<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe, The Avengers (Marvel Movies), Captain America (Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes &amp; Steve Rogers, Steve Rogers &amp; Natasha Romanov, Steve Rogers &amp; Sam Wilson, Bruce Banner &amp; Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes &amp; Natasha Romanov, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes &amp; Alexander Pierce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Natasha Romanov (Marvel), Sam Wilson (Marvel), Alexander Pierce, Bruce Banner, Helen Cho</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Time After Time

by elle1991

Summary

Steve Rogers, Iraq war veteran and long-time loner, feels like his life is stuck in a rut. With no family and a grand total of two friends, he spends most of his spare time alone, painting, jogging or having flashbacks of the war.

Which is why when Natasha invites him to a masquerade party at a kink club, Steve throws caution to the wind and decides to give it a go. There he meets the mysterious Winter Soldier, but as things blossom between them, so does a dangerous undercurrent.

Both are harbouring a big secret from the other, and the fallout could have lethal consequences...

Notes

So, this story is a belated birthday and early Christmas present for my friend Chiyume! It was originally just meant to be a short, single-chapter fic, but as I planned out the plot it took on a mind of its own and became this beast... Happy birthday and merry Christmas, Chiyume! <3

Just in case it was not obvious, this story contains a lot of explicit sexual activity between Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes. It is often (but not always) kinky, with Bucky taking the Dominant role and Steve taking the submissive role during a "scene". If this does not sound like your cup of tea, then you should probably click back and find something else more to your tastes; there are plenty of awesome fics on AO3, so you should not have any problems finding something! :)

This plot of this story is focused on mental health, specifically PTSD, as well as recovery from past abusive relationships. If either of these are upsetting or triggering for you, then you may also want to consider turning back (although I promise these are handled sensitively). Please heed the tags.

If you are fully comfortable with both the topics mentioned and generous amounts of kinky Stucky smut, then enjoy :)

Violence, Death Threats, Kidnapping, Character Study, Smut, Shameless Smut, Angst and Fluff and Smut, Drama, Angst, Heavy Angst, Dark, Hurt, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt, Comfort, Angst and Feels, Guilt, Survivor Guilt, Angst with a Happy Ending, Fluffy Ending, Cute Ending, Happy Ending

Stats:
Published: 2018-11-17 Completed: 2019-05-11 Chapters: 24/24 Words: 124026
See the end of the work for more notes.
Steve Rogers sat hunched over in his cubicle, trying hard to ignore the rattle of the air conditioner
and the increasingly noisy rumbling sounds coming from his stomach and concentrate fully on his
job. Around him, dozens of his colleagues did the same, the sounds of computer mice clicking and
keyboards typing filling the otherwise quiet office.

The atmosphere in the office was strained. The deadline for their current project was 20 minutes
away (the launch of a new type of security software that Steve did not particularly care for or
understand), and Steve and the rest of his department were busy uploading the final pieces of content
in 30 different languages to Stark Industries' global website. Steve was tasked with uploading the
Russian content, a tedious task made bearable only by one significant upside: James.

James was the Russian translator whom Steve was frequently paired with. Their relationship was
strangely intimate, considering they had never met. Whenever James sent him Russian content to
upload, once the actual job was complete, they would banter back and forth over email about popular
culture – films, books, TV shows and the like. Steve frequently had to stifle a snigger as he read
James' sarcastic review of the latest comedy horror film he had seen, or his joy at something
completely unexpected like the newest Pixar animation. James' sharp wit and obvious intellect were a
source of joy in an otherwise monotonous job, and Steve always felt a little thrill whenever James'
name popped up in his inbox. At the end of their email correspondences, they would always sign off
in the same way: with a new cat picture. The routine was as comforting as it was exciting.

The fact that he considered these emails to be a genuinely "exciting" part of his social life was, Steve
knew, a sign that he had a problem. His problem was simple: he had almost no friends. He could
count the number of people he saw on a social basis on one hand – Natasha Romanoff and Sam
Wilson. His emails with James could be classed as friendly, but Steve did not think this qualified
them as friends. Friendship required them to spend time together outside of work, and Steve had not
ever seen James' face, let alone met up with him for drinks or a chat.

His depressingly small social circle was, in large part, Steve's own fault. Since leaving the Army 14
years previously, in 2004, Steve had not stayed in any city longer than a year. He had felt unable to
settle, driven to wandering from city to city, state to state, uprooting his life every year or even every
6 months, as he sought to feel some kind of belonging, some sense of home. Friendships did not
have time to form or develop, and Steve's natural introversion and unwillingness to talk about certain
periods of his life did not help. The result was a lonely, isolated life. Sometimes, Steve would be in
the middle of a crowd – in the street, or in the staff canteen at Stark Industries – and wonder what it
would be like to turn to the person next to him and start up a conversation. It had been so long since
Steve had initiated any form of social interaction that he could barely remember how to do it.

Notification: 1 new email!

Steve shook himself from his reverie and quickly opened his inbox, embarrassed at having caught
himself daydreaming with the deadline looming so closely.
To: Steven Rogers

From: James Barnes

Subject: Russian content – FINAL SECTION

Hey,

Attached is the copy for the footer section on the new Russian pages. That should be it now! With 12 minutes to the deadline, go us :)

Have you ever watched Supernatural? I discovered it last week and I am OBSESSED.

Cheers.

James Barnes

Russian Translator

Stark Industries

Steve quickly opened the attachment, copying and pasting the content at lightning speed into the relevant part of the website CMS and saving his changes. He looked at the clock. Still 9 minutes to go until the deadline. He punched the air in celebration, allowing himself to spin his chair around in victory for beating the deadline. The smile still on his face, he went back to James' email and typed out a reply.

To: James Barnes

From: Steven Rogers

Subject: Re: Russian content – FINAL SECTION

Hi,

Thanks! All updated now.

No, I've not seen Supernatural. What channel is it on? I love spooky stuff.

Steven Rogers

Website Administrator
Steve drummed his fingers on his desk as he waited eagerly for James' reply. As he waited, his thoughts began to wander. He contemplated how exactly to define his feelings for James. He liked the man, sure, but there was something else too; something more like a crush, a dalliance of the heart, drawing him to this faceless man with the beautiful mind whose emails had the power to get Steve's heart racing like a high schooler dancing with his crush at prom. He pondered asking James to meet up some time, during lunch or after work. They could go out and grab a bite to eat, or go out for drinks, maybe even go and see a film, since he knew James was a film lover. If things went well, Steve could even ask him out on a date... His courage deserted him, his mind conjuring up imaginings of supreme awkwardness and James eventually walking off with frustration when he realised how unpractised at socialising Steve really was.

He sighed. He did not know if James was single, or interested in men. He did not even know what James looked like; he could be hideous, or worse, way out of Steve's league. It was strange, to be so entranced by a man whose face he did not know. He did not know if that made his attraction better or worse, purer or creepier, more innocent or more desperate.

Sometimes, although he would admit it to no one, Steve liked to sit in the canteen at lunchtime and look around at all the faces and wonder which one was James. He would look at each face in turn, trying to work out if the face matched up with the emails sitting in Steve's inbox. He could discount some faces immediately – too stupid-looking, too old, too boring. In his head, based on the way James wrote, he was no older than 40 years old. He typed like a young-ish man, but Steve could glean nothing more revealing about James' potential appearance from the words on his screen.

**Notification: 1 new email!**

Steve eagerly refreshed his inbox, snorting out a laugh when he saw the subject line. It was not from James, but Natasha.

**To:** Steven Rogers  
**From:** Natasha Romanoff  
**Subject:** Get in bitch...  

...we're going lunching!

Natasha Romanoff  
*Russian Translator*  
*Stark Industries*
Steve quickly closed the email before anyone could see the GIF from Mean Girls, and headed down to the canteen for lunch.

Stark Industries' staff canteen was enormous. The global software and technology company employed 5,000 people in its New York City office alone, and with so many hungry mouths to feed, the canteen took up ten entire floors of the massive building. Despite the abundance of seating, however, Steve almost always sat in the same spot. Setting down his tray of food at his usual table at the edge of the room, he pushed his food around his plate with his fork absentmindedly, using his prime vantage point to scan the crowd of faces streaming into the canteen.

He looked out for James. His eyes flitted from man to man, trying to picture each one enthusing about films, books and TV shows – or translating from English to Russian, tongue sticking out between his teeth as he typed out Cyrillic characters on a clackety keyboard. He saw dozens of potential candidates, but his mind struggled to choose between them, none of them exuding that sense of James-ness that Steve yearned for. He wondered if James ever looked for him; if he ever scanned the sea of faces looking for the one that looked like a Steve.

He was pulled from his search by the arrival of his lunch-mate. He smiled as Natasha made a beeline towards his table, her curly red hair bouncing around her slim shoulders. She sat down with an exaggerated sigh, her green eyes fluttering closed as she slumped forwards, almost planting her face directly into her mashed potato. Steve grinned, shovelling a forkful of food into his mouth as Natasha straightened back up, gracefully picking bits of mashed potato out of the angular hourglass-shaped pendant at the end of her necklace.

"I never want to translate another word about software security in my life," she declared, glaring down at her food.

Steve raised an eyebrow, trying not to smirk as Natasha began attacking her carrots with a fork.

"You might be in the wrong job," he said evenly, earning a gentle kick from under the table.

Natasha glowered as she began eating, launching into an explanation of how translation was a nuanced art that could not be rushed, not even for the launch of a super-duper, mind-blowingly excellent new piece of Stark security software. Steve smiled as she vented, a warm glow filling his chest as he listened to his friend speak.

He was not sure why exactly Natasha had attached herself to him and declared them to be friends, but he was supremely grateful that she had. She had started working at Stark Industries at the same time as Steve, six months previously – she as a Russian translator, he as a website administrator. Despite working in separate departments, they had had their induction together and Natasha had bombarded him with questions, seemingly enthralled to hear about what Steve considered to be his rather dull hobbies of painting and exercise. On that first day, she had insisted that they have lunch together, and ever since they had spent their lunch hours together, talking about anything from office gossip to gaming to politics.

When she had first heard that he had only just moved to New York City, she had taken him under her wing and helped him to settle into his new home, meeting up with him on weekends to show him...
the best bars, restaurants and parks. During the last six months, they had spent a lot of time together both inside and outside of work. She formed half of Steve's entire social circle, and she had shown an uncommon depth of caring in helping him to settle into the Big Apple. It astonished Steve, sometimes, to think that she had fallen so easily into his life; that they had become friends so effortlessly when friendship never usually came easily to him.

He felt a lot of warmth and respect towards Natasha. Along with Sam, she was the only person in New York City whom Steve considered to be a friend; someone whom he could trust, or spend time with without being an annoyance. She had not cared about Steve's social awkwardness, but had patiently stuck around as he slowly relaxed enough to have proper conversations. He had asked her, once, why she had befriended him, and she had looked surprised, replying that it was "obvious" that he was a good man. He had not felt able to correct her.

He would like very much to repay her for her kindness and friendship, to thank her for helping him to settle into New York City, and for making Stark Industries' canteen not such a lonely place as his previous workplace.

On one occasion, he had asked her if there were any troubles going on in her personal life that he could help with, but her reaction had been a split second of surprise, followed by an oddly polite shake of the head and a firm "no".

Steve drove his blue 1965 Volkswagen Sedan 'Beetle'. The rust bucket was slow but reliable; a gift from his late father, left to Steve in his will when he had passed away from cancer five years previously. Steve could easily sell it – God only knew how frustrating it was to drive and park in New York City – but he could not bear to. It was one of the only possessions he had of his father's; the only thing, aside from Steve himself, to prove that Joseph Rogers had ever lived. His father had loved the blue Beetle. So, despite its slowness and all the hassle that came with it, Steve kept the car. It was his tribute to his father.

It was that evening after work, as Steve was trundling around his block, keeping a sharp eye out for an ever-elusive parking spot, that it happened.

He was just pulling into a newly-vacated spot, his thoughts already drifting to what he was going to cook for dinner, when a car driving past him backfired. The sharp bang sliced through him like a shockwave. Steve killed the engine, the hairs on the back of his neck standing rigidly on end as panic exploded in his gut. He fumbled with the car door, staggering out into the road, barely able to orient himself as he lurched towards the pavement. His breath came out in sharp gasps. His vision blurred. He almost tripped over the curb, hardly able to differentiate the black of the tarmac and the grey of the paving slabs.

He was no longer under the night sky of New York City.

He exhaled hard, suddenly roasting. The hot Iraqi sun beat down on the back of his neck, sweat dripping down his back and sides. The dusty desert air was oddly still around him. About half a mile away, gunshots, and around him, his fellow squad members. Steve moved forwards, stones and rubble crunching underfoot, clutching his rifle, senses sharp and alert.

It was 13 November 2004.
The Fallujah mission.

Ahead of him, the building they had been seeking loomed ahead of them. They approached it, weapons ready. The front door was wooden, painted red, bits of paint peeling off to reveal pale beige beneath; the wood, like everything else, bleached by the sun. He tried to turn around, to speak to the soldier behind him, but his body would not follow his instructions. Instead of turning, he was pitching forwards, the hot desert air suddenly turning cold around him as Steve tumbled forwards onto the New York City pavement.

He hit the ground hard, only just managing to get his hands out in front of him in time to stop himself from face-planting on the pavement. His face blushing crimson, he got slowly to his feet, sucking in large lungfuls of cold air, reminding himself of his whereabouts. New York City, not Fallujah. Tarmac, not dust and rubble. Cold, not scorching Middle Eastern heat. He brushed off the pavement-grime on his hands on his trousers, forcing himself to smile as he sidestepped the questions of a concerned female passer-by.

Hurrying to his block of flats, he let himself in, practically running up the three flights of stairs that led to his flat. Fumbling with the key, he finally shoved it into the lock and stepped into his home. He let the door swing shut behind him, thunking his head back onto it as he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, forcing himself to calm down. He breathed slowly and evenly, in through his nose, out through his mouth. Slowly, his heart rate began to slow; the panic eating away at his insides began to subside; the trembling in his right arm went from a shake, to a tremor, to stillness.

It had been a while since his last flashback. Maybe a month. It had lulled him into a false sense of security. For a brief sliver of time, he had believed himself free of the ghosts from his past. Fallujah haunted him, lingering like a bad smell, or the afterimage burnt into one's retinas caused by staring at one point for too long. Wearily, he pushed his sweaty fringe out of his eyes, making a mental note to book an appointment at the hairdresser soon. He almost jumped out of his skin when a knock on the front door sounded directly behind him.

Turning around, he unlocked the door and pulled it open, a tired smile spreading over his face when a wide grin greeted him from the other side of the threshold. Sam Wilson strode into his flat, toeing off his shoes as he chattered excitedly about a woman he had passed on the way to Steve's flat who had apparently been giving him "the eye". Steve watched his friend, his flashback-related jitters slowly melting away as Sam's solid, bubbly presence grounded him back into reality.

"It's this new jacket," finished Sam, shoving his shoes into the pile by the front door. "Girls love a guy in a smart jacket. Just wish I'd asked her for her number..."

Sam finally straightened up and looked properly at Steve, his brown eyes morphing from excited to concerned as he took in Steve's pale appearance. Without a word, he took Steve by the arm and guided him into the living room, both of them settling down on Steve's squashy old sofa. After a moment's silence, in which Steve silently berated himself for letting his friend see him in such a state and Sam watched him patiently, Sam spoke.

"You want to tell me what's up?" he said. "I'm guessing you're not all broken up about the fact that lady liked me."

Steve shook his head, turning his gaze to the floor, shame bubbling up in his gut. The Fallujah mission was 14 years ago. He should no longer be so affected by it, let alone be having flashbacks that caused him to collapse in the street. He exhaled slowly, trying to lessen the pressure in his chest to no avail. Finally, after several long minutes, he spoke, addressing the carpet so as not to have to see Sam's reaction.
"I had another flashback," he said. "Fallujah. I thought they'd finally stopped." When Sam did not
speak, Steve continued: "I have nightmares too, most nights. About what happened."

With a sigh, Sam put an arm around Steve's shoulder, pulling him into a hug. Steve closed his eyes,
burying his face in Sam's shoulder. The fabric of his shirt quickly soaked through with tears, but Sam
did not comment on it, silently rubbing Steve's back until he regained some of his composure. At last,
Steve pulled away, roughly wiping his face and slapping his cheeks, trying to regain some of the
vigour he had lost since the flashback.

"Some stuff you leave there," said Sam. "Other stuff you bring back. You've got to figure out how to
carry it."

Steve wrung his hands, restless. That was precisely the problem.

"That's just it," he said. "I don't know how to deal with this. It's been 14 years. Fuck. You'd think it'd
get better."

Sam rested a hand on his arm. It was warm and comforting in its weight.

"You know I'm always here for you, right?" said Sam. "I'm not going anywhere. You want to talk
about what happened, you can with me. Or if you think I'm a shit listener, go to the VA. They're
there for guys like us."

Steve flashed him a watery smile, his heart rate finally getting back to something approximating
normal as Sam's large white teeth gleamed back at him. Steve was supremely thankful for Sam's
presence in his life. Sam, who would meet up with him for jogging and pop around to his flat
whenever he felt like some company. Sam understood him. He had been a soldier alongside Steve, in
Iraq, in Fallujah. He was uniquely placed to understand and support Steve with his problems.

"Thanks, Sam," said Steve, hoping that the feeling behind his words could convey his sense of
gratitude.

Sam waved his thanks aside, a mischievous grin spreading over his face. The time for serious talk, it
seemed, was over.

"You know what else would help you lighten up a bit?" he smirked.

Steve raised his eyebrows, not entirely sure if he wanted to hear Sam's suggestion.

"You need to get laid, man!" grinned Sam.

Sam's suggestion was so unexpected that it startled a laugh out of Steve. The bubble of sadness
around him seemed to burst, the mood in the flat instantly transforming from one dark and gloomy to
one light-hearted and full of fun. The rest of the evening passed in a blur, as they watched a re-run of
one of Steve's favourite films – Terminator – with Sam frequently interrupting with witty
commentary and disconcertingly accurate Arnold Schwarzenegger impressions.

After Sam had gone home and Steve had got himself ready for bed, he found himself staring at his
bedroom ceiling, pondering Sam's joke. Perhaps he did need to get laid. Not necessarily to stop his
flashbacks – he doubted having sex would have any effect on those – but to help fill the yawning
chasm in his life with regards to intimacy.

The last time he had had sex was about one and a half years ago – a drunken hook-up with a guy in
Boston – and he had not been in a long-term relationship... basically ever. He was romantically and
sexually frustrated, chronically lonely, and pined to share his life with someone. He had no family, a
grand total of two friends, no love life and no sex life. He was, frankly, tired of it.

He tried to imagine himself going out to a bar and flirting with someone, or striking up a conversation in a cafe or an art supplies shop. He imagined himself kissing some faceless man, imagined taking him home and having sex with him – topping, or bottoming, whichever the other man preferred. He reached down and stroked his flaccid cock experimentally, before sighing and giving up. The fantasy felt fake, flat and contrived. He was useless at small talk, a failure at flirting and an all-round hot mess.

His conscience stirred, reminding him that he was unworthy of love. Guilt flooded through him. Suddenly, he felt ashamed for even thinking that he deserved to be happy.

Perhaps it was fitting that he was alone. Perhaps this was his punishment.

He thought about Fallujah, and what had happened behind the flaky red door.

Some things were unforgivable.

---

Another day, another batch of website updates.

This time, they were in English which, whilst easier for Steve, had the downside of no emails from his favourite Russian translator, James Barnes. By the time lunchtime rolled around, he was exceptionally glad to get away from in front of his screen and walk down to the canteen to stretch his legs and eat with Natasha.

He was sat at his usual table, listening to Natasha talking about a ballet that was currently on at the theatre, when he found his eye caught by his cafeteria crush. His cafeteria crush was someone whom he had noticed almost as soon as he had begun working at Stark Industries. He often ate at the same time as Steve, at a table four rows away. He looked around the same age as Steve – in his mid-thirties – and had brown hair and beautiful blue eyes which Steve had caught himself staring into on more than one occasion. They had never spoken, but Steve liked to admire him from a distance, sneaking in appreciative little glances whenever he could. Whoever this mystery man was, he was fucking hot.

His attention had slipped from Natasha only momentarily, watching his cafeteria crush's lips wrap around a hot dog – holy fuck – when Natasha's fingers snapped in front of his face, making him jump.

"Earth to Steve," said Natasha. "Are you listening to me?!!"

Steve blushed guiltily, trying to rearrange his face from one that had just been imagining his cafeteria crush's lips wrapped around to a very different kind of meat, to one that had been diligently listening to Natasha talk about ballet. He floundered for words, his eyes darting guiltily back to the man in question, causing Natasha to twist around in her seat to get a better look at who Steve was ogling.

Looking excited, she turned back around, apparently no longer offended that Steve had not been paying full attention to her discussion about ballet.

"Are you checking out Bucky?" she said.
Steve almost choked on his mouthful of food, kicking her gently under the table as she twisted around to stare once more in the man's direction. He sat rigidly, mortified, convinced that the man in question would turn to find them staring and demand an explanation.

"Stop looking," he hissed at Natasha, jiggling his foot insistently against hers under the table.

Natasha turned around, a smug expression on her face as she smirked at him flirtatiously. Her green eyes were shining excitedly as she leaned towards him with a conspiratorial whisper.

"The fit guy with brown hair and blue eyes and the black t-shirt, four rows back," she said. "Is that who you're checking out?"

Steve cast a longing glance towards his crush, who was now finishing off his hot dog and was indeed wearing a black t-shirt. He briefly considered lying to Natasha, but quickly decided to do so would be fruitless. When Natasha wanted to know something, she was like a dog with a bone: determined, single-minded and relentless. Sighing, he nodded minutely, unable to repress a smile when the single nod elicited a kind of strangled screech from his friend.

"His name is Bucky," said Natasha excitedly. "He works in Linguistics with me. Shall I call him over?"

Steve quickly shook his head. He could imagine nothing more excruciating than having his cafeteria crush – named Bucky, apparently – come over and watch as Steve made a complete fool of himself by attempting to flirt. He would die of embarrassment. He would take one look at that beautiful face, make an innuendo, choke on his traitorous tongue, and die. He could picture his gravestone: Here lies Steve Rogers, embarrassed to death.

"No," he said firmly. "I don't need to flirt." Then, remembering Sam's words the previous evening, he added, as joke and an afterthought: "I need to get laid."

Rather than laughing, as Steve had expected her to, Natasha instead became pensive. Her previous excitement melted away to something subtler and, dare he say it, scheming. Natasha tapped her chin thoughtfully, one painted red nail rubbing against her pale skin.

"You're the second person to say that to me today," she said. "And I'm going to ask you the same question I asked the first guy: Fancy going to a kink club with me this weekend?"

Steve stared at her. He had misheard, surely. Or he had suffered some kind of break with reality. Perhaps he had suffered a stroke. Surreptitiously digging his finger in his ear in an attempt to dislodge any earwax, he tentatively asked for clarification.

"I might have misheard you there..." he said.

Natasha smirked. Apparently, she was unaffected by the sudden bout of shyness that had overcome Steve.

"A kink club," she repeated. "There's one called The Underworld that I go to sometimes. This Saturday night they're having a fancy dress and masquerade party, which means guests have to wear masks and use nicknames. I thought it could be fun. We could just enjoy the music and drinks, or we could try to find you Mr. Right. Or Mr. Right Now..."

Steve stared at her, his mouth hanging open in shock. His first instinct was to laugh, until one look at her face showed that she was being deadly serious, and he swallowed hard. A kink club? With Natasha? The idea sounded completely insane. He thought about the sheer ridiculousness of it – going to a kink club with his strictly platonic friend (and colleague – HR would have a fit) – and
almost said "no" immediately, out of instinct.

But, for whatever reason – perhaps shock – he stayed silent.

Instead of dismissing the idea forthwith, he thought about it. He thought about his sad, lonely, isolated life. He thought about how he would spend the weekend otherwise: out jogging in the park or painting, by himself of course, in a desperate attempt to distract himself from how lonely he felt. Taken by a sudden surge of desperation, he clenched his fists and swallowed back his anxiety. Fuck it. Why not?

Taking a deep breath, he made a decision that, unbeknownst to him, was a tipping point, a moment in time that would change his life forever.

"Yes," he said.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO: Hi there, I hope you enjoyed chapter 1 of this story! There will be 24 chapters in total once this is done, so buckle up and enjoy the (long) ride…

CHAPTER ART: See it here.

TUMBLR: I am on Tumblr! Come and say hi :)

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Underworld" and will be about Steve and Natasha's trip to the fancy dress and masquerade party at the kink club... ;)

THOUGHTS: Posting a new story is always a daunting experience... so your feedback (especially if it's positive) would be much appreciated! What do you think so far? Are you excited? Are you intrigued? Let me know your thoughts!

STEVE'S CAR: The most observant of you will have noticed that this chapter had a little tie-in with canon with Steve's car! In this story, he drives a blue 1965 Volkswagen Sedan 'Beetle', which is the same car that he drives when he arrives at the airport in Captain America: Civil War. You can see a picture of it here!

SAM'S LINE: One of Sam's lines in this chapter also tied in with canon: "Some stuff you leave there. Other stuff you bring back. You've got to figure out how to carry it." Well done if you spotted this and recognised it from Captain America: The Winter Soldier!

BYE-BYE: I've already started chapter 2! "See" you in a week! :)

The first time Steve fell in love, it was with a boy whose name he did not know and whose face he only ever saw from a distance.

He had been 13 years old, on holiday with his parents at Springfall Lake in Redmont National Park. It was a beautiful place, with clear waters perfect for swimming, lush woodland and snow-topped mountains framing the scene like a picture-perfect postcard. Steve had been madly excited for the holiday which, of course, meant that he fell ill with a fever on the very first day.

His temperature rocketed. His head ached. His body grew tired. Despite his protests, his parents confined him to the holiday cabin, insisting kindly but firmly that bed rest would help him to get better faster and enjoy the end of the holiday in good health. He spent five days stuck inside the cabin, fuming at being kept inside and bored out of his mind.

To keep himself occupied, on the second day he began sitting by the window, spying on the other holidaymakers. At first, he was jealous, his heart pounding with frustration that he could not be outside with them, swimming in the lake or eating at one of the picnic tables by the water's edge. Driven by boredom, however, his jealousy quickly faded, being replaced by an insatiable urge to imagine himself among them, making up stories for each person, their personalities growing in Steve's head like characters in a book.

There was one boy in particular who captured Steve's interest.

He was staying at one of the cabins furthest away from Steve; too far away for Steve to make out his face, but close enough for him to observe the boy's actions. The boy looked around the same age as Steve – thirteen – with long, gangling limbs and a mop of messy brown hair. Whenever Steve saw him, he was wearing a pair of bright, rainbow-coloured swimming trunks.

When Steve first saw the violently multicoloured trunks, he giggled to himself, thankful that although he was confined to his cabin, at least he did not have to wear such a monstrosity. As the days wore on, however, he grew fond of them, a sense of respect building inside him for this boy who obviously did not care what other people thought of him. This sense of freedom, of individuality, was so at odds with how Steve felt within his own skin that he felt a pang of longing, a strong urge to walk out and befriend this confident, strangely charismatic boy.

Steve grew captivated by him, watching him with an eagerness that bordered on obsession, if only because he was the only other boy around Steve's age whom Steve ever saw through his cabin window. Fascinated by him, Steve's imagination began to invent scenarios involving the two of them, playing these out in his head like a film, over and over, permutations of the same scene, without end, without boredom.

He watched the boy swimming in the lake and imagined swimming up to him, introducing himself and becoming his friend. Perhaps they would go swimming together, try to see who could swim the fastest, or who could do the silliest stroke.

He imagined them bobbing in the water, or sitting together on the shore, or trekking through the woodland. He imagined them finding a quiet place to sit together, to share stories with one another, or to each divulge his deepest secrets. He imagined them playing sports together, before his mind
drifted to those secret thoughts that had started coming to him recently, those exciting but shameful thoughts, and he imagined cuddling and kissing him.

He longed to recover from his fever so that he could go out and talk to this beautiful boy. He would ask him out on a date, and – as in Steve's fantasies the boy always said yes – they would go exploring together, go adventuring in the lake or the woodland, before kissing gently, or not so gently, and running their hands through one another's hair.

Steve liked to imagine that the other boy's interests were perfectly matched to his own. They would like the same TV shows, the same comic books, the same sports teams. The other boy would secretly like painting and art, just like Steve, and they would draw together until sunset. The other boy would cry when it was time for them to part ways and beg Steve to keep in touch. They would become pen pals and then, when they were adults, they would finally move in together.

The boy was Steve's first love. Steve did not know the boy's name, or even his face, yet he fell in love with him, deeply and completely.

By the time Steve finally recovered from his fever and was allowed out of the cabin, the brown-haired boy with the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks had gone, and Steve never saw him again.

At last, it was Saturday night – the night he was going to pop his kink club cherry by accompanying Natasha to The Underworld.

Steve stood in front of the full-length mirror, staring at himself with a deep-seated and slightly hysterical sense of self-consciousness. He was wearing the clothes he had picked out as most suitable to wear to a kink club and, after looking at himself for just a split second in the mirror, he had come to the firm conclusion that he looked ridiculous.

He did not know the specifics of what classed clothes as "kinky", so he had simply picked out an ensemble of the tightest, sexiest clothing he owned. The result was an eclectic mix: tight, navy-blue, booty shorts; a t-shirt designed like the US flag; and heavy, black, lace-up boots.

Once he got over the initial shock of seeing himself in such a tight-fitting, strangely patriotically-themed outfit, he did begrudgingly accept that it made him look good. It showed off his fit, masculine physique; the bulges and outlines of his muscles clearly visible through his clothing when he moved. The red, white and blue also went together nicely, the colours complimenting one another in a way that seemed natural.

It also, thankfully, completely covered the right side of his torso. The large, ugly scars that snaked down his right side were utterly hidden beneath his t-shirt. He lifted his arms above his head experimentally, relief rushing through him when the t-shirt did not ride up and reveal the scars. Steve was not ready to answer any questions from strangers about where he had got them.

He turned around, turning his attention to his appearance from behind, his eyes immediately zeroes in on his ass. The navy-blue booty shorts barely reached the mid-thigh, the tight material clinging to his ass like a second skin. He was staring at his ass in the mirror, desperately wondering whether the shorts were even too risqué for a kink club, when the doorbell rang.

His heart jumped to his throat. He stood frozen in horror, his heart pounding as one horrifying thought filled his mind: was it Sam, on one of his frequent, impromptu visits? He stood rooted to the
spot, unsure whether to strip out of his outfit completely, throw a dressing gown on top of everything, or simply leave the door unattended. The third option was taken off the list when the person at the door – fuck, please don't be Sam – began to ring the bell more insistently. In a state of panic, he grabbed his dressing gown and pulled it on, walking to the door and pulling it open, only realising right as he did so that he was still wearing his heavy, black, lace-up boots.

To his immense relief, it was not Sam at the door, but Natasha. He let out a long sigh, pulling the door fully open, no longer self-conscious about his porn-star-level-of-hot boots on his largely naked legs. Natasha stepped inside his flat, her eyes widening as she took in his appearance. Her eyebrows flew high up her forehead, letting out a low whistle as she looked him up and down.

"Sexy boots," she grinned. "But please... tell me you're wearing something underneath that dressing gown?"

Steve snorted and peeled it off, revealing the outfit beneath. Natasha smiled and nodded with approval, seemingly pleased with Steve's choice.

"Very American," she said thoughtfully. "When we think of a nickname for you, maybe we should play around with that."

She shrugged off her coat, allowing Steve to finally get a glimpse of what she wore beneath. She was wearing a tight, black, leather catsuit, with electric blue piping running down her forearms to her wrists. The outfit was completed by smoky eye-shadow and dark red lipstick. The effect was impressive. She exuded an aura of poise, control and elegance; both badass and sexy – neither of which were words Steve ever thought he would think about his friend and colleague.

It was only after several long seconds that Natasha's words penetrated his brain.

"A nickname?" he echoed.

Natasha flopped down into a chair, nodding.

"It's a masquerade party," she reminded him. "Costumes and nicknames. My nickname's Black Widow, so tonight, that's what you have to call me."

Steve repeated the nickname to himself, the words feeling strange and foreign on his tongue. He hoped he would remember to call her that throughout the night. It was then that he realised he had to create a nickname for himself. He looked down at his outfit, blushing again when he saw that his booty shorts were just as tight at the front as they were at the back. He pulled his t-shirt down self-consciously, trying to hide the bulge of his crotch. The red, white and blue stared back up at him, reminding him of Natasha's earlier comment on the American-ness of his outfit.

"I could be... Mr. America?" he said, before instantly cringing. Mr. America sounded like the lamest nickname imaginable.

Natasha, however, hummed thoughtfully.

"How about Captain America?" she said. "Sounds more impressive."

Steve imagined introducing himself as Captain America and had to suppress a laugh. It sounded ridiculous, but at least it sounded better than Mr. America. His mind remained stubbornly blank, unable to offer anything better.

"OK," he said. "I'm Captain America. I just realised though – you said this is a masquerade party, but I don't have a mask."
Natasha grinned, before reaching into the pockets of her coat and pulling out two objects. The first one she picked up and put to her face, wrapping a piece of elastic around the back of her head to hold it securely in place. It was a mask, black and lacy, designed to cover the upper half of her face. She looked alluringly mysterious. The other object she tossed in Steve's direction. He caught it deftly, before staring at it, unable to decipher what it was.

"What's this?" he said.

"A cowl," said Natasha.

"And what's a cowl?" said Steve.

"One of those."

Not entirely satisfied with Natasha's explanation, he nevertheless followed Natasha's example and pulled it onto his head. It fit like a hat, except it descended to cover his upper face and around his eyes. Also, instead of being made of wool or any other hat-like material, it was made out of something much firmer.

He got out his phone, turning it onto selfie mode so that he could see his appearance. The navy-blue cowl obscured his identity, whilst giving him an almost superhero-like vibe. Natasha let out a whoop of excitement, obviously pleased with the result. Suddenly, she let out a gasp, digging around in her bag and pulling out some Tippex. Before Steve could protest, she began painting something onto his cowl, her tongue poking out in concentration.

After several minutes, she pulled away with a smile. Bewildered, Steve looked once more at his reflection in his phone, revealing that Natasha had painted the letter "A" on the cowl in the centre of his forehead.

"Now you really look like a Captain America," said Natasha.

Steve smiled weakly, the reality of the situation finally sinking in as he stared at his reflection, dressed up like the slutty version of a patriotic superhero. A slightly hysterical giggle built up in his chest. Jesus, what was he doing? This was the most sexually outrageous thing he had done for a long time. Scratch that, it was the most sexually outrageous thing he had ever done in his life.

"Are you ready?" said Natasha, pulling off her mask and putting it back into her coat pocket.

Steve automatically nodded and got to his feet, removing the cowl. After a moment's thought, he walked over to his closet, grabbed the longest coat he owned and pulled it on, not particularly wanting his neighbours to see him dressed in such body-hugging clothes. His lower legs would still be on display, but he did not mind so much about that – he could easily be off to the gym, if anyone noticed and bothered to question it. Grabbing his phone, wallet, keys and cowl, he stuffed them into his coat pockets and followed Natasha out of his flat.

They quickly descended the three flights of stairs to the ground floor and headed out onto the street. Natasha's car was parked two blocks away. They headed towards it, walking quickly to keep warm in the cool night air. Finally reaching the vehicle, they clambered inside, Steve buckling himself in as Natasha started up the engine.

"Tell me about the kink club," said Steve. "The Underworld. Is it... hardcore?"

Natasha smirked, checking her mirrors before pulling out into the street and joining the flow of traffic.
"You're not going to see people fucking all over the place, if that's what you mean," she said. "The Underworld is a kink club, not a sex club. Most of it looks like a normal club, to be honest – there's a bar, booths you can sit at to chat and have a drink, and a dance floor. But there's also a stage where kink demonstrations can happen. You might see a bondage demo, or a hot wax demo, or someone getting flogged. But all the performers are experienced professionals, and you'll never see anyone without their underwear.

"If guests want to do kinky things, or do anything sexual, there's about ten private rooms at the back of the venue. They're equipped with beds. People can do whatever they want in there."

Steve nodded nervously, beginning to feel slightly out of his depth. He was unfamiliar with the world of kink. He did not know what to expect of the people or the types of demonstrations that might be going on on-stage. He wondered if it would be painfully obvious that he was new, and if that would be a source of contempt or curiosity.

Some of his anxiety must have shown on his face, because when Natasha spoke next, it was with a gentler tone.

"The people are really nice and welcoming," she said. "No one's going to try to make you do anything you don't to. Respect is the number one rule at The Underworld. It's a club for everyone: straight people, gay people, bisexual people, ace people. You get all kinds of people there, into all kinds of kinks. No kink-shaming is allowed. And if anyone starts being a creep, there's security on hand to take care of things. It's not a scary place, I promise."

Steve nodded, exhaling deeply. He had not been so concerned about security – he had been a soldier; he knew how to take care of himself, if it came to that. What he was glad to hear about was the welcoming and respectful atmosphere of the club. For some reason, in his head it had been a lot darker and seedier.

It was then that Steve noticed that they were slowing down. Natasha pulled into a car park, bringing the car to a stop before killing the engine. Natasha unbuckled her seat belt, gesturing for Steve to follow suit. As they stepped out of the car, Natasha pointed to what looked like a regular nightclub across the street, the name lit up in blue neon lights: The Underworld.

They crossed the street, Steve's heart suddenly hammering in his chest as they approached the front doors of the club. Seeing Natasha putting on her mask, Steve followed suit, remembering that for the rest of the night they were no longer Steve and Natasha; they were Captain America and Black Widow.

They reached the door. The bouncer gave them a once-over, before opening the door to the club. Steve stepped inside, his heart hammering, his imagination going into overdrive, expecting to see flogging, patrons suspended from the ceiling by ropes, hot wax poured onto bare skin...

Normal.

That was Steve's first impression. Apart from the decidedly kinky outfits of the clientele, The Underworld was exceedingly normal. There were around 50 people, sitting in booths or milling around the bar as they chatted amongst themselves. Music played in the background, lively but non-intrusive. When Steve sneaked a glance at the stage, he saw that it was empty.

"Fancy a drink?" asked Natasha, nodding towards the bar.

Steve nodded. Dutch courage was what he needed, some alcohol in his system to loosen himself up and untie his tongue. As they wound their way to the bar, Steve found himself staring at some of the
outfits of the other people. There was one woman in a dress that appeared to be made entirely out of rope; a man who appeared to be dressed as a peacock; a woman dressed a sharp, beautifully-cut suit.

Steve was so captivated by the diversity of the costumes and masks that he only realised they had been served when Natasha pushed a vodka and coke into his hand.

"My treat," she winked, when Steve reached for his wallet. "Come on, I'll show you wear we can put our things."

She led him past the dance floor to a cloakroom, handing her coat and bag over to the attendee and pocketing the ticket he handed back in receipt. Steve did the same, shoving the ticket under the waistband of his sadly pocket-less booty shorts; they were tight enough that Steve was confident the ticket would not slip loose.

As they walked back to the main crowd, a small group of women peeled off from the rest and waved in their direction. Natasha smiled, pulling Steve with her as she approached the group.

"Hey," she said. "Meet Captain America!"

Steve was quickly introduced to Natasha's small gang of friends: the woman whom Steve had seen earlier wearing the rope dress, as well as two other women, who were hand in hand and dressed in matching neon corsets. Steve smiled nervously, taking a deep swig of his drink as he tried to relax into the conversation, his mind inwardly screaming in protest at the prospect of socialising with strangers.

His tongue felt too big for his mouth. Witty banter only came to mind several sentences after the conversation had moved on. He felt a strong urge to melt into the floor, or to turn back time, anything to save himself from the social disaster that was unfolding as he woodenly blurted out a joke that he belatedly realised did not even make sense.

He downed the rest of his drink. His heart was drumming a staccato in his chest, his eyes desperately seeking out the nearest exit, when Natasha grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away from the women, excusing them with a polite smile and a wave. Steve was just about to thank her for saving him, when Natasha abruptly coming to a stop in front of him, Steve almost crashing into her.

He was just about to ask why they had stopped when Natasha beamed at a man in front of them, throwing her arms around him.

"Winter Soldier!" she said. "You made it! My directions weren't too fucked up, then?"

Winter Soldier hugged her back and grinned, his teeth glinting in the low light.

"I'm here, aren't I?" he said. "Thanks for inviting me, Na—... Uh, Black Widow."

Natasha pulled back, smiling mysteriously.

"No worries," she said. "Can I introduce Captain America? Captain America, Winter Soldier. Winter Soldier, Captain America."

Steve grasped Winter Soldier's hand, shaking it as he raked his eyes over the other man's outfit. His cock immediately twitched in his shorts, his brain short-circuiting as he tried and failed to think a single coherent thought. Fuck, this man was hot.

If there were ever a perfect example of a leather daddy aesthetic, this was it. Winter Soldier was the same height as Steve, with a toned, muscular build. He was wearing tight black leather from head to
toe, with leather straps crossing over his chest from left to right, and heavy lace-up boots similar to Steve's own on his feet. He was also wearing a pair of large black goggles that completely obscured his eyes and much of his face from his forehead to his cheeks. Steve could only really see his mouth, chin and jawline, but that alone was enough for his thoughts to go straight to the gutter. Winter Soldier had beautiful lips. Jesus, the things he wanted to do with that mouth...

He was brought back to reality by Natasha leaning in close to his ear, the smirk audible in her voice as she whispered to him.

"Have fun..."

Before Steve could react, Natasha gave them both a cheery wave and darted away, leaving Steve and Winter Soldier alone. Steve licked his lips nervously, his eyes darting desperately around the unfamiliar club as he tried to think of a topic of conversation.

"Are you nervous too?" asked Winter Soldier, sounding relieved. "I was so anxious on my way here tonight that I thought I was going to puke."

Steve's eyebrows shot up in surprise at Winter Soldier's raw honesty. With his confident demeanour, he had not expected the other man to be nervous, much less admit to it. Respecting his honesty, Steve decided to return it with some of his own.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm kind of shit at making friends though, so I get nervous whenever I have to talk to new people. The fact this is a kink club isn't even the bad bit."

Winter Soldier laughed, his lips curving up into a smile. Steve instantly found himself relaxing, returning the smile easily. The fact that Winter Soldier was just as nervous as he was was strangely empowering. They were equals, comrades in anxiety in this strange new place.

"So, is this your first time here?" asked Steve. "How did you hear about it?"

Winter Soldier nodded. He gestured towards an empty booth and they walked over to it, sliding into it and sitting opposite one another as they relaxed into the comfy leather benches.

"Yeah," said Winter Soldier. "It's my first time at any kink club actually. I've never done anything like this before. Black Widow invited here when I told her I was feeling lonely. I think she's trying to hook me up with someone."

"Wow, hard same," laughed Steve. "I told her as a joke that I needed to get laid and she asked me to come here with her. I thought I'd been transported to some kind of alternate reality."

Winter Soldier laughed, kicking his feet up onto Steve's side of the booth, his boots resting next to Steve's thigh. Steve swallowed hard, resisting the urge to look down at them, knowing that if he did, he would get a boner that would be impossible to hide. Wearing boots that sexy whilst dressed up entirely in leather should be illegal.

Winter Soldier leaned forwards, sneaking a glance around the club before speaking in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Well, do you see any girls who could take care of your horniness problem?" he asked, his lips quirked up in a smirk.

Steve blushed, taken aback by the other man's directness. He shook his head, staring out at the crowd that had about doubled in size since the last time he had looked. While there were many beautiful women present, none of them elicited any kind of sexual arousal in him.
"Women aren't really my thing," said Steve. "In bed, I mean."

Winter Soldier's mouth opened in an expression of surprise. Steve caught the expression, his stomach plummeting as he instinctively braced himself for some homophobic slur or other snide remark. Damn, of course the hottest guy in the club would be a homophobic asshole. Fucking typical. Well done, Steve, you finally manage to hold a conversation with someone and he turns out to be a douchebag. Nice one. Before Steve's train of thought could travel any further, however, Winter Soldier smiled, his foot nudging briefly against Steve's thigh.

"Cool," he said. "Me too."

Steve stared at him, the weight lifting instantly off his chest. He smiled back, hardly daring to believe it. Winter Soldier was not only not a homophobic asshole, he was into guys. He thanked whatever God might be listening for his good luck, finding himself relaxing even further now that the topic of his sexuality was out in the open and apparently accepted.

He was about to suggest that they get a drink when the music quietened and a voice spoke over the sound system.

"A bondage demonstration will start on the main stage in five minutes. If you want to watch, head over now to reserve a good spot!"

A frisson of excitement went through the crowd. As people began to drift towards the main stage, Steve looked over at Winter Soldier. Steve nodded shyly in the direction of the stage, curiosity pulling at him.

"Do you want to watch it?" he asked.

Winter Soldier nodded, looking equally curious and keen to see what all the fuss was about. They slid out of their booth and walked over to the stage, taking two seats next to one another on the front row. About half the people in the club gathered around, their voices hushed but excited. There was an air of anticipation thrumming through the venue, as if the building itself were holding its breath.

The lights dimmed, the audience falling into silence as a single spotlight shone on the centre of the stage. Two performers stepped into the pool of light: two men, one slim, one more muscular, dressed in simple black shorts and t-shirts. As performers, they were apparently exempt from the fancy dress rule.

Steve watched, fascinated, as the slimmer man – the sub – settled down on his knees, holding his wrists out together in front of him and looking up at his Dom. The Dom produced a long, slim rope, settling down behind his sub and reaching around to gently caress his wrists.

As Steve watched, the Dom wound the rope around one of the sub's wrists, forming a cuff before looping it around the other wrist to tie both hands together. The sub closed his eyes, slumping back against the Dom as his muscles relaxed, nuzzling lazily against his Dom's neck.

The Dom got to work, slowly weaving the rope up his sub's arms in beautiful criss-crossing patterns, before moving on to his chest, wrapping him up in a construction that was as elaborate as a spider's web.

Steve watched, enthralled, fascinated not only by the stunning rope-work he was witnessing, but by the dynamic between the two men. The Dom was not aggressive or rough, but slow and gentle, asserting his dominance not by force, but by carefully and lovingly restricting his sub's movements. He held his sub close to his chest, never letting them lose contact even as his hands worked to tie
complicated-looking knots to restrain him.

Presently, he slowly laid his sub onto his back, pressing kisses all along the exposed arch of his neck. The sub let out a long sigh of happiness, head lolling to the side, allowing Steve to get a better view his expression. Steve gasped quietly, stunned by the look on the sub's face. His eyes were closed, his lips parted, his cheeks flushed with pleasure. He looked both completely relaxed, on the verge of falling asleep, and completely blissed out. His expression was one of pure euphoria, total rest, and complete submission.

Steve felt himself growing breathless, deeply affected merely by being in the vicinity of this intimate scene. Somehow, this seemed more private, more personal, than if he had been watching them have sex. As the Dom ran his hands over his sub's body, stroking him whilst pulling gently on the ropes to remind him that he was tightly tied, Steve felt his cock swelling in response. His hands settled awkwardly in his lap as he attempted to hide his hardening erection.

He felt Winter Soldier shift in his seat beside him, and was struck by a sudden thought: was the bondage demonstration turning him on as much as it was Steve? Was he now also sporting a boner, underneath all that sexy black leather? Steve cast a sideways glance at Winter Soldier's crotch, but the lights were dimmed too low to be able to make anything out. Nevertheless, the thought of it made his own cock throb, pre-come oozing from the tip.

Turning his attention back to the stage, he saw that the Dom was now slowly untying his sub, caressing him just as thoroughly and lovingly as he had done whilst tying him up. As the final bit of rope was at last removed from his body, the sub curled around his Dom, seeking out his touch as the Dom peppered his face with kisses.

A quiet ripple of applause went through the crowd, the lights illuminating the audience turning back on as the ones on the stage went out. The crowd began to disperse, talking excitedly amongst themselves about the scene they had just had the privilege to witness. Steve found himself glued to his seat, amazed and overwhelmed by what he had just seen.

As his senses slowly returned to him, he blinked to find Winter Soldier still sat beside him, as well as an older woman with grey hair poking out from beneath her snake-themed mask, who had been sat on his other side, smiling at him kindly.

"What... what happened to the sub?" asked Steve, breathlessly. "He looked..."

"Like he was in Heaven?" finished the woman, when Steve trailed off into silence. "He was in subspace. It's a state of mind that submissive partners sometimes enter. They find it extremely liberating to submit. I've heard it described as complete freedom from everyday thoughts and worries. Complete freedom. If I weren't such a Dom, I'd love to experience it myself..."

The woman gave him one final smile and then walked off, re-joining her friends in a nearby booth. Steve closed his eyes, remembering the look of complete relaxation and euphoria on the sub's face. Subspace. Freedom from thoughts and worries. He was suddenly hit by an ache, an ache to experience it for himself. He wanted it desperately – to be able to forget about his boring life, his loneliness, his memories from Fallujah. To forget, to submit, sounded like liberation, like perfection.

"Did you like the look of it?" asked Winter Soldier.

Steve nodded, unable to form the words out loud just yet.

"Do you like the idea of being tied up or doing the tying?" said Winter Soldier.
Steve took a deep breath, forcing himself out of his head.

"Being tied up," he managed to say.

Winter Soldier let out an interested hum, reaching out and taking hold of Steve's wrists. Steve stared down at the twin points of contact, mesmerised by the other man's skin on his own. Without warning, Winter Soldier tightened his grip, holding Steve's wrists firmly in his hands.

"Do you like the idea of being bound like this?" he asked.

Steve moaned involuntarily in response, the blood rushing straight to his crotch at the insane, delicious idea of being bound by Winter Soldier. He saw the other man's head drop down an inch as he clocked Steve's erection in his tight booty shorts, his tongue darting out and licking his lips hungrily as he stared at the clear outline of Steve's cock.

For a moment, they were frozen, caught in the heated moment, each of them wondering whether to take things further, but unsure if, by speaking aloud, they would break the spell of whatever it was that was holding them together.

_Ding ding._

"The bar closes in ten minutes! Last orders!"

Steve blinked. Last orders? It felt as though he had barely arrived. He saw a clock on the wall and was shocked to find that it was almost 1am – three hours since he had first entered the club. The bondage demonstration must have lasted must longer than Steve realised – an hour of even an hour and a half. Steve had simply been so captivated by the performance that he had lost all sense of time.

The shout of the barmaid pulled them back to reality. Winter Soldier let go of Steve's wrists, rubbing them gently as he gave Steve an apologetic grin.

"I'd better get going," he said. "It's been great to meet you though, Captain America."

Steve nodded, still struck dumb by the flirtatious moment they had shared just a few moments earlier. Winter Soldier stood up from his seat, walking away a few steps, before shaking himself and turning back around. He looked Steve straight in the face, chewing on his lip and taking a deep breath before continuing.

"Listen, apparently this masquerade and fancy-dress thing happens every Saturday at The Underworld," said Winter Soldier. "Do you... do you fancy coming again next week? To get to know one another better?"

Steve stared at him, incredulous that someone as friendly, cool and God damn _sexy_ as Winter Soldier wanted to spend more time with someone as awkward as Steve. He gawped at him in shock, before pulling himself together, shaking himself out of his reverie.

Licking his lips, he looked at Winter Soldier, and replied.

"It's a date."

Chapter End Notes
CHAPTER ART: See it [here](#).

THANK YOU: Wow, 65 of you have already subscribed to this fic - thank you for embracing this story and following these characters' journeys! And an extra special thank you to those of you who left such encouraging comments on chapter 1, it really does make a difference to hear your lovely feedback <3

THOUGHTS: Oh, I wonder who Winter Soldier could be, underneath his mask... XD I hope you enjoyed this chapter, fellow Stucky shippers - let me know your thoughts in the comments below!

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "A Proposition". It will feature match-maker Natasha, some angst, and an interesting proposition from Winter Soldier...

TUMBLR: Want to say hello, see possible extra teasers for Time After Time, or just have a stalk of my blog? I am [ao3-elle1991](#) on Tumblr ;)
Monday lunchtime at Stark Industries' canteen was an interesting affair.

Steve had barely had time to sit down with his food when Natasha bounded over and sat opposite him. It was the first time they had seen one another since their night at The Underworld, and although she had driven him home, they had not had the opportunity to talk since she had also been giving a lift to two of her other friends.

This was why, come Monday lunchtime, Steve found himself being intensely stared at by Natasha as she grinned at him, her eyes bright and her body almost vibrating with excitement. She did not look at her food, her eyes fixed on Steve as she waited expectantly. Steve smirked, deliberately chewing his food as slowly as he could to tease her. Natasha, it seemed, did not appreciate being teased. When he lowered his fork to spear another mouthful of food, she grasped him by the wrist with a surprising amount of strength, aborting his movements.

"Well?" she said excitedly. "What happened with Winter Soldier?"

Steve was just about to reply when Natasha suddenly flashed a smile across the canteen, waving to someone. Steve twisted around in his seat to see his cafeteria crush – Bucky, Natasha had said his name was – waving back. He was looking as gorgeous as ever – this time wearing a blue t-shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes. Steve blushed, unsure whether he should wave too. His arm rose up automatically, before he caught himself – what was he doing?! Bucky was Natasha's friend, not his – and he awkwardly scratched the back of his neck instead.

Natasha's gaze slid from Bucky to Steve, a smile quirking her lips.

"I know him," she said. "I can invite him to eat with us, if you want."

Steve shook his head firmly. The last thing he wanted was to make a fool of himself in front of his cafeteria crush. If he tried (and undoubtedly failed) to flirt with him, he would never be able to look him in the face again.

Natasha sighed, disappointed, before returning to her previous topic, her eyes twinkling.

"So, last Saturday night with Winter Soldier," she said. "Spill."

Steve blushed, a grin spreading over his face as he ducked his head and pushed his food around his plate with his fork. His stomach flipped with excitement as he remembered Winter Soldier. He remembered the heated moment when Winter Soldier had grasped him by the wrists after watching the bondage demonstration. He swallowed hard, pushing the thought from his mind, not wanting to pop a boner in the middle of the cafeteria.

"I liked him," said Steve. "He seemed a cool guy. We talked all night. He, uh, asked me if I wanted to meet him next Saturday at The Underworld..."

Natasha's eyes widened. Her food, which had been half-way to her mouth, fell from her fork and landed back on the plate with a splat.

"And?" she said.
Steve grinned, amused and touched by Natasha's enthusiastic response.

"And I said yes," he said. "Looks like I'll be Captain America again next weekend."

Natasha beamed, apparently overjoyed with Steve's news. She squealed and drummed her hands on the table excitedly, causing Steve to chuckle. Once Natasha had vented the excitement from her system, she sighed dreamily, looking wistfully into the middle-distance, her food forgotten.

"Winter Soldier is a really nice guy," she said. "Even if you don't hook up with him, you should still make friends with him. He's interesting. I think you'd get along really well." She paused, before adding, as an afterthought: "You could do with some more friends."

Steve snorted, taken aback by Natasha's brutal honesty. It was the truth, but the truth on this occasion stung a little.

"Gee, thanks," he said drily.

Natasha's gaze slid to his face, unflinching and unrepentant in her demeanour.

"Come on, how many friends do you have in New York City?" she countered.

Steve looked down at his food, scooping up a large spoonful and chewing it slowly so as to delay answering. Several minutes of silence later, however, with Natasha still waiting patiently for an answer, Steve sighed in resignation.

"Just you and Sam," he admitted.

Natasha smiled smugly, pleased to be proven right.

"See, if you make friends with Winter Soldier, your number of friends will increase by a massive percentage!" she said brightly.

Steve grunted, begrudgingly accepting that she had a point. It was true, he did not have many friends, but he did not particularly like to ponder on the fact. Natasha's smile softened. She leaned her chin on her hand, her eyes misting over.

"Are you looking forward to seeing him again?" she asked.

Steve smiled and nodded, his stomach flipping, suddenly full of butterflies. Winter Soldier intrigued him as a person. He was a study of contrasts; a fascinating mix of confident and vulnerable.

Steve remembered the disarming and unashamed honesty with which he had admitted his anxiety about going to the club. He remembered also that Winter Soldier had said that Natasha had suggested he go to The Underworld because he was lonely, and wondered how a man as attractive and friendly as Winter Soldier could end up alone.

He remembered, too, the way his black leather outfit fitted tightly against his muscles. He remembered the way Winter Soldier had gripped Steve by the wrists, the way his tongue had darted out and licked his lips when he had seen Steve's erection throb within the confines of his booty shorts.

A shiver of excitement went through him.

Next Saturday could not come quickly enough.
Hot.

Desert sun.

Scorching heat.

Steve had never experienced anything like it, before Iraq. It was the kind of heat that made him feel as though his organs were cooking inside him, slowly roasting beneath his body armour and sandy-coloured military fatigues. His skin was slick with sweat, making the fabric of his clothes stick to him uncomfortably. Dust and sand, whipped up by the wind, stuck to his skin, holding fast to his sticky flesh. Grime and dirt. Every day: more grime and more dirt, sticking to his sweaty skin. It was a privilege, he realised, to be clean, to be able to bathe. Another thing he had not known until Iraq.

He was walking down the road in Fallujah. His senses were sharp and alert. The sounds: gunfire, in the distance; the thump-thump-thump of helicopter blades, far away; around him, the footsteps of the rest of the men in his squad. The sights: the damaged road; rubble strewn across the street from some earlier fight; a cat slinking amongst the ruins of what had once been a home. And a soldier's intuition: a barometer of danger. Currently, Steve's intuition was telling him to be on high alert, but that there was no imminent threat to life.

His shoes crunched beneath him as he slowly moved forward. His rifle was clutched in his hands, ready for action. Always be ready, was the squad motto. The man who ain't ready ends up dead. His eyes scanned the area as they inched forward, constantly assessing the environment, forever on the lookout for anything that could be out of place.

Red.

His eyes fixed on the red door ahead of them. It was the door of a house. The paintwork was flaking, revealing the beige wood beneath. Red, red, red, until his vision was filled with it: the red door of the house, right in front of him. He reached out, his fingers brushing over the paint, touching the wood.

His heart began to pound in his chest, pumping first anxiety, then panic, then terror, as the dream rushed onwards. *Dreaming*, he told himself, *it was just a dream*. And yet, it was not. It had happened, once, for real, in Fallujah, in 2004. It was not just a dream. He choked on a sob, unable to stop himself as he pushed open the red door. He knew what was going to happen next. He knew he could not change it. He was going to be forced to re-live it, to watch it unfold before his eyes, all over again, as it did every time he had the dream. He stepped over the threshold–

Steve woke with a shout.

He sat bolt upright in bed, fighting for breath, his chest feeling tight and constricted. He gasped and choked, his heart hammering as though he had just sprinted several times around the block. He looked down, half-expecting himself to be dressed in his military fatigues, but the meagre light from the streetlamp filtering in through his bedroom curtain revealed him to be naked. He looked at his arms, which were clean and goose-pimpled, not sweaty and covered in grime and sand. Letting out a shaky sigh of relief, he pressed the palms of his hands against his eyelids, trying to rub away the lingering after-images of the nightmare.

His stomach still churning, he swung his legs out of bed, getting unsteadily to his feet as he oriented himself in his bedroom. Feeling through the dark, he shuffled out of the bedroom and down the hallway to the kitchen. As he entered the room, he flicked on the lights, momentarily blinded by the
brightness. Once his eyes had adjusted, he took a moment to stand still, trying to calm his racing heart and listening to his body. His throat was parched, as if his body still thought that he was enveloped by stifling desert heat. As soon as he realised this, he crossed over to the cupboard, suddenly feverish with thirst.

He managed to open the cupboard door. His right arm reached in to grasp a glass, a feeling of confusion growing inside him as he repeatedly tried and failed to do so. It was only after four attempts that he realised that his right arm was trembling violently. He exhaled hard, frustration and anger bubbling in his gut as he watched his arm shake, the movements entirely out of his conscious control. All he wanted was a glass of water to soothe his parched throat. Just one measly glass of water. A small, dry sob burst from his lips. The scars down the right side of his torso tingled with phantom pain.

He closed his eyes, swallowing hard to force himself not to cry. Real men did not cry. Another thing he had learnt in Iraq.

He stood there for a long while, gritting his teeth against the phantom pain shooting down his right side, hating his body as the trembling in his arm went on and on, like a broken piece of machinery. The silence of his flat, rather than being pleasant and peaceful, suddenly felt heavy and oppressive. In the silence, his own flaws seemed loud and exaggerated. The shaking in his right arm seemed to mock him, reminding him that although time had moved on, Steve had not. Steve was defective, broken, haunted.

A punishment...

Finally, after what felt like the longest time, the shaking in his arm stopped. He grabbed the glass and thrust it under the tap, filling it to the brim with cold water. He brought it slowly to his lips, letting the cool glass rest on his lips momentarily, reminding himself that he really was away from that terrible heat, before rapidly drinking half the glass and dumping the other half over his head. Water dripping down his neck, he shuffled over to the window, pressing his nose against it and gazing out at the view.

New York, not Fallujah.


The war was over.

He pondered whether or not to call Sam, before deciding against it. Sam would be sleeping. He rubbed his eyes, knowing that despite the fatigue that felt like it went right down to his bones, he would not be getting back to sleep that night. Pulling himself away from the window, he looked at the clock, sighing when he saw the time.

4am.

Bowing his head in resignation, he headed off in the direction of the spare-bedroom-come-artroom.

If he was going to be awake, he might as well paint.

At last, it was Saturday evening.
Steve sat in the passenger seat of Natasha's car, watching the buildings slide by as they wound their way through the night-time traffic. His sexy Captain America outfit was hidden by his long black coat, his cowl tucked into the coat pocket. Steve's eyes occasionally flicked to the clock on Natasha's dash, counting down the minutes as they made their way towards The Underworld. Natasha was telling Steve about a book she had read recently – *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult – but Steve was only half paying attention.

His stomach was churning with a mixture of nervousness and excitement, questions racing through his mind, chasing one another round and round in circles. What if Winter Soldier did not turn up? What if he did turn up, but decided he did not want to talk to Steve? What if Steve screwed up by being awkward or making a fool of himself? What if Winter Soldier grabbed him by the wrists again? What if he wanted to do more?

Steve was so lost in his thoughts that it came as a shock when the car came to a halt, the engine falling silent as Natasha removed the key from the ignition. He blushed, looking over at Natasha guiltily, ashamed at having not paid proper attention to her. Far from looking annoyed, however, Natasha was giving him a kind smile.

"You like him that much, huh?" she said.

Before Steve could reply, Natasha was already getting out of the car. Steve unbuckled his seat belt and hurried after her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and giving her a squeeze once he caught up with her. She gave him a friendly tickle in the ribs, laughing when he squirmed away from the contact. They made their way across the street towards the club with their arms interlinked, Steve feeling immensely thankful for whatever had made Natasha want to attach herself to him on their first day at work together. He had never had a friend quite like Natasha before. She was startlingly unique.

They reached the front door, slipping on their masks as they walked past the bouncer. Walking into The Underworld felt a lot less intimidating the second time around. As Steve's eyes swept around the room, there was almost a comforting familiarity about the bar, booths, dance floor and stage, just as he remembered them. He hurried to the cloakroom with Natasha, dropping off his coat with the attendant before returning to the main area and observing the crowd. He spotted some outfits that he had not seen the week previously: a woman dressed as an angel; a man dressed as a sexy firefighter; a man dressed in a fishnet catsuit, with only a tight thong to preserve his modesty.

He blushed at the last outfit, turning away, his eyes immediately falling on a man who had just entered the club. His breath caught in his throat, his legs suddenly turning to jelly, his heart pounding in his chest. Winter Soldier hovered just inside the doorway, scanning the crowd. He looked as sexy as ever, dressed as per the week before in tight black leather from head to toe, earning himself a few interested glances from both male and female patrons. Like the previous week, his large black goggles left only the lower half of his face visible. Steve found himself staring at his sharp jawline, trying to imagine what it would feel like to feel the other man's stubble rub against his own.

Winter Soldier caught sight of him, a smile breaking out on his face as he wove his way through the crowd to Steve's location. Her role as matchmaker apparently done for the night, Natasha slinked away from Steve's side, disappearing into the crowd as she cast one final, secretive smile over her shoulder in Steve's direction. Steve gave her a small wave as she left, before turning his eyes back to the leather-clad man who had finally reached him through the crowd.

"Hey," said Winter Soldier. "You're looking good, man."

Steve stared at him, his conversational faculties swiftly leaving his brain as he stared at the obscenely sexy leather outfit the other man was wearing. The leather straps across his chest, buckled at one
side, seemed to be begging to be undone. He wondered what it would feel like, to undo those straps and peel the black leather from his chest. Suddenly aware that whilst Steve had been staring and gawping, Winter Soldier had been patiently waiting for an answer, Steve blurted out the first reply that came into his head.

"It's just what I was wearing last weekend."

Steve kicked himself. You look good too – that was what any normal person would have said. Of course he would butcher the conversation the moment he opened his mouth. Winter Soldier, however, did not seem to mind, if the slow lick of his lips was anything to go by.

"Well, you looked hot as fuck last weekend too," he said.

Steve almost choked on his breath, blood suddenly rushing both to his face and his crotch at Winter Soldier's smooth words. He floundered for words, his hand reaching up to rub the back of his neck self-consciously. He cleared his throat, trying to think of the right words to say that would be equally charming and disarming, and coming up with nothing. Winter Soldier grinned, pulling Steve into a hug. Steve bit back a moan, desperately trying to act normally as Winter Soldier's warm, muscular body briefly pressed up against his.

"You look great, too," he managed to say as they pulled apart, eliciting a warm smile from the other man.

"Thanks," said Winter Soldier. "I felt less like an idiot coming here, this time. Mainly because I knew you'd be here. Or I hoped..."

Any awkwardness between them dissipated at Winter Soldier's trademark brutal honesty. Steve felt himself relax, a smile spreading across his face as his muscles loosened up.

"Me too," he said. "I've been thinking about this all week, to be honest."

"About me or The Underworld?" joked Winter Soldier.

Seeing a prime opportunity to flirt, Steve seized it, thrilled that the words were coming to him in the moment rather than several minutes later, for once.

"You," he said. "You're quite memorable."

He punctuated his words with a meaningful glance up and down Winter Soldier's outfit, causing an unexpected blush to colour Winter Soldier's cheeks. Steve's stomach flipped with excitement, thrilled beyond measure to have elicited such a reaction in the other man. Grinning, Winter Soldier took a step closer to Steve, his hand resting on Steve's elbow as he nodded towards the bar.

"Fancy a drink?" he asked.

Steve nodded. They made their way through the crowd, ordering their drinks at the bar before making their way over to a booth near the back of the club. They flopped down in the booth, Winter Soldier kicking up his feet like he had done the previous week, so that his lace-up boots rested against the side of Steve's thigh. Steve swallowed hard, daring to look down at the dark boots, such a stark contrast to the paleness of his bare leg. He had never found boots particularly sexy, before then. Now, however, he wanted nothing more than to be made to kiss them, lovingly and reverently, or untie them in a frenzy, tugging them off as he sought to see every inch of Winter Soldier's skin.

To cool his raging hot libido, he took a long sip from his drink – vodka and orange – and forced his eyes from the sexy boots by his thighs to the masked face on the opposite side of the booth. Winter
Soldier was taking a sip of his own drink, looking over at the crowd with an expression of mild interest. With a smirk, he leaned across the table towards Steve, a mischievous note in his voice when he spoke next.

"Want to play a game?"

Steve swallowed hard, fighting to keep his mind out of the gutter as he imagined what kinds of games he and Winter Soldier could play together...

"Sure," he said. "What did you have in mind?"

Winter Soldier grinned, gesturing discreetly towards the crowd.

"Try to guess who's a Dom and who's a sub," he said. "Just for fun."

Steve turned towards the crowd, intrigued and amused by Winter Soldier's suggested game. He spotted one of the men he had seen the week before, wearing an extravagant peacock outfit, his brightly-coloured tail feathers blooming from the small of his back and arching up over his head. He nodded discreetly towards the man, diverting Winter Soldier's attention towards him.


Winter Soldier's eyes zeroed in on peacock man, nodding firmly in agreement.

"Yeah. I can't imagine him flogging someone dressed like that," he said, before suddenly giggling. "He could have the best entrance music though."

Steve raised his eyebrows, unsure if he wanted to hear whatever cheesy line had obviously entered Winter Soldier's head.

"Go on..." he said.

"Peacock by Katy Perry," said Winter Soldier, before singing, slightly out of tune: "I wanna see your peacock-cock-cock, your peacock-cock... You haven't heard it?"

Steve burst out laughing, unsure what was funnier: the ridiculousness of the song or the look of consternation on Winter Soldier's face that Steve was unfamiliar with it. He shook his head, consoling the other man by patting his hand, the movement coming so naturally that he did not even realise he had done it until he saw a blush colour Winter Soldier's cheeks. He took another swig of his drink, both surprised and pleased that he had had such an effect on the other man simply by touching his hand.

"The woman in the leather corset," said Steve, moving the game on. "What do you think?"

Winter Soldier looked at the woman in question, humming thoughtfully.

"Sub," he said, after a while. "You see that collar around her neck? I think that means she has a Dom."

"Oh," said Steve.

He had not known the significance of the collar, believing it to be simply part of the costume; there for aesthetic purposes rather than conveying a meaning. Now that he knew, however, he supposed it made sense. Winter Soldier suddenly gasped, obviously struck by an idea. He leaned forwards, excited as he waited for Steve to lean closer to capture his next, whispered words.
"What about Black Widow?!!"

Steve stared at him, both shocked that he had never thought about it before, and horrified that he was thinking about it now. He was very close to Natasha, it was true, but that closeness was purely platonic. In his mind, she was like a sister. The thought of her engaging in any kind of kinky or sexual activity was truly not something he wanted in his brain.

"Jesus!" he said, before forcing himself to answer, lest Winter Soldier start asking even more detailed questions about Natasha's potential sex life. "I don't know. Dom, I guess? She's kind of bossy."

Winter Soldier gaped at him, clearly in disagreement with his answer.

"No way!" he said. "She's a total sub. Sometimes the people who are always in control in normal life like to let go in the bedroom."

Before the conversation could go any further into that mortifying line of discussion, Steve was saved by an announcement over the sound system, the microphone screeching slightly as it was turned on.

"On the stage in five minutes will be a how-to rope bondage tutorial for beginners, focusing on the basic TK box tie. Our teachers are happy to take questions after the demonstration, so head over there now if you're interested!"

Steve's eyes slid over to Winter Soldier, his heart suddenly thumping with excitement and anticipation. He yearned to watch the tutorial, and for Winter Soldier to watch it too. Perhaps it could give them a few pointers and ideas, if they ever decided to go down the kinky route. He briefly imagined himself being tied up in rope by Winter Soldier, before quickly pushing the thought away before he popped another boner in public. As he came back to the present, he found that Winter Soldier was looking at him with the same expression of nervous excitement.

"Do you want to go and watch it?" said Steve, blurting out the words before he could overthink them.

Winter Soldier smiled and nodded, draining the rest of his drink as he slid out of the booth. Steve followed suit, downing the rest of his vodka and orange and following Winter Soldier towards the stage. They took two seats next to one another, close to the stage so that they could clearly see what would happen. They were joined by a small crowd, fewer people than had come to the previous week's demonstration, but still a good dozen or so. As if by clockwork, five minutes after the announcement was made, two performers stepped onto the stage: a man and a woman, wearing gym clothes and smiles.

The ambience was completely different from the previous demonstration. Whereas the week before, the lights had been dimmed and the performers had been giving a display of sensuality, this week the lights were on, the atmosphere much more one of a classroom or a workshop, the aim to educate rather than titillate. The man gave a friendly wave to the audience, introducing himself and his partner.

"I'm Avi, this is Jessie," he said. "Today we'll be demonstrating the correct way to do a Takate Kote, or TK, box tie."

Steve watched with interest as Avi and Jessie both sat down on the stage, Jessie placing her arms behind her back, her wrists facing one another as she bent her elbows to form right angles. Avi took a length of rope, doubling it up by taking the middle of the rope and smoothing down the two ends. He tied a single column around Jessie's wrists, before looping it around them three times.
Avi carefully explained what he was doing, taking care to check in with Jessie from time to time as the tie became more elaborate. The rope looped up to wrap around her shoulders, before crossing over her chest, forming columns of rope both above and below her breasts, framing them perfectly. Steve watched in awe at Avi's ropemanship, the length of rope becoming almost an artform as it wrapped around Jessie's body in beautiful, clean, geometric shapes.

It was around 20 minutes into the demonstration that Steve became aware of Winter Soldier shuffling closer and closer into Steve's space. Steve's mouth went dry, suddenly feeling sweaty and hyper-aware of Winter Soldier's body just inches away from his own. He fancied that he could feel the heat emanating from his body, his concentration on the bondage demonstration destroyed as the far more alluring pull of Winter Soldier swallowed up his attention. He longed to turn his head to the side, to nuzzle against Winter Soldier's neck, to kiss his lips. Perhaps he could lean sideways just slightly, so that he could touch the other man. If Winter Soldier objected or pulled away, Steve could pass it off as an accident and not do so again. And if he liked it...

He gasped, so caught up in his fantasies that it came as a complete shock when Winter Soldier's hand closed gently around his own. His grip was light and loose, allowing Steve to easily pull his hand away, if he wanted to. Steve swallowed hard, his pupils blown wide as he dropped his gaze to look at their hands interlocked, their fingers wrapped around one another; a perfect fit. Steve squeezed Winter Soldier's hand lightly, assuring him that he did not mind the contact, that, in fact, he fucking loved it. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the sensation of his hand being held by the warm, strong, solid hand of Winter Soldier. He lost all track of the bondage demonstration, indeed of time itself, as he savoured the warmth and the texture and the presence of the other hand wrapped so tenderly around his own. It was incredible, intoxicating, indescribably joyous. Steve had gone so long without holding another's hand that he had forgotten how good it felt.

The sudden scraping of chairs around him brought him rudely back to the real world. He opened his eyes, blinking slightly as his eyes adjusted to the lights. He watched as the majority of the crowd drifted off, the demonstration apparently over. A few people stayed behind, approaching Avi and Jessie with questions and eager expressions on their faces. Steve sat motionless, acutely aware of the hand holding his, not daring to move, indeed not daring to do anything that could break the spell and cause Winter Soldier to pull away. Finally, though, after several long minutes, even he recognised that the current circumstances could not go on much longer before straying into awkward territory. He cast a shy glance sideways, finding Winter Soldier smiling at him.

"Do you want to go somewhere more private?" said Winter Soldier.

Steve nodded, his heart swelling with happiness when Winter Soldier kept holding his hand when they stood up. Winter Soldier led Steve through the crowd, heading towards the back of the club towards a door that Steve had not entered before. They went through the door, finding themselves in a long, dimly-lit corridor with doors on one side, spaced apart at even intervals. Steve remembered Natasha telling him that there were around ten private rooms at the back of the venue, equipped with beds, available for patrons to use for any kinky or sexual activities. His heart beat a little harder in his chest, his cock twitching with interest as Winter Soldier led him by the hand towards one of the doors at the very end of the corridor.

They stepped into the room, the door swinging shut behind them. Steve had a split second to take in the layout of the room – one large double bed, one radiator, and dark, slightly-peeling, grubby wallpaper on the walls – before he was spun around and shoved against the wall, Winter Soldier pressing up against him as he kissed him hungrily. Steve stood frozen for a split second, unable to believe that Jesus, fuck, this was really happening, before letting out a groan and kissing back with equal fervour. Winter Soldier's stubble rubbed against his face, a delicious burn and a fantastic contrast to the wet, slick heat of his mouth. His tongue invaded Steve's mouth, determined to taste
him, to conquer him, to tease him.

Steve kissed him back hard, ecstatic as he tasted the other man's mouth, his hands reaching out and grabbing onto tight black leather. Winter Soldier's hands went straight to Steve's hips, his fingers slipping around to grope and squeeze and rub his ass through his booty shorts. Steve's cock swelled in response, thick and hard and sensitive, the head already starting to ooze pre-come. He rutted against Winter Soldier, feeling something hard and thick press back against him, a needy groan escaping from his lips before he could stop himself. He clung to Winter Soldier's shoulders, throwing his head back and rubbing himself desperately against the bulge in the other man's trousers, letting out a gasp when a pair of lips suddenly settled on his neck and bit gently.

