I'll Find You in the Morning Sun

by sablier_blocque

Summary

It’s all Bucky’s idea: return the stones and don’t come back. Find Peggy, find *him*. So he does.

A post-Endgame story, wherein Steve gets the girl, rescues the boy, and realizes his heart is big enough to love them both.

Notes

Behold the story in which I tried to make sense of Endgame’s ending. At the end of the day, I don’t think Steven Grant Rogers would’ve left Bucky behind to go back in time. But if he did, I hope this is how it would go. This follows the Russos’ alternate timeline concept, as opposed to the screenwriters’ main timeline concept (because, WTAF).

I made myself a period-appropriate playlist to listen to while writing this story, and every
song mentioned herein is included. It’s here if you’d like to have a listen.

A million thanks to batmandeh, not only for removing all of my errant commas, but also for answering a million questions like “DO YOU THINK BUCKY NEEDS TO WRAP HIS ARM TO SHOWER OR IS IT FANCY ENOUGH TO HANDLE THAT?”

Title from “I’ll Be Seeing You,” most beautifully performed by Billie Holiday. A few moments/lines harken back to or mirror MCU moments.
Chapter 1

I'll be seeing you
In every lovely summer's day
In everything that's light and gay
I'll always think of you that way

I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon
But I'll be seeing you
- I’ll Be Seeing You

It’s all Bucky’s idea. It’s funny since it was always Steve’s harebrained ideas that got them into trouble as kids. Steve running into fights he had no business being in and Bucky dragging him out with Steve’s arms still swinging.

Maybe it’s Bucky starting trouble this go-round or maybe he is just trying to save him one last time, but he sits next to Steve on Tony’s back porch after the funeral and says, “Don’t come back.”

Steve had been lost in thought, thinking of Tony, thinking of Nat, thinking of one in 14 million chances, and he’s unsure if he heard him correctly. “What?”

“Tomorrow. When you return the stones.” He looks away. “You— you shouldn’t come back.”

Steve’s stomach plummets in discomfort. And guilt. How many times in the last five years has he taken out his compass and imagined what could have been if things had been different, if he hadn’t have flown that plane into the ocean in a noble attempt to save mankind?

He gives a half-hearted smile in an attempt to brush him off. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Bucky turns to face him again. “Isn’t it?” He looks at Steve pointedly; Bucky has always known him better than anyone, even now. His gaze holds an uncomfortable weight, and Steve’s eyes dart away, his mouth tightening.

“I have responsibilities here.”

“You just saved the whole damn world, Steve. Again. For the umpteenth time. You don’t owe anybody anything.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. But what about you?” His eyes flicker back to Bucky’s.

“You don’t owe me anything either,” Bucky says with a self-deprecating half-smile.

“You know that’s not true.” And it isn’t. Bucky had taken care of him every day of their lives until he fell off that god-forsaken train and hurtled toward a life of brainwashed mayhem and destruction.

“It’s been less than true for a long time.” He suddenly sounds weary, as weary as Steve has felt since he watched his best friend turn to ash right in front of him. He hears the guilt in his words too, heavy with the Winter Soldier’s transgressions. Still, this is Bucky. He opens his mouth to contradict him, to remind him of how good he is and how much he means to him, but is stopped by Bucky
holding up his hand. “You have a real chance to be happy. You have the chance to get the girl and get married and have kids who will be more stubborn than the two of you put together.”

“Buck,” he whispers, tears threatening to spill from his eyes. Six years ago, Steve wouldn’t have even imagined saying yes. He was Captain “I could do this all day” America: duty-bound and tenacious to a fault. But after five years of mourning half the world, with he and Nat trying to hold up each other, and the rest of the Avengers, he was tired. He was tired enough to consider this ridiculous notion of potential happiness in an amber-colored past.

“What will you do?” he asks.

“I’ve got plenty to do here,” Bucky replies with conviction. It reminds Steve of Natasha’s raison d’être — red in my ledger — and he understands even if he doesn’t agree.

He nods gravely and then sighs. “I don’t even know how to get there. I don’t think Banner would sign off on an extracurricular mission, and he’s the only one who would know how to figure out the coordinates.”

“He’s not the only one,” says another voice from the doorway. Steve turns and sees Shuri, still in her long black dress from the funeral. She isn’t looking back at him, though, she’s looking at Bucky with a sly grin. Steve glances between them, and his eyes narrow with realization.

“You’ve been planning this.”

*  

**  

“I need to know where and when you want to return, Captain Rogers.” They’re in Tony’s garage, the lights low in case anyone comes looking for them.

“The museum said…” Bucky starts, his brow furrowing, as if trying to remember. “Weren’t you supposed to take her dancing?”

Steve shakes his head. “No. I mean, yes, I was. But that would feel…” cheap. Wrong. Disrespectful to her and the guy who’d still be in the ice when he got there. Shuri is still looking at him expectantly, her fingers poised above the computer keyboard. “1950,” he says. “Camp Lehigh in New Jersey.” It gives Peggy time to recover after the war and co-found S.H.I.E.L.D. without him getting in her way.

They settle on an exact date (before the Korean War starts) and time of day (early Friday evening to hopefully catch her alone at work), and then Shuri hands him his updated GPS system.

“Thank you,” Steve says, quieter than he means to, and she smiles in response.

“Of course.”

Bucky is suddenly at his side with two glasses of amber liquid. “This calls for a toast, doesn’t it?”

“Hey! Where is mine?” Shuri says, reaching for Bucky’s drink. Bucky holds it aloft in his metal hand, and she jumps to reach it.

“You’re 16.”
“It’s 2023 now. That would make me 21. Did they not teach arithmetic 90 years ago?”

“You’ve been dead for five years. I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Hey, pal,” Steve interjects. “Don’t act like you weren’t down a bottle or two when we were kids. I remember cleaning up your puke more than once.”

Bucky gives Steve a playful grin that he hasn’t seen since the war, and his heart flip-flops. Bucky lowers his arm and hands her the glass. “Don’t tell your brother. The last thing I need is the King of Wakanda on my ass.”

The camaraderie between Bucky and Shuri is obvious; comfortable, familiar. He’s glad for it. It makes the idea of leaving Bucky behind ache a little less in his chest. But it still aches.

Bucky grabs a third glass. “Well?”

“To…” Steve is unsure what to say. He tries to imagine telling 20 year-old Steve that he’s still alive in the year 2023, twice his size, having a glass of bourbon with an African princess who is probably the smartest person in the world and his best pal. His best pal who just talked him into traveling back in time to win the heart of an amazing woman he met 80 years ago.

“To the future,” Bucky says, his voice cracking on the last syllable. They clink glasses and take a sip.

“Oh my god, this is revolting,” Shuri explains. “How do Americans drink this shit?”

“It’s an acquired taste, kiddo.”

“I have no desire to ever acquire it.” She sets the drink down and powers off Tony’s computer. “I’ll leave you to it. Good luck to you, Captain.”

“Thank you, Shuri.”

“Should you get going? To prepare for tomorrow?” Bucky asks, finishing his glass.

“It’s my last night on earth with my best pal. I’m not going anywhere.”

* * *

Steve has had a lot of sleepless nights in the last five years, but none were like this; laughing so hard his sides hurt, eyes shiny with memories of old. They stay in Tony’s garage until dawn, passing the bottle between them, mostly for old times’ sake since it’s impossible for either of them to get drunk.

Steve had spent time with Bucky after the HYDRA takedown, but most of it was while his mind was not his own. To see him healing and in recovery after extensive work in Wakanda was a balm to Steve’s soul. He wishes Bucky would retire and live his life in peace, but he knows that he won’t do that.

“What would’ve happened to us if the war hadn’t happened?” Steve asks. They’re sitting on the sofa, both angled toward one another, their knees brushing.

“I’d be breaking my back in at the docks. You’d be… maybe you would’ve turned into a comic artist, or something.”
Still in Brooklyn?"

"Of course," Bucky replies with a shrug. "Where else?" He takes another drink. "I’d come home to a mess because your artwork would be fucking everywhere. And then I’d have to cook because your cooking stinks. But you would’ve made sure the icebox was stocked and you’d have the laundry on the line. And it would’ve worked out just fine."

"Oh. I assumed you would’ve swept some girl off her feet," Steve says, his chest suddenly uncomfortable.

"Oh," Bucky says, like he hadn’t even thought of it; like it hadn’t even crossed his mind that a world without war might mean a world without him and Steve together. Maybe HYDRA trained that sort of thing out of him when creating the Winter Soldier, the desire for women or sex or love. A lack of attachments does yield a more loyal soldier.

Steve never had that training, though. Before Peggy came along, he would’ve been quite happy with the future Bucky just described: the two of them against the world. He knows Bucky never wanted him the way Steve wanted Bucky all those years ago. Bucky would hold him close on December nights to stave off the chill and sickness, and Steve would ache with want and what-ifs. But it was a dream that Steve tossed away the day Bucky shipped out to England.

Then Peggy showed up with her dark curls and staggering smile and enough gumption to take down any man in her way. He had wanted her so badly — the first person he’d ever wanted as much as he’d wanted Bucky. And she had wanted him too, even before the serum changed his body and the way every other woman looked at it since.

"Maybe," Bucky finally says, interrupting Steve’s reverie. "But you definitely would’ve. Sweet guy like you would’ve snatched someone eventually."

"Me?" he asks. "I guess you forgot what dating was like for me before the war."

"I didn’t forget. They just didn’t know what they were missing, pal. Someone would’ve figured it out eventually." He leans back. "Peggy did. Maybe you would’ve met her some other way, huh? Star-crossed lovers and all that."

"Maybe," Steve whispers. "She probably couldn’t cook either, though. So you’d have to stick around. Just to make sure we didn’t starve." Something churns low in Steve’s belly because yeah, the idea of having both of them is everything Steve could ever want.

"Yeah," Bucky says, his voice soft. "You two’d be hopeless on your own."

Steve laughs. "You’d be dead if she heard you say that."

"You’d protect me."

"Not if you deserved it."

Bucky laughs and gives him a shove.

He’s missed this so much, the comfort and familiarity that only comes with knowing someone your entire life, someone who knows who he truly was before the war and the super serum changed everything.

"Buck," Steve says, low and serious. As much as he wants to be with Peggy again, he doesn’t want to leave him behind. "You could come—"
“No.”

“No, Stevie. No. You deserve it, and I—”

“Bucky—”

He puts his hand up to stop him, but then his eyes light up like he just figured out the right Captain-shaped button to push. “If you go back, then you can stop this,” he says and gestures to himself. “You can stop the Winter Soldier before he goes too far. It’s too late for me, but you can get him out of there.”

“Oh,” Steve breathes, honestly a little mad at himself for not thinking of it sooner. He would have, certainly, but he’s been so goddamn tired for so many years, and all of this time travel business makes his head hurt. “Oh.”

“Okay?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

Bucky gives him a small smile, sad and bittersweet, and brings his right hand forward to cup Steve’s neck. Steve leans into the touch and closes his eyes. He’s got a strong eidetic memory, so he doesn’t forget much, but he wants to remember this: the feeling of Bucky’s hand on his skin, their knees pressed together, the quiet buzz of Tony’s garage. One last night with his closest friend before he embarks on an impossible journey.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep on me, punk.”


* *

There are a couple of hiccups in returning the stones and Mjolnir. Thor sees him in Asgard and assumes he must be Loki, escaped. The fact that he can pick up the hammer at all is the only way he convinces Thor that he isn’t his brother. Returning the scepter involves too many Hail HYDRAs for Steve’s constitution, and he ends up having to kiss Alexander Pierce’s ass, when all he wants to do is throttle him.

He returns the Tesseract to the S.H.I.E.L.D. base at Camp LeHigh and realizes, since it’s the last stone, that he’s already in the right place; he just needs to go back 20 years. So he takes a deep breath and cues the final coordinates into the GPS.

The storage room he was just in is much emptier now, with just a few boxes and crates here and there. He heads upstairs where most of the lights are out and walks toward the location of where Peggy’s office was in 1970. He sees her in the window, lit only by her desk lamp, and his breath catches in his chest. Her hair is in disarray after the long day, her lipstick already faded. She’s humming along to Bing Crosby on the radio while writing notes on a legal pad. She’s even more beautiful than he remembered.

He moves forward quietly and stops outside her partially-open door. “Am I too late for that dance?” he asks.
She gasps, her eyes widening in surprise and confusion. Her pen drops to the floor.

“H-how?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me,” she responds with a shaky voice. Her eyes are wet with tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. She hasn’t moved from her chair, and he supposes she’s not quite sure if he’s real or not.

“I was buried in the ice for 70 years until S.H.I.E.L.D. found me and woke me up. I’ve fought aliens and HYDRA agents alongside Howard’s son, traveled back in time to save Earth from annihilation, and now I’m here, fresh from the year 2023, with a few minor detours along the way.”

“But—” she says, obviously finding it difficult to take all of this in. She is silent for a few moments before her eyes travel up and down his body. “Is that the fashion in 2023?”

Steve laughs, laughs loudly and heartily, warmed to see her and hear her again. “No, not really.”

Finally she gets up and runs to him, throwing her arms around him tightly. “I’m slightly inclined to believe you, only because my Steve was never a good liar,” she says against his chest. “Unless that’s something you’ve improved upon in the last 80 years.”

My Steve. Warmth spreads through his chest. “No. Not to my best girl, anyway.”

“Steve,” she whispers, choking on a sob. His hand moves to her hair to comfort her, but then she’s grabbing his chin and kissing him. It’s not what he expected from their first kiss since he boarded the Valkyrie all those years ago. He imagined it to be more tentative and shy, reconnective. But no. This was hungry and fervent, desperate. Her tongue licks against his lower lip and he moans, his own tongue swiping to meet hers hers. She nips at his mouth and presses her body against his, and then he remembers that they can’t do this yet.

“Wait, Peggy, wait,” he says, out of breath. He forces himself to take a step back.

“Why, darling?” She’s practically pouting.

“We need to talk first. I— there are some things you need to know before we go any further.”

“Alright,” her forehead creases in concern. “There’s a diner about 15 minutes up the road. Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I haven’t eaten since…” he thinks back, “2013.” Thor at least fed him after he realized it really was Steve.

“Twenty-thirteen? Wait, I thought you said—”

“It’s very complicated and convoluted, and I’ll tell you all about it soon.”

“Alright,” Peggy spins away to grab her pocketbook. “Wait. You can hardly go out into the world looking like that. Let’s see what we can scrounge up.” He’s got his suit on underneath everything, but that’s hardly inconspicuous either. She leads him to a supply room and finds him a military jumpsuit very similar to the one he wore when he was there with Tony. “I could probably find you something better if you weren’t so enormous.”

“There are worse things,” he says with a smirk.

“Watch that cheek, Captain,” she responds, smiling, before leaving to let him change.
She drives them to the Starlite Diner, whose sign boasts of late hours and the best cherry pie in the tri-state area. Peggy obviously frequents this place; the waitress calls her by name and Peggy waltzes to a booth in the back as if she owns it.

She tells Steve to order their pot roast — “Trust me, it’s divine” — before grabbing his hand and looking at him intently. “So, what do you need to tell me?”

He gives her a shaky smile and rubs his thumb against her skin. “When I woke up, you were 90 years old.”

“I was still alive?” she asks, surprised.

“Yes,” he replies with a smile. “You had gotten married. And you had two children. You told me… you told me that you had lived a full life. A happy life. I need you to know that before anything happens here.” He gestures toward their entwined hands. “It’s guaranteed happiness. And, well, a future with me may not be. I don’t know. So if that’s the life you want, then I’ve got just enough Pym particles to send me back to where I came from and that’s that.”

“Darling,” she pulls his hand toward herself and plants a soft kiss on his knuckles. “I don’t know what ‘Pym particles’ are, but if you think I’m giving you up, then you left your mind back in the 2020s.”

Steve tells her everything. Well, almost everything. He tells her of the Avengers, HYDRA, gods, and aliens. He tells her about the gauntlet and the stones. He tells her about losing half of the population, how it devastated the universe, how it devastated him. He tells her about how every single moment of every single day was a struggle to go on when all hope was lost. And how, finally, Howard Stark’s son figured out how they could travel back in time and bring back everyone that Thanos had demolished with a snap of his fingers. She hangs onto every word, riveted, her brows creased in sympathy at his tale. They finish dinner and pie long before they finally stroll out of the diner and into the dark night.

She takes him to her place, a small, one-bedroom apartment, sparse but comfortable.

“Now,” she says, taking his hand. “Is there anything else you must tell me before I take you into my bedroom and ravish you?”

He smiles. “There’s more to tell, but it can wait.”

“Wonderful.” She leads him into her bedroom and closes the paisley curtains. He comes behind her, places his hands on her waist, and smells the sweetness of her hair. He brushes it aside and trails kisses down her neck. She whispers his name.

She turns around and kisses him, and he’s suddenly warring with taking his time because he’s finally about to have sex with Margaret Carter or just pulling down her panties and driving into her as fast as he can.

She makes the decision for him, her kisses slowing against his mouth. She bites his lower lip softly, and pulls back to unzip his jumpsuit. She pushes it off his shoulders and it hangs at his hips while she roams her hands along his torso and chest.

“I still remember the first time I saw you without a shirt on, Captain.”
“So do I,” he says with a sly smile.

“I suppose I could finally return the favor,” she responds. She untucks her white blouse from her skirt and begins to unbutton it.

“Make yourself useful, dearest, and unzip my skirt.” She turns around to give him access as she continues to work on her buttons.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says. He means it as a joke but it comes out shaky and wanton, and he hears her breathe in sharply.

Okay, then.

He unzips her skirt, and it falls to the floor as she takes off her blouse. She pulls off her slip and then looks over her shoulder, obviously waiting for him to unhook her brassiere.

She sighs when he does so, a sound of comfort and relief, and then she finally turns around. He has dreamed of this moment, jerked himself off to the thought of her breasts bouncing as she rides him, his mouth kissing and biting her nipples. But, God, that was a mere shade of the real thing.

“May I?” he asks, suddenly feeling a bit shy.

She smiles at him fondly. “Of course.”

Her breasts are heavy and firm in his hands, her skin creamy and soft. He plucks at her nipples and her resulting moan makes his dick even harder than it already is. He sits on the bed and pulls her toward him before he licks around one areola and sucks the nipple into his mouth.

She’s breathy above him, whispering his name, and he honestly cannot believe he is here with Peggy after so goddamn long. He suddenly needs to be inside her more than anything. He pulls away from her breasts and looks up at her.

“I want you. Please.” His voice is rough to his own ears and he reaches down to take off her stockings and underwear.

“Yes—yes.” He barely has time to look at her fully, he only gets a glance at the dark curls at the apex of her thighs before she turns to rummage in her nightstand to pull out a condom. “You should probably get undressed.”

He looks down and sees the jumpsuit still around his hips, his dick straining against the fabric. He gets up to shimmy out of it, and when he stands again, Peggy is eyeing him with open, wanton need.

“Oh,” she says quietly before stepping forward to wrap her manicured hand around his shaft, giving it a soft tug. He moans, his eyes fluttering shut, enjoying her touch so much, but wanting more.

“Please, Peggy.”

“Right.” She lies down on the bed and motions for him to join her. “Come here, love.” He kneels before her and his gaze falling to her cunt, already glistening with her desire. She’s putting on the condom, but he’s aching to touch her. So he slides his thumb through her folds and brushes against her clitoris. She gasps, her hands moving to his shoulders to pull him closer. He continues his ministrations with his right hand and uses his left to guide himself inside her. They both groan when he enters her. She’s hot and wet around him and she sighs so prettily when he begins to move inside of her that it makes his chest ache.
It doesn’t take her long at all to come, her cunt a vice around him as she does so. Her legs are wrapped around him, and he brings his arms behind her back and holds her closer, fucking into her deeply. His face is in the crook of her neck, kissing it, laving it with his tongue.

“Look at me,” she says, gently pulling him back by his hair, and he does so. She looks so beautiful beneath him and feels so good around him that it shudders any capability of thought or forbearance.

“I love you,” he says. “I love you, I love you, I—”

She stops him with a kiss, so passionate and intense that it immediately makes him come, pleasure blinding him as he cries out against her lips, the intensity making him shake.

He pulls back to remove the condom and she caresses his face as he does so. “You beautiful man. You beautiful, crazy man.”

“Crazy? You’re the one who just slept with a 105-year-old.”

She smacks his arm. “Oh, hush.”

Steve holds Peggy in his arms as she tells him about her last few years, difficulties at the SSR, a Howling Commandos reunion, co-founding S.H.I.E.L.D. with Howard and Colonel Phillips. She gets up at some point to pin-curl her hair and returns to the bed with another condom and a raised eyebrow.

She rides him while he’s propped up against the headboard, his face buried in her breasts and his hands cupping her ass. She comes with his name on her lips, her head tilted back and her eyes squeezed shut. She’s a vision.

She curls against him after turning the light out. “I can’t believe you came back for me,” she says, barely above a whisper.

Steve still needs to tell her about Bucky and the HYDRA infiltration and a hundred other things, but right now, he just wants to enjoy this night with her.

* *

* *

She wakes him up the next morning with eggs, toast, and coffee. Her hair is still pinned and she’s wearing a turquoise satin robe.

“It’s about the only thing I can make, I’m afraid. You’ve come all this way for an awful cook.” Her words spark the memory from his conversation with Bucky just a few days ago, and he feels an emptiness in the pit of his stomach.

It must show on his face because her smile fades as she sees him. “Steve, are you alright?”

“There’s something else I need to tell you,” he says, and she nods for him to continue. “HYDRA will begin a campaign to infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D., and it will go unnoticed and undeterred for decades.”

“What?” she asks in surprise.

“When I told you I fought HYDRA, I fought them within S.H.I.E.L.D. itself. It was so corrupted by that point that the fight ended with the organization completely demolished.”
“Steve—”

“That’s not everything. Do you remember when that HYDRA agent killed Dr. Erskein and made out with a vial of the super-soldier serum?”

“Yes,” she nods.

“Well, they did it. They made their own super soldier.” Her brows crease in worry. “And it’s Bucky.”

Her eyes widen. “No. How?”

“He survived the fall. They took him, erased his memories, trained him, brainwashed him. Made him a super assassin. They held him on ice between kills so he wouldn’t age.”

“Steve,” she says, taking her hand in his. He tells her about seeing Bucky on the bridge, their fight on the Project Insight aircraft, the fight with Tony in Siberia, and everything else.

“So he’s alive, then?” she asks. He nods. “Is he… well?”

“It’s a process.” He sighs. “He’s healed a lot. I know he has. But I also know he has more to go.”

“I know how much you cared for him. I can’t imagine what dealing with that felt like.”

He takes a slice of toast and covers it in jam. He tries to ignore the memory of Bucky turning to ash before his eyes, but he can’t. “He was one of the ones that Thanos killed.”

