On the Air

by debwalsh

Summary

When Steve is invited to drop the New Year's ball in Times Square, he gets more than he bargained for. A passionate on-air New Year's kiss shared with a prominent glam gay icon changes Steve's life forever, and may end up costing him the one person who means the most to him. But when one door closes, another one opens, and Steve may be looking at the opportunity of a lifetime, courtesy of a little reality show.

In which Steve Rogers finds himself in the all the old familiar places, Tony Stark finds he can go home again with the right companions, and James "Bucky" Barnes finds himself
looking to figure out his place in history. Pepper Potts and Natasha Romanoff discover the joys of having a real live doll. And Sam Wilson is the beacon of hope for everyone in Stark Tower.

20Nov19 - Chapter 18, New Eyes - the FINAL chapter - is posted!!!!!!
Please bookmark or subscribe to the series - there will be more coming in this universe!

Notes

This story came into being as a result of comments on Salvia_G's brilliant Like a Cruel Mistress Woos work-in-progress. Rather than let her become distracted with an idea I suggested in the comments (see the end notes), I decided to take on the project myself.

The Physicist has painted a gorgeous piece based on this entire story. Go adore it here! And check out the lovely cover art by Lovesfic here! Thanks!
This started life as a sort of cracky short, grew to two parts, and then took on a life of its own to become something a lot more serious and emotional (and hopefully ultimately satisfying). I know how it ends, it's all mapped out, but some of the connective tissue is taking some time to work out, and of course the Boys have opinions of their own that must be heard (and obeyed!). :) Unrelated to my other works, and a helluva lot of fun to write!

Notes on the story: In the past, Bucky and Steve were best friends and roommates - Bucky & Steve rather than Bucky/Steve. Steve has loved Bucky forever, but has suffered in silence & never told Bucky for fear of losing him. Everyone, especially Steve, assumes that Bucky is straight. Bucky has never doubted that Steve was straight, if he thought about it at all.
Further, Bucky is well on his way into recovery, recognizing that recovery is a process, not an endpoint.

So if you're offended by Steve living his own life when Bucky basically tells him to go to hell, best not read this story.

Comments are most welcome - would love to know what you think! This is my first multi-chapter work on AO3 - the first time I'm posting something on AO3 that is a work-in-progress. So your comments really do help fuel the muse!

See the end of the work for more notes

• Inspired by Like a Cruel Mistress Woos by Salvia_G
Part 1: For Your Entertainment

It was New Year’s Eve, 2014, and the year was quickly running out. A gentle snow drifted down upon Manhattan, collecting on surfaces and upturned faces throughout the city. The air sparkled with the snow, and puffed white on the breaths of New Yorkers and visitors alike who gathered in the streets, on rooftop, at the entrances to subways and club and restaurants throughout the city.

Over Times Square, a crystalline ball hung suspended, waiting for the signal to make its annual trip downward to herald in the new year.

At Stark Tower, a singular group of extremely well-dressed revelers mingled, sipped at fine champagne, sampled delicacies imported from across the globe (including nearby Brooklyn), spilled out onto the terrace at eye level with the Chrysler Building, or gathered around the massive television set to watch the *New Year’s Rockin’ Eve* broadcast from across town.

Among the partygoers there was a noticeable, Cap-sized hole. Captain America, off-duty as Steve Rogers, was in Times Square, waiting to hit the control with Mayor deBlasio to set the ball on its final journey into 2015. The others had opted to stick with Stark’s party where the air was warm and the booze was top shelf. Cap’s serum-enhanced body adapted easily to the cold and booze was wasted on him anyway … that was what Tony Stark had thrown out and everyone more or less agreed with him. For once.

For Bucky, there had never been a question of going to Times Square. The concentration of what was loosely known as humanity was simply too much for him to process at this time. He’d originally expressed interest in attending the Times Square bash, but when he’d seen footage of previous years’ celebrations, the fine tremor in his hands had been obvious enough that Steve and Sam both had recommended against it. Well, pretty much put their combined big-ass feet down. Pity, as Buck really could have used a real blow-out. The party at Stark’s was nice and all, but nobody was dancing, and nobody’d gotten into a fight yet, so Bucky wasn’t sure he’d call it a party just yet, if ever.

Thing was, Bucky had only been functioning independently for a few months, his memories were still an unreliable patchwork, and his nerves were still raw and easily irritated. He was getting tired of being a bundle of barbed wire and flayed flesh, but all anyone could promise him was “it’ll take time, hang in there.”

So he sat on a couch in a massive room with floor to ceiling glass walls, full of pretty people drinking expensive booze, eating stuff he generally didn’t recognize and navigated mostly by smell, with a wall-sized television blaring out something people in this time considered music while his old pal froze his patriotic ass off in Times Square. He wasn’t actually sure which one of them drew the short straw, but at least his not-so-patriotic ass was warm.

Some guy dressed in a finely tailored long woolen coat with a patterned scarf wound round his neck was crooning loudly on the television, his black hair coiffed into a modern day pompadour, his nails painted black, and his eyes ringed in kohl. He held the microphone like he was going down on it, his eyes and smirking lips wickedly promising all manner of filthy … *somethings*. Bucky growled at the singer and shifted sideways, willing the subtle response of his dick to this … *guy* … to go away. Well, he had to admit there was a kind of feminine quality to his powerful voice, to the coquettish way he flirted with the camera, but Bucky wasn’t like that, no, he most surely was *not*. At least, he was pretty sure.
What the hell happened to Guy Lombardo? Or Dorsey or Beiderbeck? And what’s with all the yelling and eyeliner? How the hell do you dance to this stuff?

The archer, Clint, slid over the top of one of the sofas with a plate of food in one hand and a flute of champagne in the other, and grinned triumphantly. Nice trick, and not a drop of champagne spilled, and not one morsel had fallen off his plate. Bucky nodded to acknowledge the feat. Clint waved his plate toward the massive screen. “Adam Lambert. Hell of a voice. Kinda sorry I didn’t haul ass down to Times Square with Rogers after all.”

“You know this … fairy?”

Clint snorted just before he took a sip of his champagne. “Not a nice word in this day and enlightened age, Barnes. But you’re not wrong. And everybody knows Adam Lambert. He’s kind of a poster boy for glam gay power these days. Great pipes, got a helluva swagger, and the ladies still love ‘im – prob’ly think they can turn ‘im straight given half a chance. Everybody’s gotta have a hobby,” he added with a grin and a shake of his head.

“Huh,” Bucky observed grumpily and turned his attention back to the television. Lambert had finished singing and the camera was on that Seacrest guy, wasting airtime with some nonsense or other. Then there was a commercial for some forgettable product Bucky would never buy, and Bucky glanced over at Barton stuffing his face. “How long ‘til the ball drops?”

“Got another ten minutes. Why, afraid you’re gonna miss Steve? Trust me, everyone’s gonna be glued to the tube when Captain America drops the ball.”

“Don’t let anyone take my seat then – I’m hungry.”

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With a full plate and a full glass of champagne – he liked the taste, even if he felt not even a second’s buzz from it – Bucky was settled in on the couch surrounded by everyone attending Stark’s party, all leaning forward toward the big screen in some manner or another as the countdown ticked down. It felt a little crowded, but not so bad; he knew everyone here, spent time with each and every one of them. So it wasn’t as bad as it could be, like if he’d taken Steve up on the invitation to celebrate in Times Square. That would’ve been a shitstorm in a bottle if he’d tried that. He was kind of sorry – back in the day, he’d never found a party he didn’t like, and he loved crowds and music and people, loved the jazz he got off it all. Now more than couple of people and he had the cold shakes, a gnawing in the pit of his stomach, and the urge to maim. He was only holding it all in check now because of familiar surroundings and familiar people.

Chalk it all up to another damned thing Hydra’d taken from him.

Stark was sprawled in one of the big chairs, Pepper Potts draped artfully across his lap, demurely sipping from her flute. Natasha had dropped to the floor in front of Clint, one arm wrapped proprietarily around his lower leg while his fingers toyed absently in her hair. Banner held himself gingerly on the edge of the seat cushion in another of the big chairs. Wilson and Hill sat side by side on another couch, heads touching as they whispered between themselves. Colonel Rhoades was sitting on the arm of the couch, his own arm stretched along the back of the couch behind Sharon Carter’s shoulders, glancing from her to the screen and back again. He knew that somewhere behind him, Thor took up an entire love seat, his ladylove Dr. Foster curled up like a kitten in his lap. And yeah, over there in the dim curve of the wall was Dr. Foster’s intern, Darcy, sucking face with her intern, Ian. Erik Selvig swayed on his feet, threading precariously through the furniture, raising his glass in salute to an unspoken toast, his face split in a shit-eating grin. Lightweight, for sure. Bucky wondered briefly if anyone was going to urge the physicist to sit his
ass down before he ended up landing on it, but no one seemed inclined. Over toward the bar, Stark’s friend Happy surveyed the group, hands clasped behind his back as he kept his frown on, although his eyes flicked toward the television screen with increasing frequency as the new year edged closer.

Finally, the clock on the screen said two minutes to midnight, and Steve was brought out to officiate the ball drop. He’d refused to wear the Suit tonight, preferring to attend the party as a civilian, as himself. People forget that before there was ever a Captain America, there was Steve Rogers. But you could take the Suit off Steve Rogers, but you couldn’t take the Suit out of Steve Rogers. Even as he chatted amiably with Seacrest – a feat that frankly surprised Bucky, knowing how awkward Steve could be back in the day – he looked every inch the commanding officer. Hair neatly combed – pretty much regulation cut – shoulders square in his expensive coat (picked out by Pepper, no doubt), jaw freshly shaved, eyes clear, body held at parade rest. Looking good, really. But when Steve turned directly to the camera and smiled that million watt smile, Bucky wouldn’t admit that it felt like Steve was smiling just for him, or how it fanned an ember in his chest, making it feel warmer, in an unexpected and surprising way. How his gut coiled and his Johnson tingled a little. Just a little.

He decided instead it was one of those Mexican things on the buffet. He was, however, undecided whether he should avoid them entirely, or pile up his plate.

Then Steve moved over to the controls, stood across from the mayor, and together they pressed the great honking button. And the sparkly ball of light started its descent, and the countdown clock showed less than a minute as all the guests on the show crowded around the mayor and Steve. Probably more Steve than the mayor, because seriously, mayors come and go, but there was only one Captain America. And he was grinning like the lame-ass idiot he was, head thrown back as he watched the ball drop right above him. Bucky could see him blink away the snow that fell, open his mouth and stick out his tongue to catch a snowflake, and Buck couldn’t help grinning back at the television, savoring the sudden memory of two dumb kids kicking down a snowy street, trying to catch snowflakes on their tongues and stumbling into each other breathlessly. Rogers was still just a dumb punk from Brooklyn, and a late, scientifically charged spurt of puberty couldn’t knock all the stupid out of him.

The group on the platform was crowding close, shouting out the countdown, and that singer guy had slung an arm over Steve’s shoulders, which annoyed Bucky for reasons he didn’t stop to examine, and Steve turned his head, smiling broadly, laughing. Everyone in Stark’s living room and on the television was counting down, loudly and with laughter. The ball inched closer to the bottom, to 2015, and finally it came to rest. Noisemakers blared around him, on the television, and the sound of “happy new year” in a multitude of voices, and then kisses being exchanged until silence descended and everyone’s attention was riveted on the big screen.

Because on the big screen, Steve Rogers, Captain Fucking America, poster boy for truth, justice and the straight American way, was enthusiastically swapping spit with that singer guy, and looked like he was having the time of his life from the way his hands were roaming over the land of the free. Seacrest and everyone else stood staring while the camera stayed locked on Steve and Lambert sucking face, and then a panicked expression from Seacrest and a frantic finger across his throat abruptly gave way to a commercial.

“Oh. Thank God. Finally! I’d better get PR on the line,” Pepper said suddenly.

“Good call,” Stark agreed with a chuckle, and took a long swallow of his champagne. “Who knew?” he asked to no one in particular.
“Huh, that explains a lot,” Natasha commented from her spot midway between Barton and Bucky. Absently, Bucky wondered if she’d been planning to plant one on him until they all got distracted by Steve and that… guy.

Huh, Bucky thought. Steve had some explaining to do. And then a white hot ball of… something… was building up in his gut. The champagne flute in his hand imploded suddenly.

“Happy new year!” cried Darcy belatedly from her corner where she’d just come up for air. “Hey, what’d I miss?”

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At the broadcast booth at Times Square, Steve Rogers was coming up for air, too, a dopey grin lighting his face.

“Wow, Cap,” Lambert breathed, looking pretty mussed and disoriented himself. “If I was single…”

“Oh.” Steve sobered up instantly, expression going blank as he drew back awkwardly.

“Oh, sorry – I – uh –“

“Yeah,” Steve muttered, disengaging and taking a step back. “No, it’s okay, sorry –“

“If I’d’a known, but damn, Cap –“

“Steve. My name is Steve."

Lambert put his hand on the back of Steve’s neck and pulled him toward him, pressing their foreheads together. “Double damn, then. I’m sorry. I should know better – I got fans throwing themselves at me, always looking for the hot shit on stage, not the guy I really am. Not that I’m not hot shit,” he added with a sideways grin, “but I’m not that dude either. And you’re not Captain America 24/7 either.”

“Actually, it seems like I pretty much am. And I’m pretty sure I just came out on national television.”

“International. Ball drop is broadcast around the world.”

Yeah, like that makes it all better. “Well, then.” Steve schooled his features to impassivity and squared his considerable shoulders. “Time to face the music, then, hmm?”

“At least let me take you home – my driver’s just down on ground level. This crowd’ll eat you alive otherwise.”

Steve glanced toward the security people waiting to usher “the talent” off the platform, the furtive, panicky glances from the crew and host, and nodded, muttering thanks.

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The ride back to Stark Tower was a lot less awkward than it could have been; Lambert was a decent guy who’d seen his share of awkwardnesses over the years, and he was an engaging and genuinely friendly fella. He and Steve exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and promised to get together – platonically and later, after the inevitable press storm died down.

“How you gonna play it?”
“Honest, I think,” Steve replied after giving it barely a moment’s thought. “I mean, it’s not like it was back in the ’40s – it’s not illegal, I’m not going to jail for who or what I’m attracted to, and it’s not like I deliberately tried to hide how I felt. Just never had a reason to talk about it. It’s my business, nobody else’s.”

“Y’know, I really am sorry. I never expected –“

“Captain America to kiss you back? You underestimate your … well, you.” Steve grinned, waving his hand up and down to indicate Lambert’s whole person.

Lambert threw his head back and laughed, a full body laugh that Steve couldn’t help but join him on. When the laughter quieted down, Steve added, “It’s okay. Really, it is. New challenge. Don’t get enough of those.” That triggered a giggle fit from both men again.

Lambert breathed, grinning. “Yeah. Okay.” They’d pulled up to Stark Tower, where fortunately, the press had not yet descended to ogle the newly outed Avenger – post-ball-drop traffic had worked in their favor. “You have my number. I can’t be … well, I can be a friend. I’m a good listener. And if you’re interested, I maybe could introduce you to some really nice guys …”

“I might take you up on that, later. Maybe,” Steve agreed with a smile. “So. Happy new year.”

“Happy new year,” Lambert replied, leaning forward to place a chaste peck on Steve’s cheek. “Good luck.”

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“Captain Rogers, Sir and his guests are on the main entertainment level.”

“Thank you, Jarvis. I take it everyone has seen … ?”

“Of course, Captain. Ms. Potts is currently engaged in a conference call with Public Relations and Legal, and I believe that Sir has already received multiple phone calls from Good Morning, America, the ABC News department, CNN, Logo, and Here!. I am under instructions to politely refuse any calls from Fox News, TBN, Clear Channel, and the Murdoch organization. I believe there is currently a spirited debate amongst Mr. Barton, Mr. Wilson and Ms. Romanoff regarding whether or not special effects or a body double were involved, sir.”

“Huh.”

“Indeed, sir.”

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“Ah, the man of the hour!” Tony greeted, scooping up a tumbler and filling it – to the brim – with 21 year old Glenlivit. “Here, think you’re gonna need this,” he added, pressing the tumbler into Steve’s outstretched hand.

“I still can’t get drunk, Tony.” Steve sipped from the glass and raised an appreciative eyebrow and nodded.

“Yeah. Pity about that. Pep’s been strategizing with PR and Legal. Everything hinges on how you want to play this – plausible deniability, or –“

“Embrace the truth. Only way.”
Tony was still and silent for a long moment, and then his face split in a genuine grin. “Cut ‘em off at the balls with the truth. I like it. You’re on. Pep!” he called, turning smartly on his heel and hurrying off in search of his better half.

Steve took another sip and grinned to himself, shaking his head. And then he noticed the others. Colonel Rhodes saluted him with an encouraging smile and a lift of his glass, then turned to follow Stark. Sharon Carter lifted a shoulder in an “oh well” shrug and raised her glass to toast him. Beside her, Maria Hill smiled wryly and shook her head. “Kids today,” she seemed to say.

“Way to go, Cap,” Barton greeted as Romanoff sidled up beside him and whispered, “You could have let me know. Throw a girl a bone, Rogers.”

“You’re not going to keep trying to set me up –“

“Nope, not promising that. In fact, I have some ideas –”

“Nat … no …”

“Rogers … yes.”

“Give it up, Cap,” Barton warned with a grin. “Once she gets an idea in her head … you’ll never shake it loose.”

“Right,” Steve acknowledged with an affectionate smile.

Banner came up then and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder and smiled. “Whatever makes you happy, Steve.” He patted him absently and walked by on his way to the elevator. “Happy new year, Steve,” he called over his shoulder.

“Hey, look at you all muscle-y and gorgeous and gay and all,” Darcy greeted, reaching out to rub Steve’s tummy.

“Not exactly ‘gay’, Darcy. More, um, bi-sexual, I think.”

“Oh, that changes everything,” Pepper observed, stalking through with her phone pressed against her ear. She spun on her heel and marched back where she’d come from, talking animatedly into the phone.

“It does? How?”

“Ah, like many warriors across the nine realms,” Thor observed. “Many a great warrior have found succor and support in the arms of both shieldmate and bondmate.”

“Well, no, I’m not talking a threesome –“

“Let me know if you need volunteers, Cap,” Darcy offered, leering good-naturedly.

“No, I don’t think that will be necessary –“

Behind her, Darcy was being shushed by Dr. Foster, who shot Steve a bright smile, then grabbed Darcy around the waist, pivoted her, and aimed her at Ian the Intern.

“So that’s how it is, huh, Rogers?” Sam asked, grinning with his hand outstretched to Steve. Steve took it and shook it firmly, chuckling.

“Yep, that’s how it is.”
“Good for you, man. Hope something good comes your way,” he said, with a significant arch of his eyebrows and a nod over his shoulder.

“Yeah, me too,” Steve agreed, tracking the path of Sam’s nod. He had barely a shallow breath to register the storm forming and breaking along that path before it was in his face.

“What the fuck, Rogers?” Bucky was suddenly demanding, his eyes wild and his whole body vibrating with fury.

“Wha – Buck, I –“

“You’re queer? We shared a bed, for fuck’s sake! Are you tellin’ me you got it up for me, Rogers? Huh?” Bucky grabbed him by the lapels and dragged him roughly toward him, snarling as he did so. “Well, whaddya got to say for yourself, Rogers, huh?”

“You never had anything to fear from me, Buck. It’s not like that –“

“No? Known each other over 85 years, and you been gettin’ hard sharin’ a bed with me? What the fuck!” he shoved Steve away from him violently, and glaring like Steve had never seen before, he stalked off the floor, noisily taking the stairs rather than wait for the elevator.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Jane Foster observed quietly.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed quietly, looking over his shoulder where Bucky had disappeared into the stairwell.

To anyone who knew Steve Rogers, however, they could see the anger beginning to seethe just under the surface.

Sam was the first to react, reaching out to pull him back a fraction of a second before he started to move. “Steve, man, let ‘im go, let ‘im blow off steam –“

“That fucking asshole” Steve swore, shrugging off Sam’s hands, and took off toward the stairwell.

“Well, that went well,” Tony announced to no one in particular. No one in particular felt obligated to reply.

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Steve took the stairs two at a time, practically flying down the stairwell, fueled by an anger he hadn’t felt since … since after the train, when he and the Commandos had taken out Schmidt’s last base. When he’d lost Bucky and believed he’d never have the chance to see him again, talk to him again … sling his arm around his shoulders and hug him close when they did something stupid together. He felt that slipping away, felt it disintegrating in a pile of hot ash that blew up the stairs toward him and choked off his lungs.

Everything that meant anything to him … died in the look of loathing and disgust in Bucky’s eyes.

He wrenched open the safety door and heard the hinges groan with the force of his pull. A small part of his mind acknowledged he’d have to fix that later.

He was surprised to find Bucky just standing there, hyperventilating, flexing his fists, flesh and steel.

Steve was right up in his face in an instant, and Bucky took a faltering step back. “What the hell,
Buck, huh? You gotta humiliate me in front of my friends, my co-workers? That couldn’t wait until we were alone –“

It was Bucky’s turn to surge forward, and he breached Steve’s personal space and practically knocked noses. “What, alone so we could what? Fuck? Not my type, Rogers. Not gonna happen. I can’t believe you –“ he flipped him off and turned abruptly, moving away.

Steve’s arm shot out and spun Bucky back to face him. “What, didn’t tell you I was something that was illegal? Didn’t want to risk our friendship with something that didn’t need to be talked about? It’s my business, it never interfered with our friendship. Not until you let it.”

“Yeah, but all those years sharin’ a bed –“

“So what? So what if we shared a bed? I was only ever respectful. Only. And as for sharing a bed now, you’re the one who came into my room and just made yourself at home in my bed. You didn’t even ask, you just crawled in and made yourself at home. I let you, because you’re my friend and that’s what you needed. And I never touched you, never did anything unless you asked for it. But what the fuck, Buck – what if I ever wanted to bring someone home, huh? A man or a woman? How’d that look, my best friend tucked up in my bed snorin’ before I even get home?

“I don’t snore.”

“You snore like a fuckin’ freight train. And you hog the covers. And I never complained.”

“That’s because you –“ Bucky’s index finger stabbed the air in Steve’s general direction, but Steve swatted it away impatiently.

“That’s because you’re my friend. My best friend. But if you can’t accept me for who I am, then maybe you’re no friend of mine. I haven’t changed, Buck, not in the moment before you knew to the next. I’m still the same person. But you … I never knew you were so close-minded. Never knew you could be like this, so hateful. Maybe I don’t know you so well after all.”

“I sure as fuck don’t know you, fuckin’ fairy –“

Steve was silent for a moment too long, and Bucky glanced at him warily. Steve’s face reddened with rage at the same time his knuckles whitened with tension. Then it seemed like all the calm in the universe settled into Steve’s bones, and he spoke in a quiet, controlled voice.

“Get out. Get the fuck out. Newsflash, Barnes – I don’t have to put up with you bein’ a dick. I searched the world over and brought you home, stuck with you through the recovery and the DTs and the nightmares and the crazy shit and the drooling thousand mile stare. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to put up with you being a hateful asshole over my life choices. Pack your shit and get the fuck off my floor.”

“Wha –“

“Jarvis, are there available guest rooms elsewhere in the tower?”

“Yes, sir, Sir always maintains a guest suite as well as several other guest rooms on the designated guest floor.”

“Then please guide Sergeant Barnes to a suitable guest room on the guest floor, Jarvis. Sooner rather than later.”

“But –“
“We’re done. Get the fuck out of my sight. Happy *fucking* new year.” And Steve turned smartly on his heel and stalked off, slamming the door to his bedroom in his wake. James “Bucky” Barnes was left to open and close his mouth like a fish, staring after the spot where Steve had burned incandescently a moment before.

“Sir, if you please?” Jarvis prompted.

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As Steve stalked off, Bucky couldn’t tell what emotions he felt just then, beyond a numbness that spread from inside his heart outward. It was worse than the chair, the ice. And he didn’t know how to stop it, didn’t know how to deal with it. Didn’t fucking know how to name it.

He stood there for a long moment, quaking, feeling the tremors come at him from his feet up, the cold right behind it as it took over his body, leaving him with chattering teeth and the shakes so bad he wondered if he’d dislodge the prosthetic arm, if he’d fly apart and all that would be left afterward would be a smear on the wall.

When there’d been the pain and ice clouding his vision, when there had been the fear and the gut ache and the desperation to just end it all … there had been Steve. Steve with his Herculean patience, with his kindness and warmth and fucking goodness. Steve, with his snark and his fire and his goddamned heart so huge even that hulk of his wasn’t big enough to hold it in.

Steve had saved his life. Steve had given him *back* his life. Steve …

Steve was queer.

Steve had *always* been queer. He might dress it up by calling it bisexual (that was a thing in this century for fuck’s sake?), but at its heart, he was queer. He got it up for guys. Bucky was sure he got it up for him. Which made all those nights huddling for warmth in winter, all those nights holding him against his chest while he calmed his nerves to get his lungs working again when asthma overwhelmed Steve, all those nights stark naked in the heat and the mug and the swelter of a Brooklyn summer … made them all so much … more? Less? *Different.* Not what he intended. No, he wasn’t like that. But Steve was. And he felt like his past had been hijacked again, that his anchors had come undone, and he was floating toward immolation once more.

Like Steve was sent by Hydra to undo him one more time.

Like nothing he’d ever put his faith in could be trusted, ever again.

Why did that bother him so much? He’d never cared about anyone else’s interests before. Had plenty of friends back in the day who swung that way. Never mattered. Why did Steve being a fairy *matter*? Why did it matter so much he’d just thrown away the best thing that had ever happened to him, the best friend he could have ever asked for, 85 fucking years of history …

Why?

He didn’t have an answer, could still feel the fury licking at his heart, boiling his blood, making him stupid with anger.

And he’d been stupid in a big fucking way.

“Sergeant Barnes?” Jarvis prompted again. “If you would please gather your belongings, I will direct you to your new living space, sir.”
“Right, yeah, sure,” Bucky agreed, empty. Empty except for the anger. Or maybe just empty.

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A live interview with Steve Rogers, Captain America, was a major get in any news cycle. He was notoriously private, and never granted interviews and certainly never conducted press conferences. There might be a sound bite or two released by Stark International, or a quick flash of him in news coverage of a catastrophe where he was pitching in. But to have him in the studio the morning after the previous night before, after he’d virtually come out of the closet on global television … well, that was the get of all gets. Not even Barbara Walters had ever had a get quite like this one.

And Seacrest lost out because Rogers wanted face time, not radio play. There was also some suspicion Seacrest had bungled his opportunity on New Year’s Eve by not being sensitive about the whole coming out thing.

Robin Roberts was the logical person to interview the Captain, although there had been a good-natured virtual arm wrestling challenge to see if it would be her or Stephanopoulos, but as expected, she won out, and now waited for the Captain to join her on the couch as the crew counted down from the last commercial break. She’d come back from holiday break specifically for this interview, back at work the day after New Year’s day, giving the promos time to penetrate the post-revelry haze.

Ratings were expected to spike, and the ad buys had jumped for today’s broadcast.

Rogers appeared in the wings and conferred quietly with one of the PAs there, nodding seriously as the situation was explained to him and a microphone was fitted on the lapel of his beautifully tailored three-piece suit, and the earpiece settled in his right ear, where he tapped it experimentally. He smiled at the young woman who seated the mike, a bone-melting grin that even the hardest heart – or not in any way interested in men heart – would be unable to resist. A dimple trembled at the edge of his smile, and lit up his eyes, which were shadowed by the longest blond eyelashes anyone in the studio had seen in living memory.

There was something charismatic and artistically beautiful about Steve Rogers, and even if you weren’t attracted to men per se, you couldn’t deny the man was a living work of art, animated by a sincerely good heart – maybe that was what made him so attractive, really, the heart. It was probably a good thing that he never granted interviews, never did press conferences, never used his powers for evil. There was no question that if he put his mind to it, he could sway even the most recalcitrant of opponents with the strength of that smile alone. It would be worth good money to see him go up against the pundits of Fox News …

He strode out from the wings and crossed the set with long, confident steps. He stopped just short of the couch and reached out a courteous hand to Robin, practically bowing to her as he greeted her. His grip was firm without being overwhelming, and his manners were, as expected, impeccable. When she invited him to sit, he did so carefully, rearranging the drape of his suit to smooth down the fabric so it hung exactly as it had been designed to do. Settled in, he took a moment to grin at Robin, complement her on her outfit, ask how she was feeling, and take a deep calming breath, all before the signal that they were back from commercial.

Robin introduced him, wished him a happy new year, and asked if he had any special plans for the new year.

“I think we all know why I’m here today, Robin,” he said genially.

“Well, yes. Millions of people all over the world watched the ball drop on New Year’s Eve right
“Gay?”

Robin gave him an appraising glance, almost disapproving, slightly challenging.

“I mean no disrespect. I’m comfortable with my sexuality, more so than I ever expected to be in the time I grew up. But to answer the question, I’m not so much gay as I am bisexual. And I can confirm that Mr. Lambert is a very good kisser, but happy in a committed relationship, with someone else. I don’t know who.” And there was that smile again. Somewhere in the studio audience, several women sighed ecstatically. And a couple of guys, too.

“You say you’re comfortable with your sexuality. Then why now?”

“Honestly, I didn’t even think about ‘coming out,’” he shrugged. “It was just a spur of the moment thing. So of course half the world was watching. I can’t say I regret it, however.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“When I was a kid, homosexuality, in any form that some considered deviance, was illegal. I could have been arrested, beaten, even killed simply based on how I might react to another person. What I thought, not even what I did. Even for how I might look.” He paused chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip for a moment before resuming. “The world has made great strides in terms of bigotry and prejudice, but there’s still work to be done. This time is a whole lot more accepting than the decades I grew up in. But there are still a lot of kids out there trying to figure out who they are, how they fit into the world. I don’t like bullies, never have. It occurred to me that by not being honest about who I am, I was letting the bullies win. That by being honest about who I am, maybe I can make it easier for some kid who’s struggling.”

She smiled then, a genuine smile. It was hard not to when Steve Rogers spoke so earnestly. “And how have your friends, the Avengers, Sergeant Barnes, reacted –“

His face closed off with a nearly audible snap. The smile dropped away and she found herself facing a formidable opponent with eyes suddenly gone the color of tempered steel. “The deal was I talk about myself. Anyone else, anyone I’ve known, or currently know, is off-limits.”

“Of course, I apologize. It’s just that there is speculation –“

“There’s always speculation. Can’t stop it. You know that better than most,” he added softly, eyebrow arched. The message was clear; there had been speculation regarding her sexuality before she’d elected to quietly confirm her committed relationship and preferences.

“You’re right, of course you are. I apologize. But if I may – what are your plans now?”

“Well, I sure as heck ain’t goin’ to Disneyworld, am I?”

“Why not?”

“Well, they wouldn’t have me now, would they?” he asked with wide-eyed sincerity.

Robin clearly had trouble quelling the chuckle that bubbled up her throat. “You mean because you’re gay.”

“Bisexual, but yeah. I like both women and men.”
“Um, in the interest of full disclosure, ABC is owned by Disney. And the buzz I’ve been hearing is that there’s interest in possibly pursuing a television special or series with you. Because you’re g—er, bisexual. And Disneyworld has a strict no-discrimination rule. I know that from personal experience.”

“Oh,” Steve said, and grinned. “Guess I might be going to Disneyworld then …”

“Alone, or with someone special?”

He gave Robin the stinkeye for a split second, then relented. “Alone. Finding a suitable partner … isn’t easy for someone like me. It’s not without risk.”

“Or reward,” she prompted, smiling gently. Everyone in the studio audience was hanging on every word, and a collective, “Aw,” murmured through the audience and crew.

“Maybe,” he replied doubtfully.

And so an idea was born.

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**Chapter Summary**

In the aftermath of Steve's outing, opportunities start opening up, at the same time as Steve's sense of responsibility for kids growing up as he did.

And there is the wonder of texting ...

**Chapter Notes**

Well, this has already gotten longer than I'd expected, and an hour's drive to see Guardians of the Galaxy with Adam Lambert turned up on the sound system later, and the chapter titles are Adam Lambert songs. Go figure.