They drew apart, both panting hard, their erections obvious, straining against the material of Steve's booty shorts and Winter Soldier's leather ensemble respectively. Winter Soldier smiled, reaching out and taking Steve's hands gently, a shocking juxtaposition from the rough, passionate make-out session they had been engaged in just moments previously.

"I really like you," said Winter Soldier. "You're funny and interesting and hot as fuck."

Steve blushed, unused to such naked compliments. Before he could form a coherent response, Winter Soldier had ploughed on, almost tripping over his words in his haste.

"You really seemed to like the bondage sessions this week and last, am I right?" he said.

"Yeah," said Steve, not bothering to deny it. "I liked them, like... a lot."

Winter Soldier smiled coyly, suddenly bashful.

"I really want... I mean... Fuck. I'd love to tie you up," he said. "Would you like that?"

Steve's mouth went dry, his heart pounding in his chest as his cock throbbed in response. Did he want to be tied up by Winter Soldier? *Fuck. Was the Sun hot?* Before he could reply, however, Winter Soldier had once again rushed on.

"Not today," he said hurriedly. "I want you to think about it properly, make sure you really want it. But, if you're up for it in a week's time... We should do it. Just, think about it, yeah?"

He spoke so earnestly, so gently, that Steve could not help the smile that spread over his face. He nodded, his throat suddenly tight.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll... I'll think about it."

With a smile, Winter Soldier leaned in and kissed Steve on the cheek.

"I have to go now, but I'll see you next Saturday," he said. "I look forward to hearing your answer."

Steve nodded, watching mutely as Winter Soldier slipped out of the room, the door swinging shut behind him. He stood in solitary silence for several minutes, still reeling from what had just happened, before a grin slowly began spreading over his face. A good few minutes later, once he had sufficiently recovered from the kisses and the making out and Winter Soldier's delicious proposition, he came to his senses and left the room.

As he hurried down the corridor back towards the main part of the club in search of Natasha, he felt lighter than air.
CHAPTER ART: See it here.

TAKATE KOTE (TK) BOX TIE: The TK box tie described in this chapter is a real thing! You can see pictures of it, as well as a step-by-step tutorial on how to do it safely, here.

PEACOCK BY KATY PERRY: This song is also real! It's 3 minutes and 52 seconds of pure musical innuendo and you can listen to it here. Enjoy! XD

THANK YOU: Thank you to all of you who commented on the last chapter! It's wonderful to see more of you interacting with this story and it's also massively encouraging as a writer - I appreciate you all so much! <3

THOUGHTS: Did you enjoy this chapter? Did it inspire any feelings, thoughts and theories? Let me know in the comments! :)

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Submission"... ;)

TUMBLR: If you're feeling sociable, feel free to follow/message me on Tumblr! I am ao3-elle1991 on there.
Steve's good mood continued over the rest of the weekend and into the next week.

Even the start of the working week was surprisingly enjoyable. The usual Monday morning boredom was dispelled when he opened his emails, finding to his delight a message from his favourite translator: James. Steve put on his headphones, listening to some upbeat music as he uploaded the new Russian content to the Stark Industries website. One hour later, the task complete, he fired back an email to let James know the job was done.

To: James Barnes

From: Steven Rogers

Subject: Re: Russian content for the Renewable Technologies page

Hi James,

Thanks for the new content. All updated now!

Did you have a good weekend? I watched the first episode of Supernatural yesterday following your recommendation and omg why do I get the feeling I'm going to get sucked into this?!

Steven Rogers

Website Administrator

Stark Industries

He went to the next job on his list – a Spanish page update from a much more boring translator – and sighed, opening the relevant page in the website CMS and starting the tedious task of copying and pasting in the new content. He was part-way through the first section when a new email notification flashed up in the corner of his screen.

Notification: 1 new email!

To: Steven Rogers

From: James Barnes
Subject: Re: Russian content for the Renewable Technologies page

Hey,

Cheers, it looks good.

OMG YES. Once you hear the words "dad's on a hunting trip... and he hasn't been home in a few days" there's no going back!! Wait until you meet all the monsters – ghosts, vampires, shifters, demons... angels. OMG WAIT UNTIL YOU MEET CAS.

James Barnes

Russian Translator

Stark Industries

Steve read through the email, a warm feeling spreading through his chest as he read James' words. The excitement and enthusiasm were palpable in the other man's words. Steve could almost hear him saying the words, and suddenly found himself longing to know what James' voice sounded like.

Where was he from? Did he have a New York accent? Southern? West coast? Or perhaps Russian? James Barnes was not a particularly Russian-sounding name, but all the translators at Stark Industries had to have native or bilingual levels of proficiency in their language, so it was entirely possible that James was in fact Russian, with ancestry from an English-speaking country that could explain his decidedly English-sounding name.

He imagined James watching Supernatural on TV, his feet propped up on a table, a beer in his hand perhaps, or a plate of food on his lap. He wondered what kind of food James liked. He wondered what he liked to drink. He wondered if James lived alone, or with a housemate, or perhaps a partner. A small stab of jealousy went through him as he thought of the final possibility. Pushing the thought out of his mind, he cracked his knuckles before typing out a reply.

To: James Barnes

From: Steven Rogers

Subject: Re: Russian content for the Renewable Technologies page

Hi James,

Lol I look forward to it. Who's Cas?

Steven Rogers
He reluctantly went back to the Spanish website updates, his mind only half on the task as he waited for a reply from James. He did not have to wait long, a notification pinging up in the corner of the screen within minutes.

Notification: 1 new email!

To: Steven Rogers
From: James Barnes
Subject: Re: Russian content for the Renewable Technologies page

Hey,

Cas is a (literal) angel: a complete dork, a complete badass, an occasional assbutt, and 100% hottie XD Season 4, Steven, season 4...

James Barnes

Russian Translator
Stark Industries

Steve felt a stab of disappointment go through him. James thought Cas was hot. Cas, presumably, was short for Cassandra. James was probably straight then. Steve mentally kicked himself, berating himself for ever having entertained the possibility of him and James getting together. It was a fantasy; a nice one, but a fantasy all the same. Pushing his disappointment aside, he concentrated on the jokey banter and friendship that they had cultivated since he had started at Stark Industries. He smiled, trying to bury his disappointment. Did it matter if James was straight? Of course not. James was a lovely email buddy, regardless of his sexuality. Steve was thankful for their friendship – if indeed what they had could be counted as friendship.

To: James Barnes
From: Steven Rogers
Subject: Re: Russian content for the Renewable Technologies page
Haha, I look forward to seeing Cas then :P

Speaking of things beginning with ca—... check out this massive cat! XD

Steven Rogers

Website Administrator

Stark Industries

He inserted a pic of a Maine Coon, grinning to himself as he hit send. As well as discussions about popular culture, cat picture threads were another thing that he and James liked to indulge in. Turning his attention back to his work, he ploughed through the rest of the morning's work, managing to upload four new Spanish and French website updates, all the while swapping cat pictures every 10 minutes or so with James.

By the time lunchtime came around, he was in high spirits. He felt productive for getting so much work done, warm and fuzzy from emailing cat pictures back and forth with James all morning, and still on a high from his proposition from the Winter Soldier on Saturday. He strode down to the cafeteria with a spring in his step, getting his food and settling down at the table in record time.

Before long, Natasha had joined him, hugging him from behind before sitting down opposite him and tucking enthusiastically into her food. Steve watched in amazement as she shoved half a sausage into her mouth at once, somehow remaining perfectly elegant as she chewed her enormous mouthful.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Natasha swallowed – several times, in fact, on account of her ginormous bite – before grinning at him sheepishly.

"I had a super-busy morning," she said. "Translation is hungry work. It takes up a lot of brain power."

Steve chuckled, starting on his own food at a much more normal speed. As Natasha launched into an explanation of some juicy office gossip that she had heard earlier that morning, Steve smiled to himself as he listened, hugging his own piece of gossip close to his chest, warming himself with it.

He had not told Natasha about Winter Soldier's proposition yet. Despite having spent the rest of the evening dancing with her after Winter Soldier had departed, he had not found the right moment to tell her, having wanted to talk to her about it without her friends listening in. Now, as Natasha concluded her story, he had the perfect opportunity.

"Want to hear some more gossip?" he offered.

Natasha's eyes widened with excitement, nodding her head so vigorously that her curls bounced up and down. Steve snorted. Natasha had a thirst for knowledge more than anyone else he had ever met. Glancing around to make sure no one else was within earshot, he leaned forwards, Natasha mirroring his movements so that their heads were bent low over their food, less than a foot apart.
"Winter Soldier asked me to do kink with him," said Steve.

As Steve had expected, Natasha's eyes widened even further, her body visibly straining to contain her excitement.

"And?" she demanded. "What did you say?"

Steve smirked, staying silent for a moment purely to wind her up. Immediately realising what he was doing, Natasha clenched her fists, looking as if she were in physical pain with the effort it took not to throttle him, if only because if she did, she would never get to hear the answer.

"Well?!" she demanded, after several long seconds of silence.

Steve sniggered, deciding to put her out of her misery and spill the beans she so desperately wanted.

"He asked me to think about it over the week and tell him my answer next Saturday," said Steve. "But I think... I'm going to say yes."

Natasha's nostrils flared, her eyes shining as she looked almost victorious for a moment. Before Steve could fully decipher the expression, however, her face smoothed over and she grinned, winking at him so lecherously that Steve felt himself blush.

"He's hot as fuck, I'll give you that," she said. "If he weren't gay, I'd--"

Steve never discovered what Natasha would do if Winter Soldier were not gay, because at that exact moment, she stopped mid-sentence, frowning as she looked down at her bag. She reached inside, pulling out a ringing mobile phone and pressing a button before putting it to her ear.

"This is Natasha," she said.

Steve watched as she listened intently to whatever the person at the other end of the phone was saying. Her expression went from neutral to troubled, before she suddenly paled, nodding once and replying with a curt "understood", before hanging up.

She stood abruptly, her chair scraping loudly on the cafeteria floor. Steve watched in surprise as she threw her phone back into her bag, zipping it up and hurriedly slinging it over her shoulder.

"I have to go," she said. "Sorry."

Steve blinked, dumbfounded by the rapid turn of events. Natasha had never left in the middle of lunch before. He gestured lamely to her food, which she had been wolfing down so enthusiastically just minutes beforehand.

"But you haven't finished your food..." he said.

Natasha gave him a pained smile, already moving off in the direction of the exit.

"I'm sorry," she called over her shoulder, before breaking into a run.

Steve watched in astonishment as she sprinted out of the cafeteria, her bag bouncing on her back as she went.
For three days, Natasha was completely unreachable.

She did not come to work, texts went unanswered, and whenever Steve called her to see if she was alright, he went straight through to voicemail. Steve found himself growing increasingly anxious. It was totally out of character for Natasha to disappear so completely from the radar. It was unprecedented, unsettling and strange.

With each day that passed, Steve grew more and more worried for her well-being. It was the lack of explanation that bothered him. If he only knew what was going on, that she was safe and well, he would feel so much more reassured. As it was, he had no idea what had caused her to run from the cafeteria that Monday lunchtime. Was she sick? Was a member of her family sick? Was she caught up in something sinister? With an informational vacuum, his mind filled the void with increasingly desperate scenarios, each one worse than the last.

By the time Friday lunchtime came around, Steve was at his wit's end. He sat at his usual table, alone, not feeling remotely hungry but forcing himself to eat all the same. He was staring down at his plate miserably, considering whether or not to send Natasha another text when his previous seven had gone unanswered, when a tired, familiar voice spoke directly in front of him.

"Hey."

Steve's head snapped up, taking in Natasha's exhausted-looking appearance as she attempted to shoot him a smile. He immediately got out of his seat, rounding the table and pulling her into a tight hug. He buried his nose in her hair, closing his eyes as he inhaled her scent, relief exploding in his gut as she hugged him back. He hugged her until she pulled away, going back to his seat as Natasha sank into hers.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "Is everything OK?"

Natasha sighed, lowering her gaze and staring at the table.

"I'm OK," she said. "It was a family emergency."

There was a bitterness and a tiredness in her tone that Steve was unfamiliar with hearing. He reached out to grasp her hand, before freezing half-way, only then realising there was something very wrong with Natasha's appearance. He had been so relieved to see her that he had not noticed it at first, but now the initial shock was wearing off, the differences were glaringly obvious. The knuckles on Natasha's right hand were bandaged. Not only that, but her hair was fashioned oddly, covering much of her face. When he gently reached out and swept it aside, he saw a large bruise on her cheek.

Steve stared at the bruise, shock quickly giving way to anger that someone would dare harm Natasha. The bruise looked several days old, as if she had attained it on Monday, the day she had originally gone missing. Taking several deep breaths, he spoke as calmly and evenly as he could.

"What happened?" he said. "Where did you get that bruise?"

Natasha stared at him, her green eyes somehow both hostile and cool.

"I fell down the stairs," she said. "Scraped my knuckles trying to break the fall. Landed on my face."

Steve bit his lip, forcing himself to hold his tongue. If Natasha did not want to speak, there was nothing he could do to force her; she was as stubborn and strong-willed as they came. All the same, every fibre of Steve's being was screaming that Natasha was lying. His time in Iraq had honed his intuition for when something was not quite right, and right now it was setting off alarm bells and throwing up red flags like nothing else.
"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked hesitantly.

Natasha shook her head, stealing a chip off Steve's plate.

"There's nothing to talk about," she said, shrugging. "The family emergency is over. I'll be more careful on the stairs in future. That's literally all there is to say. Now, tell me everything I've missed over the last week."

Seeing that the conversation about Natasha's disappearance was well and truly over, Steve reluctantly began recounting all the noteworthy events that had occurred since Monday lunchtime. Whilst he spouted out the facts, almost automatically, internally he was in turmoil. He was 99% certain that Natasha was lying. It unsettled him deeply. He wondered where she had really gone, what had really happened in her absence, how she had really got her injuries.

The feeling of being unsettled continued way after lunchtime, dogging him for the rest of the day, distracting him right up until clocking-off time. As he drove home, he was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not drive his usual route. He only noticed his mistake several minutes later, icy fear immediately flooding his stomach.

Steve's commute was an unusual one. His normal route involved a detour that added, on average, ten minutes to his journey. The direct route, the one he always did everything to avoid, the one he was on right now, took him directly past the one place he feared more than any other in New York City.

It was less than a block away. The rush-hour traffic was inching along, painfully slow. Panic began to build up in his gut, spiralling and amplifying uncontrollably. There was not enough air in the car. Each breath was a fight, his muscles tense and his heart hammering madly in his chest. He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles white. Adrenaline pumped through his body, making him shaky and nauseous.

He wanted nothing more than the press the pedal to the floor, smash his way past the other cars and accelerate from the scene as fast as his shitty old car could manage. He fought the urge, the rational part of his brain reminding him that it was his father's car, one of the few valuable things Steve had inherited after his death. Regardless, he would probably crash, or get chased by the police and end up spending the night in a cell.

Terror prickling the inside of his skull, he sat in his car, shunted forward metre by metre, carried along by the wave of drivers making the evening commute, towards the place he always avoided, the place that made him want to turn and run as far and as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

He passed the war memorial – a tribute to all dead US soldiers killed in combat – with sweat dripping down his face, his hands clamped around the steering wheel, his entire body rigid as he drowned in fear.

When he got home, the moment he stepped out of his car, he was sick all over his shoes.

That night, he had a nightmare.

It was not the one re-playing the Fallujah mission, it was the other one; the more abstract, dream-like one where He inevitably turned up.
Steve was surrounded by blackness. It was complete, absolute. It was darker than night, darker than the blackest paint. It was not even the colour black, because the word 'colour' implied some kind of light source illuminating an object, and here – wherever here was – there was not a single photon of light.

Suddenly, up ahead, he could see something, looming out of the darkness, beautiful in its visibility. Steve ran towards it, his footsteps making no sound, joy exploding in his chest that he had found something in the midst of this jet black, empty universe.

He drew closer. There was a figure on the ground, a man, face down and with His arms wrapped around Himself. A strange noise was coming from Him. Crying, Steve realised. The man was crying, very quietly, as if He did not want to be heard. Steve reached out, wanting to help the man.

"Hey," he said gently.

An explosion of sound. A scream, coming from the man and from all around him. The darkness screamed at him, deafening and disturbing. The man on the floor twisted around, revealing His bloodied face and clothes, His terrible injuries that no man could survive.

"Steve!" He screamed. "You did this to me, Steve! How could you?"

Steve awoke with a violent jerk.

He buried his face in his pillow, letting out a muffled scream of his own, an echo of His in the dream; two halves of a whole, a bridge from past to present.

By the time Saturday night came along, Steve was mentally exhausted.

The combined stress of Natasha's disappearance, the circumstances surrounding her decidedly shady reappearance, the war memorial, the nightmare and the associated insomnia that had followed, had all conspired to leave him mentally fatigued in a way that he had not experienced for a long time.

When Natasha came to pick him up to drive them to The Underworld, she looked at him with concern, a small frown furrowing her forehead.

"You OK?" she said.

"I'm fine," Steve lied, too tired to go into it. "Let's go."

The drive took place largely in silence, each wanting to ask the other about their well-being but each holding their own secrets close to their chests, not wanting to ask for fear of the inevitable: What about you?

People in glass houses should not throw stones.

They arrived in good time, donning their masks as they entered the club. Natasha was quickly called over by her friends, leaving Steve standing slightly awkwardly by the entrance as he waited for Winter Soldier. He jumped when someone tapped him on the shoulder, spinning around, his heart hammering, before letting out a sigh of relief, his body sagging as he took in the familiar swathes of black leather.
"Woah, sorry, didn't meant to scare you," said Winter Soldier. "I must have been in the bathroom when you came in. I saw you standing over here like a loner and thought you might want some company."

Steve laughed, letting Winter Soldier pull him into a hug, resting his head on the other man's shoulder briefly. Winter Soldier let his hands linger on Steve's arms as he pulled away, before slipping his hands down to Steve's wrists and holding them gently. The gesture was oddly intimate, reminding him of the first time Winter Soldier had gripped his wrists, after witnessing their first bondage demonstration. Steve shivered, licking his lips as Winter Soldier's grip tightened.

"Do you want to go get a drink?" he asked.

Winter Soldier shook his head.

"No," he said. "I'd like to have a clear head tonight."

He tentatively held out a hand, waiting for Steve to grasp it. Cottoning on a couple of seconds later, Steve took the proffered hand, smiling at the look of relief that spread over the visible portion of Winter Soldier's face. He let the other man lead him to the door at the back of the club, the two of them slipping through into the corridor that led to the private rooms. They made their way to the room at the end of the corridor, going inside and closing the door behind them.

Winter Soldier led them to the bed. They climbed onto it together, Winter Soldier moving them so that they were lying down, facing one another. Steve's eyes fluttered closed as Winter Soldier's hand came up to cup his face. He could feel the other man's breath ghosting across his face and his heart rate leapt, remembering the passionate kiss they had shared the week before.

When a pair of lips did press against his own, however, the kiss was not rough and heated, but slow and gentle. The hand on his face slipped back to stroke the back of his neck, languid and sensual as Winter Soldier's tongue lazily explored Steve's mouth. Steve whimpered, the gentleness of it completely unexpected yet also exactly what he needed after his stressful week from hell.

He slipped his arm around Winter Soldier's back, caressing the black leather and clinging to him as he kissed Winter Soldier, just as slowly and gently as Winter Soldier was kissing him. The room was silent save for the quiet sounds of them kissing and the occasional sigh as one of them stroked a particularly nice part of the other's neck or back, eliciting the sound. Somehow, this felt even more intimate than if they had been rolling around the bed in a heated fit of passion.

Steve snuggled closer to Winter Soldier, feeling his stress and worry begin to fall away from him as the other man kissed him so thoroughly and stroked the back of his neck so tenderly. It felt so good: to forget about the rest of the world; to forget about his worries; to exist only within these four walls, lying in bed with Winter Soldier. When Winter Soldier scraped his blunt fingernails gently from the top of Steve's spine all the way down the base of his back, he did not feel even remotely embarrassed about the mewl that escaped from his lips.

Winter Soldier pulled away with a chuckle, his hand moving so that he was back to holding Steve's hand, his thumb rubbing gently across Steve's knuckles.

"So, did you think about my question?" asked Winter Soldier.

Steve nodded, his heart rate picking up as he remembered the insanely sexy proposition he had been issued the week before.

"Yeah," he said.
Winter Soldier smiled. Steve found himself staring at his lips, longing to kiss them again.

"And what's your answer?" prompted Winter Soldier.

Steve's eyes quickly left his lips to gaze into the black goggles covering the upper half of Winter Soldier's face. A shiver went through him. He could pass Winter Soldier in the street and have no idea that it was him. They could have sex, do the kinkiest activities imaginable, but he could bump into him at the supermarket and have no idea that he was the man who had fucked him, or who he had fucked, or who had tied him up and spanked him silly. It was an exhilarating thought.

"My answer's yes," said Steve. "I want to do kink with you."

Steve could see the way Winter Soldier's breath hitched at his answer. If he dared to look down, he bet he would see at least a semi-erection tenting the sexy black leather of his crotch. The thought sent a throb of excitement through him, causing his own cock to harden and thicken slightly.

"What do you want?" said Winter Soldier.

Steve's mind went back to the first bondage demonstration he had witnessed. He remembered the look of complete relaxation and bliss on the sub's face. He found himself desperate for it. After the week he had had, to let go and fall deep into subspace, into that world of carefree bliss, felt like exactly what he needed.

"I want you to tie me up," said Steve.

Winter Soldier nodded, his tongue darting out and licking his lips, seemingly unconsciously.

"Is there anything else you want?" asked Winter Soldier.

Steve thought about it, listening to his body. After a few long moments of self-reflection, he blushed, ducking his head, almost ashamed to say the words but too tired to hold them back.

"I want kisses and strokes," he said. "I want cuddles."

Winter Soldier smiled gently, briefly leaning in and kissing Steve gently on the lips. Before Steve could savour it, however, he had already pulled away, squeezing Steve's hand in reassurance.

"And is there anything you don't want?" asked Winter Soldier.

Steve lay there in silence, mulling the question over in his mind. The scars down his right side tingled momentarily, reminding Steve of their ugly presence. He imagined Winter Soldier seeing them and recoiling in disgust, his stomach plunging at the mere thought of it. No, Winter Soldier could not see his scars. Steve could not bear to see the horror on his face, or hear the inevitable question of how he had got them.

"I don't want you to take my top off," said Steve. "Because of... reasons..."

Winter Soldier nodded, not pressing him for an explanation. Steve closed his eyes, momentarily composing himself as he squeezed Winter Soldier's hand in thanks.

"Your top will stay on, then," said Winter Soldier firmly. "And what about... sexual stuff?"

The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch. Steve swallowed, considering the question carefully. Being tied up already sounded overwhelming. To add anything sexual to the mix sounded like too much, too soon. Much though he would love to have sex with Winter Soldier, he did not feel as
though it was a wise idea to combine it with their first ever time doing bondage.

"Nothing sexual," Steve said at last. "Not this time."

Winter Soldier visibly swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. The temperature in the room seemed to shoot up a couple of degrees at the qualifier 'not this time', with its implicit, delicious suggestion of a next time...

Winter Soldier nodded, smiling as he leaned forwards once more to give Steve another kiss, this one sloppier and longer-lasting than the previous peck on the lips. Steve closed his eyes, enjoying the rough scratch of the other man's stubble against his own, his fingers curling around Winter Soldier's leather-clad bicep.

With a grin, Winter Soldier slipped off the bed, retrieving a bag from the floor that Steve had not noticed before. He watched as Winter Soldier pulled out a length of rope, neatly wound up in a figure of eight. Steve's heart began to quicken in his chest, his lips parting as he watched, mesmerised, as Winter Soldier slowly began to uncoil the rope.

Steve licked his lips, a heady mixture of nervous and excited.

"This is my first time doing anything like this," he blurted out.

Winter Soldier paused momentarily in uncoiling the rope, giving Steve his full attention.

"Your first time doing bondage or subbing?" he asked.

"Both," said Steve.

Winter Soldier looked at him seriously, putting down the rope on the bed beside him and taking hold of Steve's hands instead.

"If you ever want to stop, just say stop," said Winter Soldier. "If you start to feel scared or uncomfortable or in pain, tell me. If you ever want to stop things, just say the word, and the rope comes off. You might be getting tied up, but you're still going to have full control over the situation. I want this to be safe and fun for both of us, OK?"

Steve nodded, unexpectedly grateful to hear Winter Soldier's words. He could not deny that the thought of giving up his ability to move was a daunting one. The knowledge that Winter Soldier would look after his well-being whilst he was in such a vulnerable position, and that he would listen to and immediately obey any requests from Steve to stop, brought him huge comfort and reassurance.

"Thanks," said Steve. "And, uh, the same for you. If you don't like it, we can stop anytime."

Winter Soldier smiled, leaning in and kissing him on the nose.

"Thanks," he said. "Now put your hands behind your back."

Steve stared at him, taken aback by the sudden shift in tone. Winter Soldier's entire countenance seemed to change, sliding seamlessly into the role of Dom as he picked up the rope, running it patiently through his hands as he waited for Steve to obey his command. Steve licked his lips, his hands suddenly sweaty as he slowly brought them behind his back.

Winter Soldier waited until they were fully behind his back before smiling, stroking Steve's cheek.

"Well done," he said. "Good boy."
Steve moaned, a blush spreading up his chest and colouring his cheeks, unbelievably proud and turned on to have received praise for submitting to the other man's request. His cock twitched in his pants. He saw Winter Soldier's head lower slightly, undoubtedly seeing Steve's arousal, but, as promised, he made no move to touch him there.

Instead, he scooted behind Steve, settling down so that he was sat directly behind Steve, his legs spread out with Steve between them. He gently placed a hand on Steve's chest, pushing him back slightly so that Steve was leaning on Winter Soldier's chest. He closed his eyes with a sigh, allowing Winter Soldier to take his weight, nestling against the soft black leather.

"Good boy," whispered Winter Soldier, his breath tickling Steve's ear. "You're doing so well. Relax for me."

Steve felt his muscles relaxing, his body naturally reacting to Winter Soldier's voice. Winter Soldier's warm, solid body pressed against Steve's own gave him a feeling of safety and security. His mind, stressed from the last week, was yearning to hand over control, and little by little, Steve could feel part of him changing, relinquishing control, entrusting it to Winter Soldier, a deep feeling of relaxation sweeping over him.

His body went limp, leaning all of weight on Winter Soldier's chest, his eyes closed and his head lolling back onto the other man's shoulder. He heard Winter Soldier praise him once more in a reverent whisper – *good boy* – and smiled lazily, a feeling of pride warming him from the inside.

A length of rope looped around his wrists, binding them together behind his back. He moaned quietly, unfamiliar with the sensation of rope on his skin. It was rougher than he expected, chafing ever so slightly. A soothing hand immediately stroked his arm, reassuring him. He leaned into the touch, the motion putting the slightest amount of pressure on the rope around his wrists.

The sensation of being bound shot through him like a revelation. His immediate reaction was to panic, but deeper still, there was an almost savage joy. He was relinquishing control to someone he trusted, giving away his freedom of movement, and somehow, instead of being oppressive, it was liberating. When Winter Soldier pushed him so that he was lying on his front, Steve went with it willingly, groaning against the soft duvet as he buried his face in it, loving the way Winter Soldier was slowly winding the rope along his arms in beautiful diamond shapes.

His breathing slowed, a feeling of contentedness, happiness and relaxation slowly filling him, seeping through his skin, tingling all the way through to his fingers and toes, permeating deep into his bones. Winter Soldier began tying his feet so that they were attached to his wrists, his back arched but his body fully supported by the bed. He moaned softly, a little patch of drool forming on the duvet underneath his mouth as his lips hung open, eyes closed, blissed out.

Winter Soldier stroked a hand along his neck and back, gentle and soothing and chaste. Steve sighed, focusing his concentration on the visceral sensations on his body: the rope, tied around his wrists and ankles, wrapped along his arms; the bed beneath him, the softness of it, pressed against his front; and Winter Soldier's warm presence right next to him, one hand stroking along Steve's back, the other holding his hand gently.

Winter Soldier gently leaned down, slowly placing kisses on Steve's neck. Steve whimpered at the sensation, waves of pleasure going through him at the simple touch, a whole new erogenous experience. He could stay like this forever. He was floating on a cloud of bliss, immersed in an onslaught of beautiful and pleasurable sensations. He was bound, helpless, and he loved it.

Winter Soldier had taken away his mobility, and with it, his sense of daily life, stress and time itself. He did not know if it had been ten minutes or an hour since Winter Soldier had first placed the rope
around his wrists. Here, in this dream-like state of mind – *subspace*, his memory whispered – he could let go of all his thoughts, all his worries. He could forget about his nightmares. He could forget about his guilt. For the first time since Fallujah, he felt free.

After a couple more minutes, or possibly a couple more hours, Steve could not be sure, Winter Soldier touched his shoulder gently, calling his name softly.

"Captain America," he said. "I'm going to untie you now, OK?"

Steve nodded slowly, the words taking a few moments to penetrate the pleasant fog in his mind. He lay on the bed, eyes closed, a smile on his face as Winter Soldier's fingers slowly and carefully removed the rope from his body, the pads of his fingers stroking Steve's skin as he did so, like a constant, lingering caress.

He came back to awareness slowly, finding himself wrapped in a warm, soft blanket, with warm arms wrapped around him, Winter Soldier whispering in his ear in a low, soothing voice, a cascade of gentle reassurance.

"You're so good, so beautiful, did so well for me. You're so perfect. Such a good sub..."

Steve fumbled his arm out from the blankets, taking hold of Winter Soldier's hand and squeezing it tightly.

"Hey, there you are," said Winter Soldier softly. "You OK? Did you like it?"

Steve licked his lips, struggling to find the right words to convey the experience they had just shared. Finally, he gave up trying to think about it and let the words simply slip from his lips, pure, truthful and unplanned.

"That was perfect," he said.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

**CHAPTER ART:** See it [here](#).

**THANK YOU:** This fic has now surpassed 1,000 readers and 100 subscribers! Thank you to all of you for following this story, and an extra special thank you to those of you who take the time to comment - I love hearing your thoughts and appreciate you guys immensely! <3

**THOUGHTS:** What do you think of Natasha's disappearance? Do you believe her explanation of dealing with a family emergency and falling down the stairs? And did you enjoy Steve and Winter Soldier's bondage session? Let me know your thoughts, feelings and theories in the comments! :)

**TEASER:** The next chapter will be titled "Pleasure Games". It's going to be pure smut... ;)

**TUMBLR:** I know a lot of fandom creators have left Tumblr in the last week in protest against Tumblr changing its policy on NSFW content, but I am still on there and do not have any plans to leave. If you want to follow/stalk/chat to me on there, my username is ao3-elle1991 <3
The week passed by in a blur.

Stark Industries announced the roll-out of a new product in Europe. Steve was assigned to the Russian website, which meant that, every day, he worked with and exchanged emails with his favourite translator, James Barnes. He and James were an efficient team, but more than that, Steve loved the pop culture discussions they had over email. Steve learnt that James was a fan of sci-fi films, that his favourite band was Coldplay, that his taste in books was wildly eclectic. James liked to read thrillers, romance, classics and obscure books Steve had never even heard of. It turned out James was a huge Harry Potter fan, and they discussed which Hogwarts' houses they thought they would each be sorted into (Steve thought he would probably end up in Gryffindor or Slytherin, James in either Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw). Steve found himself looking forward to work when he got up each morning, excited to spend another day working and emailing with James.

Lunchtimes with Natasha were wonderful, too. The spark had come back to her eyes, and the bruise on her cheek and the grazes on her knuckles were healing fast. Despite being no more open about why she had disappeared so suddenly, she seemed to have mentally bounced back and was back to her usual bright self. She looked much healthier than before and seemed to have settled back into work, following her absence. Steve loved spending time with her, feeling a renewed sense of gratitude for her friendship and presence, after the unpleasant experience of her going away.

As well as talking to Natasha, Steve also spent his lunchtimes occasionally ogling his cafeteria crush Bucky. For some reason, Steve felt more attracted to him than ever. He frequently found himself staring at him, his eyes automatically tracking the other man's movements without Steve's conscious awareness. There was something strangely captivating and unsettlingly familiar about the way Bucky walked, although Steve could not quite put his finger on it. Natasha, observant as ever, often noticed Steve's attention wandering over to her colleague, and although she frequently asked if Steve wanted her to call Bucky over, Steve always turned down the offer. He was content to watch, to appreciate the other man's good looks from a distance. No need to spoil the fantasy by calling him over and making a fool out of himself.

The evenings, of course, Steve spent alone, but he did not mind it as much as he usually did. His mind was only half there. The other half was fantasising about Winter Soldier tying him up again, wrapping him up in those beautiful ropes. He thought about going further, about stripping off that sexy black leather and touching and tasting what lay beneath. His cock thickened with anticipation, arousal shooting through his groin. He reached down and palmed himself, hard within seconds.

Sam's words from weeks before echoed in his mind, and he wholeheartedly agreed: he needed to get laid.

Saturday daytime seemed to drag.

Restless anticipation gnawed at his stomach all throughout the day. He found himself checking his
watch obsessively, counting down the minutes to the evening. He felt as though he were wound up tight like a coil, waiting, waiting, to be back with Winter Soldier. He could not concentrate on anything else. Longing and arousal simmered under his skin, like an itch, like a craving that demanded to be satisfied.

By the time he and Natasha arrived at The Underworld that evening, he was almost desperate. He said goodbye to Natasha at the cloakroom, already half-hard as he made his way out into the main room, his eyes roving across the crowd in search of black leather. The beat of the music thumped through him, multicoloured disco lights flashing, almost dream-like, as dozens of revellers danced and swayed in time with the tempo. He gazed at the crowd, their bodies blending together under the lights, when suddenly he felt someone step up behind him, a hand sneaking around and touching his own.

He turned around, coming face to face with Winter Soldier. For a split second, they simply stared at one another, before crashing together, kissing passionately, their arms around one another's waists as they held one another tightly. They kissed in the middle of the dance floor for a long while, oblivious to the people dancing around them. Steve closed his eyes, immersing himself in the visceral sensations: the taste of Winter Soldier's mouth, the feel of his tongue stroking against Steve's, his stubble scratching lightly at Steve's face and, all around them, dancing revellers and loud, fast-paced music.

Steve and Winter Soldier broke apart finally, breathless, their lips slick. Winter Soldier nodded towards the back of the club, a wordless question. Steve nodded immediately. Right now, he felt that if he had to wait a single moment longer to touch Winter Soldier, he would die. He needed Winter Soldier's touch like a man lost in a desert needed water. It was a primal, almost desperate need.

They cut their way through the crowd, rushing through the back door and down the corridor that led to the private rooms. They headed into the first empty room they came to, closing the door behind them and immediately turning to one another. Winter Soldier grabbed Steve by the hips, shoving him back against the wall and pressing up hard against him. Steve groaned, grabbing hold of Winter Soldier's face and pulling him in for another kiss.

They kissed roughly, tongues moving over one another, stubble scratching, breathing hard. Steve bucked his hips, grinding his hard cock against Winter Soldier's crotch. Winter Soldier growled in response, a smile curling his lips, pleased by Steve's eagerness. His hand slipped down to squeeze Steve's ass through his booty shorts, pressing their crotches even closer together. Steve felt Winter Soldier's hard cock poking him, a moan slipping from his lips at the feel of it.

He wanted to feel the other man's cock. He wanted to put it in his mouth, to taste him and suck him until he felt warm come splash against his throat. He wanted to feel Winter Soldier inside him, to know him totally, completely, intimately. All of a sudden, the fact that there were layers upon layers of clothing between them was almost painful.

"Fuck me," begged Steve, taking Winter Soldier's hand and putting it on the bulge at the front of his booty shorts, letting him feel his arousal.

Winter Soldier moaned, squeezing Steve's cock gently through his clothes, taking a step back to look down at the large bulge distorting the fabric. He licked his lips, his cheeks flushed. Returning his gaze to Steve's face, he shook his head ruefully.

"Sorry," he said. "I don't have a condom."

Steve groaned, grinding his teeth in frustration.
"I'll bring one next time," said Winter Soldier, giving Steve's cock another squeeze.

Steve closed his eyes, revelling in the feel of Winter Soldier's hand squeezing him. It felt so good to finally have tactile stimulation on his cock, but he longed for more – for them to touch skin to skin, to feel the warmth of Winter Soldier's hand wrapped around the feverish heat of his cock. Winter Soldier's words slowly filtered through to his consciousness – next time – and he shivered in delight at the fact that this was something they would do again, next week, and hopefully the week after that, and the week after that...

"Looks like I'll just have to be a bit more creative," said Winter Soldier, a smirk tugging his lips. "Think of other fun ways to get us off. We could them pleasure games."

Pleasure games.

Steve laughed at the silly name; at the unashamed cheesiness of it. Winter Soldier's demeanour changed immediately, that light playfulness being instantly replaced by something sexier and more intense. He spun Steve around, giving his ass a spank before pressing up against him from behind, their bodies touching from head to toe, Winter Soldier's hard cock pressing against Steve's ass. His breath was hot against Steve's ear as he whispered to him, his voice low and hoarse.

"I'm going to punish you for laughing at me," he said. "My naughty little sub."

Steve moaned, rocking his hips backwards so that he was grinding on Winter Soldier's cock. The thought of Winter Soldier 'punishing' him was a thrilling one. He wondered what Winter Soldier had in mind. Perhaps he would be tied up and spanked. Perhaps he would be overloaded with pleasure, forced to come again and again. Or perhaps the opposite would be true; perhaps Winter Soldier would not touch him at all, leaving his straining cock untouched and unsatisfied.

Winter Soldier pressed back against him, briefly rubbing himself against Steve's ass, before placing a kiss on the back of his neck, just below the cowl, and taking Steve's hand, guiding him to the bed. He lay Steve down on his front, sitting near his head so that Steve could still see him. He stroked Steve's back gently, as if petting a cat, waiting for Steve to relax. As Steve's breathing began to slow, his heart rate going from excited to content, Winter Soldier smiled, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

"I'm going to tie your wrists together," said Winter Soldier. "Then I'm going to tie them to the bars of the headboard. I'm going to keep you exactly where I want you."

Steve shivered, loving Winter Soldier's commanding tone. Winter Soldier could tie him up like a pretzel and Steve would probably thank him. It was almost frightening, how wound up he was, how desperately horny he was for anything Winter Soldier wanted. He longed to submit, to let Winter Soldier do whatever he wanted. He would do anything, anything at all that the other man commanded.

The first touch of rope around his wrists was a relief. He closed his eyes with a sigh, resting his cheek against the duvet below him. Winter Soldier took his time, slowly and carefully tying the rope around his wrists, making sure that it was snug without being too tight. Steve could feel himself relaxing, the tension in his muscles slowly easing as he began to slip down into subspace.

Apparently satisfied with the cuffs he had formed around Steve's wrists, Winter Soldier fed the rope through the bars at the top of the bed, tying it securely so that Steve was well and truly attached to the bed. Steve's cock swelled in response, goosepimples erupting on his skin at the knowledge that he was now tied down to the bed, ready for whatever Winter Soldier had in mind for him. It felt so taboo, so thrilling, so titillating in its filthiness.
Winter Soldier's hands went from the rope back to Steve's body, squeezing and massaging his shoulders and upper back. Steve moaned into the duvet, the delicious squeeze of Winter Soldier's strong hands working out knots in his muscles that Steve had not even realised he had. Winter Soldier chuckled, pleased with Steve's response, before slowly making his way lower, working his way down Steve's back.

Steve drooled into the duvet, hyper-aware of the way Winter Soldier's hands were sensually massaging his back, working their way ever lower towards his ass. His cock oozed pre-come, his ass tingling with anticipation. He longed to be touched. He wanted Winter Soldier to squeeze and spank his ass, to work his fingers inside, to massage his prostate until he came. He wanted to feel the other man's cock slip deep inside, to pound into him whilst he was bound and tied to the bed.

Steve was so lost in his fantasy that the first touch of Winter Soldier's hands on his ass made him gasp out loud, a strangled moan coming from his throat as Winter Soldier slowly but firmly squeezed and kneaded the globes of his ass. He heard Winter Soldier's low growl of appreciation as he squeezed and fondled Steve through his booty shorts. Steve wriggled his hips, grinding his ass against Winter Soldier's hands and his cock against the bed, two layers of pleasure doubling up to stimulate him.

Winter Soldier leaned down, teasing his tongue along the line where Steve's booty shorts ended and his thighs began. Steve shivered, maddening aroused, desperate to feel that tongue lapping against places so near, yet so far, from its present location. As he licked lazily along Steve's thighs, Winter Soldier's hands slowly inched from Steve's ass cheeks to the waistband of his booty shorts. His fingers slipped below the tight material, caressing the sensitive skin there.

"Can I take your shorts off?" said Winter Soldier.

His voice was thick with lust. Steve swallowed hard, his rock-hard cock throbbing within the confines of the material. He nodded wordlessly, letting out a long, hard sigh when Winter Soldier slowly slid his navy-blue booty shorts down his thighs and off his legs. The cool air hit the sensitive skin of his ass, a delicious contrast to the warm softness of the duvet beneath his bare cock. Winter Soldier's hands returned to his ass, squeezing and stroking, before spreading his cheeks apart, exposing his delicate hole.

"So beautiful," murmured Winter Soldier. "I look forward to fucking that, next time."

He brushed the pad of a single finger against Steve's entrance, causing him to moan involuntarily. Steve's legs kicked and curled, desperate for more. Winter Soldier placed a gentle kiss on Steve's ass cheek, before manoeuvring him so that he was lying on his back, his cock and balls now fully exposed.

Winter Soldier licked his lips, his erection tenting the black leather of his trousers, visibly aroused. He leant down, licking and kissing along Steve's thighs, maddeningly close to his cock but not making any move to touch or lick him there. Steve moaned, unbelievably turned on as he watched Winter Soldier sucking kisses on his thighs, swathed in black leather, his black goggles covering the upper half of his face. His cock throbbed, leaking pre-come, causing a smirk to pass over Winter Soldier's face.

Winter Soldier scooted up the bed, reaching out to rub his hands over Steve's tight t-shirt. He rubbed the flats of his palms over Steve's chest, his thumbs tweaking the hard nubs of Steve's nipples on the way past. Steve arched his back, pressing his pecs against Winter Soldier's hands. He had unusually sensitive nipples. Having them rubbed or squeezed never failed to give him a shiver of intense pleasure. Seeing Steve's response, Winter Soldier repeated the motion, rubbing his thumbs slowly back and forth across the sensitive nubs.
Steve moaned, his cock throbbing between his legs as Winter Soldier rubbed at his nipples through his t-shirt. It felt deliciously good. Each rub, squeeze, tweak and stroke caused Steve to shiver. The twin erogenous zones on his chest added to the building feeling of lust between his legs. The skin of his nipples felt red hot and over-sensitive, each nerve ending buzzing with pleasure as Winter Soldier massaged and played with them with single-minded determination.

Winter Soldier leant down, kissing Steve filthily, their stubble scratching as their tongues lapped over one another again and again. Steve closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the multiple erotic sensations he was being bombarded with: Winter Soldier's hands playing with his nipples, Winter Soldier's tongue in his mouth, the rope tied around his wrists. Steve could not remember ever being more turned on. All this, and Winter Soldier had not even touched his cock.

As if reading his mind, Winter Soldier withdrew from the kiss, his hands slipping down Steve's chest to stroke at his upper thighs.

"Can I touch your cock?" said Winter Soldier. "I want to make you come."

Eyes wide and mouth dry, Steve nodded. Reaching back into his bag, Winter Soldier pulled out some hand moisturiser, smirking as he squirted some into his hand. As he massaged it into his hands, he kissed Steve gently, licking at the seam of his mouth and nuzzling him softly. Steve relaxed against the bed, his muscles loosening as Winter Soldier began to kiss him more deeply.

He closed his eyes, his breath shuddering out of him as Winter Soldier's hands returned to his thighs, ever so slowly inching towards Steve's aching cock. He was getting closer, closer, teasing Steve with his slow pace, a smirk on his lips as Steve began to sweat. After what felt like an age, warm fingers wrapped around his length at last, surrounding him in tight heat.

Winter Soldier slowly began to jerk Steve off, his thumb sweeping over the head to gather some of the pre-come oozing from the tip, lubricating Steve's cock with each pump of his hand up and down the shaft. Steve let out a moan, his toes curling when Winter Soldier reached down to cup and massage Steve's balls with his spare hand.

Pleasure began to build up inside him, the friction on his cock all the more thrilling after having lusted after Winter Soldier all week. The fact that he was tied up, helpless and spread out, cranked up his desire even further, the kinkiness of it turning him on just as much as the tactile stimulation.

Winter Soldier began concentrating his efforts on Steve's cock head, where he was most sensitive. Steve could feel his orgasm beginning to build, the pleasure intensifying inside him like a coil being wound tighter and tighter. Winter Soldier's hand was tight and hot around him, massaging his cock head, thumb sweeping repeatedly over the tip where pre-come was now leaking from him almost constantly.

Steve's breathing became heavier and more erratic. Sweat beaded on his forehead, dripped down his sides. His legs shook. He screwed his eyes shut, losing himself in the delicious sensation of Winter Soldier's hand furiously jerking him off, dragging him rapidly towards orgasm, taking him higher and higher on a spiral of pleasure. His balls were full and tight, ready to unload. He only needed a couple more strokes, a few more seconds of stimulation, in order to reach his peak.

Winter Soldier stopped.

Steve's eyes flew open in horror, choking on his own saliva as he stared at Winter Soldier's hand, resting patiently on his hip.

"Fuck!" he said. "Don't stop!"
Winter Soldier smiled sweetly, leaning forward to kiss Steve's damp forehead. Steve's orgasm faded away, the pleasure draining out of him. Steve let out a frustrated groan. He wanted to cry. He had been so close to coming. It was maddening, to have been brought right to the edge of orgasm only to have it cruelly snatched away at the last moment.

"I told you this was a punishment," said Winter Soldier. "Let's see how much you can take."

Before Steve could fully comprehend the other man's words, Winter Soldier's hand was back on his cock, slowly dragging up and down his shaft, gradually building up an increasing rhythm. Steve let his head drop back onto the pillow, unable to stop the moan from leaving his lips as Winter Soldier once more began to play with Steve's cock head. His orgasm built up much faster this time, desperate to regain that lost pleasure that had been denied to him previously.

He let out a moan, that red hot pleasure simmering under his skin, getting stronger and stronger as Winter Soldier's strokes got faster and faster. He could feel his groin tingling, the cusp of orgasm once more within sight. He was going to come, to finally ejaculate all over Winter Soldier's hand, to paint the other man's fingers white. He groaned, his chest heaving as he gritted his teeth, seizing up as Winter Soldier pumped his cock mercilessly.

Just as he thought he was about to come, Winter Soldier gripped him by the base of the cock, cutting off his orgasm. Steve let out a high-pitched whine of frustration, bathed in sweat, physically shaking as his body fought to come. He breathed hard, his heart hammering in his chest as Winter Soldier stroked his thighs lazily with his spare hand. Steve shook his hands against the ropes, desperate to reach down and finish himself off, which only elicited a sly snigger from Winter Soldier.

"You're so sexy like this," said Winter Soldier. "Look how desperate your cock looks."

Steve cast a glance down his body, taking in the sight of his cock. It was engorged, completely covered in pre-come, shiny and slick as it rested heavily on the t-shirt covering his abdomen. The head was red, over-sensitive and over-stimulated. His balls were round and full, desperate to unleash their load. The whole thing looked obscene, outrageous, aroused beyond belief.

Winter Soldier slowly wrapped his hand around Steve once more, pumping his cock in long, slow, deliberate strokes. Steve let out a broken moan, tears prickling at his eyes. He did not know if he could cope with another aborted orgasm. He was feverish with arousal, his skin slick with sweat, his eyes pin-pricked. The pleasure in his cock was almost too much to bear, bordering on uncomfortable. He felt that if Winter Soldier brought him to the edge without completion again, he would scream, cry, lose his sanity.

Winter Soldier leant forwards, kissing Steve's neck as he slowly increased the speed of his hand around Steve's cock. Steve whimpered, turning his head to nuzzle at Winter Soldier's hair as pleasure once more began to swell inside him. He was leaking pre-come constantly, every movement of Winter Soldier's hand over his cock head causing him to twitch with pleasure. His balls were full, aching to burst. He could feel his orgasm approaching. Winter Soldier's hand was squeezing and rubbing his slick, sensitive cock head, getting faster and faster.

His orgasm hit him hard. His cock began to contract rhythmically, come spurting out of him as waves of pleasure crashed over him. He let out a long cry as Winter Soldier continued jerking his cock, milking every last bit of pleasure out of him, the intensity of it amplified by the fact he had been edged for what felt like hours.

As the last spasms of pleasure faded away, Steve opened his eyes, looking down to see Winter Soldier's hand coated in streaks of come. His own t-shirt was sticking to him, coated in the mixture of sweat and come. He collapsed back against the pillows, his muscles jelly-like as he became
enveloped in a post-orgasmic haze.

Winter Soldier kissed his forehead, ignoring the mess in favour of untying Steve's wrists and pulling him into a hug.

As Steve closed his eyes and snuggled into Winter Soldier's open arms, he was hit by the thought that he could not remember the last time he had felt so satisfied, content and happy.

The next seven days were an excruciating drag.

Steve alternated between obsessively replaying the events of the previous Saturday and being impatient for the week to be over so that he could see Winter Soldier and repeat it once more. Winter Soldier was like a drug. Now that he had sampled pleasure with him, Steve wanted more desperately. It was like a craving, an itch under his skin, something that he spent every waking hour thinking about, to one degree or another.

When Saturday evening finally came around, he was desperate. He walked into The Underworld fully hard, not even caring about the sly glances at his crotch that many of the patrons cast towards him. Winter Soldier was already there, immediately swooping in and leading him out of the back door to the corridor leading to the private rooms. They headed straight into the first available room, slamming the door shut behind them before embracing and kissing deeply.

Steve melted into the kiss, his eyes fluttering closed as Winter Soldier's tongue caressed against his own. He wound his arms around Winter Soldier's shoulders, pushing their bodies together from head to toe, revelling in the solid warmth of his presence. The itch under his skin seemed to soothe a little, his racing heart slowing a little, the addict in him satisfied at last by Winter Soldier's touch. Winter Soldier's hands ran lazily over Steve's body, his fingers tickling gently, stroking, exploring the shape of him as they kissed languidly.

Several long minutes later, they broke apart, both now with wide smiles on their faces.

"Hey," said Winter Soldier. "You good?"

Steve smiled, pressing a brief kiss against Winter Soldier's lips before replying. He could not help it. It was Winter Soldier's fault for having such kissable lips.

"I'm good," he said. "You?"

Winter Soldier nodded, pulling Steve in for a hug. Steve stepped into the embrace, his heart swelling with unexpected happiness as the other man's arms encircled him. He relaxed into Winter Soldier's arms, feeling strangely comforted by their warm, solid presence. He wrapped his arms around Winter Soldier in return, feeling a rush of pleasure when he felt the other man nuzzle and sigh against him.

They spent a long while simply holding one another, a feeling of calmness and togetherness settling over them. Steve was discreetly breathing in the scent from Winter Soldier's neck when the other man finally spoke, breaking the silence.

"I was thinking we could go further today," said Winter Soldier. "I've been thinking about you all week. I want to tie you down, feel you and finger you. Does that sound OK?"
Steve felt whatever composure he had left die instantly at Winter Soldier's words. His erection, which had flagged during the gentle embrace, went back to full mast as a rush of blood went straight to his groin, making him throb. His tried to speak but found his throat dry and his tongue too large for his mouth. He settled for nodding. Fuck, of course it sounded OK. To Steve's deliriously horny mind, there had never been sexier words spoken.

"Fuck yes," he finally managed to say, causing Winter Soldier to lick his lips and grin.

"And I just want to check," said Winter Soldier, his tone gentling. "Do you still want to keep your t-shirt on?"

Steve bit his lip, suddenly nervous as the scars running down the right-hand side of his torso tingled painfully for a moment. He did not want Winter Soldier to see his scars and be repulsed, but he also dreaded being asked why he did not want to remove his t-shirt when he was willing to take off his booty shorts and show off, arguably, much more intimate areas of his body. Anxiously, he nodded slowly, bracing himself for an onslaught of questions.

To his surprise and immense relief, Winter Soldier did not question him, simply nodding and planting a reassuring kiss on Steve's nose.

"No problem," said Winter Soldier. "Now get on the bed."

Steve shivered, insanely turned on by the sudden shift in the other man's tone. When Steve did not move quickly enough for his liking, Winter Soldier seized Steve by the arms and marched him over to the bed, manhandling him roughly so that he was lying on his back his arms and legs outstretched from his body. Winter Soldier climbed on top of him, kissing him roughly whilst pinning him down, grinding down on Steve's rock-hard erection. Steve thrust his hips up, desperate for friction, his cock aching with need.

"When I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it straight away, understood?" said Winter Soldier.

Steve groaned, wildly turned on by the other man's filthy talk. He nodded, letting out another stifled moan when Winter Soldier reached down and squeezed Steve's length through his booty shorts.

"Good boy," said Winter Soldier.

Steve lay back, being careful not to move from the position Winter Soldier had placed him in – spread out with his arms and legs outstretched – as the other man climbed off him and went to fetch something from his bag. From his position, Steve could not easily see what Winter Soldier was doing, but he felt a strange thrill in not moving, in submitting to Winter Soldier's wishes for how he wanted Steve's body to be positioned, even if it meant he were blindsided. It was a small act of submission, and it warmed him to know that Winter Soldier was already dominating him, taking away his control and, with it, his worries and stresses. Winter Soldier returned with several long coils of rope, climbing back onto the bed to stroke and caress Steve's wrists gently.

"Tell me if the ropes ever feel too tight, OK?" said Winter Soldier.

Steve nodded, both touched and reassured by the other man's words. He trusted Winter Soldier, but it was good to hear the words repeated, re-establishing that bond, that promise, to always keep Steve safe when they were in a scene. Winter Soldier leant down to briefly kiss the sensitive skin of Steve's wrist, before quickly getting to work, tying a cuff around Steve's wrist and then attaching it to the corner of the bed so that his arm was totally stretched out, unable to move.
Winter Soldier's movements were quicker and more efficient than when they had done bondage before. Previously, the act of tying Steve up had been the main event, the whole purpose, and so Winter Soldier had taken his time, making an effort to make it as sensual and long-lasting as possible. Now however, he was tying the knots quickly – first one wrist, then the other – which made Steve suspect that the main event was going to be something else, and that Steve being tied up was going to be somewhat incidental.

He shivered, a spurt of pleasure going through him when Winter Soldier rubbed his hand on Steve's cock several times, before carefully peeling off his booty shorts, leaving his lower half completely naked, apart from his heavy black combat boots. Winter Soldier bent Steve's legs so that his feet were resting on the bed, his legs spread open and his knees crooked at 90-degree angles. Once Steve was positioned exactly how Winter Soldier wanted him, he tied cuffs around Steve's ankles, before tying these to the final two corners of the bed.

Steve felt a blush spreading over his cheeks as Winter Soldier leant back, taking a moment to admire his handiwork. He felt completely vulnerable and exposed. He was unable to move any of his limbs in any meaningful manner, and his cock, balls and ass hole were proudly on display, his legs spread in such a way that afforded him no way to preserve his modesty. He could feel Winter Soldier's gaze, hidden behind his goggles, nevertheless very obviously focused between his legs, and whimpered with need.

The sound seemed to jerk Winter Soldier out of his reverie. He leant down, rubbing and massaging Steve's right leg with his strong hands, starting from his foot and working his way slowly upwards, whilst sucking wet kisses into Steve's sensitive skin. Steve screwed his eyes shut, letting out a moan when Winter Soldier slowly licked a stripe up his knee, his hands starting to caress his thighs.

Winter Soldier was worshipping his body. There was no other way to describe it. Each touch, each stroke, each reverent kiss was like a prayer, an act of adoration. To be at the receiving end of such intensely focused attention left Steve feeling far more exposed than being tied up half-naked ever could. It was as though Winter Soldier wanted to sample every square inch of his skin in as many ways as he could: touch, taste, smell, sight. He was treating Steve as if he were a delicacy, and it was getting Steve harder than he had ever been in his life.

The first touch of Winter Soldier's tongue on his cock head caused his eyes to fly open, a strangled moan tearing from his lips. Winter Soldier's mouth closed around him, his tongue swirling around the sensitive tip, sucking at the pre-come that had been oozing quietly. Steve moaned, unable to hold back little sounds of pleasure as Winter Soldier began to suck in earnest, his head bobbing up and down Steve's shaft, his lips forming a tight seal, airtight, amplifying the suction.

Winter Soldier's hand wrapped around the base of Steve's cock, the part that would not fit inside his mouth, and jackéd him off, humming with satisfaction when Steve groaned, his body lifting off the bed as he writhed against the bonds around his wrists and ankles, desperate for more. After several long minutes of sweet, sweet torture, Winter Soldier pulled off with a pop, his cheeks flushed as he leant forwards and kissed Steve hard, rubbing his tongue against Steve's, making him taste the saltiness of his own pre-come.

"Can I finger you?" whispered Winter Soldier, moving from Steve's mouth to pepper kisses along his jawline.

Steve nodded, eyes wide as Winter Soldier once more retreated from the bed to fetch something from his bag. He returned moments later with a small bottle of lube, a smirk on his face when he saw Steve's cock visibly throb in response. Winter Soldier squeezed out some lube onto his fingers, making sure they were liberally coated before settling back down between Steve's legs, placing a
Winter Soldier's fingers slowly circled his opening, letting Steve get used to the idea of something being so close to his hole, teasing at the rim with gentle pressure, not enough to penetrate, but enough to stimulate, to titillate. Steve groaned quietly. It had been so long since he had last done this. It was a slightly alien sensation; unusual, but not unpleasant. Steve was glad for Winter Soldier's slowness and gentleness; his muscles were tense, clenching, unsure. Winter Soldier patiently waited for him to relax, pressing languid kisses to his inner thighs whilst constantly running his fingers gently over the sensitive rim of Steve's ass hole.

Steve finally began to relax, the tightness in his tense muscles melting away like butter under Winter Soldier's gentle ministrations. Winter Soldier hummed with approval, stroking Steve's thighs as he finally began to press his fingers against Steve's hole, keeping the amount of pressure slow and even as he began to breach the tight ring of muscle.

Steve gritted his teeth against the burn, unable to hold back a whimper as Winter Soldier finally penetrated him, his finger sinking in several inches before stopping, allowing Steve to get used to the intrusion. Steve breathed hard, his hole clenching around Winter Soldier's finger. He purposefully relaxed his muscles, earning another sound of approval from Winter Soldier, who began sawing his finger in and out with gentle motions. With each thrust of his finger, he went a little deeper, until suddenly he was brushing against Steve's prostate, pushing a moan from his lips as pleasure shot through him.

Winter Soldier began massaging Steve's prostate, that little bundle of nerves radiating pulses red hot pleasure with every pass of Winter Soldier's fingers over it. His cock was throbbing with need, his ass clenching as he writhed against the ropes, his stomach clenched as sweat dripped down his sides, pleasure building up inside him as Winter Soldier rubbed at his prostate relentlessly.

He could feel his orgasm building. A string of fuck, please and oh Gods fell from his lips as Winter Soldier added a second finger alongside the first, fucking his fingers into him hard and fast, the sound of Steve's moans and the squelch of lube filling the room. Just as Steve began to climb the peak to the point of no return, Winter Soldier smoothly removed his fingers from Steve's ass, ignoring Steve's desperate shout of protest in favour of covering his mouth with his own and smothering him with a wet, filthy kiss.

"I brought condoms today," said Winter Soldier, his voice breathless. "Have you bottomed before?"

Steve swallowed hard, his cock and ass both throbbing at Winter Soldier's loaded question. He nodded, biting back a moan at the flush of pleasure the simple head movement elicited in the other man.

"Yeah," said Steve. "I enjoy topping and bottoming. What about you?"

"I prefer to top," said Winter Soldier. "I used to bottom, but..." He trailed off, looking troubled, before shaking his head and continuing: "I just prefer to top now."

Steve frowned, curious about Winter Soldier's slightly odd response. It was not the words he had said that struck Steve as slightly off, but the tone in which he had said them. There was caution there, and a guardedness that Steve had not sensed in Winter Soldier before. Before he had any time to further analyse it, however, Winter Soldier began peeling off his clothes, banishing all thoughts from Steve's head as he watched, mouth open, at the delicious sight that was revealing itself in front of him.

Winter Soldier slowly unbuckled each of the leather straps that criss-crossed his torso, each one
falling open and revealing a little more of his chest each time. Steve drooled, unable to stop salivating as inch by inch, Winter Soldier's glorious torso was revealed. As the final leather strap was unbuckled, he could not hold back a moan, feasting his eyes on the sight in front of him as Winter Soldier pulled off the leather jacket, revealing his bare chest beneath.

Winter Soldier's chest was muscular, with a generous dusting of hair on his well-defined abs. Steve wanted to bury his face in that chest, to lick and taste every inch of him, to suck on those sexy dark nipples, currently hard little nubs that stuck out from his pecs. His arms were muscular too, strong-looking and with dark brown hair sprouting from his armpits.

Steve inhaled sharply, his cock throbbing with anticipation as Winter Soldier undid the button at the top of his leather trousers, before slowly lowering the zipper. Steve groaned, excitement exploding in his chest as he realised that, fuck, holy shit, Winter Soldier was commando. Winter Soldier slowly lowered his trousers, before stepping out of them, now completely naked apart from his leather boots and the mask on his face.

Steve stared, transfixed by the sight of his body, cut like a Greek God or someone from a porno, oozing lust and sex appeal. His gaze zeroed in on Winter Soldier's cock. It was rock hard, pre-come already visible on the shiny, slick head. It was thick, around 7 inches long, framed by a thick thatch of pubic hair. His balls, large and round, were dangling temptingly. Steve could feel his mouth watering. There was something so debauched about it – the fact that he could see the other man's big, thick cock but not his face – and Steve loved it. The anonymity gave it an extra thrill, an extra layer of charged sexuality.

Winter Soldier climbed back onto the bed, scooting up so that his crotch was right in front of Steve's face. Without ceremony, he took hold his cock and guided it to Steve's mouth, Steve automatically opening wide to take it in. Pleasure shot through him as he closed his lips around the other man's slick head, tasting the salty tang of pre-come. He bobbed his head furiously, desperate to taste and worship the large, beautiful cock in his mouth. He buried his face in the musky scent of Winter Soldier's crotch, sucking and swallowing as much as he could, relaxing his throat and fighting his gag reflex as Winter Soldier groaned and fucked his mouth.

The thick shaft stretched his lips, the tip nudging at the back of his throat, causing tears to well up in his eyes on reflex. Winter Soldier was grunting with pleasure, grabbing hold of Steve's head and holding him in place as he thrust his hips. Steve could feel himself drooling, saliva dripping down his chin, but somehow, instead of finding it gross, he found it to be even more of a turn-on. Winter Soldier could do anything, and Steve would thank him and beg for more. It was a wild, intoxicating feeling.

Winter Soldier finally pulled away, his cock leaving Steve's mouth with a wet pop. Winter Soldier looked down at Steve's flushed, damp face and grinned, slapping his face gently a couple of times with his own cock throbbing desperately between his legs as he felt Winter Soldier's heavy girth slap against his cheeks.

"I want to fuck you," said Winter Soldier.

For a split second, Steve thought he might come all over himself, completely untouched. He had never known five words to hold such power over him before. He had not wanted something so much for a very long time. He groaned, nodding his head so fast that his vision blurred.

"Please, yes," begged Steve.

Winter Soldier pressed himself hard against Steve, head to toe, grinding their bodies together as he gave him a deep, rough kiss. Steve groaned, pushing himself up off the bed to rub back against him,
their hard cocks rubbing together. Winter Soldier reluctantly pulled away, hopping off the bed momentarily to rummage about in his bag, before returning with a condom, ripping open the foil packet and carefully removing the rubber condom inside.

Steve watched, eyes glazed, as Winter Soldier pulled the condom over his thick, rock-hard cock. He squirted a blob of lube onto his sheathed tip, slicking himself up before settling between Steve's legs, spread wide by the ropes. Steve moaned, his legs trembling as Winter Soldier rubbed the head of his cock up and down Steve's ass crack. The other man's fingers probed into him briefly, giving him one final preparatory stretch.

Winter Soldier positioned himself at Steve's entrance and slowly began to push, the blunt head of his cock nudging at and stretching his ring, the pressure increasing as he pushed harder, before he slipped inside with a pop, the thick head of his cock now buried inside Steve's ass. Steve moaned at the sudden intrusion, thicker in girth than the fingers that had prepped him. He could feel himself fluttering around Winter Soldier's cock, his body shocked by the thickness of it.

Winter Soldier moaned, slowly thrusting his hips back and forth, sliding in and out of him in shallow thrusts. Steve closed his eyes, slowly getting used to the sensation of being filled. With each thrust, Winter Soldier slid in a little deeper, until several minutes of heavy breathing, sweating and moaning later, he was fully sheathed inside Steve's ass, his balls resting snugly against Steve's ass.

Winter Soldier kissed Steve hungrily, his tongue wrestling with Steve's for dominance. Steve kissed him back just as passionately, squeezing his ass muscles around his cock deliberately, smirking at the gasp it elicited from Winter Soldier. Grabbing hold of Steve's cock, Winter Soldier pulled back with a snarl, ramming his cock back in as he finally began to fuck him, jerking Steve's cock along to the rhythm.

Steve let out a shout, unprepared for the sudden onslaught of pleasure. The cock in his ass was huge, filling him completely, and on each inwards stroke, he rubbed against Steve's prostate, stimulating that little bundle of nerves and causing him to throb and gasp with pleasure. He moved in response to Winter Soldier's thrusts the best he could, but his movements were impeded by the ropes tied around his wrists and ankles.

Pleased by Steve's responsiveness, Winter Soldier began to thrust faster, the hand on Steve's cock keeping up, his thumb sweeping over the slit of Steve's cock head and gathering up the pre-come there, smothering it over Steve's cock with the motion of his hand jerking him off, their bodies slick and hot as they moved together.

Steve moaned with each thrust deep into his body, his prostate red hot and sensitive, causing pleasure to build up slowly inside of him, coming from all sides: from inside his ass, where Winter Soldier's cock was pounding him mercilessly; to his own cock, where Winter Soldier's hand was milking him like a man possessed; and finally all over his skin, his entire body becoming one erogenous zone, sparks zipping under his skin wherever he was in contact with Winter Soldier.

His toes were curling, sweat dripping from him as his moans turned to more urgent gasps, his pleasure spiralling higher and higher, each rough thrust of Winter Soldier's huge cock stretching his tight ass and taking him closer and closer to orgasm. Winter Soldier's big, heavy balls were slapping against his ass, and it was the sound of this, along with their combined gasps and grunts and groans, that combined with the sizzling sensation of pleasure caused him to overspill into orgasm, his cock spurting wildly as his ass contracted around Winter Soldier's plunging cock, a shout tearing from his lips as his body spasmed and contracted hard.

Steve's orgasm tore through him violently, his toes curling, his limbs straining against the ropes as his cock and ass contracted, the other man's cock continuing to pummel into him, until he too moaned
loudly, his thrusts coming to a sudden stop as he buried himself as deep as he could go, his cock throbbing inside Steve's ass, unloading his thick creamy come into the condom.

The room was filled with the sound of heavy breathing, Winter Soldier collapsing on top of Steve's chest, holding him tightly through the final spasms of orgasm, until finally he was spent, their cocks slowly softening as the ecstatic glow of post-coital bliss swept over them.

Steve closed his eyes, a smile spreading over his face as endorphins rushed through his system, leaving him sleepy, content and supremely satisfied. He was only vaguely aware of Winter Soldier gently slipping out of his ass and untying the bonds around his wrists and ankles, before a duvet enveloped them both, cocooning them in warmth.

On the edges of his awareness, he heard Winter Soldier talk about setting an alarm, and the need for them to leave before the club's closing time of 3am, but Steve did not think about it, did not think about anything at all, as he wrapped his arms around Winter Soldier, before dozing off into a snooze.

The next week at The Underworld, Steve did not bother with hanging around on the dance floor. Instead, he waited for Winter Soldier at the door at the back of the club, both of them knowing by now that they would be spending the night in one of the beds in the private rooms, rather than dancing to cheesy pop songs under the coloured disco lights.

He did not have to wait long, familiar black leather cutting through the crowd in Steve's direction several minutes after his arrival, a rucksack slung over his back. Upon reaching him, Winter Soldier embraced him warmly, his hand snaking down to discreetly squeeze Steve's cock, before he smirked and lead him through the back door and down the corridor towards the private rooms. They entered the room at the end of the corridor, swinging the door shut behind them before embracing once more, kissing one another hungrily.

"So, Captain America," said Winter Soldier. "How're you doing tonight?"

Steve laughed at the cheesy nickname, suddenly realising that he was just as anonymous and mysterious to Winter Soldier, as Winter Soldier was to Steve. Hidden behind their masks and their nicknames, they were entirely anonymous. He wondered what Winter Soldier thought of him, if he ever wondered who Steve was, in real life, outside the four walls of The Underworld where that they had got to know one another so intimately. He wondered why it felt important to him that Winter Soldier did think about him when they were apart.

"I'm good," said Steve. "You?"

Winter Soldier swung him around playfully so that he was standing with his back to the bed, before pushing Steve gently backwards to make him sit down. Once Steve was seated, Winter Soldier smiled, leaning down to kiss him gently before sitting down next to him, swinging his bag off his back and unzipping it.

"I'm good too," said Winter Soldier. "I brought some toys."

Steve watched with interest as Winter Soldier pulled three items from his bag, placing them carefully, one by one, on the bed. The first item Steve had seen before: a box of condoms. A shiver of excitement went through him at the promise of sex. Winter Soldier knew how to fuck. If he wanted to fuck Steve again, Steve was more than willing to consent. The second item was more unexpected:
a long, single, peacock feather. He looked at it with curiosity, unable to work out its purpose. Winter Soldier smirked at his visibly puzzled expression, leaning in to press a kiss to his cheek. The third item was actually a set of two, and they sent a rush of blood to Steve's crotch: a large, black butt plug, thick and heavy-looking and flared at the base, lying alongside a bottle of lube.

"I'm going to make you feel so good tonight," said Winter Soldier, pressing kisses to Steve's neck. "My perfect sub."

Steve sighed, closing his eyes and stretching out his neck, shivering as Winter Soldier grazed his teeth gently against Steve's sensitive jugular. Winter Soldier stroked Steve's neck and back, coaxing him to relax as he slowly moved them further onto the bed. Steve allowed himself to be manhandled to that he was lying on his front, draped over Winter Soldier's lap, his ass pointing up in the air as Winter Soldier continued petting and stroking him.

He sighed into the duvet, his mind and body relaxing and unfurling under Winter Soldier's gentle ministrations. He shivered with anticipation when the other man's hands began to dip lower, caressing down the curve of his spine to where the swell of his ass began, his hands sweeping down to squeeze and stroke his round ass cheeks.

Winter Soldier's hands explored his ass thoroughly and carefully, inspecting each curve, each swell, each valley. He worshipped the round peaks, the deep trough, his fingers trailing along the material of his booty shorts, tracing the line of his ass crack. Steve whimpered, lifting his lips up, needing more. Winter Soldier apparently understood the hint, his hands deftly slipping below him to unzip the shorts, sliding them down and off his legs so that Steve's ass was completely naked, lying plump and tempting in Winter Soldier's lap.

"You've got a beautiful ass," said Winter Soldier, taking a moment to admire it. "I love it. It looks good by itself and stuffed full of my cock."

Steve moaned, his cock throbbing at Winter Soldier's filthy words. His cock brushed against the leather of Winter Soldier's trousers, causing the other man to chuckle when he felt the needy flex through the material. Steve heard the lid of the bottle of lube click open, the sound being followed several seconds later by something cool and slick pressing against his hole. He gasped, the cold, smooth touch of the butt plug so very different from the warm touch of Winter Soldier's fingers or cock.

Winter Soldier shushed him gently, stroking his back, urging him to relax as he rested the slick, smooth tip of the butt plug against Steve's tight sphincter, not pushing it in, but just resting it there, present, waiting patiently until Steve was ready for it. Steve slowly relaxed, Winter Soldier's hand stroking his back constantly and reassuringly, reminding him of the trust they shared, the trust that made all this possible. When he finally closed his eyes, relaxing his muscles and submitting wordlessly to Winter Soldier's request, the other man let out an audibly happy sigh, taking hold of Steve's hand and giving it a squeeze as he slowly sank the tip of the butt plug into Steve's ass.

Steve groaned against the duvet, the butt plug slowly sinking into him, inch by delicious inch, spreading his hole wider as the girth increased with every passing centimetre. He whimpered as the width reached the size of a well-endowed cock, his hole not used to being stretched so quickly in such a short space of time. Winter Soldier squeezed his hand soothingly, giving the butt plug one final push to fully insert it inside Steve's ass, his ass swallowing it rapidly as his rim passed the widest point, narrowing again to just a couple of centimetres in width, the bulbous part of the sex toy now fully inside him, with just the flared base left outside.

The butt plug rested heavily against his prostate, pressing hard against the little bundle of nerves, causing him to gasp and squirm in Winter Soldier's lap at the unexpected assault of pleasure. Winter
Soldier chuckled, reaching down to grasp Steve's hard cock and play with it lazily, not jerking him off, but simply fondling him absent-mindedly, in no hurry to get Steve off.

Steve ground his teeth in frustration, desperate for more. The insistent pressure on his prostate was driving him crazy, pleasure shooting through him whenever he shifted his position, almost unbearable in its intensity. The half-hearted motions on his cock were excruciatingly slow and gentle; enough to keep the sharp edge of rampant horniness at the forefront of his mind, but nowhere near enough to get him anywhere near orgasm. He groaned, bucking his hips in an attempt to get Winter Soldier to hurry up.

The movements immediately had an effect on the other man, although it was not the one Steve had been expecting. Winter Soldier instantly let go of Steve's cock, swatting his ass with three hard spanks, making him cry out in shock.

"Behave, Captain," chided Winter Soldier. "This is about me making you feel good, not you getting yourself off."

Steve whined, frustrated beyond belief but also wildly turned on by the fact Winter Soldier was asserting his dominance. He stilled his movements obediently, a rush of excitement going through him at the act of submission. It was thrilling, beautiful, liberating. Winter Soldier rewarded Steve's obedience with several good, long strokes of his cock, causing Steve to moan with joy.

His hand disappeared, causing Steve to feel momentarily disappointed, before an altogether new sensation came over him, causing Steve to jump. Something light and soft was tickling along his thighs, stroking and teasing at his sensitive skin. It took him a few moments to realise that he was being stroked by the peacock feather he had seen earlier, his eyes widening as the feather began tickling his balls.

He squirmed, a giggle and a gasp exploding from him at the same time, resulting in a sound that did not do anything for his dignity. Winter Soldier chuckled, amused, flicking the feather so that it tickled its way down Steve's legs, before ending up at his feet, causing Steve to shriek and kick his legs, his feet unbearably ticklish.

Winter Soldier reached down, wrapping his hand around Steve's cock and finally starting to jerk him off, whilst moving the feather back to his balls, tickling them with the tip of the feather, a strange but not altogether unpleasant dual sensation.

Steve closed his eyes, immersing himself in the visceral feelings. The butt plug lay hard and heavy in his ass, slick with lube and resting on his sensitive prostate, pleasure sparking through him as the heavy sex toy stimulated the little bundle of nerves. The feather on his balls was light and teasing, like a pair of ghostly fingers gently caressing the sensitive skin. And the hand on his cock was now slick with Steve's own pre-come, Winter Soldier concentrating his efforts on the head of the cock, where Steve was most sensitive. It was then that he became aware of something hard pressing against his stomach and after a few moments he realised, with a rush of pleasure, that he was feeling Winter Soldier's own erection pressing against him.