“Oh, darling.” She stands and comes around the table to sit in his lap. She takes the uneaten toast out of his hand and puts her arms around him. “You’ve had a rough few years, haven’t you?”

He lets her hold him for a while before he speaks again. He reaches up and caresses her cheek. “I came back here to be with you. But I also came back here to save him.”

She takes his face in her hands. “I’d expect nothing less.”

* *

* *

Steve would be just fine spending the entire weekend holed up in Peggy’s apartment, making up for lost time and only leaving the bedroom for sustenance. But she makes a very good point when she suggests that he really needs some clothes. “We can go to the city,” she says.

“The city might not be the best idea. A diner in New Jersey is one thing; the middle on New York City is another. I’d be easily recognized.”

“Oh, right.” She taps her chin in thought. “Actually, we will go to the city. I know exactly what to do.” She waltzes to the phone and dials a number by memory.

“Hello, it’s Peggy. I need a favor.”

* *

* *

They drive to New York, crossing the George Washington Bridge, and Steve peers out at the
Manhattan of his youth.

“Is it different there?” she asks.

“You have no idea,” he responds. She takes his hand and gives it a gentle squeeze.

They pull up to an apartment building in the Upper East Side. His collar is up, and he doesn’t make eye contact with anyone, but he still notices that everyone knows her: the valet, the doorman, the elevator operator.

“Are you some famous lady now?” he whispers, once they’re in the elevator.

She scoffs. “Hardly. I just spend way too much time with Howard Stark for anyone’s good.”

“Howard? I didn’t realize…”

“Well, we need to speak with him anyway about—” she roundly gestures toward him. “And he will have private tailors and shoppers on-hand.”

When the elevator door opens, a man that Steve recognizes from the trip to 1970 is waiting for them.

“Miss Carter,” he says with a warm smile, and then his eyes flick to Steve’s face. He gasps. “Wha— How—” He turns back to Peggy. “Miss Carter?”

“Hello, Mr. Jarvis. Let’s get Howard and have a nice chat, hmm?”

Jarvis’ eyes trail over Steve’s body again. “A-Alright.”

*

“Time travel,” Howard says with a dreamy expression. “This is big, Peg.”

Steve has already been poked and prodded by the Stark family tailor, and a shipment of clothing is on its way to the penthouse. The three of them are sitting in the library, and Howard’s on his second Bloody Mary.

“Yes, I know that your little brain is already whirling with ways to recreate the process, but we need to figure out a plan of action to deal with Captain America suddenly showing up after being in the ice for five years,” Peggy replies.

“You said the man’s name is Pym?”

“Howard, focus!”

“Alright, alright. Cap, do you remember where the plane went down?”

“Yes.”

“We make a trip up there, do a Captain switcheroo, and then say we found you and brought you back.”

“You’re going to bring Steve, the other Steve, back?” Peggy asks incredulously.

“Well, yeah, Peg. We can hardly leave him there for someone to find. Especially if some Soviet prick
ends up being the one to stumble across him.”

“Then what will we do with him?” She looks between Howard and Steve.

“I guess that’s up to Rogers.”

Steve has always been skilled in battle plans, tactical maneuvers, strategy. However, he didn’t leave himself a lot of time to think through this part before he hurtled himself through the Quantum Realm to be with Peggy Carter and save Bucky Barnes. The idea of killing the other Steve, even if he had willingly sacrificed his life to save the eastern seaboard makes his stomach churn (and he doesn’t think Peggy would allow it). But then he thinks of Bucky, sealed away for years at a time in a Siberian cryogenic chamber, and figures that that might just work.

“I have an idea,” he says.

“God, Barnes has been through the ringer, hasn’t he?” Howard asks after Steve catches him up on the Winter Soldier. He runs his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, the cryo chamber can work. I’ve got a few vaults stashed here and there where we can store him.”

“No offense, Howard, but I almost lost my job at SSR because someone tunneled into one of your vaults and stole all of your precious, dangerous goodies,” Peggy says, eyebrows raised.

“You don’t think I’ve made improvements since then? You wound me, Peggy.”

“I’m just saying that it would have to be the most secure location possible, carefully hidden. And if there are HYDRA ears and eyes about, no one can know this besides us.”

“You think HYDRA is spying on us?” Howard asks.

“I know so,” Steve responds, before informing him of HYDRA’s eventual plans to infiltrate the organization.

“Steve, Dr. Zola is already working with the Department of Defense, and one of my guys has been trying to talk me into bringing him on at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Well, that guy might be our first lead in breaking whatever hold HYDRA already has here.”

“Steve,” Peggy chimes in. “Are you aware of anyone else during this time that is working with Dr. Zola?”

“I have no idea.”

“Let’s get back to extracting Barnes,” Howard says. “I’m not sure how much history you studied when you thawed out, but this isn’t the best time to fly into the U.S.S.R.”

“I know,” Steve responds. “In 1952, Bucky will attempt to murder Wakandan Ambassador N’Gami in his car while visiting Nigeria. He will stop his motorcycle in the middle of the road, flag down the ambassador’s vehicle, and when the driver stops to ask if something is wrong, he will shoot the ambassador. I plan to stop the assassination and extract him then.”

Howard takes a deep breath, his cheeks puffing out as he exhales. “You don’t half-ass anything, do ya, Cap?” He gets up and walks to the window. “If you extract HYDRA’s best weapon, then they’re not going to be happy.”

“Yeah,” Steve says.
“And if Zola brainwashed him to begin with, he may easily be able to do so again,” Peggy responds.

“I know,” Steve says softly. “But I don’t have a choice.”

* *

**

Howard’s plan works just fine, especially for himself. He gets credit for saving America’s Hero, and Steve reenters society with a press conference and a smile. Peggy asks him what he wants to do now, and what else is there to do? He joins S.H.I.E.L.D., working under Colonel Phillips, and he comes to the realization that he’s probably going to spend the rest of his life fighting bad guys. He doubts that Bucky had this in mind when he first suggested that Steve should go back, but he was never one to sit on his hands and do nothing.

But he also does plenty of what Bucky did have in mind. Every single night he’s not off to DC to meet with Phillips or to play nice on Capitol Hill is spent with Peggy, in her office while sharing sandwiches over a report, in the theater taking in a picture, in their bed losing themselves in each other’s bodies.

Peggy is always a fierce creature to behold, but when it’s just the two of them, she is irresistibly so. Steve always ends up with the whole, big world on his shoulder: the heavy mantle of Captain America, the grief of losing Natasha, the intergalactic battlefield that replays in his mind, missing Bucky in 2023 and worrying about Bucky in 1950. Peggy always sees it and always try to ease his burden, giving Steve the exact reprieve he needs in those moments of overwhelming duty and loss.

She never uses force; she never has to. A soft, guiding touch, a gentle command to kneel and Steve is the softest of clay in her hands.

The first time she tells him to scoot down on the bed before she kneels above his face, he *whimpers*, his tongue immediately slicking up her folds and licking against her clitoris. She comes several times, making a mess of his hair as she pulls his face closer to her cunt.

She kisses him afterward, telling him, “you did so well for me, darling,” before rolling on a condom and riding him until he’s a shivery mess beneath her.

No matter how many times they come apart together at night and wake up together the next morning, he still can’t believe that he is finally with her.

* *

**

Six years to the day that Steve was supposed to meet Peggy for that dance, he walks into her office at 5 o’clock with flowers and an emerald green dress that her secretary, Rose, helped him pick out. She calls him a sly dog and kisses him right there where anyone could see, breaking her own rule about their conduct at work. They head to the city and dance for hours in some word-of-mouth joint in the Village that Howard told him about. He only steps on her toes a couple of times, but he considers that a win. And when they tuck away in a booth in the back to rest her tired feet, he pulls out a blue velvet box and asks her to marry him.

* *

**
They get hitched two months later in Steve’s childhood church in Brooklyn. Jarvis’ wife, Ana, is Peggy’s maid of honor, and Howard steps in as his best man. The week leading up to the big day is a bittersweet tangle of nerves and a heavy heart, as his happiness in marrying Peggy wars with his desire for Bucky to be there beside him.

“I know you miss him,” she says, unprompted, when he’s lost in thought at their small kitchenette. “But we’ll be bringing him home soon, my love.” He puts on a smile, not wanting to ruin it for her, and trudges through the rest of the week as best as he can.

They head to Florida for a small honeymoon, digging their toes into the soft sand of the Gulf coast. Steve forgets how much both of them work all of the damn time until they suddenly have no work at all. He realizes he’s never had a vacation in his entire life, and it’s a strange feeling to rest for the sake of resting. Steve goes fishing and draws in his sketchbook, and Peggy reads on the beach during their downtime, her skin turning golden under the sun. At night, she asks him all sorts of questions about the future and his life there.

“So no flying cars?” She’s naked beside him, the balcony windows wide open to let in the ocean breeze.

“A huge disappointment, but no.” He traces the tan line at her clavicle.

“And women? Are we still struggling for even a modicum of respect?”

“It’s better, but there’s still a long way to go.”

She huffs. “Really, has nothing changed at all?”

“Everything and nothing at the same time. The world is… faster. So much faster. Every bit of information is available to you in seconds. You can communicate with anyone across the globe. And yet they haven’t found a cure for the common cold. People are still hungry. Wars rage on.”

They’re silent for a few minutes before she speaks again. “Who were you closest to?”

“Natasha,” he whispers after a moment, swallowing the lump in his throat.

“Who sacrificed herself for the stone?” He nods. “Tell me about her.” She strokes her fingers through his hair.

“You would’ve loved her. Whip-smart, wry humor, could take down any of us without a drop of super strength or inhuman power. And she’d never admit it, but… an infallible sense of duty. And honor.”

“Did you love her?”

“Yes,” he says and brushes his thumb across her cheek. “But not… not like this.” Steve and Nat had found solace in one another a handful of times after The Snap, both brought together by pain and grief and a need for human connection. Some days her friendship was the only thing that got him to the next one.

“Was she your first, Captain?” Her voice is teasing, but her face belies her concern at his serious tone.

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Does it count as a first time if you’re both crying through it?”

“Oh, Steve,” she whispers and kisses his forehead, his nose, his cheeks, which are wet with tears.
They make love slowly, gently, sweetly. His heart swells as she clutches at his shoulder, never taking her eyes off of him, telling him she loves him over and over until they’re both spent and sated.

They spend the next year working side-by-side, growing together, learning each other even more. They spend cozy nights at home and weekends jaunting around the city or driving up the coast. They buy a house that looks like it came out of a storybook, with a yellow, scalloped exterior, white shutters, and a sunny front porch. Steve carries her over the threshold like he used to imagine doing during the war, and she squeals with laughter when he does it.

They take their time, loving each other. And if Steve gets a little more anxious the closer they get to October 1952, Peggy doesn’t call him on it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Two months before the assassination attempt on Wakandan Ambassador N’Gami, Steve and Peggy pull together a task force to capture and extract the Winter Soldier.

Bucky had told him the specifics: the location, the time of day, how he arrived, how he made the kill. Intelligence tells them about the ambassador’s drivers and staff and routine. They’re lucky that the ambassador exchanges drivers fairly often, so it’s not difficult for a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent to step into the role.

Steve, Peggy, and two other agents will be camouflaged in nearby brush, waiting for the Winter Soldier to strike. Steve is too worried about an agent accidentally killing him, so he gives the order that only Peggy will carry a firearm to shoot out Bucky’s tires and in case of an emergency. The rest will have tactical shields, Stark-issued electrical weapons, and tranquilizers. They seem uneasy about the decision, but Steve is adamant.

Their plan is solid and tightly weaved, and still, Steve worries. Two weeks before the extraction, he keeps finding himself unable to sleep, moving to the couch downstairs so he won’t disturb Peggy. She comes down on the fifth night, her hair pinned and wrapped, a red crease from the pillowcase on her cheek.

“This is one thing I miss about the future,” he says when he sees her. “Late night television.” The screen before him is static; the station stopped airing hours ago.

“Darling, you’re driving yourself crazy.”

He rubs his hand over his face. “I can’t help it, Peg. If we get this wrong…”

“We won’t. We have four well-trained agents, one of whom is Captain America.”

He shakes his head. “When he is under their control, he’s mindless. He’s a literal weapon. I’m not just worried about extracting him. I’m worried about what happens when we get him. I’ve been able to trigger his memory in the future, but I don’t know what to expect here. I don’t know if it will be better or worse.”

“There’s nothing to do but try.” She holds out her hand. “Come to bed, love. I sleep better when you’re there.” Her voice is warm, but it belies that it’s not a request, and he follows her into the bedroom.

Three days later, Agent Cameron complains for the 20th time that he won’t be allowed to have a firearm on the mission, and Steve cracks.

He stands up and throws a file on the table. “Would you like to be removed from this mission, Agent Cameron?”

“No, Captain, I’d just like something better than a shield to protect myself from a super soldier assassin.”

“I’m not going to let stray bullets compromise the extraction.”
“But you’re not going to let us defend ourselves when he comes at us, and the ambassador, with a semi-automatic.”

“Gentlemen,” Peggy interrupts. “It’s getting late. Let’s pick up this discussion in the morning.”

Peggy comes to his side as they leave the briefing room and whispers to meet her in her office in five minutes. She is already waiting for him when he arrives.

Steve speaks first. “Agent Cameron—”

“If we are going to remove a subordinate agent from a mission six days out, that is something that we discuss ahead of time and not done in the heat of the moment,” she says. “And certainly not done before consulting me. Colonel Phillips may be your boss, but I run this organization.” Her mouth tightens. “I’m worried that this extraction is too personal for you. If you cannot calm yourself and get adequate rest, I will be forced to take you off the mission.”

He inhales sharply. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would. For your safety and the safety of the ambassador and the other agents.” She looks at him pointedly. “Steve… the only person’s safety you seem to care about right now is Barnes’. And that’s a problem.”

He clenches his jaw. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? We routinely bring in suspects and persons of interest with orders not to kill. And we do not require agents to enter those situations without firearms. We give our agents orders and we expect them to obey them. I didn’t agree with your parameters, but I let it slide because I know how important this is to you. But I agree with Agent Cameron. The team will carry firearms and will be ordered to not use them unless absolutely necessary.” She goes around to her desk and pulls out a pill bottle before coming back around to hand it to him. “I told Dr. Thorn that you were having trouble sleeping. I’ve arranged for an agent to take you home. Please take this, eat dinner, and then go to sleep. I’ll be home later.”

He steps toward her. “Peggy—”

She tilts his chin downward with a gentle, guiding finger in the way she has done so many times at home but has never done here. “Darling, please go home and take care of yourself.”

He turns and walks away without saying a word, hurt and anger boiling inside of him.

*

**

He wakes up early. He was in bed by 7, and the medicine mercifully let him sleep. It’s 4:30 now, and the moonlight shows Peggy lying next to him, one hand resting on his shoulder. He takes her in his arms and presses a kiss to her forehead, to her neck. She groans as she wakes up and curls her hand against the side of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. Because she was right. He’s fought in dozens of battles and has gone against Bucky himself several times, but something about this mission has set him on edge.

“Mmm, love you,” is all she says before she falls asleep again. In the morning he’ll tell her how his fear of losing Bucky for the sixth time has made him sick with nerves, how it’s overclouded his judgement, and how, once again, she’s been his compass to lead him out of the storm. But for now,
he’ll let her sleep.

*

**

He hears the rumble of Bucky’s motorcycle before he can see him. His heart speeds up when his sees the ambassador’s car coming from the other direction. Peggy is with him in the brush, her hair pulled back. She’s in a tan camouflage jumpsuit identical to his. Her gun is out, waiting for Bucky to get into position so she can shoot out his tires.

Bucky drives forward, hair whipping behind him, his eyes and mouth covered by his mask. As soon as he gets to the right position, Steve whispers the go-ahead and Peggy fires into his tires. The bike skids to the side, and Bucky catches and slows himself with his metal hand, just like he did on the bridge. Steve runs out, shield on his arm, and meets him on the road.

The ambassador’s car slows down enough for Agent Jameson to jump in, and he hears him yell to the ambassador to get down. Steve maneuvers himself between Bucky and the car and raises his shield when Bucky attempts to shoot the ambassador. Sparks fly as the bullets skint off the vibranium. Bucky changes tactics and shoots Steve in the leg, and he stumbles from the impact.

“Damn it!” Steve yells, catching himself and attempting to keep the shield in place to protect the car as it drives away. Bucky’s clip empties and as he moves to grab a second weapon, Steve takes the opportunity to knock the first out of his hand with the shield.

“Grab the gun!” Steve hits Bucky in the face and in his gut and jams the shield into his arm to keep his hand away from his second gun. Peggy grabs the firearm he dropped and throws it into the brush.

Agent Cameron joins the fray, attempting to chokehold Bucky, but Bucky already saw the gun on his hip. He flips Cameron over, grabs his weapon, and aims for his chest. It happens so fast, but Peggy uses the distraction to run up to Bucky and jam the syringe in his neck a second before the gun fires, and his arm slips, shooting him in the shoulder instead. He whirs on her, raising his weapon, but then he staggered sideways. She kicks the gun out of his hand.

“What did you do?” Bucky asks, his voice strained, muffled behind the mask. Steve can tell he’s already starting to fade, and he runs behind him to grab him.

“It’s alright, Bucky.” He collapses backward, the only thing holding him up is Steve. Steve, with his injured leg, slowly lowers him to the ground.

“Bucky?” he slurs in confusion before falling unconscious.

*

**

Bucky is under heavy sedation during their flight back to the United States, a mixture of sedatives and a metabolism blocker. Once the other agents have fallen asleep, Steve allows himself to limp over to him. Bucky is strapped down in a chair with heavy magnets. He is still in his Winter Soldier gear, though he’s been divested of his weapons and his mask. His neck is at what must be an uncomfortable angle, so Steve takes off his own jacket, rolls it up, and places it behind Bucky’s head. His hair falls into his eyes when Steve shifts his position, and he gives into the temptation to brush it from his forehead, letting his knuckles trail down his stubbled cheek. He takes a deep, shuddering breath and chokes on a sob, trying to quiet himself so as not to wake the rest of the team. He attempts to steady his breathing, but tears are already pooling in his eyes.
He hears a noise behind him, and he quickly wipes at his eyes, but it’s just Peggy. She wraps her arms around him and presses her cheek against his back.

“You did it, my love,” she says softly.

He entwines his fingers with hers, still staring at Bucky. “We did it.” They stay like that for a few minutes, Steve closing his eyes, warm with the knowledge that the two most important people in his life are right here beside him.

“I’m going back to sleep,” she says. He nods before turning around to kiss her.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice heavy with gratitude and love and hope.

She smiles at him before turning her eyes to Bucky. “You should stay with him.”

“Allright,” he says. He brings over his pillow and blanket and sits in the chair next to Bucky, exhaustion finally winning over and letting him sleep. When he wakes up, his head has fallen to Bucky’s shoulder, but no one questions it.

* * *

Bucky is taken to Camp LeHigh and locked in a high-security chamber. He needs to stay there while the psychologist evaluates him and until they’re sure that the Winter Soldier will remain dormant. Steve tried to make sure the room was as comfortable as possible; there’s a bed and a sofa, magazines and newspapers sprawled on a coffee table so Bucky can catch up on what he’s missed while in cryo. Right now, though, Bucky’s still bound, magnetically strapped to a bolted chair. He knows it’ll be a while until he’s trusted enough to even enjoy the small amount of comfort Steve tried to provide for him.

He watches from the two-way mirror as Dr. Klein rouses Bucky with an injection. He jolts awake, immediately straining against his binding, his eyes falling to the doctor.

“Who are you?” he spits, his jaw clenching.

“I am Dr. Klein,” he replies gently. “I have no wish to hurt you. You are only restrained for safety reasons.” He grabs a chair and sits in front of him. “What is your name?”

“Солдат,” Bucky replies. Steve doesn’t know Russian, but it’s close enough to “soldier” for him to understand.

“What is your first memory?”

“‘Ready to comply,’” he says, a recitation. “The orders of my mission.”

“And what was your mission?”

“I cannot say.” Bucky’s eyes dart around the room, probably searching for exits and improvised weapons.

“Why is that?”

“Disclosing mission orders goes against my protocol.” His body is tense, tightly coiled, waiting for an opportunity to strike.
“Who gave you your mission? Who do you work for?”

These words seem to trigger a shut-off response. Bucky looks straight ahead, his eyes glazing over as his body loosens.

“Can you answer the question?”

Silence.

The doctor gets up and leaves the chamber, meeting Steve in the side room. “I’ll give him a little bit and then give it another go.”

“Doctor, would you mind if I go in there?”

“You can, but don’t expect a miracle.”

He doesn’t expect a miracle. He just knows that somewhere deep inside, Bucky knows who he is. Rumlow told him that Bucky remembered him. Maybe he can jog his memory.

“Of course,” Steve says and enters the chamber.

Bucky is still staring straight ahead when Steve kneels down in front of him.

“Bucky?” he asks.

No response.

He sighs, and tries the other option. “Солдат.”

Bucky’s eyes refocus, and he looks down at Steve. His eyebrows crease after he does so.

“I’m Steve. We used to know one another.

“Steve,” he says slowly, trying it out on his tongue.

“Right. And your name is Bucky.”

He shakes his head.

“We’re friends,” he tries. “We grew up together in Brooklyn.”

He looks away, emotions flitting across his face. “New York.”

“Yeah,” Steve says, breaking into a smile. “Yeah.”

Bucky’s mouth relaxes, almost—almost—curling at the edges, before he frowns again. “Why am I here? Where am I?”

“You’re in America. You’ve been used as an assassin against your will for a dangerous organization. We’re trying to help you.”

He looks forward, eyes above Steve’s head. “‘Free will is subservient to security.’” Another recitation.

“Do you believe that?” Steve whispers.

Bucky’s brows furrow and he lashes forward, struggling against his bindings. “Stop trying to get in
“I’m not.” Steve throws up his hands and scoots backwards, still on his knees. “I’m not. I just want you to focus on what you think and feel and want.”

Bucky’s breathing evens outs, and he closes his eyes. He stays like that for several minutes, and Steve thinks maybe he should give him some space. “I’m going to leave now. The doctor will be in soon. He wants to help you just like I do, alright? You don’t have to be afraid of him.”

Steve stands up and walks to the door.

“You…” his voice is barely a whisper. Steve turns around to hear him better. “You used to be... smaller.”

He nods. “Yeah, I was Buck.”

* * *

He returns the next day when Dr. Klein is just coming out of the chamber. “He’s asked for you.”

“Oh?”

“He’s remembering a bit already. It’s a good sign.”

Steve lets out a breath of relief. “That’s great.”

“We’ll still have to keep him for a few days to keep an eye on him, but Captain,” he puts his hand on Steve’s shoulder. “It will take a very long time for him to heal completely. He might not ever do so. I don’t want you to get your hopes up. He may never be the James Barnes you remember.”