I so appreciate the folks who've taken time to comment. Thank you! I do really enjoy comments, and I would like to know if you feel the story is dragging or going in the wrong direction. Not say I'd do anything about it, since I do have an end game in sight, but I do want to hear from you!

**Part 2: Whataya Want from Me?**

January 2, 2015, 9:03 a.m. EST

For a brief moment after he exited the *GMA* set, Steve wondered if Bucky had seen him on TV, and what he’d thought of it. Then the look of loathing in his old friend’s eyes came back into stark relief in his memory, and the sick feeling of plummeting a vast distance jerked his attention free of that fruitless and painful avenue of thought. So when his phone pinged that he had a text, he leapt at the opportunity for distraction.

A: Steve, you badass mofo! You were awesome!
S: Mofo?
A: Bad word. Trust it means you were beyond fabulous.
S: :)  
A: You'll have 10 proposals by lunch.
S: Already got 2 at the studio. Haven’t made it out of here yet.
A: Anyone interesting?
S: May have to let you meet them so you can help me pick.
A: Need a chaperone?
S: Dutch courage.
S: Worked?
A: Totally worked for me. But I’m taken. Thanks for how you handled that, btw. Glad you think I’m a good kisser.
S: Guess I’ll have to let Pepper pick my clothes for dates. Even if she dates Tony Stark, she has
good taste.
A: Have faith in yourself. Suit’s only window dressing. What you got works without help.
S: Ugh – another txt coming through. From Tony. Gotta go. Thanks for everything!
A: Keep me posted. Feel kinda responsible for you big baby gay boy.
S: Thanks, um, Daddy?
A: Oh, yes, I’m committed, I’m committed, I’m committed. You have no idea what power you hold, Stevie! Use it wisely! Later!

Steve stared at the small screen of his StarkPhone and shook his head. What was it about men that they liked to call him Stevie when they got to know him? That was Bucky’s pet name for him before the change, before – His mind shied away from that whole minefield. Before was in the past, over and done with. There was no value in picking that scab. Instead, he had Tony to deal with, he remembered with a sigh.

T: Well, look who’s now a media darling?
S: Oh?
T: PR is fielding multiple requests for Captain America appearances.
S: No Captain America appearances. Except for children, hospitals. VA, maybe, although I’d want to do them in my military uniform.
T: I’ll update Pepper. You did good, Steve. Happy’s waiting to extract you – need any help?
S: Could use a ride, sure, if he’s in the neighborhood.
T: On site. I’ll text him – he’ll come find you.
S: Thanks, Tony. For everything. Pepper too.
T: Pepper especially. You can pay her back by letting her buy you a new wardrobe.
S: I like my wardrobe.
T: You also like boiled potatoes. Not a big endorsement.
S: Anything for Pepper.
T: I’ll give her my wishlist. The possibilities are endless.
S: You are a shit.
T: First thing on my list – getting Steve Rogers to swear via text. My week is made!
S: Signing off now, Tony.
T: Give me more time to plan my wishlist!

Steve had barely closed out of the text window with Tony before he saw that Sam had joined the fray.

Sam: How u feeling, man?
Steve: Brave.
Sam: 2 true
Steve: Free.
Sam: About fing time
Steve: A little scared.
Sam: Comes w teritory
Steve: You really don’t mind?
Sam: Proud of u
Steve: Glad you’re my friend.
Sam: Do u always text w punctuation?
Steve: And good grammar.
Sam: Gonna have to work on that. Loosen up, man!
Steve: Ongoing project.
Sam: Mans gotta have hobbies
Steve: Oops, looks like my ride is here.
Sam: Ill let you by me lunch
Steve: You’re on. See you soon.
Sam: C U

“Captain Rogers?” Happy Hogan greeted diffidently, nodding to Steve as he crossed the floor of the green room at Good Morning America.

“Happy, how many times do I have to ask you to call me Steve before you do?”

“It’s hard to call someone you’ve idolized your whole life by their first name, sir.”

“As a personal favor? After all, you call Tony by his first name.”

“I’ve literally hauled his naked ass out of more scandalous situations than you’ve had hot lunches. Sir. You, I, ah–“

“Personal favor, Happy. Please.”

“Okay, um, Steve. I’ll try.”

Steve grinned broadly, falling in step behind Happy as they made their way to the garage and the waiting car.

As he settled into the back seat (Happy wouldn’t let him sit up front, despite his requests to do so), Steve’s phone pinged one more time.

N: Operation Steve Rogers is underway.
S: You scare me, Nat.
N: You inspire me. Good job this morning.
S: Glad you approve. Should I be even more scared?
N: Bask in my approval. You know I don’t give it out easily.
S: I am basking.
N: You want me to hurt Barnes?

Steve paused staring at the screen. He’d been avoiding thinking of Bucky, it was true. He hadn’t seen him since banning him from his floor, and he hadn’t asked about him. He knew that if he wanted it, Jarvis would provide a play by play of his departure from his floor through the present time. It was like an old bandage, though – you had to bite the bullet and just pull. And then you had to toss it away.

He didn’t know if he could do that. Too much of his life had been entwined with Bucky, growing up, making plans, serving together, searching for him, aiding his recovery … but maybe if he made a Bucky-sized space in his life, he’d finally have room for someone else. Someone who didn’t pass judgment on him, who could be more than … what? A dependent? An adversary? Buck had made it clear that he wasn’t interested in anything with him, and he wondered if their friendship was now irreparably damaged. On both sides. He could mourn 85 years of friendship, but he wasn’t sure that was enough to make him want to fix it if Bucky hated what he was, and by extension him.

But that didn’t answer Nat.

N: You still there?
S: Still here.
N: Didn’t mean to hit a nerve.
N: Have you seen him?
S: No. Don’t want to.
N: Don’t want to or can’t afford to?
S: Don’t want.
N: Good boy.
S: ??
N: You don’t need to take anyone’s shit. Except mine.
S: Good to know the rules.
N: Damn straight.
S: :)
N: You sure Lambert’s taken? You two would be perfect together.
S: Definitely taken. You don’t have to play matchmaker.
N: I like to play.
S: You make me feel like lunch.
N: Hungry?
S: About to be eaten.
N: :)

Chuckling, Steve thumbed the text window closed, clicked off phone, and shoved it into his suitcoat pocket. Maybe he didn’t have Bucky anymore, but he sure had a collection of strange and wonderful friends who accepted him for who and what he was. And maybe that would be enough. Sighing, he sure hoped so.

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January 2, 2015, 10:15 a.m. EST

The request came in through the public relations and media department of Stark International, escalated through channels to Ms. Potts’s desk.

Tony Stark’s reaction was to cackle hysterically, but Pepper considered the proposal seriously.

“You heard what he said on GMA, Tony. Steve is lonely, and he doesn’t get many opportunities to really socialize as an Avenger. Not with real people.”

“Do I not bleed if you cut me? Am I not real?” At her arched eyebrow, he shrugged and said, “Yeah, and it’s not like he can just go into a gay bar and pick someone up – paparazzi’ll be all over him. What guy’s gonna wanna be known as the dude who deflowered Captain America, huh? Popped the national cherry? Although there are some who might – and they would not be worth having.”

“Exactly. Anyone getting involved with Steve is going to have to know what they’re getting into, but they’re also going to have to have a pretty strong moral compass. And be comfortable living in a fishbowl.”

“Not to mention actually hit it off with the Capsicle. It’s not like there are tons of eligible dudes from that period who remember the good old days – or remember anything at all, for that matter. After all, his contemporaries are mostly in their dotage. Or dead.”

“Not helping,” Pepper replied in a musical tone.

“So, what, you wanna sign ‘im up for a cheesy reality show? Isn’t that a little invasive?”

“It’s a controlled situation. If we vet the participants properly, we might actually find some suitable candidates, we can manage the environment, keep the press at bay –“
“So, what, now you’re his yenta? It’s not a good look for you – although it is kind of hot –“

“He’s our friend, and he’s hurting. He’s put himself out there, the least we can do is support him.”

“Why do I feel like I’m in the middle of a ‘90s rom-com?”

“I’m going to tell him. Let him make his own decision. Let him know we’re behind him, no matter what he chooses to do.”

“Our little boy is growing up so fast – tell me, Mama, should we lend him the keys to the car? What about his curfew – do we need to have The Talk? And however will we deal with our empty nest?” She balled up a piece of paper and tossed it at him, hitting him squarely on the nose. “Ow!”

“Go get Steve,” she ordered with a faint smile.

“Love it when you get bossy. Maybe later, we can –“

“Steve, now,” she commanded, and he gave her a saucy grin before sauntering out of her home office.

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“They’re in New York today. Apparently they flew out in hopes you might be willing to take the meeting.”

“All the way from California?”

“You’re big news, Big Guy,” Tony commented. “And California’s not that far, don’t be so impressed.”

“Steve, I’m not suggesting that you do anything you’re uncomfortable with. You know that, right?” Pepper asked quietly.

Steve nodded affirmative. “Do people really find love on these shows?” Steve asked in a small voice.

“Sometimes. It’s rare, though, I won’t lie. But you know – it’s an opportunity. And you could do some good at the same time.”

“Good?”

“Role models, positive image, all that good stuff. You know – your usual,” Tony added with a grin.

Now Steve looked genuinely interested. “Okay. Let’s meet, then.”

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Chris Harrison, host of The Bachelor, and one of the show’s producers swung by the tower later that afternoon. Pepper ushered them into a conference room on one of the lower levels where Stark International occupied some offices. It looked like a normal business meeting, with the two people from the show, and Tony, Steve and her in attendance. She’d made it clear from the outset that she was in charge of the meeting, while Steve would be responsible for his own decisions. Tony was there because … well, because it was Tony’s building, and there was no way they were having this meeting without him.
The network folks were all revved up with a proposal for the first gay Bachelor when Steve interrupted and reminded them that he’d come out as bisexual, not simply gay. The two men from the network paused for a long moment in silent, then Harrison broke into a big grin.

“Even better. We can work with that. Right, we can work with that?” Harrison asked excitedly.

“Well, it’s a more complex demographic, but it might even be better than the strictly gay demo. I mean, history buffs are going to watch it for Captain America –“ the producer droned on.

“Steve Rogers. Captain Steve Rogers, if you like, but not Captain America,” Steve corrected sharply.

“But –“ Harrison protested.

“The suit, the shield, don’t come into this. This is me, private citizen, not government asset.” Steve’s jaw was set, and he wasn’t going to back down about this.

“Okay. Captain Steve Rogers, we can still work with that. Captain America or not, you have quite a reputation as Captain Steve Rogers. Again, we pull the history buffs. Women are going to watch whether your gay, straight or polka-dotted. We’d definitely pull the gay demo. I don’t see a downside, unless it’s with S&P,” the producer resumed droning.

“S&P?” Pepper asked from her desk.

“Standards and Practices,” Harrison clarified. “Unlike Big Brother on our competitor’s network, we don’t allow anything really scandalous to be broadcast on our show. Our team’s going to have to learn a new set of rules for a different kind of contestant than they’re used to.”

“Oh, you’re a cleaner brand of reality, huh?” Tony scoffed, but Harrison simply nodded.

“So, what, you think gay men are more likely to be, um, scatological?” Steve asked, on the edge of being offended.

“There’s a type …” the producer admitted uncomfortably.

“We’ll be in charge of contestant selection,” Pepper announced suddenly. “The best way to avoid awkwardness like that is to select the right people,” she added with a sweet smile. “People that Steve would actually like to spend time with, not attention whores.”

“I, uh –“ the producer stumbled.

“Yeah, I think that needs to be one of the conditions,” Steve agreed, casting Pepper a grateful look.

“Conditions,” Harrison echoed doubtfully.

“Yeah, conditions,” Tony leapt in. “Like location. Technically, Cap’s on sabbatical right now, but if the Avengers need him for something big, we need him nearby. So, I’m prepared to donate the location.”

“Here,” Harrison guessed incredulously.

“God, no. Bad television,” Tony scoffed. “Plus sometimes I like to wander around the tower in my skivvies. Or an Iron Man suit. No, my parents had a place on the Hudson – beautiful setting, right up your alley – big windy driveway goes on for half a mile, great for the reveal and the tearful goodbye. Huge pile of stone overlooking the river. I’m told it’s beautiful, but I don’t have any
good memories of the place. It’s completely up to date with technology, defensible, can be locked down in seconds if required. There’s even a broadcast dish somewhere on the property.”

“Well, that would be great, yeah. Of course, we’ll have to scout the location to confirm it meets our needs –“ the producer answered, but his eyes betrayed his avarice. Gorgeous location, and a Stark mansion to boot? The airplay they could get off that would be worth its weight in ratings points.

“Take it or leave it. You don’t take, I think I can convince my friend here that he can leave it,” Tony responded tersely, glancing toward Steve, who nodded his agreement.

“Leave –“ Harrison prompted.

Steve looked from Tony to the network guys and back, and nodded. “The show,” he answered simply. Harrison and the producer both looked like they’d just bitten into something rotten. “You sure I can get here in time from there?” Steve asked, twisting around in his seat to look at Tony.

“Thor can have you here in 5 minutes if needed. With the suit I can do it in 3, 4 tops.”

“You can outfly Thor,” Pepper chuckled.

“Been upgrading the propulsion systems,” Tony shrugged.

“Which brings up another question, the, ah –“ Harrison ventured stiffly.

“No Avengers. This is Steve’s show,” Tony replied before the question was formed.

“Well, if anyone wants to participate, I won’t stop them. But they’re not part of the package,” Steve clarified.

“And Sergeant Barnes –“

“Definitely not. He’s off limits,” Steve snapped sharply.

“Okay. Ah, well, um … we don’t know how this is going to play, to be honest. We’d like to propose a pilot, if that’s okay with you,” Harrison suggested, squirming a bit uncomfortably.


“Yeah, we focus on a putting together the first episode, see how it goes, see how the network brass likes it, how the focus groups respond to it,” the producer explained. “See how you like it. If you’re not comfortable, or if the pilot doesn’t play well, we can shut it down by mutual agreement, no harm, no foul.”

“So this isn’t a done deal,” Tony observed, standing and beginning a slow circuit of the room. “I thought you were here to make a deal.”

“We are. We have support for the pilot. It’s not uncommon to do a pilot before committing resources to a series,” Harrison expanded.

“You’re going to go to all the effort of selecting participants, transporting them here, setting the whole thing up, and you might not carry through with it? That’s a sucker bet,” Tony pointed out.

Harrison shook his head. “If it were anyone other than Captain Am – er, Steve Rogers, it would be. Network brass is willing to fund the pilot to test the waters, as it were. And if you’re donating the location - you did say donate, not lease or rent, right?”
“Donate, yep. It’s my property, and that leaves a lot of control in our hands. Anybody messes with our Steve here, there will be repercussions.” Tony grin was wolfish.

Harrison had the good sense to blanch at the look on Tony’s face. Pepper’s face wasn’t much better, the stony, steady stare of a lioness when her pride was in danger. “Of course. So, that actually frees up some budget, I think –”

“I have a request. Actually, another condition,” Steve piped up.

“Yeah, sure, Cap, er, Steve – what is it?” Harrison asked with a relieved expression on his face.

“I want help recording, um, public service announcements, er –“

“PSAs. Yeah, that would be great. I mean one of the real things that could come out of this whole thing is, you know, positive role models for kids. What did you have in mind?”

“It Gets Better, the Trevor Project, the PowerOn Initiative. Maybe some network spots? Is that the right term?”

“Yeah. That would be perfect – we were gonna ask. Yeah, we can definitely work with you on those. In fact, that would be perfect for the color package – in addition to helping you record the PSAs themselves, we can document the process for the on-air background package on you. Are you sure you won’t let us use any Captain America footage?”

“I’d rather not, but if you have to, there’s enough news footage you could choose from I guess.”

“We could also arrange for some outreach opportunities,” Harrison suggested, warming to the idea.

“Sam has been asking me to speak to one of his groups at the VA, vets who’re out.”

“That’d be great – we could cover that as well. Y’know, even if the Bachelor doesn’t work out, we could maybe have enough material for a documentary,” the producer pointed out excitedly. “I smell a possible Oscar.”

“Oh, I have one of those already,” Steve said off-handedly. The collective sputter around the room brought Steve up short.

“You have what now?” Tony demanded.

“It’s not a big deal, really. It was for those stupid movies I made – I was given a special Oscar for my work supporting the war effort. It was as bogus as the suit, really.”

“And where is this Oscar now? Can I have it? I’ve always wanted a gold statue of a naked man,” Tony practically whined.

“I think it’s with the Smithsonian stuff. Not sure why it’s not on display, actually.”

“This guy gets more interesting with each passing minute,” the producer chuckled enthusiastically. “It’s gonna be a no-brainer to promote this cycle.”

“No,” Steve said simply.

“Come again?” the producer asked as though he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“Oh, you have to advertise it, I understand that. But no advertising with my image or my name, not beforehand.”
“If I may ask, why?” Harrison asked.

“I don’t want people to be disappointed if for any reason I have to pull out.”

“Mystery bachelor, got it. Another condition,” the producer replied, pulling out a small notebook from his jacket pocket. “Guess we’d better start getting those down. Any others?”

“We’ll get back to you on that,” Tony announced genially with a smile that didn’t quite get to his eyes. “I take it you’ll draw up the contracts so we can look them over?”

“So the Stark International attorneys can look them over,” Pepper corrected from where she’d sat quietly through the meeting.

“There is one thing I’d suggest,” Harrison began hesitantly.

“Oh?” Pepper asked, bracing slightly.

“Wardrobe,” Harrison replied, nodding his head toward Steve and his chinos and buttoned down plaid shirt.

“Grandpa clothes,” Tony sneered with a shake of his head.

“Looks great on your grandpa, but kind of creepy when you’re trying to date grandpa’s granddaughter. Or grandson,” Harrison agreed.

“I like my clothes,” Steve protested, frowning.

“They aren’t the clothes of anyone with a chance of getting laid,” Tony pointed out, and not for the first time, but considering why they were meeting today, there was a chance Tony’s sage words of wisdom might even carry some clout with the Capsicle.

Steve looked toward Harrison and asked, his voice rising to a squeak, “Is that a possibility? I mean, do people, you know, on the show?”

Harrison chuckled. “Not on air, but it’s been known to happen during the shoot, sure.”

“Huh.” Steve looked both intensely interested and quite possibly terrified, all in the same moment.

Tony grinned triumphantly and pulled out his wallet, extracting a platinum card and handing it over to Pepper. “Go, spend money, drag this old dude into the 21st century.”

“With pleasure,” Pepper purred. “At last.”

The panicked look on Steve Rogers’s face simply made everyone else in the conference room chuckle. They all agreed it had been a productive meeting, and the network guys promised contract documents within a day or two. They committed to arrange with Pepper’s office a visit to the Stark mansion on the Hudson, and Pepper secured a promise from Steve that she and he would go shopping immediately after he’d had something to eat.

Pepper Potts did in fact clap at the thought of using Steve Rogers as her personal dress-up doll. And if she didn’t text Natasha Romanoff to join her for an afternoon of Armani, Ford and Hilfiger, she’d make it up to her later – this wouldn’t be the last time Steve would find himself victim of the fashion police.

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Sleepwalker

Chapter Summary

In which Bucky tries to figure out just where his head is at (other than up his arse), and what his future holds. Sam and Natasha are conspiring, and Sam takes the time to discover that waking up in the future doesn't mean you know everything that's gone before.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments and input! I especially appreciate the comments about humor in the first two parts. I couldn't make this part quite as funny because there's some serious stuff Bucky - or rather James - is dealing with here, but I did end up abandoning a storyline that would have been far darker. So I have another plot bunny waiting in the wings. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 3: Sleepwalker

Bucky had collected his belongings from Steve’s floor, noting idly that there wasn’t much that was his. Some clothes, a couple of pairs of shoes, bought by Steve, he thought, but for him, his size, not Steve’s. His StarkPad, received directly from Tony Stark’s hand, so he assumed it was his to keep, at least as long as he was allowed in the Tower. The bedding and the toiletries had either been there when he’d moved in, or Steve had gotten them for him, but there was nothing really personal among them. His razor, a comb. His meds. He had no photographs, no mementos; they’d gone missing a generation or two ago, like everything else that had defined him, except … no. Everything.

It surprised Bucky to realize he’d lived on this floor for months, and had made no mark. Christ, he’d been dying by inches even since he’d come back to himself.

And now?

Now, he was vapor, steam raised by the flame of anger. Blow too hard, and he’d disappear.

He’d asked Jarvis if he should be thinking about moving on and moving out. He had money of his own, interest earned on an ancient savings account and back pay – money wasn’t an issue. Stability, now, that was an issue. He didn’t have a lot of that, and he’d just thrown most of it down the crapper. The invisible voice had declared he did not know, but that would be at the discretion of Sir Stark.

No doubt with input from Steve, and that could go either way. If it was the Steve he saw most days, he didn’t have a thing to worry about – that Steve was all sad and mushy like a nougat center. He’d never kick him to the curb, no matter how shitty he acted. But the Steve he just saw? The reincarnation of the scrappy pistol of a guy he’d known as a kid? That Steve might toss him
on his keister for good and all.

But for now, he still had a roof over his head, a bedroom rather than a cell, and he didn’t have to go out into the world where his coping mechanisms were woefully underdeveloped to deal with stresses he no longer knew how to handle.

Stresses like everyday life. People. Sounds and smells and sights. He was so insulated from it all up here in the Tower. Protected. Loved? He shut that thought down immediately. He didn’t have to deal, and he wasn’t a danger to the average Joe.

No, when he packed up his belongings and left Steve Rogers’ floor, there was nothing left to tie him to this world except the barrier that separated him from it. The stairwell was so well-built that when he closed the door behind him, he might as well have stepped into the void of space. Silence, cold and empty, stretched around him.

He swallowed against the bile that suddenly welled in his throat, the panic attack that licked at the edge of his senses.

It was just a stairwell. Steps that lead up and lead down. Doors that open onto floors where other humans live. The doors would open. At least one of them would, anyway.

But after tonight, would any of those humans behind those doors speak to him again?

He’d done something unforgivable, and he didn’t know why.

He’d done something destructive, and he couldn’t say what it accomplished – was it meant to destroy, or to clear the way for something new?

He’d done something stupid, and now he’d taken all the stupid with him.

The end of the line had come up awful fast.

A part of him wanted to turn around and race back up the stairs, two at a time, and beg forgiveness, beg Steve to let him back in, beg Steve to forget he’d ever been a cruel and vile fool.

But right behind that emotion was still the anger, the rage. The blinding, pure light of fury. If he didn’t think about it, it settled back to a dull flicker, always there, but not overpowering his senses. He could manage if it was quietly there at the edge, immolating him slowly.

When it flared, he was tinder, ash in an instant, no trace left behind.

So his feet climbed one after another down the stairwell to the guest level, quietly entering the unoccupied floor, and following Jarvis’s soft instruction until he found the room now assigned to him.

The door swung open at Jarvis’s unspoken command, and Bucky stepped through. It was a suite, bedroom off that door there, kitchenette backing on the enormous bathroom, small dining area, and a living room arcing across the night sky, floor to ceiling glass windows framing the harbor view. Beautiful, luxurious by any measure he knew, but impersonal.

He wondered if he’d be there long enough to put his stamp on it, and then wondered what that could be. He was nothing without … no. He would have to stop thinking that way. He was just Bucky now. Not even Bucky. James. Barnes. Bucky was Steve’s. He was James. James was his.
Jarvis had confirmed quietly that all the necessities would be provided on the guest floor, so he wouldn’t have to worry about stuff like that. Food would be stocked after he moved in and a member of Stark’s staff collected his shopping list – on the second, because Stark didn’t make anyone work on New Year’s Day. So at Jarvis’s suggestion, and after the AI had confirmed the communal level to be empty, Bucky, no James, he reminded himself! had slipped up there and collected just enough edibles to get him through to the third. He had a momentary sense of déjà vu, planning out meals carefully to stretch limited stocks as far as they could possibly go, hopefully to a payday that would never come now.

He put the food away carefully, considerately, using the time and the activity to calm himself, like Banner’s yoga exercises.

His meager belongings stowed, the food put away, he wandered the suite aimlessly for a few minutes, mapping the entrance, the floorplan, the flow. That took all of a few minutes, and then he was faced with the big empty bed. The big, empty, cold bed. He stripped down and slid in between the sheets, registering that this was the first time he’d slept alone – without Steve – since that first night he was released into Steve’s custody. Since yes, he first crawled into Steve’s bed, craving harbor from the nightmares that churned his dreams. He told himself that he missed the heat coming off Steve’s fucking furnace of a body, that’s all. So different from the tiny body that used to suck the heat right out of him on cold winter nights. He told himself that he was healthier now, he could handle the nightmares so much easier now. He was stronger. They wouldn’t beat him, and he didn’t need help. Didn’t need Steve. Not to hold off the dark, not to stay warm, and sure as fuck not for any other reason.

But sleep didn’t come easily, because he was resistant to its charms. If he didn’t sleep, he wouldn’t dream, and if he didn’t dream, dreams couldn’t morph into nightmares. And if there were no nightmares, he wouldn’t surge out of his bed, thrashing his way free of the sheets, screaming his throat raw, tearing at the join of flesh with metal, trying to rip it off with his own fingernails.

But as he fought sleep, he also fought memory. His mind shied away from what had happened, the things he’d said, the things he’d felt. The things he couldn’t face. Instead, he watched the news, threw the remote at the screen when the news replayed footage of Steve making out what that guy, a blonde bitch talking trash about Captain America’s big gay coming out, and then he brought up Stark’s Netflix account and watched pointless movie after movie. Fuck if anyone in this century knew how to make a good picture – all the women were flat-chested like boys, no meat on ‘em for a fella to grab hold of, and the men were no better, too soft, too smooth, too skinny, not an honest callus among ‘em, not an honest day’s work to be had in the whole fucking industry. Probably nancy boys, the lot of ‘em.

He was disgusted with this new century, disgusted with himself. Disgusted with what his life’d become, spiraled out of control.

It was with happy thoughts such as those he finally drifted off to a restless sleep.

When he woke bleary-eyed, the first thing he did was reach for Steve, pat down the bed to feel the hot depression of where Steve had slept, listen for the sounds of puttering in the kitchen, and sniff the air for freshly brewed coffee.

Shit. Last night really happened.

Bucky’s chest clenched and he felt short of breath. No wait, James, he chided himself again. He had to stop thinking of himself as Steve’s Bucky, and start thinking of himself as his own James.

But …

Was this how Steve felt when his asthma struck?

He didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all.

He’d had his share of mornings after in his life, but truth be told, Steve had been there for almost every last one of them to help him through. Really, only one he missed was after that liberty in Northern England right before the 107th shipped out for the continent. James had leaned over the railing on the troop ship and vomited into the English Channel for two hours straight. Not one of his shinier moments.

But he wasn’t drunk on alcohol last night. This wasn’t a hair of the dog hangover where he needed help not to vomit.

This was a rage hangover, something he’d never experienced before, at least not as himself. Wait, could he blame all this on Hydra? As appealing as that might be, the answer was an emphatic, shit hell fucking no. He needed to own his rage and his fear.

His whole body was jittery from too much stored adrenaline. His head ached like a sonovabitch, and his skin felt two sizes too small. He felt like shit.

He was alone to face his demons, and it sucked.

So what’s the deal, Barnes? What the fuck are you going to do?

Head pounding and stomach roiling, James opted to deal with mundane bodily functions like taking a leak and knocking back a couple of aspirin rather than dwell too long on the night before. Maybe if he ignored it, it would all go away, the earth would tilt back on its axis, and Steve wouldn’t be out and proud.

Maybe fucking pigs would fly.

They didn’t, did they? Not one of the future details he was really ginned up on. ‘Cos if they were flying, then maybe there was a pill Steve could take, right?

There had to be something that could make this all okay again, right?

Or maybe he just had to face up to the fact that Steve had lied to him all those years, that they’d never really been friends, and he really was all alone, adrift in time like some character in one of his old pulp stories.

He wondered idly if they still printed those magazines. Of course, the future came and went, and looked nothing like what those stories said it was going to be. Cars still didn’t fly. But Stark’s kid did, so maybe that flying car wasn’t so far off after all …

James shook himself to clear the cobwebs. He could get lost in wondering.

Well, breakfast wasn’t going to make itself. Or coffee, or lunch. Or dinner. James was a passable cook, so he was going to find out what he was made of.
Tomorrow. For today, he had party leftovers. Including a pile of those Mexican things. He really needed to experiment with those Mexican things, to prove his hunch that they, and not the sight of Steve Rogers’s smile, had made his Johnson sit up and take notice.

Christ, leak, then breakfast.

&&&

A day by himself was boring. He’d gone through his entire Netflix queue, did some searching and didn’t find anything else he wanted to watch.

By now, Steve would’ve pulled out some lame-ass board game, and together they’d have chewed up the hours, playing the game, talking and chuckling softly while he’d gotten more and more vocal about how lame the game was.

He’d’ve beat Steve at least once if not twice, and Steve would’ve been planning a major rout. Competitive side in that kid was epic. Made games so much more fun.

But all the board games were on his floor, and there was no one to play here.

So, no epic rout tonight.

No memories shared.

No memories recovered.

No … just no, he reminded himself emphatically.

Finally, out of desperation, he pulled up a couple of those porn sites Tony Stark had shown him on his StarkPad. Stark had lifetime memberships and he shared the accounts and passwords with anyone in the Tower who wanted them. Settling in by himself in bed, lights down low, StarkPad tuned to a decidedly heterosexual array of porn, James snuggled in, took hold of his situation, and watched.

And if he didn’t get it up as fast or as hard as he expected, he wrote it off to emotion and upset. It surely was not because he wasn’t as interested in female tail.

And it was most definitely not because he was more interested in a certain star spangled butt than he was the rack on the lead actress in the current film.

And when he fell asleep in the middle of the “good part,” it surely was not because it just wasn’t doing it for him.

&&&

He woke himself up with the sound of his own snoring.

And then he realized that it wasn’t his own snoring that woke him, but Jarvis, making a general announcement. That Steve was going to be on TV, on Good Morning America. No doubt setting the record straight, seriously straight, and clearing the air that what happened the other night hadn’t really happened.

He could make a wish, at least.

A rare personal appearance by Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America.
James would never admit it to anyone, but he was on the edge of his seat waiting for what Steve had to say. In the end, he threw a soft-soled shoe at the television.

Queers were welcome at Disneyworld?

Then he realized he didn’t know what Disneyworld was, so he had to look it up on his StarkPad. Then he threw the other shoe at the TV. Kids’ amusement park full of dancing monkeys and fairy princesses? Steve would fit in perfectly there.

Because of course, when the jackass had the opportunity to talk it all away, he’d given a Captain America speech about how he owed it to all the kid queers to be a superqueer.

Well, wasn’t that just fucking wonderful?

At least he left James’s name out of it.

But everyone just seemed so happy about Steve being queer. No one seemed bothered by it at all. Like it was normal. To be expected. Like he was the one who was wrong.

Just what was he missing?

&&&

Sometime in the late morning, one of Stark’s people showed up at his door to collect his shopping order. James hadn’t put it together yet, so the poor guy had to sit with him while they went through his options. Half the shit on the list he didn’t even know what it was. Since he was still trying to fly under the radar, he deliberately put together a conservative request, and the nice young man shook his head doubtfully.

“You’re one of them super-soldiers, right, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, this is like a quarter of what Captain Rogers put in for today, and that was like half of what he put in for last week. So this isn’t going to be enough for you, is it?”

“Well, I, uh –“

“How about I double it this week, and if you need more, you give me a call, okay? I can always put in a second order with the grocer.”

“Yeah, okay. Um, thanks.”

The young man tidied up his notes, had James sign off on the order, and started to make his way to the door. “I’m sorry you and Captain Rogers didn’t work out. You looked so happy together, I thought … well, I’m sorry, sir.”

James’s hand shook as he toyed with the pen, not looking up at the young man as he backed out of suite quietly. Once the door was closed, James launched the pen at the door with deadly accuracy. The pen sank an inch into the hard wood of the door, and vibrated with his anger.

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“Whadda you want?” Barnes demanded when Sam Wilson showed up at his door an hour or so later. The clock in the kitchen said 12:25 p.m.
“Don’t want you to miss group,” Sam announced sidestepping James’s bulk blocking the door. “Thought you’d be dressed and ready to go by now,” he added, looking Barnes up and down in his t-shirt, sweats, and bare feet.