Steve moaned, his cock head dribbled pre-come with excitement, the tight coil of pleasure starting to coil tighter and tighter inside him. He could feel his blood pressure rising, could feel his face grow hot as Winter Soldier continued jerking him off fast and hard, sweat dripping down his face and down his sides. Every movement of Winter Soldier's hand on his cock caused his body to move slightly, which caused the butt plug to nudge back and forth against his prostate, a high-pitched moan of pleasure escaping him as his orgasm rushed towards him.

Winter Soldier immediately removed his hand from Steve's cock, shoving Steve off his lap so that he
landed with a bounce on all fours, his ass pointing in Winter Soldier's face. Steve gasped with shock as Winter Soldier roughly pulled the butt plug out of his ass, the sound of his zipper lowering causing Steve's eyes to widen with realisation of what was about to happen. Winter Soldier grabbed the box of condoms, quickly retrieving one and pulling it down over his cock. Steve looked behind him, his heart stuttering at the sight of the other man still completely dressed in head to toe in leather, with only his thick, hard cock hanging out of his open zipper.

Winter Soldier lined himself up to Steve's hole, already slick and gaping from the butt plug that had been nestled there just moments ago, and shoved himself inside, grunting as he immediately buried himself to the hilt. Steve moaned, the warmth of Winter Soldier's cock a welcome replacement to the cool, unfeeling butt plug that had been inside him before.

He clung to the duvet, the breath almost driven out of his lungs as Winter Soldier set a brutal, rapid pace. Winter Soldier fucked into him hard and fast, almost violent with his thrusts. Steve buried his face in the duvet, muffling his shouts and grunts of pleasure as Winter Soldier pounded relentlessly into his ass. He could feel his orgasm spiralling towards him, his pleasure rushing towards him as Winter Soldier's cock ploughed into him, pummelling his hole, stretching him and attacking his prostate with sharp jabs of pleasure at every thrust.

When he came, it was with his cock untouched, come spurting from the tip and soiling the duvet as he let out a long, loud groan, ecstasy exploding through him as his ass milked Winter Soldier's cock and catapulted him into his own intense orgasm. Winter Soldier grabbed onto Steve's hips as he unleashed his huge load into the condom, gripping tightly enough to leave bruises.

It took them several long minutes to fully come down from the high. When Winter Soldier finally withdrew from Steve and collapsed onto the bed, Steve took a moment to feast his eyes on him: the swathes of black leather, the rapidly deflating cock and the lower half of his face the only parts of his body visible.

Steve absorbed the moment, committing it to his memory, knowing that the sight before him was possibly the sexiest he had ever seen, and possibly ever would see, in his life.

One night the following week, Steve was lying alone in his bedroom, his hand slowly stroking his hard cock as he lay there in the darkness.

For a long while, he simply stroked himself, but twenty boring minutes and zero orgasms later, he realised that that alone was not enough to get himself off. He exhaled deeply, closing his eyes as he began to fantasise about the perfect man. At first, he imagined just a random body, perfectly proportioned, like what he would see if he could be bothered to grab his phone and search for porn. That again, had no effect, so with a long, frustrated sigh, he tried again.

A man began to form in his mind's eye. He imagined someone with the face of his cafeteria crush Bucky, the body of Winter Soldier, and the wit and intelligence of his favourite translator James Barnes. His hand sped up on his cock, imagining this perfect man in bed with him; sucking and getting sucked, fucking and getting fucked. Steve moaned, his hand flying up and down his cock as this perfect man fully solidified in his mind's eye.

His orgasm hit him unexpectedly violently, come spurting all the way up his chest, a shout escaping from his lips as his body was catapulted into a spasm of pleasure that was nothing to do with his
hand on his cock, and everything to do with this man of his fantasies: his Bucky-Winter Soldier-James hybrid, his deepest desire, his perfect man.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like and re-blog it [here](http://example.com) <3

THANK YOU: Thank you for your patience in waiting longer than normal for this chapter. For obvious reasons, I couldn't write this during my lunch break at work, which is when I usually do most of my writing ;) A special thank you to those of you who commented on the last chapter - seeing the AO3 notifications emails come in with your comments is always super-exciting!

THOUGHTS: I hope you enjoyed the smut in this chapter. Feel free to share your thoughts in the comments section ;)

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Lemons". It will contain a good dosage of angst to balance out this smutty chapter...

TUMBLR: I am on Tumblr! My username on there is [ao3-elle1991](http://example.com). Feel free to follow/message/send me asks on there if you're feeling friendly!

MERRY CHRISTMAS: I don't think the next chapter will be published before 25 December, so I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you all a very happy Christmas! <3

WANT MORE SMUT FICS? If you enjoyed the smut in this chapter, you may also enjoy these two fics of mine which also feature of a lot smutty sex scenes ;)

Steve And Bucky's Kinky Alphabet (176,544 words) - 26 chapters of explicit porn-with-plot featuring Steve and Bucky. Or: the one where JARVIS goes rogue and kidnaps the Avengers until they can sort their mental health out, and Steve and Bucky fuck a lot and fall in love.

Black Widow By Day, Black Kitten By Night (6,164 words) - Natasha dons her cat ears, Clint ties up his pet, and hardcore, steamy sex ensues.
The following Saturday, Steve arrived at The Underworld pent-up, aroused and excited.

He hugged Natasha goodbye at the bar and attempted to hide his already-hardening erection as he squeezed his way through the crowd, making his way to the back of the club where he and Winter Soldier had got into the habit of meeting. It seemed like The Underworld was having a live rock night, with loud music blaring out of the speakers to the delight of the crowd.

Steve stood by the back door that led to the private rooms, enjoying the guitar solo up on the stage with a smile on his face, already imagining the delicious night ahead of him. He wondered what he and Winter Soldier would do tonight. The other man always seemed to be full of new and filthy ideas of how they could enjoy one another's bodies with their aptly-named 'pleasure games'.

Steve especially enjoyed it when bondage was involved, but last week had proven that ropes were in no way necessary for them to enjoy themselves. Steve would happily try anything Winter Soldier proposed (within reason), such was the strength of the bond they had formed over the last couple of months.

It was strange to think that he had been meeting Winter Soldier for such a long stretch of time. Their weekly meetings seemed far too fleeting, and yet Natasha's suggestion, back in the Stark Industries canteen two months ago, that he join her at The Underworld one Saturday, felt like a lifetime ago. He felt a bubble of happiness swell in his chest. He was supremely thankful he had said yes to Natasha's suggestion. He could not imagine going back to his lonely old life now that he had found such excitement and intimacy with Winter Soldier every Saturday night.

The rock band started on a new song – a slower, more melancholy ballad – and Steve watched as the crowd began to sway to the beat. He surreptitiously checked his watch, finding to his surprise that Winter Soldier was late. They usually met at 10pm on the dot, but the time on Steve's watch now read 10:21pm. He shuffled uncomfortably, scanning the crowd for the familiar swathes of black leather.

He was not particularly worried. Winter Soldier was probably stuck in traffic, or perhaps had missed his preferred mode of public transport. He would be along soon. Steve shook himself, banishing the creeping anxiety and forcing himself to concentrate on the song. He let the waves of music wash over him, the beat of the tempo going through him like a second heartbeat, the cascade of notes caressing him like invisible hands. He closed his eyes, losing himself in the rhythm, in the melody, finding joy in the harmony.

By the time the song had finished, the long list of verses looping into the chorus countless times, his watch read 10:34pm. Steve bit his lip, his stomach beginning to churn uncomfortably. The band started on a faster-paced, more exciting song, the crowd reacting instantly and jumping to the beat. Steve tried to get into the same frame of mind, but suddenly the whole thing simply did not fit. He felt awkward and exposed and claustrophobic all at once. The music and the whoops of the crowd were too loud, the tempo too fast, the flashing lights too overwhelming. His face burned with self-consciousness and shame.

Everyone was having fun – everyone except for him. Steve scanned the crowd for Winter Soldier, his heart growing more and more desperate when he found no one who looked even remotely
similar. His heart sank, goosepimples erupting over his skin as the sickening realisation that Winter Soldier was simply not coming washed over him.

Sadness, worry and the raw sting of rejection all warred within him for dominance. Steve stood at the edge of the room, his face red, his stomach sick and his body cold. He stood there miserably, his mind wrestling with the fact that Winter Soldier had stood him up. He felt as though he had been punched in the gut, or perhaps more accurately, that someone had ripped his heart of his chest and stomped on it.

His eyes stung with tears. He furiously blinked them away, ashamed and angry that he should react in such a way. He forced himself to think rationally, to figure out what was going on and what he could do about it. No point in standing by the dance floor crying like a schoolboy who had been ditched by his prom date. Drawing himself to his full height, he breathed deeply, sorting through the facts as he knew them.

Fact #1: Winter Soldier had promised last weekend that he would see Steve at The Underworld the following Saturday.

Fact #2: Winter Soldier was very obviously not here.

Conclusion...? Here, Steve struggled. There were many reasons that could explain Winter Soldier's absence. He might be ill. He might have been involved in an accident on his way to the club. He might have had to attend some family emergency that had cropped up without warning. He might have made alternative plans with friends. He might have met someone else and be rolling around in someone else's bed right now.

Steve's stomach churned violently at the last possibility, his gut sinking as two new facts bubbled up to the surface of his consciousness, both of them disturbing in their raw truth and honesty.

Fact #3: Steve did not know a single thing about Winter Soldier's real life.

Fact #4: Steve was falling in love with Winter Soldier.

As these two new realisations crashed over him, so simultaneously did a feeling of dismay. Because who was Winter Soldier in real life? What was he like, outside of the bedroom? Steve knew the exact weight, shape and taste of his cock, but he knew nothing about the other man's personality, likes or dislikes. He did not know what motivated him to get up in the morning. He did not know his wishes or his fears, his hobbies or his bad habits, his favourite book or film or food. He did not know Winter Soldier. He did not even know his name.

Steve felt excluded, as though he had been snubbed at a party by the cooler kids who were laughing at the fact that awkward Steve Rogers had ever thought he was welcome amongst them. Except this was a million times worse, because Steve felt that there was something special between him and Winter Soldier. The other man felt like more than a fuck buddy, more than a just a nameless cock to pound his ass or a tongue to caress with his own. He felt as though he and Winter Soldier had real chemistry, real camaraderie, real potential.

All self-delusion, he realised bitterly. He knew nothing about the man behind Winter Soldier's mask. He knew nothing of his real life. Maybe in real life, Winter Soldier was a complete asshole. Maybe he was a terrible person; bigoted or rude or arrogant. Or worse, maybe in real life he was amazing, and Steve, being too much of a wimp to ask him out on a proper date, was missing out on the best thing ever.
He allowed himself to imagine asking Winter Soldier out. What if the other man miraculously said yes? What then? Steve would not be good enough for him. He was disfigured by ugly scars that ran down the right side of his torso. He could not hide them beneath his t-shirt forever. Ugly. Ugly. His mind, too, was broken, ravaged by nightmares and flashbacks of Iraq. Winter Soldier would not want to be with someone like that.

A cold shiver went through him as another, darker, more frightening thought came to him. What if Winter Soldier were ever to discover Steve's secret? What if, after he grew tired of Steve breaking down with yet another flashback, he finally demanded to know exactly what had happened in Fallujah, behind that red door with the flaking paint?

No, thought Steve. Winter Soldier would never, ever want him once he heard the answer to that.

Tuesday evening, Natasha came over to his flat after work, a pizza box in one hand and a grin on her face when he answered the doorbell.

Steve smiled, pulling open his front door to let her in. Natasha kicked off her shoes, wrapping Steve in a one-armed hug whilst she balanced the pizza perfectly in the other. Steve hugged her back and sniffed the air, his stomach rumbling loudly when the delicious smell of pepperoni and assorted meats met his nose.

"I got a meat feast with a garlic stuffed crust," said Natasha, before winking lecherously. "I know you love meat."

She wiggled her eyebrows up and down, rolling her eyes back and pretending to slobber in a way that was far more hilarious than sexy. Steve laughed, dropping a kiss to the top of her head before shooing her into the lounge where they liked to hang out on their gaming nights.

"I should tell HR about you," he smirked. "You tell far too many dick jokes than can be professional."

Natasha snorted, setting the pizza down on the coffee table before flopping down onto the sofa, stretching as she put her feet up.

"We're not at work now, website boy," she said. "Plates. Cups. Chop chop, Steven."

Steve tickled her feet on his way past the sofa, mildly disappointed at her stony glare and distinct lack of giggling. He had forgotten Natasha was not ticklish. Natasha was far too hardy to have any kind of physical weakness, let alone in the undignified form of ticklish feet. Sighing, he strode into the kitchen to fetch plates and cups for them both, filling the cups up with water. He returned a minute later, shoving her feet off the sofa as he sat down next to her, placing the plates and cups on the table in front of them.

Natasha perked up as Steve opened the pizza box, humming with approval as the delicious meaty, garlicky, doughy scent washed over them. Before Steve could intervene, Natasha's slim hand had darted past his own and grabbed the largest slice, bringing it up to her mouth and moaning as she bit into it. Steve pouted incredulously, his own hand frozen in mid-air, hovering over where the slice had been gently steaming just seconds before.

"No fair, I'm bigger than you," he whined.
Natasha smirked as she took another huge bite out of her slice.

"I'm hungrier than you, fuck off," she replied.

Steve rolled his eyes, reaching in for the second-biggest slice, grumbling loudly as he did so. Despite it all, though, he felt warmth blossoming inside him in a way that had nothing to do with the pizza slowly but steadily filling his stomach, and everything to do with Natasha's company. Natasha was like a balm, soothing over his hurt edges. As he listened to her chattering about a TV show she had discovered recently – some French drama called *The Returned* – he found himself nodding and smiling, happy for the first time since Winter Soldier had stood him up at the weekend.

By the time the pizza was finished about half an hour later, he was laughing and chatting freely, feeling a million times happier than before Natasha had arrived. Natasha hopped off the sofa, digging around in her bag before pulling out a car racing game, heading over to the TV to set it up. Steve relaxed on the sofa, a content smile spreading over his face as he let her do her thing. He loved his and Natasha's gaming nights. They were the perfect mixture of fun and relaxing, silly and genuinely heart-felt.

Natasha finished setting up the game, heading back to sit down next to Steve, tossing a controller to him. Steve caught it deftly and shifted his attention to the game, where he and Natasha were apparently going to race one another through an alien-themed race track.

The game began, the two of them sitting in silence as they both got used to the new game, racing one another through tight turns and dodging obstacles. As they finished attempt one – Natasha winning after Steve crashed quite spectacularly just yards from the finish line – Natasha finally spoke.

"So, are you OK?" she said. "You've seemed pretty down these last few days."

Steve cringed internally. He had hoped that he had managed to hide his sad mood from Natasha pretty well. He did not want Natasha to worry about him. Apparently, he had not hidden his emotions as well as he had hoped. It did not help that Natasha was one of the sharpest, most observant people he knew.

"I'm fine," lied Steve, hoping that that would satisfy her.

Natasha, without batting an eyelid, turned to face him, her face completely neutral as she replied.

"And I'm Batman," she said. "Try again."

Steve squirmed under her gaze, the controller slipping from his hands as the game, now forgotten, went back to its home screen. He slowly picked the controller back up, placing it on the table carefully, before examining his nails, hoping that if he took enough time about it, Natasha would forget her line of questioning and move on.

He had no such luck. Smaller, paler fingers wrapped around his own, surprisingly gentle, stopping his nervous fidgeting.

"Steve," she said. "What's wrong? And don't you dare say you're fine. I want to help, if I can."

Steve stared down at the floor, too ashamed to look Natasha in the face. It was stupid, to get so upset about some guy he had been hooking up with for kinky sex. It was his own fault, for getting so attached. The arrangement between them had been pretty clear – kink and sex, anonymous and with no strings attached. If Winter Soldier had wanted more, he would have made it clear by now. Unless, said a small voice in the back of his mind, he was just like Steve, unwilling to make the first move, perhaps only now realising that he had feelings beyond the ones caused by the nerve endings in his
cock. Steve's head ached.

"I really like Winter Soldier," he blurted out. "As in, I might be falling in love with the guy." The confession finally off his chest, he exhaled deeply, closing his eyes and burying his face in his hands. "Jesus fucking Christ, I'm a moron. I've never seen the guy's face. I don't even know his name."

There were a few beats of silence as Natasha absorbed the news. Steve braced himself for a mocking, sharp-tongued response, but when Natasha replied, it was with that same quiet, respectful kindness she had spoken with earlier.

"He's got a good face," she said. "And an OK name, if that's any consolation."

Steve laughed bitterly. He had forgotten, somehow, that Natasha knew Winter Soldier, the real Winter Soldier behind the mask. He had forgotten that she had been the one to invite him to The Underworld in the first place, just as she had invited Steve. A pang of jealousy shot through him. It hurt, that Natasha knew Winter Soldier in real life, and Steve did not. He wanted to know Winter Soldier. He wanted to know him better than Natasha did.

"I'm falling in love with a guy I know nothing about," said Steve, his self-loathing cranking up now that the source of his misery was out in the open. "I want to know him. I want to know his real life. I let him fuck me and now I'm desperately pining about him like an obsessed loser. How pathetic is that? I must sound like some creepy weirdo stalker. I'm a freak."

Natasha shook her head firmly, her red curls bouncing around her shoulders. A frown slashed between her eyebrows, her lower lip sticking out defiantly as she crossed her arms.

"You're not a freak," she said. "Stop talking shit about yourself. Kink is a very intimate thing. You submitted to Winter Soldier. You let him tie you up and have sex with you. That takes a special bond and a lot of trust. It's no wonder you've grown attached to him."

Natasha gave him a strange look, as though weighing up certain possibilities in her mind. Steve looked back at her miserably, wondering what calculations were going on behind those intelligent, mysterious green eyes. Sometimes, he felt as though Natasha only revealed a fraction of what was going on under the surface.

"I know Winter Soldier," she said finally. "He's a really nice guy. I think you guys could be really good together. If you want my advice, I say you should ask him out. There's a good chance he'll say yes."

Steve bit his lip, torn between his head and his heart.

Because although Natasha had just told him exactly what his heart longed to hear, it was also exactly what his head was afraid of.

If Steve asked Winter Soldier out, what if he said yes? How would Steve cope when Winter Soldier inevitably saw Steve's true colours and left him?

What then?

Steve took Friday off work.
He needed a break. He had spent so much time thinking about Winter Soldier that he had started to make silly mistakes whilst updating the Stark Industries website. Not wanting to jeopardise his chances of keeping his job, he had taken the day off as annual leave, hoping that a day to himself would allow him to do all the moping he needed to get Winter Soldier well and truly out of his system.

After spending a good chunk of the morning cleaning his flat, he did a full inventory of his cupboards, realising he was running low on various essentials. Making a list of everything he needed, he set off to the nearest supermarket to go grocery shopping, going on foot so as to get some fresh air and exercise.

He entered the supermarket, winding his way through the aisles, his concentration lapsing as his thoughts once again turned to Winter Soldier. He wondered which supermarket he liked to shop in. He wondered what he liked to eat; did he like to cook from scratch, or was he a fan of ready-made meals that could simply be heated up? What was his typical daily routine? Steve longed to know these domestic little details of the other man's life, the daily tasks that might seem dull but suddenly felt important for Steve to know. He wanted to know everything about Winter Soldier. He wanted them to be closer than just fuck buddies.

He was so preoccupied with his thoughts of Winter Soldier, that he did not look where he was going. Unbeknownst to him, he had wandered into the fruit aisle, concentrating so hard on his inner thoughts that the fruits around him were just a vague, colourful blur in the periphery of his vision, their smells silently wafting over him.

It was then that it hit him: the smell of lemons. Their sharp, citrus tang filled his nostrils, bitter and strong. Panic exploded in his gut, his shopping basket slipping from his sweaty hands as he fought for breath, unable to escape the bitter scent of lemons that seemed to be trying to suffocate him.

He was in Fallujah, the smell of fresh lemons filling his nose. He was in New York City, frozen in the fruit aisle of his local supermarket. He could not tell where he was. He could not tell what was real and what was a memory. It was all real. Past, present – all of it was real. All of it was happening at once, suffocating him, overwhelming him, surrounding him.

Crunch, crunch, crunch... He walked down the dusty Fallujah road, his rifle in his hands, senses hyper-alert as he picked his way through the rubble. He approached the house cautiously, the rest of his squad all close by as they moved as one. The house loomed ahead of them, paint flaking from the red door under the scorching sun. He was sweating, rivulets of sweat rolling down his grimy face.

Steve reached out his hand, his fingertips memorising the texture of the wood forever, and pushed open the red door. Terrified, locked inside his body, forced to watch the scene play out in front of him, Steve tried to turn away, tried to close his eyes, tried everything possible to stop himself from witnessing what he had witnessed so many times before – in his memories, in his flashbacks, in his nightmares. The scene continued playing out around him, heedless of his attempts to intervene and stop fate.

He turned around, and saw Him, the man from his nightmares, the man who he dreamt about so often, his guilty subconscious never failing to remind Steve of what he had done. He was grinning, saying something to Steve, although Steve could not hear Him properly. The sounds were distorted, as if they were underwater. Steve stared at His lips, trying to figure out what He was saying. He was happy. The squad were close to the end of their deployment. They would be going home soon. They were looking forward to seeing their families.

Steve breathed deeply. The smell of lemons filled his nose, and the memory jolted forwards. Steve was no longer standing in the downstairs hallway of the house with the red door. He was upstairs,
lying on the floor, the smell of lemons overpowering him, but this time it was mixed with another smell – the smell of blood – rich and thick and copious.

"Sir, are you OK?"

A hand on his arm. A threat. Steve was snapped back violently to the present, his fist swinging out and making contact with something warm and soft that had been trying to shake him. The teenage shop assistant fell to the floor with a surprised shout. Steve stared at the shop assistant, unable to work out what was happening, before suddenly realising his own unusual position. He was on all-fours in the middle of the fruit aisle. Sweat was pouring down this face. His throat felt sore, as if he had been shouting, although he had no memory of doing so.

A small crowd was gathered around him. Several shocked-looking shoppers helped up the teenage shop assistant, who was rubbing his cheek where Steve had punched him, a dazed expression on his face. Steve staggered to his feet, moving towards the shop assistant with concern, before stopping dead as the young man shrank away from him in fear.

"I'm sorry," muttered Steve. "Fuck. Sorry, sorry..."

He turned away, coming face-to-face with a large box of lemons sitting innocently on the shelf. He jerked away from the bright yellow fruits violently, almost vomiting in horror, before turning on his heel and fleeing the supermarket.

Steve sat hunched over his table at his booth at The Coffee Bean cafe, his stomach tightening as he replayed the events of the supermarket in his head. He checked his phone anxiously, before burying his face in his hands, overwhelmed.

Several minutes later, he heard someone slide into the booth opposite him. He opened his eyes to see Sam lolling casually with his arms flung over the top of the leather booth's sofa, a relaxed smile on his face.

"Yo," grinned Sam. "I got your text. What's up?"

Steve let out a shaky breath, some of the tension leaving him as Sam's calm, soothing presence washed over him. Confident, unflappable Sam. Simply being near him made Steve immediately feel so much more grounded. Steve gave Sam a grateful smile, immensely thankful that Sam had been nearby and available at Steve's hour of need.

"I just needed a friend," said Steve, before closing his eyes, banishing the shame that had been threatening to overwhelm him. He did not need to hide anything from Sam. Sam understood. He had been a soldier alongside Steve in Iraq, in Fallujah. He knew. His voice shaking slightly, Steve continued: "I had a flashback to Fallujah while I was at the supermarket. And then I punched some kid when he tried to snap me out of it. He was just some poor teenage shelf-stacker trying to check if I was OK, and I punched him in the face. I didn't mean to, but God, I feel like such a piece of shit."

Sam winced sympathetically. Steve warily searched the other man's brown eyes, looking for judgement, but found nothing but concern – for both the teenage shop assistant and Steve himself.

"Was the kid OK?" asked Sam.
Steve squirmed uncomfortably, remembering the way he had sprinted from the shop, too scared out of his mind after being confronted by the lemons to give a second thought to the shop assistant's welfare. He was ashamed of how he had behaved. It had not been the decent thing to do. Guilt gnawed at his stomach.

"I don't know," said Steve. "I think so? He didn't look like he'd got a broken jaw or anything. There were some shoppers looking after him when I... left."

Before Sam had a chance to respond, a waitress arrived at their booth, giving Steve a kind smile as she whipped out her notepad.

"Hey there. What will you be having today?" she asked.

"Just a black coffee, please," said Steve.

"Nothing for me," added Sam.

The waitress smiled, nodding as she scribbled down Steve's order on her notepad before drifting back behind the counter. Steve and Sam lapsed into silence as they watched her make Steve's coffee, both of them smiling when she returned to their booth a few minutes later with one cup of steaming black coffee in her hand, setting it down in front of Steve.

"Enjoy!" she said brightly.

"Thanks," said Steve, before taking hold of the cup of coffee with both hands, warming his hands on it.

For a while, neither of them spoke, Steve allowing himself to calm down as Sam's soothing presence enveloped him, Sam watching the other people in the cafe with mild interest. After several minutes, Sam sighed, his eyes shifting to Steve as he spoke gently.

"You know, what happened in Fallujah wasn't your fault," said Sam.

Steve closed his eyes, shaking his head, his heart clenching painfully.

"How can you say that?" said Steve. "You know that's not true."

Sam reached out across the table, gripping Steve's right wrist gently.

"Hey, Steve," he said. "You won't be able to drink your coffee if you're wearing it."

It was only then that Steve realised his right arm was trembling violently, his coffee sloshing around in his cup madly, threatening to spill out over the sides and onto the table. Steve immediately loosened his grip, his cheeks burning with embarrassment as his right arm continued to shake.

"Thanks, Sam," he said.

At that moment, a little girl who had been passing their booth with her mother stopped, staring at Steve in astonishment. Innocently shameless, she pointed straight at Steve, her high voice piercing through the rumble of background noise.

"What's wrong with that man, Mommy?"

The girl's mother blushed bright red, visibly mortified by her daughter's outburst. Firmly avoiding eye contact with Steve, she hissed at the little girl to be quiet, grabbing hold of her arm and hauling her away from Steve and Sam's booth, to a flight of stairs that led to the upper floor of the cafe. Steve
shoved his trembling arm under his jacket, silently humiliated.

Sam stared after the mother and daughter, his eyebrows raised. Turning his attention back to Steve, he cleared his throat, before speaking as if they had not been interrupted.

"So, in the supermarket," he said. "What triggered the flashback?"

Steve was silent for a moment, still reeling from the little girl's innocent yet deeply uncomfortable question. He was not angry at the little girl. He was more angry at the mother, who had simply rushed her daughter away without a single word of explanation to her daughter or apology to Steve. Shaking off his lingering hurt, he turned his attention to Sam.

"The smell of lemons," he said. "I walked past some lemons on a shelf, and it took me right back to Fallujah."

"So, you just have to avoid lemons," said Sam.

Steve smiled weakly. Sam had a unique way of cutting straight to the heart of the problem. He had a calmness to him, like nothing was too big a task to do, no obstacle too large to overcome. To Sam, every problem had a solution, every wrong had a corresponding right that could fix it. He did not dwell on things like Steve did, tying problems into knots inside his head. Steve was envious of Sam's apparent lack of worries.

"What else is up?" asked Sam. "There's something else bothering you. You look like someone promised you a puppy and then took it away."

Steve hesitated. He was not sure how Sam would react to the news of his sexual encounters with Winter Soldier. Despite him having been the one who had jokingly told Steve that he needed to get laid in the first place, he did not know the truth about Steve's sexual orientation. Homosexuality was not something that was exactly acceptable to talk about in the military. Don't ask, don't tell.

Anxiety gnawing at his insides, Steve cleared his throat awkwardly, taking a sip of his coffee in an attempt to give himself some caffeine-induced courage.

"I've been, uh, seeing a guy," he mumbled. "I think I really like him."

Sam did not even bat an eyelid.

"Are you going to ask him out?" he asked.

Steve stared at him, unable to believe that Sam had not so much as raised an eyebrow. Indeed, the way he had said: Are you going to ask him out? was much the same in tone as if he had asked: Shall I pick up some milk on the way home?"

Steve blinked several times, gathering his scattered wits as Sam waited patiently for an answer.

"Uh, I don't know," he said. "Yeah, I guess? Maybe?"

Sam grinned and punched the air, doing a little celebratory dance on his side of the booth.

"Oh yeah! Steve's going to get himself a man! I told you you needed to get laid. Glad you're taking my advice, for once."

Steve laughed with amazement, giddy with disbelief and relief that Sam had taken his coming out so unexpectedly well. He felt a rush of gratitude towards his friend, a warm feeling blossoming in his
chest as he watched Sam dancing dorkily (for far too long to be socially acceptable) on his side of the booth.

The low winter sun shone in through the window, catching Sam's face in a way that made him look almost angelic. Steve was taken by the ridiculous mental image of him with a harp and wings, doling out advice as he took on the persona of Cupid. Almost as if he read Steve's thoughts, Sam finally stopped dancing and turned to him, his eyes twinkling.

"Ask him out," he said simply. "I've got a good feeling about this."

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like and re-blog it here <3

THANK YOU: Thank you for your comments on the last chapter! It seems like a few of you destroyed your panties whilst reading it, which I take as a massive compliment! XD

THOUGHTS: What did you think of this chapter? Let me know your thoughts, feelings and theories in the comments section below! Oh dear, I seem to have got some lemon juice in my eye...

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Revelations". It's going to be quite an exciting chapter...

HAPPY NEW YEAR: This will be my final posting before 2019, so I'd like to wish you all a wonderful New Year! I hope 2019 is a good one for you, full of fun, love, laughter and success <3 See you on the other side!

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. On New Year's Eve, I will be posting a "2018 round-up" which will include all the fics I wrote in 2018, a message for all you lovely readers, and a sneak peek of what you can expect from me in 2019. Follow me if you want to read it!
Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Saturday evening came around, Steve had come to a decision.

He made his way to The Underworld alone, weaving his father's old blue 1965 Volkswagen Sedan Beetle through the night-time streets, feeling strangely calm. Natasha was not going to the club that evening. She had texted him earlier to say that something had cropped up at the last minute. Steve found he was actually thankful for her absence. Tonight was important. He did not want any distractions, even in the form of his best friend.

Parking his car, he slipped out into the dark car park, crossing the street and slipping on his mask as he approached The Underworld's front doors. The bouncer opened the door when he saw Steve approach, giving him a friendly nod, by now used to seeing him each Saturday night. Steve stepped into the club, walking inside and making his way to the back door that had become his and Winter Soldier's unofficial meeting point.

Finally, he reached the back door, coming to a halt and turning around to survey the crowd. For the first time that evening, butterflies fluttered in his stomach, anxiety unfurling and wrapping him up in its icy tendrils. He had been trying to ignore the possibility that Winter Soldier would stand him up again. It would be too cruel of him, too cold, too wicked. Now, however, standing alone by the back door, Steve was forced to face his fear, that perhaps Winter Soldier had walked out of his life for good.

He clenched his fists behind his back to stop them from shaking, keeping his mouth tightly closed in an attempt to smother the anxiety that was threatening to overwhelm him. Winter Soldier would surely turn up, thought Steve. He had to. Steve did not know what he would do if Winter Soldier stood him up again. Steve had been rehearsing what to say to the other man all day, but not once had he considered that Winter Soldier might not turn up at all. The possibility had been too awful, too raw, too inhumane to think about.

Steve glanced down at his watch. 10:05pm. Winter Soldier was five minutes late. Steve's stomach plunged, his nerves almost cracking under the pressure. He was seriously wondering whether or not he was feeling the beginnings of a panic attack, when beautiful black leather, just as perfect and gorgeous as Steve remembered it, broke through the crowd, walking purposefully towards Steve. Powerful relief washed over him. He exhaled shakily, a smile instantly spreading over his face as Winter Soldier ran the last few steps towards him, wrapping him up in a tight hug. Steve closed his eyes, holding Winter Soldier tightly, turning his face discreetly towards his neck and breathing in his scent, the musky masculinity of him, melting a little at the warm, familiar smell.

After several long minutes, Winter Soldier finally pulled away, placing a kiss on the end of Steve's nose. He gestured towards the door that led to the back rooms, his hand already on the door handle, when Steve put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

"I was thinking we could have a talk," said Steve, silently relieved to hear that his voice was not shaking.

Winter Soldier let go of the door handle, visibly surprised but nodding nonetheless, following Steve as he led him to one of the booths furthest away from the noisy dance floor. As they slipped into
opposite sides of the booth, facing one another, their legs brushed together, a jolt of excitement going through Steve at the unexpected contact.

Swallowing back his anxiety, Steve forced a smile to his face, trying and failing to sound casual when he spoke next.

"So, last week... Where were you?"

Steve braced himself for the worst, all the most horrible answers flashing across his mind. Had he been with someone else? Had he found another partner? Or had he simply got bored of Steve and ditched him in favour of a night out with friends or a night in in front of the TV?

Winter Soldier immediately looked apologetic, reaching out over the table and taking Steve's hands in his.

"Oh yeah, sorry about that," he said. "I was ill. I wanted to come, really, but I was feeling really rough."

Steve stared at him, relief and ecstasy exploding inside his gut. All his pining, all his worrying – all for nothing. Winter Soldier had simply been ill. Mundane, ordinary, wonderful sickness. He had not found someone else. He had not got bored of Steve and decided to ditch him. Steve let out a sigh of relief, smiling properly for the first time that evening.

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked.

Winter Soldier nodded, smiling.

"Yeah, loads better, thanks," he said. "And, uh, I'm sorry if I worried you by not turning up. I would have let you know, but I don't have your number."

Steve nodded. Unknowingly, Winter Soldier had just steered the conversation in exactly the direction that Steve wanted it to go. Before Steve could take the reins, however, Winter Soldier continued speaking, his mouth seeming to be doing a rather forced smile.

"So... Did you get up to anything fun last week?"

Steve's eyebrows shot up in surprise. After a moment's pause, he shook his head hard, realising that Winter Soldier had just been having the exact same worries that Steve had been having all week.

"No," said Steve firmly. "I spent the evening hanging out with Black Widow and her friends at the bar. I didn't do anything kinky in any of the back rooms, if that's what you mean."

A relieved smile spread over Winter Soldier's face. He squeezed Steve's hands affectionately, his thumbs sweeping over the backs of Steve's hands.

"That's sweet," he said, before lowering his head and planting a kiss on Steve's knuckles. Steve shivered, the butterflies well and truly rushing back when Winter Soldier spoke again. "You're sweet."

Steve licked his lips, his throat tight with nerves. Now was the time to speak. It was now or never. Suddenly, despite having been rehearsing this scenario all day, Steve found himself completely unable to speak, his carefully laid out words deserting him at the crucial moment.

Feeling his face grow hot, he took a deep breath, before his mouth opened, the words spewing out rapidly, blunt and undignified and not at all the way he had planned.
"Doyouwanttogoondatewithme?" Closing his eyes, mortified, Steve steadied his nerves, exhaling long and hard, forcing himself to calm down. When he re-opened his eyes, he found Winter Soldier staring at him. Lowering his eyes so as not to freak out under such scrutiny, he addressed Winter Soldier's hands on the table top. "Uh. I mean... Do you want to go on a date? With me? Like, in real life, outside The Underworld? And, uh, without our masks and costumes and nicknames and stuff? Like... a proper date?"

For the longest while: silence. Steve's heart hammered in his chest, panic erupting and racing through his veins like wildfire. Oh God, he had fucked up. He had overstepped the mark and now Winter Soldier would never, ever want to see him again. Oh fuck, fuck, fu–

"Yes."

Steve's head snapped up so quickly that his neck twinged in protest. He stared at Winter Soldier, unable to believe his ears.

"Yes," repeated Winter Soldier, a joyful smile spreading over his face. "I'd love that."

Pulling a pen out of his bag, he grabbed a coaster and scribbled down his mobile phone number, sliding it across the booth to Steve. Steve picked it up with shaking hands, staring at the digits, giddy, disbelieving happiness blossoming in his chest.

"The fountain at Central Park," said Winter Soldier. "See you at noon tomorrow?"

Steve nodded, slightly in a daze at the ease and speed with which things were progressing.

"Yeah," he said. "That sounds great."

Winter Soldier grinned, leaning over the table to plant a kiss on Steve's lips, lingering slightly longer than necessary, his tongue teasing him, tasting him. When he finally pulled away, his cheeks were flushed, his lips slick. Steve watched as the other man shuffled out of the booth, reaching out to stroke Steve's face tenderly before turning towards the exit.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he grinned. "Gotta get my beauty sleep for my hot date."

Steve watched as Winter Soldier headed out of the exit, his heart swelling to what felt like twice its normal size as he turned to wave to Steve, before slipping out of the door.

That night, Steve barely slept.

When he awoke the next morning, he slid out of bed immediately, excitement and nerves giving him the same amount of energy that normally required at least one large mug of strong coffee.

He had breakfast, showered and brushed his teeth, before hurrying back to his bedroom, pulling open his wardrobe and staring at his clothes. What should he wear? Was casualwear too slobbish, or did it convey a sense of being friendly and down-to-earth? Was formalwear too uptight and cold, or did it show that he considered their date to be important and worth dressing up for? Never before had he put so much thought and care into how he presented himself.

Steve agonised over his meagre clothing collection, paralysed by his own lack of fashion sense and
the pressure to get this right. He only had one chance to make a good first impression as Steve Rogers (a very different entity from Captain America); he did not want to blow it. Finally, after trying on several outfits and feeling his blood pressure rise with stress each time, he settled for a smart-casual look: smart, dark blue jeans, and a polka dot shirt. He hoped that they went together reasonably well, or at least did not clash horribly. Grabbing a bottle of cologne, he sprayed some on his neck, feeling slightly safer in the knowledge that even if he looked like an idiot, he would still smell great.

Heading into the bathroom, he reached for his comb, wetting it and brushing his hair into what he hoped was a smart-looking side parting. He stared at himself in the mirror, feeling self-conscious as he looked at himself from different angles. It was ridiculous, how anxious he felt – Winter Soldier had seen him tied up in ropes and with a huge butt plug stuck up his ass – yet Steve still felt the desperate need to look good, to look attractive enough for Winter Soldier to accept him. Deciding that he looked as decent as he was ever going to, he exhaled shakily and headed out into the hallway, grabbing his black leather jacket and stuffing his phone, keys and wallet into the pockets.

Casting one final look around his flat, he came to the conclusion that he had everything he needed – including Winter Soldier's number saved in his mobile phone – and exited the front door, locking it behind him. He forced himself to walk slowly as he exited his block of flats, not wanting to work up a sweat and ruin all the effort he had put into his appearance. He glanced down at his watch, flushing when he saw how early he was: still 90 minutes to go until the meeting time. Nevertheless, Steve was a firm believer in the philosophy that it was better to be early than late.

He made his way to the nearest subway, focusing on his surroundings in an attempt to distract himself from the nerves that were clawing at his insides. He could not remember the last time he had been on a date. It had been years. He certainly could not ever remember feeling so emotionally invested in a date before. Somehow, in the preceding months, Winter Soldier had gone from being a fuck buddy to something more. It was disconcerting how easily the feeling of falling in love had crept up on him.

By the time Steve arrived at the subway station closest to Central Park, he had just one hour to go until the meeting time. He came up to ground level with a sigh of relief, breathing in deep lungfuls of fresh air. He was not claustrophobic, but he did not particularly like being underground. He walked into Central Park, heading towards the fountain that Winter Soldier had chosen as their meeting point.

Finally reaching the fountain, Steve sat down on the low wall that encircled the shallow water, facing outwards so that he could have a better view of his surroundings. He wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans, trying to calm his heart, which was already racing with pre-date nerves. He closed his eyes, trying to clear his head, a thousand worries skittering at the edges of his consciousness. What if Winter Soldier did not like Steve? What if Steve did not like Winter Soldier? What if Winter Soldier got cold feet and failed to turn up?

He clenched his fists and exhaled shakily, re-opening his eyes, attempting to banish the thoughts from his mind. In an attempt to distract himself, he fished out his mobile phone – still 30 minutes until the meeting time, the clock said – and began to flick through the local news. Certain headlines jumped out at him, attention-grabbing and sensational.

*Woman discovers 10ft snake in apartment...*

*New York Yankees continue winning streak with fifth consecutive game...*

*Notorious criminal gang HYDRA implicated in missing man's disappearance...*
Steve read through the articles half-heartedly, the words not quite sinking in, his concentration flagging, his thoughts elsewhere. Finally, after about 10 minutes of trying and failing to distract himself with the news, he put his phone back into his pocket with a sigh, turning his attention to the people walking by.

It was a busy day in Central Park. There were men, women, young people, old people, people who looked like tourists and people who seemed to be locals. People walking alone, in pairs, in groups. People everywhere, on their way somewhere, or on their way back. Steve stared at the crowd as they flowed past him, wondering if any of them were Winter Soldier, perhaps off to grab a quick coffee before their date. He scanned the crowd, trying to see if anyone had the right build, the right facial hair on his lower face – which had been visible below his mask – or the right stride. It was too difficult to tell. He saw several potential candidates, but by the time his brain had clicked that it could be him, the man had breezed past him, clearly on his way elsewhere.

Many anxious minutes later, when Steve next glanced down at his watch, he was relieved to find that the time now read 11:50am. Just ten minutes to go until their meeting time. It no longer felt silly for Steve to announce he had arrived. Pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket, he brought up Winter Soldier's contact and tapped out a message.

*Hey :) I'm sat in front of the fountain. I'm the guy wearing dark blue jeans, polka dot shirt and leather jacket. Blond hair, blue eyes.*

He pressed send, his heart rate immediately sky-rocketing when a tick appeared next to the message, confirming that it had been successfully sent. He shuffled self-consciously, his eyes returning to the crowd with a renewed sense of nervousness. Suddenly, all of Steve's insecurities rushed back to him. Would he get on with Winter Soldier? Would the other man find him remotely interesting? Was leather the wrong choice of jacket, given their history? Were polka dots stupid? Was Steve's face stupid?

It was too late to worry about any of those things. Steve got to his feet and wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans, desperately hoping that his antiperspirant deodorant was as effective as advertised. In the distance, he could see a man walking towards the fountain, somehow managing to capture Steve's attention, despite the fact there were dozens of other people treading the same path.

As the man came closer, Steve realised where he recognised him from. It was his cafeteria crush, Bucky, looking as gorgeous as ever in black jeans, a navy jacket and a t-shirt featuring a white star on a blue background, surrounded by red and white concentric circles. It was an interesting design, somehow patriotic and fashionable at the same time. Steve watched him draw closer, feeling both confused and guilty for ogling him whilst waiting for Winter Soldier, whom he was undoubtedly falling in love with. It felt wrong that he should be looking at another man, yet there was something powerfully magnetic about the way Bucky walked that compelled him to keep watching.

Bucky kept walking closer. By now, he was little more than ten metres away, almost at the fountain. He should be veering to the side by now, or he might walk straight into Steve and then, inevitably, the fountain. Steve watched him, dumbfounded and mildly concerned when Bucky beamed at him. He looked around uncertainty, half expecting to see Natasha or some other colleague from Stark Industries who Bucky could conceivably be grinning at. He saw no one who he recognised. His gaze slid back to Bucky, his eyes widening when the other man stopped right in front of him.

"Hey," said Bucky, grinning widely.
Steve stared at him, utterly confused as to what on earth was happening. He did not know why Bucky was speaking to him. They had smiled at one another once or twice in the cafeteria, but they did not know one another. They were not friends. All this left Steve completely befuddled as to why the other man had suddenly decided to strike up conversation with him now.

"Uh... Sorry, I'm kind of waiting for someone..." said Steve, before realising how rude he probably sounded and grimacing.

To his incredulity, Bucky simply laughed and winked, making no effort to move away and allow Steve to wait for his date in peace.

"Someone who looks awesome in leather?" said Bucky, his eyes twinkling.

Steve stared at him, dumbfounded, the cogs in his brain whirring furiously as it tried to make sense of what was going on. Was Bucky referring to Winter Soldier's leather outfit (and if so, how the fuck did he know about that?), or was he simply making a joke that just happened to be spookily accurate? His eyes zeroed in on Bucky's facial hair, his heart rate accelerating, his eyes widening, as his body realised what was happening before Steve's brain did.

He stared at Bucky, trying to imagine what he would look like dressed head to toe in leather, with black goggles obscuring the upper half of his face. The complexion fit. The body build fit. The beard, now, looked shockingly familiar. Realisation dawning, Steve gaped at him, unable to care how stupid he must look, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide, an expression of complete shock plastered across his face.

Winter Soldier was Bucky.

His cafeteria crush and his Saturday night lover were one and the same.

"You're Winter Soldier?" Steve said finally.

Bucky smiled, and any nigpling doubts were banished from Steve's mind. Steve had seen that smile many times over the last few months, on multiple steamy Saturday nights in The Underworld.

"Yeah. But you can call me Bucky."

Bucky held out his hand for Steve to shake. Dazed, Steve reached out and shook it, the warm touch of the other man's hand startling him back to his senses. A smile spread over Steve's face, realisation dawning that it was really happening; Winter Soldier was here, Bucky, on a date with Steve. Warmth spread through his gut, his mind and body simultaneously relaxing at the familiar feel of the other man's hand.

"I'm Steve," he said. "It's nice to meet you... again."

Bucky smiled, hugging Steve briefly. Steve closed his eyes, returning the hug, butterflies fluttering in his stomach as strong, familiar arms wrapped around him.

As they broke apart, Bucky gestured along the path.

"Wanna go for a walk?" he said.

Steve nodded. They fell in step with one another as they wandered along the path, going deeper into Central Park. They were surrounded by beautiful greenery. As they reached a particularly scenic spot, they headed towards a bench that was a little way away from the path, giving them some respite from the chattering crowd.
As they sat down, Bucky pointed down at his t-shirt, grinning.

"Do you like my very American t-shirt?" he asked. "I thought it was a good reference to your nickname."

Steve snorted, amused by Bucky’s endearing dorkiness.

"It's pun-tastic," said Steve. "I love it."

Bucky sniggered, before fixing Steve with a gaze that was at once familiar and alien. Steve stared into his blue eyes, committing to memory the shape and shade of them, blown away to finally able to see what had been hiding behind those black goggles all along.

"So, what made you choose the nickname Captain America?" asked Bucky.

Steve cast his mind back to that very first night he went to The Underworld, remembering just how difficult it had been to put together an outfit that could be classed as sufficiently kinky for a kink club. He remembered how self-conscious he had been, until Natasha had arrived and placated his worries with her usual blend of bluntness and kindness.

"My clothes," said Steve. "Red, white and blue. I came up with Mr. America at first. Then Natasha suggested something a little less lame."

Bucky laughed, his eyes crinkling up with joy.

"Oh man, Mr. America sounds like a contestant in some cheesy reality TV beauty pageant," he said. "Captain America sounds way better."

Steve nodded with agreement.

"Why Winter Soldier?" he asked.

"I like winter," said Bucky. "It's my favourite season. I love snow and warm blankets and Christmas decorations. And you can't beat all that hearty winter food. I thought of Winter Man at first, or Winter Lover. But then Natasha swooped in and suggested Winter Soldier instead. Said it sounded sexier. I think she was right."

Natasha, it seemed, had a lot to answer for.

Steve smirked, nodding. He could not quite imagine having wild sex with Winter Man. The name made him think of someone dressed up as a snowman or something equally unsexy.


Bucky nodded, smiling.

"What do you do for a job?" he asked.

Steve licked his lips nervously, hoping that he was not going to sound incredibly stalker-ish with what he was about to say.

"Uh, I work at Stark Industries," said Steve. "In the Websites department, taking care of website updates and stuff like that. You work there too, right? I've, uh, spotted you in the cafeteria before."

Bucky nodded, glancing downwards shyly in a way that was far too adorable for a grown man.
"Yeah, I've noticed you in the cafeteria too," he said. "I'm a translator in Linguistics, like Natasha. She sits opposite me, actually. Can't get away with slacking under her eagle eye."

Steve laughed. He had never actually seen Natasha whilst she was working – their departments were separated by multiple floors and he had never had any reason to venture there – but he could easily imagine that she would have no problem with severely kicking someone's ass if she thought they were slacking on the job.

"That sounds like Natasha," grinned Steve. "What foreign language do you speak, then? You have to be a native-level speaker, right?"

Bucky nodded.

"Da," he said. "I speak Russian. My mom's Russian, my dad's American. I grew up speaking both languages and then studied Russian and translation studies at university. I really like it."

Steve nodded, hungrily absorbing the new information. He imagined Bucky speaking Russian at home with his mother, when he was younger. He wondered if Bucky had ever visited his mother's homeland, and if she had brought him up surrounded by Russian culture and food.

"Do you ever dream in Russian?" asked Steve.

It was something he had always been curious about. Being able to only speak one language himself, he found it incredible that there were people who were able to not only string a sentence together in another tongue, but think in that language too.

Bucky hummed as he considered the question.

"Yeah," he said. "I don't normally notice what language I'm dreaming in though, to be honest. It's all just the meaning of the words, you know?"

Steve nodded.

"That's so cool," he said. "Do you get on with your folks?"

"Yeah," said Bucky, smiling. "My parents and I get on really well. They've moved away to Montana so I don't get to see them as much in person nowadays, but there's Skype, so we still get to talk via video call about once a week. What about you and your family?"

Steve stared down at his hands, the pain still cutting into him, even after all these years. It was not a raw pain anymore. It was more like an ache, ever-present in the background, and flaring up every now and then when poked.

"I, uh, don't have any," said Steve. "Mom died when I was young. Dad died five years ago – cancer. All my grandparents died before I was born, and my parents didn't have any siblings, so it's just me."

Bucky stared at him in horror, reaching out as if to hold Steve's hand, before thinking better of it, perhaps not wanting to be overly touchy-feely.

"Oh God," said Bucky. "That's awful. I'm sorry for your loss."

Steve shrugged, trying to wave it off. He had not meant to bring down the mood.

"It's OK," he lied. "I've got used to it. Being alone isn't so bad."

"What about Christmas?" asked Bucky. "What do you do then?"
Steve rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Watch The Grinch on repeat?" he said. "Wallow in my own misery?"

Not impressed by Steve's attempt at humour, or perhaps taking him at face value, Bucky crossed his arms, a stubborn look settling on his face.

"No one should have to be alone at Christmas," he said. "Next Christmas, you're spending it with me and my family. Whether we're boyfriends or friends or exes who hate one another, it doesn't matter. No more Christmases alone for you. Dad always makes too much food, anyway."

Unsure if Bucky was joking or being sincere, Steve was touched nonetheless by his offer. He allowed himself to fantasise briefly about them spending next Christmas together. What would things be like between them, then? His heart fluttered at the thought of it.

"Thanks," he said. "I'll bear it in mind if I get bored of The Grinch."

Bucky smiled.

"So, you update the Stark Industries website," said Bucky. "Does that mean you're into tech? I have some friends who are massive tech geeks."

"Not really," admitted Steve. "It's just a job, for me. I've had quite a lot of jobs, to be honest; I've never really settled down in one place long enough to find anything that stuck. I used to be in the Army for a few years, when I was younger. I guess I enjoyed that, at first. But then, I, uh, left."

Steve coughed nervously, unsure why he was suddenly rambling. He did not want to scare Bucky off with his issues so early on, but his motor-mouth apparently had other ideas.

"Did you ever see combat?" asked Bucky.


He expected Bucky to ask why, or at least raise a questioning eyebrow, but Bucky did no such thing. He smiled gently and nodded, moving the conversation on without so much as batting an eyelid.

"Well, me, I love pop culture," said Bucky. "Movies, TV, books, comics – I love them all. I love losing myself in stories and trying to imagine what characters would do in certain situations, or trying to imagine what it would be like to live in their world. I love the great outdoors, too. There's something really pure about hiking in the wilderness that feels amazing."

Steve smiled, his heart blossoming with affection as he watched Bucky talk about something he obviously found so much joy in. It was clear by the way the other man's eyes had misted over that he was remembering some old hike he had done, perhaps in the woods, or by a lake, or in the mountains. He imagined Bucky doing a long hike during the day, then curling up in a cabin to watch a film in the evening, and found himself longing to join him, to share in this pure and simple pleasure.

"I like pop culture too," said Steve. "I'm more interested in art, though. I love painting and sketching. There's something really relaxing and satisfying about watching an image come to life on the page."

Bucky turned to him, looking fascinated.

"Tell me more," he said.
Steve smiled, ploughing into the intricacies of art and creative design. They quickly got lost in the conversation, trading stories, delving into conversational rabbit holes and swapping puns as if they had known one another for years. Steve marvelled at how easy Bucky was to talk to. There was no awkwardness, no painful small-talk or long silences. There was simply good conversation, with Bucky's sharp intelligence and warm disposition seeping out of him with every word he spoke and every gesture that he made.

When Steve looked down at his watch later, when his joints were starting to get stiff and the cool air had started sinking through his clothes, he was shocked to find that that it was 4pm. His shock must have shown on his face, because Bucky looked concerned, glancing down to see what Steve was looking at, before his eyes widened too.

"Uh... You want to grab some lunch?" said Bucky. "Or dinner. Linner? Dunch?"

Steve grinned, getting up from the park bench and groaning as his joints popped.

"Dunch sounds great," he said. "I think there's a food cart that sells all-day pancakes down there."

They headed down the path. Steve suddenly felt ravenous, his stomach rumbling loudly as they walked. They reached the food cart, ordered their pancakes and left with their food several minutes later, each with their pancake plus their desired topping (Nutella and banana for Steve, strawberries and blueberries for Bucky).

They walked for a little while, eating their so-called dunch, before finding another bench, this time in front of the lake. They sat down, eating their pancakes as they watched the ducks gliding across the water.

"Do you prefer ducks or geese?" asked Bucky.

"Ducks," said Steve. "Geese are vicious bastards."

Bucky smirked.

"There's a story behind that sentence. You'll have to tell me about it sometime," he said.

Steve smiled.

"Cats or dogs?" he asked.

"Cats," said Bucky immediately. "100% the best animal in the world."

"Agreed."

They finished off their pancakes in companionable silence, both content to watch the ducks in one another's company, the delicious pancakes filling their stomachs. Finally, Bucky wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, before turning to Steve with a sad smile.

"I have to go," he said. "I promised my parents a Skype call at 5pm tonight. I've had a really awesome afternoon with you, though."

"I've had a great time, too," said Steve.

He was sad that their date was already at an end. Time seemed to have flown by. Bucky was so incredibly easy and wonderful to talk to.

"Are you out?" asked Bucky.
Steve nodded.

Without a word, Bucky smiled, leaning in to place a gentle kiss on Steve's lips. Steve closed his eyes, leaning into the kiss, reaching out to cup Bucky's cheek gently as the kiss went on and on. Their tongues caressed one another gently, their stubble scratching in a way that was both familiar and new, thrilling and calm. Steve had kissed Winter Soldier many times before, but this was the first time he was kissing Bucky – and he loved it. Steve melted into the kiss, sighing against Bucky's lips when the other man finally pulled away.

"I'd love to go on another date with you sometime," said Bucky.

Steve nodded, his heart already aching for it, his insides bursting with joy at the mere idea of seeing Bucky again.

"Me too," he said.

"Are you free on Wednesday evening, after work?" asked Bucky.

Steve nodded, a zip of excitement going through him when Bucky beamed in response.

"Awesome," said Bucky. "I'll text you some date ideas; I have your number from when you texted me earlier. Oh, yeah: what name shall I put for you in my phone? I know several Steves and I feel like putting Captain America would be too weird."

Steve snorted with laughter.

"Pass it here," he said, holding out his hand.

Bucky unlocked his mobile phone and handed it over. Steve navigated to Bucky's contacts list and created a new contact, inputting his number and labelling it Steve Rogers. When he handed the phone back to Bucky, the other man's eyes widened as he read Steve's name. After a moment of silence, Bucky looked up at him, a dazed expression on his face.

"What did you say your job title was again?" said Bucky.

"Uh, I don't think I did," said Steve, slightly puzzled by Bucky's question. "Website Administrator."

Looking amazed, Bucky laughed, gesturing for Steve to hand over his phone as well.

"I'm going to put my full name in your phone," said Bucky.

Steve unlocked his phone and handed it over, watching, puzzled, as Bucky opened up Winter Soldier's contact and edited the name. With a mysterious smile, he pressed save, before handing it back to Steve. Steve glanced down at the screen, his eyes widening with shock as he read the name staring back at him.

James Buchanan (Bucky) Barnes

Bucky was Winter Soldier was James Barnes. His head span. He remembered that night, not too long ago, when he had masturbated to his idea of his perfect man – his Bucky-Winter Soldier-James hybrid – and stared at his date, incredulous.
"You're James?" he said.

Bucky held up a hand, looking affronted.

"First of all, I hate the name James," he said. "So please don't ever call me that. And second, yeah... We're email buddies."

They stared at one another in shock, before Bucky laughed, the incredible coincidence simply too amazing to do anything else. Steve smiled, his mind reeling from shock, when something surfaced in his memory.

"Wait, I thought you were straight," said Steve, confused. "You said Cassie from Supernatural was a hot."

Bucky momentarily looked confused, before realisation dawned on his face, a laugh bursting from his lips.

"You haven't reached season 4 of Supernatural yet, have you?" he smirked. "Cas is a man. It's short for Castiel, not Cassie. And I stand by what I said, he is a hottie. Wait until you see him. You'll agree."

Steve stared at him, overwhelmed by the sheer number of revelations that the afternoon had unveiled. Winter Soldier was Bucky. Bucky was James. James was Winter Soldier. His head ached from the shock and the wonder of it.

"I've really got to go now," Bucky said gently. "But thank you for an incredible afternoon."

Steve smiled. Bucky leaned in to give him one final kiss before turning and walking away.

Steve watched him go – his perfect man, his Bucky-Winter Soldier-James hybrid – not just a fantasy, but incredibly, unfathomably and beautifully real.

Chapter End Notes

2018 ROUND-UP: I did a 2018 round-up post on Tumblr! If you want to see my 2018 AO3 stats, a list of all the stories I wrote in 2018, a sneak peek of what you can expect in 2019, a bit about my personal life, and a message for all you amazing readers, then you can check all that out here!

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

STUCKY: Omgggg. They have finally got together! SQUEE! Feel free to scream with me in the comments! :D

OTHER STUCKY STORIES: Here's a list of other Stucky stories I have written, if you're interested!

Steve And Bucky's Kinky Alphabet (176,544 words) - 26 chapters of explicit porn-with-plot featuring Steve and Bucky. Or: the one where JARVIS goes rogue and kidnaps the Avengers until they can sort their mental health out, and Steve and Bucky fuck a lot and fall in love.
Turkish Oil Wrestling (2,620 words) - Steve and Bucky decide to have a wrestling match to settle an old score. Cue them stripping down to their pants, getting oiled up and engaging in a vigorous wrestling match that leaves them both hot and sweaty.

The End Of The Line (3,433 words) - Bucky falls from the train to his assumed death. Steve has to come to terms with a world without him in it.

In Memoriam: James Buchanan Barnes (120 words) - A grief-stricken Steve writes a poem in honour of his best friend.

The Adventures Of Steve Rogers, Newsboy Extraordinaire (11,161 words) - 7-year-old Steve Rogers does not have many friends. The other children in his class think of him as the weird kid who can't speak. His next-door neighbour Bucky Barnes doesn't care about Steve's Selective Mutism though. He thinks Steve is awesome and is willing to fight anyone who says otherwise. When Steve gets a part-time job as a newsboy, it triggers a chain of events that no one could have predicted. A mystery robber is targeting local businesses, putting Steve right in the firing line. Will Steve find the courage within himself to save the day - and even find his voice?

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who commented on the last chapter, especially those of you who wished me a happy new year! You guys are the sweetest <3

THOUGHTS: Did you enjoy this chapter? Let me know in the comments below! Incoherent squealing is acceptable, as it's what I did whilst writing a lot of this chapter haha XD

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "All Your Perfect Imperfections" and will look at Steve and Bucky's developing relationship.

TUMBLR: Feeling friendly? Feel free to talk to me/follow me/send me asks on Tumblr <3 I am ao3-elle1991 on there.
If there was one person who could be described as the captain of the Steve-and-Bucky ship, it was Natasha.

She was thrilled that Steve had finally, in her words, ‘got a life', and demanded to know everything about his and Bucky's blossoming relationship. Her level of interest in their relationship was as disconcerting as it was sweet, but Steve did not have it in him to deny her any of the details when she was hanging onto his every word as if her life depended upon it, staring at him with rapt attention and what could only be described as heart eyes.

And so it was, that Steve found himself divulging all the details of his and Bucky's relationship as it developed. He explained to her how, by mutual agreement, he and Bucky had stopped going to The Underworld in favour of more normal dates. He told her about everything they had done together so far, in their first month of dating: dates out to restaurants, a trip to the cinema, walks in Central Park and, most recently, cooking together at Bucky's flat.

The simple domesticity of this last date had been perfect, the two of them talking and bantering together as they prepped and cooked the ingredients. It did not matter that the resulting lasagne was slightly burnt around the edges, and that Steve had tipped in a little too much garlic, they added to the meal's character, and it was the process of cooking together that they had both loved, much more so than the food that was the end result.

It was incredible to imagine that already an entire month had passed since their first date in Central Park. By now, there was no doubt in Steve's mind that he really, really liked Bucky, and that he was falling for him harder and faster than he had ever fallen in love with anyone ever before. Presently, sitting opposite Natasha in the Stark Industries cafeteria one Friday afternoon, the words finally slipped from his lips, desperate to burst out of him, to be officialised, to be spoken aloud and made real.

"I think I love him," he said. "God, how can one person be so perfect?"

Euphoria surged through him; he was giddy with excitement as the words, sacred and secret, were finally thrust out into the open. Natasha smiled, her eyes glinting with something that Steve could not quite put his finger on, as she shovelled a gigantic meatball into her mouth.

"When are you going to see him next?" she asked, the side of her cheek bulging with food.

"Tonight," said Steve. "We're having our first overnight date. Bucky's coming over to my apartment for a movie night."

Natasha nodded, swallowing her food before sighing happily and beaming at him.

"Tell me everything," she said.
That evening, Steve and Bucky were sprawled out on Steve's sofa, snuggled together under a blanket as they watched the end of *The Martian*.

It was a science-fiction film, based on the idea of an astronaut being accidentally left on Mars after being wrongly assumed as dead during a panicked exit from the Red Planet, being forced to "science the shit out of everything" in order to survive. It was thrilling and absorbing, terrifying and fascinating, thought-provoking and deep. There was also, hilariously, one character who bore an uncanny resemblance to Bucky.

Steve nudged Bucky in the ribs as this character – Dr. Chris Beck – appeared on the screen. He nodded meaningfully towards Dr. Beck, forcing himself not to laugh when Bucky huffed with adorable annoyance.

"Look! He looks exactly like you," said Steve.

Bucky shook his head vehemently, crossing his arms. Steve swallowed hard, trying not to be too obvious as he ogled the way the movement made the other man's arms bulge.

"No way," said Bucky. "His hair is completely different."

Steve snorted with laughter, intertwining his fingers with Bucky as the other man leant against his shoulder. They lapsed into silence as they watched the final scenes of the film, before the end credits began to roll, both of them relaxing in one another's company as the music washed over them. Steve looked across at Bucky in the meagre light, tracing the outline of his jaw with his eyes, before giving in to temptation and planting a trail of kisses there.

Bucky moaned, tilting his head back to give Steve better access to the sensitive skin of his neck. Steve slowly made his way along Bucky's jawline, taking his time to savour the texture of his facial hair, the smell and taste of his skin. He slowly made his way to Bucky's mouth, sighing a little when their lips finally met, their tongues sweeping out to lick into one another's mouths.

Bucky's hands snaked around to wrap around Steve's back under the blanket, pulling him closer. Steve moaned as Bucky began to stroke and massage his back through his t-shirt, easing tension that Steve had not even realised he had out of his muscles. He melted into Bucky's touch, sighing and tipping his head back as the other man began to suck gentle kisses to his neck. He groaned when Bucky sucked at a particularly sensitive spot, pleasure simmering under his skin as Bucky licked and nibbled at his neck. His hands reached out to caress the broad planes of Bucky's back, worshipping with his fingers the bumps and valleys created by Bucky's muscles.

Despite having been dating for a month, Steve and Bucky had not done anything sexual since they had started their relationship. The last 30 days had been very much focused on building up their emotional bond and getting to know one another. Steve had been thankful for the slow pace – they had been able to establish a very different, much more meaningful kind of intimacy from the one they had shared in *The Underworld* – but now, making out with Bucky on the sofa, he was reminded of how much sexual tension there was between them.

Strangely, however, the idea of engaging in sexual activity with Bucky was even more daunting now than it had been whilst they had been doing kink together at *The Underworld*. Perhaps it was because they were now in a proper relationship. Now, if Bucky were to look at Steve's body and be disgusted, Steve had more to lose. The scars snaking down the right side of his torso tingled with phantom pain. Steve pulled away from the kiss, suddenly overwhelmed by shame for being horribly scarred.

"What's wrong?" said Bucky.
Steve faked a yawn, stretching and struggling upright.

"Nothing, I'm just tired," he said. "Can we go to bed and cuddle?"

Bucky smiled, leaning forwards to plant a kiss on Steve's lips.

"Sure," he said.

They disentangled themselves from the blanket, slipping out of the lounge and heading down the corridor to Steve's bedroom. As they crossed over the threshold, Steve spread out his arms awkwardly, showcasing his decidedly average bedroom. Bucky appeared at his side, casting a look around the room before smiling and kissing Steve's cheek.

"It's a bedroom, alright," he said. "Ten out of ten for bedroom-iness."

Steve laughed, turning his head quickly to place a kiss on Bucky's lips, bumping their noses together.

"If you want to use the bathroom, there's an en-suite there," said Steve, pointing to a door in the right-hand wall of the bedroom. "Do you need pyjamas?"

Bucky looked down at his jeans and t-shirt, apparently only just realising their unsuitability for sleeping and cuddling in.

"Pyjamas would be great," he said. "Thanks."

Steve crossed over to his wardrobe, pulling out a soft clean t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. He tossed them over to Bucky, who caught them deftly in one hand.

"Feel free to freshen up or whatever," said Steve. "There should be a spare toothbrush in the cabinet next to the sink."

"Thanks," said Bucky, shooting Steve a smile before heading into the en-suite bathroom and closing the door behind him.

Steve listened intently for a moment, standing still so as to hear Bucky's movements in the adjoining room. After a few seconds, he heard the sink tap turning on, the water running and splashing into the basin. It sounded as though Bucky was filling the sink to wash his face. After listening for a few more seconds just to be sure, Steve sprang into action, dashing across the room.

He frantically tore off his clothes, cursing himself as his zipper got stuck, forcing him to waste valuable time unjamming the zip from the denim fabric. His heart was hammering in his chest, his eyes fixed with fear on the en-suite door as he finally finished ripping off his jeans. It was at this point that he realised it would have been a smarter move to simply have got changed in the en-suite himself, but it was too late now; he was already naked, his scars fully on display as he stood there, dithering with paralysing indecision.

In the en-suite, the sound of running water stopped.

Steve grabbed his pyjama t-shirt in panic, pulling it over his head and yanking it down to his waist to cover his scars, relief rushing through him once they were covered, not even caring about his cock and balls hanging out on full display. With his scars covered, his shredded nerves now soothed, he reached out for a fresh pair of boxers, pulling them on to cover his modesty just as the en-suite door opened and Bucky emerged, fresh-faced and changed into Steve's borrowed clothes.

"These fit perfectly," said Bucky. "Thanks for letting me borrow them."
Steve forced a smile, desperately hoping he did not look like someone who had been on the verge of a panic attack for the last few minutes whilst getting changed. To hide any hint of anxiety, Steve quickly crossed the room and turned off the light, before heading back to bed and climbing in, patting the space next to him in invitation.

Unaware of Steve's prior panic, Bucky padded across the bedroom, lowering himself into bed and settling next to Steve. He cuddled close to Steve, before nudging and cajoling him so that Steve eventually rolled over so that his back was facing Bucky, allowing the other man to spoon him.

Bucky's breath was warm on his neck, his arms solid and secure as they snaked around Steve's torso to hold him gently. One of Bucky's legs wormed its way between Steve's. It was not a sexual gesture, but one that simply had the effect of entwining them further, their bodies effectively now in one big hug. Bucky sighed happily, placing lazy kisses on the back of Steve's neck.

"You smell great," murmured Bucky.

Steve did not reply, unsure how to respond to such a sweet, simple compliment. He sniffed the air, trying to detect any scent from himself or from Bucky, but he could not smell anything much, aside from the faint scent of washing powder from his newly-launched sheets.

By the time Steve eventually murmured a belated "thanks", Bucky was already beginning to snore softly, drifting off into a peaceful sleep, his arm wrapped around Steve's torso loosening as his consciousness slipped down into the world of dreams.

Steve lay rigidly, not wanting to move lest he wake his sleeping boyfriend. He was also painfully, frighteningly, hyper-aware of Bucky's hand, just inches away from his bare lower torso, where his t-shirt had ridden up, revealing his scarred skin beneath. What if Bucky were to wake up and feel the ridges of scar tissue on Steve's side? Would he ask what they were, or would he immediately be able to tell, and recoil in disgust and horror?

Steve's heart hammered in his chest, fear and depression washing over him in a double-blow. Tonight had been wonderful. He and Bucky had cooked an amazing stir-fry, watched a great film, and were now finally spending their first night together, spooning innocently in Steve's bed. He should be feeling happy. He bit down on his lip, trying hard not to cry.

He was not happy.

He felt terrible.

He was riddled with anxiety and self-consciousness about his scars. When he and Bucky had done kink together at The Underworld, the scars had always been covered by his costume. Steve had always insisted on keeping his t-shirt on and Bucky, perhaps not wanting to be rude, had not questioned it. But things were different now. As their relationship continued, Bucky would no doubt want to start engaging in sexual activity again, and as time went on, his natural curiosity would finally, one day, lead to him asking the inevitable question of why Steve never wanted to remove his shirt.

Perhaps, Steve thought bitterly, this was a sign that his hopes of having a relationship with Bucky were doomed. Perhaps he was stupid to ever have believed he could have a good, normal relationship. He was not good. He was not normal. If Bucky were ever to learn the truth about his past, he would leave in a heartbeat. He was not good enough for Bucky. He was disgusting, wicked, broken.

He buried his face in the pillow, muffling a cry. At last, he had met someone who he loved, who for
some reason liked him back, who was currently snoring softly against the back of Steve's neck. He had been a fool to ever think it could work. He did not deserve this. It was, quite literally, too good to be true. Someone like him did not deserve happiness. He had caused too much pain to ever deserve love.

Perhaps his scars were exactly what he deserved.

Fate had marked him out as ugly.

It seemed the universe did not take kindly to someone with so much to atone for.

Steve awoke the next morning to something large and warm pressed up against his back.

Unthinkingly, he snuggled closer to the source of the warmth, enjoying the perfect, toasty temperature of it, before his eyes flew open in confusion and panic, his sleep-addled mind unable to understand why there was someone tucked up in bed behind him.

Bucky mumbled something in his sleep, tightening his grip around Steve's waist. Steve's racing heart slowed, the panic receding as memories from the previous evening came back to him, to be replaced by a feeling a despair over his ugly, scar-covered torso. He closed his eyes miserably, wishing that he could be sleeping as peacefully as Bucky currently was, if only to chase away the horrible, nagging thoughts about his body.

He glanced downwards, feeling sick as he realised his t-shirt had ridden up during the night, revealing the scars that twisted down the right-hand side of his torso. Slowly, barely daring to breathe lest he wake Bucky, he reached down and tugged his t-shirt down to fully cover his scars. The seconds stretched on, the fabric moving down inch by agonising inch, as Steve's heart hammered in his chest, terrified that the movement was going to wake Bucky. His movements must have caused him to jostle Bucky's arm slightly, because the other man began to stir. Steve desperately tugged his t-shirt down the last couple of inches, ditching stealth for efficiency just as Bucky let out a yawn behind him.

"Morning," murmured Bucky, his voice rough with sleep.

Steve rolled over so that he was on his back, looking across the pillow at Bucky. He could not help smiling at the other man's bleary eyes and tousled brown hair; even first thing in the morning, he was beautiful.

"Hey," said Steve. "Morning."

Bucky smiled, shuffling sleepily towards Steve, hauling himself up onto an elbow to gaze down at Steve's face, before leaning down to pepper Steve's cheeks with lazy kisses. Steve closed his eyes, trying to lose himself in the visceral sensation of Bucky's stubble scratching against his own. In his chest, his heart was beating rapidly; in his mouth, he could almost taste the self-hatred. Much though he wanted to, he could not turn off his racing thoughts, the creeping anxiety about his scars and the dark whispers in the back of his mind that were telling him that he did not deserve Bucky's affections.

Unaware of Steve's inner turmoil, Bucky reached out and brushed Steve's hair gently off his forehead, before kissing him there as well, as if he wanted to kiss every inch of Steve's skin, as if he
found Steve irresistible.

"Last night," said Bucky, his voice husky, "when we kissed on the sofa, I think we both felt something special, right? Like what we felt when we met at The Underworld, but even better? God, you're so beautiful... So fucking sexy..."

Bucky licked his lips, his eyes roving over Steve's body from head to toe, his eyes darkening. With a soft moan, he began to kiss his way down Steve's neck. His hands stroked along Steve's t-shirt, heading towards the hem as if to pull it up...

In a panic, Steve pushed Bucky's hand away, pulling abruptly away from Bucky's kisses. Bucky immediately withdrew his hand, looking at Steve with concern.

"Shit, I'm sorry, did I come on too strong?" asked Bucky.

Steve looked away, shaking his head. He could tell he was being evasive and closed off, and he hated it – but he could not think of any other course of action. The alternative would be to tell Bucky the truth, and Steve did not know if he was strong enough to be able to cope with the look of disgust on Bucky's face when he finally saw Steve's disfigured torso.

Hating himself, hating his body, hating his past, Steve shrugged dismissively, trying to act as though what had happened did not require any explanation. Bucky cautiously slipped his hand into Steve's, a frown creasing his forehead when Steve did not so much as move in response.

"What's wrong?" said Bucky.

Steve lay in silence, his pulse racing, panic starting to bloom in his mind, as he fought to control his breathing, desperate not to crack.

"Did I do something wrong?" said Bucky, more urgently this time. "Jesus, talk to me."

Steve forced himself to smile, before immediately realising how incongruous it was to the situation and thunking his head back miserably against the pillow.

"Sorry," he said. "It's not you, it's me."

After a moment's pause, Bucky shuffled away so that their bodies were no longer touching, watching Steve the way one might a frightened animal.

"Do you want some space?" he said cautiously. "I can go now, if that's what you need?"

Steve closed his eyes and nodded slowly, humiliation bubbling up in his gut.

"Yes, please," he said stiffly.

He heard Bucky slide off the bed, the other man's feet landing with a soft thump on the bedroom floor.

"I'll come back over this evening, OK?" said Bucky. "Promise me we'll talk about things then?"

Steve nodded, his eyes still closed, wishing desperately that he would wake up and realise that this was all a dream. He pinched himself; discreetly, so that Bucky would not see. It hurt; not a dream. Fuck.

"Yeah," said Steve. "We'll talk."
He lay there in bed, listening as Bucky got dressed and prepared to leave. For a moment, there was silence, before Steve felt Bucky's lips press gently against his forehead.

"Everything's going to be OK," said Bucky softly. "Whatever it is, we'll work it out."

Steve felt pressure build in his throat. He bit his lip, holding it back until he finally heard Bucky sigh and leave the room. He waited until he heard the front door open and close, before finally opening his eyes and burying his face in the pillow, allowing himself to cry until his chest hurt from sobbing and his heart ached with the realisation that he had less than 12 hours before Bucky would be back – with questions that Steve finally had no choice but to answer.

For the first time since he had met Bucky, Steve found himself dreading their next meeting.

