obviously not following the English exchange, but smiled indulgently at Darcy nonetheless, patting her softly on the shoulder.

Bucky made quick introductions between Irina, Steve, and Natasha. Everyone shook hands and smiled politely at the other and tried very hard to ignore the fact that they all knew Irina had tried to
take her own life the night before and that she knew that they knew. They all sidestepped the looming elephant in the train station gracefully enough and made a hasty retreat to the car that would ferry them to the private airport where the quinjet was waiting for them. Gear, luggage, and baby accoutrements had been loaded, the trunk barely closing around it all, when the adults were brought to the realization that infant car seats were a thing that existed and were necessary when one was traveling with an infant.

Bucky and Steve were not all that concerned about it, having been raised without the things and didn't see what the issue was with just holding Becca in their laps. Irina, who had been the one to bring up the lack of car seat in the first place, planted her hands on her hips and stuck one long finger in their faces, admonishing them on being irresponsible guardians and idiots for suggesting such a thing. That's what Steve was pretty sure she was saying. It was in rapid fire Russian and his Russian was passable at best.

In any case, he found himself standing in the checkout aisle of the Romanian equivalent of a Babies R Us, arms piled high with a top of the line car seat while Bucky chatted with a lady in line, presumably picking up parenting tips. Or trading bomb making recipes.

Who the fuck knew? Steve sure as hell didn't. He really needed to work on his language studies when he got back stateside.

The nice lady and her baby followed them out when they'd checked out, helping them install the contraption into the car with the ease of a veteran parent. And thank god for that. There were about forty thousand buckles and slots and who the hell knew what else. Steve would have been at a complete loss if they'd had to install the damn thing on their own.

Sweating and grunting like a pig, Steve got the last buckle snapped into place and watched as Bucky thanked the woman with a warm smile and a handshake. She made a final parting comment, her eyes dragging noticeably over Steve's body before meeting Bucky's with a wink.

Bucky's eyes went wide in delighted surprise before he threw his head back in laughter. He threw his arm out around Steve then, pulling him into his side and planting a smacking kiss to his cheek. He winked back at the woman, waving cheerily goodbye.

Steve pressed a stiff smile on his own face until the woman had turned and walked away with her baby propped on one hip. As soon as she'd turned away, he confronted Bucky. “What was that about?”

Bucky laughed again and pushed him in the direction of the passenger seat of the car. “Oh nothing, punk. The lady was just complimenting me on my handsome husband.”

“Your what now?”

“My husband. She assumed we were together, picking up our newly adopted child. Apparently Americans looking to adopt come through these parts fairly often. It was easier to go with it than correct her. And the look on your face was pretty priceless,” he snickered as he slid behind the steering wheel.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up, chuckles.”

Bucky did, pulling out of the parking lot and heading back towards the train station where the ladies were camped out sipping coffee in a cafe. Except for Becca, of course, who was happily chewing on a cookie when the men rejoined them. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it, crumbs and soggy cookie bits all over her hands, chest, and face. Nat was holding the little girl in her lap, looking stiff
and absolutely mortified at the mess.

Bucky snorted and asked, “What’s the matter, Natalia? Don’t you like babies?”

She gave him a cutting smile, then softened it a little when she noticed Becca was watching her. “Babies are lovely,” she replied, lifting the girl and handing her off to her father. “From a distance. Send her back to me when she's ready to learn how to pick a lock and fire a gun.”

An idea took root in that shit-stirring part of Bucky's brain as he smiled wickedly at the redhead. “Guess that means there won't be any babies for you and Rogers then?”

Steve stiffened beside him, his eyes going wide as a blush rode high on his cheeks. Nat simply raised a single brow, her eyes darting from Steve's face to his and then down to her nails. “I'm not opposed to producing children. So long as Steve is willing to stay home with the little dears.”

“And then what? You're just not gonna hold them until they outgrow the messy phase?”

“Don't be absurd, James. Steve is a neatnik by nature. I’m sure they’ll all be clean and tidy by the time I get home to tuck them into bed.”

Bucky chuckled and watched the way Steve's blush deepened over his ears. The other man attempted to look cross at the turn in conversation but he had the worst poker face and Bucky could tell he was thoroughly enjoying every single word coming out of the little spider’s mouth.

The sap.