“I thought everybody took off for the holiday,” Barnes complained, but he turned and followed Sam into the living room nevertheless.

“Most people do. But that’s when it’s most important for group to continue. Everybody’s all happy-happy at the holidays. Except those who aren’t. And trust me, if you ain’t comfortable in your own skin, the holidays can be a bitch. For a lot of vets, this is the toughest time of the year. Shit, you don’t have to be a vet for the holidays to be depressing.”

“Tell me about it,” Barnes grumbled unenthusiastically.

“So … I ain’t takin’ you out with bedhead, man. Y’gotta at least pretend to make an effort.”

Barnes idly scratched his stomach and yawned. “Meanin’ what?”

“Shower, brush your teeth, clothes, comb your hair, and for God’s sake man, put on some underwear,” Sam arched his eyebrow pointedly toward where bare skin and a hint of public hair was clearly visible in the gap in Barnes’s pajamas fly.

Barnes’s eyes widened and he started to say something, thought better of it, and wandered off toward the bedroom to grab a change of clothes, and then shut himself up in the bathroom to follow Sam’s instructions.

Sam flung himself down on the couch to wait, scooched his hips in the air when he heard the text ping tone, and flopped down again. He saw the name on the screen and grinned to himself.

N: Where are you?
S: Barnes plc
N: How is he?
S: Grumpy
N: He say anything yet?
S: In shwer
N: With you?
S: With hiself geez woman!
N: So no progress.
S: Progrs w what
N: Steve
S: Dont hld breth
N: Your spelling is shit
S: Dont h8
N: Americans!
S: Russians!
N: What next?
S: Taking 2 group
N: Report in when you get back.
S: Yes ma’am
N: I will cut you if you call me that again.
S: Promise or threat? See I can spell!
N: Promise.
S: Damn, woman!
“Hah!” Sam muttered to himself, his grin unabated, closing the text window. He dialed Maria Hill’s number and waited impatiently while her extension rang.

“Hill here – oh, Sam,” she greeted.

“‘Oh Sam’? Don’t sound excited or nothin’.”

“No, it’s just that I’m working –“

“I do know that. And I am calling in your work capacity.”

“Oh.”

“Uh-huh. Now the shoe’s on the other foot –“

“So?” she cut him off impatiently. “What’s the nature of your security issue, Wilson?”

“Barnes. Taking him to group.”

“Okay, I’ll arrange for a secure vehicle. You want a driver or an escort?” Sam declined, politely and with a chuckle. “You taking him anywhere else?”

“Maybe for a burger, see if he wants to talk. You know – different environment, maybe less threatening.”

“Maybe you should have that escort, Sam. Backup. You don’t know how he’s going to react. If the other night’s any indication, he could be volatile –“

“No backup. Maria, guy’s been kicked out on his ass, everybody’s ganging up on him, I don’t want to spook him with muscle, okay? But I think somebody’s gotta get their head wrapped around what’s going down with this dude before it spirals any further, don’t you? Guy needs a friend right now, more than a guard.”

Maria was silent for a long moment, long enough that it seemed that the connection had been lost. Finally, she said, “Okay. You’ve made your point. But you need to remember his skill set.”

“You forget mine,” Sam reminded with a smile. “I ain’t no slouch, you know. I can take care of myself, and him. But cooping him up here by his lonesome ain’t gonna help anybody.”

“You be careful, and you keep your comm open.”

By the time he’d finished his texting and his phone call, Barnes was ready to go. Sam fixed his most encouraging smile on his face, and ushered Barnes out of his quarters and down to the garage and the vehicle Maria had selected for them.

&&&

James observed in Sam’s group, but he did not speak beyond his initial greeting as everyone took their seats in the circle. As he looked around, he could see relief etched in the haggard faces looking back at him. Relief that there was some respite from the relentless cheer of the holiday season, relief that they didn’t have to reassure friends and relatives that really, they were okay, honest, relief that here, in group, they didn’t have to pretend.

He wished he could feel that kind of relief.
Some days, he felt like he was still at war. This was one of those days.

The relief came in the fact that it took all of his will and attention not to fidget and fret while sitting there in group. He thought Sam might be the last person in the Tower to speak to him, and he didn’t want to fuck that up. So he willed himself to stillness, to an expression of mild interest and not-rage.

He behaved, and allowed himself to absorb the fact that he was out of the Tower, among people who didn’t know about his fight with Steve, who wouldn’t tell him he was wrong for not thinking Steve’s admission was the greatest thing ever.

So, imagine his surprise when Sam clapped his hands to signal the end of group, and a couple of guys came over and gushed about seeing Steve in Times Square, the fingers of their hands twitching toward each other, and James’s hackles rose. He stared at their hands while they told him they thought Steve was so courageous for coming out on international television. He bore holes into their craniums with his eyes when they gushed that Steve did such a great job on Good Morning, America. And he snarled, coils of his prosthetic groaning with the effort not to tear them apart, as they insisted that James must be so proud of him?

Suddenly, they weren’t smiling anymore as they inched away from him, clutching each other like old ladies trying to cross a busy Brooklyn street.

It was only the weight of Sam’s hands closing on his biceps, flesh and steel, that prevented him from either putting a fist through a nearby wall, or through one of those guys’ faces.

“C’mon, Barnes. I’m in need of a hamburger, and I’m betting you could use the protein, too. Am I right? Yeah, I’m always right when it comes to food. So yeah, let’s go super soldier. We’ll charge it to Stark, and you can have 10 hamburgers if you want.”

The tremor shook through James like a dog shaking off rainwater.

“Cheese,” James muttered.

“Cheese?”

“Cheeseburgers.”

Sam’s hands moved from James’s biceps to clap him on the shoulder. “Right on. Let’s go.”

James continued to glare at the two guys gripping each other fearfully as Sam guided James from the room.

&&&

Sam led James to a greasy spoon not far from where his group met. It looked like it had been standing since James had been a kid, sturdy and stable and staid. Scrupulously clean and worn Formica tabletops, scarred padded chairs with silver rivets, wooden booths with cracked red vinyl padding. Every table, every booth, had a vertical napkin dispenser, a tall salt shaker, a bottle of ketchup, and a china cup full of sugar cubes. Not packets of sugar, actual cubes, and not an artificial or trendy plant-based sweeter in the lot. James stood in the space between the door and the hostess station and breathed the place in. The aroma of coffee, rich and dark, the homely smell of hearty soup, the thick scent of a fryolator, and the heady fragrance of sizzling beef. He grinned at Sam.

“Hah, figured you’d like this place. Building’s been standing since before you were born. Place’s
changed hands a few times, but I figured it might feel a little like home.”

“Fuck, yeah. Shit, I’m starving –“

“Then let’s get us a booth, huh?”

They bonded over thick burgers – bleeding, not dry – and plank French fries slathered in ketchup, with thick milkshakes with bendy straws, topped off with a slab of homemade pie crowned with a dipper-full of vanilla ice cream for James, and a hot fudge sundae for Sam. Few words unrelated to food were spoken as they’d considered the menu, placed their orders, savored the collected odors of the place, and then tucked into a meal that made James grin around his full mouth and groan with carnal pleasure.

With the plates cleared and after-lunch coffee served, James settled back in his seat and waited. Nothing this good ever came without a price.

“So?” he prompted.

“So, what?” Sam asked, stirring sugar into his coffee. James took his black, and blew across the surface to cool the hot liquid down enough to sip.

“So, what’s with the winin’ and dinin’, huh? I don’t put out on the first date, y’know. Not that I’d date you, you bein’ a guy and all. Bad joke,” James concluded, frowning self-consciously and shaking his head.

“Good to know,” Sam observed with a gentle chuckle, setting the spoon down in the saucer. “You’re not my type, anyway. Nah, I figured you maybe could use a little conversation today.”

“Yeah? What’s so special about today?”

“New year. New you? New, ah –“

“New fag?” James challenged, eyes narrowing. “He send you?”

“Hasn’t said a word about you since you two got into it the other night. Except to answer Robin Roberts’ question this morning. Doesn’t know we’re here – none of his business, really.”

“Damn straight,” James agreed, taking a chance on his coffee. He grimaced; it was still too hot to drink. “So what then?”

“It’s just … you sure this is what you want, man? You two’ve got a hell of a lot of history, more’n most people ever get to have. Is this really how you want to end it?” Sam asked earnestly.

“Don’t have a choice,” James said quietly, sipping at the hot coffee anyway.

“No? Why not?”

“He ain’t the guy I thought he was. Steve I knew always stood up to bullies, stood up for the little guy. Never took advantage. Not once.”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums him up. So what’s the problem?”

James frowned – he’d always seen Sam as a stand-up guy, but he just didn’t get it. Could he be so blind? “Seriously? He flaunts himself on television, gets away with it ‘cos he’s Captain Fucking
America, or maybe Stark’s payin’ off the authorities, and you ask what the problem is?”

“Man, you’ve lost me. Flaunts what? His smile? And what the hell would Stark pay anybody off for?”

“His … you know. Whaddya call it now – gay. Light in the loafers, inverted, temperamental, nancy-boy –“ James ground out angrily.

“Dude, you have completely lost me. He wasn’t flaunting anything, just answerin’ questions –“

“He said he was a fairy on television, kissed a guy in front of millions of people. Then why wasn’t he arrested? Only reason is ‘cos he’s Captain Fucking America or Stark’s paid everybody off, and he can do whatever he likes, nobody’s gonna touch him –“

“What?”

“How come he and that Lambert guy get to act like that in public, and nobody does anything? What makes them special?”

“The law, man,” Sam said simply, leaning forward and holding James’s gaze.

“What?”

“The law,” Sam repeated. “Ain’t illegal to be gay anymore, dude. In fact, New York is one of several states where it’s legal for gays to marry.”

“What, two fairies can get a license, get fucking married, and no one cares?”

Sam shrugged and settled back in his seat. “Well, there are always people who hate, but yeah. Same-sex couples can marry, adopt children, all the things that hetero couples can do – including medical decisions, mourning their spouses when they die. You missed decades of civil rights battles, man. The fight’s still goin’ on, but we have made a lot of progress. Gays have rights, women have rights, blacks have rights, Latinos have rights. Native Americas we still gotta do some work on. But ain’t a fat old white man’s world anymore.”

“Legal,” James repeated doubtfully. “So … he can really, well, um –“

“Live his life his way, yeah. Look, you don’t have to participate – you’re not gay, that’s cool, man. I’m not gay, either, least I haven’t found a guy to make me think twice about that – although, Steve’s not far off – and no one’s makin’ you change sides. No one expects anything of you. Y’just gotta learn to respect Steve’s life choices, man. If you can’t support ‘em, at least respect ‘em.”

James sat for a long while in silence, chewing the inside of his cheek. The rage was bubbling just under the surface. He could feel it surging, heat building. He sucked a long breath in through his nose, shook his head. “I … I don’t know that I can. If all that’s true then he’s not using his position as Captain America to get away with something, but … things may have changed, but I don’t know if I can, too.”

“Fair enough. Y’know, if that’s really the case, if that’s important enough to you to end a friendship the rest of us thought was pretty epic, well, that’s your choice. No one’s forcing you to do anything you don’t want to do. But give it some thought, huh? Maybe talk it over with your therapist next week. Get some perspective.”

“And if I don’t? If I don’t change my mind? What then?” That was the big question that was
plaguing James. At what point would everyone cut him loose?

“It’ll be hard, no doubt. But life is hard. Everyone’ll deal and move on. But think about it, okay? I hate to see you guys just … end.” At the doubtful grimace on James’s face, Sam added, “Look, I’ll pull together some links and web sites for you, okay? You can do your own research, draw your own conclusions. Just … try to have an open mind, huh?”

“Not promising anything. But … maybe … um …”

“Then we’ll come back here and talk again, right? Get out of the Tower again, get some fresh air into your lungs. Clear your head a bit, right? In a couple of days, yeah?”

“Yeah, sure,” James replied, even as he wasn’t sure he would. He could feel the heat flickering just behind his eyelids. The urge to give into the heat was almost overwhelming, but he flashed a mechanical smile at Sam and tamped it down.

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Chapter End Notes

Working on the next part and hope to have that ready to share in a few days.

Comments are very welcome!
Part 4: Strut

The drive back to the Tower was slow thanks to rush hour traffic snarling the narrow streets of Manhattan. Barnes tapped a tattoo on his knees with nervous fingers as he eyed the press of people streaming down the streets, swarming into crowds filling their view, crossing at random intervals when traffic slowed to nothing, some brushing up against the door, smacking the bumper as they slid through the cars. Sam was intensely aware of the temperature of Barnes’s mood, the thrum of adrenaline in the air, the washed out paleness of his face, the bead of sweat trickling down his lip, the jerky movements that betrayed the man’s jangling nerves. They were easily an hour away from the Tower based on the flow of traffic, and Sam knew if he didn’t distract Barnes, there was gonna be a shitstorm and he was at its epicenter.

“So, you’re gonna have to do some homework, dude,” Sam announced suddenly.

“No,” Barnes replied flatly.

“Oh yeah,” Sam countered.

“Not in school anymore,” Barnes reminded Sam with a flick of his eyes.

“Gotta lot to learn, m’man. Seventy years of history you gotta catch up on.”

“Why?”

“You’ll never understand the world you woke up in if you don’t have context. Look, I’m not talking graduate level education, but there’s a lot of key moments, key events, key people, who shaped the world we live in today. Steve’s one of ‘em, you know. You, too. Hell, you live in a swanky Manhattan tower populated by history-makers. But if you don’t know why they’re
important, and how that impacts the world, how you gonna understand the world you’re livin’ in?”

Barnes seemed to be listening now. Seemed to be focusing his attention, and the nervous twitching died down. Ebbed a little, anyway, and the dangerous edge to the air seemed to ease off. He was turned in his seat, body language focused on Sam. Good. If he was focused, he wasn’t slipping into a panic attack, or worse, fight or flight mode.

“So what’s the homework?”

&&&

T: RU ever coming home?
P: Miss me?
T: Always. Hows cap?
P: A good boy
T: Mama Rogers baby
P: He has manners
T: Having fun?
P: I luv dressup
T: Shd I be jealous?
P: What do u think?
T: I can b jealous if u want
P: UR so sweet
T: Does it turn you on?
P: On 2nd thogut
T: ETA?
P: Hour
T: Got clothes?
P: Bought out 3 stores. Your owe more than national debt
T: Gr8. Drvng engine of commerce. Why me? Caps got money
P: I told him what to get. Hed die if he saw price tag.
T: Death by sales slip. No can do Stock will go down
P: UR all <3
T: Call em as I see em
P: Your friends will hate U. I will hate U.
T: Cant have that. So
P: So
T: Bring him to communal level
P: Tony
T: Bring the duds
P: Tony?
T: It’ll be fun
P: Tony!
T: CU soon!

&&&

Traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, still wasn’t cooperating, but they’d gained some ground in reaching the Tower. Sam had toyed with the idea of requesting air extraction, but quelled the urge. Instead, he tried to make good use of the forced bonding time with Barnes. “It’s not good to be isolated, Barnes. Not good for your recovery, and not good for you, period.”

“Nobody wants me around,” Barnes replied, attention still anchored on the ebb and flow of people
outside the car. He didn’t say out loud, “Because I fucked it up with Steve,” but Sam felt the simmering subtext.

“Not true.”

“If you’re comin’ on to me, Wilson, I may need to hurt you,” Barnes snarled, tearing his eyes away from the world beyond the car’s interior to glare at him.

The car was stationary, so Sam flicked on “park” and raised his hands up in a placating gesture. “Nah. Tall, dark and scary ain’t my style. And hurtin’ me ain’t gonna score you any points with your therapist. Or the powers that be.”

“The people who’d put me in a cell,” Barnes shrugged like it didn’t matter who his jailer was and turned back to the street.

“Right. So that’s part of your homework – stayin’ on the sweet side of the suits.”

“What’s the plan?”

“The public party level. Y’know, what Stark calls the ‘living room’? Hang out for, oh, two hours today, okay? Work up to more later. Don’t gotta say anything to anyone, just be there, okay? You can go hide in your regular spot in the dark, scary corner, just stay on the level where there are people.”

“It’s not a corner. The wall is curved there.”

“It’s a hidey hole and it’s still dark. I don’t care what its shape is. Are you gonna do it?”

Barnes took a deep breath and nodded tersely. “That it?”

“I’ll e-mail you some links and book titles. But you can start with the ACLU web site.”

“I remember hearing about them when I was a kid. Did some stuff with vets from the Great War, unions. Okay, I’ll check it out. Anything else?”

“It’s a start. Let’s see how you do, and we’ll go from there, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll try. Not promisin’ anythin’.”

“All I can ask, man. For now at least. Now, how about you tell me some corny stories about what New York was like in the Dark Ages, hmm?”

&&&

The communal level was surprisingly active, and James and Wilson entered the floor as the others cleared away the remains of what was apparently a late lunch. They paused at the elevator and Wilson arched an inquisitive eyebrow at James, who jerked his head toward the shadowed alcove over near the TV viewing area. Wilson nodded, gesturing toward the crowd. “Imma gonna go,” he said softly, and James inclined his head, peeling off toward the comforting darkness in the far curve of the room.

As Wilson greeted the others, James settled into his seat that gave him clear sightlines to the gathering, the elevator, the hallway leading off the area, and the span of windows. He observed as Sam joined the others, arms outstretched, stance easy. James was not at all surprised to see Romanoff’s eyes flick in his direction as she slid a hand up Sam’s arm and graced his cheek with a
peck of her lips.

He rested his back against the chair, feeling the pressure of the curving wall just behind him, close enough to touch, close enough that no one could wedge in behind him. Narrowing his eyes, he watched the lips of Romanoff and Wilson as she cornered him.

&&&

“Well?” Natasha prompted as she slid her hand around Sam’s bicep. Her smile was enticing, but Sam just shook his head. “Don’t let me down, Wilson,” she warned, her brows furrowing.

“Sorry. No can do,” he answered with a tight smile.

“I gave you a mission, soldier –“

“And I decline, Ma’am. Respectfully.”

“What the hell, Wilson –“ her eyes flashed threateningly.

“I have a responsibility. A professional responsibility that trumps even you, Natasha.”

“But Steve –“

“Can take care of himself. Barnes not so much. Right now, thing he needs the most is a friend. I ain’t known him 85 years, but I can at least be a sympathetic ear. Look, I –“

Natasha held up her index finger imperiously and tilted her head. She studied him for a long moment, eyes narrowed appraisingly. “Okay,” she said at last. “I’ll let you slide this once.”

“That’s kind of you, Ms. Natasha.”

“Just this once,” she reminded, then slid into a sweet smile. She knocked her shoulder against his. “You’re good people, Sam Wilson.”

Before he had a chance to reply, they all heard Jarvis’s voice cut through the chatter and noise. “Ladies and gentlemen, Ms. Potts would like you to know that she and Captain Rogers are en route to this level,” Jarvis announced in his quiet fashion.

“That’s great, Jarvis, thank you,” Sam called up to the ceiling, then turned back to resume his conversation with Natasha.

“And Sir would like everyone to take their seats, please.”

This caused a murmur of confusion. “What the heck?” Sam demanded, brows furrowed.

He was interrupted by the arrival of Tony Stark in full debauched rock star mode, Rolling Stones t-shirt singed around the edges, faded jeans with fabric worn away to nothing in places, comfortable sneakers. He entered the communal area with arms outstretched, beatific grin upon his face, counting down under his breath. When he reached one, he clapped his hands and announced, “Catwalk Playlist 1, Jarvis! Lady Gaga, Applause,” he added, taking a deep bow that no one bothered to notice.

Immediately, the vocals filled the space, just as the elevator dinged, disgorging an exhausted looking Steve Rogers barely visible under a tentatively balanced mountain of parcels decorated with the discreet logos of several high-end stores. He waddled into the vaulted room and dropped the truly prodigious collection of bags, boxes, and packages of odd shapes and sizes, sighed heavily
and glanced toward his companion, a triumphant-looking Pepper Potts.

“Places, everyone! Take a seat, line ‘em up! The Steve Rogers fashion show is about to begin!”

“Oh, no,” Steve protested.

“Oh, yes,” Pepper agreed enthusiastically. “C’mon Cap – time to strut your stuff,” she added with a cheeky grin.

“You’re welcome!” Tony cried with a grin and a waggled eyebrow. And everyone took their seats while Pepper shivvied Steve and his parcels down the hall to a room with the closed door.

“You didn’t!” Natasha cried out. “You went shopping without me?”

Pepper paused and grinned. “You can accessorize him,” she told Natasha, and the ex-Soviet spy was gone in a shot, leaving Sam to chuckle to himself until tears started to fall.

In his shadowed alcove, James frowned, but let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

&&&

Pepper Potts loved posing Steve Rogers. It was like having that dress-up doll she’d always wanted but never got for Christmas. Natasha Romanoff never had dolls as a child, and she was making up for it as an adult, now, with Steve Rogers as her plaything.

Tony’s music was playing through the speakers, an infectious tune that Pepper and Natasha both bopped to as Steve dutifully got changed in the walk-in closet.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” he called as he thumped around inside the closet.

“I really don’t agree,” Pepper responded, grinning at Natasha.

“Suck it up, Rogers! You’re a friggin’ national icon – least you can do is share a little eye candy with the masses,” Nat calls over her shoulder.

“You could show a little respect to your elders,” Steve yelled back, and then the closet door slid open with a swish and a bump. He stepped out into the room with his hands outstretched, and asked, “What do you think?”

The suit was a rich, dark blue, the fabric a shimmering silk blend. The shirt was a deeper shade of blue, draped like water flowing over his body, but he hadn’t put on a tie yet so the collar was open at the neck. Nat’s smile was positively vulpine as her fingers danced over the array of ties they’d laid out from Steve’s shopping spoils. She selected a silvery gray and white tie from the selections, and brought it over to Steve, holding it up against the shirt to confirm its compatibility.

“Perfect,” Pepper breathed, clapping her hands like a little girl. “Do you need help, Steve, or – “

“One of the perks of an early 20th century education. I can tie my own tie, thanks. Is this really necessary?”

“Oh yes. Absolutely necessary. It’s necessary like I need air. Turn around,” Natasha commanded, taking a step back to get the full effect as Steve executed a 360 spin.

He was beautiful, and the suit accentuated his assets in an elegant and understated way. The fabric moved with him in ways that might be illegal in certain states. He stood there, waiting for
instructions. “Go!” Pepper insisted, and Steve shot out of the room while Pepper and Natasha quickly organized the remaining clothes with the appropriate accessories in the order they wanted him to wear them, then scurried back out to the open space to enjoy the show.

&&&

James considered what Wilson had told him. Did it make a difference? Maybe. Steve ain’t some spoiled toff cashing in on influence and money to avoid prosecution. What he was doing wasn’t illegal in this day and age. Didn’t make it right. But apparently, for a lot of people what he was doing wasn’t actually wrong, not even immoral, just different. From the way the others were acting, maybe not even so different, just foreign to James.

Like James was the one who was wrong.

The others were joking around when Steve raced into the front of the space and skidded to stop, looking like a target in his crosshairs. They started teasing him, daring him to do something to model his new clothes. And damn if he didn’t start moving, awkwardly – Steve only had grace on the battlefield, never in the dancehall – but with enthusiasm. He almost kept the beat of that weird song Stark had playing.

James was nestled comfortably in his chair in the semi-dark, chuckling quietly to himself as Steve made an ass of himself prancing around showing off his new duds. He had to admit that Steve cut a fine figure of a man, and that blue suit was like liquid sex on his big body. What he could have done with a suit like that back in the day … dames’d been linin’ up for miles to dance with him in that get-up. Steve moved a little awkwardly, grinning madly as the others called out moves – spin, take off the jacket, get rid of that tie, wiggle that ass! And goddamn if he didn’t do just that, big-ass grin on his dumb face.

“Whaddya think, Steve? Think Ruthie’ll be willin’ to be seen in public with me dressed like this?” Bucky asked, tugging the knot of his tie into place and smoothing down the drape of his jacket. It was a new suit, bought with carefully husbanded pennies saved over nearly a year. A new suit just for dancing, pleated black trousers and brand spanking new suspenders, crisp white shirt, broad-shouldered jacket with deep pockets and wide lapels, red silk bow tie, just like the swells wore. He turned in a circle, arms outstretched, grinning at Steve. “Huh? Whaddya think, punk?”

“Yeah, you’re a no-good, useless jerk,” Steve chuckled fondly from where he sat atop a kitchen stool, bare feet curled around the top-most rung, elbows pressed into the tops of his thighs. All folded up like that, he looked like a little kid, not a fully grown man with an opinion worth having. But still Bucky needed to hear what Steve thought, needed to have his approval. “But I think she’ll be proud to be seen on your arm tonight, Buck. You look like Clark Gable and John Garfield all rolled into one. Handsome and a little dangerous.”

Grinning with relief, Bucky turned back to the milky old mirror and snagged a lock of hair, tugging it into position to curl in the middle of his forehead. “Yeah, that’s what I was going for. Gable to sweep her off her feet, Garfield to seal the deal.”

“Ruthie Dennis ain’t gonna know what hit her tonight, Buck. She’s a lucky gal,” Steve added with a fond chuckle.

James started with the clarity of the memory. New snippets of his past occasionally came back to him, usually hazy and gauzy like nobody’d pulled back the curtains. But this memory was crystal clear, like he’d stepped back into 1939 and that little apartment he and Steve had shared back in Red Hook. Smell of boiled cabbage hanging in the air, Mrs. O’Connell’s baby bawling down the next floor, the kids outside playing catch in the scruffy scrap of grass next door in the fading
sunlight. The last gasp of summer and the promise of bliss in the arms of a dame.

Huh.

The others were chanting Steve’s name, and Bucky looked up, curious. Guess he’d milked that suit for all it could give, and he’d disappeared. That strange song had ended, too, and James was glad – he couldn’t tell if the singer was a dame or a guy, and the beat was just not one a fella could dance to.

Just then, another song started, and this time he could tell the singer was a woman. And apparently it was a well-known song, because the women all got up and started striking poses while everyone chanted for Steve to reappear. Everyone was laughing, even Thor, although James’d bet he didn’t have a bigger fuckin’ clue than James had.

“Omigod, I love Madonna!” Barton shouted suddenly, and he got up to join the chorus line with the girls, throwing his body into the same positions as the women. Finally, Wilson hauled his butt up, too, and there was a decent kick line making fools of themselves when Ms. Potts grabbed Stark by the wrists and dragged his ass up to join the fun – and it did look like fun – while Stark protested that he did not “vogue.” Banner sat there shaking his head, laughing gently, but obviously he didn’t “vogue” either.

Steve came out again then, grinning toward the gyrating group, and tried to shimmy his way into the groove. He didn’t know the steps, though, so just kind of wove in and out amongst them in a vague sort of rhythm. This time he’d dressed more casually in a pair of painted on black jeans, a soft-looking white sweater, and a supple-looking leather jacket. James immediately wanted to raid Steve’s wardrobe and claim the jeans, sweater and jacket for himself, knowing they would look perfect on him. He definitely had the ass to sell those jeans, and grudgingly, he had to admit that Steve did, too. Idly, he wondered if he could convince Ms. Potts to take him shopping – she clearly has great taste since it matched his own.

Laughing, Steve slotted a pair of glasses with dark reflective lenses on his face, and started striking poses of his own. James wanted the glasses, too. They were so much more attractive than his old goggles, and he was sure that no woman would be able to resist him in the get-up Steve was wearing. He ignored the heat that coiled in his nether regions, mind glancing past the idea that a fella might not be able to resist Steve dolled up the way he was, either.

“I dunno, Buck. Don’tcha think the jacket’s a bit big?” Steve asked as he toyed with his tie, frowning.

“Nah, makes y’ look … bigger,” Bucky answered with a grin. “More manly. ‘Cos, y’know, y’are.”

“Manly? Me? You been hitting old man Weaver’s still again? That moonshine’ll rot your gut and your brain. Don’t know why he’s still makin’ it – Prohibition’s over.”

“No tax on moonshine, and nobody’s waterin’ down the proof. Stuff ain’t smooth, but it’ll get your motor runnin’,” Bucky added with a lascivious grin.

“Stop your heart and rot your you know what, more like,” Steve protested with a shake of his head.

“My Johnson is grade A prime Johnson, I’ll have you know,” Bucky pointed out seriously. “All the dames swear by it,” he added with a bawdy waggle of his eyebrows and a grin.

“Don’t need to know about your thing or where you stick it, Buck, just how I look in this suit. I need to make a good impression.”
Bucky twirled his index finger to indicate he wanted Steve to turn around, his friend did, a full 360. The suit might have been a little big, but Steve looked good, grown up and ready to take on the world. Bucky felt a pang of pride, followed by something he couldn’t identify. He felt like this was an important moment, where maybe Steve wouldn’t need Bucky to be the one looking out for him anymore. He shook it off and grinned.

“You’ll wow ‘em, Steve. They’ll take one look at your portfolio, and you’ll be on easy street for the rest of your life. They can’t not like your drawings, Steve. And the suit is aces.”

“I really want this job, Buck. Not just ’cos I need a job, but this is what I want to do. Y’sure this tie is okay?”

“It’s the tie of some mook who’s gonna have a new job drawin’ comics, Rogers. Now shut up and get your ass movin’ – Manhattan ain’t comin’ to you.”

James snorted at the memory. Steve was so nervous about that job interview, he barely slept for three days. After he got home, he puked up everything he’d eaten in those three days. But the job had come through, and Steve had been happy. James remembered Steve smiling a lot back then, back before the war started and newsprint ended up on the government’s list. He’d lost a little bit of time again, reclaiming that memory. It seemed like watching Steve strutting his stuff in this snazzy new wardrobe was triggering memories. He might be annoyed with Steve’s behavior, and fuckin’ pissed about his goddamned “life choices,” but he couldn’t deny the excitement he felt discovering old memories, little pieces of himself he didn’t even know he’d lost. As a new song started and Steve pounded down the hallway back into the lounge area, James concluded that it was worth it to watch Steve make a fool of himself if it meant more memories. He chased them jealously, selfishly, like an reefer addict chasing a high. Only for him, those memories made him more whole, instead of shredding him into nothingness.

Now Steve was trotting out of the back room clad in a white tank top, denim button down hanging open, and loose shorts that cut off about midway down his thighs – James thought he’d seen them called “board shorts.” And Steve’s thighs were something to behold, golden with well-defined muscle, powerful, tapering into equally impressive calves. Legs that let Steve finally achieve the dream he’d always had of being able to run, really run. James rejected the image of Steve pounding down the running path, his body fit and glorious, his face alight with the sheer joy of having a body that didn’t betray him at every turn, the muscles of his ass clenching and releasing with each unbridled stride.

He shoved aside the recent memory, but just like before, the sight of Steve cavorting around in fancy new clothes triggered a lost memory, this time further back than he’d remembered so far.

“But Ma, I don’ wanna wear those,” Bucky whined. He was standing in the kitchen of the Barnes’s apartment, pointing angrily at the long pants his Ma held up for him. “I like my pants,” he told her, hooking his thumbs under his suspenders and snapping them in place, staring down at his short pants and giving her a belligerent pout. His knees were scabbed up from scuffles and wrasslin’ and schoolyard tumbles, beatin’ down the bullies that didn’t back down when Steve put up his dukes. A fella knew where he stood when he could see his wounds and display them proudly to the world – a bully might think twice about takin’ on a fella with lots of scabs and bruises who could still stand tall. Long pants just meant church and responsibility and getting old and bein’ afraid to get ‘em dirty or rip a hole in the knees. Bucky didn’t want any of that.

“Steve don’t have to wear long pants,” he told her petulantly.

“Steve Rogers is a year younger than you and half your size. Nobody’s expecting him to wear long
pants, Jimmy. Now, I thought you’d be happy to move up to long pants, baby. You’re growing up so fast – don’t you want to be a man?”

“I don’t wanna be a man until Steve’s ready to be one, too, Ma. Lemme wait another year, wontcha? Please, Ma –“

“Oh, all right. You and that Rogers boy are joined at the hip anyway – you’d only look funny with long pants next to his scrawny, knobby knees.”

Bucky grinned at his Ma, savoring the victory. Wait til he told Steve!

Huh.