It was a disconcerting feeling – to not want to see someone he loved so much – but feel it, he did. He found himself constantly checking the time, his stomach lurching every time he saw that yet more seconds, minutes and hours had passed by. Time was like a river, constantly rushing in one direction only, sweeping him along against his will, bringing him closer and closer to the inevitable, terrible endpoint, when Bucky would return to Steve's flat and demand that they talk.

In an attempt to distract himself, he cleaned his flat. He scrubbed, hoovered and tidied every single room, even organising his paints so that they were in a logical order. He threw out various items that he realised were past their expiry date and made a shopping list of all the things he needed to buy so that his cupboards would be fully-stocked.

By the time evening came around, he felt a small sense of accomplishment, pleased that he had at least managed to channel some of his nervous energy into something productive. Presently, he was sat down in his spare-bedroom-come-artroom, running his fingers over some of his latest paintings, losing himself in the brushstrokes and colours, his mind quietening into a sense of contentment as he lost himself in the paintwork.

That sense of contentment was obliterated when, at 6:37pm, Steve heard a knock on his front door. He jumped to his feet, suddenly sick with anxiety once more as his heart hammered in his chest, his scars tingling with phantom pain, his right arm beginning to tremble almost imperceptibly. He braced himself, walking slowly out of his artroom and making his way down the corridor. He felt like a condemned man walking to the gallows, every step jolting him with a renewed sense of panic and shame.

He had finally found someone who he loved, and now Bucky was going to see him, all of him, for the first time, and walk away. It was heart-breaking. It was devastating. It was, his mind whispered to him, exactly what he deserved.

He pulled open the front door, stepping back to allow Bucky to walk in and toe off his shoes. Bucky was wearing different clothes this evening: a dark grey button-up shirt with smart black jeans. He had washed his hair recently; it was still damp. If Steve were to sniff at it, it would no doubt smell of his apple-scented shampoo. Steve's mind focused on these trivial, irrelevant little details, desperate to think about literally anything but what was about to happen.

"Hey," said Bucky gently. "How are you? You look better than you did this morning."

Steve nodded numbly, already struggling for words. *Fuck*. He was already failing and 'The Talk' had
"I cleaned the apartment," he said, before realising he had not answered Bucky's question in the slightest. "I'm a bit better, thanks."

Bucky smiled, looking quietly relieved. Steve stood there in awkward silence for a moment, before realising that, as they were in his flat, Bucky was waiting for him to make the first move and guide them to the appropriate room. Taking a deep breath, he led them to the lounge, sitting down on the sofa and trying to ignore his racing heart as Bucky sat down next to him.

They sat in silence for several long moments, until Bucky finally sighed, running a hand through his hair in a way that belied just how stressed he actually was.

"What's wrong, Steve?" he said. "When I started touching you this morning, you reacted like you were terrified. Tell me what's going on."

Steve stared down at his hands miserably. How on earth could he even begin to explain the truth? There were so many layers of complexity, so many facets of shame and ugliness. He did not know how to explain. He did not even know where to begin. Perhaps, he thought desperately, he should simply deny everything.

"It's nothing," said Steve.

Lying, apparently, was the wrong decision. Bucky exhaled hard with frustration, his eyes flashing as colour rose immediately to his cheeks. Steve had never seen him particularly emotional before, and the transformation was a shocking one.

"For fuck's sake!" said Bucky. "It's obviously not nothing. You went so pale when I tried to touch you, you looked like you'd seen a fucking ghost! You were fine with touch at The Underworld, but you don't even want to talk about touching now? What's happened? What's up? Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

Steve wrung his hands with despair. The conversation was crashing down around his ears, far too quickly and far more forcefully than he had ever imagined. He could feel the space between himself and Bucky yawning open like a chasm, even though in reality they were sat no more than one foot apart. He forced back a sob, determined that whatever happened next, he would not debase himself by crying in front of Bucky.

"I'm sorry I pushed you away this morning. I was caught up in my head," said Steve. "I'll... I'll give you a blow job, if you want?"

Bucky stared at him in disbelief, the anger and frustration visibly melting away from him as he stared at Steve in shock.

"What...?" Bucky said finally. "No... No. Jesus Christ, Steve. The problem isn't the lack of sex. I can wait for as long as you need, seriously. I don't want you to ever feel pressured into doing anything sexual with me."

Steve looked at him miserably.

"Then what's the problem?" he said.

Bucky closed his eyes, visibly upset by Steve's response. "The problem is the lack of communication," he said. "I just want you to be open and honest with me, Steve. I want to understand. You won't talk to me about what's wrong. You won't even acknowledge what
happened. That's the problem."

Steve bit his lip, his emotions in turmoil. Things would be so much simpler if Bucky were not such a good person. He almost wished that he had turned out to be awful, so that Steve would not feel bad about wanting to hide the truth from him. For the first time, he considered the possibility of revealing his scars. Bucky's insistence that he did not want Steve to feel pressured into anything sexual had been so gentle, so heartfelt, that it suddenly felt difficult to imagine him outright cringing at the sight of Steve's scars. Nonetheless, vulnerability was not something that Steve was used to, and the idea of making himself feel so vulnerable made him almost physically gag.

"I..."

The words trailed off, fear rushing up on him and wrapping its icy hands around his neck, cutting off his words. Steve closed his eyes, praying for courage, as he forced the words over his lips, his composure utterly shredded as he sat trembling, his right arm shaking against his will.

"I'm ugly," he said. "You've never seen me naked. And... And you won't like what you see."

There were several long seconds of silence, before Bucky finally spoke, his confusion obvious in his voice.

"I don't understand," said Bucky. "I've seen your body before. You look gorgeous."

Steve shook his head, shame blossoming in his gut as a stray tear rolled down his cheek. He rubbed it away roughly, his breath shuddering out of him as he finally forced himself to open his eyes and face Bucky.

"You've not seen me topless," said Steve. "I... I have scars. That's why I've always insisted on wearing a t-shirt – so you wouldn't see my scars. They're disgusting. I... I won't blame you if you want to break up."

There. The truth was out there. The words hung between them, heavy and charged and impossible to take back. Steve watched Bucky's face, dreading the inevitable look of revulsion, but somehow unable to look away. The seconds trickled by, neither of them saying a word, but Bucky did not look repulsed; he merely looked surprised. After several long moments, Bucky smiled, his expression softening to one of gentle reassurance.

"Where exactly are the scars?" asked Bucky.

Steve stared at him, unsure if he had heard the other man properly. After spending several seconds floundering for words, he finally pulled himself together, finding that the subsequent words came out easier than his original confession, the bombshell having already been well and truly dropped.

"All down my right side," said Steve. "There's several of them. About 30cm long."

Bucky nodded, keeping his face calm and neutral. Steve watched him, his eyes roving over the other man's face, trying and failing to decipher his inner feelings. After a slight pause, Bucky spoke again. His voice, if possible, was even gentler this time.

"Did you get them in Iraq?" he said.

Steve gritted his teeth, before nodding jerkily, unable to say the words out loud.

Bucky's face crumpled with sadness. With large, sympathetic eyes, he slowly reached out and, when Steve made no attempt to move away, he took hold of Steve's hand, sweeping a comforting thumb
over the back of his hand. Steve closed his eyes, losing himself in the familiar, comforting sensation.

"Oh Steve," said Bucky softly. "You're beautiful, inside and out. You're smart, kind, fun. I love spending time with you. I think you're gorgeous. Having scars doesn't change that."

Steve huffed out a laugh that somehow came out sounding more like a sob.

"You might change your mind when you actually see them," said Steve.

There was a moment's silence, during which time Bucky seemed to contemplate whether or not to say something. Apparently deciding to take the plunge, Bucky spoke.

"Well, there's only one way to find out."

Steve's eyes snapped open in horror as he realised what Bucky meant. He hugged his arms around himself out of instinct, desperate to hide his ugly scars. Bucky was being so kind, so sweet. Steve did not want to have to watch the sympathy in his blue eyes morph into horror when he saw the extent of Steve's disfigurement.

"It's your choice," said Bucky. "Whatever you choose, I'll respect that. If you want to keep your t-shirt on, that's OK. But I'd love to see all of you. I've been wanting to touch and make love to you again for so long."

Steve felt a lump in his throat. There was something about the phrase 'make love' that felt so gentle, so pure, so intimate; more intimate than anything they had done at The Underworld. He felt as though some part of his mind, his psyche, had been cracked open by his confession. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to open himself up to Bucky's scrutiny, to show off his scars, to test Bucky's words and to prove to himself that he would no longer allow his fear to control him.

Without a word, he leant forward, closing his eyes and pressing his lips against Bucky's, his tongue licking along the seam of the other man's mouth. Bucky moaned in response, returning the kiss gently, his hands slowly stroking at Steve's arms, before intertwining their fingers together. They kissed languidly, without hurry. The kisses started off slow and gentle, but as time went on, they slowly built in intensity, until each kiss and lick and suck was charged with sexual tension, both of them desperate to take things further.

Bucky finally pulled away, his cheeks flushed and his eyes dark as he raked his gaze up and down Steve's body.

"Do you want to?" said Bucky.

Steve was not entirely sure what Bucky was referring to – touching, stripping naked or having sex – but finally came to the conclusion that it did not matter, as Steve was ready and willing to do any and all of those things. He nodded, his heart leaping in his chest at the delicious groan the simple head movement elicited in the other man.

Without a word, Bucky grabbed hold of Steve and picked him up, bridal-style, carrying his not-insubstantial weight out of the lounge and the down the corridor to his bedroom. Steve slung an arm around Bucky's shoulders for support, dizzy with anticipation when Bucky finally placed him down on his bed, the other man immediately climbing into bed and joining him, kissing him hard as he pressed their bodies together.

Steve could feel the hard line of Bucky's erection rubbing against his own. He moaned loudly, bucking his hips, desperate for friction. Bucky chuckled darkly, reaching down and squeezing Steve's throbbing cock through his trousers, smiling and humming at the gasp of pleasure that
escaped Steve's lips at the touch of his hand.

"Please," begged Steve. "I want you."

Bucky smiled, leaning forwards to kiss Steve gently. Steve closed his eyes, losing himself in the sensation, relishing the warmth of Bucky's body pressed against his own, the weight of him, the hardness of their cocks rubbing together. Bucky sighed happily against his mouth, a blast of peppermint that Steve could not help but inhale.

"I want to strip you," murmured Bucky. "Will it help if the scars come out last?"

Steve nodded. It might seem odd to anyone else, but for him, taking his top off was going to be much more difficult than getting his cock and balls out. It would be easier to build up to it. He kissed Bucky, grateful that he had thought of it and been so considerate as to suggest it.

Bucky rolled off Steve, lying down beside him and slowly rubbing his hand over Steve's cock, caressing the shape of him and squeezing around the head. Steve thunked his head back against the pillow and moaned, his cock already starting to leak pre-come at the delicious stimulation. He rutted against Bucky's hand, desperate for more.

Bucky smirked at Steve's frustration, before finally reaching out and undoing the button of Steve's trousers, taking hold of his zipper and pulling it slowly downwards. Steve lifted his hips, allowing Bucky to pull his trousers and boxers down over his hips and down his legs. Bucky pulled them off his feet, dumping them on the floor beside the bed, before gently taking each of Steve's feet in his hands and pulling off his socks.

Steve shivered, his lower half completely nude, as Bucky licked his lips, staring at Steve as if he were a delicious morsel of food he was looking forward to eating.

"Jesus," breathed Bucky. "You're even more beautiful than I remember."

He lowered his head, slowly kissing and licking his way up Steve's leg, stroking him lovingly as he inched his way higher and higher, until his face was right in Steve's crotch. Bucky moaned, burying his face in Steve's thick pubic hair and inhaling deeply, savouring the masculine scent and causing Steve's cock to throb hard with arousal.

Bucky closed his hand around Steve's shaft, angling it so that it was pointing upwards, before taking it in his mouth, bobbing his head as he sucked and licked. Steve moaned, his legs shaking as Bucky sucked him hard and fast. Pleasure was pulsing through him with every suck on his sensitive head, his toes curling as he whimpered, his hands dropping down and gripping Bucky's hair tightly.

Around ten glorious minutes later, he could feel his orgasm starting to build, gasping as Bucky pulled off with a smirk, the other man immediately scooting up the bed to press kisses to Steve's mouth. Steve groaned softly, tasting himself on Bucky's tongue as they kissed.

After a while, Bucky pulled away, sitting up and slowly unbuttoning his shirt to reveal his gorgeously hairy chest beneath. Steve watched, his mouth hanging open, his cock throbbing with lust, as Bucky peeled it off and dropped it on the floor. Steve stared longingly at the swathes of skin, desperate to re-familiarise himself with every inch. With a smile, Bucky reached down to his black jeans, pulling down the zipper slowly, teasingly, before pulling them off completely, along with his boxers and socks, leaving him nude, his beautiful cock framed by a thick thatch of dark pubic hair.

Steve moaned, overwhelmed by the gorgeous sight in front of him. Bucky settled back down by Steve's side, stroking Steve's face gently as he pressed kisses to his temple.
"You're so beautiful," said Bucky. "If you start to feel uncomfortable, tell me to stop."

Slowly, every movement smooth and even, Bucky began to stroke his hand down Steve's face, to his neck. Steve breathed hard, fighting the urge to panic as Bucky's hand slowly began to move down his t-shirt, stroking gently, reassuringly, as his hand descended ever downwards towards his waist. Several long minutes later, Bucky's hand was at the hem of his t-shirt, his fingers stroking gently at his lower torso, just above his crotch, soothing the sensitive skin there.


Steve closed his eyes, his heart hammering in his chest. He was tired, so tired, of hiding. His scars were a permanent reminder of what had happened in Fallujah. He did not like looking at them, even when he was alone. He had perfected the art of washing himself without looking at his body, of getting changed without looking in the mirror. Ever since 2004, he had been afraid of his scars; of how they looked, of what they represented, of what they reminded him of. Perhaps, it was time to face them. Perhaps, it was time to stop being afraid.

He nodded, tears pricking at his eyes as he sat up, leaning his head on Bucky's shoulder for support. Bucky kissed his forehead, wrapping his arms around Steve to give him a hug, rubbing at his back comfortingly. For a long while, Steve allowed himself to be held, clinging back tightly, before finally letting out a shuddering breath, sitting up straight and opening his eyes. Bucky stared hard at him, searching his features for any sign of uncertainty or resistance and, finding none, slowly pulled Steve's t-shirt up over his head, discarding it gently on the bed.

Bucky stared at the scars that snaked down the right-hand side of Steve's torso. With hesitant fingers, Bucky reached out and traced a finger down one of the jagged scars, tracing the raised, red line with the pad of his index finger. He touched it slowly, curiously. Reaching the end of the first scar, he began to trace another one, his finger caressing it just as gently as the first, his eyes clear and free from judgement.

A sob built up in Steve's chest. It had been over a decade since anyone apart from himself had seen his scars. No one had ever touched them the way Bucky was doing – slowly, carefully, almost reverently. Perhaps sensing Steve's distress, Bucky placed a gentle kiss to his cheek, manoeuvring them so that Steve was once more lying on his back. Bucky scooted over to his right side, stroking the scars gently, kissing the tears as they rolled silently down Steve's face.

"You're beautiful, Steve," said Bucky. "All of you. You're perfect."

Without another word, he moved down the bed, pressing kisses to Steve's scars, working his way slowly, gently, down the right-hand side of Steve's torso; touching and caressing the raised, red lines lovingly, tenderly and carefully.

A short while later, when they finally made love, it was with Bucky stroking Steve's scars, whispering in Steve's ear that he was beautiful, that he was perfect, that his scars were as gorgeous as the rest of him, as he plunged in and out, making Steve come, at last, harder than he had ever come before in his life.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3
BODY IMAGE: If, like Steve, you're struggling with your body image, please know you're not alone. Poor body image affects people of all ages, genders, sizes and body types. Every body is different. If you're feeling depressed or upset about your body image, please know you can seek advice, support and counselling from a doctor. If you're in the UK, a list of additional resources can be found [here](#).

THE MARTIAN: In this chapter, Steve comments that Bucky bears an uncanny resemblance to the character Dr. Chris Beck in The Martian. If you've seen the film, you will know that Dr. Chris Beck is portrayed by Sebastian Stan, the same actor who portrays Bucky Barnes ;)

THANK YOU: Thank you for all your amazing comments on the last chapter! It seems you guys really liked it, which makes me so happy! Knowing that you guys are reading and enjoying it makes writing so much more rewarding. Thank you to all of you who took the time to comment with your thoughts <3

THOUGHTS: And feel free to let me know your thoughts on this chapter too! If you've never commented on this fic before, don't be afraid! It's not scary and I love hearing from readers :) 

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Warning Signs" and will see the beginning of a new, darker plot-line... Got any pre-emptive theories that you want to throw out? Feel free to leave them in the comments ;)

TUMBLR: I'm on Tumblr! My username is [ao3-elle1991](https://www.tumblr.com/ao3-elle1991). Feel free to follow/message/send asks to me on there if you're feeling friendly or nosy!
Over the next month, Steve and Bucky's relationship continued to grow stronger and deeper. They grew more intimate, both emotionally and sexually, and although The L Word – love – was yet to be exchanged, it was obvious in their actions towards one another that what they shared was indeed love. As well as the deep emotional connection they had forged, they had developed an active and steamy sex life. The week prior, they had both been tested for STIs and, having both been found to be clear of any infections, had decided to forgo condoms.

For the first time in a long time, Steve felt happy. He felt as though his life was finally getting back on track. He was spending quality time with Bucky and Natasha. He was frequently bumping into Sam during his daily jog in Central Park, as their running routines had coincidentally aligned almost perfectly. He had been given a pay rise at work. His nightmares had even become less frequent, probably as a result of his improved mental state. All in all, things were going pretty great.

So it was, that on this particular day, Steve was actually whistling as he walked down the pavement on his way home from the supermarket. He was in a good mood, a spring in his step as he trekked along. He did not become aware of the car immediately, his soldier's instinct dulled from over a decade out of active service. After walking the length of one block, however, the back of his neck began to prickle, his body aware of what was happening before his conscious awareness.

Suddenly aware of the uncomfortable feeling of being followed, he cast a surreptitious look behind him, half-expecting to see some wannabe-mugger launch themselves at him. The pavement immediately behind him was empty – but the sleek black car that was crawling along the kerb immediately grabbed his attention. It was a Jaguar, expensive and with tinted black windows. Steve looked uncertainly at the car for a moment, not afraid – he was more than capable of defending himself should someone get out of the car and pick a fight with him – but more uneasy, unsure of why, or indeed if, the car was following him.

Hurrying across the road to the next block, he continued walking at an even pace, alert and attentive to the movements of the car as it followed him, slowly crawling along the pavement at the same pace, just a few metres behind him. Several minutes of walking later, during which time the car had stuck stubbornly by his side, Steve finally forced himself to stop, by now deeply uncomfortable by whatever was occurring.

Beside him, the car came to a smooth halt. Steve stood tall, glaring as he puffed his chest out, wanting to portray with his body language that he was in no way intimidated by the black Jaguar's scare tactics. The window of the back seat rolled down, revealing a young woman seated inside. The woman was beautiful, about 30 years old, with large green eyes, a strong jaw, and perfectly-curled brown hair that tumbled down past her pale, slim shoulders. She was wearing a smart black jacket over a deep-green dress, along with smokey eye make-up that gave her a mysterious, sensual allure. With a smile, she rested her hand on the rolled-down window, revealing crimson-painted nails and, on her wrist, an unusual tattoo: a skull, with six tentacles sprouting from the mouth, surrounded by a solid circular line.

"Steven Rogers?" asked the woman politely.

Steve stared at her, certain that he had never met her before and therefore both bewildered and
disturbed as to how she knew his identity.

"Yes?" he said. "Can I help you?"

The woman smiled, revealing her perfect teeth.

"My name is Ophelia," she said.

Steve pursed his lips, trying not let his body language reveal how unsettled the entire interaction was making him. Ditching politeness, he glared at Ophelia, noting how she only smiled wider in response.

"Whatever," he said bluntly. "Can I help you?"

Looking mildly bored, Ophelia examined her nails, before finally looking back up at him, her green eyes hard and clear.

"Stay away from James Barnes," she said.

Steve did a double-take, all pretences of being controlled and unbothered going out of the window at the mention of Bucky's name. He stared at Ophelia with bewilderment, in equal parts confused and unsettled by the sudden turn of the conversation.

"What?" he said uncertainly.

"Stay away from James Barnes," repeated Ophelia. "We won't tell you again."

Before Steve could respond, Ophelia sat back in her seat, saying something to the driver. The tinted black window smoothly rolled up, before the car sped off, kicking up grime and bits of gravel in its wake, leaving Steve with nothing but exhaust fumes, questions and a feeling of deep unease.

That afternoon, Steve was interrupted in the midst of his latest painting by a knock at his front door.

He looked down at his watch, frowning with confusion; Bucky was not due to arrive for their date for at least another four hours. Putting his paint brush aside, he got up and walked to the front door, looking through the spy hole to see who was there. It was Bucky, running a hand through his hair, a stressed expression on his face. Steve opened the door, stepping back to allow Bucky to walk in.

Bucky did not walk in. He shuffled on the spot, looking down at his shoes apologetically. Steve stared at Bucky's shoes which, he now realised, were soaking wet, making loud squelching sounds every time Bucky shifted his weight. Confused, Steve peered past Bucky, down to the end of the communal corridor where a window allowed him to see outside. As he had thought, the sky was clear; bright winter sunshine was clearly visible, not a cloud in the sky.

"Hey," said Steve. "How come your shoes are wet?"

Bucky sighed miserably, looking stressed.

"My apartment block got flooded," he said. "The maintenance company says the damage is so bad that it could be months before any of us are allowed to move back in. I just came to say sorry and tell you I need to cancel tonight's date. I need to find someplace else to live. A hotel will do tonight, then
I can start looking at apartments properly tomorrow."

He was shifting from foot to foot, his shoes squelching each time. He was obviously agitated, his cheeks flushed and his eyes wide with stress. Steve imagined him sleeping in some grotty hotel, stressed and scrambling to find reasonable accommodation at a fair price, and found himself yearning to intervene. It seemed foolish for Bucky to go through the stress of home-hunting when Steve had ample room in his flat for them both. It only took him a few short moments for him to make his decision, his mind already made up by the time he opened his mouth to speak.

"If you want to, you can move in with me," said Steve.

Bucky stopped shifting from foot to foot, his eyes widening with surprise. He looked at Steve uncertainly, obviously not having expected Steve to offer him a home, suddenly endearingly awkward and shy.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I don't want to be a burden..."

Steve shook his head.

"You're not a burden," he said. "I enjoy having you around. If you think it's too soon, you can still look for other apartments, but hotels are expensive – if you want to save money, you're welcome to just stay here until you find somewhere else."

Bucky chewed on his lower lip, some of the awkwardness melting away, to be replaced by cautious-looking optimism.

"What's your apartment's security like?" Bucky said finally.

Steve raised his eyebrows, surprised by the unusual question. Nevertheless, he did not question it, gesturing for Bucky to follow him inside so that he could see the security on the front door.

"A lock and bolt on the front door," said Steve. "All the windows have locks too – but we're three storeys up so no one's getting in that way. Crime's quite low around here; I've not heard of any of the neighbours getting burgled."

Bucky stared at the lock and bolt on the front door, apparently lost in thought. He was silent for almost a full minute, before suddenly smiling, his face lighting up with gratefulness and relief. Leaning in to press a kiss to Steve's cheek, he nodded, causing Steve's stomach to flip with excitement.

"OK," said Bucky. "If you're sure, I'd love to move in with you. If we drive one another crazy, I can look for someplace else."

Steve laughed, pulling Bucky in for a hug, giddy with happiness. It was not quite the way he had imagined they might one day move in together, but nonetheless it felt like a natural decision. Bucky hugged him back, resting his head on Steve's shoulder, as if suddenly tired. Steve reached up and stroked a hand through Bucky's hair, smiling when the other man practically purred in response.

"Shall we go to your apartment to pick up some things?" said Steve. "Are you allowed back in at all?"

Bucky nodded, pulling back from the hug with reluctance.

"I think so," he said. "And if they don't let me, I'm not afraid to kick their butts."
Steve snorted with laughter, reaching out for his coat and car keys, pulling on the coat and slipping the car keys into his pocket. Casting one last look around his flat, he ushered Bucky out into the hallway and locked the door behind them. They headed down to street-level together, walking down the pavement to where Steve's old blue car was parked.

The drive to Bucky's flat largely took place in silence. Steve did not attempt to force him to speak. He had learnt that Bucky had a tendency to withdraw into himself when he felt stressed or tired. When they arrived, they headed to the block of flats together, gaining entry after some smooth-talking with one of the maintenance staff hanging around the front of the building.

Steve's eyes widened when he saw the water. No wonder Bucky's shoes had been so wet. There was about 10-inches of water, completely obscuring the floor. They waded through it, heading along the corridor that led to Bucky's street-level flat. Bucky unlocked and shoved his front door open, the water sloshing wildly as he did so, revealing the inside of his flat, which was just as flooded.

Steve waited by the front door, holding it open as Bucky headed inside to retrieve his most important belongings. Bucky returned about 10 minutes later, a rucksack on his back and a large hold-all in his hands.

"I got all the important stuff, and some food and some clothes," said Bucky. "I'll come back to pick up whatever else I can tomorrow."

Steve nodded, taking the hold-all from Bucky's hands. They waded back the way they had come, the sound of splashing water amplified by the narrow corridor as they struggled through it. By the time they were once more outside, Steve's legs ached and the chill had seeped through to his bones, his toes completely numb.

They made their way back to the car, the sun already beginning to set as they dumped Bucky's bags in the back seat. The drive back was a little livelier, Bucky apparently having perked up now that he had a place to stay and at least some of his belongings had been salvaged.

The rest of the evening was spent unpacking Bucky's things, slotting them in amongst Steve's belongings. Steve cleared a section of his wardrobe for Bucky's use, created a space in the artroom where Bucky could store his important documents, and helped Bucky put his rescued foods into the most logical places in the kitchen. By the time they were finished, they were both exhausted.

Nevertheless, peeking into the bedroom to find Bucky organising the last of his clothes in the wardrobe, Steve felt a warm glow inside him at the sight of their belongings mixed up together. He sidled up behind Bucky, wrapping his arms around his waist and pressing a kiss to the back of his neck.

"I love you," said Steve, the words slipping from his lips, unplanned and raw, for the first time.

For a moment, silence. Then, Bucky turned around, beautiful despite the tired bags under his eyes, and smiled, pure and joyful, as he took Steve's hands in his, holding them gently.

"I love you, too," said Bucky.

The next morning, Steve awoke to Bucky pressing gentle kisses to the back of his neck.
During the night, they had ended up spooning, Bucky's arm flung over Steve's waist, their legs entangled together. Steve smiled sleepily, savouring the warm embrace, humming with approval as Bucky kissed a particularly sensitive spot. Realising Steve was awake, Bucky raked a hand through Steve's hair, scratching lightly at his scalp, causing Steve to moan at the deliciously satisfying sensation.

"Morning," murmured Bucky.

His voice was low and husky, rough with morning gravel. Steve loved the way Bucky sounded first thing in the morning. It was raw, earthy and sexy. It was doing absolutely nothing to soften his morning wood, something that Bucky apparently did not mind, as he reached around and wrapped a warm hand around Steve's length. Steve moaned at the sensation, as Bucky began to slowly pump his hand up and down, before rolling over so that they were facing one another.

"Morning," said Steve.

Bucky smiled, leaning forwards to capture Steve's mouth with a kiss, kissing him deeply and slowly, their tongues lapping against one another lazily. Steve trailed his fingers down Bucky's chest, taking hold of the other man's warm, hard erection when he finally reached his crotch. Bucky gasped against Steve's mouth, his cock twitching in Steve's hand.

"I could get used to being roomies if we get to do this every morning," smirked Bucky.

Steve laughed, giving Bucky's cock another squeeze, loving the way Bucky's eyes fluttered shut in response, his cheeks and neck reddening with a blush. Unable to resist, Steve leant forward, covering the blush with kisses, relishing the taste of him. Before he could descend any lower, Bucky grabbed hold of him, hauling him up with a grin before rolling them over and pinning Steve down to the bed.

He attacked Steve's neck with kisses, sucking and biting at the sensitive skin, grinding their erections together as he pinned Steve's arms down with his strong hands. Steve groaned. He loved being manhandled by Bucky. There was something intoxicating about seeing the lust in the other man's eyes as he put them through all kinds of kinky and sexy scenarios. He bucked his hips up, which only kicked Bucky's dominance up a gear, causing the other man to press their bodies together from head to toe, effectively impeding Steve's movements.

"If I weren't so horny, I'd take my time and tie you up," said Bucky, kissing the delicate shell of Steve's ear.

Steve's cock throbbed at the delicious mental image, his heart pounding in his chest, pumping lust and giddy, ecstatic excitement through his body.

"And?" murmured Steve. "As you're too horny to wait, what're you going to do?"

Bucky chuckled darkly, reaching down with one hand to squeeze Steve's cock slowly, grinning victoriously as Steve's composure cracked, a shuddering, breathy whine slipping unbidden from his lips.

"As I'm too horny to wait, I'm going to fuck your mouth until I come," said Bucky silkily. "And if you're good, I'll let you come too."

Steve's eyes widened, a thrill of shock and excitement going through him at Bucky's filthy words. Before he could react, Bucky had tugged Steve so that he was lying on his back in the centre of the bed, before clambering off him and turning around, positioning himself so that his crotch was above Steve's face, before settling forwards so that they were in the sixty-nine position, his breath hot
against Steve's cock. Bucky reached down and brushed his thick, hard cock against Steve's lips.

"It's not going to suck itself," smirked Bucky.

With a moan, Steve opened his mouth, allowing Bucky to guide his length inside, fighting against his gag reflex as the blunt head brushed against the back of his throat. From his position, pinned underneath Bucky, he did not have much ability to move, so he focused on controlling his breathing, hollowing his cheeks and sucking the best he could as Bucky crouched above him.

The taste and smell were incredible. Bucky's cock was leaking salty pre-come, filling his mouth. The musky scent of his balls and pubic hair filled his nose, making Steve feel as though he were completely enveloped in Bucky's earthy, natural scent. He swirled his tongue around the thick, heavy cock in his mouth, moaning and sucking, desperate to make Bucky come.

The first touch of Bucky's tongue to his cock caused him to jerk involuntarily. Bucky chuckled above him, enveloping Steve's cock with his hot, wet mouth, bobbing his head up and down, sucking hard. Steve groaned, the sound muffled by Bucky's throbbing cock in his mouth, his heart hammering in his chest as Bucky began to jerk off the lower half of his cock with his hand, all the while never ceasing to suck Steve as if his life depended on it, obviously loving getting Steve off just as much as he was enjoying getting his cock sucked.

Steve upped his game, determined to make Bucky come before he came himself. He ignored the ache in his jaw, using what little space he had to bob his head up and down, sucking hard, as if he wanted to suck the come right out of Bucky's balls by sheer force of suction alone. Above him, Bucky was struggling to contain his moans, rocking himself back and forth in Steve's mouth, plunging his hot, rock-hard length into the wet heat of Steve's mouth, his balls bouncing inches away from Steve's face, who found himself mesmerised by the movement, unable to look away from the obscene dance taking place before his eyes.

He could feel Bucky's orgasm approaching. His cock thickened in Steve's mouth, seeming to get even hotter as he continued to thrust in and out. His balls were visibly full and round, ready to unleash their load, drawing closer to his body. Steve sucked like a man dying of thirst in the desert, desperate to get that warm, salty moisture, that sensual taste, that glorious liquid.

With a long groan, Bucky's movements stilled, his thrusts stopping as his cock began to throb and contract rhythmically, come spurting out of the end and filling Steve's mouth with spurt after spurt of warm, gooey come. Steve swallowed convulsively against the sudden flood of come, the slick, salty semen slipping easily down his throat, with just a little overflowing and dribbling down his chin. After what felt like an age, Bucky let out a hard, satisfied sigh, his softening cock slipping out of Steve's mouth with a wet pop. Steve gasped for air, his aching jaw finally closing, with no small measure of relief after being stretched open so wide for so long.

He barely had time to regain his breath before Bucky once more lowered his mouth around Steve's cock, sucking more urgently this time, one hand rubbing the base of his cock and, with his other, probing a spit-slick finger against Steve's tight, puckered hole. Steve gasped as Bucky sucked hard on his sensitive cock head, screwing his eyes shut against the burn as the other man's finger pushed past his tight sphincter and into his ass.

He was shaking, his cock leaking an almost constant stream of pre-come as red-hot pleasure spiralled higher and higher inside of him. Bucky was sucking mercilessly on his cock, his own spent, flaccid cock hanging just inches from Steve's mouth, the smell of cock and musk and come filling Steve's nostrils.

Bucky's finger pressed deeper in his ass, pressing hard against Steve's prostate, and that was all it
took for Steve to come with a shout, his come exploding from him, flooding Bucky's mouth as wave after wave of pleasure washed over him. The rhythmical contractions had his entire body convulsing, Bucky having to wrestle to keep him still as he sucked him all the way through his orgasm, swallowing every drop.

As the last throbs of Steve's orgasm faded away, Bucky rolled off him, crawling up to his side and pulling him into a warm hug. Steve flung an arm over his chest, a huge smile on his face, satisfied and content as euphoric, post-orgasmic bliss settled over him. Bucky smiled, pressing a sweet, gentle kiss to Steve's lips, which Steve gladly reciprocated. He loved their post-orgasmic moments almost as much as the moments of passion themselves – afterwards, with Bucky, there was always cuddling, warmth and comfort.

"Wow," said Steve, unable to string together a more eloquent sentence.

Bucky smiled, nuzzling against him.

"Wow," he agreed, closing his eyes and entwining his fingers with Steve's.

They lay together in peaceful silence, each recovering from his powerful orgasm, taking quiet comfort in one another's presence. Steve closed his eyes, listening to the sound of the traffic filtering through the window from the street below. It was a fairly pleasant white noise, something he had got used to since moving to New York City. Hearing the rumble of car engines, a memory from the previous day stirred, altogether forgotten until now due to the unexpected nature of Bucky's sodden arrival on his doorstep and subsequent move-in yesterday afternoon.

Opening his eyes, his rolled over onto his side to face Bucky.

"Someone told me to stay away from you, yesterday," said Steve.

Bucky opened his sleepy eyes, looking confused.

"Who?" he asked.

Steve chewed on his lower lip, trying to remember the woman's name.

"I think she said her name was Ophelia," he said finally. "Late 20s or early 30s, curled brown hair, green eyes, pale. She knew our names. Drove up to me in the back of some posh black car. Do you know her?"

Bucky stared at him, looking genuinely confused. He lay there in silence for a few moments, obviously wracking his memory for any prior encounter with anyone matching Steve's description. After several long seconds, he shook his head, looking mystified.

"No," he said. "Was there anything else odd about her?"

"You mean apart from the fact she told me to stay away from you?" joked Steve, before remembering the woman's curious tattoo. "She had a weird tattoo on her wrist – with a skull and tentacles. A bit of an odd design for some snooty young woman, I guess."

Bucky continued to look confused, shaking his head.

"I've definitely not met her," he said. "I'd remember a tattoo like that."

At that moment, his phone pinged, indicating that he had received a text message. Bucky rolled over onto his other side, reaching out and unlocking his phone to read the message, his torso blocking it
from Steve's line of sight. Bucky swore viciously, jabbing at his phone aggressively to delete the message, before flopping back next to Steve, his face as black as thunder.

Steve stared at him, surprised that a mere text message could elicit such a negative, moody reaction.

"Who was that and what did they do to piss you off?" joked Steve.

Bucky closed his eyes, looking pained.

"It's just spam," said Bucky. "I get it so many times every day. Come on, let's cuddle."

Steve decided not to press it, wrapping an arm around Bucky and pulling him in for a cuddle. They spent the next hour in bed, simply holding one another, but try as he might, Steve could not get himself into that same relaxed headspace that he had been in after they had finished sucking one another off.

His soldier's intuition was going haywire, telling him that something, somehow, was not right.

The next night, he dreamt of Fallujah.

The heat was overpowering. The sand and dust in the air stuck to the sweat that coated his skin, making him feel dirty and grimy. He felt as though his organs were cooking inside him. His skin was sunburnt. His throat was parched. He was walking along a dusty road, the honking of car horns blaring around him, filling his ears, making it hard to make sense of his surroundings.

He closed his eyes briefly, and then, suddenly, inexplicably, silence...

The silence was deafening, suffocating. His heart pumping terror through his body, Steve opened his eyes, finding that the road had gone, as well as all the smelly, noisy cars that had been there a moment before. He was in the middle of the desert, with nothing but sand as far as the eye could see. With a rising sense of dread, he realised he could hear breathing behind him.

Turning slowly on the spot, he came face to face with Him.

He was wearing His military fatigues, His gaunt eyes staring at Steve with hatred. Before Steve's eyes, He began to bleed from His nose. Horrified, Steve tried to reach out to stem the flow of blood, but found he was immobile, his body frozen in place by invisible bonds. Helpless, filled with terror, Steve had no choice but to simply watch.

His eyes began to bleed, before large areas of red began to bloom from underneath His military fatigues, painting the yellow khaki a deep, violent shade of red. He stood there in silence, bleeding an impossible amount, pint after pint of blood gushing out of Him. Without warning, His arm suddenly snapped out, grabbing Steve by the throat and lifting him up into the air with impossible strength.

"You did this to me, Steve," He spat. "You killed me. This is all your fault."

Chapter End Notes
CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

OPHELIA: Who was Ophelia? What was the intention behind her telling Steve to "stay away from James Barnes"? Was she threatening Steve, or was she trying to warn him of something? Let me know your theories in the comments!

THANK YOU: Thank you for all your comments on the last chapter! Hearing your feedback and knowing that you're enjoying this story is the best feeling in the world <3

THOUGHTS: Feel free to let me know your thoughts, feelings, feedback and theories on this chapter in the comments section below! :D

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Crash"...

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. I am known to give extra teasers to people on there upon request, nudge nudge, wink wink ;)
The following weekend, Steve was on his usual Saturday morning jog through Central Park. He ran along the tree-lined paths, breathing hard, his legs burning and his chest heaving as he pushed himself. He loved Central Park. It reminded him of his first date with Bucky. It was also nice to be amongst some greenery, something there was not an abundance of in New York City.

He had just merged onto a larger path, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his forehead, when he heard a familiar voice call out his name.

"Steve!"

Steve skidded to a halt, turning around to find Sam grinning as he jogged towards him along the path. Steve smiled at his friend, raising his hand for a high-five as Sam reached him. Sam high-fived him, before clapping him on the shoulder, smiling broadly.

"You call that running?" said Sam. "Come on, man."

Steve shoved his friend, ignoring the ache in his legs as they began running once more, together this time, heading uphill. As if to tease him, Sam upped his pace, speeding up the hill as if unaffected by gravity. Steve watched, forlorn, at the effortless way Sam ran, comparing it to his own spluttering, red-faced mess. Several minutes later, Steve finally reached the summit of the hill, to find Sam stretching lazily, apparently not even having broken a sweat.

"You're getting out of shape," joked Sam, watching as Steve doubled over, catching his breath.

"Fuck you," gasped Steve, clutching at a stitch in his side as he sucked in huge lungfuls of air.

Unaffected by Steve's jibe, Sam smiled, waiting until Steve had fully recovered before patting him on the back, then leading them down the path once more — thankfully at a slower pace this time, walking rather than running.

"So, how're you doing?" said Sam.

Steve walked in silence, his stomach churning. He thought about the nightmare he had had the previous weekend, the one where he had had to watch Him bleeding out in front of his eyes, bright red blood blossoming onto His military fatigues. He stared down at the floor, frowning hard, troubled.

"What's wrong?" said Sam.

Steve chewed on his bottom lip, before finally speaking. Sam would understand; he had been in Iraq with Steve.

"Do you ever have nightmares?" Steve said tentatively. "About... Iraq?"

For a long while, Sam was silent. When Steve finally gathered up the courage to look up at his friend, he saw Sam watching him with a strange expression on his face, somewhere between saddened and concerned.
"No," said Sam slowly. "I don't dream anymore. What did you dream of?"

Steve remembered the crunch of rubble underfoot, the scorching hot sun, the red door with the peeling paint flaking off. He saw His hate-filled eyes, from the nightmare, flash briefly across his mind and shook his head hard, dislodging the mental image, forcing himself to look at Sam's warm, concerned eyes instead.

Suddenly, Steve could no longer bear to say the words aloud. He did not want to remind himself of what had happened; what he had done. He fell silent, stewing in pain and misery, before, several minutes later, he pulled himself together, for Sam's sake.

"Never mind," he said. "Let's run."

Sam nodded, non-judgemental as always, not questioning Steve's silence or strange behaviour. He smiled, running effortlessly, setting a quick pace that Steve had to work hard to keep up with. Steve was glad to concentrate once more on exercise. It gave him a chance to switch off his brain, to fill his mind with the simple, rhythmical falls of his feet. Left, right, left, right, left, right.

They had just exited Central Park and were running along the pavement when Sam finally spoke, his voice soft despite the speed at which he was running.

"Steve," he said.

"Yeah?" said Steve.

"Come to the VA with me one day," said Sam. "Get help."

Steve was about to reply, the refusal on the tip of his tongue, when the roar of a car engine filled his ears, far too close and far too loud. Out of instinct, he dived to the side, dodging out of the way with barely a second to spare as a car mounted the pavement, mere inches away from Steve, and crashed hard into the wall next to where Steve had been running just moments before.

Adrenaline exploded in Steve's system. He looked around wildly, searching for Sam, who had been right beside him in the path of the out-of-control car. He had not seen Sam dodge out of the way, but a second later, Sam was by his side, looking just as shocked as Steve felt.

"Holy shit!" said Sam.

Steve let out a long, shuddering breath, intense relief spreading through him that Sam was OK. With shaking legs, he approached the car, intent on checking on the welfare of the driver. As he approached, a man stumbled out of the driver's door, before straightening up and looking directly at Steve.

The man was huge: over six-foot tall and with a thick, muscular build, his jaw wide and angular. He was white, with brown hair slicked down onto his head, and blue-green eyes that were pointing in slightly different directions. For a moment, he almost looked as though he were going to speak, his gaze laser-focused on Steve, ignoring Sam and the growing crowd of onlookers entirely. Steve stared back at the man, somehow mesmerised by the stranger, unable to look away.

In the distance, sirens began to wail. The spell was broken. The man tore his gaze away from Steve, shoving past several concerned pedestrians and sprinting off in the other direction, with surprising speed and agility for someone of his large size. Steve watched, stunned, in a daze, as the man turned down a side street and disappeared, the realisation that he had almost been hit by the car slowly sinking in.
If it had not been for his lightning-fast instincts, honed by his time as a soldier fighting in Iraq, he would almost certainly have been hit and killed by the car.

Steve had just escaped death, by mere inches.

That evening, Bucky and Natasha came over to Steve's flat for a board games night.

Presently, Steve was in the kitchen, preparing drinks and snacks, as Bucky and Natasha waited in the lounge, sprawled out on the sofa as they bantered together. The TV was turned on to the news channel, but no one was particularly paying it any attention; it served as good background noise, more than anything. Steve smiled as he listened to Bucky and Natasha – two of his favourite people – chatting in the adjacent room. To hear their voices made him happy, even if, as it seemed, they were squabbling.

"I hope your English Scrabble skills are better than your Russian case nouns," said Natasha, sniggering as Bucky immediately huffed in response. "Or else winning is going to be too easy."

"I got a case noun wrong one time," retorted Bucky. "Don't make me bring up the time you came to work with come stains on your dress."

Steve snorted with laughter as Natasha's shrill voice replied angrily, clearly incensed by Bucky's lewd accusation.

"They were whipped cream stains!" said Natasha. "I had been baking!"

"Ladies, ladies!" called Steve. "Let's try not to kill each other before the game's even started, yeah?"

The conversation in the other room quietened down momentarily as Bucky and Natasha reluctantly acquiesced to the ceasefire. Steve smiled, returning his attention to preparing their snacks, as the news anchor's voice floated over from the other room.

"New York Police Department announced this morning that they intercepted a large shipment of heroin in an operation last night. The shipment is suspected of being linked to the criminal gang HYDRA, who have been implicated in a large number of drug, human trafficking and homicide cases since..."

At that moment, Bucky's mobile phone began to buzz on the kitchen table.

Steve turned around, wiping his hands on his apron, intent on picking it up and taking it over to Bucky, when Bucky came skidding into the room, rushing to the table and picking his phone up before Steve could even take two paces. Steve stared at him in surprise, startled at the speed at which Bucky had careened into the room.

Bucky hastily pressed some buttons on his phone, silencing it and stuffing it into his pocket.

Natasha appeared in the doorway, as curious as ever, clearly wanting to see where Bucky had so suddenly rushed off to. She cocked her head to the side as she watched Bucky, her eyes zeroing in on the pocket where Bucky had just stowed his phone.

"Who was that?" asked Natasha.
Bucky shrugged awkwardly, shoving his hands into his pockets as he hovered in the middle of the kitchen.

"Just spam," he said. "I get it a lot."

Natasha's eyes narrowed slightly, clearly suspicious by Bucky's admittedly shifty-sounding answer. For a moment she looked as though she might speak, before she pursed her lips, holding back whatever comment had been on the tip of her tongue. Steve grabbed the drinks and snacks and carried them over to the table, keen to dispel the suddenly awkward atmosphere.

"Bucky, grab the Scrabble from the lounge, will you?" he said.

Apparently relieved at having been released from further questioning, Bucky smiled and quickly left the room to hunt down the board game. Natasha waited until they could hear him rummaging about in the other room, before crossing over to Steve and helping him to lay out their snacks for the evening.

"Have you ever seen any of these texts Bucky's getting?" she said quietly.

Steve shook his head.

"No," he said. "He says they're just spam."

Natasha nodded to herself, a frown creasing her forehead. Before she could reply, Bucky returned with the Scrabble set in his arms, dumping it in the middle of the table. Natasha fixed a smile on her face, sitting down and opening the box, setting up the game. Steve and Bucky sat down too, and soon the game had begun, the three of them becoming engrossed as Natasha churned out obscure word after obscure word, streaking into the lead.

"English words only," said Bucky, about half-way through the game. "You can't have sputnik."

Natasha pouted, consoling herself with a salt and vinegar crisp as she put down knits instead. It was Bucky's turn next, and after a long pause, he grinned, laying out his tiles on the board to spell out crash. The word jolted Steve's memory. He had had such a busy day that he had completely forgotten to mention to Bucky the crash that he and Sam had found themselves so perilously close to that morning.

"That reminds me," said Steve. "I was almost hit by a car this morning."

Bucky and Natasha stared at him in shock. The game of Scrabble lay forgotten in front of them as they gawped at him incredulously, looking both concerned and horrified.

"Are you OK?" asked Bucky, immediately reaching out to hold Steve's hand.

Steve smiled, touched by Bucky's concern.

"I'm fine," he said. "It didn't hit me. It was just close."

Bucky looked visibly relieved, lifting Steve's hand and bringing it to his lips, kissing his knuckles gently. Natasha, on the other hand, did not look so placated. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright, visibly agitated.

"What happened?" she demanded. "Tell me everything."

Steve cast his mind back to the event, remembering the roar of the engine, followed by the mad
"I was out running with Sam," he recalled. "We'd just left Central Park. We were running along the sidewalk when I heard a car come rushing towards us. We dodged out of the way. It crashed onto the sidewalk and into a wall. No one was hurt, thank God."

Bucky shuffled his chair closer to Steve, wrapping his arms around Steve and holding him protectively. Natasha nodded, her green eyes sharp and focused.

"What time was this?" she asked.

"I don't know exactly," said Steve. "It must have been about 11am, I guess."

"Do you think the car was driven deliberately at you?" said Natasha.

Steve stared at her in surprise. The idea that he might have been targeted specifically had never crossed his mind. He had no enemies, no one whom he could think would have any reason to harm him, much less kill him. Unless, it was linked to what had happened in Iraq... But no, Iraq had been in 2004. If someone had wanted to kill him for that, they had already had fifteen years to do so. It made no sense for them to only come after him now. The only strange thing that had occurred recently had been his encounter with Ophelia. But the driver had certainly not been Ophelia, nor had the car been hers, so he did not see a connection there either.

"No," said Steve finally. "I assume the driver just lost control."

"Did you see the driver?" said Natasha. "How did they behave?"

"He ran off when he heard police sirens," said Steve. "Maybe he'd been drink or drug driving. Or maybe he didn't have insurance."

Natasha nodded.

"Maybe," she said vaguely. "What did the driver look like? Did he have any identifying features – clothes, scars... tattoos?"

Steve closed his eyes, trying to conjure up the driver's image from his memory.

"He was tall," he said. "Over six-foot tall. He was white, well-built; brown hair and blue-green eyes, I think? Kind of ugly-looking. His eyes pointed in different directions. No scars or tattoos, as far as I could see, but most of his skin was covered so I can't rule it out."

Natasha nodded silently, staring hard at the table. She appeared engrossed in thought, before looking up.

"I'm glad you're OK, Steve," she said quietly.

Steve smiled. Natasha briefly excused herself to go to the bathroom. Upon her return, they resumed their game of Scrabble, Natasha winning comfortably by over fifty points. They were part-way into their second game when Natasha's phone began to ring. She picked it up, getting up from her seat and wandering into the lounge as she spoke to the person on the other end of the line. A few minutes later, she returned to the kitchen, an apologetic look on her face.

"I'm so sorry, guys," she said. "I have to go. Family emergency."

Steve and Bucky immediately rose from their seats, following Natasha as she hurried down the
corridor to grab her coat. Worried, Steve helped her into her coat, holding it for her as she slid her arms in.

"Is everything OK?" said Steve. "Do you want me to give you a lift in my car?"

Natasha shook her head, forcing a smile onto her face.

"Thanks, but no thanks," she said. "Sorry to ruin our games night. I'll make it up to you guys, next time."

Steve gave her a quick hug, a mixture of worry and protectiveness coming over him as he looked at Natasha, looking small and fragile in her big, puffy winter coat.

"Let us know if we can help at all," said Bucky. "I hope your family's OK."

Looking harried, Natasha ran a hand through her hair, giving them both a quick kiss on the cheek before hurrying out of the front door, quickly disappearing down the communal corridor and out of sight as she dashed away. Steve closed the front door slowly, thrown off-kilter by the rapid and unexpected nature of Natasha's departure.

He and Bucky stood in silence for a second, both of them looking as surprised as the other by what had just happened. It was only then that Steve realised that, despite knowing Natasha for around ten months, he did not know the first thing about Natasha's family.

"Bucky... What do you know about Natasha's family?" Steve asked curiously.

Bucky pondered the question, clearly scouring his memory, before shrugging.

"Not a lot, actually," he said. "She's never talked to me about them. She's a private person, I guess."

Steve nodded, mulling it over in his mind, trying to figure out what was making him feel so uneasy. It was then that the memory that had been nagging him resurfaced.

He remembered the last time Natasha had disappeared to deal with a family emergency.

She had returned with scraped knuckles and a bruise on her face.

The next morning, Steve awoke to Bucky's rock-hard cock pressing against his back.

As Steve stirred, Bucky hummed in response, pressing lazy kisses to the back of his neck. One hand wrapped around Steve's chest, fondling his right nipple, tweaking and rubbing at the sensitive nub until it hardened. Steve moaned in response, his morning wood throbbing as Bucky rubbed his erection between Steve's butt cheeks.

"Morning, sexy," mumbled Bucky.

Steve rolled onto his back, smiling at his boyfriend and kissing him on the nose. Bucky buried his face in Steve's neck, kissing and nipping at the sensitive skin there, manoeuvring himself so that he was on top of Steve, between his legs. Their erections dragged together, hot and heavy and throbbing. Steve gasped as Bucky ground their lower halves together, his cock rubbing deliciously against Bucky's muscular torso.
Bucky reached out to the bedside table, rummaging around in the drawer, before finally pulling out a bottle of lube with a breathless sigh.

"I want you so bad," said Bucky, squirting lube onto his fingers.

Steve gasped at the speed at which they were progressing. Usually, on long weekend mornings like these, they liked to engage in lots of foreplay; kissing and making out and sucking and touching one another before going on to the main event. Today, however, it seemed that Bucky could not wait. Steve could not deny that it excited him, to know how desperately Bucky wanted him, to feel so sexy and lusted after and desired.

When Bucky's finger pressed against his hole, he gasped, gritting his teeth as the digit wormed its way inside, pressing and probing insistently. Bucky's finger plunged in and out relentlessly, working him open as quickly and efficiently as possible. He poked repeatedly at Steve's prostate, causing Steve's cock to spurt small dribs of pre-come, before slowly inserting a second finger, stretching Steve even wider, preparing him for Bucky's thick, raging erection.

By the time Bucky had finished fucking Steve open with two fingers, he was a writhing, sweaty mess. Visibly desperate, Bucky squirited out another glob of lube onto his cock, quickly working it over himself, his hand rubbing it up and down his rock-hard shaft. Steve looked down at Bucky's cock, his eyes widening when he saw how engorged it was; the head a deep shade of purple, pre-come oozing thickly from the tip.

Without ceremony, Bucky settled between Steve's legs, pressing the head of his cock against Steve's delicate hole. Meeting Steve's eyes to make sure that Steve was ready, Bucky slowly pushed forwards, his thick cock head popping in suddenly, causing Steve to cry out at the sudden intrusion. Bucky shushed him, holding his hand and peppering his face with kisses until Steve finally began to relax.

Unable to hold back any longer, Bucky began to thrust. He fucked Steve hard and fast, his movements almost frantic as he chased his pleasure. The sound of his balls slapping against Steve's ass filled the room, obscenely loud. Each thrust drove the air out of Steve's lungs, causing him to gasp and moan with each plunge Bucky made into his ass. Steve looked up at Bucky, taking in the way his eyes screwed shut with ecstasy, the tautness of his muscles, the sheen of sweat that covered him. He had never seen a sexier sight in his life.

At that moment, as he stared up at Bucky, hyper-aware of his senses, a car honked outside. Steve's thoughts were immediately catapulted elsewhere. He remembered the car crash the previous day, how close he had come to being hit. He remembered Natasha's sudden exit the night before, for her so-called family emergency, and found himself worrying about her welfare. Suddenly, despite receiving possibly the best, most urgent fuck of his life, Steve felt cold and detached from his body, unable to concentrate on the here and now, caught up in thoughts of yesterday.

Bucky wrapped a hand around Steve's cock, jerking him in time with his thrusts. He was already visibly close, his face and upper chest flushed red, his body bathed in sweat, his hips thrusting back and forth so hard and so fast that the mattress was squeaking wildly. He suddenly leaned forwards, latching onto Steve's nipple and sucking hard. It was this, combined with the cock pounding at his prostate and the hand wrapped around his own erection, that catapulted Steve into an unexpected orgasm, his body spasming and twisting wildly, wrenching him out of his thoughts.

Steve cried out as wave after wave of pleasure washed over him, shooting his load all over his chest as his cock throbbed and contracted hard. Bucky grabbed him roughly by the hips, driving into him almost violently once, twice, three more times, before suddenly stilling, his eyes screwing shut, his mouth open in a silent scream as he came hard in Steve's ass. Steve could feel Bucky's cock
throbbing, a tell-tale feeling of warmth coating his inner walls as Bucky emptied himself inside him. Finally spent, Bucky collapsed to the side, his softening cock slipping from Steve's ass, followed by a huge gush of warm, fresh come.

For several long minutes, Steve and Bucky simply breathed hard, their chests heaving, their brains fried by the mind-blowingly intense sex session they had just engaged in. Finally returning to his senses, Bucky smiled, opening his arms and allowing Steve to crawl into them, before wrapping them both up with a blanket. Steve closed his eyes, his thoughts fuzzy as he snuggled up to Bucky's warmth, seeking love and comfort after such a hard fuck. Bucky stroked his back with one hand, the motion soothing and relaxing.

Buzz buzz.

It took Steve several moments to register that the strange buzzing noise he had just heard behind him was Bucky's phone vibrating on the bedside table. He opened his eyes groggily to see Bucky picking up his phone with his free hand, angling the screen in such a way that Bucky could read it, but Steve could not. For a moment, Bucky's eyes flicked from side to side, reading the text, before he exhaled hard, deleting the text and placing the phone back down on the bedside table.

Steve closed his eyes before Bucky could see that he had been peeking. He kept his breathing slow and even, giving every outward impression of calmness and serenity.

On the inside, however, his thoughts were whirling.

Curiosity, paranoia and suspicion all vied for dominance.

Bucky was hiding something from him.

The question was: what?

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

WHAT IS BUCKY HIDING? Bucky certainly seems to be hiding something... What do you think this could be? Let me know your theories in the comments section below!

THOUGHTS: Thoughts, feelings, feedback and arm-flailing are all welcome, if you want to leave a comment <3 I love hearing from you guys, you all rock!

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who were kind enough to leave such lovely comments on the last chapter!

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Text Messages" and will involve Steve finally getting a glimpse of one of Bucky's many "spam" texts...

TUMBLR: If you like Marvel aesthetics and occasional titbits from my fanfic-writing and personal life, feel free to follow me on Tumblr. I am ao3-elle1991 on there :)
Two weeks had passed since the car crash and the memory of it, whilst not forgotten, had finally started to fade from the forefront of Steve's mind.

Presently, he was sat at the kitchen table with Bucky, enjoying a leisurely Saturday breakfast of fruit and pancakes. He gazed at Bucky as he talked enthusiastically about the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, unable to look away, completely and utterly in love with his mind, his passion and his intellect. On mornings like these, Steve wished he could capture the moment with a camera to preserve the moment for posterity's sake, to take out and examine whenever he felt the ghosts of insecurity or uncertainty.

"When people start burning books," said Bucky, "that's a sign that things have gone beyond the point of no return. If you're a persecuted minority and people start burning books written by people like you, it's a sign that you need to get out of there, as soon as possible."

"Why would anyone want to burn books?" said Steve.

"Censorship," said Bucky, shovelling a mouthful of pancake into his mouth. "Or to send out a warning to anyone who believed in the content of those books: you're next."

Whilst eating his last bit of pancake, Bucky had got some sugar on his nose. Steve gently reached out and wiped it off, offering it to Bucky to suck off his finger. Bucky did so slowly, making eye contact the entire time as he sucked and licked Steve's finger clean, a shadow of a smirk playing on his lips. Steve swallowed hard, his cock chubbing up a little at the incredible sight.

At that moment, Bucky's mobile phone buzzed on the kitchen table with a new text message. Bucky picked up his phone, tapping the message and opening it, discreetly angling the screen in such a way that it was just out of Steve's line of sight. Steve's curiosity was instantly roused. He longed to know what these text messages said, and why Bucky was so secretive about them. Throwing caution to the wind, he finally caved to his curiosity, the words tumbling from his lips before he could stop himself.

"Who is that?" asked Steve.

Bucky swiftly deleted the text, setting his phone back down on the kitchen table firmly.

"Just spam," said Bucky.

"You get a lot of spam," said Steve, as evenly as possible.

Bucky turned to face Steve, frowning slightly. When he spoke next, he sounded strangely defensive, as if Steve had touched a nerve.

"Yeah," snapped Bucky. "So what?"

"Nothing," said Steve, raising his eyebrows. "Just an observation..."

He quickly changed the topic, not wanting to ruin their morning, but inside, his thoughts were racing. Bucky's reaction only served to confirm Steve's suspicion that Bucky was hiding something from him. He did not believe for a moment that the text messages were spam. Mere spam would not
warrant such secrecy, nor elicit such a defensive response when questioned. His feverish mind began
to generate all sorts of theories to fill the informational vacuum: an argument with a friend, money
troubles, an affair...

The last possibility sent an unexpected jolt of fury through him.

Jealousy rose in him faster than he would ever have thought possible.

He gritted his teeth, bracing himself against the hideous idea that, now dreamt up, could no longer be
forgotten or un-thought.

In an attempt to calm himself down, Steve went out for a jog.

He did not have a particular destination in mind, simply letting his feet carry him to wherever they
wanted to go. He ran aimlessly down the pavements, pushing himself hard, forcing himself to run
faster, further. His chest was heaving with the effort, his legs burning, but it felt good. It helped to
soothe his psychological distress, to focus on the physical, visceral sensations related to running. The
pain in his legs helped distract him from the pain in his heart.

Try as he might, however, he could not entirely shut down the nagging thoughts in the dark corners
of his mind. His thoughts went around and around in circles, pondering the question of what Bucky
was hiding from him and, worse still, why Bucky was lying about it. The only reason Steve could
think of to explain Bucky's evasion and secrecy was if Bucky was hiding something that he knew
Steve would not like. Steve tortured himself with possibilities, each worse than the last, wishing more
than anything that he could simply wake up to find that none of this debacle with the text messages
had ever taken place.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not see the man until he was right up in Steve's face,
aggressive and wound-up. Steve had to skid to a halt to avoid crashing into the man, who stepped
stubbornly into Steve's way, blocking his path.

"Give me your phone," demanded the man.

Steve stared at the man, incredulous. He looked a little older than Steve, maybe in his 40s, either
White or Latino, with short brown hair and brown eyes. Despite being in his 40s, the man still
looked to be in the prime of his life, with a strong, muscular build. Presently, he was glowering at
Steve, his hands thrust deep in his leather jacket pockets.

"I said, give me your phone," he repeated.

"Fuck off," said Steve, trying to side-step the man.

The man mirrored Steve's movements, blocking his way. Exasperated, Steve tried to push past him,
shouldering him as he attempted to barge past. Quick as a flash, the man grabbed Steve by the arm,
swinging his fist at Steve's head. Steve ducked out of the way only just in time, wrenching his arm
free from the man's surprisingly strong grip. He turned to face the man, his eyes falling on the object
clutched in the man's right hand.

Steve felt his skin go cold. His heart rate instantly ratcheted up as his body activated its fight-or-flight
response. He felt sick, real fear exploding in his gut for the first time since the beginning of the
encounter. The man was holding a knife, the sharp, steel blade glinting in the sunlight. Time seemed to stretch as Steve scrambled to process what was going on. The mugger – for that was what the man must be – was armed, willing to risk both Steve's life and his own in order to steal Steve's mobile phone.

Steve wanted to simply hand over his phone. It was merely a possession; material, replaceable, not worth his life or anyone else's. He did not have the opportunity to offer it, however, as the mugger lunged at Steve once more, slashing towards him with the knife. Steve dodged out of the way, dancing like a boxer on his tiptoes, his reflexes fast and his attention laser-focused. He could feel his Army training kicking in, instinct and muscle memory taking over as his body remembered those long hours spent training for hand-to-hand combat.

He focused on the mugger's fighting technique, assessing his strengths and weaknesses as he dodged swipe after swipe from the knife. The other man was strong, with good stamina, but his style was sloppy. Whilst he could no doubt inflict serious damage on a civilian with little or no experience in fighting, he did not know how to fight someone with military-level training. Dodging another attack, Steve surged forwards and grabbed the mugger's right wrist, clamping down as hard as he could. The man immediately dropped the knife with a yell of pain, the weapon clattering on the pavement. Steve kicked it away, grunting as the mugger slammed a fist into Steve's side. They fell to the floor, grappling with one another as each fought for dominance.

The mugger was thrashing beneath Steve, his arms throwing out punches and his legs kicking wildly. Steve grappled with the man's arms, gritting his teeth against the pain as the man kicked him hard in the shin. He recoiled away from a headbutt, before hitting the man hard in the throat, winding him instantly and painfully. He crawled off the would-be mugger and stood up, wiping a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, spitting out the coppery taste.

"I could do this all day," said Steve, breathing hard. "I'll give you one more chance to do the right thing: fuck off."

The mugger staggered to his feet, clutching his throat, shooting a look of pure venom in Steve's direction before sprinting off in the other direction. Steve watched him go, trying hard to ignore the pain in his shin and his knuckles. Ironically, he spotted his phone – which the mugger had been intent on stealing in the first place – smashed on the pavement, having fallen out of his pocket during the fight. Several stunned-looking pedestrians approached Steve, having witnessed the attempted mugging and subsequent fight.

"Are you OK?" asked a middle-aged woman. "Do you want me to call the cops?"

She pulled out her mobile phone hesitantly, looked down at Steve's with its smashed screen. Steve picked up his broken phone and shoved it back in his pocket, shaking his head and forcing a smile for the woman. He did not want to go to the police; right now, he simply wanted to go home, tend to his painful muscles and have a good long shower to wash away the sweat and the memory of the attack.

"It's OK," he said. "I'm alright."

He hurried away down the pavement, his nerves on edge, still hyper-aware of his surroundings lest the mugger come back and have another go. He rounded the corner, still numb with shock, and almost bumped right into Sam, who was exiting a bakery, a small paper bag in his hand. Sam blinked at him in momentary surprise, before his face broke out into a wide smile, his large brown eyes appraising Steve warmly.

"Steve!" he said. "How're you doing?"
Steve glanced around warily, hugging his arms around himself, remembering the terrible way the knife had glinted in the sunlight.

"I'm fine," he said, unthinkingly, the words coming out automatically.

Sam raised his eyebrows, clearly disbelieving. He looked pointedly at Steve's on-edge body language, glancing around as Steve once more swept his gaze over his surroundings.

"Are you sure you're OK?" said Sam. "Because my bullshit-o-meter is going crazy."

Steve sighed, hurrying down the pavement once more, heading towards home. Sam fell into step beside him, still looking at Steve, waiting for a response.

"Some guy tried to mug me," said Steve. "He failed. I'm fine."

Sam's eyes widened with concern. Seemingly without noticing, he walked a little closer to Steve, his eyes sharp and alert, his stance protective. They walked along the pavement together, side by side. Steve was supremely glad of Sam's presence; just being near made Steve feel more secure, more grounded in reality. Thankfully, for once, Sam did not offer any advice, simply walking silently beside him, apparently sensing that Steve did not have the mental energy to talk.

Sam accompanied him all the way back to Steve's block of flats. As they came to a stop in front of the communal entrance, Sam laid a gentle hand on Steve's shoulder.

"Maybe you should call the cops," Sam suggested. "This time, he tried to mug an ex-soldier. Next time, it might be someone more vulnerable."

Before Steve could argue, Sam patted him on the shoulder and slipped away. Steve watched him go. He quickly vanished from view, disappearing amongst a crowd of tourists who walked by at that moment. With Sam's words echoing in his head, Steve turned and slowly headed inside his block of flats. He made his way up the three flights of stairs to his floor, fumbling the key out of his pocket and letting himself into his flat.

Closing the door behind him, he closed his eyes, letting his head drop back with a thunk. He stayed there for several minutes, not attempting to move. Now that the initial adrenaline rush had worn off, he felt exhausted. His muscles ached. His leg was painful from where the mugger had managed to kick him. He rubbed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to go to sleep but, at the same time, he felt too agitated to rest.

Finally opening his eyes, he locked the front door behind him, making his way to the kitchen out of pure habit. He could hear Bucky having a shower in the bedroom's en-suite, his off-key singing muffled by the sound of water and the several doors that separated them. Allowing the noise to fade into the background of his awareness, Steve paced restlessly around the kitchen. He re-played the attempted mugging over and over in his mind, highly disturbed by the fact the assailant had been armed with a knife – all for a measly mobile phone.

Sam's words niggled at his thoughts. What if Sam was right? What if, next time, the mugger went after someone weaker than Steve? What if the next victim was stabbed, or hurt in some other way? The mugger obviously had no care or consideration for his victims' welfare, if his behaviour with Steve was anything to go by. The weight of such a responsibility weighed heavily on Steve's mind. If he could stop the mugger from attacking someone else, then he wanted to.

On auto-pilot, he pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket, intent on calling the police. He stared down at the device, anger and frustration exploding in his gut. His phone was, of course, smashed.
He attempted to press the power button on the side of the device, but it did not turn on. It had apparently been completely broken when it had fallen out of his pocket during his fight with the mugger. He closed his eyes and sighed hard. He could feel a stress headache forming already.

He re-opened his eyes, his eyes falling on Bucky's phone on the kitchen table. Bucky had left it there after breakfast. Steve looked at it hesitantly, feeling guilty for even thinking about using it, as if he had been caught doing something he was not supposed to. He cocked his head to the side, listening. He could still hear running water and the sound of Bucky's muffled singing; he was still in the shower. Would Bucky mind if Steve used his phone without asking? It was to report a crime to the police, so surely not? Steve would not normally access another person's phone without permission, but it was morally justified in this case, wasn't it? This was an exceptional circumstance, something way outside what could be considered normal.

Setting down his own smashed phone on the kitchen table, Steve picked up Bucky's instead. He pressed the button on the side, the screen immediately lighting up and asking for his passcode. Steve paused. He did not know Bucky's passcode. He had never looked when Bucky had inputted it. He knew, however, that people very often made the mistake of choosing predictable and easy-to-guess passwords.

Sucking in his breath, he inputted his first attempt – 1234 – and pressed the tick symbol to submit the passcode.

Wrong PIN.

Steve hesitated. Three wrong attempts would lock Bucky's phone. He had two more attempts to go. Thinking hard, he inputted Bucky's birth year, his finger hovering over the tick before finally pressing down to submit the passcode.

Bucky's phone unlocked.

Steve let out a small laugh of jubilation. He was about to go to the call screen when his attention was caught by a notification at the top of the screen.

3 new messages

His sense of burning curiosity was instantly aroused. He recalled all the times Bucky had received so-called spam messages, as well as his uncharacteristic secrecy over them. Steve was desperate to know what the messages said – and yet, if Bucky did not want to share those details, it was not Steve's right to seek them out. To look would be a gross breach of trust and an invasion of Bucky's privacy. He really should not look. It was not his place.

And yet... The impulse, the curiosity, was so strong. If Steve and Bucky were meant to be in a long-term relationship, they should not have secrets from one another, right? Steve stood stock-still in the middle of the kitchen, frozen by indecision. His head was firm that he should not look, yet his heart yearned to know what Bucky was hiding. The two opposing wills were battling it out inside Steve, the internal conflict causing his heart rate to skyrocket.
If it really was spam, then Steve had nothing to worry about. And, hypothetically, if the text messages did reveal that Bucky were in some kind of trouble, then surely it would be better for Steve to know, right? That way, he could offer Bucky help. And if it were an affair... No, Steve thought firmly. He did not believe that of Bucky. Bucky was a good man.

His heart hammering in his chest, he pressed the notification to open the messages, guilt flooding through him the moment he did so. So powerful was the wave of guilt that overcame him, Steve almost closed the messages entirely – but before he could do so, his traitorous eye had already scanned over the first message, a cold sweat coming over him as the words sank in.

**From: Alex**

*I can't stop thinking about you x*

Steve stared numbly at the text message, unable and unwilling to make sense of it. Cold, seeping horror swept over him, settling over him like a heavy cloud. His heart clenching painfully, he scrolled down, reading the second message, his stomach rolling with nausea as he did so.

**From: Alex**

*I'm jerking off looking at your pictures, baby boy*

His hands shaking, Steve scrolled down to the third and final message. He stared at it, his heart hammering, anger and horror and furious betrayal all surging within him, vying for dominance.

**From: Alex**

*You're mine*

Steve stood there, frozen to the spot, unable to look away from the hideous texts. He was shaking with anger, his heart hammering, the blood rushing through his head so loudly that he did not hear Bucky enter the room until he cheerily announced his presence.

"Oh, you're back!" smiled Bucky. "Did you have a good jog?"

Steve slowly turned to face him, red-hot jealousy and blinding rage searing through him. Bucky was freshly-showered, freshly-dressed, looking happy and relaxed, apparently without a care in the world. Steve suddenly envisaged him stepping out of some other man's shower – Alex, whoever he was; oh, how Steve hated the bastard – and felt something inside him snap, the tension and stress that had been building up throughout the day exploding out of him.

"Who's Alex?" spat Steve.

Bucky's demeanour instantly changed. His eyes widened with horror. He shook his head vigorously
from side to side, before suddenly stilling, his eyes falling on his mobile phone in Steve's hand. His fingers numb and shaking with fury, Steve shoved the mobile phone into Bucky's hands, forcing him to look at the incriminating texts.

"Just spam, yeah?" said Steve, not caring as his volume increased with every word. "Stop. Lying. Who the fuck is Alex? Have you been cheating on me this entire time?"

Bucky stared down at the texts, his cheeks slowly turning bright red. He looked up at Steve slowly, his eyes wide. Bucky looked terrified; like someone caught red-handed, finally forced to face the consequences of his actions.

"Who," said Steve, spitting out each word individually, his voice shaking, "the fuck... is Alex?"

Without a word, Bucky turned on the spot, ran to the front door, and fled.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

THOUGHTS: Oh nooooo! What the fuck is going on?! Feel free to yell at me in the comments <3

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who commented on the last chapter :)

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Ache" and will focus on the emotional aftermath of this chapter's events.

TUMBLR: Want extra teasers? Send me an "ask" or a message on Tumblr and I will oblige! I am ao3-elle1991 on there :)


Ache

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve could not stop thinking about the text messages.

He thought constantly about how Bucky had hidden them from him; about the words in the text messages themselves; about how Bucky had fled the flat as soon as Steve had confronted him about them. That had been three days ago. Steve had not seen or heard from him since. He found himself obsessing over every tiny detail, the masochist in him trying to find new ways to torture himself.

He thought about how Bucky had run from the flat when Steve had shown him the texts. It was proof of his guilt, surely? Why else would he run? The fact that Bucky had not offered any reply, any explanation, any attempt at defence, only served to feed Steve's fevered and tortured imagination. In the absence of information, he assumed the worst. He wondered how long the affair had been going on. Had Bucky been cheating on him the entire time? The idea of it made him gag.

He tried to imagine what Alex might look like. He realised that he did not even know if Alex was male or female. He had initially assumed that Alex was short for Alexander, but who was to say that it was not short for Alexandra, or Alexis, or Alexa? Alex could just as easily be a woman. He had never actually asked Bucky if he was gay or bisexual; it had not mattered. Was Alex their age, or younger, or older? What did Alex like to do for fun? Had Steve ever crossed paths with Alex, completely unaware that this person was sleeping with his boyfriend? He imagined Bucky and Alex having sex. He imagined walking in on them having sex. He punched his pillow so hard that it burst.

He grieved for their broken relationship. It had been the first serious relationship of his life. For the first time since Iraq, he had allowed himself to consider the possibility that he could be happy. He had thought, in an abstract, far-away sort of way, that one day they might properly settle down together: buy an apartment, get a cat, maybe even get married. Steve had loved him. He had thought Bucky had loved him back. Now, Bucky was just another ex. Steve mourned him.

But, alongside the grief, Steve also felt a powerful sense of rage. He was furious that Bucky had cheated on him. He was outraged that Bucky had treated him like that, with so little respect. He had thought better of Bucky. He had thought that Bucky was a decent, honest man. And yet, even as he thought this, even as he allowed himself to wallow in bitter, self-righteous anger, a small, snide part of his mind whispered to him, telling him that he deserved the pain.

Perhaps it was for the best that their relationship was over.

He had never been good enough for Bucky anyway.

Steve's mind felt raw, agitated and vulnerable. Even painting could not calm his racing thoughts as it usually did. When he tried, he simply ended up painting angry, abstract scenes, with thick, dark swathes of colour layered over and over one another. The resulting mess looked like someone had attacked the canvas in a rage, the different colours mixed together wildly.

Worse still, he began having nightmares every night, which had the knock-on effect of reawakening
his insomnia with a vengeance. It left him feeling burnt-out, on-edge and perpetually exhausted.

On this particular night, five days since Bucky's sudden departure after Steve had confronted him with the text messages, he fell asleep almost the instant that his head hit the pillow.

The dream was a strange one.

It began with him walking around New York City – except, all the features of the buildings had been erased. The scene was strangely monochrome, with tall, blank, white buildings stretching up as far as the eye could see. Steve walked curiously around this bizarre world, running his fingers along the walls of the closest building. It felt like frosted glass. He tried to peer inside, but the walls were opaque, almost like marble. It was then that he noticed the complete lack of any other people. There was not even any plant or animal life. It was a cool, sterile world; eerily silent and devoid of any form of colour or character.