He knows that already; Bucky in the future wasn’t completely better when he left either. But he was still Bucky. And that’s all that matters.

When he enters the chamber, Bucky is still restrained. He gives Steve a sad, lopsided smile and says his name.

“Hi, Bucky. How are you feeling?”

“The doctor says my name is James Barnes, but you call me Bucky.”

“It’s a nickname. Everyone called you that growing up.”

He nods, and looks down, thinking. “Everyone was mean to you growing up.” His voice tilts higher at the end of the sentence, as if he started it as a fact but couldn’t trust his mind enough to be sure.

“Yeah, they were.” Steve grabs a chair and sits across from him.

“You got in lots of fights but never won any.”

Steve chuckles. “You’re right.”

“I called you Stevie… and punk.” He looks up at him. “Nicknames.”

He nods. “Do you remember what else I called you?”
Bucky takes a minute, stares at the ceiling while he thinks. “No. The other is easier.”

“What other, Buck?”

“Steve is easy to remember. Bu—“ He stumbles over the word and huffs. “Bucky isn’t.” He’s starting to get upset, his voice shaking in panic. Steve slowly places a gentle hand on his knee. He doesn’t know how Bucky will react to physical touch, but he doesn’t seem to mind it.

“Shhh, it’s alright. There’s no rush. You’re already remembering so much.”

Bucky shifts his arms in his restraints. “How long will I be in this thing?”

“I’m hoping not much longer.”

He nods. “For your safety.”

Steve shrugs. “Not so much mine as the others.”

“Oh.” He frowns. “But— protecting you was my previous mission. I—I forgot that when I shot your leg.” His eyes widen. “I shot you in the leg! Fuck, are you alright?”

Bucky’s words sink into his gut, sadness and sorrow twisting with perverse pleasure. My mission. “Yeah, Bucky. I’m fine. I’m just like you. I’m strong and I heal quickly.”

His body relaxes in relief.

They’re silent for a few minutes, until Steve mentions the reading material that he brought. “I could read to you? Help get you up to speed about the last few years.”

“Alright,” Bucky responds. Steve stands to grab a handful of newspapers and returns to his seat. “How long have I been like this?”

“You went missing eight years ago.”

His brows knit together. “That’s a long time.”

You have no idea, pal.

* * *

That night, Steve and Peggy are lounging at home on their couch after dinner, her legs in his lap as he massages her feet and calves.

“Does he seem himself?”

“No. Not yet. He’s remembering things, especially about me when we were kids. But he confuses easily and he doesn’t trust his own mind.”

“That’s a shame. Though it’s only been a couple of days. How does his progress now compare to what you remember from future?”

“I can’t say for certain. In some ways, it’s better. In others…” he shrugs. “As soon as he showed one
sign that he remembered the past, we ran with it. We didn’t have the time we do now; we had wars to fight and people to save. It seems slower now, but it could just be that we’re not strapping him with an AK the second he remembers what he used to call me.”

“And what did he used to call you, Captain?” She gives him a devilish smile.

Steve’s nose crinkles in embarrassment. “Stevie.

“Oh, Stevie,” she singsongs, elongating the e. “That is the most adorable thing I’ve ever heard.”

Steve feels his face flush. “Hush, Ms. Carter.”

“That’s ‘Director’ to you, darling.” Her words go straight to his dick, and yeah, he’ll take this distraction.

So he cocks an eyebrow and smirks at her. “Yes, ma’am,” he replies, getting up from the couch to kneel in front of her. He reaches up her skirt and slides her underwear down her legs. She gasps when he says it and she gasps again when he buries his face at the apex of her thighs. She comes twice, hands buried in his hair. Then he wipes his mouth on her leg before picking her up and taking her upstairs to finish what he started.

*

**

Day three is more of the same, with Bucky remembering things from their childhood and before the war. On the fourth day, Bucky’s restraints have already been removed before Steve arrives, and Bucky is embracing him the second the door closes behind him.

“Hey,” Steve says, smiling against his shoulder. “Hey.” His hair is still damp from a shower. They’d always bought the cheapest soap they could because they couldn’t afford any better, so he wonders what Bucky would like now that Steve and Peggy could buy him whatever he wants.

“Hi,” Bucky breathes, like he’s relieved. Like he’s needed to do this for ages. Like hugging Steve is water to a lost soul in the desert. It tugs at Steve’s heart, makes him feel protective, suddenly understanding Bucky’s weird statement about the mission to protect Steve.

Bucky steps back, his eyes narrowing before looking Steve up and down. “You’re Captain America.”

It’s the first thing Bucky has said about Steve that took place after the war started. Steve smiles at the progress before nodding.

“Wow,” Bucky says, looking off to the side, his mind far away for a moment, before he turns back to Steve. “Please tell me you kept the outfit, Rogers.” It sounds so much like Bucky, Steve’s Bucky, and not the shell of him that has been here the last week that his resolve threatens to crumble. He takes a shuddering breath to calm himself, wanting to keep his cool for Bucky’s sake, but Steve’s never had the best poker face.

“Ah, no, Steve. What’s wrong? Did I say something bad?”

“Nothing wrong at all. You’re just… you’re sounding more like yourself everyday. It’s really good, Bucky.

“Alright,” Bucky replies with a soft smile. “The doctor brought a deck of cards. We could play
rummy if you want?"

Bucky hated rummy. Steve would beat him almost every time they played, and he’d end up throwing his cards on the table and walking out in a huff. Steve isn’t sure if Bucky is aware of that when he makes the invitation, though. He’d already said it in a way, but everything that Bucky seems to remember is external to himself. Steve realizes that he remembers that he’s Captain America, but makes no mention of his own role in the war.

Steve doesn’t say anything about it. He never says anything about how Bucky used to feel and think about things. He remembers his plea — *stop trying to get in my head* — and although Steve wants Bucky to be himself again, he also doesn’t want to influence that in any way, even if his intentions are good.

Steve agrees to play and they sit cross-legged, opposite one another, at the coffee table. He briefly considers going easy on him, letting Bucky win a few rounds, but decides against it, hoping it’ll spark something.

And it does. By the third round, Bucky is frowning, agitated. He tosses his remaining hand when Steve goes out again, and then eyes the spread of cards carefully before looking at Steve.

“I didn’t like this game.’

Steve swallows and shakes his head. “No you didn’t.”

A full minute passes before he speaks again. “I’d only agree to play when you were really sick.”

“Yeah.”

His brows furrow. “The Soldier doesn’t like or dislike things. The Soldier has no choice.”

“You are Bucky Barnes. You are not The Soldier.”

Bucky clenches his jaw and looks away.

Steve reaches out, takes Bucky’s hand in his, gives his fingers a gentle squeeze. “Maybe… let’s focus on the opposite. Maybe you can think of something that you like?”

“Like?”

“Yeah. Something that gives you, *Bucky,*” he says with emphasis, “a feeling of warmth. Pleasure.”

Pleasure is the wrong word; he feels his cheeks heat up as he says it, and he hopes Bucky doesn’t read anything into it. Because Bucky always brought Steve feelings of *warmth* and *pleasure* and things he shouldn’t have thought about in the year 1935.

Bucky looks down, silent while he thinks. It’s a long few moments before anything happens, and Steve wonder if it was too soon to push this sort of thing. He has no damn idea what he’s doing; he’s just making it up as he goes along. But then Bucky bites his lip and looks up at Steve like he used to, like maybe Steve was the only thing good in his life, in the whole damn world. It used to make his skin itch, the intensity of that gaze, especially when Steve was hot with want for something Bucky would never want to give him.

But now Steve’s been around the block a few times. He’s seen plenty of women and men making eyes at Captain America. And they looked a hell of a lot like how Bucky looks right now. Steve is still holding his hand, he realizes. His first instinct is to let go, play it cool, but he also doesn’t want to
spook him. He quietly clears his throat.

“Have you, uh… were you able to think of something?”

It breaks whatever spell they were just under. Bucky lets go of his hand and looks away, and the world comes rushing back.

“Uh, yeah.” And then Bucky gives him that cocky, self-assured, fake-it-til-you-make-it grin that Steve has maybe wanted to punch once or twice in his life. Turning on the charm like he could have any girl in the dance hall. “A beautiful dame.”

Steve gives him an uncomfortable smile. “Of course.”

Bucky leans back against the edge of the couch. “Speaking of, whatever happened to that hot broad who worked for the SSR?”

“I married her.”

*

* *

It’s 2 a.m. the next night when the phone rings, waking both Steve and Peggy. She looks at him, worry etched on her face, before throwing off the covers.

“It may be work. I’ll get it.”

Steve pads down the stairs after her, bleary-eyed and yawning, waiting to hear what’s happened.

“I’ll let him know. Thank you.” She hangs up the phone and looks at him. “It’s Barnes. He’s having some sort of episode. You may want to go in.”

Steve’s eyes widen before he runs up the stairs to change. She follows him inside and sits on the bed.

“What did they say?” He asks, tucking in his shirt.

“He’s yelling and crying. Throwing things around. He’s been as docile as a kitten for days, so they seem pretty shocked.” She stands and grabs a belt for him. “Do you need me to come with you?”

“No. Stay here and go back to sleep.” He kisses her forehead.

“Please be careful, Steve.”

Steve drives as quickly as he can without wrecking the car and runs to Bucky’s holding area when he arrives at the base. The two-way mirror shows Bucky, curled in a ball. The coffee table where they’d played cards is in pieces. His bed is flipped over, blankets strewn about.

Steve opens the door and slowly walks into the room. “Bucky,” he says. He looks up at Steve, his face an utter wreck— splotchy and red, cheeks wet with tears, bloodshot eyes. Steve crosses the room and kneels in front of him. “What happened?”

“I— I remember,” he says, his voice sorrowful and raspy from misuse.

“Oh, Buck,” he replies, putting his arms around him. Bucky shakes in his embrace, taking big, choked breaths, crying into his shoulder. Steve holds him through it, rubs soft circles against his back, lets Bucky feel all of the things he needs to feel.
He wonders if the other Bucky did this after he pulled Steve out of the water. Did he hole up in that dirty apartment, shaking and sobbing as he remembered everything HYDRA had done to him? Everything he’d done on their behalf? And he was all alone, with not a person in the world to help him. Steve thought he had understood Bucky’s suggestion to rescue this Bucky from HYDRA decades before Steve Rogers became his mission, but Steve really had no idea what was at stake.

He’s unsure how long they sit together on the floor, but Bucky’s sobs fade to a few shaky breaths. Steve pulls back. They look at one another. A pit forms in his chest as he sees his best friend so utterly worn and broken in front of him. He cups the side of Bucky’s neck and rubs his thumb along his jawline.

“You don’t have to talk about it. But I’m here if you want to.”

Bucky’s eyes are still a soft, warm blue, even after everything he’s gone through tonight. “How much do you know?”

“A lot. Maybe even most of it.” Steve doesn’t know when he’s going to tell Bucky everything, but he also wants to spare him any pain possible.

He grips the collars of Steve’s shirt in his fist. “I’ve done bad things,” he whispers.

“I know, Buck. I know. But it wasn’t your fault.”

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut before continuing. “But I still did them.” Steve’s heard this before, but it doesn’t make Bucky’s dejected tone any easier to swallow.

They stay like that for a few minutes before Steve finally shifts away. “Why don’t we get you into bed, hmm?”

“Alright,” he replies. Steve stands up and helps him to his feet. Bucky looks around the room and his eyes widen. “Fuck. Is there even a bed left?”

“It just needs to be turned over. The coffee table is probably a goner, though.” Steve walks across the room to right the bed and fix the sheets and blankets.

“They’ll never let me out of here now.”

“Hey, you didn’t hurt anybody. Just some furniture.” Steve gestures toward the bed once he finishes. “Plus, my wife runs the place,” he continues, trying for a bit of levity. “Play your cards right and I’ll put in a good word for you.”

“Peggy runs S.H.I.E.L.D.?” Bucky asks.

“Yeah. She co-founded it with Howard and Colonel Phillips.”

“Damn, Rogers. You married up.”

“You know, you’re saying that to Captain America himself, yet you’re still not wrong.”

Bucky lays down in the bed. He scoots over so Steve can sit next to him. “You always deserved the best, Stevie. More than anybody. I’m happy for you.” He tries to give Steve a smile, but he’s still a mess from the last few hours. It doesn’t meet his eyes.

Steve pats his shoulder and squeezes it softly. “You should get some rest.”

“Yeah.” He takes a deep breath. “Steve?” His voice is quiet.
“Yeah?”

“Can you stay?”

“Of course, Buck.”

“I mean. You know.” He rubs his hand over his face and looks down. “You remember... when I had food poisoning that one time?”

_Oh_. When they were around 20, Bucky ate bad food at the docks at lunch and spent the next 48 hours in absolute misery. It was the one chance Steve had ever gotten to take care of him for a change, and he crawled into Bucky’s bed both nights and held him like Bucky had done for him too many times to count. Bucky had been so much broader than Steve, and he was such a little guy to be a big spoon. It just felt so nice to give him the comfort he deserved.

Steve doesn’t speak. He just pulls back the blankets and fits himself behind him. It’s a twin bed and they’re not small men, so it’s an uncomfortable squeeze. But holding Bucky like this after so many years releases a weight he didn’t even know he was carrying. Just like then, Bucky is shaken and unwell, and Steve’s just happy that he can be there for him again.

“It’s different when you’re bigger,” Bucky says, muffled against the pillow.

“Yeah, no shit,” Steve says, because gaining a foot and a hundred pounds changed his whole goddamn life. But this is different too because being like this makes him feel like he can keep Bucky safe.

“But you’re still a little punk,” he replies, tugging Steve’s arm tighter around his body.

Steve smiles against his good shoulder. “I’m glad to have you back, Buck.”

Chapter End Notes

The attempted assassination of the Wakandan ambassador is loosely based on the real-life assassination of Chief Waruhiu in Kenya in October 1952.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter introduces a character from Agent Carter - Jack Thompson. If you've never watched the show, he's played by Chad Michael Murray, and that's really all you need to know about him.

It takes some convincing, but Dr. Klein agrees to release Bucky after he consents to questioning about HYDRA.

“I don’t know how much help I’m gonna be,” Bucky says to Steve and the doctor. “I was just…” he looks down and swallows. “A weapon. I probably don’t know much in the grand scheme of things.”

“Anything can help,” Steve says, trying to reassure him.

“Who’s gonna do the honors? Will you be there?”

“Peggy,” he replies. “And yes, I’ll be there. Well, here. Your presence here is pretty highly classified. Only a handful of people know you’re here, and we can’t have you strolling about the halls until we decide how to handle that.”

“Alright,” Bucky says. “You know, Peggy Carter interrogating me might’ve been a fantasy of mine once upon a time.” He laughs and gives Steve a shit-eating grin.

Steve shoves him playfully. “You and every other Commando.”

Dr. Klein makes a noise of concern when Steve shoves him. “Physical aggression may not be the best choice at this time, Captain.”

“Doc,” Bucky says. “They’d have to put my brain through the grinder again for me to think this idiot was trying to hurt me, even over his best girl.”

“Still, precautions—”

“Steve Rogers ain’t the cautious sort. But I swear I’m alright.”

Bucky’s speaking on his behalf like it’s 1930 and Mrs. Natalo just saw him punch Tommy Rider in the jaw. He doesn’t need it anymore, but it still makes him feel as warm as it did back then. Then he looks directly at Steve, giving him that intense gaze that used to turn him inside out. Steve looks away.

An agent steps in and tells Steve that he’s needed. When he steps in the side room, Peggy is waiting for him. He hugs her, immediately grateful for her embrace and the calm certainty she always brings him, as constant as the sunrise and even more breathtaking.

“How is everything?” She asks, pulling away to look at him. “Is he alright?” She rubs his arm softly.

“It was a rough night. But he’s doing as well as can be expected.”
“Rose cleared my schedule for questioning, but we don’t have to do it now. He’s probably tired and you certainly look to be.” She smooths back the hair that has fallen in his eyes.

“I think he can handle it. He’s already making quips about you interrogating him,” he says with a raised eyebrow.

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, so he really is back, then.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, shall we?” Peggy asks, gesturing toward the door. When they enter the room, Bucky looks up and so many emotions cross his face in mere seconds that Steve is unable to read them. His tight mouth transitions into a cocky smirk, and he stands up to meet them.

“Sergeant Barnes, we are so happy to have found you,” Peggy says, extending her hand.

He shakes it. “I hear congratulations are in order, Miss Carter. Or is it Rogers now?” His voice is still raw from the night before.

“It’s Director Carter,” she replies a bit briskly.

Well, if Peggy doesn’t end up strangling him, Steve will count the day as a resounding success. And if the pending conversation weren’t so serious, he might even enjoy the interaction.

“Of course. Director. I really am happy for you and Steve. I’m glad that one good thing came out of that god-forsaken war.”

“Thank you,” she responds with a genuine smile, before gesturing to the sofa. “If you wouldn’t mind joining me here, we can begin. We will be recording this meeting for our records.”

He sits next to her, and Steve sits on the bed across the room. The doctor excuses himself to observe from the side room.

“We want to know as much as we can about HYDRA. I know you’ve had a very rough go of it, and I may ask questions that are distressing to you. But we can stop and regroup at any time.”

“Alright,” he responds, running fingers through his hair.

“Can you tell us the first thing you remember after you fell off the train?” Her eyes flit to Steve, knowing that this won’t be an easy conversation for him either. He gives a small nod, not wanting her to worry about him right now.

Bucky tells them what Steve already knows—waking up to a metal arm and Dr. Zola whispering in his ear. Months of breakdown and molding and training until he would pass out from exhaustion. The facility location, communication channels, the names of the scientists who took him apart and Frankensteined him back together. He pauses here and there, distress evident on his face, but he continues.

“And what was your first mission?” Peggy asks.

“I had a kind of…I mean, pre-mission.”

“What happened?”

“Dr. Zola wanted to show off,” he gestures to himself, “The Winter Soldier to other HYDRA members. There was a meeting. They brought me in, he whispered the activation sequence in my ear
and gave me the file. I was already in the right place. There was a — a boy, serving drinks. He was 15. And I…” he takes a shaky breath. “I picked him up by the throat and threw him across the room. I walked over and bent down to see if he was dead and then… he was just a skinny kid and he looked like—” his eyes move to Steve’s, his face crumpling. Steve’s brows crease in sympathy.

“Sergeant Barnes, we can stop if you need to,” Peggy says, looking at him with concern.

“No,” he shakes his head. He takes a deep breath. “I finished the job, but I was a fuckin’ mess, and I kept saying ‘I’m sorry’ over and over.” Tears spill down his eyes, and he looks down at his hands. “The Soldier can’t be sorry. The Soldier doesn’t feel.’ That’s what they told me. That’s when they decided to erase my memory each time.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, reaching out to grab his hand. “I cannot even imagine being in your situation.” Steve is always amazed whenever he has the chance to watch Peggy at work. Even in this she’s so damn gifted, balancing compassion and empathy with getting the information they need to take down HYDRA. She gives Bucky a few minutes to compose himself before speaking. “Is it alright if I continue?” she asks, and he nods. “How many missions have you completed on behalf of HYDRA?”


Peggy gasps. “Senator Graves? We thought that was a car accident.”

Bucky gives a mirthless chuckle. “That was the idea.”

She bites her lip. “Sergeant, how many members were in attendance in that meeting?”

He shrugs. “About 50.”

Peggy and Steve look at each other. Based on the limited intelligence they’ve collected in the last couple of years, that was probably every member HYDRA had at that time. She turns back to Bucky. “If we showed you photos, do you think you’d be able to recognize anyone?”

“Probably some, but I didn’t study every face.”

“And would they recognize you?”

“The scientists will recognize me, of course. Dr. Zola, a few others. But I was wearing my mask that night, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t think my identity is common knowledge.”

“That’s good. Thankfully Dr. Zola is at the Pentagon and has no access to Camp LeHigh. However, you will need to assume an alias in case HYDRA has already infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. And you’ll need to stay away from New York all together in case you’re recognized.”

“Alright.” He nods. “Steve said you agreed to let me out after this.”

“I did.”

“Well,” he looks between Steve and Peggy. “I’ve been in Podunk, Siberia the last eight years. I don’t really have a place to go.”

“Of course you do, Buck,” Steve replies. “You’ll come home with us.”

“Oh,” Bucky says, his brows creasing. “Nah, I don’t want to intrude on the love nest.” He gives an
uncomfortable laugh.

“Nonsense,” Peggy responds. “We’ve already made up a room for you.”

Bucky looks at Steve, and he tries to give Bucky an encouraging smile.

“Alright. Whatever this idiot wants.”

*

**

Dr. Klein gives Bucky strict orders to take it easy the next month. “Don’t excite yourself. Your brain has been through a considerable amount of manipulation and damage. Please rest and take care of yourself.” Bucky’s always had a nervous energy though, an itch he could never scratch, and Steve worries that the doctor’s orders will be easier said than done.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Peggy says. “Steve can take you home now, so you can settle in and get some rest.”

“You know,” Bucky says, putting on a pair of gloves to hide his metal hand, “if we’re going to be roommates for the foreseeable future, we could at least be on a first-name basis.”

She cocks an eyebrow and smirks. “Very well, James.” Steve knows that’s not at all what Bucky meant, and he laughs at her response.

Bucky glares at him briefly, but then turns to Peggy with a charming smile. “Thanks, Marge. I’m glad we could come to an agreement.” Peggy rolls her eyes and gives Steve a hug before they head upstairs to leave base.

It’s a 20-minute drive to the tree-lined street they call home. Bucky whistles when they park in front of the house. “You know, Rogers. Can’t say I ever saw you leaving Brooklyn.”

“Gotta go where the job calls us.”

“Yeah, but Jersey?” He shakes his head. “Only state you pay to leave.”

“Hush,” Steve says with a shove. “Maybe we’ll move back to Brooklyn when we retire.” But Steve knows that’ll never happen. It’ll be crawling with hipsters and gentrified to the gills by the time he could ever convince Peggy to retire.

He shows Bucky around the house and takes him upstairs to his bedroom. “I already got you some things to wear. And there’s stuff for you to wash up in the bathroom.”

Bucky walks around the room, opens the closet full of clothes, sees the Baseball Weekly magazines and a stack of new pulp novels on the nightstand. He turns to Steve, his eyes narrowing. He knows that Steve made ready for his arrival. “How did you know where to find me? How did you even know I was The Soldier?”

Steve sighs. He and Peggy had discussed this: how to tell him, when to tell him. Should he even tell him at all? Steve had scoffed at the last question as soon as he’d thought it. This is Bucky; he could no sooner keep a secret from him than he could have killed him on that helicarrier. “I’ll tell you all about it once you’ve had some time to recover.” He pats Bucky’s shoulder before he heads toward the door to let him rest. “It’s a doozy of a story, pal.”
Bucky opens the icebox that night and scoffs. “What, do you two live on patriotism and saltines? There’s nothing to eat in this place.”