As music played and Steve came back out of that back room wearing new duds, James found his brain filling in the blanks. Steve came out wearing a sharp suit with a vest, fancy white shirt and a tie of molten gold. He sucked in his cheeks and stalked across the space with exaggerated hip movements, earning him loud laughter and Wilson crying out, “Cut the check!”

James was suddenly back in the old apartment watching Steve get dressed for his first date with Elsie Pickford. James had had to take away that horrible polka-dotted tie and give him one of his own and then do his hair with pomade so he looked a proper gentleman. Elsie didn’t appreciate what she was getting, and Steve was home early that night, so he and James had played gin rummy til Steve didn’t look so sad anymore.

Another gorgeous suit, this one a charcoal gray with a soft black shirt and a blood red tie, and Steve simply stood there, showing off the beautiful fabric and subtle lines of the suit with small shifts in his posture.

In his mind’s eye, James found himself preening in front of the mirror, admiring himself in his Sunday finery, while fearing God would punish him for thinking about kissing Susie Mason – and more - instead of Holy Communion.

When Steve came out wearing an elegant tuxedo, James’s breath caught in his throat, and he stared, mesmerized.

James remembered Steve and Bucky trying to help each other dress for James’s sister’s wedding , both of them overwhelmed with the fact she’d asked them both to be ushers, both of them uncomfortable as fuck in borrowed tuxedos.

A soft gray sweater and acid washed jeans.

The first time he put on his uniform.

Pale blue button-down, black slacks, suede jacket.

The first time he’d seen Steve in his.

This time Steve was dressed in a pleated white shirt buttoned up to his chin, with a long, sleek black jacket over black pleated trousers. And a hat, damn him! A slouchy fedora pulled rakishly down over his forehead. He marched right out this time, flipped the jacket back over his hip and spun around, grinning over his shoulder. The women shrieked and the men guffawed, and everyone seemed to really enjoy his shenanigans.

“Are you keeping the suit?”
“Y’know, it’s growing on me.”

Why’d he been so interested in the damned suit?

And now everyone was catcalling, but there was no sign of Steve. The music had changed again, some jazzy number, but still no Steve. Finally, after several minutes of confusion, Ms. Potts and Natasha ran off down the hallway. A minute or two later, they came back, dragging Steve between them.

No wonder he’d been hiding.

The latest outfit was a strip of stretchy blue cloth around his ass and dick, and an open white shirt, nothing else. This was more of Steve than James’d seen since before the war, probably more than anybody’d seen of Steve. And he sure as hell hadn’t looked this that when he’d been a foot and a half in the grave. Shit, he really was built like a brick shithouse. And damn if he didn’t have it where it counted with the ladies. Er, the fairies? he amended with a grimace.

But Steve looked uncomfortable, his eyes darting over to the two women who nodded encouragingly at him. He frowned, glancing at the others who laughed and goaded and whistled. Bucky would swear that he was trying to make himself smaller right before his eyes. And for a moment, James felt that familiar heat flare, the one that drove him to protect Steve Rogers at all costs. He was shocked that it was still there, despite his anger, despite his revulsion. If it was still there, what else might be?

What was that heat and tremor coiling in his gut?

His internal interrogation was cut off by Stark calling out, “Jarvis, play The Song.”

“Sir?” Jarvis replied, apparently not having ESP to go with all its other skills.

“The Theme Song,” Stark elaborated.

And there it was. The Star Spangled Man with the Plan. Steve’s old USO theme song. He’d seen it in the Smithsonian news reels, and now Steve was grinning like an idiot but still trying to compact himself at the same time the others were calling for him to “do the routine!” and, “Hooray for Captain America!” and, “Let’s see some leg, Rogers!” That was Stark, of course.

And damn if he didn’t slide right back into character. Wilson flipped him a seat cushion off one of the couches, and Steve held it up like a makeshift shield. The dames – Jane Foster, Darcy Lewis, Natasha!, Ms. Potts, and Maria Hill all got up and saluted, then slid into a new kick line around Steve in time with the music. Banner, Wilson, and Barton followed, and fuck if Thor didn’t join them, too, all elbows and muscles and flicking legs as they wove in and around each other. That left only a shuddering Ian and a defiant Stark still seated in the peanut gallery.

And that’s when the next memory hit.

August, the sun’s a big ole ball o’ hot, and the city’s dyin’ in the heat. Bucky and Steve had been saving up all summer for a day at the beach, a ride out on the subway to cool down with flavored ice and ice cream that melted before they could lick it, and water so cool on their bare skin that February seemed a warm memory.

Bucky had hit his growth spurt, and towered over Steve, eclipsing him in his shadow for all the breadth of his shoulders now. Steve could be prickly about his delayed puberty, and he’d be more likely to find himself a fist to break his nose on if he felt small and invisible. But on the beach, in
the middle of a heat wave, no one gave a crap about the skinny little guy with the pale complexion and the swimming trunks held in place with an extra rope belt because he had no damned hips to hold up the trunks. Most New Yorkers looked like flapping fish on the beach, even this late in the season. Nobody had a lot of leisure time or money to go to the beach every day or even every weekend. So most white folks were in between stone cold white and a barely healthy tan. People would take one look at Steve and peg him as a fair-skinned, sunburnin’ Mick, and just go on about their business.

Bucky was lucky he took after his Mom’s side of the family, Black Irish who tended to be a little darker and took to the sun better. And a summer working on the docks had flushed his skin a nice golden brown, so dames were happy to look at him and get their fill while he chucked seashells at Steve’s head.

And then Steve looked up at him and grinned, a wide open explosion of happy, and took off, hell for leather, toward the surf. He pounded down the coarse sand, racing between families, vaulting over partially completed sand castles, and dove into the rolling surf. Here at the water’s edge, Steve breathed easier, his lungs soothed by the moist salt air.

Bucky counted off the seconds that Steve was underwater. He got to 60 and no sign of Steve. He bolted up from the blanket, scanning the crowd, searching the water for a sign of him. The salt air might soothe his lungs, but it didn’t fix them. He took a faltering step toward the waves, craning his neck as he pivoted from side to side looking for evidence of Steve. The panic grew rapidly in his chest, the fear that something had happened to Steve and he’d been too complacent to stop it. The impending guilt was already crushing him.

And suddenly, Steve erupted out of the waves, shooting straight up with a splash and a geyser of water sluicing off his body like a surface breaching dolphin. Steve bounced back down on his feet, swiping the water away from his face, a face split in a grin of such joy, Bucky literally stopped breathing for a moment, his toes digging into the wet sand to balance himself as he ground to a halt in mid-stride.

The sun glinted off Steve’s blond hair like hammered gold, broke into a million diamond shards held in the water droplets that trembled down his skin. Steve’s eyes sought out his, and at the sight of Bucky, the impossible grin became even wider, more incandescent. He was a warrior armored in silver and gold and he was the most beautiful thing Bucky had ever seen.

Oh.

Well, fuck.

James did not have the opportunity to examine this new revelation, as he came back to himself to see that Steve was ending his routine with a cheesy smile, then dissolved into hiccupping laughter. The others were equally amused, and James expected their next action to be falling into a dogpile like five years olds. “The last time I did that, I had a mask on. And a lot more clothes!” Steve cried, falling back against the massive chest that was Thor while the big god – seriously, a god? – clapped him on the back with a paw big enough to take down a plane. Steve tossed his seat cushion/shield back at Wilson, who tossed it onto the couch.

James felt his hands flex and clench.

“And there, ladies and gentlemen – and Barton – we have the new Bachelor!” announced Tony Stark into the silence that followed Steve’s ridiculous routine, arms extended once more.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?
Clearly the crowd around Steve had some inkling, because they all erupted into speech at the same time.

“Wait, so Cap –“

“I thought the Bachelor was straight –“

“Where do I sign up?”

“Wait, I thought you were gay –“

“Bi, actually –“

“Seriously?”

“I, uh –“

“Don’t be shy, Cap, gonna have to step up if you want to get laid –“

“Why is everything about getting laid?”

“You’re shitting me, right? Isn’t everything?”

“Not everything, Tony,” Pepper countered pointedly.

“Enough so that anything else is statistically insignificant.”

“So what’s this about Steve being the Bachelor?”

“The first bisexual Bachelor,” Pepper corrected.

“So, what, dudes and ladies?” Sam demanded, incredulous. “On network TV?”

Steve shrugged, ducking his head down. “Um, yes?”

“Seriously, where do I sign up?” Darcy demanded, undulating her way up to pet Steve’s naked chest. “I’m still offerin’ Cap,” she added with a salacious grin.

“And I’m still saying thanks but no, Darcy. I’m not looking for … well, I’m looking for the right partner,” Steve said, his eyes flicking toward the dark curve of the alcove where James sat. And damn if James didn’t feel those eyes on him, sizzling along his skin like tar bubbling on the street on a hot Brooklyn day.

He gasped quietly at the sensations roiling through his body.

He set his jaw and narrowed his focus, welcoming the flame of anger. No.

His prosthetic hand closed on the arm of the chair, splintering the wood and shredding the upholstery.

No fucking way.

&&&

While everyone clustered around Rogers and congratulated him, grilled him, and in Darcy’s case, felt him up, Tony slipped sideways and trotted down the hallway, attempting to look stealthy, but in reality looking glaringly guilty. James tracked his progress with an arched eyebrow at the same
time he focused on controlling his breathing and stilling the nervous energy that coiled and uncoiled like a viper in his gut. He started to unfold himself from his vantage point when he saw Wilson separate himself from the group and follow Stark.

With a sigh, he pressed his back against the chair and waited.

&&&

Sam followed Stark quietly down the hall, watched him slide up to a room along the curve of the hallway, turn the knob and slip quietly inside.

Yeah, he was really inclined to trust a guy who snuck away from his own party. Not.

A moment later, he slipped into the room behind Stark.

“Don’t like the company?” Sam asked as he snicked the door shut behind him. He stood there, surveying the room. It was a bedroom, with clothing – Steve’s clothing – neatly folded in stacks on the bed.

“Company’s fine. But opportunity knocks!”

“Opportunity?”

Stark held up a folded pile of clothing – Steve’s regular clothes, khakis, plaid shirt, windbreaker.

“You’re raiding Captain America’s closet?”

“He doesn’t need it anymore,” Stark replied cheekily.

“How long did you plan that one, huh?”

“Not one of my best, I’ll admit. Now I’ve got this, let’s go –“

Sam stood his ground, back pressed against the door. Stark paused, eyeing him curiously.

“So. What’s up, Flyboy?”

“Barnes.”

Stark shrugged. “What of him?”

“What’re your plans?”

“Why, kind sir, are you asking me what my intentions are toward Barnes? ‘Cos, seriously, don’t have any, at least for the moment. Gotta feeling this thing with Cap will blow over. You’re going to tell me it’s going to blow over, right?”

Sam shrugged. “Dude’s gotta lot of issues to work through, and seventy years of history to learn. Hopin’ for the best, but it’s hard to say. This Bachelor thing may be more than he can handle. But he’s convinced he’s going to get tossed out, I’d like to know what to say to him –“

“I’ll talk to him. I need to get a sense of how … dangerous? he might be. How dangerous do you think he might be, hmm?”

“Right now, not much. Sure he’s got that whole assassin thing going for him, but I don’t get the sense it’s something he wants to do. But seriously, what’s it gonna take?”
“Cap says he’s gone, he’s gone. We’d arrange a transfer with … I don’t know, someone must want him. But until that happens, I’m cool with him bunking in here in the Tower. Better to have him where we can see ‘im.”

“Good, that’s what I was hoping.”

“But Wilson, if Barnes can’t handle what Steve’s doing … none of us, Steve especially, can live our lives to suit Barnes. He’s gonna have to adjust or move on.” Sam nodded gravely, so Tony pressed with a cheeky grin, “What’s your interest? Gotta thing for Sergeant Grumpy?”

“Got a professional – not to mention ethical – responsibility to a fellow vet. Plus, I don’t think Cap’s gonna be happy if any of us treat his old buddy like crap just because they had a tiff. Those two kiss and make up, you know Cap’s protective side is gonna be looking for trouble.”

“Kissing and making up. The mind boggles. According to Dad, those two were brothers from different mothers. The way he told it, a one in a million friendship. Think he thought there was something more, but he could never prove it, because you know, Barnes died. And then, well, Cap died. Guess we have our answer, huh?”

“Yeah, I think we all kind of assumed if not then, maybe now.”

“Kind of surprised Barnes never noticed. Cap’s puppy dog eyes alone were kind of obvious, but if he’s always been that way, and Barnes didn’t figure it out, well …”

“If he never expected to see it, maybe it never occurred to him. They sure didn’t have anything like Will and Grace or Queer as Folk to give ‘em context …”

“Hmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Just perhaps the kernel of a brilliant idea. We’ll see. So, great bonding with you, but are we done here? ’Cos I still have some epic teasing to do with Steve. Seriously, epic.” Then he paused and glanced up at the ceiling. “Jarvis, Let It Go.”

&&&

Wilson and Stark rejoined the group just as a female vocal started in on letting something go – James thought he recognized the tune from that Disney movie about snow. Stark had something tucked under his arm, and James half-rose from his seat to get a better look, but Stark had his body turned deliberately away from scrutiny.

What in hell?

“Jarvis, pause and ignite in 30,” Stark commanded, and cleared his throat loudly.

Wrangling a tower full of spies, superheroes and goddamned gods – was that really a thing? – wasn’t easy, and Stark was clearly on the losing side of the battle. No one noticed his throat-clearing, or his command. So he tried again. A third time. And on the fourth try, everyone finally heard him.

“Thank you,” he said sarcastically. “I have here the end of an era,” he announced, pitching his voice to carry. He held up the bundle under his arm like a prize. “Ladies and gentlemen – and Barton – I give you … the ceremonial burning of the grandpa clothes!”
Steve’s head snapped up and he made a grab for the fistful of clothes, but Stark sidestepped him and danced toward the flames that suddenly leapt up in the massive fireplace. Stark balled up the clothes and made like he was the quarterback, hauling back to snap the ball. "Goodbye, grandpa clothes!" he cried.

James grinned. Steve always sucked at football.

Where had that come from?

The clothes hit their target and immediately caught and fired in a whooshing gout of flame.

“I liked those pants,” Steve mourned, staring after his clothes rapidly turning to ash.

“Those were not the pants of a man looking to get laid. Those were not the pants of the first bisexual Bachelor!”

James felt a little wistful as everyone teased and knocked shoulders and generally had a good time celebrating the death of Steve’s lame wardrobe. Even after 70 years on the ice and life in leather armor, James knew more about fashion than Steve ever would, and he could have shown him a thing or two to lure in the dames. But …

Yeah, that happened.

He was so intent on the group at the far end of the space that he didn’t notice Darcy and her tame intern Ian until they were practically on top of him, at which point he shouted, she yelled something about a taser, and Ian screamed. Suddenly James was looking at the business end of an active taser.

“What the fuck? Can’t a guy have some privacy?” James demanded, half rising out of his chair to intimidate Darcy and her intern. It worked on the intern, but Darcy just got this pugnacious look on her face – reminding him instantly of Steve at his most recalcitrant – and waved the taser around like she meant to use it. James reached out and closed his metal hand over the device, crushing it before she could hurt anyone – like him – with it.

“Hey, that’s my lucky taser, you rat bastard!” she swore at him, her eyes wide with shock and general cussedness. “What the hell are you doing lurking like a stalker over here in the dark?”

“Observing,” James retorted, tossing the pieces of taser onto a nearby chair. “What the hell are you here for?”

“Semi-public sex, of course!” she exclaimed with a cackle, and Ian groaned while he turned a shade of red not found in nature, and looked like he was praying that the floor would swallow him whole.

From where James was standing, this situation could not get any weirder. So of course, the universe failed to take pity on him, and simply went for it in a big way. Because at that instant, a fuzzy headed, middle-aged, half naked (god, at least he’d got underwear on!) physicist woke up with a shout and an unintelligible curse as he rolled out from under the nearest sectional couch.

“Erik! I wondered where you were, dude,” Darcy said nonchalantly, like Selvig had a habit of appearing out of nowhere in various forms of undress.

Even Ian the intern didn’t seem phased by Selvig’s condition, and just bent down to help the old guy up.
“Hey Jane, we found Erik!”

“Erik! Oh my god, Erik, you’ve been missing over a day!”

“Yep, found ‘im! And yep, I think he’s still drunk. Dude seriously knows how to party down! Come on, Erik, let’s get some hair of the dog in you, huh?” Darcy offered while Ian got Selvig more or less to his feet, and Jane and Thor rushed over

James looked around, shook his head disgustedly, and swore. And with that, he fled the communal level, streaking across the space to the stairwell, and he was gone.

&&&

From where he was standing with his friends, Steve could hear the exchange between Darcy and Bucky, and he sighed as Bucky got up to go. He’d been aware of Bucky’s attention the entire time, he was always hyperaware of Bucky, always had been. He closed his eyes to tamp down his disappointment as he heard the stairway door slam shut behind Bucky’s sudden exit. He’d swear he’d heard Bucky chuckle a couple of times, and he’d hoped that maybe, just maybe, Bucky might relent.

Taking a deep breath, he put on a smile and turned back to Pepper and Tony and whatever Tony was waffling on about.

&&&

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this story has gotten quite a bit longer than planned.

Next up is "Music Again," in which Tony and Steve learn something new about the past, and everyone learns stuff about Steve than only Steve and Bucky knew. It’s all good ... :)


Music Again

Chapter Summary

Possibilities abound, and Steve is learning to enjoy the experience. In the meantime, James is enjoying learning. Sam Wilson is a good friend, and surprisingly, so is Tony Stark.

Chapter Notes

Here's the next chapter, and I apologize that it took so long to write. A lot needed to happen in this chapter, and it ended up being much longer than I'd anticipated. I hope you like it - comments would be most appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 5: Music Again

It took a while, but the impromptu runway show/party wound down, and finally Steve was able to slip away to his floor. It was early evening, but he needed to get away from the crowd and just be by himself for a while. He had a commitment to go with Tony out to the Stark home on the Hudson the next day, Saturday, with the guys from The Bachelor, to scout the location. He'd never been up the Hudson Valley, but he knew the area was ritzy in the extreme, even in his time. Tony promised there might be some surprises there, too, left over from Howard. He had to admit he was intrigued, and more than a little nervous. This whole Bachelor thing seemed to be taking on a life of its own, and Steve kinda felt like he was starting to be along for the ride again, just like with the USO. He was going to have to make sure that didn't happen again – he needed to exercise some control so the situation didn't get too weird. And frankly, if he was just going to be a glorified chorus girl again, there was no point, and he might as well shut it down now.

As he stood in the stairwell outside his tower floor, he glanced down the well, toward the guest level. He knew Bucky had sat through the silly fashion show, and he would swear he'd heard his old friend chuckle more than once. Maybe he was softening? Maybe he'd had a chance to think things through a little? He knew that Sam had him to group, and Sam was most definitely the voice of reason in this nuthouse of a superhero tower.

Should he, maybe … try?

But Bucky’s face, florid with rage, boiled up in his vision and he shook his head to clear the image away. No. Everything was in Bucky’s court. He’d made his position clear, and if anything were to change, it had to come from him. It didn’t make him miss Bucky any less. He didn’t want to face life without Bucky’s friendship – he’d never expect anything more, he never had – not after having found him again after the void. But if he had to … if he had to, he reminded himself, drawing a deep, steadying breath, he could. He really could. But it didn’t make their rift hurt any less.

Sighing heavily, Steve opened the door to his floor and entered the silent, empty space. He pressed his back against the heavy fire door and pulled out his phone, letting the door snick quietly into
place. Almost everyone he knew had now heard the news about his impending … what?

Celebrity? Notoriety? Whatever the heck it was, it was new and it promised to be exciting. Maybe even life changing.

But there was still one important person left. Steve texted Adam.

S: I’m going to be the new Bachelor!
A: What RU Gay for a Day?
S: Bisexual Bachelor!
A: Go, Baby Bi!
S: :)
A: I’ll sing at your wedding!
S: Don’t get ahead of yourself.
A: I’ll make you a mix tape for your first date.
S: That’s better. Wish me luck!
A: You won’t need it. Those boys and girls won’t know what hit ‘em.
S: By the way, what’s a mix tape?
A: You’ll know it when you hear it!
S: Thanks, Adam.
A: Gotta look after my Boo. My SO says hi, we’ll double-date when you find your one true love.
S: I’d like that. Say hi for me to him, too. And thanks. Good night.
A: Good night, Baby Bi!

&&&

James returned to the guest floor and retreated to his suite, settling into the silence and the solitude like a balm. He felt the pressure in his temples ease as he entered the empty space, felt his muscles unclench and begin to relax without the stress of dealing with actual people. It shouldn’t be so fucking hard to sit in a fucking great room with a few people having a good time. It shouldn’t be so fucking hard to sit in the same space as Steve Rogers and not feel like he’d fucked up the fuck-up of all fuck-ups. And still burn with anger underneath it all.

It had been so easy for him once upon a time. Once upon a time, James had been a real boy, with an easy grin and a body made for sin. And he had been an enthusiastic sinner, given the opportunity. And he had laughed. And sang, he suddenly remembered. And danced. He’d loved music and dancing and the feel of a curvy woman in his arms.

And now? Now he was a shadow, a dark ghost. He had no idea if his limbs could follow the music anymore, or if the rhythm had left him. Laughter was an elusive thing, more haunting memory than something he thought he could actually do.

And yet.

Steve’s antics had made him smile.

Steve’s silliness had made him chuckle.

And the tightness in his chest had let go, just a little bit. The heat of anger? Maybe that, too.

Steve in those tiny trunks had made him … tight somewhere else. Well, he didn’t want to dwell on that. Had to have been that kick line – Potts had great gams, and Romanoff? Well.

He flicked on his StarkPad, found that link Sam had recommended, and started to read. But that
song kept going through his head, echoing, commanding …

*Let it go* …

He’d thought Stark had chosen that song for Steve’s grandpa pants, but as he made himself comfortable on the couch in his suite, idly thumbing through web site links suggested by the ACLU, he wondered if perhaps Stark was speaking to him as well.

Could he? Could he *let it go*?

&&&

Tony wasn’t going to live down the fact that he’d goaded Captain Fucking America into a catwalk fashion show, and failed to invite Happy Hogan to the festivities. He was probably going to have to answer to Rhody, too, but Rhodey hadn’t been sporting a hard-on for Cap since he was knee-high to a fire hydrant his whole life. No, Happy was going to continue to punish Tony with his screaming-loud silence, and his crushing hurt face, and his I-thought-we-were-friends-but-I-guess-we’re-not vibe. Never mind that the whole thing had gone down on Happy’s day off while he was doing the whole family thing with his sister’s brood on Long Island. Tony should have delayed the entire thing long enough for Happy to haul ass back to Stark Tower. Even if, really, he couldn’t. Some things just work better when they’re in the moment.

Yeah, Tony was screwed, because no rational argument was going to sway Happy when Happy had been left out of the most epic of Cap send-ups.

But having the opportunity to drive out to Rinascente, the not so ancestral home of the Stark family in Hyde Park, escorting Captain America himself to the old pile, that was going a long way toward … well, if not actual forgiveness, at least Tony felt pretty confident he was off the “to be murdered” list.

They were already slipping out of the city, running up I-87 toward the Taconic State Parkway. Cap was flipping his StarkPhone around idly as he stared out the window at the rapidly changing landscape. And he’d ditched the grandpa clothes for an outfit Pepper herself had picked out – soft gray sweater over tight black pants and Doc Martins. Rounded out with a cashmere scarf and a black leather jacket, Steve actually looked like he might have been born sometime in the past 30 years.

The day was gray with the promise of snow, and earlier snow still coated the ground to either side of the highway as they moved from urban to suburban to rural to you-can’t-afford-to-live-here in rapid order. He glanced over at Tony and smiled. “So, Hyde Park. Howard was neighbors with FDR?”

“Yes.”

“No, wait, seriously?”

“Yes. He built the place in the early 1930s, back when Roosevelt was governor of New York. Blind luck he ended up president, and Dad had easy access to his buddy the Prez. Although I think there might have been some Stark lucre in the Roosevelt campaign war chest. Went a long way with getting government defense contracts. Just shy of war profiteering.”

“As I recall, your father was pretty good at weapons design. Pretty *damned* good. You know he developed a whole slew of prototypes for my shield, and the one I chose wasn’t even one of the ones on offer – it was a reject. I’m sure he won the contracts on his own merit.”
“Yeah, he was pretty good. I was better. And I’ve heard that story so many times, I could probably describe all the shields you turned down. Dad wasn’t above using a pal to get a leg up on the competition. So I don’t think FDR being the actual President of the United States presented much of a hurdle.”

Cap was silent for a long moment, and Tony wondered if he’d just lost interest, hypnotized by the towns rushing by beyond the tinted windows of the limo. Instead, he spoke softly and asked, “Do you have any good memories of your father, Tony?”

“None before I was sent to boarding school at 12. None after. So, no. Not really. How about you?”

“I never knew my Dad. He died was I was still a baby. Complications from exposure to mustard gas in France. Bucky’s dad was the closest thing I had to a father growing up. George Barnes was a good guy, I was lucky to know him.”

“Lucky guy. I had Howard – a man who never should have had children, let alone a kid as precocious as me – and Obadiah Stane, a father figure who repeatedly tried to have me killed, and finally took the job on himself. Although, in a weird way, I owe him a debt. Without his first murder attempt, I’d never have perfected arc technology or invented the first Suit, you know, because of all the fucking shrapnel left in my heart by his goons. But I don’t send him Hallmarks on Father’s Day.”

Again silence from the peanut gallery. And finally, a quiet, “We don’t have to do this today. We don’t have to go there. Those people from the show can find another place to shoot it.”

Tony looked at Cap, at Steve, really looked for a long moment. There was no sign of irony or humor in his gaze, just that earnest, I-believe-in-you-because-everyone-is-born-special Captain America look, patent pending.

“Can’t bear to part with the dump because my Mom loved it, so at least it’ll get some use,” Tony dismissed with a wave of his hand, feeling exposed and raw. Maybe this was a bad idea, but tactically, it was sound. “Told you, don’t want you flying too far from the nest. Last time, you broke DC.” Steve had the good manners to look a little embarrassed about that, although for the life of him, Tony didn’t really understand why.

Batshit crazy Nazis trying to take over the world with lasers and floating aircraft carriers? Something’s going to break.

“Don’t forget, Bruce broke Harlem,” Tony reminded.

“I don’t think we need a competition for who broke the largest city –“ Steve countered.

“If that’s the case, Thor’s brother wins – he broke Manhattan. Although, those World Security Council assholes tried to nuke it.”

“I’ll give you that. I’m glad they were discredited, but I am sorry they died before we brought Pierce down. And breaking DC was not my fault –“

Tony chuckled out loud at that, shaking his head. “There’s that spark! Thought I’d lost you there for a minute. So the last time I was up here it was to upgrade Jarvis’s interface. Practically had a panic attack, so I make it a point never to come up here alone anymore, if I can’t get out of coming here in the first place. Which makes Happy happy because he loves the stupid place,” Tony called out, rapping on the back of Happy’s seat.

“It’s historic, not stupid. And if you hate it that much, you can deed it over to me and I’ll take care of your Mom’s garden,” Happy called back over his shoulder.
Tony took the time to toss a wadded up piece of paper at the back of Happy’s head, but the driver and head of Tony’s security simply ignored him. “Enough of the angsty teen drama. Place is perfect for this show – you watch. These guys’ll be coming in their pants when they see the joint.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “Thanks for that image. It’s gonna make it hard to have a sensible conversation with them now that I’ve got that picture in my head.”

“Yeah, any time things get weird, just pretend to talk to Jarvis, ask him for his opinion. Works every time.”

“Jarvis? How can he be there and at the Tower too?”

“Jarvis has wireless access to every home I own, globally. Plus all the suits, of course. Pretty much anywhere I could be, Jarvis is there. And he multitasks.”

“Huh. So, all the comforts of home.”

“Yep. I can even have apple pie trucked in.”

“Make it hot dogs from Coney Island and pizza from Spumoni’s, and you’re on.”

Tony huffed a laugh and nodded. “That’ll go over big with the skinny girls vying for your attention. And the skinny guys. All those carbs! Whatever will they do?” Steve just grinned and shook his head. Hell, he didn’t have to worry about carbs – the guy could never get enough food in him to keep that super soldier metabolism satisfied. Dogs and pizza it was, then.

Tony glanced out the window absently registering the passage of snow, snow and more snow. Turning back to Steve, he asked quietly, “So tell me, Cap, ‘cos inquiring minds want to know, and I have no right to know anything unless you choose to share, but … have you ever? And don’t mind Happy – he’s professionally deaf.”

“I heard that!”

“I kno-ow.”

Steve chuckled wryly and shook his head. “I guess I trust you both as much as I can trust anyone. You mean you don’t think I’m a virgin anymore, Tony?” Tony spread his hands in mock-innocence and grinned. “It only took me coming out of the closet for you to let go of that tired old joke? Huh. Well, I’ll reward a straight question with a straight answer. Yes. I have, ever. I toured with the fricking USO for two years. Chorus girls. Chorus boys. And everyone was homesick and missing someone, we were all looking for a little comfort. And I had a new body to try out, a body the US government wouldn’t let me use for the right purpose, just for selling war bonds. So, yeah. Friends, and once, a relationship, guy in the chorus. Ended when the tour went to Europe. He didn’t get picked to go overseas. I think maybe Senator Brandt suspected, to be honest. Couldn’t have America’s Star-Spangled Man with a Plan be queer.”

“And then you found Barnes.”

“And 400 other POWs. I also found Peggy Carter.”

“Yeah, Dad made a pretty big point about all you cared about was that Barnes was behind enemy lines and you were going no matter what the brass had to say on the matter. Or whether or not you had a parachute on when you jumped behind said enemy lines. The other 399 POWs were a bonus. C’mon, Cap – are you honestly telling me that you and Barnes –“
“Never. Never came up. I made sure of that. He was my best friend – I didn’t want to lose him. Couldn’t afford to risk it – it’s true that when I had nothing else, I had Bucky. You saw how he reacted. I was always afraid of something like that, so no.”

“But you do feel …”

“Every goddamned day, yes.”

“And the guy from the USO tour?”

“I looked him up when I woke up. He died back in the ‘80s, early days of the AIDS crisis. Until then, he’d never come out, but I gather that just dying from it was an admission to a lot of people at the time. He became a director in Hollywood after the USO, nominated for an Academy Award in the ‘70s. He died alone and unmarried, no kids.” Steve shook his head sadly. “I don’t want to be alone my whole life, however long it’s gonna be.”

“I get that. I really do. I have a history, as you know. Lots of women. Quite a few men. “ Happy snorted eloquently, and Tony tossed another wad of paper at the back of his head. Happy flipped the bird at him. Tony shrugged it off with an affectionate chuckle. “Yeah, I was the poster boy for bisexual excess. Okay, excess of any kind,” he amended following another Happy snort. “But I always felt alone, until Pepper. If someone like her can love someone like me, you’ve got it made, Cap, ‘cos you’re so much more loveable. Not as photogenic as I am, maybe, but hey, you’re cuddly. In a star-spangled spandexed macho sort of way, but those puppy dog eyes of yours should be registered as lethal weapons,” he added with a grin and a salute with two fingers.

“I’ll never be that lucky, Tony. Pepper’s one in a million.”

“One in seven billion, to be more accurate.”

“I don’t see what she sees in him,” Happy shouted back. “She too good for him.”

“Quite right. My job is to make sure she never sees the error of her ways,” Tony agreed amiably.

“Yeah. So you beat the odds and then some,” Steve replied, shrugging.

“Damn straight,” Tony and Happy both replied in unison. Tony shook his head and allowed himself an enthusiastic grin. Talking about Pepper always made him feel exhilarated and nervous at the same time.

“Did my Dad ever know about your … interests?” Steve shook his head quickly. “Then you and he never …?”

“God, no, Tony! Your Dad only had eyes for the ladies –“

“Trust me, my bisexual tendencies didn’t fall far from the familial tree. Dad never stopped playing the field, and he wasn’t always picky. Lotta money spent on managing scandals over the years. Personally, I didn’t bother. I think I get monogamy from Mom, actually. Although there was someone who had a special place in his heart, someone he carried a torch for all his life. You know, the only thing really odd about my parents’ death was the fact that Mom was even with Dad in the car that night.”