In the distance, Steve suddenly spotted something swaying in the breeze. He ran towards it, relieved to have come across something that showed movement, something other than the blank, still skyscrapers. As he approached the swaying object, he felt his eyes go out of focus. It was almost as if his mind did not want him to see the truth that was in front of him. Frustrated, he stepped right up to the object, so that it was flapping in his face, when suddenly, his vision returned to him, allowing him to see.

It was a curtain, made of billowy white material, patterned with daisies.

Steve awoke with a shout, filled with overwhelming panic, his skin prickling with memories of scorching Iraqi heat.

It was Friday – almost a full week since Steve and Bucky's break-up the previous Saturday.

Steve had not seen or heard from Bucky in all that time and that, combined with the nightmares and the lack of sleep, meant that he was in a foul mood. He felt angered by the radio silence. It was as if cheating on Steve had not been enough for Bucky; to top it all off, he had added insult to injury by not even bothering to provide any attempt at an explanation. It hurt, especially as Steve had been – and, painfully, still was – so in love with Bucky.

Presently, he was at work, hunched over his desk, implementing some tedious updates on the Dutch version of one of Stark Industries' webpages. He cursed viciously under his breath, hating the complicated language as he realised he had uploaded the new content in the wrong place, forcing him to start all over again. He breathed deeply, forcing himself not to cry or punch his computer screen. The last thing he needed was to have a meltdown at work.

It was at that moment when a notification popped up in the bottom right corner of his screen, informing him that he had received a new email. Without thinking, Steve clicked on it, his heart rate immediately skyrocketing and his stomach churning when he saw who it was from.

**To:** Steven Rogers

**From:** James Barnes
Attached are some urgent updates for the Russian version of the ARC-tech page. Please upload them as soon as you can.

James Barnes

Russian Translator

Stark Industries

Steve stared at the message, numb with shock. It seemed utterly incongruous to finally be hearing from Bucky in such a bland, mundane manner. There was no mention of what had happened the previous weekend, no friendly message, no cat picture. The cool, professional sterility of the message somehow only served to make Steve even more angry. He stared at it, glued to his chair, his face growing redder and redder as his eyes roved over the words. He wanted Bucky to acknowledge what had happened. He wanted the other man to acknowledge that something good had been lost. He wanted some validation for his own tormented feelings, some admission from Bucky that he too was suffering. To think that Bucky might be happy, unaffected, possibly even laughing it up with Alex, made Steve almost sick with horror.

He was wrenched out of his crippling spiral of negative thoughts by the sound of some commotion behind him. He turned around in his seat to see the double-doors at the other end of the office flying open. He watched as a figure marched into the office, staring hard at the rows upon rows of people as they did so, clearly searching for someone in particular. About ten seconds later, apparently seeing their quarry, they suddenly began to walk with much more purpose, heading, it seemed, straight in Steve's direction.

It was only as the figure drew closer that Steve was finally able to see their face. His eyes widened with surprise. It was Natasha – back, at long last, from her family emergency. She marched right up to his desk, standing next to him and crossing her arms, her expression as black as thunder, practically vibrating with emotion. Steve looked up at her uncertainly, unsure what exactly was happening.

"Uh, hey," he said. "Welcome back."

Natasha's nostrils flared. She narrowed her eyes, causing Steve to flinch involuntarily. Angry Natasha was a scary Natasha, and Steve had never seen her look as pissed off as she looked right then. With obvious effort, Natasha forced back the urge to snap at him, and instead spoke in a cool, professional tone.

"Steve," she said. "I need to talk to you about the Russian website updates."

Steve nodded, waiting for her to continue. She did not. The silence stretched on, long and awkward, until Steve dabbed at his forehead, sweat forming as Natasha continued staring at him intensely. Steve cleared his throat.

"Do you, uh, want to sit down?" he offered uncertainly.
Quick as a flash, Natasha's hand shot out, hauling him out of his chair with a surprising amount of strength for a woman of her size.

"How about we go somewhere more private," she said. "I'd hate to distract your colleagues from their work."

Turning on her heel, she walked quickly from the office, looking back occasionally to make sure that Steve was keeping up. Steve hurried after her, pleased that she was back but utterly confused about what was going on to make her so wound up. They found themselves in a quiet part of the floor. Glancing up and down the corridor to make sure they were alone, Natasha opened one of the doors and walked inside, Steve following and shutting the door behind them. They were in a meeting room, office supplies laid out smartly on the long desk.

Finally alone, Natasha let her professional mask slip off, to be instantly replaced by a scowl.

"You're back," said Steve. "Are you OK? Did the family emergency get sorted?"

For a moment, Natasha looked confused, obviously thrown by the question. Steve watched her reaction curiously. Pulling herself together, Natasha quickly composed herself, waving her hand vaguely.

"What? Oh, yes. Everything's fine. But what the fuck is going on with you and Bucky?!"

Steve blinked, perturbed at how quickly and easily Natasha had managed to turn the conversation around onto him and, worse still, onto the one topic he had been hoping to avoid. He dropped his gaze to the floor, unwilling to talk about Bucky. To his horror, a lump rose in his throat, his eyes burning with unshed tears. He quickly blinked the tears away, determined not to cry in front of Natasha.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

Natasha folded her arms, her expression devoid of sympathy. A curl of red hair had escaped her ponytail and was lying on her shoulder. Steve stared at the curl, attempting to concentrate on it rather than the emotions raging inside him.

"Tough shit," said Natasha. "You're going to talk about it. What the hell has happened? Come on, Steve, you can tell me."

Steve balled his hands into fists, squeezing his fingernails into the palms of his hands until it hurt. He dropped his gaze, unable to look Natasha in the face. The words bounced around inside of him, but he could not bear to push them over his lips. To say it aloud would be to make it real, permanent, final. He was not ready for that. He was not ready to call Bucky his ex-boyfriend. Oblivious to Steve's internal suffering, Natasha waited impatiently, her arms still crossed, one perfectly-painted nail tapping out a sharp rhythm on the crook of her arm.

Taking a deep breath, Steve decided that the best way out was through. As if ripping off a plaster, he spewed out the words, getting the painful task over and done with as quickly as possible.

"Bucky cheated on me," he said. "We've split up."

Natasha's eyes widened. A series of emotions crossed her face in rapid succession: shock, disbelief, confusion and, most strangely of all, fear. She shook her head hard, as if she did not want to believe what Steve was saying, but after taking one look at Steve's face, she exhaled shakily, taking her hair out of its bobble and running a hand through her red curls. It was something she often did when she was stressed.
"He cheated on you?" she said finally. "Are you sure? That... that just doesn't sound like Bucky."

Steve nodded miserably.

"Remember those so-called spam texts he was always getting?" he said. "Turns out they weren't spam. They were sexts from someone called Alex. When I confronted Bucky about them, he just fucked off." Pausing, he laughed bitterly. "He probably moved in with Alex. His apartment's still got flood damage, so he can't have gone back there."

Natasha's expression went from shocked to alarmed. She paled, her eyes wide, shaking her head urgently.

"Alex?" she repeated. "No... Steve, you've got to talk to Bucky; find out what's really going on. He hasn't moved in with anyone; he's been living in a grotty hotel. I only came back to the office today, but my colleagues say he's been acting jumpy and scared and depressed all week. That doesn't sound like someone who's been caught cheating, to me."

Steve stared at her, slowly absorbing this new information. Bucky had been living alone and, apparently, he was just as miserable about their break-up as Steve. It was like a revelation. His heart, still hopeful, surged at the possibility that perhaps Bucky had not cheated on him after all. But then, if that were the case, what could explain the explicit text messages and Bucky's strange behaviour surrounding them? Why had he hidden them? Why had he fled when confronted?

A memory that had not fully made sense in Steve's head suddenly solidified in his mind. He remembered how terrified Bucky had looked, just before turning on his heel and running out of the flat. At the time, Steve had attributed it to the shock of Bucky being outed as a cheater, but the expression had not entirely fit – only Steve had been too angry to notice at the time. A cheater would look embarrassed, or guilty, or flustered. Not Bucky – he had looked afraid. It was then that Steve also remembered the strange question Bucky had asked when Steve had first suggested he move in, after his own flat had flooded: What's your apartment's security like?

Feeling increasingly uneasy, Steve dared to wonder if he had got it all wrong. Perhaps he had put two and two together and got five. Perhaps things were not quite as they seemed – or was that just wishful thinking? Was he choosing to believe that things might not be over between him and Bucky, simply because he did not want them to be over? He was still in love with Bucky, he could not deny that, but nor could he deny that the whole situation now seemed a lot more uncertain, a lot less black and white, with the revelation that Bucky had spent the last week homeless and miserable, rather than relaxing in the arms of a lover.

"Steve!" said Natasha. She snapped her fingers in his face, jerking him from his reverie. "Promise me you'll talk to Bucky? Please. Just... please?"

Her eyes were wide and anxious. Slowly, Steve nodded. Natasha sighed, the tension visibly draining from her shoulders. Looking suddenly tired, she smiled up at him wearily. She reached out and touched his arm lightly. Her expression softening, her hard demeanour melted away to reveal gentle concern.

"How're you holding up?" she asked.

Steve sucked in a breath, holding it for a moment to compose himself, before slowly exhaling. All the same, he could not stop the tear from rolling down his cheek as he remembered the past week without Bucky, rattling around alone in his cold, empty flat, which all of a sudden had felt far too large for one person.
"I miss him," said Steve, his voice cracking. "I miss him so much."

Without a word, Natasha closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him and enveloping him in a tight, protective hug.

That evening, Steve walked slowly around his flat.

He drifted from room to room, loneliness permeating him, seeping deep into his bones. His chest hurt. It was as if he had a physical hole in his chest where Bucky had used to be. It was an ache, an ache that left him exhausted and desperate, depressed and lonely. He entered his bedroom and pulled open the wardrobe, his eyes filling with tears as he gazed at Bucky's clothes mixed up amongst his own. Bucky's possessions were still everywhere, scattered throughout the flat, just as he had left them the previous Saturday. The sight taunted him. It was like living with a ghost, but not a ghost from the past; no, a ghost from a future that had been snatched away from him.

In an attempt to distract himself, Steve pulled out his new mobile phone. He had bought it that evening after work, to finally replace the one that had been broken during his encounter with the mugger. He had transferred his SIM card, so all his contacts, messages and bookmarks had survived the switch-over. To kill time, he played a couple of games of 2048, before going to the local news and flicking through the headlines, reading them but finding that he did not particularly care about their contents, that ache in his chest causing him to feel numb and apathetic.

Subway Chaos As Power Failure Affects Lines

NYPD: Brooklyn Shooting Could Be Linked To Criminal Gang HYDRA

Crate Of Cats Discovered Abandoned Down Alley

Realising he had just read the headlines four times without taking in any of the information, he sighed, closing down the news app. Several minutes later, he found himself scrolling through his contacts, coming to a stop about halfway through the list, staring down at the name on the screen as it glowed innocently back up at him.

James Buchanan (Bucky) Barnes

He remembered when Bucky had inputted his name into Steve's phone, at the end of their very first date in Central Park all those months before. He remembered how full of hope he had felt, back then. His heart clenched with pain. He had never asked why Bucky hated the name James so much. He wished he had asked. He wished a lot of things. His thumb hovered over the call icon next to Bucky's name. He remembered his promise to Natasha, to talk to Bucky and get to the bottom of what exactly was going on. He remembered how afraid Bucky had looked, when Steve had confronted him with the text messages.
He pressed call.

Bucky picked up after the first ring.

"Hello?"

Steve closed his eyes, allowing himself to imagine that Bucky was in the room with him. Hearing his voice had hit him as hard as a physical blow. He had not realised just how much he had missed Bucky's voice; how much he had missed the sound of it. He longed to speak to Bucky again, to be told that there had been a mistake, that there had been no affair, that Steve was wrong. Easy there, he thought. Now was no time for fantasies.

"It's me," said Steve. "Can we meet up? We should... we should talk about what happened."

For a moment, silence, and then, at last, an answer; just one word, but a word that opened up a whole new world of opportunities.

"Yes," said Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

HALFWAY: That was chapter 12 out of 24 which means we're now halfway through this saga! Thank you for your loyal readership and I hope you enjoy the second half as much as you've enjoyed the first!

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

PLOTLINES: Someone sent me a very interesting "ask" on Tumblr about how many plotlines are interwoven in this story! If you're curious, you can read my answer here.

THOUGHTS: Arrrrgh, the angst train is careering out of control! Let me know your thoughts and feelings on this chapter in the comments below :)

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left such amazing comments on the last chapter. It seems it left a lot of you feeling shook, which makes me incredibly happy and humbled that you're so emotionally invested in this story <3

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Tabula Rasa" and will see Steve and Bucky finally sitting down and talking...

TUMBLR: Want to stalk me on Tumblr? Go ahead! I am ao3-elle1991 on there.
Steve and Bucky agreed to meet the following day at a cafe.

Not fancying the cramped conditions in the subway, Steve decided to drive, inputting his destination into his mobile phone's satnav. As he drove along in his father's rickety old car, he wondered what kind of advice his father would have given him, had he been alive. Although he had been a loving father, Joseph Rogers had never been particularly big on talking about one's feelings. He was from a more traditional age, when men were taught not to talk about their problems, not to show any sign of perceived weakness. He probably would have gruffly told Steve to get on with it, to sort things out, as if fixing a broken relationship were as simple as replacing a broken lightbulb.

Pushing thoughts of his father out of his head with a sigh, he wondered instead what his mother would have said, had she still been alive to give advice. She had been a gentler soul than his father. She had been a nurse – kind and caring by nature and by profession. Steve's heart clenched. He wished she were here, to provide him with words of wisdom, or to simply envelop him in a warm, motherly hug. He always missed her the most when he was in need of emotional guidance or support. She would have reminded Steve to be kind, to be patient, to listen without interrupting before forming any kind of judgement. She was the calmest person Steve had ever met; the quickest to listen and the slowest to anger. He swallowed solemnly, silently promising his mother that he would follow her example and stay calm and non-judgemental as he sought the truth from Bucky.

Not allowing himself to be distracted by his thoughts, Steve kept a sharp eye on the satnav, deviating from the suggested route when he saw it was trying to take him past the war memorial. Ignoring the instructions on the screen, he instead took an alternative route. It would add a few extra minutes to his journey, but if it meant that he would avoid the memorial, and possibly give him some more time to soothe his frayed nerves, then it would be worth it. His battered old car trundled along the road as he made his detour, turning into a car park, about quarter of an hour later, that was near the cafe where he and Bucky had agreed to meet.

Locking up his car, he walked to the cafe, his sweaty hands buried in his pockets. All of a sudden, he felt nervous. What if he lost his temper? What if he broke down? What if Bucky did not want to reconcile? What if Bucky was in a happy relationship with Alex? What if Steve messed everything up? What if he was about to lose the love of his life? What if the damage was already done? His heart hammered wildly in his chest, his stomach churning with anxiety. He loved Bucky. He wanted to find out the truth about what was going on – but what if he did not like what he found? Uncertainty filled him to overflowing, his racing thoughts incapacitating him as effectively as any drug.

He found himself at the cafe door. Resisting the urge to bolt in the opposite direction, he took a deep breath and pushed it open, a blast of warm air washing over him. A quick scan of the cafe revealed that he was the first to arrive. Fishing his wallet out of his pocket, he bought a coffee from the counter and sat down at a booth at the back of the cafe. It was the booth furthest away from the door and the counter; where they were most out of the way, least likely to be disturbed. If they were going to have a heart-to-heart, Steve felt that it would be best to have what little privacy they could afford in a public space.

Several minutes later, the cafe door swung open once more. Steve's heart rate leapt up as Bucky
entered the cafe, dressed in a worn-out hoodie and jeans. He looked tired, with bags under his eyes and his hair rumpled. He shuffled over to the counter, ordering a drink, before his eyes fell on Steve. For a moment, they simply stared at one another. For one desperate moment, Steve feared that Bucky would walk out, but the other man finally walked over to Steve's booth, sliding in opposite him. They looked at one another awkwardly, both of them unsure how social convention dictate they behave. Finally, Steve offered him a smile, his hands clamped around his mug to stop them from fidgeting or shaking.

"Hey," said Steve.

"Hey," said Bucky.

A strained silence settled over them. Steve was desperate for answers, but he was also hyper-aware of his own behaviour. He did not want to lose his temper and potentially ruin the possibility of reconciliation. He chewed on his bottom lip, trying to think of the most tactful and least aggressive way to find out the meaning of Alex's text messages. The stress must have shown on his face, because Bucky sighed wearily, running a tired hand through his hair. He looked almost defeated. Steve's heart clenched.

"Whatever you want to say, just say it," said Bucky. "I won't break."

Steve took a slow sip of his coffee, giving himself a few extra seconds to steady his nerves. His stomach was churning with anxiety, his hands sweaty and clammy. He wished he could skip forward in time, to a time when everything was resolved, without having to go through the tricky middle bit that linked here to there. He had never been good at talking about emotional things. He was entirely out of his comfort zone. Setting his mug back down on the table, he braced himself and forced the words past his lips, his heart rate skyrocketing as he did so.

"Who's Alex?" he asked.

Bucky visibly blanched at the name. His hands, clenched together in front of him, twisted anxiously. He seemed to shrink in on himself, as if he wanted to disappear inside his hoodie and hide inside the dark cocoon of his clothes. A feeling of foreboding settled over Steve as he observed Bucky's reaction. Whatever was going on, it did not seem right.

"Alex is my ex-boyfriend," said Bucky quietly. "Alex Pierce. We were together for a year."

Steve felt a wave of jealousy rise in him, but forced it down. Bucky's behaviour was throwing up all kinds of red flags. Whatever kind of relationship Bucky and Alex might have had in the past, it seemed that Bucky's feelings towards him had since changed for the worse. And yet, the text messages had been so flirtatious, so intimate...

"Do you guys still have feelings for one another?" said Steve. "The text messages. They were pretty... explicit."

Bucky's eyes widened with surprise. For several moments, he simply sat there in mute shock, before shaking his head hard, as if horrified. He looked viscerally disgusted, as if someone had just defecated in front of him. When he spoke, his tone was firm.

"The texts were one-way," he said. "Alex texted me. I never texted him back or encouraged him. He's been texting me that stuff ever since we split up. It got worse after me and you started dating. I don't know how he found out about you, but yeah, he's been sending me all kinds of gross things, saying that he's better for me than you, flirting with me, stuff like that, trying to split us up."
Steve sat in stunned silence, letting the information sink in. He did not know what to say. Whatever he had been expecting, it had not been this. He could not imagine how disturbing it must have been for Bucky to be bombarded with such creepy messages from his ex. He understood, now, why Bucky had chosen not to divulge the contents of his "spam" text messages. Obviously, he did not want to think about them. Perhaps, too, he feared that Steve would react in exactly the way he had, when he had found out: angrily; blinded by jealous rage. Steve's face burned with shame. He remembered the frequency with which Bucky had received the so-called spam texts and clenched his fists against the sudden wave of fury that it elicited. Alex had sent Bucky those disgusting messages multiple times a day, apparently ever since they had split up. It was incredible that Bucky had managed not to crack under the pressure.

"That's..." said Steve, before trailing off. What words could possibly come close to describing how awful Alex's behaviour had been? 'That's messed up' did not cover it. He could not think of a sentence that would do justice to how much Bucky must have suffered – in silence, alone. "Fuck. I'm sorry. That's horrible."

Bucky nodded, letting out a shaky sigh. Now that he had started talking, it seemed he could not stop. The words tumbled out of him, as if they had been trapped behind a dam that had finally burst. Steve wondered how many times Bucky had wanted to have this conversation, only to be held back by a crippling fear that Steve would not understand, or would not accept, his explanation. Steve felt sickened that he had only proved Bucky's fears justified by flying off the handle when he had discovered Alex's text messages, flying into a rage without even considering the possibility that there may have been more to the situation than met the eye.

"Alex was a great boyfriend at first," said Bucky. "He took me out on the best dates, was really attentive, super-complimentary. He said he loved me, and I loved him. Things were great in the first six months. But about halfway through our relationship, I moved in with him and stuff started to change.

"He got more and more controlling. He didn't like me going out to see my friends. He started telling what to wear and what I could eat. He'd get jealous if I spent time with anyone apart from him; if I went out for a night out with friends, he'd yell at me and accuse me of cheating on him. He said all kinds of horrible things – but he always made me out to the bad guy. Everything was always my fault, not his. I was desperate to apologise and make him happy, so I followed all his instructions; I stopped seeing my friends, quit my job. Anything he asked, I did. I just wanted to make him happy. I just wanted him to love me and for things to go back to the way things had been at the start. I didn't recognise it as abuse, at the time.

"I could never win an argument with him. He'd always have some counter-argument, or some evidence to back up his point of view. He was a freak for being organised. He kept records of literally everything. His house was full of filing cabinets documenting everything – what he spent on me, what we ate, stuff to do with his work. I'm half-surprised he didn't document when I went to the bathroom.

"Sometimes, he'd disappear for days and days doing work, and be really snappish when he came home. But whenever I'd ask him if he wanted to talk about it, he'd refuse. Even when I was trying to help him, he made me feel like I was the bad guy for sticking my nose in or pissing him off. It was like walking on eggshells, by the end."

Bucky suddenly fell silent, as if only just realising for how long he had been talking. His eyes darted up to meet Steve's, frightened and uncertain. Steve tried to arrange his face into something calm and sympathetic, not wanting Bucky to see the true effect his words were having. Internally, he was reeling with shock. He was horrified and sickened by what Bucky was saying. His stomach rolled at
the thought that Bucky had had to suffer such an abusive relationship. Dazed and unable to put into words how terrible he felt for Bucky, he blurted out the first thing that came into his head, his horrified subconscious latching onto a seemingly trivial, unimportant detail as he struggled to comprehend the horror of what Bucky was saying.

"What did Alex do for a job that made him so cranky?" asked Steve.

If Bucky thought it was an odd question, he did not show it.

"He was some kind of marketing consultant, I think," said Bucky. "He worked freelance. I don't know the details. He didn't like to talk about it much; he said I'd find it boring and would just change the subject whenever I asked."

Steve nodded numbly. He considered the emotional impact that the abuse must have had on Bucky. It amazed Steve that Bucky had felt able to enter into any kind of relationship with him following the trauma he had suffered at the hands of his ex. It was astonishing that he had felt able to trust anyone again, let alone allow anyone to get as close – both emotionally and physically – as a relationship required. It was then that another, even more horrifying, possibility occurred to him: that the abuse might not only have been emotional, but physical or sexual too.

"Did he ever hurt you?" said Steve, lowering his voice so that there was no chance of anyone overhearing. "Like hitting you or... intimately?"

Bucky glanced around anxiously, hiding further in his hoodie. Steve yearned to reach across and hold Bucky's hand to provide comfort, but he dared not. He did not want to invade Bucky's personal space or cross any physical boundaries – not least when there was the awful possibility that Alex had done the same, on a much more terrible scale.

To Steve's immense relief, Bucky shook his head.

"Alex was emotionally abusive, but he never hit me or raped me," said Bucky. "Although... he did always top me, when we had sex. That's why I don't like bottoming anymore. The idea of being that vulnerable again scares me. I hate that he took away that part of me; I want to enjoy bottoming like I did before, but I'm scared that if I try it, all I'll be able to think about will be Alex. I hate how much he broke me down. By the end of our relationship, I was just a shell of who I was before. I'd cut off all my friends, left my job. I'd lost all my confidence. I'd forgotten what it was like to be happy. My whole world revolved around Alex."

Steve was momentarily unable to speak. He could not imagine how dreadful it must have been for Bucky to have his confidence, his personality, his sense of self, slowly and insidiously broken down by someone who was supposed to love and care for him. Steve hated Alex – intensely, viscerally, deeply. He hated what he had done to Bucky. He hated that he had broken Bucky down, instead of building him up, as a boyfriend was supposed to. Instead of love and nurturing, Alex had provided control and abuse. Instead of helping Bucky to reach his full potential, he had held him back, cutting off his contact with the outside world to keep him all to himself. It was the opposite of love. And that was what he did not understand – how could Bucky have allowed Alex to treat him like that? How had things got so bad?

"Why didn't you just leave Alex when he started being abusive?" asked Steve.

Bucky twisted his hands together restlessly.

"I loved him," said Bucky. "I just wanted to make him happy. I didn't realise it was abuse. I always thought abusive relationships were just when one partner beat the other up. I didn't realise abuse
could be emotional too. I thought that the reason I was unhappy was because I was at fault. I thought the problem was me, not Alex. That's what Alex taught me.

"I only left him when I found out that he'd been blocking my parents from contacting me. I've got a strong relationship with my parents, so the fact he'd been trying to cut us off from one another was what finally woke me up to the fact that what he was doing was wrong. I left that day. I didn't tell Alex where I was going. I just pretended to be going out to the shops, quickly packed a bag while he went to the bathroom, and left. Apparently, he went ballistic when he realised I'd left him, and smashed up a bunch of his own furniture. Since then, I've just been trying to forget about him and move on with my life."

Steve felt sick. Even though he had no idea what Alex looked like, he could perfectly imagine him flying off into a violent rage when he discovered Bucky had left him. No doubt he had felt that Bucky had been his property; that his leaving was a personal slight against him; an act of disrespect. He suddenly remembered how interested Bucky had been in Steve's flat's security when he had moved in. Steve realised, now, with a rush of horror, that Bucky must have been afraid of Alex somehow tracking him down and breaking in. The realisation made Steve shudder.

"Why is he still texting you?" said Steve. "Surely he must realise you guys are over by now?"

Bucky buried his head in his hands, gripping his hair and holding it tightly. His knuckles were white. The tension in his body was visible; his shoulders were hunched, his neck muscles taut. He looked like a man consumed by total despair. He looked desperate, like a hunted animal that was finally cornered after an exhausting chase.

"I don't know," said Bucky, his voice slightly hysterical. "Because he's a psychopath? Because he's obsessed with me? Because he's the kind of guy who won't take no for an answer? Take your pick. I'm done trying figure out how his mind works."

Steve gazed at him across the booth. He desperately wanted to help protect Bucky from Alex's obsessive attention. He wanted Bucky to never have to see Alex ever again, nor to receive a single other disgusting text message. He wanted Bucky to feel safe, to be able to move on with his life in peace, without constantly having to worry whether Alex was going to track him down and try to drag him back to his old life.

"You should go to the police," urged Steve. "See if you can get a restraining order against Alex. Or see if they can at least block his number from being able to send you texts."

To Steve's surprise, Bucky let out an anguished cry, shaking his head hard. A tear slipped down Bucky's cheek, followed by another, and another, and another, until he was crying hard on the other side of the booth, muffling his sobs in his arm as he ducked his head down, as if ashamed.

"No," said Bucky, with a surprising amount of force. "I'm not going to the cops. Don't you understand? I just want to forget about Alex. I don't want to engage in his stupid mind games. I don't want to piss him off. Alex isn't someone you mess with. He's rich, which makes him powerful. He'd find a way to wriggle out of any charges. People like him always do. Going to the police wouldn't solve anything. It'd just make him angry."

There was something unsettling about Bucky's tone. It took Steve several long moments for him to work out what was wrong. When he realised what it was, a chill went down his spine, his stomach churning. Bucky was not simply upset. He was afraid – deeply afraid – of Alex. It was not mere anxiety of running into him in the supermarket, either; most people experienced that, after a break-up, to some degree or another. No, what Bucky was experiencing was a deep, real sense of fear, bordering on terror. Fear for his safety and wellbeing. Fear that Alex would emerge from the past
and enter into Bucky's present. Fear of Alex, physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Steve felt a rush of hatred towards Alex, as well as a simultaneous protective urge towards Bucky. He wanted to help Bucky. He wanted to protect him, to help him regain the confidence he had lost, to help him become the best version of himself he could be. He wanted to be supportive, to be loving – in short, to be everything that Alex was not. On the other side of the table, Bucky had retreated almost completely into his hoodie. He had pulled the hood up and drawn it down around his face, as if it were a sanctuary in which to hide from the outside world. He was still crying, although silently now, clearly ashamed and embarrassed to have lost control of his emotions in public.

"I'm a mess," whispered Bucky. "I don't blame you if you never want to see me again."

It took several moments for Bucky's words to register properly in Steve's mind. He struggled to comprehend the meaning of what Bucky was saying. Why was Bucky speaking as if he were the one at fault, as if he were the one who deserved to be walked away from? Did he seriously think that what he had just shared with Steve was something that would make Steve want to leave him? Had Alex really got into his head so much that he was still blaming himself for everything, even now? Steve stared at him in shock and horror.

"What?!” said Steve. "Bucky, no. What happened between you and Alex isn't your fault. He was the abusive one. You've got nothing to apologise for. None of it was your fault."

Swallowing hard against the discomfort of talking about his emotions, he forced himself to continue speaking. He owed Bucky an apology. Now he knew the truth behind the text messages, he could see just how appalling his reaction had been, and how damaging it must have been for Bucky to find himself confronted with yet another angry partner. He bitterly regretted having lost his temper the way he had.

"I want to apologise," said Steve. "When I read the texts, I was upset, but I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. And I'm sorry if I ever did anything to make you feel that you couldn't tell me about Alex. I don't... I don't want to be someone you're scared of. Whatever happens next – if you just want to be friends, or if you don't want to see me again, or if you want to give it another go – I don't want you to be afraid of me. I don't want to be another Alex, in your head."

He did not realise tears were rolling down his cheeks until Bucky reached out and gently wiped them away. Steve's breath hitched. He had not felt Bucky's touch for over a week, but it was not until now that he realised just how miserable he had been without it. Unconsciously, he turned his face towards Bucky's hand, closing his eyes when Bucky gently cupped his cheek. The warmth from Bucky's fingers seeped into his skin. His heart ached at the thought that, depending on the outcome of today's discussion, he might not feel it ever again.

"I'm not afraid of you," Bucky said softly. "You're not perfect, but you're nothing like Alex."

Bucky's hand left Steve's cheek, tentatively reaching out for Steve's hand. Steve allowed Bucky to intertwine their fingers, giving Bucky's hand a small squeeze of comfort. Bucky's thumb swept up to stroke the back of Steve's hand, the motion for some reason causing Steve's throat to tighten with emotion.

"So, what about you?" asked Bucky.

Steve blinked, uncertain what Bucky was referring to.

"What about me?" he said.
Bucky smiled gently, giving Steve's hand a squeeze.

"I've told you about my past," said Bucky. "Are you going to tell me what happened in Iraq that makes you have nightmares? I've heard you yelling in your sleep. I didn't want to mention it at the time, but if we're going to start over, we need to be open and honest with one another – and that means both of us."

Steve remembered walking down the dusty road. He remembered the heat of the sun beating down on him from above. He remembered the sweat and the grime on his skin. He remembered the sound of gunshots in the distance, the rotors of a military helicopter whirring a few miles away, the way the sun had bleached many of the buildings, a large proportion of them now reduced to rubble. He remembered the smell of lemons and the smell of blood. He forced himself not to go there, halting the memory before it could progress any further.

"There was a mission," said Steve quietly. "The Fallujah mission. I made a mistake – and someone died because of it, someone who shouldn't have. They died because of me."

For a long while, Bucky was silent. Steve lowered his gaze, staring at the table, not wanting to see the disgust on Bucky's face when it inevitably came. He yearned to be able to turn back the clocks, to go back to Fallujah and undo what was done. He yearned to bring Him back from the dead. He risked a glance upwards, finding Bucky staring at him not with disgust, but with sadness and sympathy.

"Oh, Steve," said Bucky softly. "I'm sure it wasn't your fault. Whatever happened was a mistake. If you'd really done something wrong, you'd be in prison, not living in New York and working at Stark Industries."

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing them roughly, hating the tears that leaked from them. He had no right to cry; not when he was the one at fault. Bucky was wrong, thought Steve, what happened in Fallujah was his fault.

"I didn't leave the Army voluntarily," said Steve, the words slipping over his lips before he could stop them. "I was forced to leave. I was given a medical discharge. I developed a tremor in my right arm that the doctors couldn't find a physical explanation for. I still have it; it's not there all the time, but it's enough to mean I'd be useless in the battlefield. Can't have a soldier whose arm sometimes shakes so badly he can barely hold a gun."

Steve fell silent. He did not mention that the doctors had strongly suspected PTSD. He did not mention that he had refused a psychiatric evaluation.

"What exactly happened in Fallujah?" asked Bucky.

Steve's breath hitched. He saw His eyes flash before him. Steve turned his head away and closed his eyes, willing the image of the dead man's eyes to go away. Slowly, they did, until finally Steve was able to open his eyes without seeing them staring back at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but found he could not. His right hand, the one that was interlinked with Bucky's, began to shake. Steve stared down at it, shame bubbling up in his gut as it trembled violently.

"I'm sorry," whispered Steve finally. "I can't tell you. It's not a slight against you, I swear. I just... I just can't go there."

Bucky looked down at Steve's shaking arm and nodded slowly. He took hold of Steve's trembling hand in both of his own and held it gently until, several long minutes later, the shaking finally began to subside. He stroked Steve's hand gently, the motion strangely soothing.
"It's OK," said Bucky. "You don't have to tell me the details, if you're not ready."

Steve smiled up at him gratefully. Bucky smiled back, before clearing his throat, letting go of Steve's hand.

"So... Where do we go from here?" said Bucky.

Steve's initial reaction was to ask Bucky if they could reconcile. However, before he spoke, he hesitated. Was it his place to ask Bucky if they could have a second chance, when it had been his action, or rather overreaction, that had driven Bucky away in the first place? He felt uncomfortable asking Bucky for another chance, especially now he knew how badly Bucky had been hurt in the past. He knew Bucky would hate it if he felt Steve were treating him differently as a result of this new knowledge, but Steve could not deny that it changed things – not his opinion of Bucky, but his awareness of his own behaviour and how it could potentially affect Bucky in ways it would not affect someone who had not been in an abusive relationship.

"I think you should be the one to make that decision," said Steve carefully.

Bucky frowned, shaking his head.

"We're equals," said Bucky. "We both get a say." He paused for a moment, looking down at the coffee, by now long gone cold, in his cup. "How about we both just say what we want?"

Steve nodded, waiting for Bucky to go first. When he did not, Steve cleared his throat, suddenly feeling awkward. His wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans, his face flushed and hot.

"I, uh, I'd like us to give it another go," said Steve. "If you'll take me back."

It could not have been more than a second before Bucky replied, but that second felt like one of the longest in Steve's life. His heart was hammering against his ribcage, anxiety and adrenaline pumping through his system. He held his breath, desperate for Bucky's answer but at the same time afraid of it. At that moment, everything felt as though it were on a knife-edge, with the potential to fall either way.

"I'd like to give it another go, too," said Bucky, smiling.

Sweet, powerful relief rushed through Steve. He felt ecstatic, as if someone had told him he had just won the lottery, except this was even better, because this was Bucky, who was worth more than any amount of money could count. He could feel his smile stretching his face, his cheeks aching from the strength of it. He felt giddy with love, with a renewed sense of wanting to be the best boyfriend he could be, with new knowledge, new understanding to help him help Bucky overcome his past.

"All your stuff is exactly where you left it. I've not moved anything. Do you want to come home with me?" said Steve excitedly, before catching himself, realising that perhaps Bucky would want to take things slow. "Uh, I mean... Or not? If you don't want to, that's OK too. I can bring your stuff over to your hotel room, if you want to stay there a while longer or look for your own place. Whatever you feel most comfortable with."

Realising he was rambling, Steve clamped his mouth shut, hoping he had not already messed things up by being so keen straight off the bat. Bucky's smile grew wider, apparently finding Steve's rambling endearing rather than annoying.

Without a word, Bucky reached out over the table and placed his hand over Steve's heart. The gesture took Steve completely by surprise. He watched as Bucky grabbed hold of Steve's hand and placed it on Bucky's chest in a mirror image of his own gesture. Steve's eyes widened. He could feel
Bucky's heart beating, rhythmical and strong, under his hoodie. It was the single most intimate thing he had ever done.

"Steve," said Bucky. "I'm already home."

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: See it here.

HOW TO SPOT AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP: Abusive relationships can take many forms. They often start slowly and build up so that the victim does not realise what is happening, until it is too late and they feel unable to leave the relationship. Worse still, if they believe that abuse can only be physical, like Bucky in this story, then they may not even realise it is abuse at all. It is important to know the many forms that abuse can take, so that you can recognise it in case it happens to you. The main categories of relationship abuse are:

- Physical abuse. For example: scratching, punching, biting, strangling or kicking; throwing something at you; pulling your hair; pushing or pulling you; grabbing your clothing; using a weapon; grabbing your face to make you look at them; grabbing you to prevent you from leaving or to force you to go somewhere.

- Sexual abuse. For example: unwanted kissing or touching; unwanted rough or violent sexual activity; rape or attempted rape; refusing to use condoms or restricting your access to birth control; preventing you from protecting yourself from sexually transmitted infections; sexual contact when you are very drunk, drugged, unconscious or otherwise unable to say “yes” or “no”; threatening you into unwanted sexual activity; pressuring or forcing you to have sex or perform sexual acts.

- Emotional abuse. For example: calling you names and putting you down; yelling and screaming at you; intentionally embarrassing you in public; preventing you from seeing or talking with friends and family; telling you what to do and wear; damaging your property when they are angry; using online communities or mobile phones to control, intimidate or humiliate you; blaming your actions for their abusive or unhealthy behaviour; accusing you of cheating and often being jealous of your outside relationships; stalking you; threatening to commit suicide to keep you from breaking up with them; threatening to harm you, your pet or people you care about; using gaslighting techniques to confuse or manipulate you; making you feel guilty or immature when you do not consent to sexual activity; threatening to expose your secrets; starting rumours about you; threatening to have your children taken away.

- Financial abuse. For example: giving you an allowance and closely watching what you buy; placing your paycheck in their account and denying you access to it; keeping you from seeing shared bank accounts or records; forbidding you to work or limiting the hours you do; getting you fired; hiding or stealing outside financial support/benefits; maxing out your credit cards without your permission; refusing to give you money, food, rent, medicine or clothing; using funds from your children’s tuition or a joint savings account without your knowledge; spending money on themselves but not allowing you to do the same.
For more information on the various forms an abusive relationship can take, click here.

WHO CAN BE A VICTIM OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP? Both males and females can be victims, and both males and females can be perpetrators. Abuse can happen in opposite-sex and same-sex relationships, in relationships that are new or old, where the couple are dating or married, young or old, rich or poor. It can happen to a person of any age, sex, gender, race, nationality, religion, income or class. It can happen to anyone.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE IF YOU ARE IN AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP: If you are in an abusive relationship, you are NOT alone and you are NOT to blame. There are support organisations and charities out there who can help you to get out of an abusive relationship and stay safe. If you are in the UK, this NHS page has a great list of resources for both female and male victims. If you are outside of the UK, you should be able to find the equivalent help available in your country by searching online. In an emergency, call the police.

THOUGHTS: At last, they have sat down and actually talked to one another! Feel free to let me know your thoughts and feelings in the comments section below.

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left such lovely comments on the last chapter. Reading your thoughts and having such a loyal and engaged community of readers is just wonderful.

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Girl In The Daisy Dress" and will include some smut, a flashback, and a revelation.

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr! Feel free to follow, message or send me "asks" if you are feeling friendly!
It was Saturday morning, one month since Steve and Bucky had reconciled at the cafe. Morning sunlight filtered in through the curtains, bathing the bedroom in a serene, almost ethereal glow.

Steve blinked sleepily, smiling as he watched Bucky sleeping peacefully next to him, his arm flung over his pillow, snuggling it close. The last month had been good, if tiring. Bucky had moved back into Steve's flat and their relationship had started afresh. In subtle ways, both of them had changed. Steve had become more aware of his own behaviour, not wanting to do anything that might be at all reminiscent of Alex. Bucky, too, had changed in certain ways, making sure to check that Steve was OK whenever he awoke from a nightmare, offering a listening ear but never insisting that Steve talk about the contents of his bad dreams.

Presently, it was just before 8am. Bucky was snoring lightly, his face buried in his pillow, his legs tangled up with Steve's under the duvet. Steve watched him quietly, caressing each line, each curve, of the other man's body with his eyes, committing the sight to memory. Bucky looked beautiful when he slept. His face was smooth, relaxed, with no worry lines creasing his forehead as they had a tendency to during his waking life. He looked happy and carefree, which was what Steve found beautiful. That, and his admittedly gorgeous face and body.

Tentatively, not wanting to wake him, Steve reached out and smoothed a lock of hair away from Bucky's forehead. He was warm. Bucky snuggled closer to Steve's hand, sighing in his sleep when Steve stroked his face gently and lovingly. Steve smiled. It made him happy, to know that Bucky felt safe beside him; that even in his sleep, with his defences lowered, he unconsciously associated Steve with love and safety, something worthy of snuggling. Steve leant over to press a kiss to Bucky's cheek, unable to resist the fuzz on his cheekbone. Unfortunately, the motion must have disturbed Bucky, as moments later, he stirred from his sleep, blinking sleepily to focus on Steve's face, smiling softly.

"Hey, sleepyhead," said Steve.

"Morning," mumbled Bucky.

Bucky snuggled into Steve's chest, his eyes slipping closed, his breath tickling at Steve's neck. His arm draped over Steve's chest, cuddling him like a huge teddy bear. Steve looked down at him, at the way his eyelashes fanned out across his cheeks, at the way his hair flopped into his face. He felt his insides melt and his heart flutter. It was unfair that Bucky was so adorable first thing in the morning. How was Steve supposed to refrain from cuddling and kissing him when he looked so God damn cute?

Unable to resist, he rolled them over so that Bucky was on his back, with Steve on top of him. He pressed their bodies together languidly. Steve's lips hovered over Bucky's own, before he finally gave in to temptation, lowering his lips and kissing him, teasingly at first, and then deeper, more passionately, using his tongue. Bucky moaned softly beneath him, kissing him back sleepily. Steve could feel their cocks, pressed together, hardening and lengthening as their kisses grew heated and more breathless. He loved the way Bucky tasted. He loved feeling him get excited first thing in the morning. He loved making Bucky feel good, feel horny, feel desired. It was a thrilling way to start the day.
Slowly, Steve began to move, trailing his kisses from Bucky's lips to his neck, sucking and licking at the sensitive flesh. Bucky arched his neck, giving Steve better access, a moan rumbling through him when Steve sucked at a particularly sensitive spot, the sound vibrating through Bucky's neck to Steve's lips. Steve closed his eyes, enjoying the vibrations that the noise elicited. To physically feel Bucky's moans, the physical manifestation of the lust that Steve was eliciting in Bucky, was a beautiful, intimate and visceral feeling.

He dipped his head lower, licking at Bucky's torso, savouring the taste of him. His movements were slow, unhurried. There was no rush between them, no impetus to be done by any deadline. It felt as though the bedroom was a little bubble, totally separate from the rest of the world, where nothing existed apart from Steve and Bucky and the touches of their bodies. Time ceased to exist; there was only now, and the pleasures that now brought.

He kissed his way slowly down Bucky's chest, his hands worshipping Bucky's body, stroking at his sides, tweaking his nipples, massaging his strong, solid muscles. He wanted to memorise every curve and line of his body. He wanted to know every inch of skin, every pleasure point, every sensitive spot. By the time he reached Bucky's crotch, the two of them were achingly hard, lust simmering red hot under their skin.

He settled between Bucky's legs, slowly sucking his thick, heavy cock into his mouth. Steve savoured the taste of Bucky's pre-come – a perfect balance of salty and sweet – as he wrapped his lips around Bucky's cock head. He loved the moment of first enveloping Bucky in his mouth. The taste was always the strongest at that moment; at its most intense, its most heady, its most Bucky. Slowly, reverently, he began to bob his head, a thrill of excitement going through him at each moan and gasp that it elicited. He felt Bucky grow even harder in his mouth, a red blush spreading from his cheeks to his neck to his torso, a tell-tale sign he was enjoying himself.

Wrapping a hand around Bucky's length and jerking him off, Steve dipped his head down even lower and began to lavish attention on Bucky's balls. He licked each one lovingly, taking them into his mouth and sucking on them gently. Bucky gasped at the new form of stimulation, a breathless moan escaping him when Steve finally released his balls and licked a long stripe along his perineum.

Steve kneaded Bucky's ass cheeks with his strong hands, squeezing and stroking them whilst peppering them with kisses and licks. He bathed Bucky's balls, taint and cheeks with his tongue, worshipping him, giddy with the smell and taste of him. He licked slowly between Bucky's ass cheeks, hesitating just before his hole, before being seized by a desperate urge to taste him, to be intimate in a way they had never been before. His eyes hooded and glazed with lust, he dragged his tongue over Bucky's hole. He groaned at the strong, musky taste of him. Bucky gasped hard, lifting up from the bed momentarily in surprise.

Steve looked up at him, wanting to make sure that he was not crossing any boundaries that Bucky did not want to be crossed.

"Can I rim you?" said Steve.

Bucky stared down at him, his eyes round, his lips parted, his cheeks flushed. Tentatively, he nodded, settling back slowly against the pillows and relaxing, his legs spreading wider to give Steve better access. Steve took a moment to take in the unbelievable sight in front of him: Bucky, with his legs spread, his puckered hole damp with Steve's saliva, fully on display. Steve shifted his weight, the movement rubbing his rock-hard cock against the bed sheets, a zip of pleasure going through him at the contact.

Ignoring his own aching cock, Steve concentrated on the sight before him, feasting his eyes on Bucky's tight rim. Gently, cautiously, he leant forwards and licked his hole, slowly at first, applying
only the lightest pressure to let Bucky get used to the sensation. He moaned softly, alternating his technique between broad licks and teasing with just the pointed tip of his tongue, tracing circles around Bucky's twitching hole. He gripped Bucky's thighs, a feeling of excitement rushing through him as Bucky slowly relaxed, his muscles loosening, his moans slowly going from quiet to louder, more enthusiastic, as he began to really enjoy Steve's tongue.

Steve pressed his tongue a little harder, licking hard at Bucky's sphincter, the tight ring loosening under his onslaught, becoming more elastic. Pausing for breath, he leant back, staring at the debauched sight in front of him. Bucky was lying flat on his back, covered in a sheen of sweat, his chest heaving, his cock oozing pre-come onto his navel. His hole was slick with saliva, the dark hair that surrounded it wet and sticking to his skin, the rim loose. Entranced, Steve gently reached out and ran his finger over Bucky's hole, stroking it tenderly, loving the way it gave slightly under the pressure of his fingertip. Bucky let out a breathy splutter, his hole twitching as Steve stroked and stimulated it, as if trying to draw him in.

"Steve!" gasped Bucky. "Oh, fuck. Finger me..."

Steve's movements came to an abrupt halt. Stunned, he shifted his gaze upwards to look Bucky in the face, unsure if he had heard him correctly. One look at Bucky's face was enough to tell him, however, that he had indeed heard Bucky's request correctly. Bucky's pupils were blown wide, his lips slick and parted, the expression on his face one that could be described as desperate. Letting out a high-pitched keen, Bucky ground his ass down on Steve's hand, trying to stimulate himself.

Steve did not need any more encouragement. Reaching into the drawer of the bedside table, he grabbed the bottle of lube, squeezing a generous dollop onto his fingers. Working it over his fingers, he gave Bucky's hole a quick kiss, before placing his index finger at the entrance, pressing forwards with gentle pressure. Despite the attention Steve had been giving with his tongue, Bucky was still tight. Steve inserted his finger slowly, working his way inside with tiny, gentle movements, not wanting to cause Bucky any pain or discomfort. It was the first time he had ever fingered Bucky, and he wanted the experience to be a good one. He wanted to give Bucky the same exquisite pleasure that Bucky had given him so many times.

Bucky gasped as Steve finally pushed past his sphincter. Steve moaned at the unbelievable tightness around his finger. Bucky's rim squeezed hard around him. For one fleeting moment, he imagined what it would be like to feel that incredible tightness wrapped around his cock and swallowed hard, his cock throbbing at the mere thought of it. Pushing the fantasy away, he concentrated on finger-fucking Bucky, pushing his finger in to the hilt, pumping it in and out slowly until Bucky began to relax around him, some of the tension leaving his muscles.

Steve crooked his finger, seeking out Bucky's prostate, smiling when he found the sensitive bundle of nerves, as evidenced by Bucky's strangled moan. Steve concentrated his efforts on Bucky's prostate, rubbing over the little spot over and over again as he finger-fucked Bucky, drawing moans and stifled gasps from the other man as he focused on pleasuring him. He inserted a second finger alongside the first, a rush of satisfaction going through him at the way Bucky groaned as he did so, as if he were desperate for it, as if he wanted to take as much as Steve was willing to give.

Steve watched the sight of his fingers, three of them now, plunging in and out of Bucky's slick hole. Bucky writhed on the bed, his toes curling, his legs kicking as Steve continued his onslaught of pleasure on Bucky's prostate. Bucky's cock was leaking a near-constant stream of thick, copious pre-come. Intoxicated by lust, Steve leant forwards and licked up every last drop of pre-come from Bucky's abdomen. He sucked Bucky's cock into his mouth, drinking his salty nectar straight from the source, moaning around Bucky's sensitive head.
Several minutes of cock sucking later, Steve was brought back to his senses by Bucky's hands tugging at his hair, pulling him off. He released Bucky's cock from with mouth with a wet pop, his fingers stilling deep inside Bucky's ass. He looked up at Bucky, taking in his flushed cheeks and wrecked expression, and smiled sweetly, finding intense pleasure in the fact that he had managed to get Bucky off so effectively with just his fingers and mouth.

"Yeah?" said Steve.

"Fuck me," said Bucky.

Silence.

Steve stared at him, not entirely sure how to make sense of Bucky's two-word sentence. He swallowed, not wanting to misunderstand or jump to assumptions. His heart hammering, he cleared his throat.

"You mean..."

"Top me," begged Bucky. "Fuck me. God, I want your cock inside me."

Squashing down the wave of lust that Bucky's words elicited, Steve forced himself to be calm. He remembered the conversation they had had in the cafe, when Bucky had revealed he was afraid of bottoming, lest the experience remind him of his time with Alex. Much though Steve would love to top Bucky, to make love to him in a whole new way, to explore another type of pleasure together, he needed to be sure that Bucky was sure it was what he wanted, that he was not simply delirious with lust. As gently as possible, Steve removed his fingers from Bucky's ass.

"Are you sure?" said Steve seriously.

Bucky nodded. Steve watched his expression, searching for any signs of uncertainty or hesitation – and found none. Bucky's eyes were calm and clear. He reached out and interlaced his fingers with Steve. His skin was hot and damp with sweat.

"I'm sure," said Bucky. "I trust you not to hurt me. Please, Steve..."

Steve nodded, crawling up the bed and settling down on top of Bucky. He kissed him desperately, grinding their bodies together, wrapping a hand around Bucky's length and squeezing and jerking him, moaning at the whines and gasps from Bucky that the stimulation produced. Finally, breaking away from the kiss, Steve leant back and grabbed the bottle of lube, squeezing out a dollop onto his fingers and then rubbing it over his rock-hard cock. Biting back a groan, he looked up from his swollen cock to look at Bucky's face, taking in the way his cheeks were flushed, his legs stretched wide open for Steve to get between them.

He lowered himself between Bucky's legs, taking his cock in his hand and rubbing it gently against Bucky's hole. Bucky moaned beneath him, wiggling his hips in an attempt to increase the friction. Steve kissed his forehead, before searching Bucky's eyes one last time to make sure he was ready. Bucky gazed back at him, his pupils blown wide, his arms wrapping around Steve's back, pulling him closer, urging him on. Holding his breath, Steve lined himself up with Bucky's hole and slowly began to push forward, keeping the pressure gentle but steady, pushing against Bucky's sphincter.

For several long moments, he felt the resistance of Bucky's tight ring trying to keep him out, before suddenly, he popped inside, that glorious ring of tightness wrapping around his cock, squeezing him, the warmth of Bucky's ass surrounding him. It took all of Steve's self-control at that moment not to plunge to the hilt and bury himself in the incredible feeling. Taking a shuddering breath, he exhaled,
his eyes closed, burying his face in Bucky's neck and kissing him there. Bucky was breathing hard, obviously not yet accustomed to Steve's substantial girth. Steve did not move, allowing Bucky to get used to the sensation of being stretched, of having someone inside him for the first time in a long time. After what felt like an age, Bucky finally began to relax.

He tugged at Steve's hair, urging him to move. Steve groaned, sinking deeper and deeper into Bucky's ass until his balls were resting flush against Bucky's cheeks. He took a moment to revel in the feeling of being completely inside Bucky, his cock squeezed tight. It was glorious, intense, a totally different kind of pleasure from bottoming – he had forgotten how good it felt to top. Slowly, he withdrew so that only the head of his cock remained inside Bucky, before plunging back in, moaning as Bucky gasped and threw his head back in pleasure.

Steve began to build up a steady rhythm, fucking Bucky hard, desperate to make him feel good. He experimented with the angle of penetration, finally finding the best position which allowed him to directly stimulate Bucky's prostate with every inward thrust. Bucky's eyes widened as Steve began to fuck him hard in this new position, a stream of involuntary gasps and groans spilling from his lips. Steve smirked, wrapping a hand around Bucky's cock and jerking him off in time with his thrusts. His hand was quickly covered in Bucky's pre-come, which was leaking thickly from his cock head. Bucky thrashed beneath him, driven wild by the double stimulation of having his prostate pounded and his swollen, sensitive cock squeezed and jerked by Steve's warm, slick hand.

Steve could feel his own pleasure begin to build inside him. Bucky's ass was squeezing him like a vice, that gorgeous warmth surrounding him and stimulating every inch of his cock as he plunged in and out. Sweat dripped down his back as he began to fuck Bucky desperately, his hand almost a blur as it flew up and down Bucky's engorged cock. He was not going to last much longer: Bucky felt too good on his cock; the pleasure of being inside him was too intense, too much, too incredible.

Bucky suddenly seized up, his eyes screwing shut as he began to come, spurting out all over Steve's hand, coating his fingers with thick, white goo. His ass clenched and spasmed rhythmically around Steve's cock, effectively milking him, catapulting Steve into his own orgasm as he buried himself to the hilt, come spurting out of him and filling Bucky's ass. Their orgasms were intense, the red-hot pleasure seeming to linger much longer than usual as they slowly came down from their respective highs. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky, kissing him gently, wanting to show his appreciation that Bucky had trusted him enough to share this new kind of pleasure together, that he had trusted Steve enough to show him that bottoming could be pleasurable, that it was something to be enjoyed, rather than feared.

"I love you," said Steve.

Bucky smiled, his eyes shining, his cheeks glowing as he kissed Steve back, just as joyously.

"I love you, too," he said.

The following day, Steve and Bucky carried out their Sunday morning chores – Steve doing the hoovering whilst Bucky tackled the pile of cutlery that needed washing up in the kitchen.

Steve was just finishing off hoovering the lounge, sticking the hoover into the narrow space between the sofa and the wall, when it started making a large sucking sound, having sucked up something too large to fit down the nozzle. Steve turned off the hoover, pulling out a wad of fabric from the nozzle.
It took him a moment to recognise the crumpled fabric: it was Natasha's scarf. She had come over to the flat the previous Friday for a takeaway and gaming night and must have accidentally left it behind. Steve brushed the worst of the dust off the scarf and placed it on the arm of the sofa, pulling out his mobile phone. He should ring Natasha, to let her know that he had found it. Bringing up Natasha's contact, he pressed the call button, putting it to his ear.

He sat down on the sofa as the phone rang. He expected her to pick up straight away; she had mentioned on Friday that she had no plans for the weekend, and she usually picked up straight away if she was available. It was for this reason that he was puzzled as the phone continued ringing and ringing, finally going through to her voicemail, asking him to leave a message. Steve left the message, informing her that he had found her scarf and would give it to her at work on Monday, and hung up, frowning slightly at his phone. Natasha was unreachable – again. It was odd. He wondered if she was having another family emergency – or was he simply being over-dramatic? Perhaps there was nothing strange about it at all. Perhaps Natasha was simply enjoying a lazy lie-in. Satisfied by this simpler explanation, the thought left his mind and Steve finished off hoovering the rest of the flat, the space looking much cleaner and fresher by the time he had finished.

He sauntered into the kitchen, where Bucky was just finishing off tidying away the washed-up plates, pans and cutlery, taking a moment to admire him as the sun streamed in through the window, illuminating him in beautiful light. As Bucky put away the final pan, Steve walked up behind him, looping his arms around Bucky's waist and kissing the back of his neck. Bucky turned around with a smile, planting a kiss on Steve's lips as he rested his hands on Steve's hips.

"How about we go for a walk?" said Bucky. "Central Park is gorgeous in the sunshine."

Steve nodded, a smile spreading over his face at the idea of it. Central Park was one of their favourite places to go for a walk. It reminded them of their first date, of how much their relationship had grown and developed since then. On such a gloriously sunny day, he bet Central Park would look perfect. Perhaps he could even take some photographs, to use as reference pictures for some paintings.

"Let's do it," said Steve.

They went through the flat, turning off all the lights and shutting the windows, before grabbing their jackets and pulling them on. As Steve laced up his trainers, he felt a rush of contentment go through him. He loved the fluffy, domestic times they shared on weekends such as this. He loved spending quality time with Bucky; strolling through the park, or lounging on the sofa and talking for hours, or just cooking together, enjoying one another's company, one another's minds.

They exited the flat, locking it behind them and heading down the stairs to the communal lobby that led to the pavement. They made their way to the subway, chattering about the latest episode of Supernatural they had watched the evening before, pondering what they would do if they lived in that fictional world. Steve fancied he would become a hunter of monsters, like the main characters Sam and Dean. Bucky felt he would prefer to help the victims of monster attacks, helping them to recover from the trauma and rebuild their lives.

The conversation continued right through their subway journey, until they finally reached their destination, emerging back into the sunlight at the subway station nearest to Central Park. Steve blinked in the bright sunlight, momentarily blinded as he oriented himself. Bucky looped his arm with Steve's, leading them to the entrance to the park, until at last they were surrounded by trees, flowers and a beautiful abundance of green.

They strolled down the path at a leisurely pace, the conversation petering off into comfortable silence as they enjoyed their surroundings. The park was busy, with couples, friends, families and solo
individuals all making the most of the unseasonably warm weather. The first flowers of spring were beginning to bloom; snowdrops and crocuses erupting from the earth, celebrating the end of winter. Steve tilted his head up, warming his cheeks using the sun’s rays, a contented smile on his face.

They reached a part of the path that was lined with trees on both sides, bathing them in dappled green light. This area of the park was quieter, more off the beaten track, with fewer people. Steve loved the tranquillity. He began looking at his surroundings in earnest, drinking in the serene sights, contemplating what would make a good photograph to use as a reference picture for his art. About 50 yards from the path, he could see a small pond with shrubbery behind it, the sun hitting the scene perfectly. There was a family having a picnic nearby, but it was perfectly possible to be able to take a photo of the pond without getting them in-frame. He pointed to the pond, drawing Bucky's attention to it.

"Let's go over there," said Steve.

Bucky looked over to the pond, smiling when he saw it. He nodded, and the two of them began to walk towards the pond, the soft springiness of the grass a nice contrast to the hard, tarmac path they had been walking on previously. Steve gazed at the pond with delight as they drew closer. There were lily pads on the surface, making it look almost like a Claude Monet painting. It would make a perfect photograph. He was already imagining how he would paint it, what combinations of paints he would have to mix in order to achieve the perfect colours.

He was so engrossed in the pond that he did not see the little girl until she was right in front of Steve and Bucky. She was around four years old, with long blonde hair fanning out behind her, giggling as she ran in a playful circle around them. She circled them once, before running back in the direction of her parents, who were keeping a watchful eye on her from their picnic spot nearby.

Steve did not see the parents.

He did not even see the girl's face.

His eyes were drawn to the design on the little girl's dress: white, patterned with daises, billowing as she ran, as if caught in a gentle desert wind.

Steve's stomach swooped with fear. His vision blurred, his skin prickling as the world dissolved around him, before re-solidifying sharply.

He was no longer in Central Park in New York City. He was in the hallway of the house with the red door in Fallujah. He looked down, his Army fatigues dirty with dust, grime and sand. Time seemed slowed, distorted. He could hear people talking behind him, but it was as if they were underwater, the words too muffled to make out.

He blinked.

The scene changed.

He was no longer in the house's hallway, but upstairs, his eyes fixed on the window. The sky was a perfect, cornflower blue. There was not a cloud in the sky. The window was open, the curtains – white, patterned with daisies – swayed gently in the breeze. Steve's eyes watered. His right arm was in agony. He was paralysed, unable to move, to turn his head. Fear – overwhelming, blinding, shit-your-pants fear – exploded in him. He knew that if he turned his head, if he turned around to face the room, he would see...

"Steve!"
Steve sucked in a huge lungful of air, discovering to his bewilderment that his face was pressed against lush green grass. Bucky was kneeling next to him, shaking him urgently. Steve looked around wildly, confused and disorientated, trying to scramble away from Bucky but finding that his limbs would not obey him properly. The flashback faded, the reality of Central Park returning to him, but the feeling of overwhelming panic remained, gripping him in its vice-like grip.

He could not breathe. He was hyperventilating. Tears were streaming down his face, huge wracking sobs bursting from his lips uncontrollably. There was an immense feeling of pressure on his chest; the pure, blinding panic suffocating him. He closed his eyes, shaking his head in an attempt to rid himself of the images of the perfect blue sky, the white curtain patterned with daisies billowing in the breeze. His heart was palpitating. Sweat was dripping down his sides, completely unrelated to the warm weather. As if from far away, he began to be aware of Bucky's voice talking to him, soothing and constant.

"You're OK," said Bucky gently. "You're safe. It's OK. Just listen to my voice, Steve. You're going to be alright. You're not in Iraq. You're home, you're safe..."

Steve opened his eyes, allowing Bucky to approach him cautiously, before the other man slowly wrapped his arms around Steve, stroking his back gently. Steve clung to him, his sobs slowly lessening as the panic attack began to recede, the memories of the flashback fading, no longer so intrusive, so intense, so visceral.

Now that the initial, overwhelming panic had gone, Steve ducked his head, ashamed that Bucky had seen him so vulnerable. Whilst Bucky had seen Steve wake from nightmares before, he had never before witnessed a flashback. Steve feared that Bucky would think of him as weak. He did not realise he had spoken aloud until Bucky replied.

"You're not weak," said Bucky, calmly but firmly.

A fresh sob burst from Steve's lips. He drew in a shuddering breath, clinging tightly to Bucky, anchoring himself in the present, reminding himself of reality. His right arm was shaking madly. He was covered in sweat.

Bucky did not seem to mind. He held Steve gently – until the memories faded, the trembling stopped, and Steve could function once again.

---

Bucky was completely supportive and respectful.

After Steve had sufficiently recovered from the flashback, he ordered a taxi to take them home, holding Steve's hand the whole way and then insisting that Steve get changed into more comfortable clothes as soon as they got back home. He made it clear that he was there to listen if Steve wanted to talk about his flashback, but that Steve was under no obligation to do so. Later in the afternoon, they showered together, followed by Bucky giving Steve a long massage to get some of the lingering tension out of his muscles.

When Bucky realised they did not have the right ingredients to cook with, he made sure that Steve was absolutely OK to be left alone for a while, before finally going out, giving Steve a long, gentle hug and a lingering kiss before leaving. He took slightly longer than Steve expected, but Steve did not mind, using the time to fully decompress from his experience, collapsing into bed and napping...
for several hours.

He awoke to the sound of sizzling meat. He opened his eyes groggily, his sense of time completely out of whack. The bedside clock said it was 7:20pm. He rolled out of bed, discovering that Bucky had covered him with a blanket whilst he was sleeping. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, cocooning himself in warmth as he shuffled out of the bedroom towards the kitchen.

The mouth-watering smell of steak hit him as he entered the kitchen. His eyes widened as he took in the sight before him. Bucky was setting two plates down on the kitchen table, fairy lights illuminating the room with a warm, intimate glow. He shuffled further into the room, his stomach growling when he realised that Bucky had cooked his favourite meal for dinner: steak, chips and peas. He looked up at Bucky in amazement, walking over to him and pulling him into a hug, touched by Bucky's unexpected act of kindness.

"You didn't have to do all this for me," said Steve, gesturing at the fairy lights and the food.

Bucky shrugged, smiling as he ushered Steve into his seat.

"I wanted to," said Bucky. "I did the steaks medium rare, just how you like it."

Steve picked up his knife and fork, cutting up a piece of steak and eating it, the succulent meat seeming to melt in his mouth, a perfect explosion of flavour. He hummed appreciatively, closing his eyes to savour the incredible taste. When he re-opened them, he found Bucky staring at him, a gentle smile on his face.

Steve smiled back earnestly, reflecting on everything Bucky had done for him that day; from calming him down after his flashback, to bringing him home and taking care of him, helping him to shower, massaging him, and finally cooking him his favourite meal. Bucky was mollycoddling him, but rather than feeling patronised, Steve appreciated it, seeing it for what it was: Bucky caring for him. It made Steve feel safe. There were no words that could do justice to the amount of gratitude that Steve felt.

"Thank you," said Steve, momentarily setting down his knife and fork. "Not just for this. For everything you've done today. You've been amazing."

Bucky shook his head graciously.

"It's nothing," he said. "I just want you to be OK."

He hesitated a moment, before pulling out some leaflets from his pocket, sliding them across the table towards Steve. They were leaflets advertising the VA and the services they offered to veterans, including counselling and meet-ups.

"I picked these up from the VA on my way back from the supermarket," said Bucky.

Steve picked up the first leaflet, skim-reading it cautiously.

"But the VA isn't on the way back from the supermarket," he said.

Bucky smiled sheepishly, holding up his hands.

"OK, you got me," he said. "I might have made a little detour." He paused briefly as Steve picked up the second leaflet, this one focusing specifically on mental health support for veterans. "Maybe you should go to one of their drop-in sessions," Bucky suggested gently. "I can come too, if you think it'd help to have the moral support."
Steve put down the leaflets slowly. He remembered all the times Sam had tried to convince him to go to the VA, to seek help, to get support. Perhaps, said a small voice in the back of his head, he really should be considering it.

He looked up at Bucky, who was waiting patiently for an answer, beautifully lit by the warm glow of the fairy lights.

"Thank you," said Steve.

On Monday morning, Steve got ready for work.

He reluctantly pulled on his clothes, wolfed down a quick breakfast, before walking through the bedroom to the en-suite bathroom to brush his teeth, straightening his tie in the mirror when he saw that it was wonky.

He blinked sleepily in the mirror, before realising what he had just seen when he had walked through the bedroom. He did a double-take, sticking his head back in the bedroom to stare at Bucky, who was still dressed in his pyjamas, lazily sipping a cup of coffee.

"How come you aren't getting ready for work?" asked Steve.

Bucky smiled back at him. He waved his hand vaguely, setting the mug of coffee on the bedside table beside him.

"I booked the day off," said Bucky. "I forgot to mention it, sorry."

Steve retreated back into the bathroom to brush his teeth, grumbling to himself. He wished he had the day off. After their incredible fuck session on Saturday and the exhaustion of Sunday's flashback, he did not feel as though he were rested at all. He sighed, spitting his toothpaste out into the sink. He had bills to pay, and Stark Industries had a never-ending stream of website updates. A day off would have to wait another day.

Finally finished in the bathroom, he gave Bucky a quick kiss, before slinging his work bag over his shoulder and heading out of the front door. He headed down the three flights of stairs and crossed the lobby, before emerging into a grey, drizzly morning in New York City. He turned his coat collar up against the cold wind, before a splash of colour in his peripheral vision grabbed his attention. He looked back at the front of his block of flats to see a strange piece of graffiti spray-painted onto the wall. It was a skull, with six tentacles sprouting from its mouth, surrounded by a solid circle. Steve stopped, staring at the symbol. The image stirred something in his memory, unsettlingly familiar, although he could not place it...

The honk of a car further down the road jerked Steve out of his reverie. Steve snapped out of his trance, tearing his eyes away from the graffiti, heading down the pavement to where he had parked his car. He clambered in, dumping his bag in the passenger seat, before joining the horrendous New York City traffic, turning on the radio to listen to some music as he crawled his way to work.

It was not a good drive. On top of the already dreadful congestion, a road traffic accident added a further 45 minutes to his commute, meaning that by the time he finally arrived at work, he was well and truly late. He ran to the lift, jabbing the button for his floor frantically, tapping his foot with pent-up frustration as the lift seemed to rise at a snail's pace, stopping every few floors to pick up and drop
off passengers. By the time Steve finally arrived at his floor, he was 70 minutes late. He ran to his manager's office, sweating from the stress and the exertion, knocking on the door once before bursting inside, full of apologies.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," he blurted out, still out of breath. "The traffic was awful, and then there was a road traffic accident which made things even worse, then there was a diversion, and then the elevator—"

His manager, Sharon, held up her hand, halting his rambling. To Steve's confusion, she smiled widely, seemingly unbothered by his incredible lateness.

"I appreciate the apology, but I wasn't really expecting to see you at all today," she said. "Or for the rest of this week, for that matter."

Steve stared at her, uncomprehending and bewildered. What was going on? Why was she not expecting him to come in for the next week? Was he fired? Had he been suspended? Being late was bad, he understood that, but it was not that bad, surely?

"Can we put him out of his misery and just tell him?" smiled Sharon. "He looks like a lost puppy."

It was only then that Steve realised that he and Sharon were not alone in her office. He turned around, finding to his astonishment that Bucky was lounging on a chair by the wall. Steve must have rushed straight past him in his haste to talk to Sharon. Strangely, Bucky was not dressed in his work clothes. Instead, he was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, a black leather jacket and walking boots. He gave Steve a wink, getting to his feet and grinning widely.

"I just booked us both a week's vacation, starting now," said Bucky. "Sharon here was good enough to approve your vacation request at such short notice. Thanks, Sharon."

Sharon smiled.

"No problem," she said. "Now leave. Enjoy your vacation."

Steve stared at them both, overjoyed and overwhelmed. Just that very morning he had been thinking how much he needed some time off, and Bucky, being as incredible as he was, had apparently sensed the very same thing and taken action. He wanted to kiss him silly – just maybe not in his manager's office. Coming to his senses, he thanked Sharon profusely, before exiting her office with Bucky, following him down the corridor back towards the lift.

"Where are we going?" he asked. "How are we getting there? Do you need me to transfer any money over to cover the cost?"

His words almost tripped over one another in his haste, the questions flying around in Steve's mind as the excitement of having a holiday finally began to sink in. He was going on holiday, with the love of his life. He was going to have a week alone with Bucky, no work, no chores, no distractions – just him and Bucky and wherever they were going. It was beyond thrilling.

Bucky laughed at Steve's excitement, slipping his hand into his as they entered the lift. He pressed the button to take them to the underground car park, kissing Steve's cheek briefly as he leant in to do so.

"There's a holiday cabin out in the countryside that my parents own," said Bucky. "I called them this morning asking if they had any vacancies coming up, and they said we can stay there for the next week. It's free of charge. It'll take a day of driving, but that's no problem; I like long drives. I rented us a hire car. No offence, but I'm not sure I trust your rust-bucket not to break down and leave us
stranded in the wilderness."

Steve spluttered, attempting to feel offended but unable to pull it off. Bucky was right; if the holiday cabin really was a full day's drive away, he was not sure he could trust his rickety old car not to simply fall apart en-route. Bucky smirked at his mock offence, seeing through it instantly and flicking Steve's nose gently in reprimand. They arrived at the underground car park, weaving their way through the cars until they came to a large SUV with a hire company logo on the side.

"Here's our ride," said Bucky. "I packed for both of us. All the homely stuff is already at the cabin, we basically just need to bring ourselves, our clothes and our food. I brought enough clothes to last us a week, some books and DVDs. I was thinking we could pop into a supermarket on the way."

Bucky was looking at Steve anxiously, as if seeking approval or confirmation. Steve realised that Bucky's previous relationship with Alex might have left him anxious about how Steve would react to new situations, such as going on holiday together, and instantly wrapped his arms around Bucky, hugging him tightly, before pulling back, letting Bucky see just how happy and excited he was with Bucky's idea.

"All of this sounds incredible, Buck," he said. "I can't believe you organised this whole thing this morning while I was stuck in traffic. I love it."

Bucky beamed at him, visibly thrilled that Steve was so excited for their holiday. He pulled the car keys out of his pocket, pressing the button to automatically unlock the vehicle, ushering Steve into the passenger seat. Steve buckled himself in, taking in the packed bags sitting in the back seats and smiling to himself, a warm glow settling in his chest.

The drive from New York City to the holiday cabin did indeed take most of the day. They stopped around lunchtime to have a break, eat some lunch and buy food for their week in the wilderness, before finishing off the rest of the journey. Steve watched out of the window as the scenery changed from urban to rural, before morphing into something even more beautiful: mountains and lakes and lush forest. The arrived at their destination just as the sun began to set, the scene bathed in a beautiful orange glow.

Steve clambered out of the car, stretching his stiff muscles, groaning with relief when his back cracked and popped. He rolled his shoulders, taking in the view: the snow-topped peaks of the mountains, the gorgeous green forest, the perfect tranquillity of the lake, the homely wooden cabins by the lakeside. Something stirred in his memory. Everything looked so familiar, so strangely reminiscent of a time gone by. He turned to Bucky, a small frown creasing his forehead.

"What did you say this place was called?" said Steve.

Bucky grabbed one of the bags from the back seat and slung it on his back, tossing a second bag to Steve.

"Springfall Lake," said Bucky. "Redmont National Park. My parents and I used to come here every summer when I was growing up. I'm sure there's some embarrassing photos lying around in the cabin somewhere, I'll dig them out."

Steve nodded, smiling. Hearing the name, he realised why this place seemed so familiar. He had been here before, as a 13-year-old boy – ill for most of the holiday, confined to the cabin and forced to make up stories around the other holidaymakers' lives as he watched them through the window. Hopefully, this time, he would not fall ill, and he would finally be able to appreciate the place's beauty, unimpeded.
They headed inside the largest cabin, Bucky unlocking the door with an old-looking key on his chain. Bucky switched the light on, flooding the holiday cabin with light. Steve felt that same warm glow he had felt earlier flare up once more. They had stepped straight into the cabin's lounge, which was beautiful, cosy and homely. There were thick rugs underfoot, a large fireplace and several doors leading off to other rooms that Steve assumed must include the bathroom, kitchen and bedroom. There was a large, squishy sofa on one side of the lounge, with a long bookcase and DVD case on the other. Taking his hand gently, Bucky took him on a tour of the cabin, showing him around each room, each as tastefully and warmly decorated as the last.

Finally, they reached the bedroom. Steve groaned aloud when he saw the King-sized bed. After the day's long journey, sinking down into a soft duvet sounded like Heaven. Bucky smirked next to him.

"Make yourself at home," said Bucky. "I'll bring in the last of our things."

Bucky left the room, his footsteps quickly fading. Steve wandered around the bedroom, examining with delight the art on the walls. Many of them were obviously paintings of Springfall Lake and the wider Redmont National Park. Steve was particularly enamoured by a four-part painting that showed the same scene in all four seasons, capturing the year-round beauty of the lake.

He came to a bookshelf, his eyes skimming across the titles, when his eyes were drawn towards a framed family photograph. He smiled, picking up the photograph to examine it more closely. He had never seen any pictures of Bucky as a child. As he drank in the photograph, he felt his blood pressure skyrocket.

No, it could not be...

The photograph showed a gangly teenage Bucky with his parents. He looked to be about 13 years old, with a wide, toothy smile and wild brown hair. It was not Bucky's face that Steve was drawn to, however; it was his swimming trunks. They were bright, rainbow-coloured – just as Steve remembered them to be, from those long days he had spent staring out of the window whilst ill.

The boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks had been the first boy Steve had ever fallen in love with; the first boy who had ever elicited feelings that he would later learn were lust and sexual arousal; the first boy who Steve had daydreamed about in a way he had never daydreamed about anyone else ever before.

The boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks had been Bucky.

He stared at the boy's features. He had never seen him close up, not close enough to see his face clearly, not close enough to memorise his features. Now that he could finally see the boy's face, the resemblance to Bucky was obvious.