Not that he was any better. Becca had him wrapped around her fingers after having known her for less than a week. She was sweet and fat and happy and everything you'd want in a baby. She'd started smiling when he entered the room now, reaching for him with chubby arms, her cheeks dimpling. He was such a sucker for that mostly toothless grin.

And Darcy was just as bad. Discipline was going to be damn near impossible for either of them to dispense. He'd voiced his concerns about inadvertently turning Becca into a spoiled brat to Irina. The woman had only laughed and assured him that the charm wears off after a while and the first time she tried to stick her fingers in an electrical socket, they'd figure out how to tell her “no” real fast.

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Time and coffee worked wonders in the way of sobering Darcy up. By the time Nat was piloting the quinjet into the upper atmosphere, she was able to fully appreciate Captain America’s interaction with his new niece.

It was bad. Real bad.

As soon as they'd reached altitude and Nat had switched to autopilot, Bucky had pulled Becca from her car seat, bouncing her a bit and checking her diaper before thrusting her into his friend's arms without so much as a “by your leave.” Steve's eyes had gone wide, hands gripping under Becca's armpits, arms extended out and entire body rigid. Becca had taken one look at his face and promptly burst into tears, much to Bucky’s amusement.

“What’d you do? Pinch her?” Bucky chuckled as he retrieved his thoroughly upset daughter.
Steve's lips pinched into a thin line as he gave his friend one hell of a glare. “You know I'm no good with babies, Buck. They've always hated me.”

Darcy's mouth popped open in surprise. “What? Captain America is not good with kids? Say it ain't so! You're the most dad-like of all the Avengers. This is a huge disappointment.”

“Oh he does just fine once they hit about two or three years old and get a little sturdier,” Bucky responded. “For some reason he's real tense with the little ones, and babies can sense the absolute terror coming off him. Which sends them into fits.”

Steve shrugged a shoulder. “It's true. I'm always afraid that I'm going to drop them. They can be so wiggly, you know?”

“Dude, I've seen you wrestle with the Hulk. The odds of a baby wiggling out of your grasp are slim to none,” Darcy giggled, pinching a bicep for emphasis.

“Yeah but I haven’t always been so strong,” Steve replied, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Some of those instincts have stayed with me, unfortunately.”

“Well that throws a real wrench in my plans to have you be the stay at home superparent,” Natasha commented as she made her way over to the rest of the adults. “I suppose you’ll just have to spend more time with this one until we can break you of that fear,” she practically purred, leveling a look at Steve that was not even the tiniest bit wholesome.

Darcy could only watch in delight as Steve swallowed several times in succession, a series of expressions passing over his features before he finally settled on what was a rather determined clench of his jaw, holding his arms out to take Becca from her father again.

Natasha smirked and took Darcy's hand, pulling away to leave the men to figure out babies alone. Steve looked to Bucky, still a bit perturbed by the squirming infant in his arms. Bucky rolled his eyes. “Would it make you feel safer if you sat down with her?” he asked, indicating one of the rows of seats against the edge of the aircraft. Steve nodded sharply and made a beeline for them, sitting stiffly and standing Becca up on his knees.

Bucky sank into the seat next to him, placing one hand to Steve's shoulder and the other behind his daughter's back. “Just breathe,” he murmured.

“You talking to me or the kid?” Steve asked, glancing quickly at Bucky and then back at Becca before she could pull some kinda shenanigans and get the both of them in trouble.

“Both of you. But mostly you. Relax, Steve.”

Steve inhaled slowly, deeply and then forced the muscles of his back and shoulders to release their tension. His grip on the little girl grew a bit more natural and less like he was trying wrangle a slippery fish. Becca found this to be much more to her preferences and gifted Steve with a wide, gummy grin that made him melt a little inside.

“Jesus, Buck. You gonna buy a nunnery anytime soon? She's gonna be a knockout.”

“Nah, there'd be no point. She'd probably just end up being into dames and it'd be like unleashing a fox in a henhouse. She is a Barnes, after all.” He leaned forward and held his forefinger out for her to grab with a (slightly slobbery) tight fist.

“You make a good point,” Steve chuckled.
They sat quietly for a while as Steve continued to acclimate himself to holding an infant. Sitting definitely helped. He felt like the distance to the ground was probably not enough to cause more than a bit of a bump if the worst happened and he dropped her. Having Bucky, and his lightning fast reflexes, near helped quite a bit too. Eventually he was able to relax enough to gently bounce the babe on his knee, leaving his mind free to wander. There was something he had been wanting to say to his friend since he’d come back with Darcy from the Allegheny’s. He was chewing on how to get the words out properly when Bucky cleared his throat.