“Alright, that arrangement ends tomorrow. I’ll go to the market in the morning.” He grabs a notebook and a pencil and starts writing a grocery list. Peggy looks at Steve with an amused smile before returning to the files in front of her.

And just like that, Bucky makes himself at home, creating a new and odd sort of rhythm in the Carter-Rogers-now-Barnes household: Steve and Peggy heading to Camp LeHigh each morning and Bucky looking after their home during his recovery time. After two weeks of eating real meals every night, Steve nudges Bucky as they wash dishes together. “You don’t have to do this, you know.” He means the cooking, but all of the other things, too: raked leaves, clean linens on the clothesline, books finally unpacked from when Steve and Peggy moved in a few months ago.

“Don’t got anything else better to do,” Bucky responds, like he’s agitated by the doctor’s orders. But Bucky’s full of shit. There’s a quietness on this street, a tranquility to this space that even on rough days seems to settle against Bucky’s skin, calming the restlessness that has always pulled him along like a marionette.

Still, he has a point. Bucky used to whittle when they were kids and when he thought playing around with knives made him look cool. So Steve makes a couple of stops on their way home the next evening and brings him some wood and a set of carving knives. Bucky asks what the supplies were for, and Steve shrugs and responds, “something better to do.” Two days later, Bucky’s bent over a stack of library books on whittling and wood-working, checked out to one James Carter, cousin of Peggy Carter, if anyone asks. He sets himself up a work table in the garage, and he stays out there for hours at a time with a space heater at his feet.

Steve only wishes that the fragile peace that Bucky sometimes finds during the day could extend to the cover of darkness. Bucky wakes up screaming every night, shaking and flailing from night terrors. Steve goes to him each time and holds him, running his fingers through his newly shorn hair, rocking them softly back and forth. Sometimes Bucky will mumble in Russian, gripped in the clutches of The Soldier, and Steve will whisper his name over and over, telling him it’s alright, reminding him who he really is.

“I can’t wait for this shit to be over,” Bucky says one night against Steve’s shoulder, his first words in English.

“I know, Buck. We’ll get there.” We, he says, because it’s not the end of the line yet, and Steve’s not going anywhere.

He normally stays until Bucky falls asleep and then crawls back into bed with Peggy, but he drifts off in Bucky’s bed that night. He wakes up to sunlight pouring through the open curtains and the smell of coffee wafting from downstairs.

“Shit!” he whispers, carefully extracting himself from Bucky’s body to greet Peggy in the dining room. She’s reading the paper at the table, with buttered toast and coffee before her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep there.”
“It’s alright,” she says, before he leans down and kisses her.

“I had no idea what time it was. You could’ve woken me up.”

“And interrupt the frankly adorable canoodling that greeted me when I went to the door? Absolutely not.”

It’s not the reaction that Steve is expecting. Maybe Steve is projecting because he’s always wanted more than friendship from Bucky, and he also remembers when Peggy shot a gun at him because another woman kissed him. She probably has no idea what Steve has always wanted, and yet it’s 1952 and grown men certainly don’t do what they do. Shouldn’t she be concerned?

“Adorable?” he asks, cursing the discomfort in his own voice.

“Enough to rot your teeth,” she replies with a grin before her eyes return to the newspaper, like it’s any other Thursday. “Now, hurry up or we’ll be late for our meeting with Howard.”

Steve doesn’t truly need to rush because, surprising no one, Howard is 45 minutes late to his own meeting. He arrives with unruly hair and an unshaven cheek, with a lipstick print on his collar.

“I see you made an effort just for us,” Peggy says when he arrives.

“Anything for you, Peg,” he says, bending down to kiss her cheek, but stopping when she looks at him with a tight mouth and an arched brow. Peggy has strict boundaries at work. She has enough to worry about when it comes to men not taking her seriously, despite the fact that she runs the whole organization, without them trying inappropriate displays of affection.

“Howard, if you wouldn’t kiss—”


“I’m glad. He’s a good guy.” Howard pours himself a cup of coffee before sliding into a chair across from Peggy. “Alright. What are we looking at?”

Peggy relays the information that Bucky had provided them, and then passes a file his way. “We also had Sergeant Barnes look at photos of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Stark Industry employees, DoD personnel who may work with Dr. Zola, and congress members. He recognized four people.”

“Well, you were right,” Howard says, reviewing the photos, and then pointing to the second in the stack. “Mark Westley. This is the guy who tried to get me to hire Dr. Zola here at S.H.I.E.L.D.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “What should we do? Watch him? Try to pressure him to talk?”

“Let’s start with surveillance,” Peggy responds.

“Alright. I’ve been working on some new bugs. Harder to find, harder to trace. I’m sure these HYDRA guys are paranoid pricks.”

“That’s a fine plan, but we need more than that,” Steve says. “We need someone on the inside. Someone we can trust. Infiltrate them like they’re trying to infiltrate us.”

Peggy purses her lips in thought. “I know the perfect person, but it would also mean having to put up with him.” She grimaced.
“Who?”

She sighs. “Jack Thompson, a former colleague from the SSR who’s beyond insufferable and was shot because he had supposedly incriminating evidence against me that he refused to share. Meaning he’ll be even more insufferable if we call him in.” She brushes back her hair. “He’s with the CIA these days. We’ll have to poach him, but it’s nothing a good inflation to his ego and salary increase can’t fix.”

“But you trust him?” Steve asks.

“Oddly enough, yes.”

* * *

Peggy makes a couple of phone calls, and Jack agrees to meet them the following weekend, telling her he can’t get away from Langley before then. Then she calls Colonel Phillips to start working on upgrading his security clearance so they can discuss everything fully when they meet. For the first time since Steve arrived, he feels like they’re making progress, like they’re finally getting somewhere in taking down HYDRA for good.

When they get home that evening, Alberto Rabagliati is crooning on the record player, and the table is set with spaghetti bolognese and a bottle of Chianti. Steve was already feeling warm, knowing Peggy is by his side in this fight, knowing that Bucky is recovering and getting better day by day. But seeing this… he’s transported to the weekend before his 20th birthday when Bucky had saved up for months to take him to some tiny Italian joint in Hell’s Kitchen. He’d made Steve dress in his best shirt and tie, dragging him to Manhattan just to have a fancy dinner. Bucky was so damn giddy and fidgety on the subway that his excitement was contagious, and Steve was smiling like a loon before he even knew what was up Bucky’s sleeve.

“Oh my, this looks incredible,” Peggy says as they walk into the dining room, interrupting Steve’s reverie.

“Signora,” Bucky says with a bow before pulling back a chair, and Peggy laughs.

“You are something else, James,” she says.

Steve looks at Bucky expectantly. “Don’t I get the VIP treatment too?”

“You’re on your own, pal,” Bucky responds, so Steve walks past him and flicks him in the ear before sitting down.

Peggy moans sweetly when she takes her first bite, and looks over to Bucky. “Everything you make is incredible. Truly. Where did you learn?”

“I bussed a lot of tables in a lot of restaurants as a kid. Got lessons when I could. Lots of different cuisines in Brooklyn.”

She takes a sip of wine. “And Steve? What was Steve like as a child?”

Bucky looks over at Steve mid-bite and grins.

“Oh, no,” Steve says.
“The biggest little punk you ever met. Always raring for a fight. Usually sporting scuffed knuckles or a black eye.” He drops his forks and brings his fists to his face, weaving back and forth in a mime-fight. “Always had his head bent over a notebook sketching whatever he could think of. Sweet on anything small or fluffy or in need of saving.”

“So he hasn’t changed much then,” she replies, looking at Steve with a warm smile.

“Nah. He was the sweetest on you, though... you’ve never needed saving, have you, Marge?” Bucky looks down at his plate after he says it, his grin twisting in a frown, the same frown Steve has caught a few times when Bucky thought he wasn’t looking, even before The Soldier. Bitter and self-loathing. Steve surmises that he hates that he’s had to save him more than once, more than he even knows considering the other Bucky he left behind.

“Bucky saved me loads of times,” Steve interjects. “When we were kids. Hell, when we were grown. And not just dragging me out of scrapes.” He swallows. “I didn’t make much as an artist. He stopped working in kitchens and started working at the docks ’cause there was more money in the tougher labor. He was always picking up extra shifts to buy me medicine or make the place warmer in the winter. I would’ve died 20 times over without him.”

“Hush, Steve,” Bucky whispers, embarrassed or overwhelmed or something.

But then Peggy takes Bucky’s hand, her manicured fingers turning whiter as she gives it a firm squeeze. “Then I’m indebted to you. We all are.”

Bucky huffs, his eyes squeezing shut. “Don’t thank me. I didn’t want Steve to become Captain America. I didn’t want that for him. The danger and the cold and fucking bullshit that’s war.”

She looks at Steve questioningly — do you want to step in here? — but he shakes his head, motioning for her to continue.

“But he did. He made that choice. It’s important to respect the choices of those we love, even if we don’t always like them. I didn’t want Steve to—” she stops herself. She was about to tell Bucky about the Valkyrie, but he didn’t even know about that yet. “He was small,” she says instead, pivoting. “I worried if he could handle it. But that was the choice he made.”

“Not all of us had a choice,” he chokes out, before shooting up and leaving the dining room, his footsteps audible until the garage door slams.

“I almost told him about— and then—” she sighs. “God, I mucked that up royally.”

“No, don’t be hard on yourself. He’s still working through a lot.”

“Should I go talk to him?”

He shakes his head. “Buck’s got a temper in the best of times. And now his brain’s all... we should give him time to cool off.”

She nods, and they finish their dinner in near silence. They clean up together, the record player changed to Connee Boswell, Peggy’s hip swaying softly as she dries dishes. When they’re watching a show, entangled together on the couch, Bucky finally comes in from the garage, shoulders slumped forward.

He points to the TV. “Can I?” he asks. Steve nods. Bucky turns it off.

Steve sits up. “I can go upstairs?”
“No need.” He sits on the coffee table in front of Peggy. “Dr. Klein says it’s best to talk this shit out. So. Marge—Peggy. I’m sorry. I’m still…” he sighs and then gestures to himself. “I never asked to be like this. I didn’t want any of it. I didn’t want to go to the front to begin with. Steve was trying to trick his way in, but I didn’t go until I was drafted. I just wanted to stay here and make sure Steve was alright ‘cause that was always my priority. And everything is so…fucked now. Just absolutely fucked.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “I overreacted.”

“No, Bucky,” she says. “I was careless. You’re going through so much right now. I’m sorry.”

He gives her a sad smile before taking a deep breath. “I want to take down HYDRA. For myself, for the people I—I hurt. To… repent. But after that, I don’t want to fight anymore. That’s never been me.” He looks to Steve. “Alright?” His face is open, vulnerable, expectant, like he needs Steve’s blessing in order to live with this decision.

“God, Bucky. Of course.” He kneels down awkwardly and gives Bucky a strong hug, feeling the tension release from his body. He holds him for a moment before Peggy taps on his shoulder. When he sits back she takes his place, wrapping her arms around Bucky’s shoulders. It warms up Steve’s insides like a glass of whiskey to see the two people he loves the most embracing one another. Peggy kisses his cheek when they pull apart, and Bucky gives her a sad smile.

* *

Jack Thompson looks like the type of guy that needs to be taken down a peg or 20 by a swift jab to the mouth. He swaggers into the darkly lit warehouse where Peggy and Steve are waiting for him, cocky grin already chiseled onto his face, his eyes brightening when he sees them.

“You miss me this much, Carter?”

“Like a hole in the head,” she responds before turning to Steve. “Steve Rogers, Jack Thompson.”

“Captain America,” Jack says, extending his hand. The awe in his voice almost sounds genuine. “I bet our gal Peggy was beside herself when they found you.”

“Mm, I’m not your gal, Jack.”

“And for that we are all grateful,” he says, grinning at Steve like he’s in on the joke. Steve doesn’t respond and certainly doesn’t smile back.

“Thompson—”

“Alright, I’m sorry.” He raises his hands in surrender. “I had to tease you a bit for old time’s sake. I miss our days at the SSR.”

Peggy rolls her eyes and hands him a thin file. “Congratulations, your security clearance has been upgraded.”

His face hardens, becoming serious, before flipping open the file. “What’s the job?”

“We’d like to openly recruit you, bring you on at S.H.I.E.L.D. But you will also be working undercover to infiltrate HYDRA.”

His looks up from the file, eyes wide. “HYDRA? But,” his eyes meet Steve’s, “I thought you wiped them out in the war.”
“‘Cut off one head, two more grow in its place,’” Steve replies bitterly. Jack shakes his head in disbelief.

Steve and Peggy share what they know, HYDRA’s attempts to infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D., Dr. Zola’s involvement, the Winter Soldier extraction (while leaving Bucky out of it).

“Mark Westley works in Howard’s division,” Peggy continues. “Once you come on, we will concoct a mission to which both of you will be assigned. Probably a week or more. Gives you time to get to know one another, allows you to drop hints that you are all about their,” she waves her hand, “ideology.”

“Will he buy it?” Thompson asks.

“They’re desperate to infiltrate us,” Steve responds. “They’ll be happy that they’ve found a recruit.”

He nods. “Alright. I’m in. I’ll need to give notice at Langley of course, but I can be up here in a few weeks.” Peggy’s eyes widen with shock, but she quickly hides it. They had assumed this would have taken quite a bit of negotiating.

“Well, that was easy,” Peggy says with a grin.

“I don’t like Nazis, Carter,” he responds, handing back the file. “Even if they’re calling themselves by a different name.”

*

**

Peggy and Bucky’s relationship begins to blossom, their misunderstanding over dinner knocking down whatever wall was between them. Steve and Bucky teach her how to play rummy, and as soon as she has the game down, the two of them gang up on Steve to keep him from winning.

“Cheaters! Both of you,” Steve says after losing for the third time.

Peggy cackles gleefully, her cheeks flushed from two glasses of wine. She gives Bucky a gorgeous smile, beautiful enough to make any man weak in the knees. And Bucky’s always been weak for a beautiful woman.

Bucky’s eyes flit to her wine-stained mouth, biting his own lip. Then he seems to remember himself, laughing a little nervously. “We make a good team, don’t we, Marge?”

“Indeed,” she says, turning that dazzling smile to Steve. And he’s just as weak. Not for any woman, but certainly for her (and Bucky). He can hardly blame Bucky for feeling the same way he does.

*

**

October comes to a close, and with it comes crunchy leaves and chilly air. Bucky bakes cookies, stuffed into little Jack-o-lantern bags, and they sit on the front porch with hot cocoa while they pass them out to trick-or-treaters. Bucky hands out little bats and ghosts that he whittled to his favorite costumes, and the kids’ eyes light up with surprise and thanks.

A small, thin woman, rosy-cheeked from the autumn air, returns an hour later with the bag of cookies. She’s older, probably someone’s grandma, with gray hair and a warm smile.
“Did you make these cookies?” she asks, looking at Peggy. Her accent is French.

Peggy laughs. “No. That’d be this gentleman. My cousin, James.”

“Oh,” she says, surprised. She holds out her hand. “I’m Josephine.”

“Hi,” Bucky replies.

“They’re good. Do you bake often?”

“Well, I’m more of a cook than a baker,” he says, red from her praise.

“I run a group that bakes twice a week for charities. Tuesdays and Fridays. You should join us.”

“Oh. Alright,” he says. She gives him a bright grin and retreats down the street.

“Oh, my god,” Peggy says, laughing. “You’re going to join a granny baking group. Oh, James!” Steve can’t help but laugh with her.

“Why the hell not? I’ll learn loads from them. The nonnas were always the most willing to teach when I worked in food.”

“Alright, Gran,” Peggy says, laughing so hard she can barely breath.

Bucky wants to play angry, but then he’s laughing too. He throws a bag of cookies at her, landing squarely in her chest.

* *

The next week marks one month since Bucky’s extraction. He has a long examination with Dr. Klein who is pretty pleased with his progress. Steve is too. The bad nights are coming fewer and farther between. He spends less time lost in The Soldier and more time living side-by-side with Steve and Peggy.

“I’ll keep seeing the doctor every week, but you don’t have to keep taking care of me. I can find work now.”

“Nonsense,” Peggy says. “We’re not hurting for money, and there’s no rush. Taking care of yourself is most important.”

“Well, the least I can do is start training again,” he says. “To get ready for the takedown.”

“Sure, we will. Together.” Steve replies, distracted. He’s been waiting for this day, wanting an all-clear from the doctor before telling Bucky everything: the ice and the quantum realm and the other Bucky. But now that it’s here, he’s not sure if he’s ready. Most importantly, he doesn’t think Bucky is ready. His mind has been shredded, his reality has been warped. Steve’s not sure if he should upend everything all over again just to tell him who he really is.

Bucky’s eyebrows furrow as he looks at him. “You alright, pal?”

Peggy looks at Steve meaningfully, silently asking if now is the time.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m fine.” He says to Bucky, trying to smile. “We’ve been meaning to set up the basement as a training space. Let’s do that this weekend.”
“Alright,” Bucky replies. Steve can tell he doesn’t buy it, but he doesn’t press him on it. He just switches on the radio and turns back to the wood and knife in front of him.

*

**

“I couldn’t do it,” Steve whispers to Peggy later that night while they lie in bed.

“I know.” She kisses his forehead and runs her fingers through his hair.

“I’m scared that I’m gonna…” he sighs. “He’s been through so much. He didn’t even know who he was a month ago. And all of this time travel nonsense is difficult for even a healthy mind to grasp. I don’t want to make it worse.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. You’ll tell him when the time is right.”

He burrows closer to her, needing to feel her warmth and comfort. “What if it upsets him that I’m not — actually the Steve he knows? The Steve that’s locked away in a vault somewhere.”

She is quiet for several moments before she speaks. “It very well may. But. You are the Steve he knows, darling. You just… come with a little extra these days. Older and wiser and all that.” She smiles softly, and though her words and touch only help a little, he’s still so damn grateful for them.

*

**

They spend the weekend setting up the basement as a training space; soft mats and a couple of punching bags, securely fortified to withstand the punch of a super soldier. Bucky finds them an old sofa at a garage sale two blocks down and they haul it into the house and down the stairs.

“Wait,” Peggy says before they pick up the couch again to take it to the other side of the room. She lays down on top of it, sighing like a damsel in a dime novel, the back of her hand pressed against her forehead. “Continue.”

Bucky laughs, hearty and warm, before he and Steve pick up the couch and her majesty and carry them to the opposite wall. “You are something else, Marge,” he says when they put down the sofa.

“I live with two men with super strength, and I think I’m well within my rights to take advantage of it.”

“Fair enough,” Steve says with a shrug, before picking her up and flipping her over his shoulder into a fireman’s carry and taking her up the stairs.

She makes an undignified squawk, yelling, “This is not at all what I meant!”

*

**

On Sunday morning, Steve trains with Peggy first. They did this some when Steve first arrived, heading to base on the weekend when it was deserted, using it as an excuse to touch one another in a whole different way. She was good, sneaky. She used men’s assumptions of how a fight should go and upended them, using her gender and size to her advantage. Natasha would’ve loved her.
But with the exception of the Winter Soldier extraction, Peggy is out in the field less and less these days, and her training has decreased. She’s still a strong fighter, but she’s a bit out of practice. Steve avoids several hits in a row, and she gives a frustrated cry after 30 minutes. Her hair is pulled into a ponytail, and there’s a sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“Damn, I am sorely out of practice,” she says.

“I can give a couple of pointers,” Bucky says. He’s been sitting on the stairs watching them, taking a break from the punching bag, and he stands and walks over to the mats.

“I’m all ears,” she replies, hands on her hips, surprising Steve. He would’ve expected a response like if I wanted your help, James, I would’ve asked for it. It’s a testament, he thinks, to how far they’ve come.

He comes up to her, turns his back to Steve, and whispers in her ear. He mimes a duck and a hit and she nods, her brows knitted together in concentration. “Alright,” she says, smiling at Bucky and then at Steve. “Alright, let’s do it.”

They maneuver around each other for several moments, and when he dodges her blow this time, she spins, and catches his face with a left hook.

“Ah ha!” She yells in victory, but she leaves herself wide open, so Steve knocks her to the mat. “Hahaha-oww! Ow. Damn.” He kneels over her and smiles before giving her a kiss. “Darling, if you wanted me on my back, you just had to ask nicely.”

“I always want that,” Steve says quietly with a smirk, but then he’s suddenly a little self-conscious in front of Bucky. He forgot, for a moment, that this is 1952 and not the future where such brazen, sexual flirtation with your wife would be just fine. Peggy’s always been fearless, not caring a wink about propriety, and he got caught up in the moment. When he looks at Bucky his face is unreadable, a mix of something that Steve can’t quite pinpoint. When his eyes return to Peggy, she’s looking at Bucky too, biting her lip with a far-off look, as if solving a puzzle.

She comes back to earth and then taps the mat. “I’m out for now. Your turn, James.” She jumps up and saunters over to the couch to make herself comfortable.

“Alright,” Bucky responds and faces him. He gives Bucky a smile, but he doesn’t return it. His eyes turn dark, and Steve catches a quick glimpse of The Soldier before Bucky makes the first attack.

It’s brutal. He’s sharp, quick, anticipating a lot of Steve’s moves. At one point, Steve attempts a quick jab, but Bucky grabs his fist with his metal hand and wrenches his arm behind. Steve groans from the sharp pain in his shoulder, and stomps on Bucky’s foot in retaliation, as hard as he can, jabbing his elbow backward to hit Bucky’s ear. It knocks Bucky sideways, so Steve takes advantage of the opening, jumping on his back to put him in a chokehold.

Bucky grunts and stills, and Steve is wondering if he’ll tap out when he flips Steve sideways onto his back, his arm breaking away. Then Bucky is on top of him and they’re wrestling, grappling at one another, flipping each other over and knocking one another down.

Something... changes, and it starts to feel less like Captain America and the Winter Soldier and more like Steve and Bucky, wrestling over something stupid in his apartment while his mom was still at work. Back when Steve was just starting to realize that his feelings for Bucky were more than friendly, and having him so close and warm against his body would shoot fire through his veins, making him hot with want. Steve would always push him away before things got too far, before Bucky felt something. He’d call him a jerk or say sorry if it was his fault that time, but he always put
distance between them.

Steve doesn’t push him away this time, too lost in nostalgia and memories and fantasies of old to even think straight. So when Bucky flips him over, and lays his entire body against Steve’s with his arm pressed against his throat, Bucky inhales sharply. And Steve knows he feels it, the hard length of his arousal. He’s 0.2 seconds from closing his eyes in shame when Bucky presses his hips down a little harder, and Steve feels that he’s hard too, his erection pressed right next to his own. They both still, looking at one another, their chests heaving from the fight. Bucky’s eyes are hooded, and his mouth, soft and lush, is open as they breathe against each other.