&&&

It was early afternoon when James’s phone pinged to announce the receipt of a text message. There was a closed circle of people who even had his phone number – and they all lived in this building.
So when he swiped the screen saver out of sight and opened the text, his stomach was fluttering with anticipation.

Could it be Steve?

And why was he thinking that? Of course it wasn’t Steve.

It wasn’t Steve.

He ignored the sense of disappointment that it wasn’t Steve and opened the text.

It was from Barton, and the text said:

B: Hear UR learning history I got books Ill drop off

James stared at the text for a minute before realizing that Barton would probably expect a reply. What kind of books? Didn’t matter. James appreciated the sentiment, and people lending him books meant he wasn’t completely *persona non grata*.

J: Gr8 thnk u

Huh. Maybe things were looking up.

&&&

Rinascere was the Stark mansion in Hyde Park on the Hudson, located not far away from Springwood, the home of FDR. The estate was secluded, reached by a private road that branched off the Albany Post Road just north of Springwood. Surrounded by mature trees and attractive open spaces, it had full river frontage, with a massive lawn sloping down to floating docks and an overlook built over the river. The house itself was Georgian in style, but it was built in the 1930s, when Tony’s father’s company rose to prominence. The approach was a gently curving driveway that followed the rise of the land, finally coming to a massive graveled circle in front of the house’s grand façade. There, graceful marble steps lead to the massive mahogany doors of the main entrance.

The doors opened onto the enormous foyer, larger than any apartment Steve had lived in before the war (and bigger than one apartment building), dominated by an expanse of gleaming white marble tile, white walls with high ceilings, a gently spiraling white staircase with a red velvet runner, and a blue crystal chandelier suspended over the room, hanging from the domed vault. The red white and blue theme was not lost on Steve, and Tony simply arched an eyebrow at the gaucherie. Steve had to admit it was an imposing entrance, and one that would likely play well on television.

“Welcome, Sir, Captain Rogers,” greeted Jarvis as Steve looked up and around the foyer.

“Hey, J,” Tony replied affectionately. “Status?”

“You are the first to arrive, Sir. The groundskeeper has completed the ‘sprucing up’ you requested, and the house staff have prepared all the public rooms. The private rooms have also been cleaned and aired out, should you wish to use any of them during your stay. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering lunch to be delivered from town, sir. It should be on site in approximately one hour.”

“Great, J, thanks for that! Not staying, just visiting, but good to know the old hut is ready to go. So, driving out to the great outdoors always gives me an appetite. How about you? Nah, don’t answer that. You’re always hungry. Okay, let me give you the nickel tour while we’re waiting for the network guys.”
“Don’t you want to wait for them?”

“Nah. I’ll show you the stuff they’ll never see. Wanna see?” Tony grinned at Steve, and Steve nodded.

There are many rooms on the main level, including a grand ballroom, a smaller conservatory, a piano room, a more human sized sitting room, formal dining room, informal dining room, smoking room, library, study, kitchens and pantries, and servants’ quarters. Bedrooms were located on the second and third floors, and there were 25 of them, each with an en suite bathroom. All of the rooms had private phones, and had since been outfitted with satellite and hi-def TVs. Tony assured Steve the place had wifi. “Go on, check your tablet – the wifi password’s ‘kissmyasshoward’.”

Off the conservatory was a lovely sunroom overlooking a magnificent garden currently shrouded in snow.

“My mother’s. She loved that garden. It was the one thing that always made her happy. So I’ve got one of the best landscape architects in the world on retainer to keep it up. For her. Architect takes care of the rest of the place, too.”

“That’s your ‘groundskeeper’?”

Tony shrugged and grinned at Steve.

The house was grand and beautiful and cold. Steve felt sorry for little Tony Stark growing up in this museum. Steve might have grown up in a tiny apartment with neighbors on all sides and the smell of boiled cabbage set into every surface, but he’d never for a moment doubted he was loved. By his Mom, by Bucky’s family, by Bucky. Even by some of those neighbors. He might have been poor, but in this moment, he’s convinced he’d had a richer life in many ways than Tony Stark did.

&&&

Tony led Steve into the lair of the beast, Howard’s old study. It was a room he entered only under duress, the personal preserve of the man whose DNA he shared, and little else.

It looked the same as it had when Howard Stark had been alive, a masculine room with heavy woods and dark leathers, like something out of a clichéd men’s magazine. Humidor, drinks cabinet, cut crystal decanters and tumblers, framed photos on the wall of presidents, actresses and actors. Marilyn Monroe. Jayne Mansfield. Lauren Bacall. Even Humphrey Bogart and Gary Cooper. Few personalities from the ‘60s or ‘70s, and no one from the ‘80s other than Reagan and Bush.

Tony hadn’t changed anything. He hadn’t removed a single item from the room, nor rearranged anything. This was not a place he’d choose to be, except it was the way to get to what he wanted to show Steve.

“So, this is where the world thought Howard hung out. But really, he had an even more secret lair,” Tony reached into the bookshelf and pressed a switch recessed in the wall. The entire wall released and swung inward to the room, revealing a passageway beyond.

“Secret passageway?” Steve asked, chuckling.

“Just like Nancy Drew. Take the right fork to the bomb shelter under the property – outfitted with all the latest conveniences circa 1990, including a wine cellar that even I envy, and the left will take you to Howard’s workshop. From there he could slip out for a little nookie, and Mom would never know he was gone. But that’s not what I wanted to show you. Come on.”
Tony led the way into the passageway, which was in no way a narrow, grotty tunnel. No, Howard Stark didn’t stint if he didn’t have to. Oh, yeah, Dad could make do if he had to, but on his home turf? No, the tunnel was as wide and tall as the study itself, well lit, and furnished with an expensive carpet and comfy seating along the way. And the paneling? Not cheap plywood. This was the real stuff, hewn from endangered species from the Amazon at great expense and no regard for the ecosystem. Yeah, Dad was a real prince.

They arrived at the junction where the corridors branched, and Tony pointed out the path to the bomb shelter. “Fit for a president, even a king. Designed to withstand anything short of a direct hit. Able to support a population of about 20 for at least two years.”

“Twenty?”

“Family and household staff. Dad wasn’t a complete asshole. He wasn’t going to let the cook burn.” Shaking his head, he strode down the other branch, pausing to tsk at Cap. “Coming?”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around someone having a bomb shelter.”

“It was a thing, mostly in the ‘50s. People were so afraid of the ‘Red Menace,’ and the imminent threat of nuclear war, it was a cottage industry for years – people building bunkers on their property, stocking them up with non-perishable food, buying generators to keep them off the grid. What am I saying? I just described an entire subculture of modern American life – survivalists. Good ol’ militia men. Here we are.”

“What the – that’s my stuff!”

“Yep, Dad’s private little shrine,” Tony announced, gesturing toward the wall of Captain America mementos. On display were an earlier version of the suit that Steve ultimately wore into battle, draped on a dressmaker’s dummy, and on the wall, several prototype shields were displayed, each with a card detailing what the shield was made of. In nooks and crannies set in the wall, photographs and reels of film were stacked haphazardly, although Tony bet his father could have reeled off the contents of each and every one of them, down to the smallest artifact. And then, stacked in front of the display were a stack of wooden crates of other personal items.

Steve started to paw through the crates when he stopped himself and asked, “Can I?”

“You may,” Tony inclined his head magnanimously. “It’s your stuff. And Barnes’s, too,” Tony added, indicating one of the crates. “Knock yourself out, take anything you want.”

“But how?” Steve breathed as he examined the contents of the top-most crate. He pulled out a gold statue. “Here’s my Oscar! No wonder I didn’t see it at the Smithsonian …”

Tony snatched the statuette from Steve’s hands, and studied it for a moment. “Knew I should have gone through this crap first. This is the real deal, isn’t it – you really won an Academy Award. And shit, he’s heavier than I expected.”

Tony handed the naked gold man back to Steve, who took it with a smile and hefted it in his hands. “I didn’t win, not really. The Academy presented me with it for my ‘war efforts’ – it was propaganda, pure and simple. Hollywood was definitely in on the war machine.”

“Huh. And only a few years later, Hollywood would be considered the enemy of Washington.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t take much for the wind to change, does it?” Steve looked into the blank eyes of the award, as if seeking answers. He shook his head with a wry smile. “Lot’s changed in 70 years, huh? But that still doesn’t explain how my things got here …”
“Way I figure it, Dad scooped anything Peggy Carter didn’t pack up when they closed up shop in Europe and stored away. All the stuff she collected went to the Smithsonian.”

“Yeah, and it looks like he got the stuff I left in storage when I, when I changed – I didn’t have an apartment any more, and I couldn’t leave it with Bucky’s family – no one was supposed to know about the transformation.”

“What, so you never saw them again?” Tony asked, quite honestly shocked. From the way Steve had talked, the Barneses were the closest thing he had to family, especially after his Mom passed.

“Nope,” Steve answered sadly. “I wasn’t allowed to have any contact with anyone I knew before Project Rebirth. They didn’t tell me that beforehand, but Senator Brandt was insistent. Steve Rogers ceased to exist, and there was only Captain America. And then it was a choice between lab rat and chorus girl, so I hit the road. My stuff stayed with the SSR. And I never got a chance to say goodbye to the Barneses. I always felt bad about that – they were good to me, made me part of the family. Damn, I loved them. I missed out on the girls growing up, getting married, having kids. I missed it all.” To mask the wetness pooling in his eyes, he turned back to the contents of the crate, sifting through to see what other treasures were buried there.

Steve lifted a photograph out of the crate and cradled it in his hands. From where Tony was standing, it looked like the big lug was going to burst into tears for real this time. “This was taken on my 18th birthday. Bucky was just being silly,” he passed the faded photograph over to Tony. Barnes and skinny Rogers were standing together on a Coney Island pier, and Barnes had his arm slung around the little guy’s shoulders. The silly part was Barnes planting a big wet one on Rogers’s temple, while the shorter man scrunched up his face in mock disgust. “That was a good day.”

“Yeah, looks like you’re having tons of fun,” Tony said, handing the photo back to Steve. “You’re sure he didn’t …? He’s not …?“ Steve shook his head vehemently as he took back the picture, then set it aside. He moved the top crate off and was looking through the crate Tony had said belonged to Barnes. Steve gasped, his hand flying to his mouth, as he lifted another photo from the box. “Look, you don’t have to do this now – you can come here any time –“

“Oh my God,” Steve breathed, staring at the photo reverently. “There are no other pictures of Bucky’s family, but look,” he tilted the photo so Tony could see. “That’s Bucky’s Mom, his Dad, his four sisters, Buck, and me. I remember when this was taken – his sisters were teasing me about either adopting me, or marrying me.”

“Sounds very … Mormon.”

“No, not really – the girls were all younger than we were, but I was at their house so much, they treated me like another brother. After my Mom died … I didn’t go around as much for a while, but Buck convinced me to get an apartment together, and then we were back to Sunday dinners at the Barneses.”

Tony huffed a laugh. “How Rockwellian of you.”

“I got that reference – I loved his work. Look, this should go to Bucky. He has nothing of his family. In fact, if you don’t mind, this whole crate should probably go to him.”

“Well, you can give it to him when you kiss and make up.”

Steve’s expression hardened. “I don’t think that’s going to happen. Doesn’t mean I don’t want the jerk to be happy. Would you, Tony? Give this stuff to Bucky?”
Tony needed to have a sit down with Barnes at some point, and giving him the contents of the crate would be a perfect pretext. It could really help to diffuse a situation that could go south pretty quickly without some help. Tony nodded.

“But you know, that does bring up something we need to discuss. What do you want done with Barnes?”

“Done?”

“Well, it’s unlikely he would’ve ended up in the Tower if he hadn’t been your old pal, Steve. He would have likely ended up in a cell or some other kind of holding facility, possibly for the rest of his life. And if the rift between you is permanent, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. So, does he stay or does he go?”

“Wow. I hadn’t thought … does he have to go? Is it okay if he stays?”

“So long as you’re okay with that, I can find something for him to do in exchange for room and board,” Tony replies with a grin.

“Oh. I mean, I can pay his expenses – I’m rich, remember? In fact, I’d be happy to pay for my expenses – “

“Chill, Capsicle. I’m not looking to collect rent from anyone. I can afford it, and I’m a little less anxious knowing where everyone is. Super soldier amnesiac body-augmented assassin? Yeah, I’m happier if he’s where I can see him. We’ve been through the whole killed my parents while under the influence, so don’t be concerned about that. No one could withstand what they put him through. He’s got a home as long as you want him to.”

“Okay, that’s great. Thanks, Tony. It’s just … if he goes away, I might never see him again. And yeah, that would bother me. He’s been my best friend since we were little kids. It hurts to be … the way we are now. I keep hoping if he sticks around –“

“He might realize how much you mean to him, gay or no gay? Yeah, we’re all hoping that.”

“Yeah, something like that. I want him to see I haven’t changed, that I’m still the same guy –“

“But you’re not. You’re not the same guy. Coming out has … opened you up. You’re more outgoing – you smile more. You even laugh. I didn’t think you knew how to do either before this happened. Hell, you even tried to dance – you failed miserably, but A for effort!”

Steve snorts softly. “Yeah. I guess not living a lie any more … yeah. Then maybe Buck’ll never see I’m still the same guy he’s known all his life.”

“Maybe he’ll finally see what a horse’s ass he’s being.”

Steve quirked a smile at that, and suddenly stared rapt at the wall behind where the crate he’d hauled to the floor had been.

“What?”

“‘Fuck Captain America’?”

“Oh. That. What can I say, it sucked growing up in a house where Dad was obsessed with his dead man crush.”
Steve cocked his head, and frowned at Tony. “What do you mean?”

“Dad had a hard-on for a ghost. Always thought I’d hate the guy, but it’s kind of hard to once you meet him in the flesh.” Tony gestured toward the collection. “This is a shrine to his long lost love.”

“Tony, I never knew anything – I, uh, nothing ever happened – are you sure?” Steve asked desperately.

“I knew my Dad was in love with you before I built my first bomb. And for the record, I was four. Mom knew it, too. The only thing that made it bearable for her was the fact that you were dead – well, presumed dead. You know he went out in search of you every year? Like clockwork. The ice broke up, he was there with his crew, hunting. He designed the ship, developed new technology, the whole magilla, anything to find you.”

“Sirs, the gentlemen from the network have arrived and are waiting at the front door. Shall I allow them entrance, Sir?” Jarvis announced suddenly. Both Tony and Steve chuckled at the prosaic interruption, delivered by that high-tech entity that was Jarvis.

“Let ‘em in, J. Cap and I will be there momentarily.” To Steve he added, “I can give you the tour of Dad’s workshop some other time, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, yeah that’s fine. Are you sure I can take this stuff?” Steve nodded toward the crates.

“Yeah. It’s time this stuff went to its rightful owner, don’t you think? Make this place feel less like a robbed grave. Maybe I might even start to like the old dump. Need a hand? No, didn’t think so. This way,” Tony commanded, stalking back the way they’d come, leaving Steve to juggle several of the heavy crates in his wake.

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Steve set the crates down in Howard’s study, where Tony assured him they would be safe. “J’s got security locked down – no one without authorization can get in here or any of the other private rooms. Your shit’ll be safe until we see these bozos off. I’ll get Happy to collect it all later so you can be all smooth and everything.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Steve breathed sarcastically as he saile by Stark on his way out to greet the producer and Harrison.

“Anytime, Cap,” Tony whispered, glancing toward the crates and allowing himself a small smile. “Suck that, Dad,” he added with a devilish gleam.

“This place is great,” Harrison was gushing as Tony closed the door of the study behind him and joined the men in the great foyer.

“Think it’ll play Topeka?”

“Hey, I’ve been there –“

“It’ll play anywhere. This is exactly the exotic locale our viewers have come to expect. Better in many ways – you’ve got easy access to New York, New England – even Niagara Falls isn’t a huge distance,” the producer replied enthusiastically.

“Niagara Falls? Why would –“

“Perfect place for a date, maybe a group date, huh? All that romantic lore, the honeymoon capital
of the north – it’d make great television,” Harrison said with a grin.

“I wouldn’t want to lead anyone on –“

“Clearly you haven’t watched the show,” Tony pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, no, I haven’t had a chance yet –“

“It’s on ABC.com and Hulu,” Harrison suggested helpfully.

“Oh. Good. Thanks.”

“Yeah, this place is amazing,” the producer was saying, looking up at the ceiling and spinning slowly. “So much history. We could do a package on Howard Stark, pull in FDR, segue to Tony here –“

“Call me Mr. Stark,” Tony replied tightly, glaring suddenly.

“Yeah, remember when I did GMA? I had to remind Robin Roberts that anyone I knew or know now is off limits. That includes Howard, and it definitely includes Tony.”

“Yeah, but –“

“Check the contract.”

“But –“

“Look, I’m doing this show for two reasons – one of them is to maybe meet someone. I honestly don’t hold out a lot of hope for that, but my other reason is to reach kids, help them feel better about themselves. I’m not going to be able to do that if you play up the fact that I’m an old war relic and a lab experiment.”

“Well, we, uh –“

“I’m aiming for a younger … demographic?” Steve pressed, resting his hand on the small of the producer’s back, guiding him toward the conservatory and the garden beyond the windows. “You know – under 95? Not dead? Wouldn’t it play better to focus on my charitable efforts, the stuff I’m doing now, to paint me as more contemporary? More now,” Steve emphasized.

“I suppose –“

“It’s that or it’s nothing,” Steve finally laid it on the table, and the producer spun in shock; Harrison hurried over to join them at the windows overlooking Maria Stark’s garden. “I don’t want anything I do to impose of the privacy or security of my friends. Tony’s kind enough to open his home to this, the least you guys can do is respect his family’s privacy, right?”

“Yes, yes of course,” the producer replied hurried, bobbing his head affirmative. “Sorry, Mr. Stark.”

“Ah, call me Tony,” Tony replied with a lop-sided grin, visibly relieved. The last thing any of them need is a documentary spin on Howard Stark. “You can still get a fair amount of airplay by focusing on the place’s proximity to FDR’s place – but not too much, you don’t want to tax the attention span of your audience.” The smile Tony received in return was as tight as the one he offered.

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The *Bachelor* producer wanted Steve to fly out to California to shoot his PSAs, but Steve put his foot down. “I’m a New Yorker. I want to stay here to do the shoots in my town – it’s an important part of my story. Besides, one of the ideas I have would need location shots in Brooklyn.”

“One of the ideas? I just assumed we’d put the script together for you, and the director would more or less guide you –”

“Nope, I have very definite ideas of what I want. And you have facilities here in New York – your news division, *Good Morning America*? If mean, if you don’t want to work with me on this, I can always call up Robin Roberts to see what I can work out with her for studio space and resources – I can pay for people’s time and trouble, if that’s what it takes – I can find another way to do this … NYU Film School, hell we could even record it with my StarkPad.”

“No, no, I’m sorry, Captain, that won’t be necessary. We’ll make arrangements to set-up your shoots here in New York. We’re based out of Los Angeles, so of course we think in terms of the resources there.”

“Good, thank you. I’m really looking forward to all this, but especially to doing those PSAs. There are a lot of kids out there hurting, and I really want to do what I can to help.”

“Wow, are you really for real?” Chris Harrison asked suddenly.

“Oh, he’s real all right,” Tony replied with a wry chuckle. “You’re just noticing now? Strap in boys – you’re in for the ride of your life, provided you’re in bed by 9. Be thankful he’s staying in New York – we can contain him here. Let ‘im lose in LA, and you might be replacing the Hollywood sign before long.”

“Tony –“

“I’m not saying he’s clumsy, but, you know, *DC.*” Tony twitched and did his patented eye roll to sell the joke. The others were a little dumbfounded at the reference, and plowed on without acknowledging it.

“Interesting name for the place, Rinascere. What’s it mean?”

“It’s Italian,” Tony replied off-handedly, but his attention was on Steve.

Steve got the reference. “I thought I recognized the word. It means ‘rebirth’.”

“That it does,” Tony agreed. “It was a concept that meant a lot to dear old Dad.”

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On the way back to Manhattan, Steve announced that he’d like to visit FDR’s home, Springwood, and do the tourist thing. Happy immediately volunteered to go with him, earning a snicker from Tony.

Tony asked if Steve had ever met FDR.

“No, I missed my chance when I blew off my Medal of Honor ceremony. Too busy fighting the war, trying to dismantle Hydra. And then there wasn’t another chance before I –“

“Went to sleep.”

“To everyone else, I died. And I think I did, really. For a second, maybe longer. Yeah, I think I
really did.”

“I know how that feels,” Tony agreed quietly.

The memories came when James was near Steve. He hadn’t had a single memory resurface in months without Steve being nearby.

Yeah, as patterns went, it was fucking frustrating.

Wilson must have let it slip about his learning project. The others started contributing books, articles, links and suggestions for James’s education. It was a common sight for him to be reading a book in the common area, a pen stuck between his teeth, and a highlighter held in his hand, tapping out a tune on the nearest surface – arm of the chair, coffee table, floor, sometimes even a real table, his leg. James often preferred to lay on the floor, legs propped up on the chair nearby, reading upside down. The others would come by and put a book down in his pile, and without looking up, he’d say, “Thanks. When do you need it back by?”

The answer was usually, “keep it,” or “donate it,” but rarely did anyone ask for the book back. Links to web pages and online articles showed up regularly in his e-mail and text messages.

He’d always loved books, and that was something he liked remembering about himself. One of the fringe benefits of his flavor of super soldier serum was that he could read faster and retain more than before the war. He devoured books at a fevered pace.

He started reading about historical events and comparing them to his missions, and quickly realized that civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, religious freedom, economic inequality, and reproductive rights were all on Hydra’s watch list as social movements to kill. Just like they’d been for the Nazis. In fact, he or other Hydra operatives had been actively deployed to put a stop to the growing freedom movements. This alone inspired James to have a more open mind – if these were events and people that Hydra wanted stopped, they were events and people he wanted to know more about and hopefully support.

James knew he’d been responsible for JFK and MLK’s assassinations, and when he read about the Stonewall riots, he saw Hydra’s fingerprints over the entire thing. Similarly, he saw Hydra influence in the murders of Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepperd, in the rise of bullying on the internet, the proliferation of hate groups. Hydra had been destabilizing society for generations, and tolerance and accord were not welcome in a Hydra-dominated world.

Hydra sought order, order of their own design. Free will had no place in Hydra’s order.

He could see their DNA in the social upheaval in the Middle East, Europe, the ex-USSR, Asia. People flexed their muscles to exercise freedom, Hydra was there to put the boot in.

Natasha pointed him to recent events in Russia, where gay support of any kind was criminalized. “Is this the country you want to live in?” she asked him.

He knew it wasn’t, because it was a country in which Hydra would thrive.

Tony sent him an e-mail with a link to install the Kindle app for StarkPad, along with the account and password information to have his own Amazon account. Tony also later started sending James links for gay porn, including a lifetime membership in Cockyboys. James logged in and wondered if Stark could track his internet usage, but he ultimately decided he didn’t care. He told himself he was doing research, and appreciated Stark provided additional resources. The fact that he got it up
and rubbed it off satisfactorily every time he watched a Cockyboys video was purely coincidence. The fact that heterosexual porn wasn’t as satisfying was something he refused to acknowledge.

Sometimes, what was delivered to his pile was a movie or a TV series, something the lender thought James should add to his deepening understanding of the latter 20th and early 21st centuries. He especially appreciated the loan of Ken Burns’s *Baseball* (he didn’t admit to anyone how much he would have liked to have watched that with Steve), and developed an interest in the man’s work, actively seeking out more of his documentary series.

“Damn, I should look into getting you college credit for all this research,” Sam commented one afternoon, eying the shaky stack of books at James’s elbow.

“Is that possible?” James asked, coming up for air from the book he was reading and quirking a very interested eyebrow in Sam’s direction.

“Well, usually you have to be an enrolled student to be able to negotiate any kind of student-designed learning credits. Why, is that something you’d be interested in?”

“I loved school, always hoped to go to college. But that wasn’t something that somebody like me had any right to hope for.”

“Whaddya mean, on the GI Bill, you’d’a had a pretty much free ride.”

“GI Bill?”

“Oh, Christ, yeah. That went into effect after … um … after –“

“After I died. Got it. But college, today, now – that’s a thing I could do?”

“Hell yeah. Pretty sure you won’t have any problem with tuition, either your own coin or Stark’s. Did’ya graduate high school?” James nodded affirmative. “Okay. Lotta subjects have changed a lot since the 1930s, and there might be some topics on the college entrance exams that you wouldn’t have studied anyway at the time. But yeah – we can figure out what you need to bone up on, go from there. Good thing we went public with your resurrection – no need to falsify any information. We just have to focus on preparing you to get in. Any idea what you’d want to major in? I can get pull some information together for you on likely colleges then –“

“Engineering. Or architecture. I always wanted to design and build. I loved it when I got jobs on construction sites. Wanted to work on that,” he added, nodding toward the spire of the Chrysler Building, so close he could touch it, outside the window of Stark Tower. “But never got the chance. I was still trying to apprentice, didn’t have the right skill set yet.”

“Okay. Maybe start online first, ease you into the classroom situation. There are a lot of good schools that have strong online programs, in addition to in-person classes. Oh, I wanted to give you this,” Sam said, pulling a crumpled sheet of paper out of his back pocket and handing it to James.

James smoothed out the page, noting a lengthy list of names. “What’s this?”

“Key people of the 20th century – these, my friend, are the people who shaped the century,” Sam told him.

At Sam’s saying “people who shaped the century,” James’s hand started to shake, a fine tremor at first, but within a few heartbeats, it was shaking all the way up to his shoulders, and he started trembling violently. His mind was flashing all over his tenure with Hydra, images of torture, bodies seen through the tight focus of his scope, the sound of a single shot hitting home, the stink of blood
and brains splashed against a wall, the cries for mercy that would never come. He was breathing through his nose convulsively, almost painfully, deep, thick breaths that never seemed to reach his lungs. His eyes were locked wide, unfocused, terrified. His body was going into seizure.

He could hear Sam call out, “A little help here!” and the sound of others running. And then he could hear nothing but the gunshots and the cries for mercy and the whine of the electric arc of the Chair.

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Natasha grabbed Steve by the arm and told him no before he’d moved a step.

Steve shook his head, and said desperately, “But I know what to do.”

“Text Sam. I’ll make sure he answers.”

Steve nodded and texted Sam, who ignored his phone. Natasha was already on her way over and touched his shoulder, mouthing, “It’s Steve.”

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Sam nodded urgently and pulled out his phone, glancing quickly over his shoulder to see Steve standing over at the kitchen area, holding up his phone. From here, he could see the tension in Steve’s shoulders, in his face, as he waited for Sam to respond.

Steve: Do breathing exercises. Like you taught me.
Sam: That all?
Steve: Box scores from baseball games. Helps him focus.
Sam: Which ones?
Steve: Brooklyn Dodgers.
Sam: Like hell! Howm I gonna know that
Steve: I’ll coach you. I have them all memorized.
Sam: Course you do. OK send scores ill work on breathing

With Steve coaching him, Sam recited the box scores, finally getting a response from James when he misread one of the scores and James had to correct Sam. With attitude. And Sam could tell from the light in his eyes that James was back.

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Finally, Sam was able to bring James out of his fugue state and get him stabilized. Sam asked what triggered him this time, and James told him breathlessly, “What you said. Pierce told me that’s what I did. With my missions.”

“Sorry, man. You know he was full of shit, right?”

“No, he wasn’t. They chose very specific targets and times. The missions … they were meant to have the biggest impact possible. Maybe not newsworthy, but the ripples … you have a country that is dependent on foreign oil. Your oil industry wants control of that oil. War is in the air, but there’s a guy, in Indiana, who’s developed a foolproof way to use simple household waste to fuel cars – the design is so simple, it could be brought to market in under six months, and it would revolutionize the transportation industry, break the hold of oil, eliminate the country’s dependence on fossil fuels.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”
“It wasn’t. The guy existed, the technology existed. Hydra had the guy killed before he could show his plans to anyone who could make them happen. His technology died with him. And the first Gulf War was fought, destabilizing the area for a generation, changing the course of American history. World history. And the world became further addicted to fossil fuels, and the oil companies got that much stronger. Hydra got that much stronger. World called for sanctions. Control. Security. Hydra won. All of that could have been prevented if that one man in Indiana had gotten his technology in front of the right person.” James lifted his hands, staring at his palms and outstretched fingers. “These hands pulled the trigger.”

Sam laid his hand over James’s flesh hand and said gently, “Hey, we’ve been through this. That was Hydra, not James Buchanan Barnes. And Hydra’s out of your head now. You got nothin’ to be afraid of.”

“No? Is the reason you want to look into online learning because you really think I can’t make it in a classroom, or you’re afraid if I go out in the world, Hydra could retake me?”

“I don’t think you’d let that happen, actually. I think you’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, Barnes. And I didn’t say you can’t hack the classroom, I said it would make the transition easier to start online – you can work at your own pace, maybe even take extra credits if you want to help you catch up on stuff you’ve missed out on.”

“Okay. Okay. Hey, how’d you know about the box scores?”

“I, uh …” Sam shrugged and jerked his head to indicate the common kitchen area. James followed the gesture with his eyes. The others had gone back to their activities once James had come out of his state. They were hanging around, but the way Sam’s head moved, James’s eyes went toward the entrance, where Steve was talking to Natasha again.

Of course.

No one else knew James the way that Steve did. No one else would know box scores for the Brooklyn Dodgers, at least no one cool enough to hang out in Stark Tower.

The warm, pleased feeling this information gave him was something he didn’t care to examine too closely. It had been a while since he’d felt anything like this, certainly not since New Year’s Eve … no, New Year’s Day. Since … well. He still wasn’t completely convinced that this Steve really was the Steve he knew and loved from all those years ago, but …

<em>It was a start.</em>

Bumping his knuckles against Sam’s, James simply said, “Thanks.”

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At the same time Bucky was receiving research suggestions, books and DVDs, Steve was receiving odd little “gifts” in his mail slot in the Tower mail room.

Flavored lube. A new tube and a new flavor every day. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to be taste-testing them, or using them on his dick when he masturbated. Which, considering his level of mortification, would not be anytime soon.

Sample packets of condoms. Many condoms. Many, <em>many</em> condoms. Who knew there were so many colors and textures? How would he ever use so <em>many</em> condoms?

and getting to first base before the end of the first date.

DVDs of a decidedly different kind than Ken Burns’s *Baseball*.

Links showed up on his phone in a steady stream – relationship advice, fashion tips, outright porn. His StarkPad seemed to suffer a malfunction keeping the volume at fucking loud, instead of just loud.

And then there were the toys. Silicon, rubber, titanium, surgical steel, ribbed and smooth, battery-powered and inert. Toys. Some of them were downright intriguing, and some of them, he had no clue what they were until he looked them up on the internet.

Those intrigued him even more, but there was still the provenance of the toys. He was completely humiliated that his colleagues even knew he had the stuff in his possession, let alone using it!

Steve was starting to feel overwhelmed by the pressure everyone was putting on him. To *perform*. 

&&&

Sam made himself a sandwich in the kitchen, and then came out to find Steve at the big dining table in the communal space, papers spread out so that there was no evidence of the gleaming wood of the table beneath. “Don’t you have a work surface on your floor?”

“Nothing this big, unless I use the floor. And besides, I like the light here,” Steve replied without looking up. He was doing something intricate with pencil, eraser, and a big board with polygonal shapes sketched out.

But Sam wasn’t fooled. All he had to do was glance toward the shadowed alcove by the big plasma, and there was Barnes, bent over his pile of books. He looked up occasionally at the screen. And even more occasionally, Barnes’s attention shifted toward the big ass dining table.

Wait, just what was Barton watching, anyway? A romcom? Who knew that assassin archers had such an ooey-gooey center? The boy had it bad for Sandra Bullock, at any rate. That had to be the third Sandy movie this week.

“Couldn’t you just appropriate a conference room? On this side of the building? Light’s probably the same, and you’d have some privacy. And you know. *Somebody* could actually have a sandwich. At the table. Sitting in a chair. Like now.”

Sam’s tone of voice finally got through to Steve, who had the good manners to at least blush when he looked up from his hogging of the communal dining table to see Sam standing there shoving his sandwich in his mouth so he could hold his plate with potato chips in one hand, and his glass of juice in the other.