A fierce feeling of love and joy exploded within him, afresh, as if he were once again a teenage boy falling in love for the first time. He remembered how deeply he had loved the boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks, how devastated he had felt when he finally became well enough to leave the cabin, only the find the boy and his family had gone. How fortunate was he, to get a second chance at that first love?

Bucky re-entered the bedroom, carrying the final two bags.

Without a word, Steve crossed the room in just a few long strides, clutching the photograph in one hand, and embracing Bucky tightly with the other. He buried his face in Bucky's brown hair, the exact same shade as the boy he had spent so many teenage nights fantasising about, and felt tears come to his eyes.
"It was you," said Steve.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

FORESHADOWING: Bucky was the boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks! Well done if you thought the childhood memory scene at the beginning of chapter 2 was important - and you get double points if you suspected that the boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks might have been Bucky.

THOUGHTS: Let me know your thoughts on this chapter in the comments below! I love hearing what you guys think!

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left such lovely comments on the last chapter. You're too kind <3

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Springfall Lake" and will be a massive pile of fluff and smut ;)

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. Feel free to say hi to me on there if you're feeling friendly!
Steve awoke the next morning to warm hands wandering down his chest.

He moaned sleepily, snuggling deeper beneath the warm duvet, displeased by the coolness of the hands on his skin. Bucky chuckled softly next to him, pulling the duvet over their heads so that it was fully covering them, cocooning them in warmth. Steve smiled, opening his bleary eyes to gaze at Bucky, drinking in the sight of the other man smiling back at him.

"Looking forward to day one of our vacation?" said Bucky.

Steve's eyes widened. On the border between sleep and wakefulness, he had entirely forgotten that they were not in New York City but, in fact, on holiday at Springfall Lake. A smile instantly spread over his face, finding renewed pleasure in the realisation that they had days and days alone together to look forward to.

"Fuck yeah," he said.

The corners of Bucky's eyes crinkled into a smile. He leant forwards, pressing a soft kiss to Steve's lips. Steve closed his eyes, savouring the kiss – the languidness of it, the taste of Bucky and the sweet pounding of his heart that accompanied it. He would never get bored of kissing Bucky. He could not imagine a more perfect way to start the day than with Bucky by his side. Bucky's tongue swept out, licking at the seam of Steve's lips, dipping into his mouth and meeting Steve's tongue.

Steve could feel his cock, already hard with morning wood, stiffen further, twitching between his legs. Bucky, it seemed, noticed it too, humming with appreciation as he continued kissing Steve, wrapping a hand lazily around Steve's length, squeezing a drop of pre-come out of his tip. Steve whined, rolling his hips, thrusting up into Bucky's hand. Bucky laughed softly against Steve's mouth, finally pulling away from the kiss with a smirk, a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Wanna start this vacation with a bang?" winked Bucky.

Steve groaned theatrically at the terrible pun. He hid his smile by pressing his lips to Bucky's own, kissing him heatedly. Bucky groaned, rolling on top of him and pressing their bodies together. Steve shivered with excitement, a wave of lust swelling inside him at the touch of Bucky's hard, heavy cock resting alongside his own. He reached out and gripped Bucky's ass, squeezing his firm, round cheeks whilst pulling him closer, grinding their groins together. Bucky moaned at Steve's touch, dipping his head down and latching onto Steve's neck, kissing and biting him gently.

Steve threw his head back with a moan, giving Bucky better access to his sensitive neck. Bucky licked and sucked, slowly making his way downwards, scooting down the bed to tug and play with Steve's nipples. Steve gasped as Bucky rubbed and squeezed the little nubs, stimulating them until they pebbled, sticking out small and hard. Bucky enveloped Steve's erect nipples with his mouth, sucking and licking at them, bathing them with his tongue, teasing them. Steve gasped. He had unusually sensitive nipples, for a man, something that Bucky took delight in taking advantage of.

Bucky chuckled. Giving Steve's nipples one final suck and tweak, he shuffled down further, settling between Steve's legs and gripping his muscular thighs. Steve spread his legs to give Bucky more room, moaning when Bucky rewarded him with a light kiss to his cock head. It was wonderful, but it
was not enough. He needed more. He could feel Bucky's breath teasing his sensitive head, his mouth right there and yet doing nothing. Steve whined, trying to thrust upwards in an attempt to nudge his cock into Bucky's mouth, to at least get some friction, but he found his movements impeded by Bucky's surprisingly strong arms pinning down his thighs.

"I'll suck you, but only if you keep still," said Bucky, a dark edge to his voice.

Steve shivered. He recognised that tone of voice. It was the voice Bucky had used as Winter Soldier when they had done kink at The Underworld. He whimpered, suddenly desperate to submit, to connect with Bucky in that way again, to allow Bucky to be his Dom and take him away to that beautiful state of mind known as sub space. He relaxed his muscles, fighting the urge to thrust upwards towards Bucky's waiting mouth, a thrill of pleasure going through him as he obeyed Bucky's command. Bucky hummed with satisfaction, obviously pleased with Steve's obedience.

"Good boy," said Bucky, before wrapping his lips around Steve's cock and sucking hard.

Steve let out a strangled moan as Bucky forcibly sucked up the pre-come that had been leaking from him, his cock twitching with pleasure. Bucky began to bob his head up and down, slicking up Steve's shaft with his saliva, the warmth and pressure of his mouth surrounding Steve's cock in a way that had his eyes rolling back in pleasure. Bucky moaned as he sucked Steve down deep, the vibrations from his throat travelling through Steve's cock, almost making him break the no-movement rule.

Seemingly impressed by Steve's stoicism, Bucky rewarded him by wrapping his hand around Steve's cock, jerking him off whilst he sucked him hard, ensuring that every inch of his cock was receiving stimulation. Steve screwed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth against this new onslaught of pleasure. Bucky was driving him wild. The sensation on his cock was incredible. Bucky was a talented cock-sucker, using the perfect amount of suction, alternating between taking him deep in his mouth and concentrating on his sensitive head. If Steve was not careful, he would be coming down Bucky's throat in no time.

It was then that Bucky took him by surprise, pressing a wet finger against Steve's tight hole. Steve jumped in surprise, his hips jerking upwards out of instinct, almost choking Bucky with his cock. Bucky immediately stopped sucking him, pulling off Steve's cock with a wet pop whilst removing his hand from around his shaft. Steve whined at the sudden loss of contact, his cock missing the stimulation immediately, aching with lust. Bucky tutted him, shaking his head, a dark smirk playing at his lips.

"I told you I'd only suck you if you kept still," said Bucky.

Steve whimpered. Between his legs, his cock was almost painfully erect. Did Bucky want him to beg? On the one hand, the mere idea of it made him cringe with shame, but another, more primal, part of him was more than willing to debase himself by begging if it could mean the return of Bucky's incredible mouth on his cock. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he did not realise that Bucky had moved until he heard the familiar click of the bottle of lube opening. He shook himself from his reverie to find that Bucky was spreading lube over his fingers, a sly smirk playing at his lips.

"You never asked what I'd do if you moved and ended the blow job," said Bucky.

Steve licked his dry lips.

"What would you do?" he said.
Bucky's smile widened. Never breaking eye contact with Steve, he pressed a slick finger at Steve's entrance, tracing his rim in light, teasing circles. Steve's breath quickened, his internal muscles fluttering at the promise of being penetrated. He stared down at Bucky, unable to look away from his dark blue eyes.

"I'd fuck you, of course," replied Bucky.

Steve groaned, the groan changing to a gasp as Bucky's finger pushed gently inside, breaching his tight rim. Bucky's free hand slipped into Steve's, allowing Steve to hold on tightly as Bucky began to work his finger in and out, going a little deeper each time, allowing Steve to slowly get accustomed to the sensation of being filled. Several long minutes later, Bucky's finger was buried to the hilt, stroking Steve's inner walls lovingly as Steve breathed hard. Bucky's finger was teasingly rubbing against his prostate, that little bundle of nerves on fire with pleasure, his entire body twitching with every minute movement of Bucky's finger, every delicious bit of friction, as he rubbed constantly and relentlessly. On one particularly pleasurable pass of Bucky's finger over his prostate, Steve let out a loud moan, unable to control himself.

"Aww, my poor Stevie," crooned Bucky. "Is one finger not enough for you?"

Before Steve could reply, Bucky was pushing a second finger in alongside the first, causing Steve to almost choke on his breath. Bucky worked him open quickly and efficiently, two fingers quickly becoming three until Steve was writhing with pleasure, a stream of pleas and gasps and oh f*cks falling from his lips at an almost constant rate. Bucky's fingers pumped in and out of him rapidly, dragging across his prostate with every pass, making him shake, almost delirious with lust. Finally, Bucky withdrew his fingers, shuffling up the bed until he was on top of Steve, his hot, thick cock resting on Steve's abdomen.

"Are you ready?" whispered Bucky.

Steve nodded, bending his knees and spreading his legs wide. He kissed Bucky, closing his eyes and concentrating on the feel of the other man's lips on his own, their stubble scratching together. Bucky slicked up his cock with another squirt of lube, before finally he was at Steve's entrance, the blunt head of his cock pressing forwards gently, nudging at Steve's wet hole. Steve gasped as Bucky sank in, inch after inch sliding home until he was fully inside, his balls resting on Steve's ass, the sensation of being completely filled intense and overwhelming.

He moaned against Bucky's lips, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him close. He wanted as much skin-to-skin contact as possible. He wanted to feel that visceral connection as they made love, their damp skin pressed together, the undulation of Bucky's muscles as he thrust, the pounding of their heartbeats as they rocked together. Bucky set a slow, gentle pace, interlacing his fingers with Steve's, peppering his lips, his face, his neck, with kisses. Steve closed his eyes, kissing him back, feeling Bucky with all his remaining senses: the hotness of his skin, the texture of his body hair, the scent of him, the bulk of his body, and every glorious inch that was thrusting in and out, massaging his prostate, a crescendo of pleasure building inside him.

When they finally came, it was together, Steve spurting all over their chests as Bucky came inside him. Their bodies were pressed together, their fingers and hearts entwined, the same three words falling from both sets of lips, over and over:

I love you, I love you, I love you...
The remainder of their first day at Springfall Lake was spent exploring the area.

Thankfully, Bucky had had the foresight to bring walking boots for them both, as the terrain was rugged. Springfall Lake was in a valley, surrounded by beautiful, snow-topped mountains. Around the lake was a forest of lush evergreen trees, the area criss-crossed with walking trails that took the walker on long, rambling, gorgeous routes. Occasionally, there were clearings between the trees, little oases of calm where the sun shone through to reveal a woodland floor covered in a blanket of flowers. Steve could understand why Bucky's parents had bought a holiday home there; it was simply stunning.

It was late afternoon when Bucky suggested swimming in the lake. Steve had originally been sceptical – it was early spring, meaning that the temperatures were not exactly scorching – but Bucky had pleaded with him, eventually convincing him with promises of a natural hot spring that heated the water in one particular part of the lake to a pleasantly warm temperature. Steve cast a cursory glance around his surroundings, making sure that there was no one in the immediate vicinity who might be offended by them stripping off. He need not have bothered; it was not holiday season, and the nearest permanent settlement was miles away. They were completely, blissfully alone in the valley.

He and Bucky stripped off, wading into the lake at the spot where Bucky had assured him there was a natural hot spring. He was true to his word. Steve could see the warm water bubbling up from its underground source, the water all around him as warm as a bath. He closed his eyes, letting out a sigh as he immersed himself in the warm water, feeling his muscles relax. He floated lazily on his back, opening his eyes to watch Bucky doing the same, a smile spreading over his face as he watched him. The perfection of the warm water made it feel almost like getting a spa treatment. No, this was better, in fact, as there was not the crippling social awkwardness usually associated with going to a spa.

He was pulled from his thoughts by Bucky flipping over onto his front and swimming up to him. Steve smiled at him, taking in the beautiful sheen of freshwater on his naked skin, the way his wet hair looked darker, flattened slick against his head. He puckered his lips as Bucky finally reached him, expecting a kiss or some other affectionate gesture. What he did not expect was to be splashed in the face by a handful of water. He spluttered with indignation as Bucky swam strongly away, laughing as he went, twisting around periodically to see if Steve was following him. Steve glared at him, setting his facial expression to one that meant business: the game was on.

They played in the water for the next hour, chasing one another, diving and swimming in the warm water, reaching out and holding one another from time to time when they could not resist the other's nakedness. It was playful, innocent, as if they were catching up on the time they had lost as teenagers, when Steve had watched Bucky from afar and fallen in love with him for the very first time. As the hour drew to a close, they finally emerged from the lake, tired out by their exertion, drying themselves using their boxers and then slipping into the rest of their clothes commando, their sodden underwear stuffed into the pockets of their coats.

They made their way back down the trail that led to their cabin, the evening light bathing them in an orange glow. When they finally reached the cabin, Bucky tugged at Steve’s hand, bringing them to a halt. Steve turned around, about to ask why Bucky had stopped them, when his lips parted with awe. Bucky was facing the sunset, his face bathed in a beautiful warm hue as he drank in the sight before them. Steve turned to look at the view too, his heart almost skipping a beat at the glorious sight.

The sun was setting between two mountains, the deep orange light spilling between the two peaks
and illuminating the valley like a cascade. The surface of the lake reflected the apricot hue, dazzling them and throwing up light that seemed to illuminate the scene like a second sun. Steve could not tear his eyes away from the beautiful landscape, searching for words to express just how radiant, how special, that moment was, but found himself coming up short, unable to find the words that could do it justice.

Bucky slipped a hand into Steve's, the final piece of the puzzle, making the almost-perfect moment perfect. Steve squeezed Bucky's hand, his heart swelling with love – love for that perfect moment in time, the perfect man by his side, this true and heart-felt sense of love and contentment.

When Steve spoke, it was without thinking, the words falling from his lips as naturally and easily as breathing.

"I can't think of a better place to be in the whole world," he said, "than right here, right now, with you."

Several days later, they decided to go for a picnic.

They spent the morning together in the kitchen, getting in one another's way as they prepared their food. Steve loved the domesticity of it; the smell of the food, the teasing, the tender touches as they cooked together. It was intimate in a way he could imagine them still being in years to come. The food they ended up with was an eclectic assortment of bits and bobs, since neither could decide what he wanted: they made sandwiches, pies (both sweet and savoury varieties), cheesy pasta and, because Bucky wanted to be healthy, salad.

By the time they had made all the food and packed everything up in preparation for their picnic, it was almost noon. They divided the load between them and pulled on their shoes and jackets, a thrill of excitement going through Steve at the thought of eating their delicious home-made produce in the beautiful wilderness. There was something supremely satisfying about eating home-cooked food, made all the more wonderful by the fact he was on holiday, with his boyfriend, surrounded by such naturally-stunning scenery. His soul sang, bursting with happiness.

They stepped outside, Bucky locking the cabin's front door behind them. Steve tilted his face up to the sun, closing his eyes and basking in the heat. The weather was gloriously sunny and unusually warm for spring. It felt almost like early summer. Bucky leant in and planted a kiss to Steve's cheek. Steve opened his eyes to find Bucky smiling at him, his expression happy and carefree. Steve smiled back, pressing a kiss to Bucky's temple, unable to resist his kissable face.

They set off down the trail, walking along the path, by the lakeside, the blue sky wide and clear above them. They walked, following the curve of the lake's edge, until they came to a clearing. The ground was flat, spring flowers blossoming in clumps around them. They both came to a stop, coming to the same conclusion that they had found their picnic spot. Bucky removed his rucksack from his back, pulling out the picnic blanket and spreading it out on the ground, careful to choose an area where there were no flowers to squash. They both unloaded their food, laying it out in front of the blanket to create a buffet. Removing their shoes, they sat down on the picnic blanket.

From there, Steve could see the holiday cabins, across the water. A strange sense of déjà vu came over him. He had not been to this part of the lake before, he was sure, and yet something about the scene felt strangely familiar. He stared at the holiday cabins, puzzling it out, until it slowly dawned
upon him. This spot was where he had seen Bucky and his family sitting and swimming when he had first seen them, whilst he had been confined to the cabin, ill. He had watched Bucky, looking relaxed and carefree in his rainbow-coloured swimming trunks, and started to fantasise about befriending him.

"This is where I first saw you," said Steve. "You were here with your parents, swimming and relaxing."

Bucky smiled. The first night they had arrived, Steve had explained to him how they had both stayed here at the same time as teenagers; how Steve had pined to go out and speak to him as he watched the holidaymakers enjoy themselves through the window.

"Aww, so sweet," said Bucky, his eyes twinkling cheekily. "Did I give you your first boner?"

Steve snorted, grabbing a slice of meat pie to avoid revealing just how close Bucky had got to the truth. The romantic moment well and truly ruined, they tucked into their lunch, slipping into easy conversation as they grazed on their eclectic selection of foods. They talked about their favourite foods, about various cooking disasters they had had over the years, about the foods that reminded them of childhood. Bucky reminisced about his mother's Russian cooking. The next time he went to visit his parents for the holidays, Steve should come with him, Bucky suggested. It would be worth it just so Steve could sample his mother's delicious cooking.

By the time they finally finished their picnic lunch, it was almost an hour and a half later. They put the leftover food and rubbish into their rucksacks so as not to let the wind blow any of it away and spoil the pristine environment. They lay back on the blanket, looking up at the blue sky, letting a light breeze blow over them. Steve rested his hands on his full stomach, a feeling of contentment washing over him. He had a full belly, the sunshine was warm on his face, and Bucky was lying by his side, looking up at the cloudless sky. At that moment, he could not think of anything that could make him happier than he was right then. They lay there in companionable silence for a long while, until Steve was almost dozing off to sleep, when Bucky suddenly spoke.

"What's your dream job?" asked Bucky. "Like, if you could be anything in the world?"

Steve considered it briefly, the answer coming to him quickly. The answer was obvious, when he thought about it. However, it was not something he particularly felt comfortable admitting. He had been raised to believe that art was merely a hobby, not a serious career path, and although he knew intellectually that that was nonsense, he still could not shake the innate feeling of slight ridiculousness that he always felt whenever he brought up his art. Blushing slightly, Steve pushed away the misplaced embarrassment and pushed the words over his lips.

"I'd love to be an artist," he said. "I love sketching and painting. If I could turn it from a hobby into a career, that'd be the dream."

Steve suddenly found himself nervous, lest Bucky laugh at him for having such a frivolous, fanciful ambition. Bucky did no such thing. He propped himself up on his elbow to stare at Steve with awe. His blue eyes were wide, full of excitement.

"That's awesome! I'd love to see your art," said Bucky. "If you feel comfortable showing me, of course."

Steve nodded, smiling as he let out a breath he had not even realised he had been holding. He kissed Bucky gently, the two of them losing themselves in the kiss for a while, licking at one another's tongues languidly. Finally pulling apart, they settled back down on the picnic blanket, interlacing their fingers as they lay next to one another.
"What about you?" said Steve. "What would you do for a job, if you could do anything at all?"

Bucky was silent for several minutes as he considered the question. He chewed his lip thoughtfully, gazing up at the cloudless sky.

"I'd love to do a job that helps people," he said finally. "Especially victims of crime. Maybe a police officer, or a counsellor."

Steve was about to make a joke about how sexy Bucky would look in a police officer's uniform, before glancing over and seeing the wistful expression on the other man's face. Swallowing the smutty comment, he went for sincerity instead, squeezing Bucky's hand and smiling tenderly.

"You'd be awesome as either of those," said Steve.

They were more than mere words; he meant it. Bucky had a kindness to him that was quite unique; a willingness to help others and support those weaker than himself that made Steve sure that he would be a wonderful police officer or counsellor, should he ever seriously consider either profession. Bucky smiled in response, his eyes lighting up at Steve's words of praise.

Steve gazed back at him, a question forming in his mind. He held his tongue, unsure if he should voice it, or if doing so would make Bucky upset. The last thing he wanted to do was spoil their day by bringing up a potentially sensitive topic. He looked over at Bucky, taking in his calm, relaxed demeanour. He seemed strong and stable. If Steve was ever going to ask the question, now seemed as ideal an opportunity as he was ever going to get.

"Have you considered having counselling?" Steve asked tentatively. "About your relationship with Alex?"

Bucky's hand twitched in Steve's. He stared at the sky for a long moment, before shaking his head.

"No," said Bucky. "I try not to think about him. Whenever I do, I just feel like shit."

"Maybe that's a sign that counselling would be a good idea," said Steve.

Bucky rolled onto his side, looking at Steve. Steve tried to decipher his expression, but was unable to do so. He looked cautious, guarded, as if keeping his emotions under tight control.

"Maybe," said Bucky, noncommittally.

Recognising that the conversation was over, Steve dropped the subject. He gazed at Bucky, suddenly struck by his beauty. The sun shone through his brown hair, giving it an almost ethereal glow. His eyes caught the colour of the lake and reflected it; a deep, vibrant blue. Steve reached out and cupped Bucky's face, stroking the soft skin, the stubble, the warmth of him. He leant forwards, pressing his lips to Bucky's and kissing him gently. Bucky's eyes fluttered closed, his arms reaching out and pulling Steve down on top of him, their bodies pressed together as they began making out.

They kissed for a long while, tongues caressing one another, hands wandering over each other's bodies, exploring one another. Bucky's hands stroked down Steve's back, cupping his ass cheeks and pulling him closer, drawing him between Bucky's legs. Steve moaned, grinding down, rubbing their bulging crotches together, their cocks visibly straining against the material of their trousers. He dipped his head down, sucking gently at Bucky's neck, tasting the sweat on his skin and inhaling the scent of him.

"Fuck me," moaned Bucky. "I brought lube."
Steve pulled back in surprise, staring down at Bucky. His cock twitched with excitement at the idea of fucking him, right there in the wilderness, exposed. It was a tantalising thought, but it was far more risqué than anything they had ever done before.

"Here?" said Steve.

"Please," begged Bucky. "There's no one else for miles and miles. Fuck me. Touch me the way you wanted to when you first saw me here, all those years ago."

Steve swallowed hard. There was no one else staying in any of the other cabins. The lake was so quiet that he was sure they would hear the approach of another vehicle. They did not have to worry about being seen. Steve could fuck him out in the open and no one would ever know. His cock throbbed in his boxers, desperate to be released.

"You want me to top?" croaked Steve, his lips dry.

Bucky grabbed the back of his head, pulling him down for a bruising kiss. By the time they finished kissing, they were both breathless.

"I trust you," said Bucky.

Steve did not need any more convincing. He fumbled with his zipper as Bucky reached inside his rucksack, pulling out the bottle of lube.

When they were finally ready, Steve pushed slowly against Bucky's entrance, entering him slowly, gently, with the water lapping on the shoreline behind them, the open sky above them, the quietness of the forest enveloping them like a blanket; perfection.

Far too quickly, their holiday came to an end.

Steve and Bucky went through the cabin, collecting together their scattered belongings and packing them away into their bags. It was hard to believe that an entire week had gone by so fast. They had gone out walking every day, cooked all their meals from scratch, made love at least every night. They were both feeling well and truly relaxed, the holiday having done them both a world of good in terms of their well-being.

Springfall Lake was now one of Steve's favourite places, both because of the memories (old and new) associated with it, and because of the natural beauty of the place itself. He had taken over 100 photographs, for use as reference pictures for his art and also as a keepsake. He wanted to have these photographs, to be able to look at them in the future and remember.

Bucky returned from a final sweep of the cabin, tossing Steve a jumper that they had missed previously.

"That's everything," said Bucky.

"Did you check the bathroom?" said Steve.

"Yes."

"Did you check we didn't leave the oven on?"
"Yes."

"Did you turn off the power?"

"Yes, mother," said Bucky, kissing Steve on the nose. "Now shut up and get in the car, before I decide to leave you here."

They laughed. Steve carried the bags to the car as Bucky locked up the cabin and made a final circuit of the building to make sure they had remembered to close all the windows. Finally, Bucky joined Steve in the car, starting up the engine and slowly pulling out onto the track that led to the main road. Steve rested his forehead against the cool window, taking one last final look at the lake, the mountains, the lush green forest. They trundled slowly down the uneven track, making their way back towards civilisation.

Neither of them saw the black-clad figure watching them from the treeline, in the distance.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

FLUFF: I hope you enjoyed the fluffiness of this chapter! It's nice to indulge in a bit of fluffy whimsy every now and then :)

OTHER FLUFF FICS: If you want to read some other soft, fluffy fics by me, you can check them out here:

The Adventures Of Steve Rogers, Newsboy Extraordinaire (11,161 words) - 7-year-old Steve has Selective Mutism. When Steve finds himself confronting a dangerous criminal, will he find the courage within himself to save the day - and even find his voice?

The Black Widow Ice Cream Parlour (3,746 words) - Natasha meets one of the people whose lives she has saved, and finally gets the appreciation she deserves.

So, You Like Cats? (1,697 words) - Sam has a confession to make. It could make or break his and T'Challa's relationship. It all comes down to one question: Do you like cats?

THOUGHTS: What were your thoughts on this chapter? Do you think this is the start of a happier period in these characters' lives, or does it feel more like the calm before the storm? Who do you think was watching them at the end? Let me know your theories in the comments below!

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left comments on the last chapter. The fact that this story has built a community of loyal readers fills my heart with joy <3

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Hunted"... What do you think that could that mean?

TUMBLR: I am on Tumblr as ao3-elle1991. Feel free to follow me or send me messages/asks on there if you're feeling friendly :)
Going back to work was a shock to the system.

The day began with traffic jams and angry drivers. Steve had to honk his horn several times during his commute, growing more and more frustrated at the poor driving of others as they attempted reckless manoeuvres just to save a few seconds of time. He sat sullenly in his car, sticking to the rules of the road, even though it felt like no one else was. He sighed. He could almost taste the pollution. A sudden downpour did nothing to improve Steve's already dampened mood, and when he finally arrived at work, he found his department in minor meltdown.

The website updates were coming in thick and fast – just as it seemed that the content management system that they used to update Stark Industries' website had dramatically slowed down following a software update. He ground his teeth, his patience stretching to its limits as he attempted to upload the most urgent updates nonetheless, wrestling with the buggy system. His job seemed even more boring and frustrating than he remembered, especially following the peaceful tranquillity of Springfall Lake. The only comfort was that he was working on the Russian website, meaning that he was in constant email contact with Bucky, who was consoling him with cat pictures at the end of each email.

By the time lunchtime rolled around, he was more than ready to leave his desk and make his way to the cafeteria, intent on stuffing himself with whatever comfort food he could get his hands on – healthy eating be damned. He entered the canteen and got himself a plateful of beans and chips, sitting down at his usual table, waiting for Bucky and Natasha to join him as per usual. He was joined several minutes later by Bucky, who flopped down in the seat opposite Steve's, looking as tired as Steve felt.

"Can we go back on vacation?" said Steve.

Bucky laughed wearily as he dug into his food: a chicken Caesar salad.

"Oh my God, yes, please," said Bucky. "Natasha's off, which means I've got to do her urgent translations as well as my own. You can't rush translation! Quality work takes time."

Steve sat up a little straighter. He remembered how Natasha had not answered her phone when he had tried to contact her the week before, to inform her that he had found her scarf at the flat. For her to now be missing from work was worrying.

"Natasha's not at work?" said Steve anxiously. "Do you know why?"

Bucky shrugged.

"I asked our manager, but he just said Natasha's on leave," said Bucky. "He didn't elaborate. She must be OK, though, otherwise he'd have said something."

Steve nodded slowly, still feeling uneasy. He did not have long to dwell on it, however, as all too soon their lunch hour was over. He kissed Bucky briefly on the lips, before heading back up to his floor to continue with the website updates. The slowness of the system meant that he ended up staying at work an extra hour in order to upload all the most urgent updates, meaning that by the time he headed down to the staff car park, he was well and truly exhausted.
He was so tired, in fact, that he did not see the scrap of paper tucked under his windscreen wiper until he was sat in the driver's seat, buckling up his seat belt. He stared at the piece of paper in bewilderment. What...? It could not be a parking ticket, surely? He was parked in Stark Industries' car park, his staff badge clearly visible in the window. Unable to believe it, his temper flared after his long, frustrating day. He stomped out of his car, grabbing the scrap of paper more forcefully than was strictly necessary.

He opened it, his hot temper shifting to something much colder, much closer to fear, as he read the message, neatly hand-written in black pen.

*Stay away from my boy.*

His hand began to shake. He stared at the neatly-written words; five simple words that carried so much more meaning than the sum of their letters. The note was written by Alex – it had to be. There was no other explanation, no one else who could possibly have any reason to leave such a sinister note tucked into Steve's windscreen wiper. *My boy...* Alex was jealous; possessive. He was referring to Bucky. Steve's blood ran cold.

He felt afraid. His stomach churned. He felt sick. He felt, too, a rising sense of anger. How dare Alex talk about Bucky as if he were a possession, as if he were a mere object, whom he owned? How dare he tell Steve to stay away from him, to act as a protector, as if Steve were dangerous, after everything Alex had put Bucky through? How dare he think he could insert himself into their lives? He had no right, no right at all.

Steve shivered, an uncomfortable wave of anxiety washing over him as he came to a disturbing realisation. Assuming Alex had left the note himself, that meant he had been there, just hours beforehand, at his and Bucky's place of work, uncomfortably close. It meant, too, that he had somehow tracked down Steve's workplace, and somehow discovered the identity of Steve's car.

Something moved in the shadows.

Steve span around.

There was nothing there, but Steve's heart did not stop racing until a long while later.

Over the next few days, Steve tried his best to push Alex's note out of his mind. He did not tell Bucky about the note; he knew that it would achieve nothing other than causing the other man to panic, which he ideally wanted to avoid.

He distracted himself with painting, which he was now becoming more open about, much to Bucky's interest. Previously, Steve had only painted when Bucky had been out of the flat, feeling embarrassed about his hobby. Now that his artistic ambitions had been brought out into the open following their conversation about their dream careers at Springfall Lake, however, he felt able to paint openly.

Bucky was fascinated by the painting process. He loved watching Steve work. He was in awe of the
process, enraptured by the way Steve built the image, the way the scene would slowly come to life before their eyes, becoming more detailed, more vibrant, more life-like. He complemented Steve's artistic style, the colourful and detailed realism of it, the beauty that was captured within the brushstrokes. Encouraged by Bucky's positive feedback, Steve put down his next creation on a larger-than-average canvas. He could tell the exact moment when Bucky recognised what he was painting, the quietest of gasps coming from his lips as it clicked in his mind: Springfall Lake.

By the time Thursday rolled around, Steve was in a much better mood and had largely stopped thinking about Alex's note.

Thursday was a good day. The bug that had been slowing down Stark Industries' content management system had finally been fixed, meaning that Steve was able to upload the latest website updates with much less frustration than earlier in the week. He actually enjoyed himself, managing to get an extra batch of updates done, a feeling of satisfaction going through him as he saw his to-do list had shrunk dramatically, to much shorter than its usual length. By the time the work day was over, he was in high spirits. He was just entering the lift to go down to the staff car park when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He pulled it out, a smile spreading over his face as he read the text.

From: Sam

Hey. It's been a while. Wanna go for a run after work?

Steve tapped out an affirmative reply and pressed send, humming to himself as the lift finally reached the car park level. He exited the lift and made his way across the large car park, wrapping his coat closer around himself as a chilly breeze whistled around him. He had just reached his car and unlocked the driver's seat door, his hand wrapped around the door handle, when his stomach clenched with shock, his eyes widening as he spotted something very wrong, very different, about his car door.

Three words were carved into the metal.

**I'M WARNING YOU**

He stared at the message, struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. He felt a prickling feeling on the back of his neck. He spun around, expecting to see an assailant but finding no one. His heart was hammering in his chest. Sweat erupted on his forehead. He fumbled with the car door, collapsed into the driver's seat and planted his forehead on the wheel, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to gather his racing thoughts.

He felt claustrophobic. He felt upset, deeply upset, that his dead father's car had been vandalised. It felt like an act of desecration, a gross violation of his father's memory. It was terrifying, too, that Alex had returned to Stark Industries, sought out Steve's car for a second time, and left another message – this time using a knife or some other sharp object in order to carve into the metal. He did not even know Alex. They had never met. For him to be leaving Steve increasingly menacing messages was insane. He felt as though he was being hunted.

He did not know what to do. He had never been up against anything like this before. In a way, even
Iraq had been easier. At least, in Iraq, he had known the rules of the game. Shoot the terrorists. It had been physical, military, impersonal. This intimate, psychological warfare that Alex was waging, on the other hand, felt completely different. Alex was inserting himself into Steve's life; a creeping, insidious presence. It was disturbing in a way that was unlike anything Steve had ever experienced before. He wondered if this was how Bucky felt all the time; if he was constantly on edge, fearing when and where Alex would next emerge from the shadows.

He could feel a panic attack forming. His heart beat was thundering in his ears, his breathing becoming rapid and shallow. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, his eyes still clamped shut, blocking out all external stimuli, focusing on getting his breathing under control. Inhale, hold, exhale... Inhale, hold, exhale... He was drenched in sweat, his arm was shaking, but the breathing exercises were working, gradually slowing down his heart beat until it was no longer racing quite so alarmingly. Inhale, hold, exhale... So focused was Steve on his internal, physiological state, that he did not realise someone was in the car with him, until–

"Hello, Steve."

Steve's eyes flew open immediately. He gasped so hard that he almost swallowed his tongue, his fist swinging out to meet the man sat next to him, in the front passenger seat. Sam caught Steve's fist with his hand, blocking the punch, his eyebrows flying up with surprise. He looked almost offended, as if he did not realise that just turning up in a person's car without warning was not a desirable behaviour.

"Woah!" said Sam. "Is that a way to greet your running buddy?"

Steve stared at him, bewildered as to what on earth was going on. Alex's message had ramped up his paranoia to the max. Suddenly, everything seemed like a threat, even the appearance of one of his best friends. Speaking of which...

"How the fuck did you get in here?" demanded Steve. "Are you with Alex?"

Sam blinked at him, looking baffled.

"I used the door..." said Sam slowly. When Steve did not respond, a small worry wrinkle creased Sam's forehead. "You said you were up for a run. I was nearby and figured I'd try my luck and see if I could catch you here. I came down to the car park and saw a blue 1965 Volkswagen Sedan Beetle. Do you know the last time anyone else drove one of those things? 1965. So I figured it was you, came over, saw you hunched over in your seat and hopped in."

Steve began to relax. Simply hearing Sam's voice always had a soothing effect on Steve. He shook himself, berating himself for ever having been scared of Sam, despite the other man's rather sudden materialisation beside him whilst Steve had been concentrating too hard on controlling his breathing to notice anything else. He was thankful Sam had been strong and fast enough to block Steve's punch. He did not need a friend's busted face adding to his list of worries.

"Sorry," muttered Steve.

Sam shrugged, dismissing Steve's apology with a wave of his hand.

"What's wrong?" said Sam. "And who's Alex?"

Agonised, Steve dithered, paralysed by indecision. He had promised Bucky that he would not tell anyone about his past with Alex. He had made a promise, and he felt strongly he should keep his word. That, however, had been before Alex had started stalking him and leaving him threatening
messages. The situation felt different now; more volatile, more dangerous. He did not want to break 
his promise to Bucky, yet at the same time he felt as though his hand was being forced by Alex's 
actions. He had to tell someone what was going on, if only to alleviate the pressure of struggling with 
it alone. He did not want to burden Bucky. Natasha was unavailable. Therefore, Sam seemed the 
only viable candidate. He looked across at Sam, appraising his large brown eyes, wide with concern. 
He trusted Sam. Twisting around in his seat to scan the car park, making sure no one was nearby, 
Steve turned to face him.

"You can't tell anyone about this..." said Steve.

Once he began talking, he found the words could not stop. They flowed one after the other, like a 
torrent. He told Sam about how Bucky had been in an abusive relationship with his ex-boyfriend 
Alex. He told him how Alex texted Bucky on an almost daily basis, sending crude sexual messages 
and requests for Bucky to come back to him. He told him how Alex had started leaving Steve sinister 
messages warning him to stay away from Bucky. By the time he was finished, he was exhausted, the 
energy drained from him as effectively as if he had engaged in a vigorous bout of exercise. Sam was 
staring at him in barely disguised horror.

"That's fucked up," said Sam, sounding shocked.

Steve nodded tiredly.

"I know..." he said.

"That's... fucking up," Sam repeated.

Now that some of the initial shock had worn off, he looked in equal parts disgusted and furious. His 
hands were balled into fists, as if he wanted to come face-to-face with Alex and show him exactly 
what he thought of him.

"You need to report this bastard to the police," said Sam.

Steve shook his head reluctantly.

"Bucky doesn't want to go to the police," said Steve. "Even thinking about Alex freaks him out. He 
just wants to move on with his life."

"Fuck what Bucky wants!" Sam said angrily. "His ex is a psycho!"

Steve thunked his head against the steering wheel miserably. In his gut, he agreed with Sam. By 
tracking down Steve's workplace, his car, and by leaving him threatening messages not once but 
twice, Alex had proven himself to be as resourceful and dangerous as he was obsessive. It was a 
potentially lethal combination, especially if Alex decided to escalate things further. Steve wanted to 
go to the police, to report everything Alex had done, but more importantly he did not want to go 
against Bucky's wishes. Bucky had made it clear that he did not want any further interaction with 
Alex, and Steve was not going to force him to do something so significant against his will – doing so 
would make him no better than Alex.

"I don't know what to do," whispered Steve.

Sam locked eyes with him, gripping him by the shoulder.

"If something like this happens again, call me," said Sam calmly. "I'll come over. We can go to the 
police station together. Bucky never has to know."
That night, Steve had another nightmare.

He was running, his heart hammering in terror as his Army boots pounded rhythmically against the dusty ground. He was ducking and weaving through a maze of derelict buildings, his heart in his mouth, trying desperately to shake off his pursuer.

He was being chased, relentlessly, by Him.

Without pausing to check how far He was behind him, Steve ran into a building that looked relatively intact, slamming the door shut behind him and pulling a heavy bolt into place. He closed his eyes, his back to the door, his chest heaving as he took a moment to catch his breath. He whispered a short prayer, desperately begging to any God that might be listening that he had managed to close the door before He had spotted him.

Steve had no such luck.

The window to Steve's right shattered as He flung Himself through it, unfeeling to the pain as shards of glass lodged into His flesh. Of course He would feel no pain, thought Steve; He was dead. He walked slowly towards Steve, His military fatigues soaked with blood. Steve tried to run but found his legs immobile, his body completely frozen with terror. He squeezed his eyes shut, a sob clawing its way up his throat as he heard His footsteps stop right in front of him.

"Look at me," He said.

Steve shook his head, tears slipping down his cheeks as he stood paralysed against the door.

"Look at me!" He shouted, angrier this time, more frantic. "Look at me! Look at me!"

Steve sobbed hysterically, his head spinning, his heart racing with pure terror.

He dared not open his eyes.

He could not look at Him.

He could not face the man whose death laid so heavily on his conscience.

Chapter End Notes

**CHAPTER ART:** View, like, comment on and re-blog it [here](#) <3

**STALKING:** Stalking behaviour can range from being followed, to being sent unwanted messages, to being repeatedly harassed. If you are being stalked, please know that you're not alone. In an emergency, call the police. Your top priority must be to protect yourself. Do not think that you're wasting the police's time - you are not. They are there to help people in exactly your situation. This page contains a list of additional support organisations in the UK.
THOUGHTS: Please let me know your thoughts on this chapter in the comments section below.

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left such lovely comments on the last chapter. It seemed like you enjoyed the fluff and a few of you were even jealous of Steve and Bucky's holiday - to be honest, me too! XD

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "A Photograph And A Bullet" and will really ramp up the tension. There will also be a shocking revelation regarding Steve's past...

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr! Feel free to talk to me on there :)
Chapter Notes

That Saturday, Steve awoke to find Bucky spooning him from behind. A warm arm was wrapped around his waist. Gentle puffs of air caressed the back of his neck as Bucky snored lightly. Steve snuggled back against the warmth behind him, finding comfort in Bucky's warm, solid presence. On sleepy weekend mornings such as this, he loved to drift in and out of sleep, entwined with Bucky. There was something so peaceful about waking up slowly together, something intimate, something that felt like home.

At some point, he must have fallen back asleep, because when he awoke a short while later, it was to find something hot and hard pressed against the curve of his ass. He let out a quiet whimper when Bucky rubbed his erection between Steve's ass cheeks, prompting Bucky to press a gentle kiss to the back of Steve's neck. Bucky's hand moved from Steve's hip to his morning wood, wrapping around his length and stroking it lazily. Steve sighed happily, grinding back lightly against Bucky's rock-hard cock.

"Good morning to you, too," murmured Bucky.

"Mmm... Wanna make it even better?" whispered Steve.

He pressed back against Bucky's erection to punctuate his point, drawing a hum of interest from the other man. He attempted to roll over to face Bucky and kiss him, but Bucky stopped him, the pout evident in his voice when he spoke.

"I like spooning," said Bucky. "You're so good for cuddling."

They laughed softly. Bucky's thumb swept over Steve's cock head, swiping through the pre-come and slathering it down over his cock. Bucky's hand jerked Steve's cock slowly, the movement now eased by the lubrication the pre-come provided. Steve moaned against the pillow, rolling his hips gently, enjoying the feeling of Bucky's hand wrapped around his rigid length. Bucky nuzzled his face against the back of Steve's neck, cuddling up close behind him. Steve sighed happily. Bucky was right: spooning was great.

He pressed back against Bucky, enjoying the feeling as he came into contact with Bucky's erection. He heard Bucky gasp slightly behind him and sniggered with satisfaction, rolling his hips in a teasing, undulating manner. Bucky moaned against the pillow, rolling his hips harder to muffle his noises. Steve shivered with pleasure. He loved it when Bucky sucked love bites onto his skin. It would leave him marked for several days thereafter. He stretched his neck to the side to give Bucky more room to suck on his skin, his cock throbbing hard between his legs.

Bucky finally detached from Steve's shoulder, giving Steve's cheek a gentle kiss before reaching over to the bedside table, pulling out a bottle of lube. Steve watched, dazed with lust, as Bucky squirted a glob onto his fingers, coating them liberally. Bucky resumed spooning Steve. This time, however, his hand was no longer wrapped around Steve's cock, but probing gently at his hole. Steve closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he relaxed his muscles, whimpering at the slight burn as Bucky's finger pushed in past his tight sphincter.

Bucky hushed him gently, rubbing his back comfortingly with his free hand, peppering the back of his neck with kisses. Steve entangled their legs, gasping against the pillow as Bucky buried his finger
in to the hilt, stretching him open. Bucky slowly began to pump his finger in and out, brushing teasingly against Steve's prostate, his free arm reaching out to wrap around Steve's waist and cuddle him closer. Steve moaned as one finger became two, until ten minutes later he was writhing and gasping in Bucky's arms as three fingers fucked in and out of him. By the time Bucky was finally satisfied Steve was ready, Steve was sweating, whimpering, desperate to be filled.

Bucky snuggled up close behind him, an arm around Steve's waist, spooning him, as he gently pushed his blunt cock head against Steve's hole. Steve screwed his eyes shut, his mouth open with lust, drooling on the pillow, as the pressure increased and increased, before Bucky finally popped inside him, stretching him wide. Steve gasped. Bucky grunted. Slowly, Bucky began to rock his hips gently, sliding deeper and deeper, his moans muffled against Steve's neck. Soon, he was buried to the hilt, thrusting lazily, in no hurry on their languid Saturday morning. Steve's cheeks were flushed, his cock leaking pre-come as Bucky thrust slowly and steadily, teasing him.

Steve's right arm began to tremble. He stared at it, confused. His arm only usually trembled when he was thinking about Fallujah, or feeling intense stress. He did not consider their current situation to fall into either category. Noticing Steve's unusual reaction, Bucky's arm snaked out to intertwine their fingers. Bucky pressed gentle kisses to the back of Steve's neck, his hand holding Steve's as he fucked him gently, his cock head nudging repeatedly against Steve's prostate.

Steve's orgasm washed over him unexpectedly a short while later, with his eyes closed, Bucky still holding his hand.

His gritted his teeth as he spurted over the bed sheets, tumbling into ecstasy as Bucky whispered continuously into his ear: "I love you. I love you."

The following Monday, Steve received a pleasant surprise.

It was lunchtime. Steve was sat at his usual table at Stark Industries cafeteria, working his way through a delicious lasagne slice and salad. He was eating alone. Bucky was in the middle of the big translation job which meant he had had to move his lunch hour such that it no longer coincided with Steve's. It was a shame, but Steve did not particularly mind. He understood that translation was important, and besides, he had plenty of experience in eating alone. However, it was a surprise, therefore, when a tray of food was unexpectedly plonked down on the opposite side of the table.

He looked up, his eyes widening as his gaze fell upon someone he had not seen for several long weeks. He immediately got to his feet, rounding the table to wrap Natasha in a tight hug, closing his eyes and inhaling the scent of her shampoo as she rested her head on his shoulder. Despite feeling slightly silly and paranoid for doing so, he had been worried about her welfare during her unexplained absence. He held her for a little longer than was perhaps appropriate for the workplace, eventually causing her to laugh and wriggle out of his grasp, a wide grin on her face as she sat down.

"Aww, I missed you too, you big softie," she said. "Although it's been days, not years, you know."

"More like weeks," countered Steve, taking his seat, before his tone softened, a warm feeling spreading through his gut as he stared opposite the table at his friend. "It's good to see you again."

Natasha smiled, tucking a lock of curly red hair behind her ear, before picking up her knife and fork and staring to cut up her food.
"Thanks," she said. "And same. I missed seeing your ugly mug."

Steve laughed. He hesitated briefly, before deciding to delve straight into the one question he was desperate to know the answer to. Natasha was sharp enough to realise he wanted to say something, even if he delayed the question. With Natasha, there was no point in beating around the bush.

"Where have you been?" he asked. "I've been trying to contact you for ages. Every time I called, your phone went straight to voicemail. And you didn't reply to any of my texts."

Natasha grimaced apologetically. She set down her knife and reached across the table to give Steve's hand a brief squeeze. Her green eyes were wide and sincere, her mouth puckered into a small "o" of regret.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to worry you. I've just been super-busy. Family stuff, you know?"

Steve felt something shift in his gut. For all the family emergencies that Natasha seemed to have to disappear for, he had never once actually heard her talk about her family. He did not know how large her family was, or how many lived in the US versus her native Russia, let alone what kind of so-called emergencies they were apparently always finding themselves in. Steve understood that Natasha was a private person. He did not expect her to share the specifics of what the emergencies involved. For the first time, however, he did find himself curious about her complete lack of mention of any single family member, ever. It felt odd.

"Oh?" said Steve, as casually as possible. "Is everyone OK? And hey, if any of them live in New York City, you know you're welcome to bring them around on a gaming night, right? You're always saying I need more friends."

Something flickered over Natasha's face. Her eyebrows pinched momentarily, her lips pursing. Before Steve had a chance to decipher her expression, however, she had carefully smoothed her face back to neutral. Lowering her eyes, she shoved a large forkful of food into her mouth.

"They're all fine," she said. "And none of them like gaming."

"None of them?" pressed Steve. He felt as if he were on a cusp of something. Natasha was being not-so-subtly evasive, but the truth felt so close, just out of reach, shrouded in darkness that was on the border with light. "Come on, everyone likes games. Board games, if not video games."

Natasha swallowed her food, glaring at Steve.

"They all hate games," she said stubbornly. "They're very boring."

"Boring enough to keep on having emergencies that mean you have to go and deal with them every few months..." said Steve.

Natasha lapsed into silence. Her green eyes bored into Steve's blue ones. Steve could practically see the cogs whirring in her sharp mind – assessing, evaluating, calculating.

"What are you getting at?" she said eventually.

"I just don't get what the big secret is!" said Steve. "You never mention your family, but then you disappear for days on end to be with them, and when you come back, all you'll ever say is that they're fine. It's weird, Nat."

Natasha fiddled uncomfortably with her sleeve. When she spoke next, her tone was decidedly
"It's not weird," she said. "What would you know? All your family are dead."

Steve was momentarily stunned by Natasha's harsh bluntness, before quickly composing himself. Natasha did not mean any harm. For all her secrecy, she was simply, in many ways, the most straightforward person he had ever met.

He was struck by a sudden idea, one so ridiculous, so far-fetched, so ludicrous, that he almost laughed out loud. He looked at Natasha and – realising he was never going to be able to cajole the truth out of her – decided to voice his outlandish theory.

"So many secrets," he joked. "Are you a secret agent?"

Natasha's eyes glinted.

"I could tell you," she deadpanned. "But then I'd have to kill you."

They both laughed. The tension dissipated. Steve dropped his line of questioning, recognising that that thread of the conversation had been well and truly shut down, and that any attempts to pursue it any further would simply be met with the brick wall of Natasha's stubborn silence. He tucked into his meal, the weight on his chest lightening when Natasha relaxed in response. For a couple of minutes, they ate in companionable silence, before Natasha suddenly blurted out a question of her own.

"So, how are things with you and Bucky?" she said. "Bucky was so buried in his work this morning that I didn't get any chance to speak to him."

For a moment, Steve thought about mentioning the threats he had received from Alex, but quickly pushed the idea away. To explain that, he would have to tell Natasha about the fact Bucky had once been in an abusive relationship with the man, and Bucky had been very clear that that information was strictly confidential. Instead, he focused his mind on Bucky himself, and how their relationship had recently felt as though it were going from strength to strength.

"We're doing good," said Steve. "We went on vacation a couple of weeks ago to Springfall Lake in Redmont National Park. It was amazing. Gorgeous scenery. Mountains, woodland, the lake of course. Bucky's parents let us stay in their cabin."

Natasha nodded eagerly.

"Did Bucky enjoy it too?" she said. "Did he have a relaxing time?"

Steve nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "He arranged it as some rest and recuperation for me, but it did us both a world of good. Sometimes it's good to just get away from the world and live in a little bubble for a bit."

"That sounds so cool," said Natasha, before taking another large bite out of her lunch. "So... has Bucky been OK in general? Is he happy? Has he seemed stressed or unhappy to you at all?"

Steve raised his eyebrows, slightly taken aback by Natasha's unusually keen interest in Bucky's well-being. Whilst it was not unusual for the three of them to ask about the welfare of the others if they had not seen one another for a while, Natasha's interest in Bucky seemed strangely focused.

"Uh, he's fine," said Steve. "He's his normal self. Happy, dorky, hot as fuck."
Natasha laughed, stirring her cup of coffee absent-mindedly.

"Good," she said, her eyes locking momentarily with Steve's. "I care a lot about Bucky Barnes."

Steve arrived home that evening to a strange noise coming from somewhere within his dark flat.

He stilled, his senses instantly alert, his heart pounding in his chest. Slowly, silently, he closed the front door behind him, slipping off his bag and curling his hands into fists. He strained his ears, trying to locate the exact source of the sound. It sounded as though it were in the lounge or the kitchen. It was low, irregular and disturbingly out of place. He could not decipher what exactly it was. It was too quiet, too muffled to make out properly. All Steve knew was that its unfamiliarity and unknown nature had him tense, on-edge and spooked.

He crept his way down the dark corridor, his heart hammering with fear, his pupils blown wide in the darkness. His muscles were tight, ready to lash out at any moment, should he be pounced upon by some unknown assailant. His mind was grappling with possibilities for the source of the noise: burglars, pranksters, Alex... He pushed the final theory out of his mind. There was no way Alex could know where he lived. And even if he did, it was even less likely that he would be mad enough to break into Steve's flat. Steve was being paranoid. It was a ludicrous idea, and yet the mere thought of it ramped up his anxiety into overdrive, because the fact was: some was in Steve's flat, making that terrifyingly out-of-place noise.

He slipped into the lounge, sticking to the shadows as his eyes pierced the darkness. The lounge was empty, but he could now hear that the noise was very clearly coming from the kitchen. He could hear heavy breathing, punctured by occasional sharp gasps, as if the person was in pain. Steve shivered. The situation was making less and less sense. The noise, clearer now, sounded almost like a wounded animal – except there was no way an animal could make its way into the block of flats, up three flights of stairs and through a locked door. Steeling himself for whoever, or whatever, might be in there, Steve charged through the lounge, his fists ready, barrelling into the kitchen to come face to face with –

"Bucky?" said Steve.

He skidded to an abrupt halt, staring incredulously at the scene in front of him. Bucky was sat at the kitchen table, his face blotchy with tears and snot. His eyes were red. He had clearly been crying hard. With a twist in his gut, Steve realised that the noise he must have heard when he had first entered the flat was the sound of Bucky desperately stifling his sobs. He immediately crossed the room and drew a chair up next to Bucky, wrapping his arms around him, rubbing his back as Bucky dissolved into a fresh bout of tears.

"Shh, it's OK," said Steve. He tried to keep his voice as soothing as possible; gentle and calm. "Everything's going to be OK."

Slowly, Bucky's sobs began to peter out into snuffles and hiccups, before finally quietening down into silence. Steve grabbed a tissue and handed it to Bucky, watching him as he blew his nose. He looked away so that Bucky could discreetly dry his eyes and clean his face, his eyes falling as he did so on the cardboard box that was on the table in front of Bucky. The box was open. It seemed to be a house-moving box, filled with a jumbled assortment of random household items.
"I'm sorry," Bucky said finally. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

Steve's eyes widened as he realised that Bucky's cheeks were burning not with exertion, but with shame. He shook his head hard. He did not want Bucky to think it was in any way weak for him to cry, to display his emotions, to be vulnerable. He reached out to take Bucky's hand, realising as he did so that Bucky was clasping something tightly. It looked like a piece of A5 paper.

"Never be sorry for crying," said Steve. "I'd rather you cry than keep it bottled up."

A fresh tear rolled down Bucky's cheek. Steve gently wiped it away. Pulling his chair closer to Bucky's, he gently manoeuvred them so that Bucky was resting his head on Steve's chest. Steve wrapped his arms around him protectively, rubbing his back in soothing, repetitive, circular motions. Bucky sniffed, before placing the piece of paper face-down on the kitchen table, drawing a shuddering breath.

"I picked up some old boxes from storage earlier today," said Bucky. "I was going through this box and I... I found an old photo of me and Alex. I wasn't expecting to see his face and I just... I just..."

He buried his face into Steve's chest, letting out another miserable sob, a delicate tremble going through his body. Steve held him tightly, wishing desperately that he could take away Bucky's suffering. He stroked Bucky's back, letting him cry softly against his chest. He pushed the face-down photograph further away from Bucky, as if creating some physical distance might alleviate some of his pain. He pressed kisses to the top of Bucky's head, periodically passing him fresh tissues as existing ones became soggy. He comforted him for what felt like a good 20 minutes, before Bucky finally began to regain some of his shattered composure, straightening up and rubbing his face wearily.

"How can I help you?" asked Steve.

"I just want to go to sleep," said Bucky.

Steve nodded wordlessly. Whatever Bucky needed, he wanted to help. He could not imagine how awful it must have been for Bucky to have been confronted so unexpectedly with Alex's photograph with no prior warning, no time to prepare himself mentally. He helped Bucky get to his feet, wrapping an arm around him and guiding him slowly to the bedroom. Bucky was leaning against him, as if the incident had left him completely physically drained. He looked pale and exhausted, his eyes red-rimmed and half-closed. As they entered the bedroom, Steve was almost surprised when Bucky did not immediately collapse onto the bed.

Steve helped him to undress, before passing him a fresh set of soft, clean pyjamas to change into. As Bucky pulled them on, Steve filled a glass of water in the en-suite and placed it on the bedside table next to Bucky's side of the bed, in case he got thirsty in the night. When Bucky was finally dressed in his pyjamas, he clambered into bed, his limbs giving way the instant he touched the mattress. Steve carefully pulled the duvet over him, stroking his hair before pressing a gentle kiss to his forehead.

"Sleep," said Steve. "You'll feel better after some rest."

Bucky smiled up at him wearily, visibly grateful despite his exhaustion.

"Thank you for looking after me," he said awkwardly. "Can I, uh, ask you to do one last thing for me?"

Steve nodded instantly.
"Anything," he said.

"Can you get rid of the photograph?" said Bucky, a grimace passing over his face. "I don't want to see his face ever again."

Steve nodded, his throat too tight to speak, before giving Bucky one last kiss on the forehead and slipping out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him. He closed his eyes briefly, composing himself for a moment. He had never seen Bucky so upset before. He could not deny that it disturbed him, to see the deep, long-lasting effect that Alex's abuse had had on Bucky. He had known Bucky hated Alex, of course, but he had never truly understood just how fearful he was. He had never known that a mere photograph of Alex was enough to leave Bucky sobbing and shaking in a way that rivalled Steve's own breakdowns when he would have a flashback of Fallujah.

Reopening his eyes, he headed back to the kitchen, walking slowly to the kitchen table where the photograph lay innocently, face-down. He stared at it for a long moment, before picking it up. He did not really want to look, from a curiosity perspective. The very idea felt disgusting, voyeuristic. A small part of his mind whispered to him, however, gently suggesting that since Alex had taken to leaving threatening messages for Steve, it would be foolish for him not to know his face. If Alex decided to escalate his behaviour and come after Steve to physically attack him, knowing his face could give Steve a few extra seconds of preparation time. And, as he knew all too well, mere seconds were all it took for situations to go from run-of-the-mill to life-and-death.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Steve turned over the photograph. His first impression was that Alex was older than he had imagined. He looked to be in his fifties, with greying strawberry-blonde hair and striking blue eyes. He was smiling, his perfect teeth gleaming in the sunlight. He had a smug, entitled aura that Steve could not tell was objective or simply what he was projecting, knowing Alex's true nature. He had an arm slung over Bucky's shoulders, pulling him close. Bucky was smiling, resting his head on Alex's shoulder, his arms wrapped around Alex's waist. Steve stared at Alex's face, taking in every inch of his face, every line, every hair on his perfectly-quaffed head. His hand began to shake. He breathed deeply, forcing himself not to lash out and punch something. He felt hatred, pure hatred, for the first time in his life. He hated what Alex had done to Bucky. He hated the person that Alex was. He hated Alex's stupid face. He hated Alex – wholly, deeply, viscerally.

He crumpled the photograph violently into a ball, crossing the kitchen in three long strides to reach the bin. He flipped open the bin's lid.

Without hesitation, he shoved the photograph deep down, to the very bottom, underneath all the rubbish, where it belonged.

The following evening, Bucky went out for a night out with his fellow Russian colleagues from the Translation department. It had been planned weeks in advance, to celebrate one of their birthdays, with Natasha kindly offering that Bucky could crash in the spare room in her flat so that he would not disturb Steve by returning home in the early hours. Taking into account Bucky's breakdown the previous evening, Steve had checked that Bucky felt well enough to join the party. Bucky had been adamant that he wanted to go, not wanting the memory of Alex to impede his life.

So it was, that Steve found himself alone that evening. It was a fairly dry and pleasant evening, so he
He climbed the steps to his flat, out of breath but satisfied. He imagined Bucky, Natasha and the rest of the Russian translators would probably be at their first bar by now. He smiled. Nights out with Natasha were always fun. If the rest of the department were anything like her, Bucky was in for a fantastic night out. He reached the third floor, making his way down the corridor to his flat, coming to a stop in front of his front door and rummaging in his pocket for his key. He pulled the key from his pocket, stepping forwards to insert it into the keyhole, when his foot accidentally knocked something over.

He looked down, his world slowing down as he stared down at what was at his feet. Stunned, numb, he slowly crouched down, picking up the two items that had been left directly in front of his door. The bullet was gold-coloured and heavy in his hand. It had one word written in black marker pen on the side – Steven. It was Alex's handwriting – identical to the hand-written note he had found tucked under his windscreen wiper in Stark Industries' car park when Alex's campaign of harassment had first begun.

Finally tearing his eyes away from the bullet, Steve opened the scrap of paper that he had been placed with the bullet. There was another message, written again in Alex's neat handwriting: This is your final warning. Underneath the message was a strangely familiar symbol: a skull with six tentacles sprouting from the mouth, with a thick circular line surrounding it.

The symbol stirred something in Steve's memory, suddenly solidifying with horrifying clarity. He had seen this symbol twice before. First, he had seen it tattooed on Ophelia's wrist when she had pulled up beside Steve in the street in that sleek black Jaguar, warning him to stay away from Bucky. Second, and most recently, he had seen it spray-painted on the front of his block of flats just before going to Springfall Lake. For the first time, he linked those two memories with Alex, shaken to the core that he had apparently been on Alex's radar for so long; Ophelia felt like a lifetime ago.

He turned his attention back to the bullet, shivering involuntarily as his eyes slid over his own name, written in black along the length of the bullet. This was Alex's clearest and most dangerous threat yet. The implication was clear: that the next time Steve encountered Alex, it would be to receive a bullet just like this one; with one key difference, the next one would not be left outside his front door, but would be delivered in the more traditional, much more lethal method.

Panic began to eat away at the edges of Steve's vision. Alex was not just possessive and obsessive, he realised; Alex was dangerous. Suddenly, he found himself whirling around, his heart hammering with fear. The corridor was empty. He fumbled with the lock, letting himself into his flat and slamming the door shut behind him. He locked and bolted the door, running through the flat in a panic, checking that he was alone. Three checks later, finally satisfied that he was by himself, he sank down onto the sofa, burying his head in his hands as he tried to gather together his frayed nerves.

The bullet in his hand was heavy and slick with sweat. Alex wanted to kill him. The realisation hit him as hard as a punch in the gut. He found himself delving into his memories, certain ones suddenly taking on a much more sinister hue in light of this shocking new information. He remembered when he had almost been killed when the car had mounted the pavement near Central Park. He remembered the mugger, who had been armed with a knife, seemingly willing to stab Steve in order
to steal his phone. For the first time, those apparently separate incidents came together in his mind, tied together by the terrifying spectre of Alex, hidden in the shadows but pulling all the strings, everything under his control.

The incident with the car mounting the pavement had happened just after he and Bucky had started seriously dating. Had Alex been stalking him the entire time? Had Alex been trying to split him and Bucky up from the very beginning? It was a terrifying thought. He felt sick. He began to hyperventilate, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to regain control of his breathing. His racing thoughts blurred in his mind, merging into one another under the weight of his panic. One memory rose to the forefront of his consciousness: Sam, the last time he had seen him.

*If something like this happens again, call me. I'll come over. We can go to the police station together…*

He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket, dialling Sam and listening to the dial tone.

"Can you come over?" said Steve, unable to keep his voice from shaking. "Something's happened."

He hung up, burying his face in his hands as he let his phone slip from his fingers and fall to the floor. His right arm was shaking. His heart was hammering in his chest. He wrapped his arms around himself, unable to shake the fear that Alex might still be nearby. He imagined him, dark collar turned up against his strawberry-blonde hair, protecting him from the wind. He imagined him writing Steve's name on the bullet, his bushy eyebrows furrowed with concentration as he held the black marker pen in his hand, forming the letters on the slippery surface of the bullet.

A knock at his front door had Steve almost falling off the sofa in shock. He dithered for a moment, before swallowing his panic, heading to the front door and flinging it open before he could overthink it, letting out a long sigh of relief as his eyes fell on Sam, who was looking as calm and unruffled as always. Sam stepped over the threshold, looking at Steve with concern as Steve immediately shut and locked the door behind him, sliding the bolt into place.

"What happened?" said Sam.

Letting out a shuddering breath, Steve opened his hand, revealing the bullet nestled there. Sam's eyes widened with shock as he stared at it, his eyes silently tracing along the side where Steve's name was clearly visible. Sam swallowed, clearly unnerved by the visual.

"Is this Alex again?" said Sam.

Steve nodded, running a hand through his hair shakily.

"Yeah," said Steve. "It came with a note. This is my final warning, apparently."

"Shit," said Sam, pacing restlessly up and down the corridor several times before coming to a stop directly in front of Steve. "You need to go to the police about this, Steve, *now.*"

Steve's face crumpled miserably. He hated the idea of going to the police. It would drag Bucky into it, and Bucky had been clear that he wanted nothing more to do with Alex. Bucky had had a mental breakdown the night before at the mere sight of Alex's face in a photograph. Steve could not imagine the mental anguish it would cause if Bucky were forced to talk to the police about Alex and face him in the legal system, giving evidence against him at a trial. It would be re-traumatising in the most horrific way.

"I can't," said Steve. "Bucky would have to get involved. I can't make him face Alex again."
Sam stared at him, incredulous. His eyes almost popping out of his head, he shook his head hard.

"Steve, Alex is making threats to kill you," he said. "This has gone way beyond Bucky. I'm sorry, but you have to do this. You can't ignore this. It's too serious."

Steve wrung his hands together desperately.

"Fuck," he said. "Can't I just give them an anonymous tip-off?"

"And say what?" said Sam. "Yo, this guy Alex is trying to kill me. I have evidence but I can't come in and give it to you because I don't wanna? Come on, Steve, man up."

"It's not about me," snapped Steve. "I don't want to drag Bucky into this."

Sam's expression softened.

"Bucky doesn't have to be involved," said Sam. "Please, Steve, you need to go. I'll come with you, if you want."

Steve hesitated. Sam's presence did sound like it would help. Being with Sam always made Steve feel calmer, more focused. All the same, the idea of betraying Bucky's trust and going to the police behind his back tore at his conscience.

"Can't you go instead?" said Steve desperately. "I'll give you the bullet, the note. I'll tell you everything you need to pass on to the police. You can give them all the information they need to get Alex locked up and just keep me and Bucky anonymous."

Sam shook his head sympathetically.

"No, Steve," said Sam. "You know I can't do that."

"But why?" begged Steve. "Please, Sam."

"You know that I can't," repeated Sam quietly. "I can go with you, but I can't go instead of you."

"Why not?" said Steve.

Sam gazed at Steve sadly.

His large brown eyes met Steve's.

His hand reached out and grasped Steve gently by the shoulder.

"Because I'm dead," said Sam.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

THOUGHTS: Whaaaaaaat just happened?! Feel free to leave any comments, theories and/or screeching sounds in the comments section below! ;)

THANK YOU: Thank you for your comments on the last chapter. I love hearing from
you guys!

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Fallujah Mission" and will reveal exactly what happened in Fallujah...

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. Feel free to say hi to me on there!
The Fallujah Mission

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fallujah, Iraq

13 November 2004

The Fallujah mission was deceptively simple, on paper. Code-named Operation Phantom Fury, the mission’s aim was to clear the city of Fallujah of insurgents. The mission would involve thousands of soldiers from Iraqi, American and British forces. It would be highly dangerous. All this, Steve knew. What he did not know, what no one could ever have predicted, was that it would end up the bloodiest battle in the entire Iraq war, a colossal waste of life.

If he had known, then, what would happen, he would have done certain things differently. Perhaps, he would have insisted that they not enter the house with the red door. Perhaps, he would not have said what he did. Perhaps, he would simply have taken a moment, in the calm beforehand, to look Sam in the eyes and tell him that he loved him – truly, deeply, like a brother.

But as it was, he could predict what would happen no better than anyone, and so Steve and the rest of his squad, like everyone else, went in without foresight, but with only their armour, their weapons and the intelligence they had been given.

Steve's squad was a tight-knit group of men. The squad was made up of eight soldiers, headed up by Chester Phillips. Steve had a lot of respect for Chester. He was a great leader – sharp, intelligent, no-nonsense. He had trained Steve and the others to be the best that they could be. He had trained them to be smart, efficient; lethal when necessary and compassionate at other times. He believed very much that the key to winning the war was through winning hearts and minds, preventing radicalisation, breaking the cycle. Steve had learnt a lot from Chester. It was Steve's first ever tour, his first experience of war, and so every day was a learning experience. Chester was as much a teacher as a father figure.

The rest of Steve's squad, he saw as his brothers: Jim Morita, James Montgomery Falsworth, Gabe Jones, Jacques Dernier, Tim Dugan and Sam Wilson. Over the course of their tour, they had formed an unbreakable bond. They had fought together, sweated together, seen one another stripped bare, both emotionally and literally. They knew one another better than anyone. They had saved one another's lives, had one another's backs, grown as close as family. Steve loved each of his squad brothers, but he was closest of all with Sam Wilson.

Sam and Steve were the two youngest, aged just 22. Whilst the others were on their second tour, or their third, or even more than that, this was Steve and Sam's first time at war. Steve had joined after several dull years working in a factory after finishing high school. Sam had been recruited straight out of university. He had majored in Arabic and Translation Studies, something that the Army was keen to utilise. Sam was a brilliant linguist as well as a great soldier, a great asset when they had to speak to the locals or if they found written plans left by insurgents.

Presently, they were walking down a bombed-out Fallujah street, Chester on point, followed by Jim, James, Gabe, Jacques and Tim, with Steve and Sam bringing up the rear. Steve held his rifle tightly, his finger resting next to the trigger. Always be ready, Chester had taught him. The man who ain't ready ends up dead. It had become the squad motto. They joked about death. It was the joke that was not a joke. It was good to keep the awareness that death was a real possibility at the forefront of their
minds. It kept them alert. They could not afford to be complacent.

Steve's heart was beating hard in his chest. He was on the lookout for anything that seemed out of place. They had been warned of the possibility of ambushes. Improvised explosive devices were another real threat. The area they were combing had been supposedly cleared of insurgents by another squad a few hours before, but they all knew there was a real possibility that they had left behind a little gift for the soldiers, in the form of something deadly and explosive. Underground tunnels were also strongly suspected, which could allow insurgents to slip in and out of areas without the soldiers knowing any better.

Sweat dripped down Steve's face. The scorching sun beat down on him from above, roasting him inside his military fatigues and body armour. His throat was parched. His skin felt disgusting: slick with sweat mixed with coarse desert sand and layers of grime that never seemed to shift however much he scrubbed himself in the shower. He smelled. He was too hot. He was thirsty. He was uncomfortable. He ignored all of it, focusing his attention solely on his surroundings.

About half a mile away, he could hear gunshots. Further away still, there was the sound of helicopter blades beating the too-hot air: thump-thump-thump. The sky was a beautiful, cornflower blue. The squad swept forwards. Underfoot, stones crunched under their sand-coloured Army boots. They picked their way through the rubble. Aside from the noises in the distance and the sound of their movements, the immediate vicinity was eerily silent. It was as if the street itself was holding its breath, waiting on tenterhooks to see what would unfold.

Once upon a time, this had been an ordinary street. The remains of houses lined each side. Not too long ago, before the civilians had been ordered to flee, these houses would have been full of life: mothers looking after their children, kids playing in the street, fathers working hard to provide for their families. Now, the only ones left were the insurgents, the stray animals, and those poor bastards who had been too slow or too infirm to join the civilian evacuation.

Something moved in the corner of Steve's eye. He shouted out a sharp warning to the rest of his squad, swinging around and aiming his rifle, his finger wrapping around the trigger, ready to kill. The cat yowled at him, angry and hissing, its ginger fur puffed up in outrage that the squad had disturbed its prowl of its territory. Steve exhaled hard, allowing himself the brief thrill of relief at still being alive. The cat sprinted away, its ears flat and its tail rigid, yowling as it went. The rest of his squad exhaled too, a collective sigh that it had only been an animal.

"You scared of cats, Steve?" joked Sam.

"Fuck off, Sam," smiled Steve.

They settled back into their rhythm. They continued their way down the street, wary of their surroundings, vigilant to any movements in the shadows, anything that could be a threat. Up ahead, Steve could see their target coming into view. Intelligence had informed them that the house up ahead was suspected of having been a base used by insurgents to plan their attacks. Although the previous squad had swept through the area, it was Steve's squad's job to make sure that no insurgents had somehow managed to evade capture, and to gather any intelligence that might have been left behind by the fleeing insurgents.

The house loomed ahead of them. Unlike much of the rest of the street, it had managed to avoid the bombing and appeared to be entirely intact. Its walls, like everything else, were bleached beige by the sun. The only splash of colour was the front door, which was painted red, the red paint peeling away from the wood, flaking off. The squad fanned out, rifles aimed as they approached the house, straining their eyes and ears for any movement from inside. It appeared to be abandoned.
"Private Rogers, Private Wilson, take point with me," said Chester, gesturing for the two youngest soldiers to join him.

Steve and Sam stepped forwards, joining Chester at the front door of the house. Chester turned to face them, his skin red and sunburnt, looking as sweaty and dirty as Steve felt.

"We go in, we secure the building," said Chester. "Only once we're sure there's no insurgents hiding, do we search for intel."

Steve nodded. He stepped up to the red door, his fingertips reaching out and memorising the texture of the wood, the peeling paint, forever. The other members of the squad bunched up behind him, ready to rush in and flood the house. Sam was by Steve's side. Steve could tell he was nervous; he was breathing faster than normal. Steve secretly felt glad that he was not alone in feeling afraid. Upon Chester's signal, Steve body-slammed the door, busting it open and rushing inside, Sam following along with Chester, the three of them fanning out and running through the house, checking each room quickly but thoroughly, calling out rooms as they went.

"Kitchen, clear!"

"Front room, clear!"

Steve ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, Sam hot on his heels. At the top of the landing, the corridor split in two. Steve headed to the front of the house, Sam taking the back. Steve entered what looked like another living room, large and spacious, with a low coffee table and mats for sitting on. He checked all four corners of the room, then flung open the cupboard that was resting against the back wall. It was empty.

"Upstairs front room, clear!" he shouted.

He listened as the rest of the squad shouted back, reporting back with "Clear!" for every room. Steve felt himself relax slightly. The insurgents were gone. They could search the house for any intelligence without the immediate threat of being killed. Like air-con and personal hygiene, it was a luxury he had never realised until Iraq. He cast his eye over the room. By the door was a large wicker basket, filled to the top with lemons. He could smell their citrus tang, sharp and fresh. The window was open, a curtain swaying gently in the breeze. It had a simple pattern: white, covered in daises. On the wall, hung a rug, patterned with geometric shapes. Otherwise, apart from the cupboard which had simply been full of spare bedsheets, the room was empty.

He was just about to leave the room when the rug tugged at his attention. He paused. Something about it did not feel right. The floor was bare and plain. Why put a beautiful rug on the wall when it could be covering the floor? It was illogical. It did not fit. He crossed over to the wall and tugged at the rug, pulling it down from its pegs with ease. He swallowed hard, letting the rug tumble to the floor. On the wall, was a detailed map of the city. It had been heavily labelled, covered with cramped Arabic writing, symbols and coloured pins. He needed a translator.

"Sam!" he shouted. "Get in here! I need you to translate something."

Sam made his way down the corridor from the back room. His heavy boots stomped loudly on the wooden floorboards, his voice floating ahead of him.

"Just think, in two weeks' time we get to go home," said Sam. "You know what I'm most looking forward to, when I get back? A cheeseburger. Extra ketchup. Extra cheese. All that good stuff. Plus, the girls. You know girls love a war hero, right?"
Steve snorted.

"Sure," he said. "Still don't think it makes them blind to your ugly mug."

Sam appeared at the doorway, a smile on his face, his mouth open, a sharp retort on the tip of his tongue, when his foot snagged on something that Steve had avoided when he had arrived, having apparently hopped right over it when he had run into the room. Steve's eyes zeroed in on it, time seeming to slow down as Sam's foot kicked the thin wire.

The tripwire instantly detonated the improvised explosive device embedded in the wall.

The bomb blasted Sam and Steve off their feet, the ceiling above them crashing down as the internal wall collapsed. Steve slammed against the floor with enough force that he heard something crack. He screamed with agony as a large chunk of the roof came crashing down onto his right shoulder and arm, slashing down his side, pinning him to the floor.

"Sam!" he shouted, coughing hard, his eyes streaming as the dust finally began to settle. "Sam?!"

"Steve..."

Terror exploded in Steve's gut as the dust cleared enough for him to see the scene in front of him. Sam had taken the main force of the blast. He was lying flat on his back, crimson flowers blossoming from his chest and abdomen onto his sandy-coloured military fatigues. His head lolled to the side. His brown eyes met Steve's blue ones, wide with shock.

"Just hold on," begged Steve. "You're going to be fine. Just hold on."

Sam nodded, dazed, blood trickling down his forehead. Steve strained hard, desperately trying to move, but he was completely immobile, his right arm trapped beneath the rubble, his right side ripped open and bleeding. He whimpered, helpless, praying for the first time in years as his vision swam, Sam gasping and gurgling just a few metres away.

"Steve... Tell my parents I love them."