Steve isn’t sure how long they stay like that, suspended in the revelation of their bodies, but then he hears movement in the corner of the room and remembers that Peggy is right there with them.

He taps the mat and faintly pushes Bucky backward. He buckles so easily, like knocking down a house of cards, until they’re both sprawled on the mats. Steve puts his feet flat on the ground, his legs in a closed V, in an attempt to hide his erection. He’s scared to look at Peggy, but his gaze is pulled to her despite himself.

She gives him a harried, frazzled smile, looking a hell of a lot like she did when he came out of Erskine’s Project Rebirth chamber for the first time. “Well, that was quite a show,” she says, her voice high and a little shaky. “Two super soldiers fighting for the gold. I should sell tickets.”

Steve tries to laugh but it comes out forced and foreign to his own ears. He looks across the mat and Bucky’s flat on his back, jaw clenched and pointedly not looking at either of them.

“I’m gonna take a walk,” Bucky says, before hopping to his feet and running up the stairs.

* *

It’s silent, painfully so, the rest of the day. Bucky doesn’t come back until a couple of hours later, and he avoids both of them until dinner. Peggy’s eyes flit between them, obviously reading their discomfort, and she tries to alleviate the tension with reminiscence about the Howling Commandos and tales of ridiculous Howard run-ins from the SSR days.

When Steve goes to bed, Peggy is already upstairs, pinning her hair for the next day.

“How long?” she asks when Steve closes the door.

“What?” he replies, crossing the room to get in bed.

“How long have you been attracted to one another?” She’s looking at him through the mirror of her vanity. Her face is calm, inquisitive, not at all how he’d think she would react.

“I don’t think he ever…” He would’ve said “never” on Bucky’s behalf before this morning, but now he’s not sure. “I never thought it was mutual,” he whispers.

“And for you?” She asks

He looks down and runs his fingers along the edge of the blanket. “Since… forever.”

She turns around to face him. “You love him,” she says. It’s not a question.

He scoffs. “He’s my best friend.”
She gives a small smile and shakes her head. “That’s not what I mean.”

“Peggy,” he says, his voice cracking. He gets out of bed and kneels in front of her. “I love you. I would never—betray—”

“I know that,” she responds.

He frowns. “You’re reacting so calmly to all of this.”

She shrugs. “And?”

“You tried to shoot me when Private Lorraine kissed me in the war!”

She smirks. “Yes, well. Can’t a woman grow and mature over time?” She takes his face in her hands and looks him directly in the eye. “I know you love me, Steve. You traveled through time itself to be with me. The fact that you love Bucky isn’t going to change that.”

“And the fact that he’s a man?”

Peggy shakes her head. “It’s ridiculous that people even care about that sort of thing.”

Steve sighs and rests his head against her stomach. She runs her fingers through his hair, her fingernails scratching at the nape. “Do you remember why Dr. Erskine chose you?” she asks. He nods against her belly, but she still continues. “The serum magnifies what’s on the inside. Now you have,” she pauses, moving her hands down his arms, squeezing his biceps, shamelessly groping at his pecs, “this enormous, gorgeous body to match the enormous, gorgeous heart inside of you.” He can hear the smile in her voice. “I have no doubt in my mind that there’s room for both of us in there.”

He looks up at her. He tilts his head, pondering what she just said. It makes an odd sort of sense, her explanation, a soothing balm to the shaky anxiousness at his core.

Chapter 4

When Steve goes downstairs the next morning, there’s a big breakfast waiting on the table, the type that Bucky only makes on the weekends: french toast, eggs, bacon, sliced fruit. Bucky isn’t there, though. Steve wants to check on him after everything that happened yesterday, so he climbs the stairs and knocks on the door.

“Buck? Can I come in?” There’s no answer. “Bucky?” Steve pushes open the door slowly and Bucky is standing with his back toward the door, putting clothes into a suitcase. “What are you doing?”

He doesn’t turn around. “It seems I don’t own a suitcase, so I’ll send money back to replace this one. And for the clothes.”

“What the hell, Buck? What are you doing?” He doesn’t say anything so Steve steps forward and grabs his arm to turn him around. Bucky inhales sharply and yanks his arm away, as if Steve’s touch burns him. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not going to fuck this up for you.” He won’t even look at Steve. His eyes are glued to the folded shirt in his hand.

“Fuck what up?”

“This!” His arms gesture to the space around them, finally meeting Steve’s gaze. “Your amazing marriage to an amazing dame and your nice house in the suburbs and the family you’re going to have.”

“Bucky, you’re not—”

“I’m so fucked up, Steve.” Bucky is crying now, his body shaking. “I’m trying every day to be your Bucky, alright? But some days it’s really fuckin’ hard. Some days The Soldier is there. And he’s not supposed to want or feel but he does. They couldn’t figure out how to turn that shit off when they unmade me. And all of the bad things, the bad thoughts and— and the bad desires just fucking amplify.”

Steve’s face crinkles in pain. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Like what?”

Steve takes a shuddering breath. “How you— how we feel... for one another isn’t bad.”

Bucky huffs. “Ain’t it?”

“No, it’s not. I don’t think so. And neither does Peggy.”

Bucky winces. “So she knows?”

“Well, we practically put on a show, didn’t we? The look on your face—”

“My face? Pot and kettle, pal.” Bucky throws the shirt on the bed. “You see why I gotta go then? I can’t mess this up for you and Peggy.”

“She doesn’t care,” Steve says. Bucky tilts his head, disbelief written all over his face. “I don’t really get it either, but she doesn’t. It’s Peggy. You know she marches to the beat of her own drum.”
“That makes two of you,” Bucky replies.

“Look, Buck, I don’t know how or—or when this started for you. But,” he takes a big breath, “it’s always been there for me. And it never affected our friendship. And it never affected my relationship with Peggy. And it doesn’t have to now.”

Bucky sits on the bed and looks up at him through those pretty, thick lashes. “‘Always?’” he whispers. Steve’s mouth quirks into a sad half-smile, and he nods. “God, we’re a couple of idiots.”

“Wouldn’t be us if we weren’t,” Steve replies. Bucky laughs at that, soft and sad, nodding in agreement.

There’s a knock on the open door, and Peggy peeks her head in before frowning at the suitcase. “I’m sorry to interrupt, darling, but we’ll be late if we don’t leave now.”

“I’ll be right down, Peg,” he says before turning back to Bucky. He hears Peggy’s footsteps down the stairs. “Please don’t go.”

Bucky looks at Steve and then glances to the space Peggy just occupied, his face pained. But then he nods. “Alright.”

Steve exhales deeply, relief washing over him. He motions for Bucky to stand up, and when he does he envelops him in a tight hug, relishing the solid warmth and comfort of his frame. “I love you, you jerk.”

Bucky shoves him away softly. “Fuck, get out of here before your wife tears me a new one for making you late.”

Steve runs downstairs and grabs a piece of French toast and a slice of bacon before running to the car. Peggy’s brows knit together in concern as she backs out of the driveway. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine now.”

“I heard some of it. Did he agree to stay?”

“Yeah.”

She takes his hand, squeezing it softly. “Good.”

* *

It’s such a whirlwind of a day once they get to base that Steve hardly has a minute to think about everything that’s happened in the last 24 hours. It’s Jack Thompson’s first day, and they’re in meetings to finalize cover stories and game plans and strategies.

“I’m sure it won’t be difficult for you to grumble to Westley about your new position here, since the tables of leadership have certainly turned since our SSR days,” Peggy says to Thompson with an innocent smile. He was her supervisor for a brief stint before Peggy left the SSR to co-found S.H.I.E.L.D.

“I wouldn’t say they’re completely turned. It’s not like I’m filing reports and taking lunch orders,” Thompson responds, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head.

“Mmm, that could be arranged. Shall I have it added to your job description?”
He slightly narrows his eyes but responds with nonchalance. “Does that come with a salary increase? Extra duties, and all that.”

“A pay cut, I’m afraid.” Peggy gives him a falsely apologetic smile, and Thompson barks in laughter. Steve’s eyes flit between them, perplexed. Howard drives Peggy crazy, but there’s a fondness between them, a true friendship. With these two, there’s a razor edge of sharpness to their jokes and barbs. One would think that Peggy hated this guy, and yet this is the person she chose to help them bring down HYDRA.

“Lucky for us,” Peggy continues, “the SSR apprehended a number of HYDRA’s Tesseract weapons during the war, and we’ve planted a small cache of them in a farmer’s cellar in France. We’ve been ‘tasked’ with extracting them and keeping them out of the hands of the Soviets, which is where you come in, Thompson. Westley will go along with you to verify the power source and to oversee their safe handling. This is your opportunity for reconnaissance, to build his trust, and to see if we end up with all of the weapons we’re supposed to.”

“What about surveillance?”

“His office has been bugged for a while, but he’s either smart or quiet,” Steve says. “We’d like to expand surveillance. If you’re invited to his home or any sort of HYDRA meeting place, we can provide you with the necessary equipment to plant them.”

They review the information of the other known HYDRA operatives, especially Dr. Zola, and the importance of collecting evidence against any other members. “We have intel that the majority of, if not all, HYDRA members met in secret several years ago,” Peggy says. “If this is a recurring event, then it may be our ticket to take all of them out for good.”

“Well,” Thompson says, “here’s to cutting off all the heads this time around.”

*       *

Bucky’s still there when they return, and Steve breathes in relief at the signs of life when they walk in the door. He’s quiet and maudlin at dinner, and damn near skittish around Peggy. So she pulls out the deck of cards and drops it in front of him.

“What do you say, James, to a couple of rounds of ganging up on Mr. Stars and Stripes over here?”

He gives her a half-smile, seeing it as the olive branch that it is. “Alright.”

It smooths the waters a bit, but a tension remains in the air over the next few days, all of them playing nice and avoiding the elephant in the room. Bucky throws himself into baking, coming home from Josephine’s with leftover breads and sweets, making even more on days when he’s at home. That restlessness that always surrounded Bucky is back, and Steve worries that their concerns for his safety are turning him into a caged animal.

The first night Bucky wakes up screaming after the sparring incident, Steve goes to him like he always does, tucking him in into his arms, shh-ing as he cries, repeating his name to remind him who he is. But as soon as Bucky comes to himself, he is, stilling, and Steve can feel him holding his breath.

“Is this still okay?” Bucky whispers, soft and pained.

“Don’t be stupid. Of course it is.”
His body is still stiff. “But—”

“Shhh.” Steve moves even closer, pressing their bodies together. He places his hand over Bucky’s heart. “‘Til the end of the line, pal.”

It’s a whole minute until his body relaxes, melting against Steve, exhaling shakily. They fall asleep entwined together until the sun peeks through the curtains and announces a new day.

*

Steve’s been avoiding DC for as long as he can since Bucky came back, but there’s a VA bill in committee that they want to pass before Eisenhower takes office, and he’s been asked to testify.

“I’ll call with my room number when I get there,” he says to Bucky at breakfast two days before his trip. He’s nervous about leaving him in case he has a bad night while he’s gone. “Don’t worry about the phone charge either, alright? If you need me, you call me.”

“James,” Peggy says, setting down her coffee cup. “This may be presumptuous of me, but if you have a bad night, I can help the best I can. I know I’m not——” she looks to Steve and then back to Bucky, “I’m not Steve. But you won’t have to go it alone.”

Bucky looks at Steve before responding. “It’s, uh, it’s just one night. I’m sure it’ll be okay.” Then the side of his lip quirks up, a little sad, and he returns Peggy’s gaze. “But thanks, Marge.”

*

The night before he leaves, Steve’s jittery and nervous, unable to sleep. Around 1 a.m. Peggy turns on the lamp and looks at him before softly grabbing his chin. “Get undressed.” He does so.

“Lie back,” she says, slipping off her nightgown, wearing nothing underneath. She straddles his legs and wraps her hand around his dick, sliding up and down until he’s fully hard.

“Would you like my mouth?” She asks. He nods. “Ask me.”

“Please.”

“Please what?” she asks, determined.

“Please suck my cock,” he whispers, his cheeks turning red as he says it.

“Of course, darling,” she coos softly, before wrapping her lips around the head and licking up and down the shaft. He gasps, already losing himself to the heat of her lips and tongue, before she fully sinks her mouth down and around his dick.

“Fuck,” he groans, thrusting into her mouth. Sometimes she’ll smack his hip, telling him to stay still, but tonight she lets him do it. Her mouth is plush and warm, and he drives into it over and over until he comes, aching pleasure overwhelming him. She swallows the first spurt, but then sits up, letting the rest streak onto her chest and neck.

She looks at him, tilting her head in thought, before she smiles wickedly and speaks. “Clean me up,” she says. “With your tongue.” His eyes widen because they’ve never done anything like that before. He sits up and tentatively licks the side of her neck, the come warm and salty on his tongue. “Every
drop.”

His mouth moves along her skin, trailing across her collar bone, when his mind suddenly wonders, *is this what Bucky tastes like?* And then he whines, completely done for, lapping every drop from her skin like a man dying of thirst. He falls back on the pillows when he finishes, dazed in a way he sometimes gets when following Peggy’s orders, floaty and warm.

“Do you want me to…” he asks a few minutes later, softly, not even sure if he can but wanting to please her.

“Mmm, no. I’m tired. Good night, my love,” she says with a quick kiss, but her expression has changed. When she turned on the light, she looked determined, focused, allowing Steve to take what he needed in hopes that it would calm his nerves. But now she looks like the wheels in her mind are turning, her eyes are narrowed in thought, before she snuggles into the covers with a satisfied smile. And Steve wonders what the hell that’s all about.

* *

DC is fine; shaking hands with senators, testifying before the committee, and giving a couple of interviews about the bill. There was no call from home during the night before the hearing, so he assumes Bucky had an okay time of it. He has a meeting with Colonel Phillips after the committee hearing, and they talk shop about HYDRA and the eyes and ears he’s got on Dr. Zola at the DoD. Then Steve hops on the train and makes it back to New Jersey in the early evening. When he gets home, Peggy’s car is in the driveway, but the house is quiet. He does a circle about the first floor before he sees that the garage door is partially opened. As he steps closer, he hears voices.

“... because it’s bonkers, Peggy. Who does that?” he hears Bucky ask.

“Does it matter what other people do? There’s no reason why everyone can’t be happy.”

Bucky gives a humorless laugh. “Of course there is.”

“Are other people’s objections the only reason you’re saying no? Would you want it beside that?”

“You’re the craziest broad I ever met, you know that?” Bucky says, and Steve knows the deflection in that voice. He hears the scrape of a chair, and Steve opens the door before they find him standing there. They both jump when they see him, wide-eyed, like two kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“Darling, you’re home,” Peggy says, coming forward and giving him a kiss. “How was the trip?”

“Fine,” Steve says, his eyes darting between the two of them. Bucky’s suddenly paying attention to his work table like it’s the most important thing in the world. “The bill passed committee; the Senate will take it up on Friday.”

“Lovely,” she responds with a nervous smile. “We’ve already eaten, but there’s soup on the stove. And James’ granny bread, of course.” She glances to Bucky before returning her gaze to Steve. “I have some work I need to do this evening, but I’m sure he can keep you company.” Then Bucky huffs and shakes his head, his nostrils flaring.

His brows knit together, unsure what has passed between then in his absence. “Alright.”

Peggy’s set up shop in the dining room, the table half-covered with files, so Steve eats at the
kitchenette with Bucky sitting across from him.

“Last night was fine?” Steve asks, digging into the soup.

“Yeah, no issues. I slept fine.”

“Good. And you and Peggy? Everything alright there?”

Bucky huffs. “Sure.”

Steve’s eyes narrow. “What’s going—"

“I heard you on the radio,” Bucky interrupts. “Your testimony. It was good.” He smiles.

“You used your,” he deepens his timbre, “Captain voice.”

Fine. If Bucky wasn’t going to give him any information, he’d just ask Peggy tonight. “My Captain voice?”

“Yeah. Same one you used barking orders and giving pep talks during the war. Made everyone fall in love with you and follow you behind enemy lines. I bet you charmed every guy in Congress to vote for that bill.”

“Oh. Well.” Steve feels his cheeks redden at Bucky’s fondness. “They were good soldiers doing their duty.” He takes another bite of soup. “Plus, you were always the charming one.” Bucky could get away with anything before the war, forgetting to call a dame, showing up late to work, not having enough change for a hot dog. He’d turn on a smile, look at them with those soft blue eyes, and make anyone soft clay in his hands. He had a way of looking at you like you were the only person in the world, everything and everyone else dissolving into the distance. It would suck the air from his lungs, making him ache for Bucky in a way he never thought could be reciprocated.

“Used to be.” Bucky says with a self-depreciating frown.

Steve shakes his head. “Still are.” Lifting his eyes to Bucky’s.

“Oh,” he whispers. Bucky’s mouth parts before his eyes trail to Steve’s lips, and when Steve’s tongue darts out to wet them, his eyes fill with hunger and longing. And he looks so gorgeous that Steve can barely breathe. He’s not sure how long they stay like that, watching one another, the air becoming thicker with want and desires better left unsaid.

It’s Bucky that finally breaks, clearing his throat and looking away. “Uh,” he says, his voice thick as molasses. “I’m going to put the food away.” He stands up from his chair.

“My god,” Peggy exclaims from the doorway. Her eyes meet Bucky’s before she strolls into the kitchen. “You’re an idiot. You’re both bloody idiots.” And then she takes Bucky’s face in her hands and kisses him.

Steve inhales sharply, paralyzed in his chair, suddenly understanding what the hell they were talking about in the garage. Bucky’s eyes, wide in shock, seek Steve’s, his mouth stilled against Peggy’s.

She pulls back, waiting for Bucky to turn his gaze from Steve and look at her.

“Bucky, if you’ve ever wanted to kiss me, now is certainly your chance to do so.” Bucky looks at Steve again, questioning. And Steve. Steve can’t even wrap his mind around what just happened, but he’d be lying to himself if he said he minded his wife kissing his best pal. So he gives Bucky a nod.
“You’re both crazy,” Bucky says softly, in awe, and then kisses her. Steve’s seen Bucky kiss lots of girls, watching slyly from the corner of his eye, wondering what it’d be like to be in their place. He’d watch him place a possessive hand at the small of their backs, pulling them tight against his body, and Bucky would moan every time he did it, like their bodies pressed against him was the best feeling in the world. He doesn’t do that this time, though. His hands rest tentatively at her shoulders even as the kiss deepens. He’s so obviously out of his element that it makes Steve smile fondly. Peggy has a way of doing that to people.

Peggy pulls back, and when she turns to look at Steve, her eyes are shiny with want. “Darling, it’s simply not fair that I’ve kissed James here and you haven’t.” She extends her hand toward him. He looks at Bucky and sees that his hands are shaking, even his metal one, his whole body overwhelmed by what’s happening between them. He stands up and takes Peggy’s hand, but his eyes don’t leave Bucky’s, and all of the heat from a few minutes ago comes rushing back. He reaches out with his free hand and cups Bucky’s cheek, running his thumb along his cheekbone.

“Stevie,” Bucky whispers on a shuddering breath, and then Steve presses his lips against Bucky’s mouth, once, chastely. He pulls back, his eyes flitting over Bucky’s face, and then Bucky is kissing him. The sudden intensity of it knocks the wind out of him, all of the years of pent-up longing exploding between them like fireworks on his birthday. Peggy squeezes his hand before letting go of it, and then Steve is bringing Bucky closer against him. This time it’s Bucky’s hand at Steve’s back, and yeah, the press of their bodies is just as good as Steve imagined it to be. Steve licks into his mouth and Bucky groans, his other hand tangling in Steve’s hair. He hasn’t kissed anyone besides Peggy in years at this point, and Steve marvels at the difference of kissing a man, of kissing Bucky — rougher lips, the sweet abrasion of his five o’clock shadow, a larger frame to press against.

Steve pulls back and turns to look at Peggy. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes hooded with desire, and she gives him a hopeful, pleased smile. He pulls her to him, one arm around her middle and the other arm around Bucky’s. He bends to kiss her, reveling in the warm familiarity of her lips against his own. Bucky’s hand is still in Steve’s hair, against the nape of his neck, and he pets him softly while they kiss.

Peggy ends the kiss and looks at both of them with a devilish glint in her eyes. “Now that we’ve all snogged each other properly, we could go upstairs and see what else we can get up to?” She takes Steve’s hand and he takes Bucky’s and they trail after one another up the stairs and into their bedroom.

“Steve, my love, why don’t you two divest each other of those clothes, hmm?” Peggy says when she closes the door, probably because they were standing there like a couple of clueless dumbasses. Bucky’s got a little more work to do because Steve is still in his suit and tie from rubbing elbows on Capitol Hill. Peggy perches herself on the edge of the bed before Bucky comes up and loosens his tie.

“I haven’t worn a monkey suit in a long time,” Bucky says, sliding the jacket off of Steve’s shoulders.

“You always looked good in them,” Steve whispers, thinking of him all dressed up, hair slicked back with pomade, ready to jive with every girl in the dance hall. It feels strange to finally tell Bucky the things he’s always thought about him, but that strangeness floats away when Bucky looks up at him through his lashes, his cheeks turning pink from Steve’s sweet words.

When they’re finally undressed, Steve’s eyes rake over Bucky’s body, taking in his cock, beautiful and hard against the dark patch of hair at his thighs. His gaze moves upward over the taut lines of his stomach to the scar tissue at his shoulder, pink and purple lines, mottled, criss-crossing where skin
and metal meet. Bucky’s body tenses when he sees where Steve is looking, and his eyes squeeze
shut under the scrutiny.

“Hey, no. Don’t get shy. It’s me.” He steps forward, curls his hand at the nape of his neck. “You’re
gorgeous. Nothing’s ever going to change how much I want you.”

Bucky huffs. “You say that, standing there lookin’ like a fuckin’ Adonis.”

“I haven’t always looked like this, Buck.”

Peggy stands up and walks over to them. “But you were always beautiful, Steve. We both knew it.

“She’s right,” Bucky replies. Bucky turns to look at her, and his eyes grow wide because she
must’ve gotten undressed while they did. His gaze fall to her heavy breasts, her dark nipples, and
Steve knows the look on his face because it mirrors exactly how he feels every time he sees his
gorgeous wife too.

“You’ll catch flies if you stare too long, James,” she says, her lips teasing a grin.

“No more starin’, then,” he says before grabbing her breasts and sliding his tongue over one nipple
and then the next, both turning to tight buds under his ministrations. She gasps, arching against his
mouth, and Steve uses it as an excuse to kiss her, completely without finesse but entirely wonderful.

If Bucky was hesitant beforehand, he’s not now. He reaches for Steve’s cock while he kisses
Peggy’s breasts, the metal already warmed from grasping her skin. Steve groans as his palm slides up
and down his shaft, and his mind zeros in on the fact that he’s having sex with two people at once
and those two people are Peggy and Bucky and his brain gets all fuzzy and fuck, fuck, fuck, he’s
about to come.