“You’re, um, tomato is going to fall out –“

“Righ row!” Sam replied around the sandwich, his eyes crazy wide.

Shaking his head good-naturedly, Steve bundled up some of his art to make room for Sam’s plate, which got plunked down immediately so Sam could salvage his sandwich and the errant tomato. Hooking the chair leg with his ankle, Sam pulled it out and dropped into the chair. “Now, was that so frickin’ hard?”

“Don’t get mayo on my art,” was all Steve said, and started rearranging the papers until he was happy with the narrative sequence.
“Art? Since when are you an artist?” Sam asked, peering interestedly at the piece in Steve’s hand. It actually looked kind of like a page from a graphic novel. “Shit, that’s good.”

“Thanks. And to answer your question, before I was Captain America, I was a commercial artist. It’s how I made my living in the 1930s and ‘40s.”

“Wait, there was life before Captain America?”

“Very funny. Yes. And sometimes, it was a good life.”

“I thought you just did funny doodles, like the pieces in the Smithsonian.”

“Those were just funny doodles. The art I did for a living I never got to keep. Once it was submitted to the publisher, it was their property.”

“You do know that people find artists sexy, right? I mean, you could just go sit in the park with your sketchpad, and I’ll bet you’d have five offers of dates before sundown.”

“It’s January. And I don’t like the cold. I’ll pass.”

“Okay, wrong month to suggest that, but come spring? It could be a thing for you. Sorta kinda handsome lookin’ white guy with drawing pad – like babies and dogs, art’s a chick magnet.”

“Sorta kinda? What about guys?”

“Draw some nudes, and see what happens. How the hell do I know?”

Steve snickered at that. “Yeah, I’m not getting picked up for public indecency, Sam. Not even for a date.”

Steve went back to work on the drawing then, a smile creeping across his face. A smile that clearly wouldn’t come off his face while he had a pencil in his hand and drawing paper under his arm. Sam settled back in his seat, and watched for a while, entranced as he ate. “Damn, son, you got hidden depths. I never would have pegged you for the artistic type.”

“Why, because I’m a soldier?”

“Hell no. Because you been hiding your light under a bushel. What is a bushel, by the way?”

“It’s a unit of measure. A bushel basket. Maybe I have been,” Steve added softly. “Tony said something about that, too. That since I, well since I came out, I’ve been freer, more at ease. Not the same.”

“Laughing and joking more. I’ve even heard you sing – you really did belong to a barbershop quartet, didn’t you? Yeah, we’re gonna leave that off your bio, ‘cos that’s just not cool enough for The Bachelor.”

Steve, bless him, actually snorted at that. A full-on snort. He rubbed the back of his hand against his nose. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, you should be. Snorting at a brother’s good intentions is just not cool, man. But this art … this art is cool. This you should play up. Hey, do you do commissions?”

“I’d have no idea what to charge nowadays – it’s been over 70 years since I’ve been paid for doing art.”
“So what kind of art did you do?”

“Comic storyboards and magazine illustrations.”

“Wait, you worked in comics? In the 1940s. So that’s why there’s all those boxes on those big pieces of paper.”

“Started in the 1930s, yeah. Freelance. And yes, those are storyboards. That’s what I did for comics, I storyboarded the script before it went to the penciller.”

“So what are you storyboarding now?”

“The It Gets Better PSA. There’s no photos from when I was a kid in Brooklyn, but I wanted to show what it was like, getting bullied, so I’m kind of animating it. But before I do too many pieces, I want to lay it out, see how it flows. It’s an effective way of visualizing a scene – I did storyboards in Hollywood, too.”

“Seriously, dude, you’re like some renaissance man – all muscle-y super soldier type, and artistic guy who worked in comics and Hollywood? I thought you kinda acted.”

“Eh, if you can call it that. I also storyboarded the films. Director found out I knew how to do that, and he put me to work. And to be honest, I always loved it, so I wasn’t complaining. I got paid for it, and I got screen credit – which is more than I got for the comics storyboards – they didn’t always credit the storyboard artists back then. Hey, wait, I can show you.”

Steve whipped out his StarkPad and quickly flipped through his apps, bringing up Netflix. He zeroed right in on one of the old Captain America films, and started it up, scanning through until he hit the credits. “See – SG Rogers, Storyboard Artist. That’s me.”

“You know how to use that.”

“Yeah?”

“Stark thinks you’re a technophobe.”

Steve snorted again. “Yeah, it pisses him off. I can use all his tech, but I don’t let it use me. Guy’s gotta have a laugh now and then,” he added with an impish smile.

“And you have a dimple! Geeze, Rogers, you been on grumpy pills the past year? I am learning all these new things about you today. Tell me somethin’ else I didn’t know about you.”

“Well, since I was on GMA, I’ve been hearing from people in Hollywood. You know, I belonged to the Screen Actors Guild and the Society of Motion Picture Art Directors – I had to in order to do the storyboards. Plus the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I’m a firm believer in unions. And I recently got an invite to rejoin the Academy.”

“The Academy. As in the Academy Awards. Does that mean you can vote on the Oscars?”

“Guess so. Is that important?”

“If Denzel’s up for a statue, damn straight it is. Even more so if it’s Halle or Beyonce.”

Steve just snickered again, and pulled over one of the storyboards to work on adding some detail.

“So who’s this?” Sam asked, pointing to a small figure in one of the full-size drawings.

“That’s me.”
“Little runt of a guy? That’s right, you were small. So this is you before your growth spurt.”

“That’s me after my growth spurt.”

“Damn, son!”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I was short, sickly, and with my hearing problems and poor vision, some people thought I was stupid.”

“Hell, you can’t say any of those things any more – they’re not politically correct.”

“No? So if I told you what people called me back then, could you tell me what the ‘socially acceptable’ term is today?”

“Hit me.”

“Short.”

“Vertically challenged.”

“Half-blind.”

“Visually impaired.”

“Half-deaf.”

“Aurally impaired.”

“Diabetic.”

“Glucose sensitive. Or, wait, ah, insulin resistant!”

“Asthmatic.”

“Oxygen-deprived.”

“You’re reaching. Heart condition.”

“Cardiatically challenged.”

“Seriously, ‘cardiatically’? Is that even a word?”

“It is now. C’mon, we’re just getting’ started.”

“Queer.”

“Gay.”

“Yeah. Neighborhood’s favorite punchin’ bag. Not even countin’ the fights I started when some mook was outta line.”

“And Barnes was always there to pull you out.”

“Yeah. ‘Cos he didn’t know about the last one.”
“Really think if he had, he’d’ve let you get beat up, maybe die? Just because of that?”

Steve looked off toward the shadowed corner where Bucky hunched in on himself, blandly watching the movie Clint had put on earlier. “Kids called me queer, a fag, some other things that weren’t so nice. But Bucky always defended me, swore I wasn’t like that. I never contradicted him. It was a big deal to be queer then, a big risk. People reacted …” he paused to swallow hard. “In retrospect, I guess it was important to him that I wasn’t. So yeah, I guess maybe I do.”

“Aw, man. That sucks.”

“Yes. You got no idea.” Steve sighed heavily, dragging his hand down his face. “I told you I freelanced. It was a great gig, especially since I got sick so much. So instead of havin’ to go to an office every day, I’d go in to pick up my assignments and turn in the finished work – got paid by the finished page, no matter how many panels or how complex it was. But if I couldn’t make it, Buck would go in, turn in my work, collect my pay, and if it was available, the next script. I was able to make a decent living doing that, plus the magazine illustrations.”

“So what comics did you work on – and why does no one know about this?”

“That’s ‘cos I haven’t told anyone. It’s not like anyone would be able to tell from lookin’ at a page that I did the storyboard. And like I said, none of my art still exists – as soon as it was submitted, it belonged to the company, and they disposed of it once they used it. Comics were meant to be disposable. But I worked on a bunch of different titles, for different publishers. Did some work on Action and Detective – I liked working with Joe and Jerry, but Bob was kinda bossy and man was he vain. But those were fun books – gotta chance to use my imagination on them.”

“You worked on Superman and Batman? Wait a minute – Joe and Jerry? Schuster and Seigel? Dude, why are you not headlining at Comic Con?”

“I don’t know, maybe ‘cos I haven’t been invited?”

“Well, you let this info out, they’re gonna be building a whole day in Hall H around you!”

“That’s a good thing?”

“It would be fucking awesome, Steve. What kind of magazines did you work for?”

“Oh, mostly what’s called pulps nowadays. Lotta detective stories. Lotta science fiction. I always wanted to do a cover for Hugo Gernsbach, but covers were always in color, and with my color blindness, I just couldn’t pull it off. But I had a lot of illustrations published – under SG Rogers, like the movie storyboards. So I’m guessing no one’s ever made the connection between that SG Rogers and me. But I worked pretty steadily between the comic storyboards and the magazine art, and I loved it.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

“No, it’s good. It’s really good to see you get excited about somethin’ other than punching Hydra’s lights out. Like I said, I wouldn’t have pegged you for an artist. And now I think I know why – you really have been suppressing this side of you. What, you think you can’t be Captain America and an artist too?”

“Not really appropriate to stop and sketch a tree when an army’s pourin’ out of the sky. Or your old teammates are tryin’ to kill a couple million people.”
“Okay, that’s kind of a given. But that’s not your whole life. And if you think it is, we’re gonna have words, son. Y’gotta find a life balance. Especially if you end up, you know, with someone.”

“With someone,” Steve repeated, testing out the words. A slow smile spread across his face, lighting his eyes. “Do you really think it’s possible? To find someone who’s interested in me, and not the suit?”

“Keep doing what you’re doin’ here, open yourself up – you might be surprised. You don’t need the suit. You just need to be you.” He settled back in his chair and rubbed his tummy. The sandwich had magically disappeared while he and Steve talked. “Up for a little workout? I think I need to move after that sandwich.”

Steve set his pencil down and dusted eraser droppings off the page. He looked at it critically for a moment, then nodded to himself, looking up at Sam. “I wouldn’t mind doing the wall – been meaning to try it out.”

“Oh, you think you’re gonna convince me that you haven’t already mastered that climbing wall? You think you’re going to lull me into a false sense of security, and then you’re gonna just fly up the damn thing, aren’t you? Just to make me look bad.”

“I always make you look bad, Wilson,” Steve replied, rising. “Don’t have to try,” he added with a challenging smirk.

“Oh, that’s how it is?” Sam demanded with a laugh in his voice, getting up to follow Steve.

“You know it, that’s how it always is,” Steve answered, chuckling, and then shot off toward the elevator, Sam in hot pursuit.

&&&

After Sam and Steve left, James made his way over to look at the art, followed the panels showing a small boy facing off against neighborhood toughs, fists and chin held up defiantly, then the others pounding him with their fists, the little kid bleeding but struggling to get back up again. And then in the later panels, a larger boy, straight and tall, coming to his rescue, and the last panel, the boys standing together, arms around each other’s waists, grinning to beat the band. Steve had already started to flesh out the larger drawings, and he could see himself in more than one picture.

James stood there for a long moment, staring at the art, tears trailing down his cheeks. A sob escaped his mouth and he quickly covered it up. He rearranged the art to put it back the way he’d found it, his fingertips lingering over the drawing of Steve and his savior that day. So very long ago, but even with his fractured memory, it shone bright in his memory. It was a memory that helped him back from the brink, a fixed point in time so luminous in his memory, he was surprised that no one had ever commented on the bright and shining light that had illuminated Brooklyn that day.

With a heavy sigh, he lifted his hand, scrubbed his face with it to eradicate evidence of his tears, and returned to the TV area to rejoin Clint.

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Clint had watched, and he’d seen James’s reaction clearly. Years of reading lips had also improved his ability to read facial expressions and body language. He could see that James was hurting, and something in those drawings touched him deeply. He winced, not wanting the guy to feel any pain, but he had to admit to himself that this was progress. As James put the drawings back how he’d
found ‘em, Clint pulled out his phone and quickly typed a semi-intelligible message off to Nat.

&&&

A few days later, Steve appeared on Late Night with David Letterman, reading “the top 10 things Captain America doesn’t miss from the 1940s”:

1. Boiled everything
2. Nazis and Hydra
3. Hitler
4. Rations
5. Powdered eggs
6. Operator assisted phone calls and party lines
7. Stupid laws against gays
8. Stupid laws against women
9. Stupid laws against people of color
10. Stupid laws

Viewership spiked and everyone thought that Steve Rogers knew how to deliver a funny line – or had funny delivery, depending on who was reviewing. Even the conservative media had no real problem with Steve until he got to the latter part of his list, and then the shitstorm took off. Letterman’s staff got kudos for being strangely imaginative. Fox News called for an investigation – by whom, and for what, no one was quite sure, but they made a lot of noise about it. Other media outlets covered the hubbub at Fox humorously.

At the same time, NOW, NAACP, ACLU and GLAAD all applauded Steve’s appearance. The American Egg Board hopped gleefully onto the bandwagon, and egg sales skyrocketed. It turned out no one in the 21st century liked powdered eggs, either.

What viewers, advertisers and pundits didn’t realize was that Steve wrote his top 10 list and asked David Letterman if he could read it on the air. It was the first public salvo in the war Steve Rogers launched on bigotry in the 21st century. Steve was already lining up appearances on other programs.

Avenger, indeed. Steve Rogers did not like bullies. Steve was taking the battle to the public.

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Chapter End Notes

Up next: More adventures for Steve, and more revelations for James. And some weirdness for the team as a whole. I’m hard at work on part 6, "Broken Open"!

Again, comments welcome!
Broken Open

Chapter Summary

In which Steve works on his film, Bucky goes to group and doesn’t kill anyone, food porn happens, Tony has a revelation, Steve meets a nice guy, and show and tell is not gonna happen. And movie night will never be the same again.

Chapter Notes

Gosh, sorry this took so long. Sorry this is so long! I knew where the chapter had to end, and the characters just kept getting in the way with their feelings and their agendas. The final scene was the toughest to write, I really struggled with just how James would react. And then he told me.

Comments, kudos, and bookmarks give me life and the will to go on to the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 6: Broken Open

Steve received the text from Adam two days after the Letterman spot. Pepper frowned at him over her coffee cup as she fielded inquiries from PR regarding Captain America’s response to requests for comment and appearances.

“No to anything Fox, at least for now,” Steve instructed, rising from his seat to take the text in private. “I wouldn’t mind Fallon.”

“Fallon it is,” Pepper agreed, setting the cup down and speaking quietly into the phone to relay instructions to Stark PR.

A: Quite the media darling every1 wants piece of U
S: Stirring the pot, I guess. Look okay?
A: U look hot perfect poster boy for bis everywhere
S: Don’t want to be poster boy for bisexuals. Want to be poster boy for what’s right.
A: U always that. Twitter feed blew up over U – U trended last 2 days. Next time U may break intenet
S: Is that a bad thing?
A: Jury still out
S: Kids pay attention to internet
A: Twitter, FB, Instagram, Tumblr, Vine, UTube, probly 10 new things this wk. y not famous enough?
S: Need to reach more kids.
A: UR avenging angel!
S: Guardian angel I hope. At least good role model.
A: UR that already. Kids r talking about u in a good way – my feeds r all steve all time
S: Hope that’s good. There’s a lot to be done. Parents need to talk and understand too.
A: I am proud to know u Steve Rogers. Come on tour with me
S: Sing backup? Used to be in barbershop quartet!
A: Hot. But tour to talk to kids
S: Tempting. Boyfriend okay with that?
A: Suggested it – cd b awesome
S: I’ll think about it – after Bachelor
A: Bring ur dream guy with
S: Could be dream gal
A: Nah, guy way better for u trust me
S: :)
A: What next
S: Fallon I think
A: U will have fun – he is good bro
S: Hope so. Will let you know when I’m on.
A: I will record – Steve Rogers greatest hits
S: You are too good to me
A: U deserve it most of all, baby bi
S: Glad I met you, Adam.
A: Feeling mutual, very!
S: Gotta go. Thanks for everything.
A: Any time. Srsly. Bye bi!
S: Bye, Adam!

&&&

It was mid-January, and the Tower had fallen back into a more or less rhythm. Steve and James were still avoiding each other, or rather James was avoiding Steve, and Steve was just going with the flow. But the others weren’t ostracizing James, nor were they pushing Steve on him. James continued to devour social history of the 20th and 21st centuries. Steve continued to commandeer the big table to work on the art for his PSAs, and the It Gets Better shoot was scheduled for the next week.

Around James, everyone was talking how Cap, Steve, seemed to have come alive, how happy they were for him. And everyone was excited for the video Steve was planning.

James couldn’t claim to be excited about Steve’s big gay coming out, but the art he’d done for his movie … that was special. When no one was looking, he would check it out, and every time it was a punch to the gut. Steve blurred the lines of the face, but he could see himself in the pencil drawings. And as each new drawing emerged out of the paper, James felt memory return like a sharp left hook. Dizzying, stomach-lurching, breathtakingly clear memory that would leave him swaying on his feet, gasping for breath, and sick with longing for that time past.

James was always acutely aware of Steve, however. He didn’t know if Steve was aware of him, but he suspected he was. They’d always had a spatial awareness of each other, like they were tethered, grounded in each other. They were. Until.

Yeah.

He still didn’t know why Steve’s disclosure bothered him so much. It’d been two weeks, and he still couldn’t bring himself to forgive or let go. He kept going over the details again and again, how he’d had pansy friends in Brooklyn back in the old neighborhood – they had more than their fair share of queens and queers of both sexes amongst their neighbors, and there were bars, clubs,
where queers would gather. Wasn’t unusual to stumble across a heated embrace or a noisy suckjob in an alleyway on the way home from work, or dancing, or drinking. If he was honest with himself, it was a lot more common than the Hollywood movies of the era would admit.

With the 107th, there’d been guys, brothers in arms, who’d suck a fella off as a way to feel closer to home. And yeah, there might have been one or two queers in the unit, who’d go down on their knees and enjoy it, too. He wouldn’t say if he’d availed himself of the service, told himself that part of his memory was still incomplete, might never come back. Even he had to admit it was a convenient excuse, but he was sticking with it.

Thing was, he’d never been afraid before. Never been bothered. Figured a fella – or a dame – had a right to snatch whatever happiness he or she could out of this lousy world. There were few enough opportunities between the cradle and the grave, and where they came from, him and Steve, the grave was usually a lot sooner than you’d like.

Yeah, how’d that work out for the pair of them, huh?

He’d never felt his blood boil and his skin get too tight and his head throb with pressure, at the thought of someone being that way. Someone he’d trusted. Someone he’d cared about.

He’d never felt his dick twitch so insistently. And maybe that’s what scared him most. It wasn’t just some queer in an alley, some queen on a stage or in a club. It was Steve. Just bein’ Steve. And he’d always been that way. And James had never noticed? Not once?

And if Steve was that way … where did that leave James? What did it mean for James? Was James … no.

He and Steve had never been separated for long, unless you counted a war and 70 years of torture. This was a form of torture, and James was his own Torquemada.

Steve, on the other hand, seemed to be thriving without him. Without James. The anger had ignited a fire in him that had been cooled too long. Since the serum, since the change, the light burning in that firebrand of a pint-sized Mick had been covered by the mountain that was Captain America, Star-Spangled Man with a Plan, symbol, not a man. James had begun to wonder if Steve’s light, his fire, had gone out completely.

Now that Steve was so furious with James, now that he was “out,” that light had leapt back to life, and Steve was like an archangel charging into battle, all fire and righteous anger. If he squinted from his vantage point in the shadowed corner of the TV area, surrounded by his books, James swore he could see the glow of the internal heat through Steve’s skin, the fiery updraft of his outstretched angel’s wings, the cold flame of his terrible sword. Steve was Michael, Ezekiel, Gabriel, and all the firmament. Even when he’d been small, that’s how James had always seen Steve – an avenging angel from the old Testament, a warrior of God, burning and beautiful.

Oh.

Yeah.

That’s not exactly how guys saw their best friends, was it? And the way his breath came a little faster, the way his blood fizzed – that wasn’t really, either, was it?

And that pressure against his zipper? Pretty sure that wasn’t standard issue for friends.

James swallowed hard, willing all those unwelcome emotions and sensations away. Willing that
pressure down. Well, he tried. Something told him he was waging a losing battle, but that didn’t mean he was going to give up without a fight.

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“You sure this is what you want, Rogers?” Natasha asked, puffing out a little white cloud of breath and grinning at him. They’d just come up from the 9th Street subway station and were making their way down the snow spattered sidewalk to the B61 bus to take them into the Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn. It was cold and raw, snow promised in the air, January thaw nowhere in sight. Natasha wore a deep red knitted cap, a fur-lined black leather jacket over a black v-necked sweater and denim jeans, fingerless gloves, and a deep red cashmere scarf wound round her neck and tucked into the jacket. Her ankle boots were practical, flat-soled and waterproof, perfect for the weather.

“This is where it all began, Natasha. C’mon, let me show you the story of my life,” he urged, slipping his hand under her elbow and urging her up the steps to the bus. He also wore a shearling lined leather jacket, over jeans and a soft gray sweater, and supple leather gloves against the cold. “Got the camera?”

She held up the tiny video camera and waggled it. “We have the technology. And the story of your life better have hot coffee and delicious pastries before it ends, or I’ll be arranging a not so happy ending for you.”

“It’s okay, I know a place,” Steve told her with a chuckle. “Now come on!”

&&&

“I was a scrawny kid, all elbows and knees, and shorter’n the other kids. Not for nothin’, but I was sick a lot, which people in my time figured meant I wasn’t quite right in the head. Jury’s still out on that one,” Steve added with a dimpled smile, and earned a quiet chuckle from Natasha where she aimed the camera.

“Kids can be like the wild – predators go after the weakest in the herd. They figured I was the weakest, and I was often the target of bullies. See that parking lot over there? That’s where my grade school stood – it’s a parking lot for a local furniture store now. But where I’m standing right now? This very spot is where I was beaten up for the first time. Not 20 feet from the school. Coupla guys from the next grade up, trying to be tough guys and pick on a little kid. I didn’t take kindly to big kids punchin’ down a littler kid, and I waded in and pulled that kid out. And then those bullies turned on me.” Steve paused to do a 360, arms outstretched. He grinned into the camera, embracing the tiny patch of grass surrounded by a lower wrought iron fence.

“And I’m still standin’. The thing I learned that day is that if you run, you never stop runnin’. Bullies won’t ever stop if no one stands up to them. So I kept getting’ up, and they kept knockin’ me down. I was wearin’ ’em down though. Had ‘em on the ropes. Until finally another kid figured he was tired of seein’ me get knocked back down again, I guess. And he scared the bullies away, and stuck his hand out to me to help me up. And that was the start of a friendship that lasted, well, a really long time.” Steve’s smile had faded in those last few words, and now he looked into the camera solemnly, silently.

“Are you gonna say anything else?”

“Nah. Fuhgeddaboudit. Let’s go to the next location.”

“Are we doing a greatest hits of places little Stevie Rogers had his ass handed to him?”
“Kinda.”

&&&

The next location found them in a dead end alleyway, old brick buildings rising on three sides. “Just around the corner, there was a movie theatre. A guy would not leave this girl alone durin’ a matinee, we had words, and this was the last place I got beat up in Brooklyn. Told ‘im I could do it all day – I wasn’t about to back down from a bully. Turns out I didn’t have to – that friend of mine? He found me and kicked the bum in the ass to send ‘im on his way. But I don’t regret standin’ up for what’s right. For takin’ a pop in the nose defendin’ a girl’s honor. For helpin’ a little kid not get beat up for his lunch money. ‘Cos doin’ what’s right? That’s reward in itself.”

“Rogers, I don’t think kids are going to find it inspirational that you rented your face out as a punching bag,” Natasha said off-camera. “I mean, we could sell the Steve Rogers Beat-Down Tour at the Welcome Center if you like. Could be a big seller to all the Cap freaks. Got your own nerd patrol, Rogers. But kids don’t generally plan to be punching bags.”

“Neither did I. Nobody does. Y’don’t wake up one day and think, ‘I wanna have my face rearranged by an asshole.’ That’s what makes bullies so rotten. They take away your choices. And if you don’t stand up to ‘em, you’re givin’ up your right to choose. Gotta stand up to ‘em and take back what’s yours. Else you’ll never really be yourself.”

“Great. Are we done?”

“Nah. Got one more stop, and we can wrap it up.”

“And then coffee and pastries.”

“Coffee and pastries it is, milady,” Steve assured her, bowing deeply and with a flourish.

“Then you may lead on, Captain,” she commanded haughtily, and they made their way toward the nearest subway station.

&&&

They took the subway up to Flushing Meadows, and Steve dragged her through more snow-crusted streets. Finally, they were on the edge of the Stark Expo, that monstrous paean to excess Tony had resurrected a few years ago. “I could’ve gone a lifetime without coming back here,” Natasha commented as Steve led her to a spot not far from the entrance to the Expo. “Why are we here?”

“This is where it all … started over,” Steve explained wistfully. “New York World’s Fair, World of Tomorrow. Right over there, Army recruitment center. This is where I met Doctor Erskine, and my life changed forever.” Steve’s hands sketched out the shape of the old building against the backdrop of a manicured lawn veined by walkways and garden plots – the grounds had been converted to a public park, one of many ringing the Expo grounds.

Natasha took the hint, and had already started the camera recording before she’d asked her question. Steve didn’t know she was capturing this, so she just let him meander.

Steve took a deep breath. “Got rejected four times, and every time the recruitment agent thought he was doin’ me a favor. Skinny runt can’t serve his country. Useless to the fight. Better off out of harm’s way so he don’t get somebody else killed. Y’know that’s a form of bullyin’, too. Makin’ someone feel worthless, small. Lookin’ at the outside and refusin’ to see the person inside. But I knew it wasn’t true. I knew I had somethin’ to offer, if only someone would see past the asthma and the heart condition and the bad vision and … yeah, there was a lot wrong with me physically,
but there was a lot right with me too. Inside. I didn’t wanna kill Nazis, I just wanted to defend the
world against a bully. Maybe the biggest bully’d ever been, y’know? I just wanted to do what was
right. And somebody finally saw that and let me have my shot.”

He paused and rubbed the back of his neck, reddening slightly. “Kinda speechifying, huh?”

Natasha was silent for a long moment, then lifted the camera up to eye level, and thumbed off the
recording. “No, not at all. That was perfect.”

“Wait, you recorded that?”

“Well, yeah. You meant it, right?” Steve nodded. “Then you know, it was perfect.” She let the
words hang in the air for a moment while a slow, pure smile spread across Steve’s face until he
was grinning delightedly at her, dimples in full display. “Now, coffee. Pastries. Cab – I am not
walking in this slush a moment longer.”

“Your wish is my command,” he told her, still grinning.

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Surprisingly, they ended up back in Red Hook, this time on Van Brunt Street tucked among
various small shops at a bakery called The Brooklyn Brownie Factory. Natasha couldn’t make up
her mind over which brownie, cookie, tart, or bar to try, so Steve went ahead and ordered two of
each. “I can always make room for brownies,” he said with a grin, then had the server add a couple
more of the shop’s signature turtle brownies, plus caramel coconut bars, whoopie pies, black and
whites, mini apple pies, and rounded out with the seasonal fruit tarts. He was tempted to keep
going, but even Captain America needed more than just sweets to survive.

The result was a tower of small, tied boxes which Steve intended to invade as soon as they sat
down with their coffees. But they’d be able to take the leftovers back to the Tower.

“How’d you find this place?” Natasha asked as she liberated a turtle brownie and bit into the
caramel and cashew-encrusted chewy goodness. Steve knew it was the right place when she didn’t
even try to contain the moan that shuddered through her entire body. “And why haven’t you shared
sooner?”

“I’m sharing now. And I found it when I was wandering around the old neighborhood, back before
the Chitauri. Building’s been here since my time, but it’s all ‘gentrified’ now. This was a grocer,”
he added, embracing the narrow storefront with its plate glass windows, red-painted front door,
brick walls, and wide-plank wooden floors. “Over there is where the pickle barrel stood, and over
there was where fresh bread came out of the oven every day,” he indicated the big brick oven
behind the cash register. “Used to do deliveries for the owner some times when I was a kid,” he
added with a boyish grin. Small black wrought-iron tables with upholstered bistro chair punctuated
the space where oblivious Brooklynites sipped at real coffee and noshed on baked wonders,
unaware they shared the shop with an ex-spy and a man out of time. “How’s the coffee?”

“Perfect. You knew it would be.”

“I take that as high praise – Natasha Romanoff doesn’t deem something perfect often.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, an image that set him to giggle. “You’ve got a, here, let me,” he
wet his thumb and wiped away the coffee mustache full of chocolate crumbs off her upper lip. She
smiled gently at him and the intimate act of saving one from looking like a sappy, sloppy eater.

“Thanks.”
They ate goodies and drank their coffee in a companionable silence, until Natasha finally broke it with the quietly spoken question Steve had been expecting for two weeks.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That you were gay. I wouldn’t have tried to set you up with all those women. There were plenty of nice gay boys working for SHIELD – we’ve missed valuable opportunities there!”

“First of all, not gay. Not heterosexual. Bisexual. There is a difference. I like both men and women. I’d like to think that opens my possibilities, but apparently not everyone is accepting of someone who ‘can’t make up their mind’. And second, I don’t really want to get involved with someone I work with. Especially in a job as dangerous as SHIELD could be.”

She regarded him over the rim of the cup as she took a slow, luxurious sip. “So, what, you don’t want to deal with someone else being in danger, but you don’t mind the fact you throw yourself into danger all the time? I heard about that grenade back in the day – you haven’t changed at all.”

“Not according to Tony.”

“Yeah, you’re a little freer, a little more fun to be around. Okay. A lot more fun. Always knew you had it in you to be a laugh. But have you changed fundamentally? I think not.”

“Where’s this goin’, Nat?”

“You want a relationship with someone, you need to give, too. So you need to think about risk and what you could put a potential partner through. Male or female.”

“You suggestin’ I retire? ‘Cos right now, I’m on ‘hiatus’.”

“I’m suggesting you need to think things through. It’s more than just a date you’re looking for. You’re looking for an ever after. And if that’s what you’re looking for, odds are, your partner is too. Not fair to the civilian to end up with a super soldier with a death wish.”

“I don’t have a death wish, Nat.”

“Hmm. I remember your orders to Hill, Steve. No one’s forgotten, you know. You downed a plane you could have landed. I could mention a hundred other times you’ve made a field decision that put you in the crosshairs when it didn’t have to. You claim it’s to save someone else, but there’s always another way. It’s a pattern. You take a lot of unnecessary risks. How come?”

Steve picked at the corner of the brownie on the napkin before him, and rolled his thumb in the crumbs. Buying time. Maybe Natasha would get bored of this line of inquiry and take off on another tangent.

Maybe pigs, horses, and porcupines would fly.

Finally, she answered herself.

“Barnes.”

Steve lifted his eyes slowly and nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

“Because you thought he was dead?”
Again, the small nod.

This was a thing Steve had long ago admitted to himself, that that simple statement, “even when I had nothing, I had Bucky,” was less a claim and more of a sacred truth. It was at the core of his being, that need, that pull. And a world absent Bucky was a world in which Steve Rogers had little interest in living.

“Can you imagine losing the person most important to you in the world? Of facing a future where that person just isn’t? Of facing the absolute cold, empty void every day?”

Natasha was silent for a long moment, regarding Steve with solemn, almost frightened eyes. At last she said softly, “I have memories. That’s not the same as having experiences. I don’t know if they are memories of things that actually happened to me, or if they were implanted. I think they were implanted. I have memories, but no emotion attached to them. I can remember a woman’s face, a gentle touch, a scent, but no feeling of safety, or warmth, or love. So no, I can’t imagine losing anyone that important.”

Steve leaned forward and reached toward the V of her neckline and deftly tugged out the chain holding her necklace with the tip of his index finger. A necklace with a stylized arrow dangling from it. “I think you can,” he told her quietly.

Natasha snatched the necklace away and closed her fist over it. “It’s complicated,” was all she’d allow.

“It always is,” Steve agreed, causing Natasha to gasp softly.

“And now?”

“He’s alive.”

That made all the difference. He could breathe again, he could live again. He could love again. It didn’t even matter if Bucky was in his life, really. Just knowing he was alive was enough to uncoil the leaden knot in his chest. He might wish for more, but he could live with less.