“Just spit it out punk. I know there's something on your mind.”

“Yeah. Well,” Steve cleared his throat a couple times before continuing. “It's just that...you're different now. More like yourself than I've seen since, I dunno, maybe since before the war. You're so much better than you were when I left you with Darcy.” He said it almost like a question, curiosity gleaming from his honest blue eyes.

Bucky took a breath and let it out slowly, thinking back those six months and how uncomfortable he’d felt in his own skin. He tried to think what exactly it was that had sparked such a change in him. “I...I feel different. Better. Between Darcy and her family and even having Becca...I don't know how to describe it other than they've given me a sense of peace back. I don't feel like a stranger in my own head and body anymore. I'm more in control without the need to actively seek control. I dunno. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. Yeah it does. I'm happy for you.” Steve's smile was soft and if his eyes were a little damp, they both decided to ignore it.

Bucky's returning smile was equally tender as he bumped his shoulder into Steve's. “Good news is, I should be cleared to start going on missions with the rest of the team.”

“Yeah...about that.” Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat and Bucky fixed him with a hard stare.

“What? You don't think I can do it?” he asked, somewhat indignant.

“No, that's not what I'm saying Buck,” Steve replied, trying to placate his friend. “I'm just wondering why you want to go with us. You got a kid now. And Darcy.”

“Yeah and I've also got seventy years worth of Hydra shit that I have to make up for,” he said through gritted teeth.

Steve sighed. “Bucky, are you wanting to atone for what they made you do… or are you wanting to get revenge?”

Bucky opened his mouth, prepared with a sharp retort, but paused, his thoughts lingering on Steve’s words. Finally, his shoulders loosened and slumped with a sigh. “I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t feel like I’m solely responsible for all the death I caused anymore. I'll always feel a little guilty, but not like...before. So yeah, maybe I do want to burn the bastards for everything they took from me. Is revenge such a terrible thing?”

Steve was slow to answer. “Nooooo, not necessarily. But...have you ever thought that maybe the best way for you to get revenge is to go live the life that they took from you in the first place? The life you wanted when we were young? Marry your sweetheart. Settle down. Make a bunch of babies and have cookouts and all that.”

“You think all of that is even possible for someone like me?” he snorted. “Look Steve, all else being equal, I've got skills that the team could use. What kind of man would I be if I let my friends run into
the thick of danger while I’m sitting pretty at home when I know I can help?”

“You wouldn’t have to retire from the life completely. There’s enough of us on the team that we could handle most missions without you...but you could still help us on occasion. When we need the backup or in a consulting capacity? It’d keep you on the Stark payroll without being on the Avengers starting lineup and all the dangers that come with that.” Steve shrugged his shoulders. “Just think about it?”

Bucky pinched his lips together but eventually nodded. “Yeah alright, I’ll think about it. And I want to talk it over with Darcy and get her opinion on it.”

Steve smiled brightly, confident that he'd already won Bucky over. “You do that,” he said, patting him on the knee. “And for the record, yes, I really do think those things are possible for you.”

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The return home, as is usually the case, seemed to pass so much faster than the journey to Romania. Bucky was thoroughly surprised to find the entire team waiting in the landing bay when the jet finally touched down. He'd expected Sam and possibly Bruce would be waiting for them but no, the whole gang was there. There was a feeling of anticipation that seemed to still the bodies waiting outside the jet as the loading ramp lowered.

Steve was the first to step out, followed by Natasha and Irina, with Bucky and his girls bringing up the rear. As Bucky's heavy boots clanged against the ramp, every eye snapped to the sleeping bundle curled against his chest.

It was Pepper, bless that lady, who finally stepped forward and cut the silence and tension in the room. “James,” she greeted warmly. “I know it's been a long journey for you and the little one. I hope I haven't overstepped, but I've arranged one of the suites on the Avengers residential floor to accommodate you and Darcy, along with a nursery for your daughter. If you've no pressing medical concerns, I would love to direct you to your suite so you can get some rest?”

“Yes, thank you, that would be wonderful. Thank you, Pepper,” he sighed in relief, suddenly feeling the exhaustion of the last few weeks finally settle over him all at once. Darcy seemed to be feeling the same as she sagged heavily against him.