“Stop, stop,” he says, grabbing Bucky’s hand and taking a step back. He closes his eyes to collect
himself. Peggy pulls away from Bucky’s mouth and slides her hand against Steve’s chest and sides,
calming him. Her other hand runs through Bucky’s hair before sliding her thumb along his wet
mouth.

“Do you want to fuck him?” she asks Bucky.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Yes.” He leans in to kiss Steve again. Peggy moves to the dresser and comes
back with a small paper bag and places it in Bucky’s hand. Steve peers and inside and sees a jar of
vaseline. His eyes shoot to Peggy.

“You planned this.”

“I would’ve thought that was obvious by now, Captain Rogers.” She lays down on the bed and pats
the space next to her. “If I waited for you two to make a move on each other, we’d never be here.”

Steve lies next to her, and she snuggles into the crook of his arm, her hands moving up and down his
chest and torso before teasing at his cock. Bucky kneels in front of him and slicks up his fingers
before tilting his head with a questioning look.

“Alright, Stevie?” Bucky asks, his voice low and thick. Steve nods emphatically. He brings his knees
up, and then Bucky’s fingers circle against his entrance before he slips one inside very slowly. Steve
gasps and groans at the intrusion, and he doesn’t even have time to think before Peggy is kissing
him. Steve has done this before, to himself, but it’s been years. And it certainly didn’t feel like this,
being touched and caressed and fucked by the two loves of his life.
Bucky’s got three fingers stretching him open when he finally hits his prostate, and Steve moans, his
dick twitching against his stomach. Peggy sighs blissfully, watching them, before rubbing her thumb
through the precome at the slit of his cock. She sits up and brings her thumb to Bucky’s mouth. His
tongue darts out to taste before his lips wrap around the pad of her finger, his eyes closing as he does
so. When he opens them, his gaze is hooded and warm, and it takes Steve’s breath away.

“Are you ready?” Bucky asks, and Steve says yes. Bucky slicks up his cock, and Peggy pats Steve’s
ribs.

“Up, turn over,” she says, gesturing for him to get on all fours. When he does so, she lies down in
front of him. “Be a good boy and put that lovely mouth to use.” He hears Bucky groan behind him,
and when he turns back to look at him, his lips are parted, drinking in the sight of both of them.

“You two are something else,” Bucky breathes, before pressing his cock against Steve’s entrance
and entering him slowly. The stretch burns at first, and all he can do is whimper and rest his head on
Peggy’s thigh, breathing against her soft skin as he tries to adjust.

“Shh,” she says, her hands caressing his hair and his shoulders. Bucky has stilled at his back, petting
his flank, running his right hand in circles along his spine until Steve’s body relaxes.

He pushes the rest of the way in, bottoming out, groaning as he does so. “Fuck. Goddamn,” he says
in awe, and that’s when Steve knows that Bucky’s a goner. James Barnes might’ve fucked half the
girls in the local parrish, but he was always a good Catholic boy who’d never take the Lord’s name
in vain. Steve can hardly blame him when it feels so incredible, after so many years of wanting each
other.

As soon as the pain ebbs away into pleasure, he turns and nuzzles against Peggy’s cunt and licks up
and down the seam before pressing in and circling her clitoris. She gasps, pulling his face closer to
her center. Steve suddenly realizes how filthy this room must sound, all three of them moving
together, moaning breathily, the slapping of Bucky’s groin against his backside, the wet slide of
Steve’s tongue along Peggy’s slick folds.

Bucky’s hands grip Steve’s hips hard enough that he’d bruise if the serum would let him, and every
stroke in and out of his body sparks pleasantly against his nerves, building and building, getting him
closer and closer. He whines because he doesn’t want to come yet, not wanting it to end, not wanting
to go over the edge before Peggy does because he’s a gentleman, thank-you-very-much, and he’s
never gotten off before her.

But she hears it, and she sweetly says, “Come, darling.” So he gives in and cries out, his cock
pulsing untouched on the sheets below him. His eyes squeeze shut at the intensity because coming
while bookended between both of them is too much to handle. He presses his mouth to Peggy’s cunt,
lapping and sucking at her clitoris, his face slick with her arousal. He feels her thighs tremble and
shake and then she tenses, her body bending upward, following him over the edge.

Bucky’s losing it behind him, fucking him faster and more erratically. So Steve reaches back,
etwining his fingers with Bucky’s right hand at his hip, and says, “please, Bucky.” He stutters to a
stop, groaning, and Steve can feel him coming inside him, pulsing, grinding against him two more
times before collapsing over his back.

The room is quiet now, nothing but the sound of their ragged breaths filling the evening air. Peggy
careses his face and he looks up at her. She smiles at him, pleased as a peacock, mouthing I love
you, and god, does he love her too. His forehead falls to her thigh. He smiles against her skin, and
they lie like that for several minutes, Bucky’s cock slowly slipping out of him as it softens.
“Why don’t you boys clean up and I’ll change the sheets?” Peggy says, tapping Steve on the shoulder. Bucky sits up and Steve already misses the feeling of their bodies pressed together. They trudge into the bathroom, and Bucky turns on the shower.

“Do you wanna?” Bucky asks, gesturing to the bathtub.

“Yeah, alright,” Steve replies.

“I mean,” his voice turns into a whisper, “together.”

“Oh,” Steve says, blushing at the sweetness of the offer like they didn’t just have a threesome two minutes ago. “Okay.” He checks the water temperature and then follows Bucky into the shower.

Bucky kisses him when he steps inside, slowly, gently, with no agenda or pressing need. It makes Steve’s heart flutter, the softness of it. Bucky leans back, his hands cupping Steve’s face, and he looks at him so deeply it’s like he’s reaching inside and rummaging around his soul.

“Tell me you wanted to do all of that.”

Steve’s brows furrow. “Wasn’t it obvious that I did?”

“I just gotta make sure, Stevie. That it’s not just to make me happy.” His lips quirk upward. “Or to appease your frankly perverted wife.”

He laughs then shakes his head. “I’m not looking a gift horse in the mouth. I love Peggy and I—I love you.” Bucky’s eyes soften when he says that, so he thinks he should say it again. “I love you. And if we’re all on board then…” he shrugs, “why the hell not?”

“Well, she’s definitely on board. Her manifesto on the subject could rival Marx’s.”

Steve laughs again. “I take it that you had an interesting time while I was gone?”

“You’ve got no idea, pal. She’s tenacious.”

“I married her. I’ve got several ideas.”

Steve reaches for the washcloth and soap, but Bucky shakes his head, taking it from him. “Let me do it.” He lathers up the cloth and then begins to run it along Steve’s body. “I miss taking care of you,” he whispers, like a confession.

“Hey,” Steve says, tilting his face upward so he can look directly into his eyes, clear and blue and lovely. “Now we take care of each other.”

“Sure,” Bucky says, breaking the gaze.

Steve wants to chase away the creeping of sadness in his voice, so he pulls him close and runs his fingers through his wet hair. It’s nice now that it’s shorter; it reminds him of the Bucky he grew up with. But part of him remembers how handsome his other Bucky looked when he left, with his beard and his soft, long locks. There’s still a pang in his heart for the Bucky he left behind, even though this Bucky is standing right here before him, flesh and blood and beautiful. He hopes that he and Sam are taking care of each other. He hopes Shuri’s keeping him in line. He hopes he’s found the peace and healing he deserves.

Bucky pulls him from his reverie by stepping back and continuing his earlier task of cleaning him up. He finally trails the cloth down his back, along the cleft of his ass, between his thighs, and it feels so
intimate that his chest seizes in unwelcome pleasure.

“Thank you,” Steve says, when he finishes, kissing him. When they leave the bathroom, Steve grabs his hand, pulling slightly toward his bedroom. “It might not be the most comfortable, but if you wanted to sleep with us tonight…”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he says. Steve hides his disappointment with a kiss, and they part ways.

Peggy is already lying on the fresh sheets, still naked, and she gives him a warm, lazy grin when he joins her.

“Peggy,” he whispers in awe, in disbelief, his voice choking. “You are—I can’t…” he sighs, unable to convey what he feels in that moment, so he just settles for, “thank you.”

She chuckles. “It was hardly a hardship for me, you know. I was hoping you two would get there on your own eventually, but it quickly became clear that you’d never get there without a push.” She curls against him and kisses his chest. And yeah, she’s right as usual. So he tilts up her chin and caresses his lips over hers, pouring all of his love and hope and happiness into one kiss.

*

**

Some time later, there’s a hand nudging Steve’s shoulder to wake him up. “Can I still…” Bucky whispers.

And Steve nods, pleased, and kisses Peggy’s shoulder to wake her. They shuffle over for Bucky to get in beside him, and Bucky wraps his arms around him immediately.

It’s quiet for a few minutes, and Steve’s almost asleep when Bucky whispers “I love you too,” against his ear. Steve smiles, perfectly content while being squeezed in a bed that’s too small for three people, but he sleeps soundly.

*

**

Steve’s only had two other morning afters before this one.

The first was with Natasha, both of them with red-rimmed eyes and hangovers that were not at all from alcohol. She gave him that little half-quirked smile she always did and said, “You’re alright, Rogers.” And he didn’t didn’t know if she meant in bed or it’s okay, we’re gonna get through this, even if it kills us. And it did. Kill her. Which still claws at his soul even now (A soul for a soul is hardly a fair trade when giving back the stone didn’t even bring her back).

The second one, with Peggy, was infinitely happier, and yet still. Bucky weighed on his mind. The stones, Natasha, Tony—all of it was right there, needing to be sorted and mourned and dealt with. Some of the happiest and saddest moments of his life were packed into the smallest window of time.

This morning is lovely and funny and... well, still a little sad. Steve feels Bucky shift next to him when Peggy’s alarm goes off, and he hears Bucky hold in his breath, taking in his surroundings. Steve’s eyes are still closed but he feels Peggy sit up and then—

“Good morning,” she says quietly.
“Oh. Uh. Yeah.” Bucky replies. “Morning.” His voice is so flustered and downright sheepish that Steve can barely believe it’s him. His lip quivers against the pillow in an attempt to hold in a smile. He feels Peggy stand and then hears an intake of breath behind him, so he cracks an eye open. She’s still naked from the night before, her back arching as she stretches upward, the curve of her breast just visible at her side.

“You act like you haven’t seen this before, James,” she says in response to his gasp. Steve closes his eyes again.

“Y-yeah. I know I have.”

She doesn’t say anything, and it’s several moments later until he hears her open and close the door. He wonders if anything passed between them silently. He lies there for a few more minutes, not wanting to disturb the feeling of Bucky at his back. Then there’s a soft, tentative touch at his shoulder.

“Steve? You awake?”

Steve smiles, still turned away. “Since when are you bashful wakin’ up next to a naked dame?”

Bucky huffs and smacks the back of Steve’s head, and Steve barks out in laughter. He turns around to face him and finds that Bucky’s cheeks are tinged pink.

“I’m telling your wife you called her a dame.”

Steve pushes his shoulder. “You didn’t answer my question, jerk.”

“I—I don’t know, Steve.” He smiles, but his eyes shift nervously. “It wasn’t just a naked dame—woman—that I woke to, was it? It was you,” he glances down at Steve’s chest, “naked. And your wife. Also naked. And that’s… that’s a lot for a man to handle first thing in the morning.”

“Hey,” Steve says, his brows knitting together, frowning. “You don’t—we don’t… this doesn’t have to be a thing. If you’re uncomfortable, then we leave it where it is. Okay? Whatever you need, Buck.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think that’s it. It can just… it takes me a while to process things now. It’s gotta go through filters.”

“Filters?”

“Yeah, like,” he crooks his elbow and rests his head on his metal hand. “Reality filters. Do I really want something or is it, you know. The Soldier?” He trails his finger along the sheet right in front of Steve’s chest, but he doesn’t touch it. “Am I in control? Am I making the decision? And sometimes I just,” he shrugs, “kinda wing it. But this.” He breathes, closing his eyes, before finally touching Steve, placing his hand right over his heart. He looks at Steve pointedly. “This. Is important.”

“Oh,” Steve whispers. He wants to kiss him; it felt so easy last night during their stolen moment in the shower. But he won’t. Not now. “We’ve got time. You’re here and you’re safe and that’s really all that matters to me, Buck.”

Bucky nods, a half smile on his lips. He tentatively reaches out with his metal hand and brushes the hair off of Steve’s forehead.

“Can I hug you now or am I too naked?” Steve asks.
Bucky laughs. “God, you’re an asshole.”

*

**

Even with Bucky’s hesitancy that morning, Steve is so distracted by his memories of last night that he can barely concentrate at work. That is, until Peggy shows up.

“You look like a love-sick fool,” she says, entering his office and closing the door behind her.

“Do I?” He asks. She nods, smiling. “Well it’s your fault if I do.”

“Fair enough,” she says, but then her face turns serious. “We’ve had word. Thompson and Westley will be arriving at the farm to extract the weapons in about half an hour.”

“Moment of truth, then.”

“Indeed.”

Steve sighs and drops the pen he’s holding on the desk. “Do you worry that we might be putting these weapons back in the hands of HYDRA?”

“Of course. We’re only banking on the fact that we didn’t give a lot of information about the weapons before the mission and the hope HYDRA wants to remain a secret right now. But yes, I do worry about the risk.”

“Where are we storing them after extraction?”


Steve frowns. “We should destroy them.”

“We’re in the middle of an arms race. There’s no way the U.S. government would allow that to happen.”

He sighs. It feels like the Sokovia Accords all over again; invisible borders getting in the way of the safety of the whole planet.

“We didn’t plant a whole arsenal down there,” she says. “Just three weapons. Enough to peak their interest, but not enough to hurt us if we lose them. And now we let Thompson do his job.” She pauses for a moment. “Most of this battle will be fought with secrets and espionage. It’ll be a lot of sitting and waiting. I know it’s not your type of battlefield, but that’s just how it is.”

“Yeah,” he says. Didn’t Nat try to teach him the same thing? Their mall excursion was the first of many instances where Natasha showed him the advantages of hiding in plain sight, of biding your time, of manipulating your enemies into spilling their deepest, darkest secrets. Weaving and spinning so skillfully that your prey won’t know until it’s too late. And yeah, that’ll never be him; he’s not made for that, but he can certainly respect its place in what they do. He thinks, not for the first time, how much Natasha and Peggy would’ve loved each other. It makes him smile. He looks at her. “I guess I can retire then.”

“Nonsense. Colonel Phillips is a grumpy old man, and now that you’re here, I never have to deal with him.”
He grabs her and pulls her into his lap. He’d never do it if his door weren’t closed, but well, it is. “Is that all you keep me around for?”

She laughs and taps her finger against his chest. “And a few other things.”

*

When they get home, Bucky is waiting for them in the living room. He looks between them and smiles nervously. “I think we should talk about—things. If we can?”

“Of course,” Peggy replies. Steve sits next to Bucky on the couch and Peggy moves to the armchair next to them.

“I told Steve I needed some time to think and sort out,” he smirks, but his eyes are still nervous, “everything that happened last night. So that’s what I did today. And, well. I’d like for it to happen again.”

“Oh,” Steve says, unable to hide his smile in response.

“But I wasn’t kidding last night. I think what we’re doing is fucking crazy. So I think we should probably figure out what that crazy looks like.”

“Ground rules?” Peggy asks.

He nods. “Something like that.”

“You said you’ve had time to think things over. So what’s on your list?”

“Okay, first. Is this the Three Musketeers all the time or…” Bucky trails off.

“Or do we have time one-on-well as well, you mean?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

They both look to Steve, and he realizes he’s been completely silent thus far. “Oh. Well. No, I don’t think it should be all of us all the time. You two would—”

“—kill each other,” Peggy and Bucky say at the same time. They laugh, and it breaks the awkward tension that’s been building since the conversation started.

“My original plan didn’t involve all three of us together,” Peggy said. “So that doesn’t matter to me. But it was,” she looks at Bucky and smiles. “Nice.”

“We take turns, then?” Steve says. “And” he gestures between the three of them. “All together?” Peggy and Bucky nod.

“Alright,” Bucky says. “Second, does the same go for sleeping?”

“Sure,” Peggy says, “but we must get a bigger bed when we’re all together. You’re both gigantic. I almost fell off three times.”

Bucky laughs, sudden and sharp, and Peggy reaches across and smacks his arm.

“Well.” Bucky turns his gaze to Peggy. “Steve said last night he wasn’t gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. And I ain’t either. But if you want to stop this, Marge, you just say the word.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m not trying to ruin anything here, alright?”

Her brows knit together. “I think that goes for all of us. Any of us can say no. At any time.” He opens his mouth to speak but she holds up her hand. “I know what you’re trying to say, James. And I’m sure all of this will take getting used to. But dear,” she leans forward and takes Bucky’s hand. “You have to know that Steve loves both of us.”

He scoffs. “It’s different.”

Steve shakes his head and places his hand on Bucky’s wrist, his fingers brushing Peggy’s. “It’s not, Buck,” he replies. Bucky turns his eyes to Steve, his gaze questioning and full of doubt. So Steve cups his face with his other hand and kisses him softly. “It’s not.”

* * *

The evening passes almost like any other. But this time, there are shared caresses and kisses between all three of them while reheating dinner, while listening to a radio show afterward, Peggy stretched out over both of them on the couch. Around 9, she says she wants to turn in and suggests that Steve should stay with Bucky tonight. So she leaves them, giving each of them a hungry, passionate kiss before she does so, and it makes Steve glaze over watching her kiss Bucky like that.

“Do you wanna?” Bucky asks, his face still flushed from the kiss, and Steve realizes what he means. He nods and follows him upstairs, and Bucky is on him as soon as they shut the door, hands and mouth and teeth.

“God,” Steve says when they finally make it to the bed, their naked bodies sliding against one another. Bucky palms both of their dicks in his right hand, and it feels exquisite, but Steve wants to taste him, wants to feel the weight of Bucky’s cock in his mouth.

He whines when Steve wraps his lips around his shaft. Steve’s never done this before, but he tries to do what he likes done to himself, hoping for the best outcome. It seems to work alright because Bucky gets talkative, gasping and babbling—Fuck, Stevie, yeah—shit, please, God, I’ve wanted—so long, oh, please please please—and Steve could almost come just from that alone, how wanton and gone he sounds just from this simple thing.

When Bucky comes, Steve swallows down what he can and laps up the rest, hot and salty, remembering doing this with Peggy just a few nights ago. He realizes now that she was testing and plotting, and God, Peggy Carter is equal parts devious and incredible.

Steve gets off with Bucky’s spit-slicked hand wrapped around his dick, Bucky kissing and sucking at his neck, ribbons of spunk trailing across their stomachs. Bucky grabs his shirt from the floor and cleans them both off before collapsing bonelessly on top of Steve. They lie like that for several minutes, with Steve tracing invisible circles along Bucky’s back.

Finally Bucky pulls back to look at Steve, resting his chin on Steve’s chest. “When did you know?” Bucky whispers tentatively, like he’s almost too scared to ask.

Steve huffs a laugh. He doesn’t even need to try to rummage around his memories because he remembers it like it was yesterday. “We were 14. You remember when your mom won that radio giveaway and had a little extra cash? She was damn tired of us by that point in the summer.”
Bucky smiles softly. “Yeah.”

“We spent a whole week at Coney Island. You wouldn’t let me get in the water much—”

“You were really sick that year. I didn’t want you exerting yourself.”

“—so I sat on the shoreline with my sketchbook and drew the people and the seagulls. I looked up at one point and you were just coming out of the water. You were tan from a week in the sun and your hair was messy from the saltwater. And you looked… beautiful, Buck. Like a sculpture at the Met. Like… Rodin carved you himself.”

“You always got soft talking about art,” Bucky says.

Steve flicks his ear. “I’m talking about you, asshole.” Bucky laughs, pushing Steve’s hand away before grasping it in his own. “I drew that moment from memory the next night at home after Ma went to bed. And then burned it in case anyone found it. I was so scared you were going to figure it out,” he says, his voice rough to his own ears, remembering the panic he felt.

“I wish I had.”

Steve’s brows rise upward. “Did you know then?”

Bucky tilts his head. “I… it wasn’t a moment for me. I think it was always there, but I didn’t recognize it or know what to call it or know how to act on it.” He takes a deep breath. “And then, you know, you’re a kid and you hear people spit the words ‘queer’ and ‘faggot’ like they’re the worst thing someone could possibly be, you know? And you were always so good, Steve, always doin’ the right thing. So I knew there was no way you’d ever do something so dirty.”

Steve wraps his arms around Bucky and squeezes him, wanting to chase away the sad bitterness in his voice.

“It wasn’t too hard to push it away. I liked dames, and there were plenty of them to keep me busy. And whenever you’d let me drag you out to go dancin’ with a couple of gals, I could squint and imagine it was the real thing. But if I’d figured out that you felt the same?” He whistles.

“And miss out on all of those awful, cringeworthy double dates?”

Bucky laughs. “Hey, I was tryin’. I wanted you to be happy. Wanted it more than anything.” He shrugs. “I guess there’s no changing the past, though.”

Steve’s stomach plummets, and he winces, averting his eyes at Bucky’s words, cursing himself for his complete lack of a poker face.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Bucky grabs his chin and turns his face to look at him.

Was this the time? Was this the time to tell him everything?

“Steve? You’re scarin’ me.” His eyes are wide with worry, and if he doesn’t tell him now he’s not sure if Bucky will ever forgive him.

“Buck, I’ve gotta tell you something.”

His brows furrow. “Alright.”

“I’ve gotta tell you something. And it’s… well, it’s shocking. And very difficult to believe, and if I hadn’t seen the things I’ve seen then I wouldn’t believe it. So if it—if it takes you time to process or
even if you don’t believe me or get upset, I understand. Alright?”

“Just fuckin’ say it, Rogers.”

He takes a deep breath. “A week after I thought you’d died, I fought Red Skull on a plane heading toward New York with very powerful A-bombs. I took care of him, but the plane was on a charted course, and I couldn’t turn it around. So I flew it into the ocean. And I stayed there, in the ice.” He takes a deep breath. “For 70 years.”

“What?”

“I was thawed out and woken up in the year 2011. I… I had to learn to live in a very different world, and I ended up fighting bigger and badder things than even our war gave us. And then—and then I met you. Well. I met the Winter Soldier.” He pauses. “Your mission was to kill me.”

“Steve,” he whispers, pained.

“But you eventually got better—like now—you started to remember who you really were. And there are specifics, of course, so many things to tell you about some day. But at some point I had to go back… in time,” God, it sounds dumb, “for a—a mission. And you told me to not come back. You told me to find Peggy and to find you and to not come back.”

Bucky doesn’t say anything. He looks shell-shocked, wide-eyed, spooked; the same way he looked when Steve found him strapped to Zola’s table. He lifts himself off of Steve’s chest and falls next to him, facing the ceiling.