“But … but he … well. He’s not very keen on you, is he?”

“Old-fashioned slang doesn’t become you, Nat,” Steve replied with a small smile.

“That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“Trying is good,” he agreed with a sigh.

“I still don’t get it. Even after you knew he was alive, you still haven’t taken me up on any of my offers – unless you were holding out for him –“

Steve shook his head. “Not that naïve, no.” He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I hate blind dates. Hate ‘em with a passion. If I had a nickel for every blind date Buck set up that went south before he got his first kiss of the evenin’ … well, it would cover most of this,” he gestured toward the tower of boxes of baked goodies. “Maybe one or two out of a hundred didn’t end up in me feelin’ like total shit.”

“Why didn’t you just say?”

“Because you’d’ve come up with something else, something that might have been more … uncomfortable. I could manage the matchmaking game.”
“Manage.”

“Sometimes you’re easier to manipulate than you think, Nat. Especially when you don’t expect it.” He grinned at her suddenly, pouring every ounce of All-American Apple Pie into the grin, and she stared at him, eyes wide.

“You little shit!” she breathed at him. “You played me?”

“Sometimes. Guy’s gotta have a little fun, too, you know,” his smile widened, dimpling. “I wasn’t ready,” he added suddenly, his face growing serious.

“Ready for what?”

“Anything real.”

“Because you were in love with Barnes.”

Steve laughed at that, a bark of surprise.

“No. I’ve been in love with Bucky Barnes all my life. Lovin’ him isn’t something I do. It’s part of who I am. And I’ve always known I couldn’t have him.”

“Okay, you’ve lost me.”

“I wasn’t ready to get involved with anyone because I was in mourning. When I woke up, yeah, years had passed. But for me, it was days. From where I was standin’, Bucky had just died. And to find out over 60 years had passed? Peggy was lost to me, too. The two people I loved most, gone. My whole team, everyone I knew … I tried going out a couple of times – it didn’t feel right. Didn’t have anythin’ in common, couldn’t very well be honest about where I came from. So I stopped.”

“You went out on dates? And you held out on me?”

“Before we met. Before I found Peggy again. Before … all this. But now … now I’m ready to try again. I don’t have to keep secret when I’m from – everyone knows. The Smithsonian’s done me a favor in that,” he added with another grin.

“Huh,” Natasha observed, and turned her attention to the brownie in front of her. She’d demolished turtle brownie and a fruit tart while they’d been talking. “I’m going to have to work out for three days straight to make up for this, but it’ll be worth it. They deliver?”

“Don’t know, but I guess we could always come back out here for supplies.”

“You’re on. And I don’t want to share these. So I can’t store ‘em in my fridge – Clint’ll take one look, and they’ll be gone by the time he closes the refrigerator door. Don’t want to risk ‘em in the communal fridge. Can I store them in your fridge – since you’re alone now –” She stopped herself with a guilty frown. “Sorry, I don’t mean –“

“No, it’s all right. I am alone. Feels weird. But if you think you get to keep all the leftovers, you’d better think again. I’m not gonna be able to resist this stuff if it’s in my fridge, either, you know. I’m just not that strong,” he added, grinning widely as he popped the rest of his treat in his mouth.

“Then I guess you’d better get some more to take home.”

“Me? You could spring for ‘em, y’know. And we’re never gonna get all this stuff on the subway _”
“No subway, no cab. I’m calling Pepper and asking to arrange extraction. I’m done with roughing it today.” She put her arms around the stack of boxes, hugging them to her chest. “And this is my salary for freezing my pretty little ass off playing cameraperson for your crazy-ass walk down frickin’ freezin’ memory lane.”

“All right, you call, I’ll buy more. But you’re bringing the ice cream for the midnight sugar fest we’re gonna have later tonight.”

“Deal. So what, we’re doing a slumber party? Oooh, maybe you can braid my hair.”

“Only if you do my nails,” he replied with an affectionate smile.

“Nah, that’s Clint’s job.”

“Great, you bring Clint, I’ll invite Sam. Better double my order …”

“Y’think?” she grinned broadly at him, pulling out her phone.

No, quadruple. Maybe more – he should take some back for Pepper and Tony. Oh, and Thor and Jane and Erik and Darcy and Ian. And Happy. Happy deserved sugary treats. Oh, and Maria of course. Sam might want to bring her along, actually.

Shit, Steve thought as he made his way to the register, he might as well buy out the whole bakery and arrange to have it all delivered to the Tower party level. They could do with an impromptu movie night …

Because if he bought enough to stock the communal fridge, Bucky could have a taste. And he knew that Buck would love the brownies – every flavor.

And maybe a flavor he hadn’t tasted in a very long time. The flavor of Ma’s brownies.

And if the brownies were for everyone, Bucky might actually try one. And maybe he’d remember and he’d smile a little at Steve. Maybe it would be a first step. Maybe.

“Hi, uh, do you do custom baking?”

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In the end, Steve did nearly buy out the store, and spoke to the store manager about the possibility of having something custom made, which they were happy to accommodate when the manager recognized Steve. He stayed behind to supervise while Natasha took the limo back to the Tower. Steve preferred the subway anyway. And he’d admit that just once, he took advantage of his post-New Year’s Eve notoriety to secure a special favor. Even if it meant signing autographs and having his picture taken with the bakery staff.

Natasha called in an order for gourmet ice cream from Oddfellows in Brooklyn as well, and together they planned an impromptu party in the main communal space rather than Steve’s floor. Tasty baked goodies, ice cream, and a movie with a collection of extraordinary people who could get on each other’s nerves in epic proportions. And yet, they made the best support system Steve could hope for, outside the Commandos.

Since when had this become Steve Rogers’s life? He grinned to himself at the realization that this was real and present.

Fact was, Tony, Bruce, Pepper and Steve had agreed that unless there was a compelling need,
Steve would stay out of battles leading up to the whole Bachelor thing. And they’d been lucky this first two weeks of 2015 – there had been no global catastrophe, no impending threat to the security of the country, continent, hemisphere or planet that needed the attention of the Avengers. And he had severed ties entirely with SHIELD, despite repeated requests from Phil Coulson. He just wasn’t cut out to be a spy. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t go out for a beer with Phil the next time he was in New York, he just wasn’t going on SHIELD missions anymore.

So there was no moral conflict for Steve to wrestle with – there simply was nothing calling him away from his almost vacation-like existence. It was kind of nice and seriously weird all at the same time. He felt an overwhelming need to find a new hobby, maybe join a new chorale group, take some tai chi lessons … Maybe learn to dance at last.

Now that Tony had successfully convinced them all – including Sam – to relocate to Stark Tower, they were in each other’s back pockets all the time. Like it or not, they were getting to know one another, and on occasion, even found common ground. But it was things like movie night and too-much-alcohol-for--people that helped them bond the most effectively.

So What’s Your Number? was on the big screen tonight, yet another rom-com with a star that everyone insisted looked just like Steve (he couldn’t see the resemblance, and he’d certainly never parade around with nothing but a washcloth!). He figured that Barton or maybe Natasha had picked it, and he didn’t feel like arguing. Although, the scatological subject matter did kind of point to Tony … Oh well. He could always pull up a good actioner on his Netflix back in his apartment.

The brownies and pastries had been delivered on schedule, along with the ice cream Nat had ordered (he’d paid for it anyway, over her protests), and Earth’s mightiest heroes with their plus-ones were working their way toward competitive sugar comas. There was also alcohol, but there was always alcohol. And as usual Stark had footed the bill for the alcohol. Steve let him.

Tony footed the bill for most activities in the Tower, so Steve wasn’t surprised when Pepper glided by and asked how much they owed Steve for the ice cream and goodies. “Nothing. I wanted to do this.”

“Steve, no one expects you to pay for all this –“

“Which is what makes it fun,” Steve countered with a sunny smile, the one that was designed to get him anything he wanted. Like any effective weapon, he used it sparingly, so that its impact was never dulled, and his power was never abused. He was gratified to see the dazed expression on Pepper’s face as she nodded agreement. He patted her shoulder and turned her around so she wandered back to Tony’s side, where she was greeted with wide, surprised eyes. Tony raised his glass in salute of Steve’s heretofore unknown powers of persuasion. Steve simply grinned, a grin this time.

Now, Steve was in the kitchen area making himself a root beer float when Bucky came onto the floor. His old friend paused at the stairwell door, swept the floor with his eyes, and Steve could see him running through a risk assessment in his head. Old habits don’t die, and that’s how soldiers stayed alive. He felt rather than saw Bucky’s eyes rake across his position, pausing for a moment before continuing on. He wished he could capture Bucky’s gaze, hold it until he could burrow into Bucky’s head and read what was going on there. But Bucky was careful not to make eye contact. He turned toward his spot past the TV lounge area, and stalked there in silence.

Shrugging, Steve put the soda and ice cream back in their respective coolers, and carried his drink over to the couch where he dropped down next to Natasha. Nat immediately leaned over, snagged his straw, and took a long gulp, declaring it, “Yummy. Where’s mine?”
“Waitin’ for your lazy ass to make it, Romanoff.”

“You’re a hard man, Rogers.”

“I hear that’s a good thing to find,” Barton quipped around a mouthful of ice cream, waggling his eyebrows lasciviously.

Natasha glanced over her shoulder at him and sniffed, turning back to Steve haughtily. “I wouldn’t know,” she said pertly. “I haven’t found one yet.”

“Oooh,” Clint and Steve called in unison. “Burn!”

“What are you, twins?” Nat demanded, glancing from one to the other of them. “Dumb and dumber,” she added, shaking her head.

“Nah, just both used to calling you on your bullshit, Nat,” Clint interjected, earning him a sharp elbow in the chest, but then Natasha flopped down so her head was in Clint’s lap, and her feet were in Steve’s. She wriggled enthusiastically to get comfortable, earning her loud complaints as she dug bruises into their flesh.

“Geeze, Nat, you’re like a bratty two year old!” Clint complained

Steve grabbed Natasha’s ankles in one hand and squeezed, holding them in place. “Behave yourself or there’s no more ice cream for you.”

“I’d like to see you try, Rogers.”

“Actually, so would I,” Clint added with fervor. “Hey, maybe we could sell tickets!”

“Hey!” Nat protested.

“Hey, keep it to a dull roar over there!” Sam called out from where he and Maria Hill were tangled together on another section of couch, feeding each other sweets and ice cream.

Steve glanced around and saw the couples bonding over ice cream and goodies. Pepper and Tony, Sam and Maria, Jane and Thor, Darcy and Ian. Even Nat and Clint were sharing ice cream, and Clint was absently sneaking bite-sized chunks of brownie to Nat, who grinned up at him with soft eyes.

Erik had blown right past dessert to a hot creamy drink, the fragrant steam wafting across the space. Ice cream and rum hot toddy? Steve gave Erik 10 minutes tops before the old guy was out cold again. Maybe this time, someone would remember to pick him up and put him to bed.

Bruce looked up from his stack of brownies and heaping dish of ice cream and grinned broadly, raising his chocolate ice cream laden spoon in salute. Happy had swung by and piled up a plate, gushing thanks at Steve, and then took himself off to wherever Happy took himself. He was always uncomfortable socializing with the Avengers and their menagerie of friends. It was a shame, really – he was a nice guy, except, well. He kind of missed.

That left … the seat over by the curved wall was empty.

As casually as he could, he stretched his arm along the back of the sofa, and craned his neck to glance toward the spread of goodies near the galley kitchen.

Bucky was there, piling treats on his plate, juggling a full dish of ice cream alongside the goodies.
And Steve held his breath as Bucky’s hand hovered over the box of special brownies, baked with his Ma’s old recipe. Buck frowned, picking up one of the brownies, and turned it over in his hand. Steve knew that Buck would have to recognize the dusting of ground hazelnut and confectioners’ sugar over the crispy sheen on the tops of the brownies. Bucky’s lips parted in disbelief, and he raised the brownie to his nose first, a beatific smile spreading across his face. Then he slid it into his mouth and bit down.

Steve could hear the groan of pleasure from Bucky all the way to where he sat, over the sound of the movie playing on the TV. The rest of the brownie disappeared into Bucky’s mouth instantly, and he groaned again. A smile twitched at the corners of Steve’s mouth.

Buck quickly grabbed several more of Ma Rogers’s special brownies, stacking them on his plate and shoving another in his mouth, whole.

Steve felt a thrill of fear as Bucky’s eyes lifted and locked on his. With the brownie filling his cheeks, making him look like a murderous chipmunk, it was impossible for Bucky to look angry or truly dangerous. But Steve would swear that Bucky shrugged slightly and lifted his eyebrows. It was all Steve could do not to smile.

Bucky had never been able to resist Steve’s Ma’s brownies. Obviously, he still couldn’t.

*Rogers for the win.*

Without betraying his internal elation, Steve just turned back to the movie, stuck his straw in his mouth, and sucked up his root beer float noisily, grinning inwardly. Then not so inwardly, causing Nat to kick his elbow inquiringly. He just stared ahead and watched the movie, enjoying his root beer float.

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Jesus Fucking Christ.

*Mrs. Rogers’ special brownies.*

He knew Steve didn’t make them, because Steve couldn’t make shit. Well, what he made was always shit, but that was the extent of Steve Rogers’s culinary mastery.

But Sarah Rogers? At her hands, the simple and every day became magic. And when it came to baking? *Angels sang.*

And her special brownies? The brownies everyone in the block would beg and barter when a special occasion was upon them? *The heavens fucking wept.*

James didn’t know the recipe – it was a closely guarded secret in the Rogers family. He’d helped make them a number of times, but when the final ingredients were folded together, Sarah Rogers had always insisted that everyone but Steve leave the kitchen so the magic could seep in.

He’d always suspected a little bit of faerie magic had gone into the recipe, a touch of the old country, leprechauns dancing through clover or some such bullshit. Whatever the final ingredients, the result had always been the same – brownies that made James Buchanan Barnes weak in the knees, cry halleluiah, and kiss the face of God.

Sarah Rogers’s brownies were better than sex. *Seriously.* If she’d made these every day, the legend of James Buchanan Barnes would’ve been the Boy Who Remained Celibate. And fat, ‘cos he’d’ve been chowin’ down on these brownies like air.
Those brownies had died with Sarah Rogers. Or so he’d thought.

But there they were, perfect rectangles of chocolate goodness graced with that delicious magical faerie dust of Sarah Rogers’s, stacked up on a plate daring him to walk away.

Like hell.

He’d already inhaled one, and shoved a second in his mouth, stacking several more on his plate. He was tempted to take them all. He knew he was making food sex noises, and he didn’t care. It was Sarah Rogers’s brownies, man!

And then he saw Steve looking at him.

And for once, the fire was low, buried under the sensory overload that was Mrs. Rogers’s magic brownies.

And any doubt that James had harbored that maybe this wasn’t really Steve Rogers, that maybe he’d been replaced by a changeling or an alien or some other bullshit decoy, just vanished. No one would ever have known Steve’s Ma’s recipe but Steve himself.

And no one but Steve would know how that recipe affected James.

Face stuffed with one brownie, hands burdened with plates of more brownies and ice cream, James could only shrug and waggle his eyebrows in acknowledgment of the sacrament of the brownies.

Steve turned away without a word, without any expression. James found that he was disappointed. Not angry, not upset. Disappointed, like he’d missed something important.

Well, that was unexpected.

And was that a root beer float Steve was slurping noisily? Damn, now James was craving one, too!

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The following morning, Steve was back at work at his drawings and storyboards, hogging the big dining table yet again. Everyone had learned to accommodate, and Pepper had arranged for smaller tables to appear in the lounge area at strategic points so that people could eat and converse while Steve continued to dominate the primary eating area. No one seemed inclined to call Steve on his shit because he was clearly being very productive. And everyone wanted to see his art – Steve was going to have to think about either prices or presents, because everyone in the Tower, Thor included, wanted a piece of art signed by Steve Rogers. Steve Rogers, not Captain America.

A stack of drawings for the PSA were complete and ready to go, and the clean storyboards were nearly complete. He had a meeting with the director on the It Gets Better PSA later that day, so he was working furiously to get the last of the storyboards roughed out.

Pepper was planning a dinner party as soon as Steve relinquished the table. So she stopped by every day for a progress report so she could give the chefs sufficient notice to prepare the feast.

The leftovers from the goodie party were laid out on the counter in the kitchen. Steve had finished the last of his Ma’s brownies last night before bundling the remaining sweets away into their string-tied boxes. Despite a good night’s sleep and a thorough tooth brushing this morning, the tastes still lingered on his tongue, chocolate and sugar, ground hazelnut and streaks of cream cheese, and just a dab of raspberry jam. The bakery had done a good job translating his memory of his mother’s recipe into reality. They’d agreed to treat the recipe as confidential, but the more
Steve thought about it, the more he thought he might be able to do some good with his Ma’s magical brownie recipe. It had already wrought a miracle in that Bucky had looked straight at him and hadn’t threatened to knock his lights out. Maybe there was still some of that faerie magic left in the air.

A little while later, Buck came into the kitchen whistling jauntily, rummaged through the boxes of baked goods, and huffed a disappointed sigh. The whistling petered out mournfully. Ah. He’d discovered there were no more Sarah Rogers brownies. From where Steve was working at the big table, he heard boxes being shifted, rustling of bakery waxed paper, feet shuffling. The fridge opened and closed. Finally, Buck came out of the kitchen carrying a plate full of baked goods and a tall glass of milk. Steve braced for a smile, an acknowledgement of some kind, and tamped down the raging disappointment when Buck breezed right by without a glance, and headed directly toward his spot by the far wall.

Steve had used his best weapon, and it got him nowhere. That one moment of rapprochement last night had achieved nothing lasting.

Steve had to remind himself he’d been watching too many rom-coms, ‘cos life doesn’t really work like that … there’s no such thing as magic brownies …

… and maybe there’s no such thing as happy endings, either, Steve told himself sourly.

There was such a thing as too many rom-com movie nights, however.

A few minutes later found Steve savagely filling in a background on one of his drawings, viciously slicing across the paper with his conté crayon as the black grew blacker. He didn’t notice Sam drop unceremoniously into the chair directly across from him at the table.

Sam cleared his throat, beat out a rhythm on the table with his hands, and finally reached across and snapped his fingers repeatedly under Steve’s nose.

Steve looked up dazedly. “Huh?”

“Earth to Rogers, man! Where do you go when you’re like that – and what the hell did that drawing do to you? You’ve worn right through the paper!”

Steve glanced down and saw that Sam was right – he’d rubbed right through the paper and had been grinding pigment into the dining room table for the past 10 minutes. “Oh, gosh, I need to clean that up – Pepper will be furious!”

Chuckling, Sam disentangled himself and darted into the kitchen, where he found some vinegar-based glass cleaner and a roll of paper towels. As he and Steve cleaned up the evidence of Steve’s murderous intent on paper, Sam asked the question he’d dropped by to ask.

“So I was down visiting Stark in his lab …”

“Always a mistake,” Steve countered absently and without any heat, frowning as he rubbed at the pigment build-up.

“Not when he’s upgradin’ my wings, it’s not. Wait’ll you see – I’ll have more lift, maybe can carry your half-ton ass easier. Plus safeguards to ensure that some scary-ass metal-armed assassin can’t tear off a wing. It’s a beautiful thing,” Sam insisted with a grin.

“Okay, I’ll give you that. We’ve been rough on the wings, and it’ll be good to have you airborne again. So how is Tony?”
“So I may have mentioned about a certain comic artist and his undocumented but really super cool past. Like, rock star cool.”

“You didn’t,” Steve replied with a grimace. Oh, now he’d never hear the end of it! He wiped harder at the mark.

“I did. And Tony wants to track down the Steve Rogers catalogue of comic and science fiction art.”

“Wow, too bad no one knows what comics Steve Rogers worked on, huh?” Steve could barely hold the smile off his face as he scrubbed at the stain.

“Steve Rogers knows,” Sam sing-songed.

“Yeah, I don’t remember.”

“Yeah, I know you got an eidetic memory, so don’t give me any of the ‘I don’t remember’ crap, Cap.” Sam’s arms were folded aggressively across his chest as he tipped back in his chair, balancing it on one leg.

The stain was gone, and Steve’s drawing was trash, so he scrunched it into a ball and flipped a three-pointer into the trash can. Sam gave him an impressed look and nodded, but didn’t relent.

“What’s he want it for anyway?” Steve asked, dropped back into his chair and pulled his drawing pad over to start work on redoing the murdered illustration.

“You know, comics and science fiction are big with kids. Movies, too. You’ve done all three. And in the golden age! That promises some pretty serious geek cred, but only if people know about it. Tony wants to pull together the Steve Rogers collection and mount a show. Let people see what you did back in the day. Maybe some of these,” he indicated Steve’s drawings, “make it into the show, too. Maybe see if it can lead to something in the now.”

“What, comics? My style is too old-fashioned for today’s graphic novels.” He slid the rough sketch across the table toward Sam to demonstrate his point. But Steve would be a fool not to admit that the idea thrilled him.

“Don’t look bad to me. Look, Steve, it’s one more way you can reach the kids you want to help. Can you imagine if Stark can engineer an invite and a session for you at San Diego Comic Con?”

“Big?”

“Fuckin’ global, man.”

“All right. I’ll pull together a list for you. From what I’ve seen of prices today, this isn’t going to be cheap.”

“Yeah, but what else has Stark got to spend money on, hmm?”

Steve chuckled at that, and went back to work recreating his artwork.

“So, see you later – I’m off to group. Once I collect Mr. Grumpy.” Sam’s eyes darted to Steve’s face as he set his implements down again, glancing sideways at Sam. “You okay with that?”

“Not my place,” Steve commented, feeling the disappointment at Bucky’s lack of response boiling up again. He willed it back down, swallowing at the faint sense of bile at the back of his throat. “But I’m glad you’re looking out for him.”
“Hey, a vet’s a vet, no matter what war they served in. I’d say you should come, too, but we’ll leave that to another time, okay?” Steve nodded. “Yeah, so you get that list together, and we’re gonna make you a star, my friend.”

Steve just groaned theatrically, but grinned at Sam nonetheless.

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“I don’t really want –“

“Don’t care. I let you slide last week and let you blow off group ‘cos you were up to your nose in books. Not again. Look, you know you don’t have to say anything, you just need to go and be part of it. Do you good. And if you don’t hurt anyone, we’ll go back to that diner you liked.” Sam stood at the driver’s side of one of the armored SUVs authorized by Hill, waiting for James to get in the vehicle.

“If I don’t hurt anyone. Like those two guys –“ James backed away from the door, stepped to the side as if to bolt for the elevator and the residential floors of the Tower.

Sam shook his head, eyebrow arched menacingly and hooked a thumb to the car. James’s shoulders slumped, and he climbed into the vehicle after all. Sam slid in behind the wheel flashing a victorious grin, and pulled the seatbelt over his torso, snicking it into place. “Yeah. You might want to think about apologizing, actually. You really scared the crap out of both of them, and they were Special Ops in the first Gulf War."

“They were Special Ops?” James asked, his disbelief dripping from his words as he secured himself in his seat. “But they were –“

“Gay, yes. Married to each other, yes. Damn fine soldiers, yes. Scary motherfuckers, yes. And shitting their pants over your reaction, yes.”

“I don’t mean – I mean, they just – ah, fuck.”

“Learn to say I’m sorry when you’re a dick. Use your inside voice and try to be nice.”

“Geeze, you sound like my Ma,” James complained, as Sam merged into traffic, and there was no going back that didn’t involve tuck and roll.

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Sam wouldn’t admit it, but he was surprised with how well group went that day. Barnes took his seat in the back of the room, but he worked hard on not glowering at everyone who came into the meeting space, and once even opened his mouth and words came out. The recipient of those words had been shocked to a) hear Barnes speak, b) hear Barnes say something nice, or at least not super scary shit, and c) Barnes didn’t look like he was gonna put somebody through a wall.

Yeah, Barnes had made quite the impression the last time he came to group, and the members had been discussing it among themselves. That was another reason why Sam really wanted Barnes to come today – he didn’t want this to escalate any further so that Barnes would not be welcome back. Barnes needed this outlet more than he’d admit, even to himself, but Sam saw definite improvement after each session. Even if Barnes did appear to just sulk by himself.

But today, Barnes surprised everyone. Sam would bet that Barnes surprised himself.

When the session broke up and everyone migrated to the coffee and donuts, Barnes had roused
himself and walked stiffly over to take a spot in line for the refreshments.

But what really iced the cake was him walking up to Carl and Dave, arms held loosely at his sides, making an effort not to look scary. Trying to look like he really meant it when he extended his right, flesh hand, and offered, “I’m sorry about what happened last time I was here. It’s complicated, me and Rogers. We’re, ah, we’re kinda on the outs right now. Not your fault, so sorry.”

Carl stared at the hand, but Dave shot him a glance and warily accepted the offered hand. “Oh. Sorry to hear that. We … we didn’t know.”

Carl seemed to be studying Barnes’s face, a small frown line forming between his brows. He cocked his head to one side, and finally said, “You don’t approve.”

“Sorry?”

“You don’t approve of Captain Rogers coming out. You’re not …?”

“Me? Hell, no!” Barnes replied emphatically, withdrawing his hand like it was scalded.

“No? But surely you two have been friends so long, you’re not going to let something like this come between you?” Dave asked and Sam found himself stretching to hear from where he chatted with one of the group members.

“I, ah, like I said, it’s complicated.”

“Not so much,” Carl said.

“Nope,” Dave chimed in.

“You been friends for what, 85 years, give or take?” Carl asked.

“And what I read was he searched the world for you, dragged your ass back and helped you through recovery. Big investment of time and effort,” Dave added.

“Yep,” Carl emphasized the “P” sound.

“Yeah, well, like I said, sorry, it wasn’t your fault –“ Barnes replied, stepping backward to make his escape.

“It’s not contagious, you know,” Carl said suddenly. “Being gay, bisexual, whatever. It’s personal. It’s inside,” he rapped his own chest. “It never has to be anything more than you allow it to be, y’know? It never has to be bigger than 85 years of friendship.”

“Y’know, it’s really not any of your business –“

And that was Sam’s cue.

Sam spun around, clapped his hands, and offered brightly, “So, burgers, Barnes?”

&&&

Carl and Dave definitely weren’t cowed by Barnes anymore, and in fact the looks they gave him as Sam ushered him out of the basement meeting room were more like pity. Sam felt bad that’s how they saw Barnes. Yeah, he felt sorry for the guy about a lot of things, but pity? Nah. Dude was pretty fuckin’ strong, even if he did have his head up his ass some days.
The question remained why. Just what was it that bothered Barnes so much about Steve’s sexuality?

He remembered that Steve had told him that both Steve and Barnes had been raised Catholic. Catholic Church even today had some pretty negative views about homosexuality, although the new Pope had made some comments that sounded pretty reasonable and sane. Organized religion could use more of that, he figured.

Could that be the key, Barnes’s faith?

When Sam asked, Barnes admittedly readily – proudly – to being sexual active with women – many women, he emphasized – before he was called up. Sam then asked how Barnes felt about sex in relation to the Church, just to get a feel for how he interacted with his Church.

“Church didn’t approve,” Barnes said softly.

“Hmm. Ever use protection?”

“Every damn time. Okay. Once when Marylou Kowalski was a little too overeager. Drove us both crazy waiting for her monthly visitor. Huh. We never spoke again after it came. But yeah, always had a johnnie in my pocket. Might do without lunch a coupla days, but I wasn’t no creep – I was responsible.”

“Church didn’t approve of birth control.”

“Church didn’t approve of me steppin’ out, neither. Pre-marital sex and all that. But that wasn’t stoppin’ me – hell if I didn’t love the feel of a dame in my arms. I was already damned to hell first time I stuck it in –“

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t need the sordid details. So …”

“So … what?”

“So you don’t actually care what the Church has to say when it’s not convenient.”

“Church hasn’t done much for me. Maybe because I was already a sinner. Maybe because there is no God. Because if there is a God, I must already be damned to hell, ‘cos I ain’t seen nothin’ of God for 70 years. Longer. But if there’s a God, why would he hate me for much, huh? What’d I ever do to him?”

“Huh. Yeah, I –“

“It’s okay. Was never much of a churchgoer myself. That was more Stevie – er, Rogers. His Ma, she made him go to church every Sunday. Sang in the choir ‘til his voice changed. He believed, so it wasn’t much of a hardship. Hell, he’d had all the sacraments by the time he was 12, ‘ceptin’ a weddin’ and ordination. Some days it was even money whether he’d go one way or the other. Sometimes I’d tag along. To church, I mean. If the music was good – I liked the music sometimes. If I didn’t have somethin’ better to do, o’course.”

“Of course.”

“But it’s easier to believe there is no God. Easier to believe he doesn’t exist than to believe he abandoned me. Don’t you think?”

&&&
The director arrived with a film crew in late afternoon, and Pepper was with Steve to receive them on one of the lower conference levels. As usual, Pepper looked lovely in her cream colored suit, long lines and flattering silhouette accented by her coppery hair gathered in an elegant chignon. She stood at the head of the table, arms crossed, head held high, revealing the long line of her graceful neck.

She was, as ever, gorgeous, imposing and kind of scary, garnished with a sweet smile.

Steve was glad she was there. He had no doubt he’d get the hang of all this stuff, but it was nice to have someone in his corner, someone who could stop a problem with the arch of a perfect eyebrow. So much more effective in this situation than a shield or a luger.

The director, a young-ish man with a dark-haired buzz cut, attractively unshaven stubble, and nicely developed muscles, shook Steve’s hand and looked directly into his eyes with interest in his own brown eyes. “Captain Rogers, I’m Evan Cantwell, on assignment from ABC,” he greeted warmly, his hand enveloped in Steve’s.

“Mr. Cantwell,” Steve acknowledged with a nod and a half smile. “Pleased to meet you. You’ve met Ms. Potts,” Steve gestured toward Pepper.

“Ms. Potts. And call me Evan, please. We’re going to be working together a lot, so we might as well get comfortable with each other.” Steve noticed that he wasn’t in any hurry to reclaim his hand, and that made Steve cock his head to one side curiously.

Steve gave the guy’s hand one final squeeze and extracted his hand. He dragged it through his hair nervously. “Then, um, call me Steve, please. What do you mean by a lot?”

“Well, yeah, I’m gonna help you with your PSAs, but I’m also going to be in charge of the package team. You know, recording you doing the PSAs, getting ready to be the Bachelor. Color stuff.”

“Oh. Well, that’s great, so I’ll, we’ll be seeing a lot of you, then,” Steve responded, and if he was honest with himself, he’d admit he was really looking forward to seeing a lot more of Evan Cantwell.

“So, Mr. Cantwell, you’ll be responsible for the content of the material about Steve shown on The Bachelor,” Pepper interjected from her vantage point at the head of the table. “You’re aware of the agreement we have in place, I assume?”

“Nothing sensational, no footage of other residents of the Tower, unless we are granted explicit consent in writing, no making Steve here look old and doughty – don’t think that’s gonna be a problem,” he added with a look that swept up and down Steve’s body, and didn’t that just make things a bit more interesting? “Anything I’ve forgotten?”

“Just that Captain Rogers and I have final say on anything that goes into the final broadcast.”

“I understand, ma’am,” Cantwell said, and Steve had the sense that he used the word “ma’am” deliberately to editorialize on his opinion of Pepper’s intervention.

Steve’s eyes shuffled between Pepper and Evan, and he knew who’d he’d put money on – Cantwell didn’t even realize he wasn’t in the same county as Pepper’s league. Suddenly the thought made Steve grin.

“So, I have ideas, and I’ve been working on storyboarding the It Gets Better spot,” Steve said, breaking the tension by redirecting their attention to the stack of storyboards on the conference table.
“Seriously,” Cantwell said, surprised.

“Didn’t your producer tell you? I used to be a commercial artist – this is what I did for a living before signing up. I also used to storyboard film.”

“Before you became Captain America, you mean? Wow,” he added, as he spread the drawings out on the table with a gentle index finger. “These are really good, but this is a much longer piece than you’d ly do for a project like It Gets Better.”

“Yeah, I know, I have a lot to say.”

“Yeah. But this is way more involved than I’ve got resources for. You’re talking animation, voiceovers, cutting video from multiple sources – I’d love to work with you on this, but I think you need someone who’s got more time than I do. I do have a full-time job with GMA, after all. But I know of a couple of people who’d be great for this, and they would jump at the chance to work with you.”