Steve shook his head, his feet scrabbling for purchase as he tried to drag himself out from under the rubble. He needed to put pressure on Sam's wounds. The pool of blood under the other man was far too large, growing far too fast.

"No! You're going to tell them yourself," said Steve, gritting his teeth against a wave of pain that briefly wiped out his vision. "Hold on. Just keep breathing. Help is coming."

"Steve..."

Steve let out a sob. His vision returned. He stared across the floor, giving Sam his full attention, drinking in the sight of him; brown eyes wet with tears, a trembling smile on his lips, the ghost of his last joke. Sam's chest and abdomen were haemorrhaging too much blood. The floor was slick with it, as red as the front door. Steve held his gaze, trying to give him one last smile, one last bit of comfort.

"It's OK," whispered Steve. "It's OK."

The large basket of lemons had overturned and spilled its contents everywhere. One of the lemons rolled right up to Steve's face. The citrus scent filled his nostrils, now mixed with the coppery smell of blood. In his peripheral vision, Steve saw the curtain – white, patterned with daises – swaying carefree in the breeze. Sam smiled, holding Steve's gaze, his whole world reduced to one room, one final minute, perhaps a dozen more so breaths.
Steve wanted to beg him to hold on, to keep fighting, to keep breathing, but he knew in his heart that it was fruitless. Sam's injuries were too severe. He was beyond help. Sam's final moments deserved to be peaceful, not filled with Steve ranting, begging him to hold on, asking for the impossible. Steve smiled back at Sam in silence; the only sound, the two of them breathing. A peaceful expression took over Sam's face, his brown eyes calm as they gazed at Steve, his comrade, his friend, his brother.

Sam exhaled one final time, his eyes becoming blank, his chest still, the sounds of his gasping breaths finally giving way to silence as Steve watched, helpless, trapped beneath the rubble.

Sam Wilson, one of the bravest men Steve ever knew, died in front of his eyes.

Steve and Sam were evacuated by helicopter to the nearest medical base.

Steve was lightheaded throughout the flight, slipping in and out of consciousness. He was given morphine for the pain. He was aware of medics moving frantically around him, checking his vitals, re-checking, re-checking. He must have passed out at one point, because next thing he knew, he was regaining consciousness as the helicopter landed with a bump. He looked across at Sam, his heart wrenching with pain as a medic spotted Steve staring and pulled a sheet over Sam's body.

Steve was whisked away for surgery. He received several blood transfusions to replace that which he had lost. His right arm, broken in three places, was realigned and fixed with metal rods and pins. The injury down the right side of his torso was stitched up. He was given more morphine. Afterwards, lying in his hospital bed, he lay there as the doctors explained what had happened. It was almost certain that he would have serious, long-term scarring down the right-hand side of his torso, they said. Psychological counselling would be made available, they said.

Steve nodded, the information washing over him. He was not listening. He was numb, in shock. It was as if there was a hole in his chest, where Sam had used to be. Sam was gone. Sam was gone. He could not believe it. He longed to wake up, for it to be the morning of 13 November 2004 all over again, for it all to have been a terrible nightmare. He poked himself in the side. It hurt. Not a nightmare. Real. No, no. no.

He dissolved into tears. The doctors went away, to give him space and to tend to patients who needed more urgent care. Fallujah was turning out bloodier than they had expected. Several beds away, a soldier had woken from an amputation, and was screaming. Steve closed his eyes, blocked it out. He did not care. He did not care about anything except Sam. Sam was dead. He had not known grief until then. He had not known pain. He had not known suffering. Not until then. Sam was gone. How could he be gone? He had been so young. He had had so many more years left to live.

Suddenly, alongside the grief, came a sickening wave of guilt. It knocked the breath out of him, leaving him gasping. Sam's death had been his fault. He was the cause. He was the start of that chain of events that had led to Sam being blown up. He had called Sam into that room. He had asked him to come, all to translate that stupid map.

Sam! Get in here! I need you to translate something.

His right arm, broken, crushed under the rubble, began to shake. He choked out a sob. He re-lived the moment Sam had entered the room, playing the scene over and over again in his head. He scrutinised everything, from the moment they had left the base that morning to the moment of Sam's
final breath, coming up with all the things he could have done differently, all the things that could have changed the final outcome, all the ways he could have saved Sam's life.

He thought about it constantly, obsessively, until he passed out from exhaustion, tears leaking, even in his sleep, from the corners of his eyes onto his pillow.

Steve began hallucinating Sam one week later.

He had been sent back to the US, to recover from his surgery in a military hospital designed exactly for soldiers like Steve. He was sat on his hospital bed, gazing out of the window at the beautifully-tended lawns, dumb shapes cut into the shrubs, flowers lined up in rows with military precision. He stared out at the hospital garden, unseeing, as he counted all the ways he could kill himself and join Sam.

A bullet in the head.

Jumping off a high-rise building.

Stealing his dad's shitty blue 1965 Volkswagen Sedan 'Beetle' and crashing it.

No, maybe not the last one. The rust-bucket was so old and decrepit that it would probably rattle itself apart if he tried to make it go over 30mph. A bullet in the head, then. It would be swift, instant. Preferable to jumping from a building because it did not involve those terrifying moments of falling before death.

"You don't have to kill yourself to join me," said Sam. "I'll stick around and stay with you here, instead."

Steve jerked violently, staring at his friend, who was sitting on the chair beside Steve's bed, his body intact, his face unmarked by bruises or cuts. He was wearing jeans and his favourite hoodie. He was grinning at Steve. He laughed when Steve rubbed his eyes, incredulous as to what he was seeing.

"Sorry, buddy, you can't get rid of me that easily," joked Sam.

In his waking life, Steve would see Sam as he had been: warm, friendly, full of jokes and good advice in equal measure.

But in his nightmares, when the guilt took over and ran rampant, Steve's subconscious would change Sam into Him, a monster who would remind Steve, over and over again, that he was responsible for His death.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

CHAPTER MUSIC: Lullaby for a solider by Maggie Siff.
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES:
This page has detailed information about mental health support available to serving members of the Armed Forces, reservists, veterans and military families in the UK.

FORESHADOWING: Well done if you picked up on the foreshadowing that Sam is dead. It has been foreshadowed throughout the story, but I've deliberately made it subtle. Here's a list of clues that might suddenly seem significant in retrospect:
- Sam has frequently appeared when Steve has been stressed and needed support and guidance.
- Example: The most notable example was when Steve ran into Sam immediately after the attempted mugging in chapter 11. As New York City is so huge, the chances of this happening by chance are tiny.
- Uniquely, no other characters have ever interacted with Sam. Steve is the only character who Sam has ever interacted with, even when other characters have been present.
- Example 1: The waitress ignored Sam and only spoke to Steve when she served them in the cafe in chapter 6.
- Example 2: When the car mounted the pavement near Central Park in chapter 10, it was specifically mentioned that the driver ignored Sam and only looked at Steve.
- When the little girl pointed at Steve in the cafe in chapter 6 and said "What's wrong with that man, Mommy?" she was not referring the Steve's arm shaking, but the fact he was talking to himself. She only piped up when Steve spoke aloud, even though his arm had been shaking previously.
- At the end of chapter 6, Steve briefly envisioned Sam as an angel with wings.
- When Sam and Steve went for a strenuous run in Central Park in chapter 10, it was mentioned that Steve became sweaty, red-faced and out of breath, whilst Sam was not affected by the exercise at all.
- When the car mounted the pavement in chapter 10, it was mentioned that Sam was not seen to move out of the car's way, yet he was unharmed.
- Sam spontaneously appeared in Steve's car in chapter 16, even though Steve did not notice the car door being opened. This was described as a "sudden materialisation".

THOUGHTS: Please let me know your thoughts and feelings in the comments below!

THANK YOU: Thank you for all your comments on the last chapter! It seems like you were all quite shocked by the ending and to hear you all freak out and get so emotional made me so happy! :D

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Watcher". What do you think that could refer to?

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. Feel free to say hi!
"I can go with you," said Sam, "but I can't go instead of you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm dead."

Sam was gazing at him sadly, sympathy and tenderness written plain across his face. His large brown eyes were wide, his expression soft. His hand on Steve's shoulder felt warm and real. Steve shook his head hard, not wanting to accept the dreadful truth of what Sam was saying. Sam always felt so real, so solid, so present. He was always able to soothe Steve, to calm him down, to be the person who provided advice and guidance when he needed it the most.

Sam's hand left his shoulder. Steve looked up at him in panic, terror clawing at the inside of his chest when Sam turned away as if to leave. Sam could not go now, not when Steve needed him so desperately. He did not know how to cope with Alex's death threat. He could not face the immense pressure of it alone.

"Don't go!" begged Steve. "Please!"

Sam smiled at him sadly, the corners of it crumbling away. His expression was pinched, pained, as if he were in physical pain.

"I'm sorry, Steve," he said. "I was never here."

He faded away. Steve watched, agog, his heart in his mouth, until he was staring only at his front door. Steve shook himself, rushing forwards and unlocking the front door, desperately flinging it open in the hope of seeing Sam standing on the other side. The corridor was empty. He ran down the corridor to check the staircase: empty, of course. His hands shaking, Steve slowly walked back to his flat, stepping inside and fumbling with the lock until he heard it click shut. Dazed, he thumped his head back against the door, panic exploding in his gut as a sob wrenched its way from his throat.

Sam was gone.

Steve slid to the floor, gasping, his eyes prickling with tears as he clutched at his right side, where his scars felt as though they were on fire. It felt as though his old wounds had been ripped open, as if his torso had been shredded by the collapsing roof once more. Images flickered across his mind – the dusty rubble-strewn road, the red door, the basket of lemons, the white curtain patterned with daisies blowing against the cornflower sky, Sam's face, Sam's smile as he stepped towards the threshold of the room. Sam had been looking forward to going home. He had talked about cheeseburgers and dating girls. Sam was dead. He had been dead for fifteen years, and yet the pain was so intense, so devastating, that it felt as if Sam had only died yesterday.

A raw wave of grief washed over Steve. He pressed his face against the floor, curling into the foetal position as he began to weep. He clutched Alex's bullet in his hand, rocking back and forth, the weight of it, the weight of everything, dragging him down. He sobbed uncontrollably, until his vision was blurred with tears and his throat was sore from crying, oscillating between the past and the present, both of them occurring simultaneously, both of them happening at once.
Sweltering desert heat.
The cold, hard floor of his hallway.
The insurgents' bomb.
Alex's bullet.
Sam's wide, frightened eyes as he bled out on the floor. The best friend.
Alex, invisible, insidious, lurking in the shadows. The stalker, the watcher.
Steve sobbed until he was exhausted, until he was close to passing out from the sheer pain and effort of it. His muscles felt as though they were made of water. He was utterly drained of energy, on the border between consciousness and unconsciousness. The last image to linger in front of his eyes, before he was finally dragged down into sleep, was Sam's face: beautiful dark skin, warm eyes, that cheeky, gap-toothed smile.
The bullet slipped from Steve's hand as he reached out to touch the mirage.
His hand met empty space.

He did not tell Bucky about the bullet.

He struggled with the decision the whole of the following day, wrestling with the problem, conflicted and torn. He made slow progress at work, his mind only half on the website updates he was supposed to be implementing. At lunch time, he listened mutely as Natasha and Bucky regaled him with stories from their night out with the rest of the Russian translators. During the afternoon, he paused whenever Bucky's name popped up in his inbox, the confession on his fingertips, before closing the email and carrying on with his work. That evening, as they drove home together, Steve found the truth bursting on the tip of his tongue, desperate to be spoken aloud, yet unable to make that final leap.

He knew that Alex's threat was serious – both in magnitude and in the strength of Alex's intention to carry it out. He knew he should turn his car around right then and drive to the nearest police station. He knew, too, that if he did that, he would have to tell Bucky what he was doing and why. He could not do it. Not to Bucky, who had already suffered enough, who had broken down in tears, inconsolable, at the mere photograph of his ex-boyfriend. If Steve went to the police, he would have to tell them the whole backstory of Alex's abuse of Bucky. Bucky would have to give evidence, and Steve knew that it was too much for Bucky to handle without prior warning. It would do nothing but cause him immense stress and suffering. If Bucky were driven to the police station without his prior knowledge or against his will, it would end in disaster. He would resist, do everything possible not to go.

No, if Steve were to convince Bucky that they had to go to the police, he would have to plant the idea in Bucky's head, so that he would want to go. It felt deceitful, underhand, but Steve believed it would make things easier for Bucky in the long-run. It was a bad thing, for a good reason. Ethically unethical. As they arrived home, a plan began to form in his mind. As they removed their coats and shoes, Steve slipped his hand into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the bullet. They went through to the lounge, settling down on the sofa as they did every evening.
Bucky pulled his phone out of his pocket to put it on charge, the screen briefly lighting up as he plugged it in. The action gave Steve an idea, a ball of nerves rolling in his gut as he licked his lips, bracing himself to broach the subject.

"Have you had anymore weird texts from Alex lately?" said Steve.

Steve immediately felt a rush of guilt, regret twisting in his gut when Bucky physically flinched at the moment of Alex's name. Steve forced himself not to buckle, not to offer comfort, but to plough on with his plan.

"Yeah," said Bucky stiffly. "The usual. Creepy and dirty. I delete them as soon as I get them."

Steve schooled his face into one that was both firm and concerned. He furrowed his eyebrows, pinching his lips together.

"You should report those to the police," said Steve. "They'll be able to lock him up for harassment."

He cringed internally, hating himself. Hypocrite, hypocrite, hypocrite. He had no right to tell Bucky to go to the police about the text messages, when he himself would not go for something much more serious. Steve swallowed hard. He was doing this for Bucky, he reminded himself. If Bucky voluntarily went to the police, it would be far less traumatising an experience for him than Steve doing so against his will and dragging him into it regardless. What Steve was doing was a kindness. A fucked-up, manipulative kindness, but a kindness, nonetheless. He was simply trying to minimise Bucky's suffering. That was what he tried to convince himself, anyway.

"What the fuck?" said Bucky. "No way. I don't want to have anything to do with him. I don't want him in my life, period. Besides, what's the point? He'd get away with it. People like Alex always do. It's not fair, but it's true. He's rich and smart. He'd find a way to wriggle out of it."

A wave of guilt washed over Steve. Everything Bucky was saying was valid. He should stop now, give up the argument. The bullet lay heavy in his pocket, reminding him of why he was doing this. Steve dug his fingernails into his palms, hating himself as he continued pushing.

"But we have to try," he urged. "We have to fight."

Bucky shook his head, his face pale as he shrunk away from Steve. His blue eyes were wide and frightened. He wrapped his arms around himself, as if hugging himself, giving himself an approximation of comfort.

"I'm not like you!" said Bucky. "I'm not a soldier; I'm a translator. I can't go to the police. Alex scares the shit out of me. Please don't make me."

To Steve's horror, Bucky began to cry, burying his face in his hands, ashamed, as fat tears began to roll down his cheeks. Steve immediately dropped his line of argument, sliding closer to Bucky and wrapping his arms around him, as he should have done all along, regret a bitter taste on his tongue as he rubbed Bucky's back, soothing him for a pain that he himself had inflicted.

He wished he had never brought it up. He had been a fool to think Bucky was in any way ready to go to the police. He had been wrong to try to convince him to do something he had very clearly previously stated that he did not want to do.

Steve would just have to go to the police alone, and try his very best not to get Bucky involved.

"I'm sorry," whispered Steve. "I'm sorry."
Bucky went out later that evening to buy some last-minute ingredients for their evening meal. Steve kept himself occupied by doing some cleaning, tidying up the kitchen and wiping down the surfaces in preparation for their cooking dinner together.

The bullet was still in his pocket, weighing on him both physically and psychologically. He pondered when would be the best time to go to the police, without having to tell Bucky what he was doing, thereby avoiding the inevitable explanation that would have to follow. Tomorrow morning seemed like the best candidate. He could drop Bucky off at work and then go straight to the nearest police station. He could tell them about the threats he had received, without mentioning Bucky. The bullet alone felt like it should be enough to get Alex locked up; it was clearly no harmless threat. Feeling slightly better at having made a decision, Steve let out a sigh of relief and smiled with satisfaction as he finished wiping down the kitchen counter.

He turned around as Bucky re-entered the flat, the other man's footsteps quickly making their way towards the kitchen. Steve's smile slid from his face, being immediately replaced with a look of concern, as Bucky came stumbling into the kitchen, making a beeline for Steve, a terrified expression on his face. He was out of breath, as if he had been running, and was frighteningly pale. His eyes were darting around; agitated, paranoid. His hands immediately latched onto Steve's wrists as soon as he was within reach.

"I think someone followed me here," said Bucky. "Oh God, oh God... What if Alex has found out where I live?!"

His eyes were wide with panic, the whites visible around the blue of his irises. His hands were cold and clammy, slick with cool sweat. Steve could see his chest heaving, almost on the cusp of hyperventilating. He forced Bucky into the nearest chair, sitting him down and holding his hand, rubbing his back, trying to avert the imminent panic attack. Despite the calm exterior he was putting on, however, on the inside, Steve too was reeling with shock.

"Are you sure you were being followed?" said Steve sharply. "Was it Alex? Did you see his face?"

Bucky nodded, before shaking his head, a moan slipping from his lips as he planted his head between his legs, as if he were about to be sick. Steve quickly grabbed the bin, shoving it between Bucky's knees in case he really did heave. Bucky took several deep breaths, screwing his eyes shut as he struggled to regain his composure. Up close, Steve could see the beads of sweat on his forehead. He bit his lip, his heart breaking for Bucky. The other man was literally shaking with fear.

"I didn't see his face," said Bucky. "But I noticed someone following me out of the corner of my eye as soon as I left the convenience store. I took a few wrong turns to try to shake him off, but he just kept on tailing me. It's got to be him. Who the fuck else could it be?"

Steve nodded gravely. Honestly, even disregarding the bullet and note that Alex had left by the front door the night previously, Steve would be hard-pressed to think of a single other person who would be following Bucky. The fact that, unbeknownst to Bucky, Alex had already been pursuing Steve, made it almost certain in Steve's mind that Bucky's stalker and Alex were one and the same. Bucky moaned again, gripping the bin tightly with both hands, his throat working desperately as he tried not to throw up. Steve felt a rush of anger surge through him. How dare Alex cause Bucky so much suffering? How dare he re-insert himself into Bucky's life? How dare he follow him? Gritting his teeth, he was taken by a sudden, violent urge to set things right.
"What's he wearing?" said Steve. "The son of a bitch is probably still outside."

Bucky stared at him, uncomprehending.


Steve nodded, not answering Bucky's question. The description would suffice. Besides, he knew Alex's face, and he if was close enough to see the other man's face, he would be close enough to tell him, with his fists if necessary, to leave the two of them alone. Swallowing hard, he took a step back, peeling off his jumper.

"Give me your clothes," said Steve.

Bucky blinked at him incredulously.

"What are you, Terminator or something?" said Bucky.

"Let's swap clothes," urged Steve. "I'll go out pretending to be you, lure him away from here and then shake him off."

Bucky hesitated momentarily, before exhaling shakily, nodding once in consent to Steve's plan. He unzipped his hoodie and handed it over to Steve. He then handed over his jacket, before finally removing his shoes and placing them in front of Steve. Steve put on Bucky's hoodie and jacket, before slipping on the other man's shoes and tying the laces. Finally, he pulled up the hood and tugged it down low so that it hid his hair colour and obscured his face in shadows. He checked his reflection in the kitchen window, grimly satisfied with the result. If he walked with his head bent low, he should easily pass as Bucky.

"I won't be long," said Steve. "You just stay here. Try to relax. Have some tea."

Walking over to the cupboard, Steve grabbed Bucky's favourite blue mug and a teabag. He filled the kettle and set it to boil, setting down Bucky's blue mug and the teabag in front of it, before turning to Bucky and planting a gentle kiss on his lips. Bucky kissed him back, closing his eyes and leaning into Steve's touch. Steve was glad to feel that he was no longer shaking. Touching their foreheads together briefly, Steve gave him a final kiss on the nose, before turning to leave.

"Be careful," said Bucky.

Steve nodded, swallowing his anxiety.

"I will be," he said.

Before he could lose his nerve, Steve exited the flat, locking the front door behind him. He tugged Bucky's hoodie forwards and bent his head low, keeping his face hidden. His heart hammering in his chest, adrenaline pumping through him rapidly, he jogged down the stairs, before walking across the communal lobby and heading out onto the street. His eyes darted around furtively, hyper-vigilant of his surroundings as he began to walk quickly down the street. It was night-time now. The streetlamps threw up exaggerated shadows, making every innocent shape and crevice look like a potential threat. He forced himself to remain outwardly calm, trying his best to emulate Bucky's relaxed stride.

He had barely walked 50 yards when he spotted a hooded figure slip out from a narrow gap between two buildings. His heart rate ratcheted up a notch, trying to turn his head in a way that was not obvious and yet still allowed him to keep the stalker in his peripheral vision. He hurried down the pavement, turning down a side street that led to more residential properties. He shivered. Alex had
been hiding between those two buildings, watching, waiting. It was insane. He balled his hands into fists, only noticing then that they were shaking. He risked another quick glance behind him, disguising the movement as checking his reflection in a window. Alex was still following him, at a distance. His hood was pulled low, hiding his face, but the height looked roughly correct – in the photograph, Alex has been about six inches shorter than Bucky.

Steve made another left down a side street, his throat dry with nerves as he waited, straining his ears, to see what the stalker would do. Steve had made two left turns, essentially doubling back on himself. It was a nonsensical route that no one else would take – unless they were following him. If the hooded figure were actually an innocent person who had simply taken the same route as Steve by coincidence so far, this latest turn would show that – they would go a different way. He waited with bated breath, hoping with all his might that the stalker’s route would diverge from Steve’s nonsensical path, simply an innocent person whom Steve had been too quick to be suspicious of. The stalker turned onto the same road as Steve, following a little closer now. Steve swallowed. Not an innocent coincidence, then. It was Alex, stalking him, thinking he was Bucky.

Steve spotted a narrow alleyway and ducked into it, running silently along it until he reached a dumpster, hiding behind it, holding his breath, as he waited to see what Alex would do. He held his breath, listening with all his might, not daring to stick his head out to sneak a glance. The stalker stopped at the mouth of the alley, their footsteps pausing momentarily. Steve could imagine the confused expression on Alex's face, his quarry having seemingly vanished into thin air. A few seconds later, the stalker's footsteps began once more, walking slowly, cautiously down the alley. Steve lay in wait, barely daring to breathe as the stalker came closer and closer to his hiding place. The stalker's shadow came into view, elongated by the nearest streetlamp, thin and eerie. Their footsteps were close. Steve could almost hear the sound of them breathing. Steve stared at the shadow, his heart hammering, his balled fists slick with sweat. What if Alex had come armed with his gun? God, he had been so stupid. Steve would simply have to use his superior physical strength to his advantage. Alex would not be able to shoot him if he was knocked out cold. Alex's footsteps were so close now. He must be just metres away, feet, inches.... The stalker passed the dumpster, continuing down the alley, having not spotted Steve crouching in the shadows.

Steve gritted his teeth, silently rushing forwards, grabbing hold of the stalker by the shoulders and slamming them hard against the alley wall. The impact caused their hood to fall back, revealing their face. The artificial light illuminated their features in a way that caused strong contrast, but they were still unmistakably recognisable. Steve stared, stunned, his hands letting go of their shoulders momentarily out of pure shock. His heart raced. This was wrong.

It was not Alex.

It was not even a man.

It was Natasha.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

THOUGHTS: Ooh! :O What do you think is going on with Natasha? Why was she following Bucky and later Steve (thinking he was Bucky)? Is she a friend... or a foe? Let me know your theories in the comments below!
THANK YOU: Thank you for your comments on the last chapter. It seems it ripped out several of your hearts, for which I'm at once touched, apologetic and pleased <3

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth" and will reveal what Natasha has been hiding all this time...

TUMBLR: I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr. Feel free to follow/message/ask me stuff on there :)
Steve stared at Natasha in shock, barely able to believe his eyes. This was wrong. It made no sense. The seconds stretched on, as if elongated by a temporal elastic band, Steve's heart beat a staccato beat in his chest as his eyes roved over Natasha's curly red hair, her wide green eyes, which looked dull and grey in the dim light provided by the streetlamp.

"You're not Alex," said Steve.

"You're not Bucky!" said Natasha.

She looked as shocked as Steve felt. Her eyes, usually cool and impassive, were wide and fearful. She tried to push past Steve, but Steve grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her back against the alley wall. Natasha had been stalking Bucky. She had followed him from the convenience store and had continued to follow Steve, believing him to be Bucky, as he led her away from the flat. She had caused Bucky to almost have a panic attack, believing her to be Alex. Steve's nostrils flared angrily. He needed answers. Now.

"What the fuck is going on?" he demanded. "Why were you following Bucky?"

Natasha did not seem to hear him, staring back at him and issuing a question of her own.

"Where's Bucky?" she said.

It took all of Steve's self-control not to shake her.

"Why were you following him?" he repeated, enunciating each word clearly. "Talk!"

Natasha shook her head hard, her red curls bouncing in the streetlight. She put her palms on Steve's chest and pushed him back hard, with a surprising amount of strength. Steve staggered back several steps, taken by surprise. Natasha stepped up to him, grabbing hold of his hand to steady him and looking up at him desperately, imploringly.

"Where's Bucky?" she said. "Did you leave him alone?"

Steve was not sure if it was the familiar warmth of her small hand, or the palpable fear in her tone of voice, but something pierced through the red mist that shrouded his mind and allowed Natasha's question to penetrate. She did not sound angry at being tricked by Steve. No, instead, she sounded afraid, deeply afraid – which was a strange emotion for a stalker. It did not make sense. Granted, the entire situation did not make sense, but something about Natasha's expression made him pause. For the first time ever, Steve felt as though he were seeing her with no filter. And she was afraid.

"I left him alone at my apartment," he said, a feeling of foreboding rising in his gut as soon as the realisation dawned on him. "Oh God."

Natasha paled.

"Shit," she said.

She pushed roughly past Steve, running from the alley. Steve raced after her. He did not trust her.
She had still not given him an answer as to what she had been doing following Bucky. She had not proven that she was not a threat. He caught up to her, grabbing hold of her arm and forcing her to stop. Natasha struggled in his grip, trying to fight him off.

"Why were you following Bucky?" demanded Steve. "Tell me what's going on."

Natasha stared up at him wildly, her teeth bared, looking almost ready to attack him in order to wrench her arm free and get away. Thankfully, for both their sakes, she spoke instead, the words tumbling quickly from her lips.

"I swear, I'm not the bad guy here," she said. "Bucky's in danger. We need to get back to him, now."

There was panic in her voice, real panic. Steve let go of her arm. Natasha immediately resumed running back in the direction of the flat, re-tracing their steps. Steve chased after her, keeping pace. In his chest, his heart was hammering rapidly, both from the physical exertion and his own rising sense of fear. Natasha's explanation was threadbare, and Steve was not entirely sure if he believed her, but if there were the slightest chance that Natasha was right and Bucky was in danger, he did not want to waste a single second of time. He berated himself for leaving Bucky alone. Was Alex after him? He could think of no one else who could mean Bucky harm. Alex – who had left Steve the bullet outside his front door. He knew where they lived. Shit. Shit.

They reached Steve's block, their shoes pounding on the pavement as they raced towards the entrance to the block of flats. Natasha sprinted into the brightly lit foyer, Steve hot on her heels. They began to climb the stairs up to the third floor, their footsteps echoing up the winding staircase. Steve did not know what to think. He did not know what was happening. He did not know what to expect. His eyes zeroed in on Natasha's shoes, just a few steps ahead of him. Why had she been following Bucky? She was like a stranger. He did not know her. He did not usually hit people, but if Natasha turned on Bucky and posed a threat, Steve knew in that moment that he would not hesitate to take whatever action was necessary to protect his boyfriend.

They arrived on the third floor, careering around the corner and onto the corridor that led to Steve's flat. Steve could see something up ahead, in the corridor. With a stab of horror, he realised, as they drew closer, that what he was looking at was pieces of his own doorframe. Steve's front door was busted in, reduced to several large chunks of smashed-in wood. Natasha pushed open the ruined door, running inside and calling Bucky's name. Steve followed, his breathing suddenly constricted as fear rose in his gut. He ran straight to the kitchen, where he had left Bucky, skidding to a halt as he struggled to take in the scene in front of him.

Bucky was not there. On the floor, however, was his favourite blue mug, which Steve had got down from the cupboard just 20 minutes beforehand – smashed. Steve slowly stepped over the shards of pale blue porcelain, dipping his fingers in the spilt tea that stained the kitchen floor like a murder scene. The liquid was still warm. By chance, Steve glanced to his left, his vision zeroing in on one small patch of the floor. Fear immediately exploded in his gut. Sweat erupted on his forehead, his right arm beginning to tremble as he stared at the small patch of red on the kitchen floor.

Blood.

Natasha came running into the room, her hair dishevelled and her eyes wide with fear as she returned from her search of the rest of the flat. One look at her face told Steve what he already knew to be true.

Bucky was gone.
Panic.

Panic like he had not known since Iraq, when the bomb had detonated and blown Steve and Sam off their feet.

Suddenly, he was no longer in New York City, crouching down on his kitchen floor.

He was in Fallujah, pinned beneath the rubble of the ceiling, his right side torn open and bleeding. He was in agony, his ears still ringing with the echoes of the bomb blast. He coughed. Dust and dirt filled his lungs, choking him. His eyes watered. He strained to see through the dust and debris that had been thrown up by the blast, tears carving little rivers through the dust that covered his face. He tried to move, tried to drag himself out from beneath the collapsed ceiling, but he could not. He was trapped.

The citrus tang of lemons filled his nostrils, the fruits having tumbled from the basket when the bomb had detonated. The dust was beginning to settle now, allowing him to see the daisy-patterned curtain swaying in the breeze. He looked to his side, terror filling his gut as his gaze fell upon Sam, who was bleeding profusely from his chest and abdomen. Steve shook his head hard, tears streaming down his face, a sob escaping his lips. He knew what was going to happen next. He had watched it happen hundreds of times before – in his nightmares, in his flashbacks, in his memories: he was going to watch Sam die.

Except, for the first time ever, that did not happen.

Sam's eyes met his. He got up from the floor, miraculously healed, the blood on his military fatigues disappearing in the blink of an eye as he crossed the short distance between them. He bent down in front of Steve, who was still trapped beneath the rubble, blood seeping sluggishly from the wound down his side. Sam snapped his fingers urgently in front of Steve's face, his eyes wide and concerned.

"I need you to focus, now," said Sam. "Wake up, Steve. Wake up!"

Steve jerked violently back to the present, returning to the cool hardness of his kitchen floor.

New York City.

2019.

Bucky: missing, in danger.

He looked around wildly, trying to figure out how much time had passed during his flashback. It must have been mere minutes. The spilt tea was still warm to the touch. Natasha was still there, her expression stressed and her hair frazzled as she spoke rapidly into a small, two-way radio.

"...forced entry. I repeat: James Barnes is missing, assumed kidnapped. Taken from the Rogers residence after a forced entry. Get all available units looking."
Steve stared at her, bewildered. She lowered the radio with a weary sigh, briefly balancing it on her lap as she ran a stressed hand through her hair. She spotted Steve gawping at her and crossed the kitchen, helping him into a chair and pulling up a seat beside him. Steve took a deep breath, trying to ground himself. He still felt thrown-off from his flashback, the echoes of Iraq lingering like an afterimage. He massaged his temples.

"What's going on?" he said.

"I've called in Bucky's disappearance," said Natasha. "Try not to worry. They'll find him, and they'll tell me what to do, once they figure out where he's been taken. Right now, we just have to wait."

Steve stared at her. Natasha did not seem to realise that every sentence she had just said had raised more questions than it had answered. She was watching him carefully, her green eyes drinking in his reaction with maddening calmness. Steve almost wanted to scream.

"What?!" he snapped.

Natasha, to her credit, had the decency to look guilty.

"I haven't been entirely honest with you," she said quietly. "I'm not really a translator."

No shit, thought Steve.

"Explain," he said out loud.

Natasha fiddled with her sleeves, her gaze dropping to the kitchen floor, taking in the spilt tea and the remains of Bucky's favourite blue mug. When she spoke, she spoke slowly, as if she were wondering where to begin. With so many secrets all tangled together, it seemed working out the best way to untangle them was a challenge.

"I'm an undercover police officer with New York Police Department," she said. "For the past two years, I've been working full-time on the fight against HYDRA. You'll have heard about them on the news. They're the worst of the worst. Murders, drugs, the sex trade of vulnerable young people – you name it, HYDRA's running it. They've been operating for decades, and the police have been throwing everything at the problem but getting nowhere. At least, that was the case until a year ago."

Steve nodded numbly. His mind was reeling. Natasha – his friend, his so-called colleague – was actually an undercover police officer? She had been lying to him the entire time they had known one another about who she really was? He understood the necessity of it, of course, but still, it was difficult to wrap his head around. It was a bitter pill to swallow, to discover he had been on the receiving end of such a deep and long-running deception.

"What changed a year ago?" he said, because he could think of nothing else to say.

Natasha's eyes flicked up to meet his. A flicker of pain crossed her features, a pink blush rising to colour her cheeks.

"We discovered that their leader had a weakness," she said. "Their suspected leader, anyway. All our findings point to him being in charge." She sucked in a deep breath, as if steadying herself for what she was to say next. "His name is Alexander Pierce," she said. "You mentioned his name in the alley, which means Bucky must have told you about him. He's Bucky's ex-boyfriend. They were together for a year. Bucky is his weakness."

Steve could feel his breathing quickening. Alex, Bucky's abusive ex, the head of HYDRA? It was incredible. It seemed too far-fetched to be true – and yet, at the same time, it somehow did not shock
Steve. He had already known that Alex was a vile person. He had already known that Alex was capable of making death threats. It made sense that someone prepared to do that could be connected to organised crime. But still, the boss? The kingpin? It was a lot to take in.

"Alex is the leader of HYDRA?" he echoed.

"We're 99.9% certain, yeah," said Natasha. "We had an undercover officer infiltrate the gang a couple of years ago. He got quite far up the ranks. One of the last reports he ever sent was that everyone in HYDRA's top ranks is under the control of Pierce. He seems to have leverage on all of them, to make them do exactly what he wants. Anyone who disagrees or tries to walk away, disappears. With that kind of reputation, even the lower gang members don't step out of line. Alexander Pierce is the key. There are rumours he even has a membership list of every HYDRA gang member, so he can keep tabs on every single one of them. We bring him down, and we can put an end to HYDRA once and for all."

Steve nodded, dazed.

"What happened to the undercover police officer?" he said.

"He disappeared," said Natasha.

She was silent for a long moment, her eyes glistening before she discreetly wiped her sleeve across her face.

"So, anyway, Pierce was pretty damn infatuated with Bucky," she said. "And when Bucky left him and then didn't disappear like anyone else who'd ever turned their back on Alexander Pierce, we realised we'd found a chink in his armour. Bucky is his one weakness, which meant it suddenly became very important that we keep him safe – and keep an eye on him."

"Keep an eye on him?" said Steve, his eyes narrowing.

Natasha nodded, looking unapologetic.

"In the early days, we didn't know if Bucky was HYDRA or not," she said. "For all we knew, he could have been a murderer or a people trafficker or a drug dealer or anything, so yeah, we kept an eye on him. It eventually became apparent that he wasn't involved with the gang at all, though. I doubt he even knew that Pierce was a criminal."

"Bucky thought Alex was a marketing consultant," Steve said numbly.

Natasha nodded, her expression softening.

"Yeah," she said. "And as soon as I realised that Bucky wasn't a threat, my mission changed to just keeping him safe."

"Your mission?" said Steve.

"I was the officer tasked with keeping an eye on Bucky," she said. "First to figure out if he was a threat, and then to make sure he was safe and out of Pierce's clutches. I was planted in his department at Stark Industries to watch him during the day, and I befriended him so that I'd be able to be near him and protect him outside of work too. I set you guys up when I realised you'd be a good person to protect him when I couldn't be there. Sometimes I had to go away when I was asked to help out with other intelligence-led operations against HYDRA. Those have been my, ah, family emergencies. So, I did background checks on you, and you were perfect: no criminal record, an ex-soldier. Who better for Bucky to have looking after him when I got pulled away on other missions?"
Steve felt himself shaking, his hands balling into fists as white-hot anger boiled up inside him. Natasha had run background checks on him?! She had vetted him for his suitability to be Bucky's protector?! He remembered how she had set them up together, at the very beginning. He remembered her keen, almost obsessive, interest in their love life. At the time, he had thought she was just a fangirl for their romance. Now, he saw it for what it had really been: clever, clinical, calculating.

"You've been using me," spat Steve.

He was furious, but more than that, he was upset. He had loved Natasha. He had trusted Natasha. He had thought that they were friends.

"No," said Natasha, looking defensive, before squirming uncomfortably. "OK, when I first set you guys up together, yeah, I was using you... But I really do care about your relationship now. You guys are great together. And you've always been my friend, Steve. We were friends way before I had the idea of putting you and Bucky together."

Steve shook his head hard. He felt as though he was going to be sick. It was too much to take in.

"No," he said. "This isn't friendship. This has all been a lie."

He did not miss the look at hurt that flashed across Natasha's face before she was able to hide it. A vicious stab of satisfaction went through him. Good. At that moment, he wanted Natasha to hurt, the way she had hurt him through her deception and manipulation.

"Why do the police think Bucky needs protection, anyway?" he demanded. "Why is he so special?"

Natasha quickly composed herself, tucking a red curl behind her ear before replying.

"I told you," she said. "Bucky is Pierce's one weakness. He used to be very close to Pierce. He may have intelligence, and could be a valuable witness if Pierce goes on trial for his crimes. He's a very valuable asset, and we can't let an asset like that be endangered." She paused, fear momentarily flickering across her features as she lowered her eyes, avoiding Steve's gaze. "I also believe he's at risk from Pierce's obsessive attentions. I've been investigating Pierce for a long time now; I know how his fucked-up mind works. He sees Bucky as his property, and it's only a matter of time before he tries to take him back." She let out a shaky sigh. "NYPD want to keep the asset safe. But I also want to keep him safe – Bucky Barnes, the person – do you understand?"

Steve's stomach churned. He buried his face in his hands. He was in turmoil. He wanted to hate Natasha for her deception, and yet the way Natasha spoke sounded as though she genuinely did have Bucky's best interests at heart. He did not know what to think. He did not feel as though he knew the woman sitting next to him. She was a stranger. He felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under him. It left him reeling, uncertain of reality. Morality was not that tidy thing he wanted it to be. He had once thought it black and white. Now he saw it for what it really was: a mix of shades of grey.

"All those times you've disappeared for your family emergencies, what have you really been doing?" he said, changing the subject.

He could not talk about Bucky anymore – not whilst they were sitting there, uselessly, waiting for Natasha's colleagues to get back to them with a location for where Alex might have taken him. He needed to talk about something else, if only to distract himself.

"Various things," said Natasha, ticking them off on her fingers as she cast her mind back. "The first time, I was part of a team sent to rescue victims of HYDRA's sex trafficking business. We got
intelligence of a likely location where they were being held. The intelligence was right. We rescued eighteen women and girls that day, even if I got a few bruises arresting one of the guys in charge of that little exploitation ring."

Steve remembered how she had returned to work with bruises on her face and arms, her knuckles scraped. She had said she had fallen down the stairs.

"The second time, I was providing back-up to a team trying to interrupt a HYDRA weapons sale. The third time, I was part of a team trying to stop a massive shipment of drugs making its way to New York City." Her eyes darkened, her hands balling into fists. "Do you know how much I hate drugs? They're the root cause of so many social problems affecting the most vulnerable communities. So many crimes are committed by drug addicts to feed their addictions. So many lives are ruined because of drugs. I fucking..."

She trailed off, shaking her head as she calmed herself down. She breathed deeply for several long moments, before exhaling long and hard.

"Anyway, it hasn't all been dangerous missions and stuff," she continued. "Sometimes I've just been tailing Bucky, keeping an eye on him to make sure he was safe. Springfall Lake was lovely."

Steve felt as though his eyes were about to bug out of his head.

"You followed us to Springfall Lake?!" he squawked.

He remembered how he and Bucky had made love outside and blushed furiously, balking at the gross invasion of their privacy.

Natasha, apparently, was remembering the same event, as her cheeks too flushed red. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, clearing her throat awkwardly.

"Well, no, I didn't watch what you guys were doing all the time," she said quickly. "Mainly, I was just patrolling the perimeter of that little resort, making sure that no one else was there who shouldn't have been. It would have been a good opportunity for Pierce to snatch Bucky. I wasn't going to let him get near enough to have the chance."

OK, that was admittedly far less creepy than his original thought, but still. The lies, the manipulation, the stalking – it was too much. He shook his head, unable to cope with the avalanche of new information.

"All of it has just been... one big lie," he said. "Everything you've said. Us being friends. Your interest in me and Bucky as a couple. Your fucking family emergencies. You... You..."

He did not have the words to describe how betrayed he felt. He did not know if his anger was justified or not. He did not know if Natasha's actions were justified or not. All he knew was that, in that moment, it felt wrong. It felt as though Natasha had been manipulating his life. It felt hurtful. He was stunned. He had thought he had known Natasha. He had thought they had been best friends, who shared everything.

Remorse briefly flashed across her features, before being replaced with a controlled expression, as if she were swallowing back whatever she was feeling and compartmentalising it away, putting it away in storage to be dealt with later.

"We'll talk properly later, I promise," she said. "Right now, though, I need to find Bucky."

Steve was silent for a moment or two, trying to figure out what felt off about her statement, before it...
hit him. His eyes narrowed as realisation struck, his hands balling into fists.

"You?" he said.

If Natasha thought that he was going to stand by the side-lines and just sit at home twiddling his thumbs whilst she and the rest of NYPD went to find and rescue Bucky, she was sorely mistaken. Natasha immediately picked up on Steve's meaning and crossed her arms, giving him a warning look.

"Yes, me," she said. "You need to stay put, Steve. You're a civilian. Let the police handle this. I've already called in another officer to come over here and keep you safe. Right now, you're a potential high-risk target."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, but at that moment, Natasha's police radio suddenly burst back into life. The voice that came through was a male, his New York accent muffled by static.

"We've narrowed it down to two suspicious vehicles," said the voice. "Both got false plates, both seen on CCTV leaving the area around the Rogers residence during our time-frame."

"Where are they headed?" asked Natasha immediately, her attention leaving Steve to become laser-focused on the radio in her hand.

"One was last seen heading in the direction of Pierce's residence in the Upper East Side," said the voice. "The other was seen heading towards an abandoned factory." He reeled off the factory's address before pausing. "Oh, scratch that, that plate is coming up on the police database as having previously been involved in low-level drug deals. Not HYDRA-related."

"Copy that," said Natasha. "Send all available nearby units to Pierce's Upper East Side address. It must be where he's taken Bucky. I'm on my way."

She rose to her feet, tucking her police radio back into her pocket before turning briefly to Steve.

"Stay here," she said firmly. "A police officer is coming to look after you. And try not to move or touch anything. Forensics will probably want to photograph the scene of the kidnapping and take some samples."

Steve nodded, avoiding her eyes.

"Sure," he said. "I won't move."

Natasha ran from the room, her footsteps fading as she left the flat and sprinted along the hallway and down the stairs. Steve sat stock still, waiting until she was out of earshot – since that would also mean that he was out of earshot of her – before leaping to his feet and sprinting from the room.

He quickly located and grabbed his car keys, before rushing from the flat and down the stairs, dashing across the lobby and out into the cool night air. His feet pounded the pavement as he rushed to where he had parked his car, skidding to a halt beside the rusty old banger. He fiddled briefly with the door, before clambering inside and putting the key in the ignition. He paused, briefly gathering his thoughts as he struggled with what to do.

Something about the situation seemed too neat. Alex must know that once Bucky disappeared, the police would go straight to his house. For a car to be seen going to that location seemed too good to be true. He remembered the way the police officer on the radio had mentioned that the other car was marked as belonging to a drug dealer not affiliated with HYDRA. That, too, seemed too convenient. He wondered how easy it would be for HYDRA to fool the police into thinking that a car was not
affiliated with them, thereby giving them the perfect vehicle to travel in undetected. If Alex was anywhere near as smart as everyone kept saying, Steve was sure it would be small fry for him.

Making up his mind, he set his jaw, his fingers wrapping around the steering wheel. If the police were converging on Alex's house, then he would take the abandoned factory. Just in case. He thanked his lucky stars for his good memory, recalling the factory's address and pinpointing roughly where it must be using his spatial memory.

He put his foot down on the accelerator, urging his crappy little car to go as fast as it could. Astonishingly, considering his car's age and condition, he might even have broken the speed limit.

All the police cars he encountered, however, were blue-lighting in the opposite direction, towards the Upper East Side.

They did not give him a second glance.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

FORESHADOWING: Well done if you guessed or picked up on the foreshadowing about Natasha being an undercover police officer! There have been clues scattered throughout this story:
- She has frequently been mysteriously absent due to her "family emergencies". These absences often coincided with news reports of the police trying to disrupt HYDRA's operations.
- She has been very evasive about her "family" and what their "emergencies" involve.
- She has sometimes returned from these "family emergencies" with minor injuries, as if she has been involved in physical altercations.
- She has had a very keen interest in setting up, knowing about and maintaining Steve and Bucky's relationship. You might have thought she was just a big Stucky shipper, but in fact she has been trying to maximise Bucky's safety by placing him with an ex-soldier, i.e. someone with a high chance of being able to protect Bucky should HYDRA come knocking.
- She asked very pertinent, police-like questions about the car crash in chapter 10.
- In chapter 17, I slipped in a joke about her being a secret agent.
- Well done also if you guessed that she was the dark-clad figure who was watching them at the end of the chapter about Springfall Lake!

THOUGHTS: Feel free to share your thoughts and feelings in the comments section below! Hearing from you guys, and knowing that you're enjoying this story, makes me so happy :D

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left comments on the last chapter! It seems that the ending left some of you rather shook! <3

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "In Deep Water"...

TUMBLR: Shameless plug - I am ao3-elle1991 on Tumblr ;)
Steve arrived at the abandoned factory about thirty minutes later.

He drove his car over a bridge that led to the rusty industrial complex, the dark water below shimmering in the moonlight. He slammed on the brakes when he finally reached his destination, the unlit factory suddenly looming out of the darkness. He jumped out of the car, running to the factory’s large doors, which hung open, vandalised and decayed. As he approached the doors, he slowed his run to a walk, realising that if Alex really had brought Bucky here, then stealth might be a wise option.

Sticking to the shadows, he crept inside the factory, slipping in through a hole in the wall instead of entering through the front doors. Once inside, he paused momentarily, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. He cast an eye over his surroundings, taking it all in. The former factory was dilapidated and rubbish-strewn. There were large patches of the roof that appeared to be missing, either fallen in naturally or damaged by hooligans, allowing bands of moonlight to illuminate the interior with an eerie, pale glow. Old pieces of machinery, benches and old shipping containers were scattered throughout the large space, creating a maze of haphazard corridors and nooks and crannies to circumnavigate.

He began to move through the industrial decay, on his guard in case Alex was hiding in one of the many deep shadows, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of Bucky. His movements were noisier than he would have liked; litter, grime and natural debris all covered the floor, making it impossible to move about silently. There went his element of surprise, he thought bitterly. Should Alex be here, he reasoned solemnly, he would simply have to rely on his soldier’s instincts and reflexes. At least there he had an advantage; he was fairly confident that if it came to a physical fight, he could beat Alex fair and square.

He picked his way through the abandoned factory in as logical a manner as he could manage. He did not want to leave any inch unexplored in his search for Bucky. His movements were noisier than he would have liked; litter, grime and natural debris all covered the floor, making it impossible to move about silently. There went his element of surprise, he thought bitterly. Should Alex be here, he reasoned solemnly, he would simply have to rely on his soldier’s instincts and reflexes. At least there he had an advantage; he was fairly confident that if it came to a physical fight, he could beat Alex fair and square.

He turned a corner, his eyes zeroing in on a sight that he was at once relieved and terrified to see. He ran towards Bucky, who appeared to be unconscious, sprawled out on a camp bed. When he reached him, Bucky stirred, moaning quietly as he blinked his eyes open blearily. Steve fell to his knees, crouching down to cup Bucky’s cheek, trying to ascertain his physical condition. Bucky had blood on his forehead, presumably from when he had been knocked out back at their flat and snatched. His hands were tied in front of him, thick rope wrapped around his wrists. Steve immediately got to work undoing the ropes, his fingers picking at the tightly-done knots.

"How are you feeling?" said Steve.

Bucky blinked slowly, watching passively as Steve loosened one of the knots binding his wrists together.
"My head hurts," he said finally. "M'feeling fuzzy."

Steve glanced up at him, concerned at the dazed expression on his face and his unfocused eyes. He looked concussed. The blow to his head must not have been gentle. Steve gritted his teeth, fighting against the wave of anger that surged within him, concentrating on working the rope around Bucky's wrists. At last, he managed to loosen the ropes enough to slip them off Bucky's hands. He rubbed Bucky's red, tender skin where the rope had dug in.

"There you go," said Steve.

Bucky smiled weakly.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

Steve got to his feet, taking a step back to give Bucky space. Now that Bucky had his hands free, he wanted to get them both out of there as quickly as possible. He did not know where Alex was or if there were any other HYDRA gang members nearby providing back up. He did not particularly want to stick around to find out.

"Can you stand?" asked Steve.

Bucky had been resting on his back with his eyes screwed shut, obviously in pain from the blow to his head. At Steve's question, he opened his eyes groggily, staring at Steve for a long second before suddenly gasping and flinching. Steve rushed forwards, concerned that Bucky was having some kind of seizure, when he became aware of two things simultaneously. Firstly, Bucky's gaze was not fixed quite on Steve's face, but at a point over his right shoulder. And secondly, something cold and metallic had just been pressed into his back. Steve froze instantly. He did not need to be an ex-soldier to know that the thing currently pressed against his spine was the muzzle of a gun.

"Turn around slowly," said the man behind him. He had a lazy New York drawl. "No sudden movements."

Steve obeyed, turning slowly on the spot, keeping his movements as even and non-threatening as possible. Finally completing his 180-degree turn, his eyes fell upon the man who he hated above all others. Alexander Pierce was dressed in a sleek black coat, the collars turned up against the non-existent wind. Beneath it, he appeared to be wearing a smart navy-blue business suit. In his hand was a black pistol, his finger wrapped casually around the trigger. Steve forced his eyes away from the gun, meeting Alex's gaze as the other man watched him with interest. Steve did not flinch, setting his jaw as they eyeballed one another. Behind his glasses, Alex's eyes were a watery blue. His greying strawberry-blonde hair was perfectly quaffed.

"Come and take a walk with me, son," said Alex, gesturing with his pistol towards the factory's front doors.

Steve tried not to shudder at the overly-friendly nickname. A jab with the pistol muzzle got him moving, his feet carrying him jerkily out of the factory. The cold night air instantly hit him as they stepped outside, cooling his sweat and making him shiver. His mind was in overdrive, desperately trying to work out how he was going to escape the situation. He kicked himself internally. How had he been so foolish as to come out unarmed? Of course Alex would have a gun. Steve's mind had been so focused on finding and saving Bucky that he had not given a second thought to his own personal safety. Now, he was going to pay for that lack of thought – possibly with his life.

He pondered how quickly he could duck out of the way of the gun and disarm Alex. Not as quickly as Alex could simply pull the trigger and kill him, he concluded. Attacking Alex was not an option,
at least whilst Alex was concentrating on keeping the pistol aimed at Steve. Perhaps distraction was the best technique. If he could engineer the situation so that Alex was somehow not paying so much attention to keeping Steve at gunpoint, then perhaps in that moment of distraction, Steve could wrestle the gun from Alex's grip. It was a faint hope. He wondered how long it would take the police to realise that Alex was not at his Upper East Side address. Perhaps if he could keep Alex talking long enough, he could stay alive until the police arrived at their location. Perhaps.

"Keep moving," said Alex, jabbing the pistol into Steve's back. "To the bridge."

Steve stepped onto the bridge that he had driven over just 15 minutes prior. It was an ugly structure – all rusted wrought metal and peeling paint. It was obviously rarely used; its sole purpose was to connect the abandoned industrial area to the road network. No through-traffic came this way. Steve swallowed, fear raising its head for the first time as he was hit by the realisation that he could, quite honestly, die there. He did not want to die. He still had so many years left to live. He wanted to paint. He wanted to see the world. He wanted to grow old with Bucky. They reached the middle of the bridge.

"Stop," said Alex.

Steve stopped, casting a look over the wall of the bridge and immediately wishing he had not. The water below was black, cold and malevolent-looking. Barely a ripple marred the river's surface. Steve felt that something could be dropped down there and it would not be found for months or years later, if at all. He shivered. Perhaps that was the point. He turned around, facing Alex, hoping vehemently that none of his fear was visible on his face. Alex was smirking. The gun was still trained squarely at Steve's heart.

"So, you're Steven Rogers," said Alex. "You're shorter than I expected."

"You're uglier," shot back Steve, before he could stop himself.

He froze instantly, horrified at his motor-mouth's apparent disregard for his longevity. Thankfully, Alex laughed, looking genuinely amused. The wrinkles around his eyes deepened as he chuckled, his arm holding the gun jiggling slightly as he did so. Steve stared, bewildered, at the sight in front of him. The situation and the weapon aside, Alex did not come across as the monster that Steve knew him to be. He looked like someone's fun grandfather. A paternal workmate. A friendly neighbour approaching retirement. Evil did not always look evil.

"You're funny," said Alex, still smiling. "I can see why James likes you."

"His name is Bucky," said Steve. "He hates being called James."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Steve felt his blood run cold. Horror unfurled in him at the realisation that, perhaps, this was exactly why Bucky so hated being called James. It had been the name that Alex had called him, when they had been together. A fresh wave of hatred and revulsion stabbed through him. He hated Alex. Alex had damaged Bucky's life so deeply, so thoroughly, that he could no longer even bear to be called his own name. It was beyond fucked up.

Alex did not seem to come to the same realisation, or perhaps he simply did not care, because he did not comment on Bucky's change of preferred name. Instead, he took a step towards Steve, causing Steve to step back reflexively before he could stop himself. Alex smirked at Steve's unconscious display of fear, the corners of his mouth twitching up cruelly. Steve's back bumped against the wall of the bridge. He swallowed, his skin prickling with claustrophobia as Alex stepped into his personal space. He held his breath, trying not to betray his nerves.
"Do you know how many people I've killed?" said Alex.

Steve stared at him, stunned into momentary silence at the casual ease with which Alex voiced the question. His tone was as if he were asking Steve about the weather, or if he wanted to know if Steve had watched the latest Major League Baseball game. He was fucking with Steve's mind, taking enjoyment in shocking him, horrifying him. Bastard. Steve shook himself out of his reverie, not giving Alex the satisfaction of a response as he replied coolly.

"No," said Steve.

"Me neither," admitted Alex. "I stopped counting years ago. But I do know that I've killed three people on this very bridge."

Steve glared at him, unable to stop his shiver of revulsion.

"Fuck you," said Steve.

Alex smiled, reaching up to cup Steve's cheek with his free hand. His index finger trailed down Steve's cheekbone before stroking gently over his lower lip. Alex's eyes were dark, his pupils blown wide. He leant forwards so that his mouth was right next to Steve's ear. Steve could feel his breath, hot against his skin. It was a chilling mimicry of intimacy.

"The mouth on you," Alex whispered huskily. "The things I could do to that mouth..." He let the thought linger horribly between them for a moment, before pulling back, scoffing dismissively, a cold hardness returning to his eyes. "I should put a bullet in it."

Steve remained silent, struggling to keep up with Alex's break-neck changes of tack. One minute he was friendly, the next creepy, the next dangerous. Steve could not keep up. He felt unsettled, disturbed, mentally thrown-off. He supposed that was the point. Alex was playing mind games.

"I'm always fair, though," continued Alex, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "I'm not some trigger-happy thug. I always give people the chance to do the right thing; to follow my orders. If they end up dead, it's their own fault for not doing what I say."

"Wow, you're a real saint," snapped Steve. "Do you want a medal?"

Alex's eyes glinted. His lips curved into a smile, apparently genuinely amused by Steve's reaction.

"More jokes," said Alex. "Do you think it hides how frightened you are?" When Steve did not reply, his smile grew wider. "Let's talk a bit about you. I've given you more warnings than anyone. I don't want to kill you, Steve. You're a veteran. I respect that. I'd much prefer you to just do what I say. So far, though, you haven't been, ah, compliant. Let's go through all the warnings I've given you. Can you think of any?"

"The bullet by my front door," said Steve. "And before that, the note tucked under my car windscreen wiper. And before that, you carved a message into the car door."

Alex nodded.

"That's right," he said.

Steve remembered how he had felt when he had found the message carved into the metal. He had felt sick, almost ready to retch. It felt like a desecration of his father's memory. His car, to him, was not just a car. He clenched his fists, his hands shaking by his sides.
"That was my father's car," said Steve.

"Was it?" said Alex, sounding uninterested. "I don't care."

Steve could feel his anger rising. His cheeks were hot. He knew he was turning red. Alex smirked. Steve fought the urge to shout at him. He had some sense of self-preservation.

"At the very beginning, I sent Ophelia to tell you to stay away from James," said Alex. "I hoped you would listen, but when you didn't, I sent Rollins to give you a scare with his car when you were out running near Central Park. Turns out, you're a stubborn bastard, so I had to send out Rumlow to rough you up later, under the pretence of a mugging. You beat him up pretty good, by the way. I was almost impressed, but most of all, I was annoyed, because you were still disobeying me."

"I'm sorry I'm not one of your lapdogs," said Steve.

Alex smiled, his eyes glinting in a way that sent shivers down Steve's spine.

"No, you're not sorry," said Alex silkily. "But you will be." He let the statement hang in the air for a moment, before continuing smoothly. "The reason I'm telling you all this, is that I want you to understand that it's your fault that you're in this situation. I was very generous with my warnings. I really would have preferred that you simply obeyed me and left James when I told you to. I never wanted things to come to this. I never wanted to have to kill you."

His eyes were wide and sincere. Steve gazed at him long and hard, probing his soul, and realised with a jolt that Alex was telling the truth. He genuinely did seem disappointed that he had to kill Steve. It made no sense. The man was a mess of contradictions.

"Why do you care?" said Steve. "Why give me all those warnings? Why not just kill me?"

"I told you," said Alex, averting his eyes briefly. "You're a veteran. I respect our country's heroes."

Alex, apparently, was a bad liar.

"Bullshit," said Steve. "Tell me the truth."

An expression of annoyance flashed briefly across Alex's face. For a moment, Steve feared he had gone too far. He closed his eyes, readying himself for a bullet in the chest, counting down the seconds. Nothing happened. Several long moments later, he opened his eyes, dizzy with the thrill of still being alive.

"I did it for James," Alex said finally. "If you were to leave him, he'd be heartbroken, but he'd get over it. Maybe he'd even come back to me voluntarily. Killing you would upset him on a deeper level. He would never forgive me for killing you. I may never be able to let him be free again. That's not what I want. I want James to live a free, happy life."

Steve silently absorbed the horrifying information that had been embedded within Alex's revelation. It sounded as though he was willing to get Bucky back by whatever means necessary. Even, it seemed, if it meant keeping Bucky as his prisoner. I may never be able to let him be free again. He shook his head in disbelief, horrified and sickened by the lengths Alex was apparently willing to go to secure Bucky as his boyfriend. It was chilling, dark, inhumane.

"What – you're... you're going to keep him chained up?" said Steve.

He did not care that he had stammered. He did not care if Alex thought he was weak. It was simply too much to take in – too horrifying, too extreme, too disturbing. He could barely believe that
someone could think of treating a fellow human being in such a way.

"Maybe," said Alex, looking genuinely thoughtful. "Honestly, I haven't properly thought about the logistics yet."

"You're insane," said Steve.

Alex's expression darkened. For the first time, he looked angry, his eyebrows pulling down into a frown as he glowered at Steve.

"If someone took your belongings away from you, wouldn't you be angry?" snarled Alex. "I would. I don't like people touching my things. So I hope that even you, with your tiny little brain, can understand why I have to do this."

He pressed the muzzle of the gun against Steve's heart, causing his pulse to skyrocket, panic lancing through him just as he noticed something on the horizon that simultaneously flooded him with sweet, heady relief. A long trail of blue and red lights had just mounted the crest of a hill and were racing in their direction. Steve had never been so thankful to see those flashing coloured lights. The police cars' sirens were off, presumably so as not to provide Alex with any warning of their impending arrival. Desperate, stalling for time, Steve turned his gaze back to Alex, blurting out the first thing that came into his head – anything to keep the other man talking, to keep him distracted, before he put a bullet in Steve's heart.

"Why are you telling me all this?" said Steve. "Why didn't you just kill me as soon as I stepped foot in the abandoned factory?"

Alex cocked his head to the side, considering the question, before shrugging.

"I like to get things off my chest," said Alex. "It's cathartic. And seeing as I'm going to kill you, it doesn't matter what you do or don't know. It's not as if you're not going to live long enough to tell anyone."

He paused momentarily, before sneering nastily, obviously having remembered something, his eyes glinting with childish glee as he poked the muzzle of the gun against Steve's chest.

"It's good for your mental health, to talk, you know," continued Alex. "Although it seems you're already an expert in that. I've had my men watch you, Steve. I know all about your daily runs in Central Park, talking to yourself. Hey, Sam! How're you doing, Sam? It's been so long since I saw you, Sam! Who's Sam, your imaginary friend?"

Steve closed his eyes, the ghost of desert heat searing into his skin briefly, before the memory faded away. His right arm trembling lightly, he forced his eyes open, ignoring Alex's jibe in favour of asking his own question.

"What's going to happen, after this?" said Steve. "You kill me, then what? Do you even know?"

Alex smiled, a dreamy expression coming over his face.

"I'll find some place for James and I to live," said Alex. "Some place nice, where those bastard cops won't come knocking. James and I will be together. It'll be the way things were always supposed to be. We'll be happy together."

Steve could not help the laugh that burst out of him, harsh and too-loud, bordering on hysterical.

"That'll never happen," he said. "Bucky hates you. He has nightmares about you. He's told me that
he never wants to see your face ever again. Why the fuck do you think he'd ever want to even be in the same room as you?"

Alex smacked Steve hard across the face, his eyes wide, his expression enraged.

"He's just confused," hissed Alex. "You've messed with his head."

Steve risked a glance over Alex's shoulder, where he could see the police cars were now much closer. Hope spiked through him, as well as a fresh wave of anxiety. He just had to stay alive until they arrived. Time had never felt so slow. Minutes suddenly felt like hours.

"How do you think he's going to react when he finds out that you killed me?" said Steve, just to keep the conversation going. "How do you think he's going to feel when he finds out about your little criminal empire HYDRA? Do you think he'll still want to be with you then? Wake up, Alex! Bucky's a decent man. He won't want anything to do with criminal scum like you."

Alex stared at him in shock. For a moment, Steve felt victorious, thinking that perhaps Alex was shocked because no one had ever spoken back to him in such a way before. When Alex spoke next, however, it was with such dark, dangerous quietness that Steve was gripped by an icy sense of dread. He had made a mistake, said too much, pushed him too far.

"How do you know about HYDRA?" Alex said silkily. "I never mentioned that word."

Steve floundered for an answer, his mind stubbornly blank. Out of the corner of his eye, from the direction of the abandoned factory, he spotted movement. Bucky had finally recovered from his blow to the head enough to stagger out of the factory. He was still visibly unsteady, leaning heavily on the factory wall as he stumbled his way towards them. Steve was filled with a sudden sense of fear. He did not want Bucky to be anywhere near Alex's loaded gun.

It was then that he became aware of the sound of cars speeding towards them. Alex did not seem to have noticed, so focused was he on Steve. Through the gaps between buildings, Steve spotted several police cars, their lights off now, just a few blocks away. His attention was snapped back to Alex as the other man roughly rubbed his hand down Steve's torso, his expression livid, his eyes feverish.

"Are you wearing a wire?" demanded Alex. "Answer me, you little shit!"

Steve did not get an opportunity to respond. Before he could speak, two things happened at the same time. First, the police cars came screeching to a halt at one end of the bridge, police officers piling out, their weapons drawn. Steve spotted Natasha amongst them, kitted out, like the rest of her colleagues, in a bulletproof vest. At the same time, Bucky came running towards them from the other side of the bridge, joining Alex and Steve above the water.

"Put the gun down, Pierce!" shouted Natasha. "Get on the floor!"

Quick as a flash, and with far more strength than Steve ever would have imagined, Alex grabbed hold of Steve and put the muzzle of the gun to his temple, the cold metal digging hard against his skull. He dragged Steve over to the edge of the bridge, hauling them both up onto the wall so that they were balanced precariously on the bridge's edge. Steve struggled in his grip, desperate to get away but at the same time terrified of toppling both of them into the icy water below.

"Nobody moves or I shoot this man in the head!" shouted Alex.

Steve became stock still. Alex sounded frightened. Hate-filled, desperate and afraid; it was not a good combination. With a rising sense of terror, Steve realised that he could see no resolution to the
situation where he got out alive. His breath came out in sharp bursts. He was living his final minutes, trapped in the clutches of an obsessive madman who was cornered, teetering inches away from the edge of a bridge, below which flowed cold, dark water. He wanted to cry, but in that moment, the shock and adrenaline was so great that the tears would not come, leaving him simply gasping.

"Please don't," came a small, frightened plea. Steve looked down at Bucky, who was standing just feet away, his eyes wide and scared. "Alex, please. Don't? If you love me, don't shoot Steve. Please. I'll do anything. Just... don't shoot Steve."

Steve felt Alex's grip on his torso loosen marginally, some of the tension going out of his muscles. When Alex spoke next, his voice was soft and gentle, a stark contrast to anything Steve had heard that entire evening.

"OK, baby," said Alex. "Anything, for you."

For a split second, Steve stood perfectly balanced, stunned as Alex withdrew the gun from his temple. He was barely able to believe his good fortune. It was incredible, that Alex was willing to spare Steve's life at Bucky's request.

Wording, apparently, was important.

Before Steve was able to climb down to safety, Alex shoved him hard backwards, sending him toppling into empty space. Steve stomach lurched sickeningly as he fell, his speed increasing as he tumbled downwards. His arms pinwheeled in panic, reflexively trying to grab onto something to slow his descent but finding nothing. For several seconds that felt more like aeons, he fell, weightless, with nothing but the rapid beating of his heart and the whistling of the air past his ears as his soundtrack.

He hit the water hard, sinking fast beneath the surface. The water was cold, instantly sapping his energy, sending him into shock. His weight dragged him down, the river swirling around him, greedy to claim another victim. Steve flailed in panic, striking out with his arms and legs, trying to stop himself from sinking any deeper. He could not orient himself. He was not even sure which way was up and which was down. He could feel his body starting to shut down; the sudden cold-water immersion and the lack of fresh oxygen combining to deadly effect.

His ears were ringing, the sound of rushing water beginning to fade into nothingness, when suddenly a voice rang out clearly, coming from directly in front of him.

"Steve!"

Steve's eyes flew open, a small puff of air escaping his lips, a flurry of bubbles floating upwards towards the river's surface. He stared at Sam, who was in front of him, treading water as if they were simply hanging out at the local pool. Sam was looking at him with an expression of acute concern, his brown eyes wide as he held Steve's gaze.

"You've got to swim, Steve!" urged Sam. "Just kick your legs one at a time, come on."

Steve tried to obey Sam's instructions, kicking each leg as he attempted to point himself in the right direction, following the bubbles as they floated up towards the surface. It was difficult. His saturated jeans were heavy, dragging him down; his muscles were oxygen-deprived and weakening with every passing second. Sam snapped his fingers in front of Steve's face, forcing him to concentrate.

"Harder!" said Sam. "You call that kicking?! My grandmother can kick harder than that!"

Digging deep, Steve called upon his final reserves of strength, putting on a burst of speed as he
coordinated his movements, kicking his legs and drawing powerful strokes with his arms as he rose through the water. His lungs were bursting for oxygen, his muscles were burning, but he forced himself to swim upwards, fighting against the weight of his clothes and the river current that was trying to suck him deeper. Suddenly, above him, a flurry of bubbles exploded as a second person plunged into the river. Bucky swam towards him with strong strokes, grabbing him under the armpits and hauling him upwards those final few metres.

They broke the surface of the water together. Steve sucked in a huge lungful of air, gulping down oxygen greedily as his body screamed for air. A laugh burst of out of him. It was involuntarily, purely reflexive; unadulterated jubilation at being alive. He had thought, for one horrible moment, that he was genuinely going to die, sucked down by the river's current, never to be seen again.

He turned to Bucky, about to thank him for jumping in and helping to save him, when the words died on his tongue. Bucky was struggling and spluttering, sinking below the surface every few seconds. River water was filling his mouth, his eyes half-closed and rolling back into his head. Bucky was still disoriented from his blow to the head earlier in the evening. Steve immediately swam up to Bucky, grabbing hold of him and attempting to jiggle him back into consciousness.

"Keep his nose and mouth above water," said Sam, silently breaching the surface of the river beside Steve.

Steve tipped Bucky's head back so that his nose and mouth were clear of the water, treading water to keep them both afloat. He could feel his breath coming out in sharp bursts. Supporting the weight of a full-grown man was a totally different ballgame to simply keeping himself afloat. Bucky was heavy, plus the combined weight of both their wet clothes made it feel like Steve was holding a dead weight. He could feel himself tiring rapidly, the cold water sapping his energy. The edge of the river looked so far away, too far, too far... Panic began to seep in to his consciousness, his sense of calm cracking under the very real weight of the knowledge that his and Bucky's survival rested upon him getting them to shore.

Another splash sounded behind him. He managed to turn both himself and Bucky towards the source of the noise, relief flooding through him when he saw Natasha swimming towards them, buoyed by three inflatable lifebelts. She threw two of them towards Steve, who reached out and grabbed them, relieved to finally have some assistance. Natasha smoothly slid into her lifebelt as she swam towards them, cutting through the water effortlessly.

"What's wrong with Bucky?" she said, finally reaching them.

"He's unconscious," said Steve. "He was hit over the head earlier."

Natasha nodded, sliding beneath Bucky and tugging the lifebelt over his head.

"Put yours on," she said, awkwardly dragging Bucky's arm through the inflatable hoop. "I've got him."

Steve reluctantly let go of Bucky, sliding into the lifebelt that Natasha had thrown him. The difference was immediate. He no longer had to tread water to stay buoyant. Suddenly, he felt a lot safer, relief rushing through him. Natasha finally managed to secure Bucky in his own lifebelt, hooking an arm around him to keep him held snuggly to her chest.

"We're going to go to that shore, OK?" said Natasha, pointing to the shore to their left. "An ambulance is already there, up on the road."

Steve nodded. He watched as Natasha tried to support Bucky's unwieldy weight, before realising she
was struggling and immediately swimming forwards to help her. Together, they held Bucky securely between them, before swimming backstroke towards the shore. Steve made sure to match Natasha's pace, so as to ensure they were swimming in as straight a line as possible. Sam swam by Steve's side, encouraging him quietly as he kicked his tired legs.

At last, they reached the shore. Steve shivered as they emerged from the water, the cool night air immediately chilling his wet skin. He struggled to stand upright; Bucky's weight, the weight of his waterlogged clothes, and sheer physical exhaustion causing his legs to shake. Natasha laid Bucky gently on the ground, putting her ear next to his face and listening intently for several long seconds. Steve waited for her to say that everything was alright, that Bucky was going to be OK, his stomach dropping like a stone when she looked up at him in panic instead.

"He's not breathing," she said.

Natasha immediately began CPR. Steve watched, paralysed with fear, as she performed chest compressions, alternating them with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He felt as though he were watching a scene from a film. It felt too horrible, too terrifying, to be real life. He watched in mute horror as Bucky lay unresponsive on the ground, his face pale, his eyes closed, his hair wet and stuck to his head, slicked down by the river water.

He was only vaguely aware of the paramedics until they were right there in front of him, taking over from Natasha and transferring Bucky quickly onto a stretcher. He made a small noise of distress when the paramedics began to carry Bucky away from him. A small hand slipped into his, pulling him gently after the stretcher.

"Come on, Steve," said Natasha. "Didn't you hear them? The paramedics want us both to be checked out at the hospital, too."

Steve had not heard them. He did not properly hear Natasha. She helped him up the river bank, guiding him as he stumbled, his legs freezing cold and numb, following Bucky's stretcher up the slippery slope. They arrived at the ambulance, cramming into the back together. The ambulance doors were swung shut by one of the paramedics, the vehicle immediately moving, its siren blaring and coloured lights flashing. Steve was shaking violently, his teeth chattering and his muscles spasming. One of the paramedics wrapped a foil blanket around him, doing the same for Natasha, who was also shivering beside him.

His eyes were fixed on Bucky, who was still lying motionless and pale on the stretcher. The paramedics were performing CPR, the whole ambulance heaving with frantic activity as they tried to resuscitate Bucky. Steve slipped his hand into Bucky's, which was hanging off the side of the stretcher, rubbing his thumb over Bucky's palm in soothing little circles, urging him to survive. He tried to remember the last time he had told Bucky that he loved him. He tried to remember the last time he had made him breakfast in bed. He could not remember.

Beside him, Natasha was pale and quiet, her knuckles white as she clung to Bucky's stretcher, her eyes fixed on Bucky's face.

A silent tear rolled down her cheek.
10K READERS: Holy shit, this fic just surpassed 10,000 readers! Thank you to each and every one of you for following these characters' stories. I massively appreciate your readership, your comments and your love <3 You guys and your reactions are what make writing this story so fun!

THOUGHTS: Noooooo, Buckyyy! :O Feel free to scream at me in the comments!

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left comments on the last chapter; getting comments notifications is the best feeling in the world! Congratulations again to those of you who guessed that Natasha was an undercover police officer or secret agent of some kind.

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "Lifelines"

TUMBLR: Tumble with me on Tumblr at ao3-elle1991!
Lifelines

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve hated hospitals.

The smell reminded him of Iraq, 13 November 2004: when his arm had been shattered, the right-hand side of his torso had been ripped open and Sam had been swiftly taken from the world. Whenever he smelt that disinfectant smell, saw those harsh bright lights or saw the doctors and nurses in their uniforms, his skin would crawl, anxiety expanding to fill his gut, his nerves on edge.

The ambulance crew swiftly wheeled Bucky's stretcher off the ambulance and into ER, Steve and Natasha following immediately behind. A group of doctors were there to meet them, grabbing Bucky's stretcher and rushing him away. Steve made to follow, but found his way blocked. Doctors ushered Steve and Natasha into separate rooms, talking about hypothermia and check-ups and all kinds of bullshit that Steve did not care about. He did not care if he had hypothermia. All he wanted to know was if Bucky was going to be OK.

Throughout the journey to the hospital, the paramedics had been fighting to revive Bucky. Steve had not been able to follow what was going on. They had been speaking in medical jargon, using words that he did not understand, doing CPR and injecting drugs. The situation had been so fast-moving, so chaotic, so frantic, that Steve had not known if Bucky was dead or alive when they had at long last arrived at the hospital.

Steve got up to leave his hospital room and track down where they had taken Bucky, but the ambulance paramedic who had taken him there blocked him once more, putting a hand on his shoulder, frowning slightly.

"You've got to stay here until one of the ER doctors has taken a look at you," the paramedic explained. "I know you're worried about your friend, but you have to stay here, for now. He's in good hands."

Steve exhaled, frustrated, as the paramedic pushed him gently but firmly to sit down on the bed. The paramedic paused for a moment to make sure that Steve was not going to make another attempt to move, before finally leaving the room, the door swinging shut behind him. Steve closed his eyes, burying his head in his hands, on the verge of tears. He knew that the paramedic was right. There was nothing to be gained from him following Bucky to wherever they had taken him – he would only get in the way, potentially putting Bucky's life at risk by impeding the doctors from doing their job properly. He knew this, intellectually, but dear God that did not take away any of the pain of being apart from Bucky at such a critical time.