“Bucky?”

He is still, quiet, for several minutes. And then he says, softly, “That’s how you knew where to find me. In Nigeria.”

Steve nods. “Yeah.”

“I tried to kill you.”

“Don’t—don’t worry about that. I obviously survived.”

Bucky takes several deep breaths. “I can’t. I—I need some time to…” he trails off.

“Yeah, of course,” Steve replies. Bucky lies there for several more minutes, not moving. “Do you want me to go?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “No, I don’t.”

“Okay.” He turns over and reaches out, his fingers centimeters from Bucky’s skin. “Can I hold you?”

He closes his eyes and nods.

* *

**

Bucky is screaming in his sleep. It’s the first time Steve’s already there the moment it starts, and he jolts awake, a gasp escaping his lips from the shock. When he realizes what’s going on, he wraps himself around Bucky, who’s curled in on himself like a question mark.
He’s still shaking long after he stops screaming. He doesn’t say anything either. And Steve worries that he was wrong in telling him so soon.

Neither of them sleep.
“Let me talk to him tonight,” Peggy says in the car the next morning. “It might help him to talk to someone who’s also had to deal with this from the other side.”

So Steve sequesters himself upstairs that night after leaving them with a kiss on the forehead each. He’s got the radio and a sketchbook to keep him company, as well as a couple of cookies that Bucky made with Josephine that day. He pulls from his memories, drawing Bucky from that day at the beach with pastels, blue sky and murky ocean behind him. He sketches Peggy the night he asked her to marry him, emerald green skirt spiraled around her mid-twirl, her cheeks flushed and her smile bright.

It’s late when he finishes, his eyes tired from strain and lack of sleep from the night before. But when he leaves the room to get ready for bed, the house is quiet, so he decided to go downstairs to check on them.

He finds Peggy and Bucky asleep on the couch, Peggy sprawled on top of him, her head on his chest. Bucky’s metal arm is holding her, and his right arm is dangling to the side. There are crumpled handkerchiefs on the coffee table and two half-finished cups of tea. Warmth spreads through his chest at the sight of them, and even though he’s beyond exhausted at that point, he quietly grabs a chair from the dining room, and sits down for a final sketch. He pencils their intertwined legs, her loose hair, Bucky’s soft, open mouth. He highlights the glow of the side lamp reflecting off of Bucky’s arm and the way Peggy’s lashes fan against her cheek. When he finishes, he grabs the blanket from the armchair and drapes it over them before turning off the light. He ignores the desire to touch either of them, not wanting to disturb Bucky’s sleep after such a rough night, and heads back upstairs to finally sleep himself.

* *

* *

They both wake him up the next morning with kisses and touches in the soft morning sun.

“Hey,” Steve says against Bucky’s lips when he’s awake enough to put more than two words together. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” he says and then kisses him again. “Yeah. Marge set me straight.”

“Is that the right word to use?” Peggy asks with a grin.

“Hush,” Bucky responds softly and then kisses her, too.

* *

* *

“He wants to see the other Steve,” Peggy whispers while Bucky’s in the shower.

“Really?” Steve asks, brows creased in concerned.

“Yes. I understand it. I think about him sometimes, too.”
Steve… doesn’t. Oddly enough. Steve is him and he is Steve and it hurts his head trying to think about what all of that implies. “What did you tell him?”

“I said that he and I could make a trip after HYDRA is defeated. If he somehow, God forbid, got back in the hands of Dr. Zola, him knowing the location of an extra super soldier would be less than desirable. Even knowing what he knows now may be dangerous.”

He sighs. “I had to tell him.”

“I know, my love.”

* *

“I panicked a bit,” Bucky says. It’s the afternoon now, and they’re sitting on the back porch with hot cider and sandwiches. “Even ignoring the crazy time travel shit, it was hard to wrap my mind around you being here at the same time as—as the other version of you.” He takes a bite of his sandwich.

“Yeah,” Steve says softly.

Bucky shakes his head. “I don’t know, I kept thinking about Steve — the other Steve — under ice somewhere, and that—” he hesitates, nervous to continue, “— that you’d taken his place. Living his life.”

Peggy places her hand over Bucky’s but looks at Steve. “I had those feelings at first too,” she says. “I know. I didn’t act like it. I was so happy to have you here, and you were dealing with so much. I didn’t want to add to your burden. I had to remind myself that you’re not a… science fiction clone. You’re the same person; you’ve already lived what he’s lived.”

“And Peggy told me some of the things you did and the stuff you went through. And I know—I know—that I would’ve told you the same thing, to go back and worry about your own happiness for once. It’s easier to accept two versions of the same Steve knowing that that Bucky would’ve made the same decision as me.” He gives a weak smile. “I also know you wouldn’t’ve gone back unless you had a selfless reason for doing it ‘cause that’s just how you’ve always been. It’s fuckin’ annoying sometimes, but it’s you.”

Steve’s brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“Peggy told me that you didn’t change your future by coming here. She called it an alternate timeline. So hey, you rescuing me here ain’t doing jackshit for Bucky Barnes over there. But he knew that you wouldn’t come here just for your own happiness. Coming back to get your girl wouldn’t be enough. But asking you to rescue me, well. You weren’t going to say no to a reality where you could save me from HYDRA.”

Steve tightens his jaw, thinking back to his conversation with the other Bucky after Tony’s funeral. Steve had been waffling, thinking about backing out, until Bucky convinced him that he could make a difference to another Bucky if he went back.

“I see you getting a little upset over there,” Peggy says.

“I’m just thinking about the jerk I call my best pal.” He eyes Bucky. “Both of them.”

“It’s not either Bucky’s fault that they know you so well. You’re here now and you have me,” she
puts her feet in his lap, “and you have him,” she squeezes Bucky’s hand, “and bringing down HYDRA is going to change the world.”

*

**

Thompson returns from France the following week.

“Well?” Peggy asks. She and Steve are sitting across from him in a briefing room.

He hands her his report before speaking. “The weapons are all accounted for, though he did ask several questions about where they’d be stored. Said he was worried about the proper storage of the energy source. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s some sort of break-in soon wherever they’ll be kept.”

“We’ve got that taken care of, but thank you for the warning. What else?”

He smiles wolfishly. “I made a couple of comments in passing, stuff that’s right up HYDRA’s alley. People not knowing what’s good for them, that sort of thing. He asked if I wanted to grab a beer next week. We’ll see if he’s already ready to try to recruit or if he needs a little more coaxing. Either way…”

“Either way, you’ve made progress already,” Peggy says hopefully.

*

**

November continues as a meandering, winding path, and the Three Musketeers (as Bucky likes to call them) acclimate to this new thing between them. They buy a new bed, the biggest they can, and give their old one to a family that Josephine knows. They finally fall into a training routine, Bucky teaching both of them HYDRA fighting tactics and maneuvers. At one point, he makes a comment about Peggy’s penchant for knives during the war, and she responds wistfully that she hasn’t thrown knives in years. So the two of them set up targets in the basement and incorporate knives in her hand-to-hand training. Peggy grins from ear-to-ear every time they finish, collapsing onto the mats in a satisfied sprawl.

They learn each other in whole new ways, especially Peggy and Bucky. It’s amusing to watch them circle around each other with barbs and teasing, then finally with gazes and touching. The first time Peggy sinks down onto Bucky’s cock, Steve is out of his mind with how damn beautiful they look together. He doesn’t even want to join them, he just jerks off to the view from the other side of the bed, come splattering up his chest as Bucky thrusts inside of her, whispering ‘honey’ against her ear.

Bucky quickly realizes the underlying dynamic between Peggy and Steve, how she guides him, how he yields to her. He asks Steve about it one time while Peggy is taking a bath upstairs. His cheeks flush and he shrugs. “It grounds me,” he replies. “It clears my head.”

“Ah,” Bucky says softly and then throws him a half-smile before shrugging himself. “I could’ve seen the appeal once upon a time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Little Steve Rogers bossin’ me around when I got home from the docks? I mean, you basically did it anyway, but this version sounds a lot more fun.”
“Oh,” Steve responds, blushing even harder. “Is that... is that something you want now?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Nah. Not as fun when Zola’s the boss, is it?”

Steve takes his hand. “He’s not anymore.”

Bucky nods, smiling sadly. “I know. But I don’t always remember that.”

*

Bucky gazes at him sometimes when he thinks Steve’s not looking, eyes dark and contemplative. It happens more now that Bucky knows the truth. He never says anything, never asks the dozens of questions that Peggy did about the future or how time travel works. He just looks at Steve in a far off manner, and Steve worries.

“We can talk, Buck.” Steve whispers one night, the two of them lying in Bucky’s bedroom. “If there’s anything you want to know about... about any of it.”

Bucky shakes his head, averting his gaze. “I don’t want to know.”

“Oh,” Steve says, hurt creeping into his voice. Bucky must hear it because he turns to face him again.

“No, Stevie, it’s just—it’s hard enough to be in this reality sometimes. It takes a lot to work through my filters. I can’t muddle that up with...” he gestures roundly, “all of that.”

“Alright,” Steve says, pulling him closer, sounding maudlin to his own ears.

“Jeez, punk,” Bucky replies, his smile suddenly too bright. A deflection. “Just let me enjoy you in the here and now.”

Steve opens his mouth to object, but Bucky presses their lips together. He kisses his mouth, open and hungry, he whispers “sweetheart” against his neck, achingly sweet. So Steve gives in. He gives in just this once.

*

It’s Thanksgiving before they know it. Bucky cooks for two days straight, and the house smells of fresh sage and rosemary. They invite Howard and Jarvis and Ana. They invite Josephine, too, though she only stays for a few minutes. She leaves behind a basket of croissants before she says goodbye, and they’re so good that Howard asks if she’s single.

“Seriously, I’m very wealthy!” He calls out after her when she heads toward the door.

“Leave that poor woman alone,” Peggy says, coming up next to Howard’s chair.

“She didn’t seem to mind,” Bucky chimes in with a grin.

“She doesn’t know his reputation.”

“Aw, I would’ve changed my ways for you, Peg,” Howard responds, throwing an arm around her waist.
“Not that you had a chance before, Mr. Stark, but you had zero chance once Captain Rogers returned,” Jarvis says.

Howard glares at Steve playfully before taking a swig of gin. “Yeah, I guess no one has a chance with Peggy Carter with him around.”

Steve looks up and sees Peggy and Bucky sharing a small, private smile.

There’s food (so much food) and drinking and dancing in the living room to Glenn Miller. Bucky complains about his super metabolism keeping him sober, and then Howard gets a far-off look and tells him five minutes later he can take care of that.

“I’ll have some behind the bar for the New Year’s party,” he says. “A Christmas present for you and Cap.”

“What party?” Peggy asks.

“Having a small get-together for a few hundred people at my place on the North Shore. Booze, dancing, debauchery—but don’t tell Peggy. You’re all invited.”

“That’s really nice, Howard,” Steve says, “but it’s too risky until we get rid of HYDRA. Bucky keeps a low profile right now. Big party at a Stark mansion would be too much.”

Howard honest-to-god pouts before Ana sits up. “You could always have a masquerade? That way no one will know who he is.”

“I don’t know—”


“There you have it, Cap,” Howard says. “You’re not going to stop this man from having a night of fun, are ya?”

* *

Thompson is officially recruited to HYDRA at the end of November.

“They’re busy,” he says to Steve and Peggy one snowy morning. “They’ve got one person on Eisenhower’s transition team and are aiming for another for the cabinet.”

Peggy sighs. “Any idea how large the organization is at this point?”

“No idea. The conversation was pretty American-centric. There were seven of us there, but no Zola, so who knows how many more of them there are. I do have the impression that infiltrating the U.S. is their highest priority, which makes sense.”

It does. The U.S. is a powerhouse now that the war is over, and Dr. Zola himself is stationed at the Pentagon. “That probably means most members are here in the U.S.”

“Any word on the Winter Soldier?”

“Yeah. They’re pissed and they’re looking. But it doesn’t seem like they’ve got any leads.”
Steve exhales a breath he didn’t realize he was holding.

* *

More information creeps in throughout December: names, a couple of meeting locations, recruiting efforts. Steve is surprised how much intel Jack is collecting at such a quick rate.

“It’s just rubbin’ elbows, Cap. Get a few drinks in these HYDRA pricks and they can’t shut up.” He says with a cocky grin. “Speaking of pricks, they’ve even got call girls spying for them.”

“You mean like a Dottie Underwood situation?” Peggy asks, frowning in concern. From what Peggy told him, Dottie was trained in the same program as Natasha. She was vicious, lethal, and, of course, well-versed in spinning webs. Howard was, of course, one of her targets.

“No, this didn’t sound that advanced. At least not from what they told me.”

It’s mid-month when he shares that Dr. Zola has a small research facility outside DC. “Westley heads there sometimes on the weekends. He says it allows Zola to take fewer trips to the U.S.S.R.”

Steve thinks of the Siberian facility: the cryo chambers, the chair that warped Bucky’s mind. His blood turns cold.


Thompson shrugs. “Both, probably. I don’t know for sure.”

“Any chance of you getting in there?” Steve asks. If Zola is treating it as a new hub, there’s a possibility that records are stored there. Maybe they could get their hands on member names or other incriminating evidence.

“Not anytime soon,” he replies. “I’m not a scientist, so it’d be suspicious for me to sniff around. Give me a few months and I’ll casually work in an interest to see it. Westley loves to brag though. He might let something interesting slip.”

“Alright,” Steve says. It’ll have to do for now.

* *

Steve didn’t care much for Christmas as a kid. The cold made him sick, the lack of money made him fret about getting something nice for Bucky or his ma. All of that changed when he joined the Avengers. Tony made a big production of it every year: 15-foot Christmas trees, Secret Santa, a feast that included everyone’s favorite food and alcohol. He’d dress up like Santa and try to convince everyone to sit in his lap and tell him what they wanted under the tree that year.

Nat used to use the term *found family* to describe what they were to each other. And Christmas with the Avengers was when he felt that the most. After Thanos, there weren’t anymore showy spectacles in Midtown Manhattan. It was just him and Nat and whatever stray hero was around the compound that year. She’d put up a little tree and make him watch Christmas movies, her feet tucked under his legs on the couch. One year, she got him a sketchbook and a set of charcoal, and he gave her a new pair of ballet shoes, and he realized they were telling each other the same thing: to take time for themselves in the midst of all the turmoil and heartbreak.
So he appreciates Christmas now in a way he never did before the war. He’s glad for it when both Peggy and Bucky get glossy-eyed over string lights and eggnog and picking out a tree. Bucky hangs up mistletoe in a new place every day, trying to catch both of them unaware with soft kisses and smiles. One time, Steve moves it himself and ends up surprising Peggy so thoroughly that they have sex right against the bathroom sink, her legs wrapped around him as he thrusts inside of her.

So, yeah. Merry Christmas, indeed.

* *

Things take a downward turn when Bucky wakes up tired and sullen on Christmas Eve from the roughest night he’s had in a while.

“I don’t want to ruin Christmas,” he whispers against Peggy’s shoulder in the kitchen.

“You’re not ruining anything, love. Let’s just rest today, hmmm?”

“But—”

“Uh-uh.” She shakes her head. “You’re going to eat some oatmeal and then you’re going to sleep and then we’re going to laze about all day while Steve takes care of us.” She turns her head and smiles at Steve. He huffs a laugh.

It’s a sad, melancholic sort of day, but they make the most of it, snuggled together on the couch under thick blankets, listening to Christmas tunes on the radio. It bleeds into Christmas morning, but there are smiles when they open presents. Bucky opens up a stack of pulp novels, a couple of cookbooks, and a pair of soft leather gloves to help hide his metal hand. Peggy receives knives, several of them. One is even a pen that turns into a knife (that one is from Steve), and she gives a rapturous, devious smile when she realizes what it is. She also gets a pair of stockings from Bucky — *sorry for ruining your last pair* — and a bottle of her favorite wine.

Steve cleaned up his sketches of Peggy and Bucky and had them framed, and he gifts them to the unknowing models after they’ve opened everything else.

Bucky’s eyes soften, and he chokes out, “Stevie,” recognizing the importance of the moment that Steve drew. Peggy’s face lights up beautifully, and she hugs him tightly.

They finally pull Steve out to the garage, Bucky holding his hands over Steve’s eyes so he won’t peek. When he opens then, he sees that the garage has been transformed into an art studio, with a long table filled with paints and brushes, canvasses, pencils and charcoal, and a stack of sketchbooks. There’s an easel with a canvas already set up, and on it are two hearts painted in very different styles, one from each of them.

“This is incredible,” Steve whispers around a lump in his throat. He wraps his arms around both of them, kissing their foreheads.

It’s a quiet and calm Christmas Day, but Steve has no complaints.

* *

* *
They drive to Howard’s on New Year’s Eve morning, the North Shore barren against the December sky. Jarvis is waiting for them when they arrive, standing in front of the largest, most ostentatious home Steve has ever seen. *The apple definitely won’t fall far from the tree,* he thinks.

Jarvis smiles. “Mr. Stark is with a, erm, business associate. I thought it may be best to take you around back so Mr. Carter is not seen.”

“Alright,” Bucky replies, but they’re immediately interrupted by a string of women in various stages of undress pouring out the front door and heading to the garden to the right, despite the fact that it’s 40 degrees.

“Business associate?” Peggy asks, her brow arched.

“Erm, well, he’s securing entertainment for the evening,” Jarvis says. Peggy rolls her eyes.

A final woman exits, a bit older, seemingly in charge. She has red hair and redder lips and a long fur coat held at her neck with her hand. Howard follows her and gives her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Celine.”

“Of course, darling. We’ll see you tonight.” She turns and sees them standing there. “Oh, looks like your guests have already begun to arrive.”

Howard waves them away. “Don’t mind them. They’re not guests.”

Celine runs an appreciative glance over Bucky and then, after a moment, does the same to Steve.

“Can we go inside now?” Peggy asks, scowling.

Steve laughs. “Yes, Peggy.”

They have lunch with Howard and Ana and then Jarvis shows them to their rooms, which are diagonal from each other at the end of a very long hallway.

Bucky throws himself on their bed after Jarvis leaves. “Can’t wait to sneak out in the middle of the night to return to my room like one of Howard’s girls downstairs,” he says. “I just need a satin robe falling off my shoulder to complete the look.”

“You rang?” Peggy asks from the wardrobe, a hanger holding a pale pink robe rests on her index finger.

Bucky barks a laugh. “Leave it to Howard.”

* * *

Bucky’s downright bouncy the rest of the day, smiling so much his face probably hurts, touching both of them every chance he gets, and it’s infectious to see Bucky so happy and bright.

At nightfall, Ana comes and grabs Peggy to get ready — *like old times,* she says — leaving Bucky and Steve to fend for themselves. They both change into tuxes, Bucky’s newly acquired from a tailoring session with Jarvis. He hangs a white tie around his neck, looks at the mirror, and then looks at Steve.

“You know, I don’t actually know how to tie a fuckin’ bowtie,” he says.
“Here,” Steve says, getting up from the bed. He stands in front of him and reaches for the tie.

“How do you know how to do this?”

Steve raises an eyebrow and tries not to grin. “You saying I’m not a fancy guy?”

He huffs. “Sure, pal.” Then he looks down at both of them and cracks a smile. “A couple of Brooklyn schlubs in tuxedos. Who would’ve thought?”

Steve kisses him then, the bowtie only halfway finished, but he doesn’t care. Bucky looks so handsome with his slicked hair and stiff collar and the bluest eyes Steve’s ever seen. He thinks of years wasted, both of them too stupid to go after what they wanted, and now Steve can kiss him and hold him and love him every day for the rest of their lives. When he pulls back, Bucky’s looking at him like he hung the moon and stars, and his chest constricts under the warm weight of his gaze.

The door suddenly opens and Bucky jumps back because, of course, they’re not at home and only one other person should be seeing that.

“It’s just me, loves,” he hears Peggy say, and when Steve turns to face her, his mouth falls slack. She is… a vision. Her dress is black, sleeveless, and cut to allow an ample amount of cleavage. It’s form-fitting until midway down her thigh, where the skirt flares and opens to reveal an inner lining of burgundy ruffles at the knee, and more ruffles trail down to where the dress falls right above her ankle. She’s already wearing her mask, shiny and black with a large, dark red feather on the side, curling over her coiffed hair.

“Shit, honey,” Bucky whispers behind him, his voice full of awe.

“Not too shabby, eh?” she responds with a smirk.

She’s not wearing lipstick yet, a sign of permission for Steve or Bucky to kiss her senseless, so Steve steps forward and does just that. She moans sweetly against his lips before he takes her hands in his and steps back to look her over again. ”You look stunning.”

“So do you,” she says, her eyes raking over him with appreciation. “Where are your masks?”

“Haven’t gotten that far,” Bucky says. He picks up the ends of the forgotten tie and gestures for Steve to continue. Steve finishes him up and Bucky dons a white jacket before walking over to a box on the bed. “Jarvis helped me find something that would cover most of my face.”

He pulls it out and steps in front of the mirror to put it on. It’s the face of a wolf, Steve realizes, made of silver metal, an illusion of fur carved into its surface, complete with ears and a snout. He’s right; it does cover most of his face and if Steve didn’t know him so intimately, he’d have no idea who he was. Then Steve takes in the complete look— the mask and his white tuxedo— and his breath catches before he can stop himself.

“What?” Bucky asks.

“Nothing,” Steve says, trying to smile, brushing past him to find his own mask in the suitcase. He tries his best to honor Bucky’s wishes to keep the future where it belongs. He shouldn’t have reacted that way.

“Oh… you can tell me—if you want. It’s fine.”

He turns to face him. “The people who helped you—him— recover called him the White Wolf.”
He turns back toward the mirror. He looks at himself for several moments before squaring his shoulders. “The White Wolf,” he repeats softly, like he’s trying it on for size.

*

**

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Peggy,” Howard exclaims, removing a cigar from his mouth.

“Hello to you, too,” she responds as they walk toward him, her arm draped over Steve’s.

“Promise me one dance tonight. Please.”

“Very well,” she says, accepting the kiss to her cheek.

“Two?”

“Don’t press your luck. I got several new knives for Christmas, and I’m not afraid to use them.”


He takes them to the bar and pulls the bartender aside. “These are the two gentlemen I told you about. Make sure they’re taken care of.”

“Yes, Mr. Stark,” the man says, and pulls a bottle from below the counter. It’s unmarked, except for a red star painted on the glass.

“What is it?” Steve asks.

“Scotch, I believe, sir.” So Steve orders his on the rocks and Bucky orders his neat.

“To getting drunk,” Bucky says. They clink glasses and take a sip. “Will it work?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Steve replies, suddenly hoping Howard actually tried this out in some form or fashion before using them as guinea pigs. “If we don’t die.”