Bucky noticed Bruce discreetly make his way to Irina, using Natasha as an interpreter before gently guiding her to what was most likely the medical wing. Irina turned to Bucky, eyes wide in mild alarm. “You’ll come get me when Rybka wakes to nurse? Please?”

Bucky stepped forward, placing a calming hand to the center of her back, rubbing gentle circles. “Yes, yes of course. This isn’t another prison. Dr. Banner is a good man, he will make sure you're well taken care of and he’ll personally escort you to our...suite, whenever she wakes.” He leveled a look at Bruce and relayed his message in English.

Bruce nodded and folded his arms around himself. “Of course. Of course,” he muttered in his characteristically soft voice. He held a hand out and jerked his head to the side, indicating for Irina to follow. She glanced one last time at Bucky and then kissed Rebecca on a rosy cheek before following Bruce towards the elevators.

What Pepper had called a “suite” looked more like a damn palace, in Bucky's poor, Brooklyn boy
opinion. The apartment was huge, with not one but two living areas, a formal dining area, a kitchen that would have made his Ma cry, a master bedroom and bath that was fit for a king, two guest bedrooms, and the most exquisitely decorated nursery he'd ever seen. Pepper Potts put that Hydra interior decorator to shame, and probably spent a small fortune on the whole apartment, if not the nursery itself.

Their disbelief must have shown on their faces as they settled Rebecca into her new bed, closing the door softly behind them. Pepper smiled widely, a slight blush rising on her cheeks. "I, ahem, may have gotten somewhat carried away with the nursery," she said, waving a delicate hand somewhat awkwardly in front of her.

Darcy smiled wide, her eyes crinkling with mischief. "Oh noooo, I mean, what baby wouldn't want a crystal chandelier--that likely cost more than my entire college education--in their bedroom?" Darcy teased, tucking her hand into Pepper's elbow, squeezing lightly and leading her towards the front door.

Pepper gave a lovely, full tinkling laugh and patted the tops of Darcy's knuckles. "Yes, well, anything for family."

Darcy paused at the sincerity in her boss/style icon/girl-crush/friend’s voice. “Aww Pepper, I didn't realize you saw us that way. I take back my snarky comment.”

Pepper glanced to the floor and then back at Darcy and then finally settled on Bucky who stood nearby. “We all have had so much taken from us, and yet here we all are. We've all found each other, and--despite those who would seek to tear us apart--we are family. We've gone through too much, fought too hard for each other, to be anything else.”

Darcy was astonished to see the normally pristine woman start to tear up, her nose turning bright pink as a few tears spilled over onto her cheeks. Damn, Pepper was even a pretty crier. Darcy pulled her into her arms, wrapping her up tight. "Yes we are, Pepper. You are so stinking right, we are.”

Pepper gave a slight hiccup and pulled from her embrace, swiping delicate fingers under her eyes to remove the tears, not a trace of ruined mascara in sight. “I'm so sorry about all this,” she laughed, waving a hand vaguely in front of her face. “Not sure what came over me.”

“You're probably overworked from giving us the most baller status apartment I've ever seen in my life. Really, Pepper, it’s gorgeous and I want to live here forever.”

“Well, I had hoped that you would both consider living here permanently. After the attempt on your life at your apartment and subsequent bugout, I would feel so much better knowing you were safe under our roof. No rush on a decision, just know that it's an option if you are interested.” Pepper smiled at Darcy's awestruck face, leaning in to buss a kiss to her cheek in a very posh fashion. “In any case, I should be going. You both look like you could sleep for a week.”

With that she made her goodbyes and Darcy and Bucky decided that a hot shower was required before bed. If they happened to make good use of the marble bench that lined one wall of the shower, then who could blame them? They may have been exhausted, but the slick slide of their bodies together under the shower spray was soothing in an affirming, bone-deep way that they’d both greatly needed.

Still, it was with great relief when they crawled into bed together, curling around each other and succumbing to sleep as soon as their heads hit their pillows.
In case you didn't pick up on it, the whole sterilization bullcrap from AoU is just not going to exist in my universe because it is dumb for many reasons. The main one being that infertility is not a flaw, a dirty secret, and (specifically forced infertility) DOES NOT make a woman into a monster. Ugh. Just fuck off with that.

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