Before Steve could compose himself, the door to his room opened once more, a female doctor stepping inside. The doctor was short and petite, with black hair neatly tied back and delicate East Asian cheekbones. She smiled at Steve as she entered the room, exuding calmness and professionalism as she closed the door behind her.

"My name is Dr. Helen Cho," she said. "My colleagues told me you were pulled from the river. I'm going to give you a check-up to make sure you're alright, OK?"

"How's Bucky?" said Steve, his words almost tripping over themselves in his haste. "The guy I came in with. Is he going to be OK?"
Dr. Cho looked slightly surprised at the urgency in Steve's voice, but nevertheless answered calmly.

"Are you family?" she said.

Steve shook his head.

"No," he said. Why the fuck did it matter?

"Then I'm afraid I can't give you any details," said Dr. Cho. "All I can say is that the situation is very dynamic."

To her credit, she did look genuinely guilty for not being able to tell him more. Unfortunately, Steve's nerves were fraying rapidly, his concern for Bucky's well-being overriding his usually sensible mind. Feeling slightly hysterical, he shook his head hard, not caring how desperate or childish he looked as he bargained with her, begging unashamedly.

"I... I won't let you examine me until you tell me how Bucky's doing," he said desperately.

"Please, please, just tell me if he's OK?"

A small frown creased Dr. Cho's forehead. Steve waited on tenterhooks for her to answer him, desperate to know what was going on. He knew that he was being unreasonable, he knew that he was almost certainly pissing her off, but he did not care. She could think he was an insane, selfish, rambling fool for all he cared. All he wanted to know was an update on Bucky's condition.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Dr. Cho. "I can't--"

Steve did not even let her finish, pushing her roughly away as tears spilled down his cheeks. She stumbled, her eyes widening in momentary fear as she only just managed to maintain her balance.

"Fuck off," he said, rubbing an exhausted hand across his eyes.

Sam stepped out from behind the curtain, a sharp expression on his face as he stepped between Steve and Dr. Cho.

"Calm down, Steve," ordered Sam. "You don't ever lash out at people out of anger, understood? Look at her, she's scared."

Steve cast one look at Dr. Cho, who did indeed look startled at having been physically pushed, before dissolving into tears, immediately swamped by a wave of guilt. He could not cope. It was simply too much for him to deal with: Alex's attempt on his life, Bucky's kidnapping, the fact that Bucky had stopped breathing. Bucky was somewhere in that very same hospital, at that very moment, probably surrounded by doctors fighting to save his life. Steve could feel his nerves cracking under the weight of it all.

"I can't take it, Sam," said Steve. "Bucky... Bucky..."

His throat closed up, making it impossible to speak. He sobbed into his hands, his heart aching for Bucky. He longed to be with him, to hold his hand, to urge him to recover. To be away from him in his hour of need was excruciating. He wished there were something he could do other than sit and wait. He wished he could help.

Sam sat down beside him, rubbing his back in gentle, soothing circles.

"He's going to be alright," said Sam.
Steve sniffed, taking a deep breath that ended up being half-sob, half-hiccup. He looked across at Sam, whose eyes were warm and earnest. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Dr. Cho watching him curiously, but he was too far gone, too exhausted, to bother trying to conceal his and Sam's conversation.

"But what if he's not," said Steve, voicing his worst fear aloud for the first time. Fresh tears slipped down his cheeks at the mere idea of it, too terrible, too devastating, to comprehend. "Sam, what if Bucky doesn't make it?"

Dr. Helen Cho left quietly after witnessing his exchange with Sam. A male doctor came to perform the check-up on him shortly afterwards, declaring once he had finished a battery of tests that Steve was not in any immediate medical danger, but that he should stay in overnight for observation. Steve acquiesced to the request, too tired to argue and frankly relieved that he had an excuse to stay in the same hospital as Bucky.

It was several hours later that someone knocked quietly on his door. Steve had been sleeping fitfully and immediately woke up, rubbing his eyes and sitting up in bed, leaning against the too-hard hospital pillows.

"Come in," he said.

Natasha entered the room, dressed in a hospital gown, with some gauze on her arm. She closed the door behind her, before turning to Steve, looking exhausted. Steve sat up straighter, his heart hammering in his chest, feeling sick with anticipation as he waited on tenterhooks.

"Bucky's pulled through," said Natasha, getting straight to the point. "I don't know any more details, sorry. But Bucky's alive, he's doing well, and he's stable."

Steve felt his whole body sag with relief. He exhaled long and hard, his tense muscles releasing their tension at the reception of the news he had been so desperate to hear. He collapsed back against the pillows, giddy and emotional with relief. He had feared, in those terrible hours alone without news, that the worst had come to pass. To hear that Bucky was alive and stable was the most beautiful thing. He could not remember ever feeling so immensely thankful for anything before in his life.

"Oh, thank fuck," murmured Steve. "Oh my God."

The corners of Natasha's lips twitched upwards. She, too, looked overwhelmingly relieved. She fiddled with the hem of her hospital gown, looking restless despite her visible exhaustion.

"I'm sorry I can't stay and talk with you more," she said. "I have to go and report to my police chief. I just wanted to let you know the good news about Bucky before I left." She paused momentarily, biting her lip. "I, uh, wasn't supposed to have told you, since you're not family, so like, keep it on the down low?"

Steve nodded. He was thankful to Natasha for having told him the news, even though it was not strictly allowed. It was comfortingly familiar. It was the Natasha he knew – not the police officer, but the person he had become firm friends with since their first day together at Stark Industries.

"Thank you," said Steve.
Natasha gave him a nod, before slipping from the room, the door swinging shut behind her. Steve sighed, settling back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling of his hospital room. Bucky was alive. He let the realisation sink in, a wide smile spreading slowly across his face as it did so. Bucky was alive, and safe, and stable. Powerful relief washed over him. He longed to find Bucky and hold his hand, but he was no doubt sleeping, recovering from his ordeal. Steve could wait. Now that he knew Bucky was safe, that itch under his skin was gone, that desperate need to know what was happening. He knew that Bucky was receiving the best care possible from the doctors and nurses. To know that he was well, was enough.

He was just contemplating what he was going to say to Bucky when they were finally reunited, when the door to his room swung open once more. Steve looked over to see Dr. Helen Cho entering the room, giving him a smile as she shut the door behind her.

"Is it safe for me to come in?" she joked.

Steve immediately felt mortified. He remembered how he had physically pushed her away when she had tried to examine him earlier, so consumed by stress and fear about Bucky's situation that he had lashed out at her for simply trying to do her job. He felt horrible. She had almost fallen. He had done wrong. He wished bitterly he could turn back the clock and put things right.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I know that doesn't make it OK, but I am really, truly sorry. I... I don't know what came over me."

Dr. Cho shrugged.

"I've had worse," she said.

The feeling of guilt in Steve's gut intensified. He felt like a piece of dog shit on the bottom of someone's shoe. He hated that Dr. Cho shrugged off his actions so easily, due to her being used to it. It was not right. No civilian should go to work in fear of physical attack. She was not a soldier. She was not in a war zone. She was a doctor in New York City. She should not have to deal with idiots lashing out at her out of misplaced anger or frustration.

"That doesn't make it OK," he said.

Dr. Cho looked at him for a long second, her head cocked to the side, before smiling – a real, genuine smile, not the professional courtesy of earlier.

"I know," she said. "Thank you for apologising. I can see that you mean it. I forgive you. Like I said, I've had a lot worse, and most of the time I don't get an apology afterwards."

Steve nodded silently, unsure of what to say. Dr. Cho seemed to sense his awkwardness, because she smoothly continued speaking before the silence could become noticeable.

"I came to give you a check-up," she said.

Oh. It seemed that Dr. Cho had not received an update on Steve's condition.

"It's OK, I've already been looked at," said Steve. "A male doctor came in earlier and checked me over. He said I was fine, no hypothermia, but that I should stay in overnight for observation as a precaution."

Dr. Cho smiled.

"You've received your physical examination, yes," she said. "But health is made up of two parts:
physical and mental. I'm here for the second part. I was wondering if you could tell me who you were talking to earlier?"

Steve froze. He knew immediately what she was referring to. She had witnessed him talking to Sam, voicing his fears that Bucky might not survive. He floundered for an answer that could reasonably explain away what she had observed. He could feel his face going red. He lowered his eyes, staring at the pattern of his hospital gown on his knees as he attempted to brush away her concerns.

"Oh, uh, I was just stressed," he said, smiling weakly. "I was talking to myself."

"No, you weren't," said Dr. Cho gently. "You were talking to someone called Sam. You mentioned his name twice whilst talking to him."

Steve fell silent. His mind's eye conjured up Sam; his cheeky expression, his warm, brown eyes. He remembered his gap-toothed smile and his easy New Orleans accent. He remembered his laugh, his energy, the way he would always seem to know how to defuse a tense situation – effortlessly taking on the roles of both light-hearted joker and trusted confidant. A tear rolled slowly down Steve's cheek, his subconscious bursting with Sam – his best friend, his comrade, his brother.

Dr. Cho sat down in the chair beside his bed, offering him a tissue. Steve took it, wiping his eyes and blowing his nose, thankful that Dr. Cho gave him at least the illusion of privacy by looking down at her clipboard as he did so. Only once Steve had regained his composure, did Dr. Cho look up and continue speaking.

"Your records say that you were a soldier," said Dr. Cho. "It says here that you received quite a nasty injury in Iraq that resulted in you receiving a medical discharge from the US Army in late 2004."

Steve nodded, scrunching up his tissue and fiddling with it, choosing to look down at it rather than dare look Dr. Cho in the face. She was not intimidating – on the contrary, she had a gentle, calm aura – but Steve had spent so many years burying what had happened in Iraq, that to talk about it openly felt like a great emotional struggle.

"Was Sam a fellow soldier?" asked Dr. Cho.

Steve nodded. His throat was too tight to speak. He continued fiddling with his tissue. For a moment, there was silence, before Dr. Cho rested her clipboard on her knees, giving Steve her full attention, fixing him with her kind brown eyes.

"Was Sam's death very traumatic for you?" she said gently.

Time seemed to stretch, elongated and full of tension as Steve's fiddling came to an abrupt stop. His heart was hammering hard and fast, blood rushing through his ears: thump-thump-thump. Fear exploded in his gut, horror rising within him as he slowly raised his head, finally meeting Dr. Cho's eyes as she watched him kindly.

"Do you hallucinate him often?" said Dr. Cho. "Is he in the room with us right now, for example? Or does he only appear at specific times?"

Steve stared at her, denial on the tip of his tongue. He could laugh and try to dismiss the idea as ridiculous. He could politely but firmly tell her that her suspicions were incorrect. He could take his chances and just run from the hospital, hoping against hope that Dr. Cho would not arrange a home visit. In the end, though, perhaps he was tired of running away, because what came out of his mouth was not the staunch denial he had been expecting, but the first fragment of truth he had ever said
aloud to anyone: an admission, a plea for help, a first step in the long road to recovery.

"How do you know?" he whispered.

Dr. Cho smiled at him gently, neither judgemental nor pitying as she began to speak.

"A lot of military veterans suffer from hallucinations as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD," she said. "And when I say a lot, I'm not talking about 5% or 10% – I mean that as many as 40% of veterans with PTSD suffer from some kind of ongoing hallucination or delusion as part of their illness. 40%. Let that sink in for a moment. 4 in 10. You're not alone, Steve."

Steve's eyes widened, his breathing quickening. 40%? There were veterans just like him, seeing things that were not there? He had thought that he was crazy. He had thought that his mind was totally broken, a whole new kind of insane. He had never considered the possibility that there might be others just like him. It was a powerful, liberating, stunning thought.

"I wonder if you could tell me a bit more about your hallucinations of Sam?" asked Dr. Cho. "Do you have any other symptoms of PTSD? Flashbacks? Nightmares? It says in your file that you refused a psychiatric evaluation when you were brought back to the US to recover from your surgery."

Steve nodded slowly. For a moment, he considered withholding the information. It was purely a habit – 15 years of keeping his problems hidden was a difficult habit to break – but looking into Dr. Cho's calm, understanding eyes, he found himself feeling a little braver, the words coming from him tentatively, in fits and starts.

"I started seeing Sam a week after he died," he said. "He looks and sounds as solid and real as anyone else. He doesn't look like a ghost or anything. I know he's not really there, but I miss him so much and he feels so real that I just kind of... ignore that fact. Sometimes he turns up when I need support and guidance. Sometimes he turns up when I'm just feeling lonely. I like it when Sam appears. He always makes me feel better."

Taking a deep breath, Steve ploughed on. He knew that if he stopped talking, it would be too difficult to start up again. Clutching his blanket tightly, he willed his hands not to shake so much, shame colouring his cheeks as he silently begged Dr. Cho not to notice.

"I have flashbacks," he admitted, his voice shaking. "Certain things trigger them – things that were there in the room where... where Sam died. I have nightmares, too. My right arm does this crazy thing where it shakes whenever I think about Iraq. I avoid anything that reminds me of the war – news reports, the war memorial, anything military. And sometimes, I get so... angry. Sometimes I'm scared I'm just going to snap and totally lose it. I scare myself, sometimes."

He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by shame. He buried his face in his hands, his throat closing up with emotion, unable to go on. Dr. Cho pressed another tissue into his hand. Steve accepted it. He had not even realised that tears had been leaking down his cheeks. He dried his face, trying desperately not to sob, shame and embarrassment and anxiety all swirling sickeningly in his gut.

"I'm going to refer you to a psychiatrist to be diagnosed with PTSD," said Dr. Cho. "The experiences you're describing are very typical symptoms."

Steve nodded, feeling sick. He forced himself to look Dr. Cho in the eye, willing himself not to betray his fear as he voiced his question.

"Am I going to be locked away?" he said. "In a... in a mental hospital?"
Dr. Cho looked surprised at Steve's question. Smiling reassuringly, she shook her head.

"No," she said, before clarifying: "Probably not. The psychiatrist will be the one to recommend exactly what treatment he thinks will work best for you, but based on what you've just told me, I see absolutely no reason why you'd need to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital."

Steve allowed the information to sink in, feeling a weight lift off his chest as the oppressive fear of captivity was removed. He found himself breathing a little easier, some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

"The usual treatments for PTSD are counselling and medication," explained Dr. Cho. "In addition, anti-psychotic drugs might be prescribed if the psychiatrist thinks it's important to get the hallucinations under control, but from what you've said, it sounds like Sam is a positive force in your life, so I don't think you'll be given these. With counselling, as you come to terms with the trauma of Sam's death, he should disappear by himself."

Steve nodded slowly. He was not sure he wanted Sam to go away. He had been in Steve's life for so long, providing him with help and support when he needed it the most. He did not know what he would do without Sam.

"When will I see the psychiatrist?" he said eventually.

"In the morning," said Dr. Cho. "I've asked him to come and see you at 11am, to give you some time to rest and recover from this evening's events. Speaking of, I'll let you get some sleep. You've had a busy day."

Steve smiled, thankful that she had taken his tiredness into consideration. Who knew almost drowning in the river could be so exhausting? Dr. Cho got to her feet, tucking her clipboard under her arm and giving Steve one last warm smile before heading towards the door. She had her hand on the door handle when she turned her head to look back at him, her black ponytail swishing delicately over her shoulder.

"Thank you for opening up to me, Steve," she said. "I know that must have been difficult. If it helps soothe your nerves at all, the psychiatrist I've requested to see you used to be an Army doctor. He's seen a lot of soldiers and veterans with mental health issues. He's really nice. Hopefully you'll feel comfortable talking to him."

"Thank you," said Steve. "What's his name?"

"Bruce," smiled Dr. Cho. "Dr. Bruce Banner."

The following evening, Steve was discharged from hospital.

He was just heading out of the foyer, his mind a scrambled mess from the events of the previous 24 hours, when he heard someone calling his name. He turned to find Natasha jogging towards him, dressed in casual attire this time, rather than a hospital gown or a police uniform. She caught up to him, her red curls bouncing around her shoulders, and looked up at him, her green eyes meeting his blue ones.

"Hey," she said.
"Hey," echoed Steve.

"I was just visiting Bucky," said Natasha. "I got him some get-well-soon flowers."

"Thank you," he said. "Bucky loves flowers."

He had visited Bucky earlier that day, the doctors finally allowing Bucky to have visitors in the early afternoon. He was recovering well from his ordeal. The doctors were keeping him in for another day to keep an eye on him, since he had suffered quite a severe concussion. Thankfully, though, they did not think his blow to the head or subsequent drowning would have any lasting effects. When Steve had been told the good news, he had wept with relief.

"Do you want to talk?" Natasha asked tentatively, after a slight pause.

Steve hesitated. Honestly, he was not sure how he felt towards Natasha. So much had changed regarding their relationship that he was not sure where they stood anymore. He did not feel as if he knew her – and yet, he still considered her to be one of his best friends. He did not know if he could get over his sense of betrayal over the lies she had told – and yet, she had proven herself to be loyal, by saving his life and Bucky's at great risk to her own. The whole thing was a mess of confusion. In the end, he simply nodded. The only way to move forward was by talking. No good could come out of creating a wall of silence.

They left the hospital, circling around to the back of the building to the small hospital garden. They walked down a small winding path, eventually coming to a bench that overlooked a pond. They sat down, the surrounding trees and shrubs providing a sense of privacy. Chubby orange carps swam lazily around the pond in meandering circles. Steve stared at the nearest fish, searching through his heaving mass of thoughts to pick out the most important. Natasha waited patiently for him to speak, her legs crossed elegantly, a small hum of excitement escaping her as a blackbird landed on the bench beside her.

"Thank you for saving Bucky," said Steve finally. "When you found us in the river, I was losing energy. I wouldn't have been able to keep hold of him and keep him afloat much longer. You saved him. Thank you."

There was a slight pause, during which time Natasha stared at the pond. She seemed to be thinking deeply, a gentle smile curving her lips as she eventually shook her head.

"We both saved Bucky," said Natasha. "Don't underplay your role. We both saved him. I couldn't have done it alone. If you hadn't been there, he would have slipped under the water and drowned long before I was able to grab the lifebelts and jump down to join you."

"If I hadn't been there, he wouldn't have jumped in the river in the first place," Steve pointed out.

Natasha tsked softly.

"Don't be pedantic, Stevie," she said.

Steve's heart clenched. The pet name reminded him of all the times they had hung out together – gaming nights and takeaways, dinner parties and days out in the City. He had considered her to be one of his very best friends. Had it all been a sham, engineered to manipulate him and Bucky into being together, to provide Bucky with protection when she was pulled away on urgent police business? It seemed to have triggered the same train of thought in Natasha, because when she spoke again, her voice came out haltingly, vulnerable; with none of her usual crisp sureness.

"I really did care you about you, you know," she said. "I still do. Our friendship, hanging out,
helping you to settle into New York City – all of that was real. I didn't fake any of it."

She took a deep breath, bowing her head. She folded her hands together in her lap, biting her lip before continuing.

"I'm sorry for lying to you. Things got messy, too messy. The lines between personal and professional got too blurred. I was in deep cover, but I got too deep. I should have stuck to the mission parameters and just kept watch over Bucky. I never should have dragged you into it, trying to make you his protector when I couldn't be there. That wasn't fair on you. I put you in danger. That's unforgivable."

She wiped her eyes discreetly, but not before Steve saw the tears glistening there. He stared, unable to stop himself. In all the time he had known Natasha, he could count the times he had seen her cry on just one hand.

"I understand if you hate me," she said. "I understand if you don't want to see me again. That's OK, if that's what you choose. I just wanted to let you know that I really am sorry for deceiving you. If I could take it all back, I would."

Steve reached out his hand tentatively, before taking hers in his and giving her hand a gentle squeeze. He had not realised the healing power that hearing a simple, heart-felt apology could have. To know that Natasha was truly sorry for the lies she had been forced to tell made the world of difference. The pain lessened in his chest, to be replaced by a quiet sense of calm. He reflected on what it must have been like for Natasha, to live a double life, to have to lie, to pretend, to keep the truth of her activities secret, all whilst putting her life at great risk as she fought to protect the public from HYDRA's insidious threat.

"I don't hate you," said Steve. "I understand that being undercover meant that you couldn't exactly tell me who you really are. And you don't need to apologise for setting up me and Bucky. I'm glad that you did. We wouldn't be a part of one another's lives, if it wasn't for you."

"Which means you wouldn't have almost drowned in the river last night, if it weren't for me, either," Natasha said bitterly.

Steve smiled as he elbowed her lightly in the ribs, echoing her words from earlier.

"Don't be pedantic, Natasha," he said.

Natasha laughed softly, wiping her eyes as she composed herself.

"I'm not sure where we go from here," Steve admitted, after a slight pause.

Natasha nodded, accepting Steve's statement without argument. She gazed at the pond for a long moment, contemplating their next move. After a moment's hesitation, she turned to face him, one of her curls tickling her cheek as she spoke.

"How does a fresh start sound?" she said. "A clean slate. No more secrets. No more lies."

Steve considered it, a smile spreading over his face and the weight on his chest lightening. A fresh start? Yes. He could do that. Their previous friendship had been shrouded in secrets – necessary secrets, he knew now, but secrets and manipulation nonetheless. Nevertheless, he believed Natasha when she said that she truly did care about him, that none of the friendship and love that they had shared had been faked. Sometimes, the best that they could do was to start over. It was time for a clean state. A new beginning. Day zero.
"I like the sound of that," he said.

Natasha smiled, holding out her hand. Steve took it, shaking her hand with a bemused grin.

"Hi," said Natasha. "I'm Natasha Romanoff, New York Police Department."

Steve smiled.

"Steve Rogers," he said. "Website Administrator at Stark Industries."

His throat swelled up, preventing him from saying anything extra. He turned his face away to gaze at the pond, trying to get a handle on his emotions. So much had happened over the last 24 hours: Bucky's kidnapping, Bucky almost dying, Alex trying to murder Steve, almost drowning, the revelation that Natasha was an undercover police officer, Dr. Cho, Dr. Banner, his PTSD. It had felt as if his life was falling apart, as if he were drowning (both literally and metaphorically) – but now he had been thrown a lifeline, multiple lifelines, and it was simply overwhelming.

A fresh start.

No more secrets.

No more lies.

"I was diagnosed with PTSD this morning," said Steve.

Natasha nodded. If she was surprised, she hid it well. Steve was thankful. He did not want a fuss to be made of his condition. He did not want to be treated any differently by his peers, like he was weak or in need of mollycoddling or pity.

"How do you feel about that?" said Natasha.

Steve paused, considering it. It felt strange, to finally have a label to attach to his mess of trauma-related symptoms. If he was being honest with himself, he had strongly suspected that he suffered from PTSD for a long time. He had avoided a diagnosis simply because he had been uninformed and afraid of what came after. He had feared he would be locked away in a mental institution. He had thought he was crazy for hallucinating Sam. He had not known that hallucinations were common amongst veterans struggling with PTSD. He had not known that individuals with PTSD rarely needed to be hospitalised. Perhaps, if he had gone to the VA, like Sam and Bucky had so often tried to convince him, he would have learnt those things – but he had not gone, and so he had continued to live in fear of the unknown, suffering in silence for 15 long years.

"It feels good to finally have a diagnosis," said Steve. "I'm kind of relieved to be getting help, at last. Dr. Banner specialises in soldiers and veterans with mental health issues."

Natasha smiled, looking genuinely pleased for him. She hugged him briefly, giving him a squeeze.

"That's great," she said. "I hope your treatment goes well."

"Thanks," said Steve.

He returned his gaze to the pond. He smiled to himself. Natasha's positive reaction meant a lot to him. He had told Bucky earlier, as well, and he too had been completely supportive of Steve. Bucky had been relieved that Steve was finally going to be getting treatment, and had been over the moon with the fact he would be getting specialist help from a psychiatrist specialising in soldiers and veterans. It meant a lot to Steve, to have the support of those around him, to be able to speak openly
about his illness. It made him feel a little braver – and he knew that bravery would be very much needed in order to face his trauma head-on and recover.

"I have news about Pierce," said Natasha, after a short pause. "If you want to hear it."

Steve turned to face her, a coil of anxiety loosening in his gut. He braced himself and nodded, indicating for her to continue. No doubt he would be hearing whatever news it was soon anyway. He might as well get it over with.

"He’s been arrested on suspicion of your attempted murder and Bucky's kidnapping," said Natasha. "We’ve also found what we think is a list of all of HYDRA’s members, so we’re going to be busy making a fuck tonne of other arrests over the coming days. We’ve got CSI teams going through a mountain of records and documentation that we found at Pierce’s address. We think they might contain records of some of the main crimes that HYDRA masterminded. Turns out Pierce is massively anal about organisation and documentation. If he's recorded everything the way we think he has, he might have just written his own jail sentence."

Steve let the information slowly sink in. Hearing Alex's name still sent shivers down his back, but hearing that he had been arrested was a huge relief. Nevertheless, arrest was still a long way away from being conviction and incarceration. The stress of the inevitable trial loomed over him, causing his stomach to churn slightly nauseatingly. He breathed deeply, pushing down his sense of panic, focusing on what Natasha had said about them finding reams of documentation at Alex's address.

He remembered Bucky telling him, when he had first revealed Alex's emotional abuse to him, about how Alex would record everything from what Bucky spent to what he ate. Steve gritted his teeth. With this in mind, he was not surprised Alex had also kept records on his gang members. It gave him a grim sense of satisfaction that Alex’s penchant for documentation was now the very thing that could well be his downfall.

"The police will need to talk to you," said Natasha. "Bucky, too, once the doctors have discharged him from hospital. Seeing as you've just been discharged now, you should expect to be interviewed tomorrow."

Steve nodded, biting his lip. He twisted his hands together anxiously. The prospect of the police interview worried him – not for himself, but for Bucky.

"Bucky won't want to talk about Alex," said Steve. "He's fucking terrified of him. He'd have a panic attack just seeing a photograph of him. And that was before Alex kidnapped him. He's got to be a hundred times more scared of him, now."

"I'll make sure that specially-trained police officers interview Bucky," Natasha said seriously. "They're used to dealing with abuse victims. They'll be kind and sensitive, make it as pain-free as possible for him. You have my word."

Steve exhaled hard, letting out a breath he had not ever realised he was holding. Relief swelled in his gut, some of the tension leaving his muscles.

"Thank you," said Steve.

"I heard about your car," said Natasha, after a pause. "About Pierce scratching it with his warning message. My colleagues will need to take photos of it for evidence, but once that's been done, I can arrange for a professional to get rid of the carvings for free, if you like. I know how much that car means to you. It used to be your dad's, right?"
Steve nodded, a lump forming in his throat. He was incredibly touched – both by Natasha's kind offer and the fact she remembered it had been passed on to him from his late father. He had only mentioned it once, in passing. If he was being honest with himself, the damage done to his father's car had hurt him deeply. It was not just a car, to him. It was a physical reminder of his father. It was Joseph Rogers' final gift to him. Years' worth of family memories were tied up with that car. He nodded gratefully, blinking his suddenly-dewy eyes.

"I'd appreciate that," he said. "Thanks, Nat."

Natasha smiled. Steve planted a chaste kiss on the top of her head. Natasha leaned her head on his shoulder. It felt just like old times – a strange sense of déjà vu. They were old friends starting afresh with a new beginning. It was strange, it was going to take some getting used to, but Steve was looking forward to building up his friendship with Natasha once more – based on honesty and openness, this time.

"What are you going to do, now?" he said.

"Well, my cover's blown, so no more Stark Industries for me," smiled Natasha. "Besides, with Pierce arrested, my mission's ended anyway. So, I guess that leaves me with a butt-load of paperwork. I'll probably be helping with arresting some HYDRA goons, too, helping to gather evidence, preparing everything for trial, stuff like that."

Steve nodded.

"You're a badass, you know that, right?" he said.

Natasha laughed, her curls bouncing around her face, before her expression sobered. She suddenly became very serious, turning to face him, her green eyes steady and determined when she next spoke.

"I won't rest until Alexander Pierce is in prison for a very long time," she said. "His victims deserve justice – and I'm going to make sure that they get it."

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

STEVE'S PTSD SYMPTOMS: Steve has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and throughout this story he has been displaying some fairly typical symptoms. Specifically, he has repeatedly avoided the war memorial (as this reminds him of the traumatic event), he has experienced pain and a tremor in his right arm (particularly during times of Iraq-related stress), he has suffered flashbacks (triggered by things that remind him of the traumatic event - i.e. a bang, the smell of lemons, and white fabric patterned with daisies), he has suffered nightmares and insomnia, he has occasionally had outbursts of anger, and he has hallucinated Sam.

HALLUCINATIONS IN PTSD AMONGST SOLDIERS: Like Dr. Helen Cho said in this chapter, hallucinations and delusions are an unexpectedly common symptom amongst soldiers and ex-soldiers with PTSD. Lindley et al. (2000) found that amongst combat veterans with PTSD, between 30-40% experience hallucinations or delusions. This means that, sadly, Steve is a fairly typical example of a veteran struggling with
PTSD, his hallucinations of Sam included.

ABOUT PTSD (IN GENERAL POPULATIONS): Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder caused by a very stressful, frightening or distressing event. In most cases, symptoms develop during the first month after a traumatic event. But in a minority of cases, there may be a delay of months or even years before symptoms start to appear. Typical symptoms include: involuntary re-experiencing of the traumatic event (e.g. flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive images and sensations, and physical symptoms such as pain, sweating and trembling), avoidance and emotional numbing (e.g. avoiding anything that reminds you of the traumatic event, trying to ignore what happened, becoming emotionally numb), and hyperarousal (e.g. being constantly aware of threats, finding it difficult to relax, irritability, angry outbursts, insomnia and difficulties concentrating). You can learn more about PTSD [here](#).

TREATMENTS FOR PTSD: The main treatments for PTSD are psychotherapy (including trauma-focused CBT) and medication. Traumatic events can be very difficult to come to terms with, but confronting your feelings and seeking professional help is often the only way of effectively treating PTSD. It's possible for PTSD to be successfully treated many years after the traumatic event occurred, which means it's never too late to seek help. You can learn more about PTSD treatments [here](#).

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR MILITARY PERSONNEL: [This page](#) has detailed information about mental health support available to serving members of the Armed Forces, reservists, veterans and military families in the UK.

THOUGHTS: As always, let me know your thoughts in the comments section below! I love hearing from you guys <3

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who left comments on the last chapter! I'm sorry (not really) for ripping out several of your hearts ;)

TEASER: The next chapter will be titled "The End Of The Line"...

TUMBLR: I am [ao3-elle1991](#) on Tumblr! Come and say hi :)}
The End Of The Line

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1 year later

The day that Alexander Pierce's trial concluded was a day that Steve would never forget.

The spectacular downfall of New York City's most brutal and notorious criminal organisation had dominated the headlines from the day the story broke. For most people, it made for great TV, an exciting thing to gossip about when meeting up with friends, the horrors of HYDRA mercifully distant from their ordinary lives. For Steve and Bucky and others like them, however, it was horrifically personal. It was not something that they wanted to talk excitedly about in a coffee shop; it was a part of their lives that they wanted to forget about, to move on from.

Alex had faced a huge number of criminal charges, ranging from multiple murders and attempted murders, to kidnapping, people trafficking, money laundering and drugs charges. The police had left no stone unturned when preparing charges against him, even including road traffic offences on his huge charge sheet. Their job had been made a great deal easier by Alex himself, whose careful cataloguing and documentation of his gang's activities formed a large chunk of the prosecution's evidence. In his arrogance, he had considered himself untouchable, not thinking that one day his carefully-constructed criminal empire might come crashing down around him.

Stubborn to the end, he had pleaded not guilty to all charges, forcing his victims to go through the ordeal of a trial. There, under the eye of heavily-armed security guards and the world's press, survivors had had to testify, one after the other, recounting to the court the horrors they had gone through at his hands. From sex trafficking victims, to drug addicts who had fallen behind on their payments and found themselves facing HYDRA's wrath, to victims of extortion, Alex had made each of his victims tell their stories as he sat silently in the dock, watching them with cold aloofness.

It had been Bucky's testimony that had been hardest of all for Steve to watch, however. To see him bravely walk up to the witness stand and recall Alex's kidnapping of him, only to dissolve into tears when Alex, smirking, had called out a sarcastic comment half-way through the proceedings, had been absolute torture. Bucky had had a panic attack, right there on the witness stand, almost on the cusp of passing out, triggering an unscheduled break in the proceedings whilst Alex had guffawed with laughter at the chaos unfolding in front of him. Steve had simultaneously wanted to whisk Bucky away to protect him and smash Alex's head through the wall to get him to shut up.

In the end, though, neither Alex's thinly-veiled threats towards the jury, flashy showmanship nor staunch denials could change the inevitable outcome of the trial. Faced with a towering mountain of evidence, much of it penned by Alex's own hand, it took the jury just less than three hours to find him guilty of all 117 criminal charges against him.

He was sentenced to life imprisonment, without the possibility of parole.

It was the final nail in HYDRA's coffin. With the fall of its leader, the gang had scattered into disarray. Alex's careful documentation of each gang member and their "missions" had led to a great many simply admitting their guilt upon arrest and being thrown straight into jail. A few die-hard gang members had decided to plead not guilty and go to trial, but with such weighty evidence against them, not one had so far managed to avoid justice. Presently, there were around a dozen gang members still on the run, but the police were catching them, one by one, determined to bring each
individual to justice. After far too many decades, HYDRA's stranglehold on New York City was over.

Bucky was recovering well from his experience. A key turning point had been the day when Alex had received his sentence and been told, in no uncertain terms, that he would live the rest of his life behind bars. Finally, with that sense of closure, Bucky's sense of anxiety had drastically gone down.

Incarceration meant so much more than just punishment for the perpetrator; it meant freedom for the victim. Bucky no longer had to live his life looking over his shoulder, or live with the fear that his abuser might walk back into his life.

At long last, Bucky felt free.

Steve stood quietly in the kitchen, the early morning sunshine filtering in through the windows as golden shafts of light. Dust floated silently through the sunbeams, delicate and mesmerising. Steve fiddled anxiously with his tie, making sure it was snug against his collar. The khaki-green material of his shirt felt stiff and uncomfortable from lack of wear. It had been a long time since he had felt able to look at his old dress uniform, much longer since he had actually worn it.

He let his gaze fall from the sunbeams to the bouquet of flowers sitting atop the kitchen table. White lilies were arranged in a beautiful cascading pattern. When he had explained to the florist what he needed the flowers for, she had embraced him tightly and waived the fee, even providing a complimentary American flag – made from real woven material, none of that cheap plastic nonsense.

Footsteps shuffled into the kitchen behind Steve. He turned around to find Bucky bare-foot and bleary-eyed, his hair sticking up in all directions as he hugged his pyjamas around him. He paused momentarily when he saw Steve, his eyes widening as he took in the sight of Steve dressed from head to toe in his dress uniform. After getting over the initial shock of Steve's appearance, Bucky walked up to him, wrapping his arms around Steve's waist as he rested his chin on Steve's shoulders, joining him in gazing at the flowers.

"Are you feeling ready?" asked Bucky finally.

Steve swallowed, considering the question. He was nervous, but it was not the type of crippling, panic attack-inducing terror he would have felt in the past. What he was intending to do felt doable. Daunting, significant, yes, but doable nonetheless. He nodded, smiling when Bucky pressed a chaste kiss to the back of his head.

"Yeah," said Steve. "I'm ready."

He turned around, to find Bucky gazing at him with wide, sombre eyes. The morning sunlight filtered through his hair, turning the brown into gold. Bucky's gaze appraised him steadily, calm and gentle.

"Are you sure you want to do this alone?" said Bucky. "I'll come with you, if you want."

"No," said Steve. "This is something I have to do alone."

Bucky did not argue. He picked up the bouquet from the kitchen table, placing it gently in Steve's hands. The lilies tumbled over his fingertips. They touched foreheads, closing their eyes briefly as
they absorbed the peaceful moment. After a moment, Steve placed a kiss on Bucky's nose, before pulling away and making his way to the front door. There, turning to give Bucky one parting kiss, he stepped outside into the communal corridor, his feet carrying him down the stairs, through the foyer and out onto the pavement.

It was still early – about 7am – and it was the weekend, meaning that it was fairly quiet as he began to walk towards his destination. The concept of "quiet" in New York City was a relative one, however, so the street was not exactly deserted as he made his way along the pavement. He could feel people staring at his uniform. Some people smiled. Others glared. Steve ignored the stares and continued walking, clutching the flowers and listening to his body, the way Bruce had taught him. He focused on his breathing, controlling his anxiety. Truth be told, the anxiety was barely there. He was no longer afraid of his destination, the way he used to be. Instead, he felt compelled to go there. It felt like a place he needed to be.

Steve arrived at the war memorial about half an hour later. It was surrounded by an oasis of green, the perfectly-tended park providing an island of tranquillity amongst the hustle and bustle of the city. The white stone monument rose up in the centre of the park, majestic. It was flanked by two long walls made of the same white stone, the names and ranks of the fallen inscribed into it. Steve walked slowly up to the first wall, his hands trembling as he got close enough to touch it, his fingertips brushing against the cool, smooth texture.

He gazed at the names, perfectly etched into the white stone, row upon row, hundreds upon hundreds of them. Soldiers. Americans. People. He traced one of the names with his fingertip, a lump forming in his throat. His heart ached with the weight of the loss inscribed on the wall. Behind each name was an individual, a human being, who had given the ultimate sacrifice for their country, who had a family, who had friends. Each name was an epicentre for a circle of grief, of relationships cut short, of dreams left unfulfilled, of things left unsaid. He bowed his head, composing himself before re-opening his eyes and wiping his face.

He walked slowly along the wall, scanning through the dates until he came to the year he was looking for. The list for 2004 was long. Steve's heart rate increased. He could feel his arm shaking lightly as his eyes slid down the beautiful white wall, finally reaching November. The inscription jumped out at him, somehow taking him by surprise despite being fully prepared to see it, winding him as effectively as a blow to the gut.

*Private Samuel Thomas Wilson – 13 November 2004 – Iraq*

With trembling fingers, he reached out and touched Sam's name, his fingertips tracing the shape of the letters. He had not known that Sam's middle name had been Thomas. His vision blurred with tears, his cheeks becoming wet as he was hit by a fresh wave of grief. He allowed himself to cry, his chest heaving, his shoulders hunched, his head bowed. For years, he had avoided the war memorial, doing everything he could to avoid seeing Sam's name etched into the stone. He had not wanted to believe it. He had not wanted to accept the truth. To see his name written out so plainly was agony, yet it also felt like catharsis, to finally confront the reality which his mind had for so long been protecting him from: Sam was dead.

After a long while, during which time he at some point ran out of tears, he felt the dull ache of grief give way to something lighter. Not quite peace, but acceptance. He accepted reality. Breathing became a little easier, that terrible weight on his chest lightening by some intangible degree. He wiped his eyes and crouched down, laying down the flowers underneath Sam's name, arranging
them lovingly. As he straightened up, he felt his mobile phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out, realising when he saw the sender that his phone had not buzzed at all. He read the text that he knew was not really there, his eyes wide as he drank in the words.

From: Sam

Go to the old abandoned railway station, three blocks away.

He slowly put away his phone. Turning to face the wall one final time, he gazed at Sam's name and saluted, his heart aching both with pride and loss. Finally turning away from the war memorial, he began walking southwards, heading towards the abandoned railway station as Sam had instructed. He had never been to the station before, nor did he have any idea what Sam intended, but he trusted Sam both explicitly and implicitly. If that was where Sam wanted him to be, then there he would go.

The abandoned railway station was an oddity. It was hidden away, its tracks overgrown with weeds, its old platform covered in graffiti. No one ever went there. It was forgotten, empty; a ghost in the middle of the city. There was talk of re-generation, of making the space into an urban garden or something equally hipster, but personally Steve rather liked the surreal decay. There, it was as if time had stood still, allowing nature to take over the railway station whilst life continued at a dizzying pace all around it. The railway station was alone, but not lonely; derelict, but still recognisable – usually...

His eyes widened as he stepped out onto the platform. He stared, incredulous, his heart stuttering as he gazed at the sight in front of him. The platform was spotlessly clean, the floor gleaming white; ethereal and peaceful. The structure of the station itself had also totally transformed. The wall and ceiling, rather than being graffiti-covered and falling apart, looked as strong and magnificent as they must have been when the place was newly built. The tracks, too, were no longer covered in debris and weeds, but instead were smooth, uncluttered and shining. A white steam train sat on the tracks, quietly puffing steam, pulling a single carriage behind it.

Steve walked forwards uncertainty, towards Sam, who was standing next to the steam engine, dressed, like Steve, in his military dress uniform, looking smart and happy as Steve walked towards him. At last, Steve drew level with him, staring at him, drinking in the sight of him, looking strong and magnificent in his uniform. Sam smiled at him gently, his brown eyes calm and steady.

"What is this?" said Steve finally, once the lump in his throat had lessened enough to allow him to speak.

"The end of the line," said Sam. "It's time for me to say goodbye."

Steve stared at him in disbelief, panic and fear swelling inside him. He did not want Sam to leave. He was not ready to let him go.

"What?" managed Steve. "Where are you going?"

Sam turned to look at the beautiful, white steam engine, resting his hand against it, his touch leaving no handprint on the sleek metal. His eyes were misty, a look of almost longing taking over his features.

"I'm going to catch my train," said Sam. "It's time I moved on."
Steve fought back tears, biting his lip as he swallowed hard. He shook his head, not wanting it to be true. He could not imagine his life without Sam. Sensing Steve's discomfort, Sam sighed, turning back to face him, his brown eyes meeting Steve's blue ones.

"Before I go, we need to talk about Fallujah," said Sam.

Steve flinched. He had talked about the Fallujah mission at length with Bruce, and he had recently even revealed the details of it to Bucky, but he had never discussed it with Sam, before. It had felt taboo; too painful, too close to home, too difficult to bring together those two elements of reality and unreality. He felt sick with guilt, his heart aching with it.

"I'm sorry," he said desperately. "I should have seen the tripwire. I should have checked the room properly, before calling you in to translate the map. I... I fucked up."

Sam shook his head sadly, stepping forward and pulling Steve into a hug. Steve closed his eyes, tears leaking down his cheeks as he rested his head on Sam's shoulder, letting the other man stroke his back. Steve's right arm trembled lightly as he remembered the room: the map on the wall, lemons piled high in their basket, the daisy-patterned curtain swaying in the breeze. The room had seemed serene, deceptively unassuming right up to the second before the disaster.

"There's nothing to forgive," said Sam, finally releasing Steve from the hug and stepping back, smiling sadly. "What happened wasn't your fault. The responsibility for my death lies with the people who planted the bomb. Not you. Not Colonel Philips. Not anyone in our squad. I was a dead man walking from the moment we stepped into that house. You've got to let go of that guilt, Steve. It's not your guilt to bear."

Steve bit his lip, casting his eyes downwards, where the platform gleamed, smooth and ethereally white. Sam's hand came to rest on his shoulder, making him look up.

"I forgive you," said Sam. "You're forgiven."

Steve nodded, his vision blurring with tears. He was not sure how long he cried, the cathartic release of Sam's forgiveness causing his perception of time to warp as 16 years of guilt flowed out of him. He buried his face in his hands, powerful relief flowing through him. At long last, he forgave himself for what had happened behind the red door of the house in Fallujah. He accepted that Sam's death was not his fault; that what had happened was a terrible, tragic chain of events that started and ended with the terrorists who had planted the bomb with the sole intention of killing whichever soldier entered the room to investigate their insurgent base. He sobbed until there were no more tears to cry, the pain of Sam's death now soothed with a balm, knowing that he was forgiven, that there was in fact nothing to forgive, that there was nothing he could have done that could have saved Sam's life. What had happened, had happened. It was just life – cruel, random, unfair.

"Steve," said Sam gently. "You're one of the strongest men I know. You've gone through hell – my death, PTSD, Alex, all of it – but you never gave up. You never let circumstances make you bitter. You never stopped caring about other people. You kept your compassion, your humanity, your vulnerability. Even when things were at their darkest, you never stopped fighting. Your mind conjured me up, to support you, for God's sake. That's so strong. You're a brave man, Steve, and I know you're going to do great things."

Steve shook his head. It frightened him, to hear Sam talk like this. Sam was saying goodbye, and Steve did not feel ready for it.

"But what will I do, without you?" said Steve.
The idea of being without Sam made him feel lost, adrift in a sea of uncertainty. Whenever he had needed support and advice, Sam had provided it. Whenever he had felt lonely and isolated, Sam had turned up to be a friend. Whenever the horror of the Fallujah mission had gotten too much, Sam had appeared to soothe the pain. To live in a world without Sam was a terrifying prospect.

Sam smiled gently.

"Everything I've ever said and done since Iraq – every piece of advice, every time I turned up – that was all you," said Sam. "I've been in your head this entire time. I've never been here, not really. I'm not the one who's been helping you get stronger – you've been doing it all by yourself. And since you started seeing Bruce, you've been getting stronger every day. I'm so proud of you." He reached out, taking hold of Steve's hand and squeezing it gently. "You're going to be OK, Steve. You've got a good thing going here."

Steve felt a tear slip down his face, his throat raw as he clung to Sam's fingers.

"But I'm not ready for you to go," he whispered.

"Yes, you are," said Sam softly. "You laid flowers at the war memorial. You've accepted my death. It's time for me to go, now. You'll be OK."

Steve nodded, his eyes screwed shut. He had known, in his heart, the moment he had ordered the lilies and taken his old dress uniform out of storage, that he was ready to say goodbye to Sam. He had accepted his death. He had accepted that it was time to let Sam go. But damn, that did not make saying goodbye any easier.

"Just promise me something," said Sam.

Steve opened his eyes, looking up, already nodding. It did not matter what Sam said next. Whatever he requested, Steve would do. There was no doubt in his mind that there was no request that Sam could make that Steve would consider too large or too small. He would do anything for Sam. He was his comrade, his best friend, his brother.

"Anything," said Steve.

"Remember me," said Sam.

Steve smiled, a half-laugh half-sob bursting from his lips. He stepped forwards, wrapping his arms around Sam and hugging him tightly as he replied.

"Always," said Steve.

They hugged for a long while. Sam felt warm and solid in Steve's arms. He closed his eyes, cherishing the warmth of his skin, the bulk of his body, the smell of him, one last time. He would treasure that moment forever, he knew – just like he treasured every moment they had shared together in real life, before Fallujah, before 13 November 2004. Steve had never had the opportunity to say goodbye to Sam in reality. He was immensely grateful that he had the opportunity to do so, now, on their home turf, 16 years later. It did not matter that it was all taking place in Steve's head. It was their reality, their shared journey coming to an end. The end of the line.

Finally, they pulled apart, both smiling at the other in the way of two friends who knew their time was up, but who had said everything each needed to say. There was no unfinished business. There were no words left unsaid. Each knew that they loved the other deeply, that all was at peace between them, that all was forgiven.
"Take care of yourself," said Sam.

Steve nodded, his throat too tight to speak. Sam gave Steve's shoulder one final squeeze, before turning and boarding the single carriage behind the steam train. He swung the door shut behind him, pulling down the window so that he could lean out one final time, flashing Steve that familiar, gap-toothed grin.

"I'll see you again, one day," said Sam. "Maybe, 50, 60 years from now, you'll board a train of your own and come and join me. We'll have so much to catch up on."

Steve nodded, giving Sam one last smile.

"I'll see you then," said Steve. "I'll live a life to make you proud."

Sam winked at him, cocking a cheeky eyebrow.

"You better," said Sam.

Steve's eyes were wet with tears as the train blew a single loud whistle. Steam began to puff from the chimney, the wheels slowly beginning to turn as Sam gave him one final, gentle smile. Steve waved farewell as the steam train began to pull out of the station. Sam waved back, leaning out of the window to look back at Steve as the train slowly carried him away. Steve watched him go, the train giving one last triumphant whistle as it disappeared in a long bright flash, bathing Steve in white, heavenly light.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

JUST ONE MORE CHAPTER: Wtf?! There's just one more chapter to go! I hope you enjoy it!

THOUGHTS: Goodbye, Sam <3 Feel free to let me know your thoughts on this chapter in the comments section below.

THANK YOU: Thank you to those of you who commented on the previous chapter! I absolutely love hearing your thoughts.

TEASER: The final chapter will be titled "Time After Time" and will give Steve and Bucky the ending they deserve <3 There will also be some final smut :)

TUMBLR: Wanna tumble with me on Tumblr? I am ao3-elle1991 on there!
Steve woke up slowly, warm morning sunlight filtering in through the curtains and gently heating the bedroom. He snuggled deeper under the covers, savouring the warmth, a smile curving his lips when he realised it was Saturday, allowing himself to completely relax. His muscles were loose and pliant, the bed soft and comfortable beneath him. By his side, Bucky's snores rumbled quietly, the perfect background noise.

He closed his eyes, his heart overflowing with love as he listened to Bucky breathing. It was a beautiful sound. He wondered what he was dreaming about. His hand wormed its way across the space between them and gently took hold of the other man's wrist. He enjoyed the simple contact between them, the texture of Bucky's skin, the pulse that he could just feel beneath the pads of his fingers. He would never get bored of touching Bucky.

At some point, he must have drifted back to sleep, because he found himself being pulled back to consciousness by soft lips gently kissing his own. Bucky was sprawled naked beside him, propping himself up with an elbow as he kissed Steve's lips softly. Steve blinked open his eyes, smiling as he started to kiss back, drawing a pleased hum from Bucky. Bucky pulled back, touching their foreheads together so that they could gaze into each other's eyes. Steve stared at the perfect shade of blue above him, his stomach flipping with butterflies as he took a moment to simply admire how gorgeous Bucky looked even with just-woke-up bed hair.

"Morning," said Steve, his voice still raspy with morning gravel.

Bucky smiled, leaning down to kiss his nose affectionately.

"Morning, beautiful," said Bucky.

Steve reached up to cup Bucky's face, unable to resist those pink lips, chasing the taste of him. They kissed languidly, their beards scratching, their hands wandering over one another's bodies. Steve slid his arms around Bucky's back, pulling him closer and gently massaging his back muscles. Bucky moaned softly, lowering his head to kiss Steve's neck whilst trailing his fingers along the scar tissue down Steve's right side. Steve shivered with pleasure at the sensation. The scars were more sensitive than the rest of his skin. Whenever Bucky touched them, it felt intense, visceral, beautiful.

Eventually, Bucky's touches became more intimate. His hand wrapped around Steve's cock, squeezing gently to coax a dribble of pre-come out of his tip, before his thumb swept over his cock head to spread the pre-come down his shaft, using it as lube. Steve closed his eyes, gasping and relaxing into the pillow as Bucky slowly began to jerk him off. His hand was warm and snug around him, applying the perfect amount of pressure. He focused on Steve's sensitive cock head, rubbing and stimulating him, drawing moans and whimpers from his lips.

The sheets rustled as Bucky moved further down the bed, settling between Steve's legs and licking a long line from Steve's balls to the tip of his cock. Steve looked down his body, a moan escaping from his lips, his cock throbbing with lust at the sight of Bucky lying between his legs, lazily licking Steve's cock as if it were a popsicle. Looking up at Steve with a wink, Bucky's mouth engulfed him, taking him deep inside and sucking him enthusiastically. He moaned around Steve's cock, the vibrations causing him to lose control momentarily, rutting up into Bucky's hot, wet mouth.
Bucky calmly put his hands on Steve's hips, holding him down whilst sucking on him mercilessly, ignoring Steve's groans and gasps. Steve screwed his eyes shut, his balls already full of come, drawing up towards his body as his pleasure mounted, his orgasm rapidly approaching. Just as Steve approached the point of no return, his toes curling, Bucky pulled off him, his cock leaving Bucky's mouth with a wet pop.

Steve gasped, his legs shaking with desperation as his orgasm began to fade. Once Bucky was sure he was not going to come, he smiled sweetly, wriggling further down the bed to gently push Steve's legs up, exposing his sensitive hole. His hand slipped into Steve's, giving his fingers a comforting squeeze as his tongue began lapping gently at Steve's entrance. Steve moaned, his muscles turning to jelly as Bucky's tongue traced his rim, alternating between intensely-focused probes and wide, gentle licks. He adored being rimmed. Bucky was moaning softly against his hole, enjoying it just as much.

He closed his eyes, floating off into a blissful state of relaxation, feeling cherished and comforted by the dual sensations of Bucky's hand holding his and Bucky's tongue licking gently at his hole. He could feel his muscles loosening, his breathing getting slower and deeper as Bucky's tongue probed his most intimate places. The sound of a cap being clicked off the bottle of lube pierced through the fog of his consciousness. He smiled as Bucky placed a string of lazy kisses along his thigh, as the other man squeezed a glob of lube out onto his fingers.

The first touch of Bucky's finger against his hole made him jump slightly; the lube was still cool, not yet body temperature. Bucky murmured an apology, rubbing a soothing hand on Steve's thigh as he waited for Steve to get used to the sensation. Once Steve began to relax, Bucky pushed gently against Steve's hole, taking it slow and steady until he got past the resistance of Steve's sphincter. Steve gasped as Bucky penetrated him, his finger sliding in smoothly to the hilt, filling him up and pressing gently against his prostate.

He whined at the sudden intrusion, the feeling of being filled by Bucky's finger both overwhelming and not enough. He allowed his body to get used to the invasion, relaxing around the finger and rocking gently against it, his prostate zipping with little sparks of pleasure at the friction. Bucky hummed with approval when Steve spread his legs wider, wordlessly begging for more. He gently inserted a second finger, which quickly became three. Steve groaned as Bucky stretched him gently, making sure he was properly prepped for what came next.

Bucky covered Steve's body with his own, kissing him gently, his tongue stroking against Steve's. Steve felt the blunt head of Bucky's cock press against his hole, rubbing up and down a couple of times before pushing forwards. He popped inside easily, causing them both to groan. Steve sighed into Bucky's mouth, before burying his face in his neck, his arms wrapping around Bucky's torso, holding him close as Bucky began to rock in and out of him.

They made love slowly. Their bodies rocked together, fitting one another perfectly. Their pleasure spiralled upwards in unison, Bucky's cock nudging against Steve's prostate over and over again, Steve's ass milking Bucky's cock as he thrust faster and faster. They were sweating, grunting, holding one another tightly as they fucked their way to orgasm, their hands all over one another, kissing one another passionately, full of so much love for one another that they felt as though they were going to burst – until they did, quite literally; Steve spilling over his chest, as Bucky simultaneously filled his ass with thick, warm come.

They came down from their orgasms slowly, giddy and breathless as Bucky's softening cock slipped out of him with a quiet pop. Bucky rolled off Steve and collapsed by his side, immediately wrapping him up in an affectionate hug. Steve smiled, enjoying the afterglow, pressing kisses to Bucky's temple. He closed his eyes with a happy sigh, relaxed and intensely satisfied, ready for a short nap before a leisurely brunch.
To his chagrin, Bucky poked him in the ribs, gently at first, then suddenly practically tipping him out of bed when Steve did not respond. Steve's arms pinwheeled for balance, his eyes flying open in shock. Bucky caught him before he fell out of bed, a grin on his face as he sat up, his arm coming down on Steve's pillow to prop himself up. Steve stared longingly at his pillow, wishing that it were his head that were there, instead of Bucky's elbow.

"I don't want to get up," whined Steve.

Bucky grinned wickedly.

"You have to," he said. "You have an appointment in an hour with Dr. Banner. Don't think I won't drag you there naked, if I have to."

Steve hid his grin by turning away. Bucky's threats were a running joke. At first, when Steve had first started his therapy sessions with Bruce, he had not wanted to go. Fifteen years of fear and trauma was a lot to overcome, and at first, it had seemed impossible, terrifying and simply too intense. Bucky had always made sure Steve attended his therapy sessions, though, using a combination of actual support and increasingly ludicrous threats. It had worked. Thanks to Bucky, Steve had not missed a single therapy session, and his penchant for ludicrous warnings had become a welcome part of Steve's therapy routine.

Playing his part, Steve groaned dramatically as he rolled out of bed, laughing as he dodged out of the way of a pillow that was flung in his direction.

Dr. Bruce Banner's office felt more like a friend's living room than a psychiatrist's clinical assessment and treatment room. The space was filled with plants – Bruce was apparently an enthusiastic botanist – giving the room a fresh, calming ambience. There was no scary-looking "therapy chair", but instead a squishy sofa adorned with colourful hand-made cushions. Running along the left-hand side of the office was a large window, filling the room with natural light and giving Steve the opportunity to stare outside and compose himself whenever he needed a break. Bruce himself always dressed informally, his style decidedly cosy and homely, frequently sporting warm knitted jumpers and comfortable-looking trousers alongside his thick-framed glasses.

Presently, Steve was sat on the sofa, his favourite cushion on his lap, his fingers fiddling with the colourful tassels that ran along the edges. Bruce was sat on his own sofa, watching Steve with patient eyes and a kind smile.

"I haven't had any nightmares about Iraq for two months," said Steve. "I used to be afraid of going to sleep, in case I dreamed of Fallujah, but not anymore."

Bruce looked genuinely pleased, jotting down a note on his clipboard before looking back up at Steve with warm brown eyes. Steve looked back at him, remembering the first time he had met Bruce, how he had been simultaneously desperate for and terrified about treatment. It had taken several months of intensive therapy for him to become fully comfortable in Bruce's presence and start opening up to him properly, but since then, their clinical relationship had blossomed. Steve now felt completely comfortable sharing anything and everything with Bruce. He was his closest confidante, someone whom he trusted implicitly. It helped, too, that Bruce had also been a soldier; that he understood the horrors of war in a way that a civilian doctor never could. They were a perfect fit. Steve could not have asked for a better therapist.
"You said in our last therapy session that you hadn't seen Sam for a while," prompted Bruce, when Steve lapsed into silence. "Is that still the case?"

"Yeah, I've not seen Sam for two months, either," said Steve. "Not since he left on the train. I think that was goodbye."

Bruce nodded thoughtfully.

"It seems so," he murmured. "And when did you last experience a flashback or a panic attack, or feel compelled to avoid a particular place because it reminded you of the war?"

Steve lapsed into silence, gazing out of the window as he considered his answer to the question. He had not particularly been keeping tabs on it, but now that Bruce mentioned it, it had been a while since he had experienced any of the symptoms that Bruce had listed. Laying flowers at the war memorial and saying goodbye to Sam at the abandoned railway station had been a key turning point. He had not experienced any panic attacks, nightmares or flashbacks since then. It was as if saying goodbye to Sam had finally soothed his agitated mind, allowing him to move on peacefully.

"Not for two months," he said. "Not since I said goodbye to Sam."

The realisation struck him as significant, although he was unsure as to what exactly it meant. He looked up to find Bruce positively beaming, the lines around his eyes crinkling into a smile. Steve gave him an uncertain glance, unsure of what Bruce seemed so enthused about. Bruce, sensing Steve's cluelessness, chuckled kindly, putting down his pen and resting it on his clipboard.

"I'm prepared to say that you're now fully recovered from your PTSD," said Bruce gently. "You don't need these counselling sessions anymore. You haven't for a while, actually, but I'd wanted to wait for you to be two months symptom-free, just to be sure of it."

Steve blinked, stunned into silence by the ease with which Bruce had delivered his diagnosis, or rather, lack thereof. He sat there, incredulous, unsure if he had understood him correctly. Cautiously, barely daring to believe it, he cleared his throat, tentatively seeking confirmation.

"What...? That's it?" he said.

Bruce nodded kindly.

"That's it," he confirmed. "Of course, if you experience a relapse, you should come back – but I don't think that will happen. You've resolved your trauma, you've developed some great coping mechanisms for general stress, and your symptoms have disappeared. You've beaten your PTSD, Steve. Congratulations!"

Steve felt a smile spreading over his face. He wanted to jump up and down, fling open the window and yell news of his recovery to the street below. It had been a long time coming. Therapy had been tough, brutal sometimes, and often tearful, but it had been worth it. Bruce had helped him to overcome his guilt, to slowly but surely build up healthy coping mechanisms, whilst gently encouraging him to face what had happened in Fallujah rather than avoiding it and letting it fester. The result was that Steve was mentally healthier than he had ever been. Iraq no longer haunted him. He felt strong. He felt healthy. He felt happy. Resisting the urge to jump up and wrap Bruce in a bone-crushing hug, he settled instead for savouring the moment, grinning widely as he allowed the joy of his recovery to properly sink in.

"It's been a pleasure treating you," said Bruce. "Watching you come to terms with your trauma and grow healthier and stronger has been a joy and a privilege."
Steve turned to Bruce, struggling for words, unable to express just how grateful he was for everything Bruce had done for him.

"Thank you for fixing me," he managed, before a lump formed in his throat, preventing him from saying anything more eloquent.

Bruce shook his head, smiling in a way that was somehow both kindly and chastising.

"You were never broken, Steve," Bruce said firmly. "What you experienced was a natural reaction to something that most of us could never even imagine. You were ill – and understandably so, considering what you went through – not broken."

Steve smiled, lowering his eyes, suitably chided. Bruce chuckled, setting his clipboard aside and pushing his thick glasses further up his nose with his index finger.

"So, what are you going to do to celebrate?" said Bruce. "As a doctor, I can't really recommend heavy drinking, but I think you've earned a beverage or two..."

His eyes twinkled behind his glasses, causing Steve to laugh. He considered the question. He was not sure how he was going to celebrate, if he was being honest. He had not expected to be diagnosed as cured. It was altogether a very pleasant surprise.

"I'll go out for drinks another time, when I have more energy," smiled Steve. "Right now, I can't think of a better way to celebrate than ordering a takeaway and having a night in with my boyfriend. Being self-employed is tiring, you know?"

"Oh, yes, I meant to ask you about that," said Bruce. "How is the art studio doing?"

Steve smiled.

"Really good," he said. "Folks seem to love my art. It's providing a pretty good income, much better than I expected, actually. I'm working on a special painting at the moment: poppy fields at dawn. I'm going to auction it and donate half the proceeds to a military charity."

"That's really great," said Bruce, looking earnest. "You're doing a wonderful thing, Steve."

"Thanks," said Steve. "And next week, I'm going to showcase some of my art in an exhibition in Manhattan, try to drum up some publicity for my studio. Some art class friends of mine are coming along. You're more than welcome to come too, if you're interested in that sort of thing."

He remembered, not so long ago, when his entire social circle had comprised of just Bucky, Natasha and Sam. That was no longer the case. About a year ago, he had started taking evening art classes and had met a number of like-minded artists with whom he had instantly hit it off. His social life was much more active, now. The lonely, isolated man whom he had once been no longer existed.

Bruce smiled, looking genuinely excited at the invitation. He pushed his glasses – forever slipping down his nose – back up as he nodded excitedly.

"I'd love that," he said. "I adore art. Tell me when and where, and I'll be there."

However much things change, some things stay the same. New York City traffic was one of those
things. Steve was pretty sure that the city would have tailbacks even after the last human was long
dead. New York City simply would not be New York City without horrendous traffic jams.

And so it was, that one month on from his final therapy session with Bruce, Steve was 20 minutes
late in picking Bucky up from college on the one day when it mattered most that they not be late to
their destination. Bucky clambered hurriedly into the passenger seat of Steve's car, visibly anxious at
their already being late. Steve made sure Bucky's seat belt was done before immediately putting his
foot down on the accelerator and making his way down a side road. Perhaps the backroads would be
less hectic. He glanced at his watch, his stomach flipping when he saw the time. He could make it on
time, barely, if he encountered no more traffic and nudged the speed limit.

He chuckled to himself, not blind to the irony of considering breaking the legal speed limit,
considering where they were headed. Beside him, Bucky eyed the car's speedometer, raising his
eyebrows in faux-shock that the battered – no, vintage and characterful – car was actually capable of
reaching 35mph.

"Wow, this car, going a decent speed?" smirked Bucky. "Now I know I'm dreaming."

Steve tutted, his lips twitching upwards into a smile at Bucky's sass. Steve's car was something that
Bucky loved to hate. Steve allowed it, though, if only because he knew that under all the snark,
Bucky really did care about Steve's car. He understood its importance in Steve's life; how it was a
physical reminder of his late father, Joseph Rogers. That did not stop Bucky from brutally roasting it
whenever he had the opportunity, however. Steve smirked. Two could play at that game.

"Dreams, yeah?" teased Steve. "Did you learn any dream interpretation at shrink school today? I had
a dream about a black-feathered flamingo last night that I think represents my long-suppressed
heterosexuality."

Bucky scowled. He hated when Steve acted (in jest, of course) as though Psychology was not a real
science. Bucky was proud of his new life path: studying Psychology at college with the ambition of
later undergoing further education and training in order to become a counsellor. Steve remembered
when Bucky had first mentioned his ambition, on their very first holiday as a couple, at Springfall
Lake, when they had talked about their dream jobs. Now, Bucky was making that dream into a
reality. Steve could not have been happier for him.

"You know that dream interpretation is a load of bullshit," said Bucky, his lower lip sticking out in
an adorable pout, before spotting Steve's smirk and glaring at him. "God damn it, Steve."

They laughed, lapsing into companionable silence as Steve concentrated on driving and Bucky ran a
hand through his hair, trying to make himself look a little bit more presentable. Steve hoped that he
too looked half-decent. He had dressed smartly and brushed his hair before leaving the flat, but that
had been before he had become increasingly frazzled sitting in traffic en-route to pick up Bucky from
college. Unlike Bucky, however, since he was driving, he did not have the luxury of being able to
give himself one last spruce up.

Steve was not sure what he had done to please the God of Traffic, but somehow the route to NYPD
headquarters was traffic-free. Steve arrived in the nick of time, with just minutes to spare as Steve
and Bucky made their way to the square where the annual Medal Day Ceremony was taking place.
They squeezed their way through the crowds to where their seats had been reserved, finally finding
their names amongst those stuck to the rows of plastic chairs set out in neat lines.

They had barely taken their seats when the Chief Inspector of New York Police Department took to
the stage. The crowd fell into silence as the Chief Inspector tapped on the microphone to check if it
was working. He warmly welcomed the crowd, before launching into a speech about the bravery
and acts of courage that they would be celebrating that day.

Steve was not particularly paying attention to the Chief Inspector. Instead, he was surreptitiously scanning the rows of police officers who were positioned in front of the stage, looking smart in their dress uniforms, standing in perfect lines, each giving the appearance of paying far more attention to what their commanding officer was saying than Steve was. He searched the crowd of uniforms for familiar red hair, his eyes roving along the lines of neatly-dressed police officers. Bucky nudged him discreetly in the ribs, nodding towards the police officers nearest to the stage, where Steve finally saw Natasha, on the front row, her red curls tucked neatly behind her ears.

His heart swelled with pride, a lump forming in his throat as he absorbed the sight of his friend looking magnificent in her uniform. She was straight-backed, her green eyes clear and looking straight ahead of her as she stood to attention. She was the sole woman on the front row, looking small and delicate next to her taller, thicker-set male colleagues. She was easy to underestimate or overlook, perhaps; something that had worked to her advantage when operating undercover. Steve knew, though, that underestimating Natasha Romanoff was a great mistake. She was strong, brave, resourceful and absolutely determined once she set her mind to something. She was an inspiration, a hero, a role model for a whole generation of New York girls who had by now all heard the story of Natasha Romanoff on the news.

His attention was snapped back to the Chief Inspector when he called out Natasha's name, her signal to walk up the small set of stairs and join him on the stage. Steve's hand found Bucky's and held on tight, his heart bursting with pride as Natasha climbed the stairs and stood before the Chief Inspector, looking slightly awkward to be on stage in front of so many people.

"Detective Natasha Romanoff," said the Chief Inspector. "I'm awarding you today with the New York City Police Department Medal of Honor, the highest medal awarded by NYPD.

"Last year, you arrested mob leader Alexander Pierce in exceptionally dangerous circumstances. He was armed, and was firing shots at you and your fellow officers. Indeed, you were grazed on the arm by one of these bullets, and required hospital treatment afterwards. Nevertheless, despite the enormous dangers, you tackled the suspect to the ground, disarmed him, and performed his arrest. Not only that, but you immediately went on to jump into the river below, to save the lives of two civilians who had ended up in the water.

"It's my honour to be able to bestow you with this medal today. NYPD and the people of New York City thank you for your service."

The Chief Inspector placed the Medal of Honor around Natasha's neck. It was gold, in the shape of an eight-pointed star, attached to a green neck ribbon; the highest award for bravery that could be bestowed.

As one, the crowd got to their feet, erupting into rapturous applause, in awe and celebration of this incredible woman, who had worked so hard to make New York City a safer place by bringing down HYDRA, who had risked her life to arrest its leader and worked tirelessly to achieve justice for HYDRA's many victims.

Steve and Bucky rose to their feet with the crowd, indescribably thrilled that Natasha was finally getting the recognition she deserved, immensely thankful to her for saving their lives, and so full of love for their best friend – the one, the only, Detective Natasha Romanoff.
Springfall Lake in Redmont National Park was one of Steve's favourite places in the world.

In his mind, it was a place that was intimately connected with Bucky. He could not think of Springfall Lake without thinking about Bucky. The two were twinned: permanently, emotionally, beautifully. It was the place where their lives had first intersected as children, when Bucky had been simply the boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks. It was the place where they had shared their first holiday together, after they had reconciled after their brief break-up. It was the place where they were presently, their belongings currently dumped unceremoniously just inside the front door of Bucky's parents' cabin, having just arrived for another week-long holiday.

It was a beautiful evening. They were stood by the lakeside, hand-in-hand by the shoreline, the only sounds the gentle lapping of the water by their feet, the wind rustling through the trees and the sound of birdsong. It was so quiet, so peaceful, that Steve felt like it could be just the two of them in the world. The sun was slowly setting, slicing between the mountaintops and cascading down onto the lake, bathing them in warm orange light.

Steve turned to Bucky, about to say something about the breath-taking nature of the sunset, only to find himself overcome by the sheer amount of love that he felt for the man beside him. He could not believe how lucky he was, to be with someone so beautiful both inside and out. Bucky Barnes was not a perfect man, but he was perfect for Steve. They complemented one another in some ways, whilst balancing one another out in others. They were each other's other half, the love of one another's life; soulmates.

Steve thought about that special something – true love or cosmic fate or random chance – that had brought them together over and over again, making Steve fall in love with him again and again, in so many different ways: the boy in the rainbow-coloured swimming trunks, his first love; Bucky, his cafeteria crush; James Barnes, his email buddy with the brilliant mind; Winter Soldier, his Saturday night lover. Somehow, he had met Bucky over and over again, and he had fallen in love with him, every time.

Bucky was intelligent, beautiful, kind, strong and vulnerable.

Steve loved him more than anything.

He could not think of anyone else who he would rather be standing next to, watching the sun set over Springfall Lake. He could not think of anyone else he would rather spend the rest of his life with, sharing experiences, stories, kisses. He wanted to grow old with this man. He wanted to be with Bucky for the rest of his life. The realisation struck him like a physical blow, and it was perhaps this that led Steve to fall gracefully onto one knee, completely unplanned, taking hold of Bucky's hand and touching it reverently.

Bucky turned to look at him, his eyes widening as he took in Steve's loaded stance, shock and confusion written plain across his features. Steve's heart ached with love; even bemused, Bucky was beautiful.

"Will you marry me?" said Steve.

The words came out without any planning. If he had had more time to think about it, perhaps he would have prepared something more romantic, like an engagement ring or whatever the male equivalent was supposed to be. But, at that moment, he had simply known that the question needed to be asked. He was ready to take their relationship to that next level, to commit to Bucky for the rest of his life – to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.
until death do they part.

Bucky stared at him in shock, before jerking out of his reverie with a strangled sob, flinging his arms around Steve and hugging him tightly, half-laughing and half-crying with joy.

"Yes," said Bucky. "Fuck yes!"

Bucky finally pulled back, his blue eyes shining with tears, a delighted smile lighting up his face. They kissed deeply, their arms wrapped around one another, holding one another tight, the sunset forgotten as they basked in their own brilliant glow. Steve was bursting with joy, tears slipping down his cheeks as he kissed the man whom he loved, overjoyed to be embarking on a new chapter of their shared lives.

He thought about all the ways he had fallen in love with Bucky Barnes in the past, and all the ways he was sure he would continue to do so in the future – day after day, night after night, time after time.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER ART: View, like, comment on and re-blog it here <3

MASTERPOST: I've created this masterpost on Tumblr to promote this fic. If you've enjoyed this story, then please feel free to hit that "re-blog" button!

THANK YOU: Wow, I can't believe this story is finally over. After 6 months and almost 125,000 words, we're finally at the end... Thank you SO MUCH to every single one of you who have taken the time to read this story and follow the characters on their journeys, especially those of you who came for the porn and stayed for the plot. It has been an honour and a privilege to share this work with you. I want to give a huge shout out to all of you who have commented, left kudos and sent me messages of support both on here and on Tumblr - feedback is really important to writers and I appreciate it immensely that you've taken the time out of your day to give me some; you're the kindest, most awesome, most enthusiastic fans I could wish for! Thank you for sharing this journey with me; it's been incredible <3

ANY QUESTIONS: I hope this final chapter has tied up all the loose ends. If anything is unclear though, or if you have any questions at all, then just leave a comment and I will get back to you.

ALL STORY ART AND Q&As: You can see all things Time After Time-related on my Tumblr account by searching the "time after time" tag here.

KEEP IN TOUCH: Don't be a stranger, keep in touch! I am on Tumblr under the name ao3-elle1991.

FUTURE STORIES: If you want to get an email whenever I post something new, then click on my profile and become a user subscriber. Be aware that this is different from the Subscribe button on the top of this page, which is for this story only :)

End Notes
OTHER STUFF I'VE WRITTEN:

**Fearless** (291,275 words) - A Black Widow origin story. Starting when Natasha was three years old and going right up to the present day, this story explores Natasha's life as a Red Room Academy student, KGB agent, SHIELD agent and finally, an Avenger.

**Steve And Bucky's Kinky Alphabet** (176,544 words) - 26 chapters of explicit porn-with-plot featuring Steve and Bucky. Or: the one where JARVIS goes rogue and kidnaps the Avengers until they can sort their mental health out, and Steve and Bucky fuck a lot and fall in love.

**Vengeance** (51,573 words) - Bucky falls from the train. Steve will do anything to take revenge on those responsible for his death - even if it means joining HYDRA.

**Secrets** (40,706 words) - Bucky is a man with a big secret: for 70 years, he was HYDRA's weapon. Nevertheless, despite his dark past, he is trying to move on with his life and has even formed a relationship with Tony. All seems to be going well, until a security breach at SHIELD threatens to expose his past.

**Love Is Blind** (14,512 words) - After a mission goes horribly wrong, Natasha is left completely blind. As SHIELD scientists desperately seek a cure, Natasha struggles to come to terms with her disability.

**At Your Service** (12,931 words) - Clint and Natasha lose a bet. Phil gets them to dress up and act out some of his many, many Captain America fanboy fantasies.

**The Adventures Of Steve Rogers, Newsboy Extraordinaire** (11,161 words) - 7-year-old Steve has Selective Mutism. When Steve finds himself confronting a dangerous criminal, will he find the courage within himself to save the day - and even find his voice?

**I Like Cats, Too** (10,526 words) - When the Avengers are torn apart by the split caused by the Sokovia Accords, a depressed Natasha lapses into a prolonged period of silence. Will anyone be able to help Natasha overcome her depression and mutism? Enter a very special cat named Midnight...

**Black Widow By Day, Black Kitten By Night** (6,164 words) - Natasha dons her cat ears, Clint ties up his pet, and hardcore, steamy sex ensues.

**The Black Widow Ice Cream Parlour** (3,746 words) - Natasha meets one of the people whose lives she has saved, and finally gets the appreciation she deserves.

**The End Of The Line** (3,433 words) - Bucky falls from the train to his assumed death. Steve has to come to terms with a world without him in it.

**Turkish Oil Wrestling** (2,620 words) - Steve and Bucky decide to have a wrestling match to settle an old score. Cue them stripping down to their pants, getting oiled up and engaging in a vigorous wrestling match that leaves them both hot and sweaty.

**So, You Like Cats?** (1,697 words) - Sam has a confession to make. It could make or break his and T'Challa's relationship. It all comes down to one question: Do you like cats?

**In Memoriam: James Buchanan Barnes** (120 words) - A grief-stricken Steve writes a poem in
honour of his best friend.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!