It does work. Steve Rogers gets intoxicated for the first time since Thor shared the good stuff from Asgard, and it settles over him like a nice warm blanket, his body loose and relaxed. The mask hides most of Bucky’s face, he can barely even see his mouth, but he can tell from the way his shoulders ease up as he sways to the band’s music that he gets there as well.

They take turns dancing with Peggy, though Bucky probably dances two with her for every one that Steve does. That works out just fine for him. Bucky and Peggy are much better dancers than he is, and Bucky needs tonight more than he does. He ends up taking a lot of the slower numbers and revels in the feel of her body pressed against his and the sweet smile she gives him every time their eyes meet behind their masks.

At one point, Ana asks him to dance, and she spends the entire song waxing so poetically about Peggy that he wonders if she loves her the same way he does, happily married to Jarvis or not.

That leads him down a whole new alcohol-induced rabbit hole of thoughts when he sits back down: Is Peggy attracted to women too? Is that why she was okay with Bucky and me? She never said, but he also never asked. But surely she would tell him if she wanted him to know, right?

He’s deciding to just leave it alone when Bucky comes up to him, pulling him out of his reverie.
He’s holding two drinks and he hands one to Steve before sitting next to him.

“You alright there, buddy?”

Steve nods. “Yeah, I’m fine. Got lost in thought. Where’s Peggy?”

“Finally dancing with Howard.” He takes a sip.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asks, his voice softening.

“Great,” he responds, a hint of a smile visible beneath his mask. His hair has fallen over his mask and he pushes it back. “Really great. I didn’t realize how much I needed tonight.” He presses his leg against Steve’s and leans in to whisper, the snout of his mask brushing against his cheek. “Wish I could dance with you.”

He exhales shakily. “Me too, Buck.” The ballroom is full at this point, all 200 guests plus all of the women from that morning too. No one is paying attention to them in this far corner of the room, but neither of them is dumb enough to try anything here.

“Let’s sneak off when Peggy gets done.” His breath is warm on Steve’s neck. It makes him shiver. “There’s a record player in the room.”

“And miss the countdown?” Steve asks, though he’s already convinced.

“We got a fuckin’ watch, don’t we?” He discreetly rubs his leg against Steve’s, and just that alone is making him hard. “We don’t need anybody else to ring in the new year. Just us.”

He takes a deep breath. “Go on. I’ll wait for Peggy, and then we’ll come up.”

He finishes his drink and sets the glass on the chair. “Aye-aye, Captain.” Steve watches him saunter off.

Peggy’s flushed when she returns, her chest heaving after such a spirituous song, and she sinks down ungracefully next to Steve. “I don’t think I’ve stopped dancing the entire night.”

He leans down and kisses her shoulder. “Bucky went upstairs.”

“Oh?”

He looks at her. “He wants us to join him.”

“Oh.”

*  

**

Bucky’s already got Tommy Dorsey playing when they get up to the room, but you wouldn’t know it from the hallway.

“Are the rooms soundproof?” Steve asks, taking off his mask. He couldn’t even hear the band downstairs.

“It’s Howard’s house,” Peggy replies. “Of course they are.” She falls into the armchair in the corner of the room. “You two dance for a bit,” she says, smiling. “You deserve it.”
Bucky’s mask is off and his tie is undone when he pulls Steve into his arms. If Steve closes his eyes, he can imagine they’re back downstairs, dancing with everyone else, not a soul caring that the two of them are together. There’s a twist in his heart, knowing that they could’ve done that exact thing in a different place and time, that he could’ve done that with the other Bucky if he’d known then what he knows now.

“You always liked this song,” Bucky says against his ear, interrupting his thoughts.

“Who doesn’t like Frank Sinatra?” he responds.

* * * * *

Steve will never be over the sounds Bucky makes when Steve pushes inside him for the first time. It’s sometimes a whine or a soft groan, but it always sounds like he just can’t help it, like it’s escaping from his lips without his knowledge. This time he exhales, “Fuck, sweetheart,” like he’s overwrought with the sensation of it. Or maybe it’s the combination of Steve sliding his dick into him when Bucky’s cock is already buried inside Peggy, all three of them pressed together side-by-side.

Steve loses himself in the hot grip of Bucky’s body, in the sounds of Peggy crying out as she comes, in the warm buzz still coursing through him. He goes over the edge right before Bucky does, Bucky’s nose buried in Peggy’s neck, his moans muffled against her skin. They lie there for several moments after Bucky tosses his condom to the floor, tracing each other’s skin with soft fingers. Peggy turns over and kisses both of them, softly, slowly. He still tastes like her from earlier, but she never seems to mind.

They’ve just finished cleaning up when there’s a very loud cheer from downstairs, noisy enough to be heard in their quiet little room.

“Happy fuckin’ New Year,” Bucky says with a broad grin.

“Indeed,” Peggy responds before kissing both of them again. They lie in bed for a while, Peggy between them, before Bucky yawns twice in one minute.

“I should go to sleep,” he says.
“Mm, no, stay,” Peggy whines.

“Bed’s too small, honey,” he says, but then he grins when he stands up, making a show of putting on the pink robe from earlier.

Peggy giggles. “Oh, James.”

He ties the sash in a bow before loosening the collar down and over his right shoulder.

“Goodnight, sugars,” he says with a high-pitched voice.

“Get out of here,” Steve says before throwing a pillow at him.

Peggy smiles softly when Bucky closes the door and snuggles closer to Steve. “I can’t believe this is our life sometimes.”

“Me either. I don’t think I’ll ever believe it.” He pulls her even closer to him and rubs circles on her back until they fall asleep, tangled together, her hand over his heart. Tomorrow he’ll sneak into Bucky’s room and hold him until he wakes with a groggy smile and sour kisses. But for now, he’ll lie in her arms and sleep soundly.

* *

There’s a knock on the door early the next morning, the sunlight barely peeking through the curtains.

“God, who is it?” Peggy grumbles. Steve throws on his pants from last night and walks over to open the door.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Captain Rogers,” Jarvis says, pausing at Steve’s state of undress. Jarvis himself is in a robe and pajamas. “But there’s an urgent call for Ms. Carter.”

She sits up and clutches the sheet to her chest. “Who is it?”

“Jack Thompson.”

Steve whips around to look at Peggy, whose eyes are wide as saucers. “I’ll be right there,” she says, her voice stricken.

She grabs her own robe from the armchair and ties the sash while Steve throws on an undershirt. They rush out into the hall and Jarvis takes them to the nearest phone.

“Peggy Carter,” she says when she picks it up. After a moment, her eyes look to Steve’s, stricken, her face crumpling. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Jack.” Her voice waivers, and she closes her eyes as if she’s trying to collect herself. “How long has your grandmother been ill?”

As soon as she says the words, Steve is sprinting down the hall to Bucky’s room because calling in to visit a sick grandmother is Thompson’s code for HYDRA has the Winter Soldier.

HYDRA has the Winter Soldier.

He opens the door, steps inside, and the sight before him makes him stagger and fall to his knees. The pink robe is discarded on the floor in front of him. The room is wrecked, overturned furniture, broken lamps, punch-holes in the wall. HYDRA has the Winter Soldier, but he didn’t let them take him without a fight.
Until they scrambled his brain with 11 choice words, and then he would’ve walked out as docile as a lamb.

“Steve?” He hears Peggy’s voice from the hall. “Oh, no,” she says coming behind him. “Oh, Steve.”

He vaguely feels her hand against the back of his neck, and she’s speaking, calling out for Jarvis, but then her voice fades away, in and out.

Get Howard — Rose — a helicopter — suit — soundproof — Zola — Colonel — I don’t care if it’s New Year’s Day.

“Peggy?” He is still kneeling on the ground. The sun is brighter now.

“Yes, darling.”

He looks at her and her hair is a mess and she didn’t take off her makeup from last night so there are streaks of black down her face from her tears and she’s crying because— Bucky is gone, Bucky is gone after everything — everything — all of the planning and the rescue and the recovery and the healing, and, and what they’ve shared, the three of them, all of that has been erased because he’s just fucking gone all over again and how many times is he going to lose him?

“How many times?” he asks, and he realizes that he’s crying now. She kneels before him and takes him in her arms and he presses his face into her neck. She doesn’t say anything, just allows him to collect himself. It takes him a while for the sobs to ebb away, for his mind to clear, which shames him; he’s Captain America and he’s glued to the floor, shaking and sobbing like a civilian.

When he finally comes to, he takes a deep, shaky breath and wipes the tears from his eyes and cheeks. “I heard you talking to Jarvis.” His voice is hoarse. “What’s already been done?”

“Howard will fly us to Camp LeHigh in his helicopter. Rose will go to our place and collect our things: your suit and shield and my weapons. She will meet us at Camp Lehigh. We’ll then take a plane to DC, assuming that’s where he’ll be. I’ll be in contact with Colonel Phillips soon.”

“Do we have the location of the DC facility?” He stands up and holds out a hand to help her up. She takes it.

“Jack said he didn’t know which hospital his grandmother was staying in, but he’d leave the location with Rose when he receives it if we want to send flowers.”

He sighs. “We’re flying blind then.”

“A lot can happen in the next couple of hours.”

Jarvis appears at the door and gives Steve a sad, pitiful look before addressing Peggy. “I’ve informed Howard. Ana is working on procuring the finalized guest list, though how anyone would’ve recognized him with the mask on is beyond me.”

Steve runs yesterday through his memory. Bucky didn’t wear his mask when he left their room, did he? But he definitely wore it the rest of the night. Did anyone—

He looks up sharply. “The woman yesterday morning. Celine. She saw him. She looked at him.”

Peggy gasps. “Jack said they were hiring escorts to do their dirty work. Of course, of course they were targeting Howard. We need to bring her in for interrogation.”
“We need to go now. Howard is a part of S.H.I.E.L.D. Let him handle Celine. I’ll fly the chopper.”

“Are you up for it, Steve?”

He tightens his jaw. “I’ll have to be.”

* *

Jack is waiting for them when they arrive to Camp LeHigh.

“You get us a location?” Steve asks.

“I got you one better. An invitation. We can Trojan Horse this thing if we play our cards right.” He looks at Peggy. “But that depends on you, Carter. Is it time to take me out?”

Peggy looks at him, and Steve gives a single nod; he’s tired of espionage and backdoor meetings. He wants to do this his way now.

* *

Colonel Phillips arranges for a car to meet them when they arrive to D.C., and Steve and Peggy crawl into the trunk, the two of them pressed tightly together, Peggy’s arms around him. Jack drives them to the facility; it takes them an hour from the base, and the trunk is a mixture of uncomfortable body heat and cold January air.

“We’re going to get him,” Peggy whispers against his ear, holding his hand tightly. “He’s not lost, alright? We’re going to get him.” He doesn’t respond; she doesn’t want him to. Steve just squeezes his eyes shut and breathes deeply, allowing the hum of the engine to numb his mind.

The car finally stops and Steve hears muffled voices. He holds his breath, waiting for the trunk door to open and give them away, but it doesn’t. Thompson drives forward, and he breathes a sigh of relief. Bucky’s first extraction was so carefully planned, and here they are, flying by the seat of their pants, praying that this rescue, scraped together with duct tape and hope, is going to work.

The car stops, the driver door opens and shuts, and, after a few agonizing seconds, he hears two distant slaps on the roof of the car. That means that whatever is waiting for Steve and Peggy is manageable for the two of them to take themselves. They wait a few minutes before Peggy asks if they’re ready, and then Steve unlatches the trunk slowly and exits as silently as possible. She follows after him, landing softly on her feet.

They’re alone in a small garage, surrounded by four other cars. Peggy takes out her knife and makes quick work of slashing their tires. They move to the door. He nods to Peggy, and she opens it quickly, allowing Steve to step into the doorframe and grab the only guard that is there back into the garage before the guy can even blink. Peggy shuts the door behind them with a soft click, and he knocks the guy out in seconds. She’s already pulling out a pair of handcuffs, and of course, they should be taking these pricks into custody, offering plea deals to get information. He was so singularly focused on Bucky that it didn’t even cross his mind. He drags the body over to a nearby pole, and she cuffs him to it.

He opens the door, pulls out his shield, and steps forward with Peggy locking into step behind him. He’s not expecting much HYDRA presence here at this point. Bucky could only have been here a
couple of hours, assuming they drove here from Long Island, so there couldn’t have been much time for many members to arrive. Westley’s relationship with both Dr. Zola and his penchant for spilling information that makes him seem important is probably the only reason that Thompson knows.

The space is filled with things Steve has seen at other HYDRA facilities: lab tables and medical beds with thick leather straps. There’s a half-completed cryostasis chamber to the left and Steve’s blood turns cold when he sees it, stopping in his tracks. Would they have stored Bucky right here under their noses if Thompson hadn’t gotten them here?

“To the right,” Peggy whispers, interrupting his thoughts, and he turns and sees a two-way mirror looking into another room. And there is Bucky, strapped to a chair, with Dr. Zola sitting in front of him. Thompson, Westley, and another man are standing to the side, talking to each other, Westley gesturing toward Bucky like he’s explaining what’s going on. Bucky isn’t struggling, Steve’s not even sure why he’s bound. He’s slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, and Steve knows he’s their soldier once more.

There’s a speaker button below the window, and Steve moves forward to turn it on, making sure the sound is down low in case there’s any echo within the room. Westley is speaking.

“The protocol is to erase the asset’s memory before assignment. It helps him focus on the mission. Dr. Zola doesn’t have that technology finished here Stateside. He’ll have to go to our Soviet facility for that, but the cryo chamber here is almost finished.”

Steve exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Bucky came around quickly when Zemo used the activation code because his memory hadn’t been erased. You used to wear newspaper in your shoes.

If they can get Bucky out of here, he’ll be alright. He’ll be alright.

“What’s his next assignment?” The other man asks.

“Right now? Telling Dr. Zola what he knows from the last few months. And let me tell ya, he’s shared some interesting things. We’re almost glad he got out.”

Peggy and Steve look to each other, eyes wide with fear. He reaches out to grab her hand. “Let’s go. You and Thompson handle those two. I’ll handle Zola.” He swallows. “And Bucky.” She nods.

Steve opens the door and Zola turns on him with wide eyes. “You,” Zola says, a smile creeping onto his face. Steve hauls him up and forcefully jams his shield down, breaking his leg with an audible crack. He stumbles down and Steve picks him up by his neck and slams him against the wall.

“You Nazi piece of shit,” Steve spits.

He laughs, choking against Steve’s hand. “The asset told us all about your doppelganger,” he says with a filthy smile. “We will find him. And we will make a new asset.” And then his eyes turn from Steve and to look toward Bucky’s direction. “Солдат… kill them.”

It only takes five seconds for Bucky to rip out of his restraints, and Steve turns to see him heading toward Peggy.

“No!” Steve yells, dropping Zola to the ground and rushing to stop him. He grabs Bucky by the shoulder and yanks him back. He rears back to punch Steve, but he catches his fist in his palm.

“Bucky, no! You can fight this.” Bucky grunts and hits him with his metal hand, slamming him sideways several feet.
“Jack, get out of here and call S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Peggy shouts, before running and kicking Bucky in the gut from the side. Her fist slams into his face when he staggers. His body, the stiff, foreboding stature of the Winter Soldier, turns toward her. Steve clocks him in the back of the head with his shield, and then the three of them are fighting together, Bucky between them, a perverse parallel of their dance just the night before.

Steve finally knocks Bucky to the ground and pins him down, arm against his throat. He struggles against him, trying with all of his might to knock Steve off of his body. “Bucky, look at me. Look at me.” Bucky stops moving, his chest heaving beneath him, his jaw clenched. “It’s me, bud. It’s me.” He feels Peggy kneel beside him.

Bucky’s eyes soften very slowly, perceptibly so, and he sees The Soldier starting to lose its hold. “It’s me,” he whispers again. It takes a full minute but then—

“Steve,” his voice cracks. Steve sags with relief at the sound of his name, closing his eyes in silent thanks. Bucky then moves his gaze to the right, his brows furrowing with confusion. “Peggy?”

“Yeah, Bucky. I’m here too.” She’s smiling down at him, sadly, and Bucky’s body relaxes.

In the new-found silence, they hear shuffling, the sliding of fabric against concrete. They all turn and see Zola army-crawling across the room in an attempt to escape with his broken leg.

“Let me up,” Bucky says, serious, the anger returning to his face so quickly that Steve wonders if the Soldier didn’t lose its hold after all.

“Buck—” Steve says, but he’s already up and moving across the room. He yanks Zola upward and slams him against the wall.

Zola’s eyes widen in shock. “Солдат.”

“That is not,” his metal fingers squeeze around Zola’s neck, “my goddamn name.”

“Желание—”

“No!” Bucky yells, and snaps his neck before Zola can finish the activation, his body collapsing to the floor. Bucky turns, surveying the room, his brows still furrowed with anger, his body twitching with adrenaline. He sees Westley and the other man lying unconscious on the floor and he bends over and snaps their necks one after the other.

“Bucky!” Peggy says, “What are you doing? We were going to bring them in for questioning.”

He shakes his head. “They knew. Zola questioned me, and they heard me when I—I told Zola about the—the other Steve. It had to be done.” He squeezes his eyes shut and falls to his knees. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, love,” Peggy says, both of them getting up and kneeling in front of him. Peggy pulls him into her arms and Steve embraces both of them, feeling Bucky shudder against his frame.

“All Steve wants to do right now is kiss Bucky and Peggy until the whole damn world fades into nothingness. He wants to wake up between both of them, his body sticky from too much shared body heat. He wants to eat fresh bread that Bucky baked that afternoon with Josephine, and he wants to see Peggy’s eyes crinkle as she laughs at her own tired, granny jokes. He wants to spend every
single day with Bucky Barnes and Peggy Carter until the end of the damn line. And none of that is going to happen in the middle of a covert HYDRA facility outside DC. So he nods.

Epilogue

Almost Two Years Later

Bucky wakes up to the sound of music floating into his room from downstairs. He doesn’t sleep here much during the night anymore, but it’s usually where he naps. He finally convinced Josephine that she was 65 years young, not old, and that if she’d open a bakery, he’d help her run it. That means 3:00 a.m. wake-up calls, and, if he wants to see Steve and Peggy in the evenings, then he’s got to nap when he gets home.

Of course, Steve and Peggy are home a little early today. It’s been two whole years since they started this thing between the three of them, and that certainly calls for a little celebration. They’ve got reservations for dinner in the city and then they’ll head back home and turn their living room into a dance hall made for three.

A whole lot has happened in that time. Bucky came out of hiding and is now a decorated veteran. There was a whole award ceremony, which Bucky really didn’t want to attend because war fucking sucks, thank-you-very-much, and he didn’t even want to do any of the things he had to do in order to survive. War changed his whole damn life and none of it was for the better (except Stevie not being sick anymore. He’ll take that. And meeting Peggy too. He supposes that’s okay as well. Alright, twist his arm, it gave him a silver lining or two). Now he can go to Brooklyn, and he does every month to visit his sisters and their kids. Uncle Bucky is real swell and spoils them with lots of things they don’t need.

Steve and Peggy have all but eradicated HYDRA. Raiding Zola’s home and facility gave them the information they needed to cut off all the heads and cauterize those fuckers so none of them grew back. And now Bucky gets to move on with this life as best he can. There are still bad days sometimes. Even now, The Soldier peeks in, says hello, antsy for his trigger words so he can take over again. He makes Bucky survey every room for exits and choke points. He makes Bucky store a cache of weapons in the garage at home and in the cellar of the bakery, locked away so Josephine won’t accidentally shoot herself. He doesn’t want to fight, he never did, but he’ll be ready if he has to. His two loves are saving the world every damn day, and he’ll be here if they need him.

He and Peggy finally visited the other Steve a few months ago. They took a couple of days for themselves, flying out to Howard’s underground vault in Podunk, North Dakota, Population: -5, staying at the little farm house that sits above it. Monty used to make Bucky read all kinds of stuff in the war, and remembering Freud’s idea of das unheimliche— the uncanny— is the closest thing he’s ever read or heard that could describe how it felt to see this Steve when his other Steve was at home waiting for them in New Jersey (and how the fuck did James Buchanan Barnes end up in New Jersey anyway?). It felt strange to see both, to love both, and he knew Peggy felt it too by the sad smile she cast his way as they stood in front of the cryo chamber.

“I wish I could kiss him,” Bucky said.

Peggy turned her head in contemplation before nodding. “Yes, that’d be nice. He’d like that.”

But they kissed each other instead and made a sort of melancholic love in the farmhouse above,
pressed together tenderly, Peggy kissing the tears that slipped down his cheeks. Bucky and Peggy don’t have a lot of time alone together — they’re both too damn in love with Steven Grant Rogers to see straight half the time — but Bucky always cherishes it when they do.

The music suddenly gets louder, and he recognizes the song. He loves this song. And if they’re downstairs dancing without him, he’s going to smack both of them.

He heads down and sees them, their faces pressed together, Steve’s eyes closed, a warm smile on Peggy’s face, as they slowly turn about the room. They’re quite the vision, the two of them, America’s Sweethearts. And Bucky’s chest fills with warm, gooey nonsense because they’re his, and he loves them both.

“You started without me,” Bucky says, trying to sound sad, but failing completely.

Steve turns around and gives him that bright smile that would make Bucky do literally anything in the world that Steve would ask. He could say, *hey, will you help me take over the universe,* and Bucky would do it. But usually Steve just asks for things like *will you get me another cup of coffee* or *can I fuck your mouth,* and Bucky always says yes because of that smile right there (and because putting Steve’s dick in his mouth is never a hardship).

“I tried to wake you but you didn’t budge,” Peggy says.

“Fair,” he responds. “It was a long day.”

He wants to kiss them both but the curtains are wide open and just anyone could look in on their little scene, and who knows who’s watching out there? So he crosses the room to close them.

“Come here, love,” Peggy says, extending her hand out to him. He doesn’t follow her orders the same way Steve does, but he still does whatever she says ‘cause he’d be dumb not to. So he steps between them, and they wrap their arms around one another and sway gently to the music. Kitty Kallen starts crooning about time and kisses—

*Kiss me once, then kiss me twice*
*Then kiss me once again*
*It’s been a long, long time*

— and Bucky thinks of the years they spent without one another, years spent apart across the globe, through time itself. And it hasn’t been a long, long time since he kissed Peggy and Steve; he just did it this morning before he left for work, both of them grumbling sleepily when he did so. But still, he figures he’s still making up for lost time.

So he kisses them both — once, twice, then once again. And when they smile knowingly against his lips, he smiles right back at them.
Music heard throughout this story:
Too Marvelous for Words - Bing Crosby
Mattinata Florentina - Alberto Rabagliati
Deep in a Dream - Connie Boswell
In the Mood - Glenn Miller
All This and Heaven Too - Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, Frank Sinatra
And, of course:
It’s Been a Long, Long Time - Harry James and His Orchestra, Kitty Kallen

If you loved this fic, please consider giving it a [share](#).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!