“Because I’m Captain America.”

“Because you have a filmmaker’s eye,” he corrected enthusiastically. “Yeah, look, I teach a class at NYU Film School – I have a couple of really sharp students who would probably be a perfect fit for you on this. Won’t cost you a thing if you’re willing to let them have some credit on the film – whoever you choose can submit it as a class project and get some grade credit. If that works for you.”

“I, uh, yeah, I guess. I’m interested in getting my message out to as many young people as I can. So working with young filmmakers makes a lot of sense. In fact, I’ve got ideas for more –“

“You need your own YouTube Channel, friend. It’d be the perfect venue for you to do the longer form films. Unless you’re looking to be able to submit to the Academy for Oscar consideration –“

“Nah, I already got one of those. No, I’m just interested in getting the word out. But Pepper – is that a thing I could have, a YouTube Channel?”

“You’ve got a lot to say, and there are a lot of people who’d listen. You don’t need fancy equipment to do YouTube videos, even a cellphone camera would do. You can still get your point across.”

“Whaddya think, Pepper?”

“I’ll have Legal get started on it. I’m sure there’s a verification process involved to confirm that a channel is in fact official, and we’ll want to ensure your copyright is protected.” She turned to call them while the two men continued conversing.

“So I’ll get you the resumés of the students I’d like to recommend, and you can set something up with them,” Evan offered, leaning into Steve’s space

“How many?” Steve asked, letting him.

“Well, two really strong candidates –“ Evan sketched an amorphous shape in the air with one hand, eyes fixed on Steve’s face.

Steve smiled. “So, why don’t I work with them both? Especially if they both can benefit. One on this film, the other on something else? I mean, if I’m going to have my own channel, I’ll need content. And there really is a lot I’d like to say and do for kids. Having college students working
with me can only help.”

“Are you even for real? I mean … yeah, okay. So here’s my card,” he flipped a card out of his wallet and held it out to Steve. He leaned a little further in and dropped his voice to a gravelly whisper, “And, um, I could get fired for this, but … if the Bachelor doesn’t work out for you, maybe you and I, we could get a drink sometime? Y’know after the show’s over?”

“Um, yeah, um maybe. I’m kinda hoping this Bachelor thing leads to somethin’, but you never know,” Steve answered with wide eyes, shifting backward slightly. This guy was asking him out! And yeah, because of the Bachelor, he couldn’t really take him up on it, not until the show had finished. It was only fair. But it was nice to be asked, to have someone look at him with interest. “So, um, how do you want to work this ‘color’ thing?”

“Well, we could bring the crew when you meet with my students to discuss your film, and I mean you may want to just do a short spot for the web site, and leave your longer film to YouTube. The shorter one will play better on talk shows, too, give you more exposure. Easier to share on social media, too.”

“Huh. Okay. Okay, yeah, why don’t you get in touch with your students and send me their resumes – Pepper will want to review them, I’m sure. And we’ll plan to shoot the shorter version early next week? And start work on the longer film then, too?”

“That sounds good.”

Pepper was off the phone and she came over to join the two men. “Legal’s starting the process for the YouTube Channel. I heard you talk about social media – that’s something else we should probably go over as well, Steve. Want to get together later today to discuss it?”

“That would be great, Pepper, I really appreciate that. I know the stuff is out there, but I don’t know the intricacies to making it safe and secure. All of these things are great tools.”

Evan turned his head back and forth to follow their exchange, and then a look of realization passed on his face. “Oh, before I forget, our Legal sent these over – contracts to use the Stark place on the Hudson,” he dug a thick manila envelope out of his messenger bag. “I’d like to arrange to get my crew out there to do some externals if that’s okay.”

Pepper took the envelope from Cantwell, teased out the documents and scanned them briefly before answering. “These look in order – I’ll arrange to have these approved by Legal and signed. As far as doing any filming outside the actual Bachelor recording, let my office know when you’d like to go out, and I’ll arrange to have someone meet you there. You understand, for safety reasons, that we can’t have anyone there unaccompanied.”

“Yeah, but we’re not talking about doing anything inside the house —“

“You are aware that Mr. Stark’s father worked on the Manhattan Project?” Evan nodded, a little impatiently. Steve had to suppress a grin – he knew what was coming, after all. “Well, he had a habit of bringing his work home with him.” Evan literally paled, dark eyebrows racing toward his fuzzy hairline. “You never know what you’re going to find there – trust me, you’re safer having someone with you who knows the place.”

“Happy?” Steve asked, letting the grin break through.

“Happy,” Pepper replied decisively.
Later that afternoon, Pepper arrived in Tony’s lab carrying a manila envelope of doom. Tony looked up from where he was soldering connections into the prototype for Wilson’s new wings when she came in, smiling. Any time she brought him a manila envelope, there was doom attached. It was a thing.

“Is that a happy-to-see-you smile, or a you’re-gonna-regret-this smile?”

“It’s a contract-needs-your-signature smile,” Pepper explained pulling a lengthy document from the envelope.

“You’re CEO, you sign contracts these days. That’s why I made you CEO, so you could deal with the boring contract-signing stuff.”

“Not a contract for Stark Industries. This is a personal contract, for Anthony Stark’s signature. Legal’s reviewed it and approved it for your signature.”

“I don’t like people handing me things, especially contracts requiring Anthony Stark’s signature. Don’t know the guy.”

“It’s from ABC, for the use of Rinascente for Steve’s Bachelor,” she explained gently. “Are you sure about it?”

“Letting people poke around the old homestead? Why the hell not? It’s just sitting there otherwise.” She laid the contract, two copies, on the workbench beside him, and indicated the little yellow tags with her index finger.

“It’s been sitting there for over 20 years, and it never bothered you before,” Pepper countered.

“Yeah, but we never had a decent use for it. Although, I should have offered it up for one of those zombie movies where they blow everything up, y’know? But that would’ve ruined Mom’s garden. How many more times do I have to sign?” he complained as she slid the second copy under his hand.

“One more signature, and initials where I’ve got the tags. I’ve already dated them. Are you sure Jarvis can keep the residence areas secure?”

He looked at her incredulously. “You’re serious? Questioning Jarvis’s professionalism? Did you hear that, J? Miss Potts wants to know if you can keep the private places secure.”

“I assure you, Miss Potts, that all areas designated ‘no access’ will not be accessed by anyone lacking appropriate clearance,” Jarvis responded smoothly.

“Thank you, Jarvis,” she answered, glancing up toward the ceiling, as everyone but Tony did when interacting with the AI.

“Yeah, so no one’ll stumble across Howard’s shrine to Cap. Or his assignation escape route. Or his mad scientist laboratory.”

“I’d forgotten about the shrine. Oh, what did Steve think of that?”

“A little weirded out, but he was happy to get some of his old-timey shit back. Oh crap, we brought back a crate of shit for Barnes and I haven’t given it to him yet. J, remind me to go see Sergeant Frostypants when he gets back to the Tower, ‘kay?”
“I will alert you as soon as Sergeant Barnes is back in his suite, sir.”

“Yeah, that. So, is that with the signatures?”

“Yes. I did want to talk with you about the Bachelor, though. I’m planning to vet the candidates. With Natasha’s help. But I plan to be very … hands’ on during the shooting.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I plan to be on-site during the thing. So, basically, staying at Rinasere. While Steve’s, you know.”

“Staying there,” Tony repeated, eyebrows reaching for his hairline.

“Yes. I feel that it’s important that one of us supervise the event to ensure that Stark property is treated appropriately, and that Steve is treated with respect.”

“You’re mother-henning him, you mean.”

“This is a vulnerable time for him, Tony. I mean I know he says he’s comfortable in his sexuality, but this isn’t just sex. This is the search for love –“

“You really think he’s going to find someone on this show?”

“That is the plan. But maybe not. But I plan to stack the deck in his favor as much as I can.”

“Never took you for a yenta, Miss Potts. It’s a kind of sexy look. But what’re you going to do if Steve doesn’t find anyone through this? Hire a matchmaker?”

Pepper shrugged, and Tony circled her waist with his arms, pulling her close. She smiled and settled her arms on his shoulder, inclining her head to touch foreheads. “Maybe …” she said softly.

“You know, maybe if things don’t work out with the Bachelor, maybe … well, maybe you and I could … you know, open our hearts? To Steve, I mean.”

“What, you mean a threesome? You’d … you’d want that?”

“Well, not going out of my way for it, but you know, if he was alone and it didn’t look good, I wouldn’t say no, exactly. Is it something you’d want?”

“I, um, never really thought about it.”

“Shoulder to waist ratio of a Dorito and you’ve never thought about it?”

“Take it you have.”

“Well, I’m in love with you, 100%, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate what else is in the world. And he’s right there. I mean, seriously …”

“Oh.”

“No, Pep, I wouldn’t suggest anything that would make you uncomfortable, I just thought – well, I thought maybe we have enough love to share. If worse came to worse. I, uh – sorry, stupid, I shouldn’t have brought it up. Of course you’re not comfortable with it. It’s a crazy idea,” Tony started beating himself up over even making the suggestion.
“I …” she took a deep, steadying breath, and nodded once, decisively. “I’ll consider it. You don’t even know if Steve would be interested. It’s not like he’s a stray dog you’re adopting from the pound, Tony. He’s a grown man, a very attractive grown man, I mean, really attractive – you know I never really thought about the shoulder to waist ratio, but it’s really very mathematical, isn’t it? I mean, schools could use him to teach geometry, couldn’t they? But I wouldn’t have thought … then again, I never expected to see him making out with Adam Lambert on national television. I’ll think about it, Tony.”

“Okay, breathe,” he murmured, nuzzling her neck as he circled her waist with his arms. “We’re good, right?” He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “Pepper, we’re good, yes?”

She smiled up at him and nodded. “You’d better take Barnes his things before you forget again,” she told him, pressing her lips against his cheek. “I’ll get this over to ABC so they can start plans. I already had Steve sign the version of his contract that I approved, and he met with a director earlier. This is really happening.” She pressed her forehead against his, and he lifted his lips to press against her nose. She smiled. “Oh. Since I’m planning on staying at Rinascente, I was hoping you would, too.”

“What, a sleepover in my old room? I don’t want to do bunk beds with you, Pep.”

“Then maybe we could rechristen the master suite.”

“And do the nasty in Howard’s old bed? Wow, that is both creepy and a complete turn-on. I’ll think about it,” he grinned at her, then tipped her chin so he could kiss her properly.

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“Look, we’ve done the whole ‘Hydra made me do it’ routine – I know, you know, we all know, that you weren’t in the driver’s seat when you … when you killed my parents. I know that, I understand that, I accept that. Thing is, you were a friend of my father’s – you, James Buchanan Barnes, not Scary Fist of Hydra Spice. And you were, are? a friend of Cap’s. Of Steve Rogers. As long as he says you don’t have to go, you don’t have to go. Second he says you’re out, I’m on the line with the Feds arranging a transfer, at least until your therapists clear you for solo living. Not because I’m not willing to be a friend to you, but because I’m not gonna shit on the friendship I have with Steve.”

Tony stood awkwardly in James’s living room, looking more like an unwelcome cousin than the man who owned the entire building.

James was silent for a long moment, chewing on his lower lip, staring at his fingers, flesh and steel, twining in and out of each other. At last, he lifted his face to look directly into Stark’s eyes. “I know we discussed it. I know you’ve forgiven me. I have a hard time forgiving myself. Howard could be a pain in the ass, and he was serious competition for the dames, but he was a decent guy back then. I remember him recognizing me that night, and he laughed. He said his sins had come back to haunt him. Your mother was killed instantly when the car crashed, and Howard was pretty broken up. But he was still alive and he begged me to shoot him then. Said he deserved it for not getting me out. For not rescuing me. I … I didn’t understand what he was talking about – the Asset didn’t need rescuing. The Asset just was.” James angrily brushed away tears collecting in his eyes, on his lashes. He looked up blearily at Tony. “Do you know what he meant?”

Tony took a deep breath and nodded once. “Let’s just say the Stark family owes you a debt I may never be able to repay.” James tilted his head curiously and Stark huffed again, and added, “I haven’t told Steve this because, well, there’s a limit to how much any one person should have to bear. But when Romanoff uploaded all of SHIELD and Hydra’s dirty little secrets, there were
notes. From the SSR days when my Dad was in charge. And there were handwritten notes in his files that fleshed out those notes."

“And?”

“And apparently there was quite a lot of suspicion at the time about what the Soviets were doing with their ‘fist of Lenin’ program, the program we now know they co-opted from Hydra. Suspicions about what and who.”

“Howard knew the Soviets had me? When?”

“Suspected. Pretty certainly. As early as the 1960s. Maybe earlier. From what I can tell, they couldn’t get any solid intelligence on the project, on confirming your identity, but it doesn’t look like they assigned much in the way of resources, either. Looks like there was a flurry of activity in 1963-64, and then nothing.”

“Kennedy assassination,” James breathed. “That was me.”

“That was Hydra.”

“My body, my hand, my face.”

“And it’s your face that showed up on some of the photos and film coverage of the day. Tell me you were on the grassy knoll.” James nodded morosely. “Well, that would give the conspiracy nuts a hard-on, wouldn’t it?” James lifted his eyes and speared Stark with a withering gaze. “Well, check off one more history mystery. Thing is, what you said about his last moments? He felt guilty for not trying harder. I know I would. And that’s a debt I need to pay.”

“Seriously, you fix my arm, you let me live in your house when I’m batshit crazy, and even now? On top of me killing your parents? Don’t think there was ever a debt.”

“You got your issues, I got mine. Speaking of having stuff, this crate’s yours. Dad collected everything that wasn’t nailed down of yours and Rogers’ when the SSR moved back stateside. Steve looked through it, figured you’d want it.” Stark nudged the wooden crate forward with his foot, and James grabbed it with his prosthetic hand, pulled it closer, and peered curiously inside.

“Oh,” he breathed, lifting out the clothing and seeing the sheaf of envelopes tied off below. “My letters. From Mom, my sisters. I never thought I’d see them again.” His hand trembled as he reached for the photo with his family and Steve, and tears pricked at his eyes. The noise that ripped out of him was somewhere between a squeak and a sob as his fingers gently traced the outlines of the faces he’d loved so well and lost so long ago. The memory came back to him forcefully.

“Give off, Bucky! Steve’s my boyfriend! We’re gonna get married someday!” Becky shoved at James’s shoulder to push him away so she could wind herself around Steve’s arm. The punk was just giggling over Becky’s attentions, and grinned stupidly when James’s twelve-year-old sister scored control of Steve’s arm and rested her head against Steve’s shoulder, smiling up at him. “See, we fit together perfect!”

“Becky, pretty sure you’re gonna be taller’n’me by next month,” Steve said fondly, patting the hand gripped possessively around his bicep.

“I won’t ever wear high heels so I’ll never be taller,” Becky promised, tightening her hold. “You’ll see!”

“And I’ll be maid of honor!” Tory – Victoria – cried excitedly.
“Nuh-uh! I’ll be!” Lydie countered. The two middle girls at eight and ten years old, started fighting, punching and kicking so they dropped to the ground, rolling around in the dirt, quickly threatening the integrity of their Sunday frocks.

“James?” Mom prompted, and he slid away to lift both girls up by the scruff to hand them to their mother, who chastised them gently, dusting them off and rearranging their pretty dresses.

Picture day was already out of control, and the camera wasn’t even set-up yet! Dad was trying to organize the Brownie, fumbling with the tripod so he could stabilize the picture. That was Mom’s idea, because Dad’s hands always shook whenever he tried to take a shot. It was also Mom’s idea to have the neighbor, Mr. Hawkins, take the actual picture. You know – so they’d actually have a picture at the end of the day.

In the meantime, James’s youngest sister, Cindy, had clamped onto Steve’s lower leg, smearing jam all over his best trousers, announcing that Steve was going to wait for her to grow up and marry her. Mom chuckled and nodded toward Dad, who scooped up the four-year-old to wipe her hands and face. Steve promised he’d think about Cindy’s proposal, which caused Becky to stick out her tongue at Steve.

Steve promised he’d think about Cindy’s proposal, which caused Becky to stick out her tongue at Steve. She’d have elbowed Steve in the ribs if James hadn’t caught her and given her a warning look.

“Guess you’re stuck with the Barnes clan for life, punk,” James told Steve, wrapping an arm around Steve’s neck and pulling him close so he could knuckle his hair. Steve’s arms went round James’s waist and hugged him briefly.

“No place I’d rather be, jerk,” and then he let go of James to hug Cindy, face and hands now free of sticky jam. He hoisted her up to sit on his hip, grinning. He took a moment to squeeze Becky’s shoulder and smile at her, too, winning her heart back in an instant. All the Barnes girls were in love with Steve, which was as it should be.

James didn’t let go of his hold on Steve’s narrow shoulders until Mom instructed him to gather his sisters and line them up, Becky in front of him, Tory and Lydie in front of Steve. Steve handed Cindy over to Dad, and Mom crowded in. They all shouted “cheese” and the world was suddenly swallowed in a flash.

James could still smell the clean scent of Steve’s soap, the floral of Mom’s perfume, and the spice of Dad’s aftershave. And the strawberry jam Cindy had nearly bathed in. Lemon and lavender notes from his other sisters. And the comforting odor of bay rum on James’s own clean shaven cheeks. A smile tugged at his lips with the pure sensory joy of the memory. “Becky was determined she was gonna marry Steve when this picture was taken. And Tory and Lydie were arm-wrestling over who would be maid of honor. Cindy just said Becky had it wrong, and Steve was gonna wait for her.” This time a shuddering sob wracked him. “I missed them all. All their weddings, their birthdays, their … their funerals.” He sighed deeply and looked up at Stark with a half-smile. “Thank you for this. At least this way I can remember what they looked like when we were all happy.”

Stark had seated himself and looked across the living room at James with sad eyes. “You’re lucky. You had happy.”

“You didn’t?”

“You knew Howard. Imagine him as a father.”

James looked at Stark for a long moment, then shook his head. “Sorry.” Then James spied another photograph tucked into the pile of letters, and he teased it out curiously. It was him and Steve,
Steve’s birthday, Coney Island stretched behind them. And he had his arm slung round Steve’s shoulders, squeezing him tight while he squashed his lips against Steve’s temple, Steve half grimacing, half grinning as they mugged for the camera.

*Oh.*

He remembered that day, the way he felt, bursting with light and heat and something he couldn’t identify, and all of it swirled around that scrappy kid he’d been so proud to call friend.

He remembered the feel of Steve’s skin against his lips, the way he fit just right under his arm, shoulder tucked up into his armpit, the scent of his hair, freshly washed and sun-dried, the smell of the ocean and the crowd and the day burning hot and the giddy, bubbling way he felt, like a soda shook and shook and shook until it was ready to burst.

He felt Stark’s hands gently close over his, tugging at the photograph gripped in his flesh hand. “I didn’t realize that made its way into your box. Steve wanted that –“

“No.”

“But – look, if you’re gonna throw darts at it or deface it in some way –“

“No.”

“Barnes, there aren’t a lot of photos left from that time, and none from before the serum outside a couple of Army shots –“

“I want to keep it. I remember. I remember this day. *I need this.*”

Stark settled back on the couch opposite James and looked at him seriously. “Only if you promise not to damage or lose the photo in any way. We should scan that, preserve it –“

“I can do that. I can upload it to your server, is that okay?“

“Yeah, yeah that works. I thought you hated Steve –“

“I thought so, too. But my memories are telling me different. I’m still piecing it together, but this, this helps. Don’t tell him. I can’t make any promises. I just … I just need to figure things out.”

“Okay. Y’know, I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but maybe I can help you. I’m like Steve – bisexual. I might be able to answer questions, help you understand where he’s coming from –“

“I, uh … maybe. You like guys and dames? Can’t make up your mind?“

“Not like that. More like I’ve always been open to a pretty face, a nice ass, a kind soul, didn’t matter whether it was male or female or somewhere else on the spectrum. It’s the person inside, ultimately. Sometimes you find a piece of what you’re looking for in a person, and you can’t be held back by the package. Pepper’s the only person who made me feel complete. She had all the pieces that I was missing.”

“And you think that’s what Steve’s looking for? Rogers, I mean.”

“I know which Steve. And yeah. It’s all anyone’s looking for, really. A chance to be whole.”

&&&

Pepper had sent out an alert that the camera crew from ABC would be on the entertainment floor,
so everyone but Steve gave it a miss that afternoon. That ensured no accidental cameos, and left the floor open for the crew to poke around without actually eclipsing anyone’s private space.

Cantwell’s team took some generic footage of Steve’s workspace, and of Steve working on the drawings, then some establishing shots out the windows of the community level. Steve observed them closely, and when they were done, asked to see the dailies, to ensure there were no unauthorized images in the footage they’d shot.

They set the equipment up on the table, once Steve cleared a large enough spot. He and Cantwell sat down and reviewed the playback. Watching himself work at the table in the video, Steve had to laugh, and Cantwell tilted his head to watch him. “Most people don’t laugh the first time they see themselves in playback.”

“Not the first time I’ve seen myself in playback – remember, I did a bunch of highly forgettable films back in the 1940s. No, I’m laughing at how serious I look – no wonder my friends all think I don’t have a sense of humor,” he gestured at his image on the screen.

“Huh. Most people complain that they look too fat.”

“Nah, lookin’ fat’s never been an issue for me. Always been too skinny. And since the serum, I burn calories so fast, I can’t keep myself fed enough. Tony says the Tower food budget quadrupled when I moved in. So naturally, he gives me a hard time about contributing, but I get him in other ways.”

“Hmm,” Evan said with a faint smile. “So foodie places that emphasize style over portion size aren’t your thing.”

Steve shook his head, chuckling. “Well, for atmosphere, maybe, but I’m happier with a burger joint or a breakfast-all-day kind of place.” The playback showed the view through the Tower, and Steve narrowed his eyes, peering closely at the images. The view really was spectacular from the Tower. “You don’t suppose people are going to feel alienated? Me living in a tower? Y’know it’s more for security than anything else.”

“Could go either way. Your demo is likely to find it romantic. Lonely prince stuck in a tower, pining for his dream date.” Evan crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Steve, abandoning any pretense that he was watching the video playback. “And where would this dream date go next, hmm?”

“Dream date? Oh. Dunno. What would you suggest?” Steve replied, taking a deep breath and turning in his chair to face Evan.

“Pick one: ballet, movie, baseball game.”


“Mmm, that’s a hard one. I love film, but I tend to be critical. It being my field, after all. You pick: scifi, rom-com, uh, thriller.”

“Thriller. Or scifi. I like watching the special effects, trying to figure them out. Like magic tricks when I was a kid.”

“Not rom-coms, huh? Why not?”

“That’s all anyone wants to watch around here, so I’ve hit my quota and then some. Plus the romantic comedies of today aren’t like what I watched as a kid. You’d never see It Happened One
Night being made today. That curtain would never go up! Or Bringing up Baby.”

“Hmm, yeah, that sense of innocence in those early films tends to be lacking. Unless it’s a Disney flick.”

“Ah, I love what they’re doing with animation there. The last few films have been …” Steve sighed with pleasure. “Gorgeous stuff.”

“Yeah,” Eric agreed, watching Steve’s reaction. “Gorgeous.” He chewed his lip for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision. “You like animation,” he said to Steve.

“Love it, actually. It’s a field I would have loved to have gotten into.”

“Well, you’re looking at doing some of that with your film, right? There’s an animation festival in the Village, starts next week. Maybe we could go, take in a couple of films, sit in on some of the talks …?”

“You mean, like a … date?”

“I mean like two colleagues working on a project going to a relevant film festival,” Eric said with a grin. “Seriously, until the Bachelor airs and America finds out who you picked, any employee of Disney that tries to actually date you is likely to get their ass handed to them. Probably with a pink slip. Right now, you’re a hot property – company policy is don’t mess with the property.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we can’t … hang out. If you’d be interested …?”

“Yeah, lemme think about that. So much to be done in the next few weeks before the shooting starts .. yeah. I’ll get back to you next week about it, okay?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Look, I’m sorry – I think you’re amazing and I’d really like to … well. I’d really like to, but there’s a lot riding on your season of the Bachelor. Company’s protective of its brand.”

“S’all right. I’m used to being a commodity. Sold a lotta war bonds back in the day. I get it,” Steve said, the light dimmed in his eyes. “Got what you need?” he asked, rubbing his hands together. Evan nodded. “Great, I’ll see you to the ground floor, and then I need to hunt up Ms. Potts to discuss my social media platform.”

&&&

Steve watched Evan Cantwell and his team leave through the lobby and smiled tightly as Evan turned and sketched a little wave at him.

He’d been immediately attracted to Evan, and it was clear the feeling was mutual, but his contract to do the Bachelor meant that he couldn’t engage in any actual dating outside the show’s official cast until the show had completed recording. When Steve had signed the contract, that had seemed fair and easy; he hadn’t banked on meeting someone who actually sparked a mutual interest, certainly not someone associated with the show. But Evan had made it clear that he wouldn’t be willing to risk anything until Steve’s contractual obligation was complete. Guy wanted to keep his job, after all, and Steve couldn’t blame him for that. Still …

Just Steve’s luck. Definitely a case of timing being everything. And not being on his side at the moment.
But, bright side? He’d met a guy who seemed to be attracted to him, rather than Captain America. And they’d get a chance to work together, so who knows? And he had some great ideas about Steve’s vision for short films, plus he might get two free directors out of the deal. Steve allowed himself a small smile that kept spreading wider as he rode the elevator back to Pepper’s office level.

Pepper’s assistant waved him in as soon as he arrived, and she looked up from her big desk and smiled at him.

“What a good time?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and grinned at her. “’S’all right. They’re gone now – and yes, I checked the footage. Only what we agreed on. You know I’d never want to compromise anyone’s privacy.”

Pepper sighed deeply, toying with a pen on her desk. “But this show is really going to compromise yours. You sure you’re ready for this?”

“As I’ll ever be. It’s not like I had any privacy back with the USO. And it’s too late now – contract’s signed. At least we’re only committed for the pilot, huh?”

“America’s going to love the first bisexual Bachelor, Steve, because America’s going to fall in love with you.”

“Yeah, well, it’ll boost recognition of the stuff I’m trying to accomplish, if nothing else. And that’s what I wanted to discuss with you, if you have a minute.”

“Steve, I always have time for you. You need to decide the name of your YouTube channel so Legal can lock it down.”

“Steve Rogers’s Channel,” Steve said simply.

“Not Captain America?”

“Nope. Steve Rogers. Same for Facebook, Vine, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter – can you think of anything else?”

“My assistant suggested you should get a deviantArt account, too.”

“Okay, that sounds intriguing.”

“And something called ‘Society6’ – apparently it’s a shopping site for prints from deviantArt and other art sites.”

“Sell prints, huh? Hmm. That could be useful. Because in addition to these films, and these campaigns, there’s something else I want to look into.”

Pepper turned her head slightly and arched an eyebrow encouragingly.

“I’m pretty rich, right?”

“Not quite Tony rich, but not far off, yes.”

“Then I’d like to endow a network of safe houses for kids. Not just LGBTQ kids, but kids who need a hand, kids who can’t go home for whatever reason. I want to name them after my Mom – Sarah. She was always willing to lend a helping hand. I want people to remember her.”
“Well that’s wonderful, but that’s a pricy proposition. You’ll be able to get them started, but you’ll need to ensure a stream of incoming capital to keep them afloat.”

“So am I a millionaire or a billionaire?”

“Billionaire. And you know that, Steve. You can’t get away with your ‘I’m a sweet dumb superhero’ act with me. I know better.”

He grinned broadly at her, lopsided and goofy. “And you’re the only one who recognizes that enough to call me on my shit,” he told her, and she stuck out her tongue at him, crossing her eyes. “Nice to have a friend in the Tower who’s not looking to get somethin’ from me.”

“Yes. About that.”

&&&

Damn it, there was another anal vibrator in his mailbox today. That made three in his collection, and this one was the biggest yet. What did they think he was doing with this stuff?

He had two plastic totes full of sex stuff now, from flavored lube to cock rings to anal beads to stuff he still hadn’t figured out how to describe to even look it up on the internet. Enough was enough.

He’d had enough of being sexualized. Of the innuendo. Of people dressing him like he was a big bisexual doll. Of people asking him if he thought that guy was his type, or maybe that one instead? Of people asking if he wanted to slip off with the guy at the bar for a quickie? Or how about a three-way?

And then there was Pepper’s offer.

Oh God.

A menage a trois with Tony Fucking Stark and Pepper Potts.

So Steve wouldn’t be alone. So Steve would know he was loved.

But the fact was, the simple act of offering? He already knew he was loved.

But he’d seen the pain in Pepper’s eyes, thinking she wasn’t enough to satisfy Tony. That she might lose Tony to Steve. And he could see that she’d share Tony because she loved him, but it wasn’t what she wanted. And it tore her up making the offer. That was a wound that was going to need a lot of work on Tony’s part to heal.

The thing he hated the most about it was the idea intrigued him, excited him even, but he knew that he wasn’t ready for a threesome, might never be. And it wasn’t what he wanted. He just wanted a regular, relationship. Well, as as he could get, considering Captain America and all.

And he never wanted to be the cause of that look of pain in Pepper Potts’s eyes again.

So, Steve had kissed her on the cheek and thanked her for her kindness. And gently refused the offer, telling her he was old-fashioned and he wanted the sole attention of one special person.

He’s not built to share.

When Pepper grabbed his hands and pressed her forehead against his, eyes closed and lips smiling, Steve got it. Unlike Tony. Then Pepper surprised him by telling him that if things didn’t work out
with Tony, if Steve didn’t find anyone on his own, he should come back to her. They could be happy together.

And he knew it was true. But it was also true that if he said no today, and went to her later, it would be at the cost of his friendship with Tony. And he realized that was also important to him. When had he and Tony truly become friends? He smiled, recognizing that they really were, in their own odd way.

But it wasn’t just Pepper and Tony. Darcy was constantly making three-way noises at him, and Ian was actually starting to look interested. Natasha was still trying to set him up, only her net was cast wider to encompass both sexes. Clint even offered to accompany him to gay bars – Clint, who’d never suggested anything social before. And when Thor had expressed interest in participating in their gay bar ritual, Steve about blew a blood vessel or five.

Even Banner had gotten in on the act, passing Steve books on tantric sex.

And then there was movie night. Since New Year’s, movie night was always a rom-com with pretty gay boys or wise gay best friends. Like he’d told Evan. Not a single political thriller or sci-fi action movie in the bunch.

He was becoming a Hollywood cliché.

And he really missed action movies. It’s been weeks since he’s seen a good explosion on the big screen. If it weren’t for his Netflix account, he’d’ve lost it a week ago.

It was Miss Congeniality and Miss Congeniality II on tap for tonight. While he loved Sandra Bullock just as much as the next guy, the gay stereotypes in both films are enough to fill any ridiculous quota. He needed to cut the cord.

So, that was how Steve Rogers found himself standing in front of the huge plasma screen (seriously, larger than many multiplexes) in the Avengers’ lounge area, blocking everyone’s view, and earning himself a pelting of buttered popcorn. Clint’s aim, not surprisingly, was flawless, and Steve could feel the butter collecting on his cheeks.

“Put it on pause, for fuck’s sake,” Steve commanded. “I have something I need to talk to you all about.” The sudden silence was gratifying. He could still stun this crowd into muteness just by using the faintest of profanity. Did none of these people ever serve in the military? Did they really believe he was a blushing teenaged girl in some silly sitcom? Clearly they did. His image was in serious need of rehabilitation if his closest friends in this century all thought of him as virginal and bound for the monastery. God help whoever he ended up with – this crew would eat that person alive for deflowering their personal national icon, even though that actually happened a good 80 years earlier. If Evan had thought that the Disney Company could give him a hard time over dating Steve Rogers, he surely hadn’t factored in the Avengers and their friends.

So he had their attention. Tony’s eyebrow was arched expectantly, and Pepper looked braced for impact. Natasha’s face was bland, and Clint’s was mildly annoyed. Darcy was sitting grinning maniacally with her chin balanced on her fist, and beside her, Ian was leaning forward attentively. Thor and Jane hadn’t even noticed he was talking, but that didn’t surprise him. Erik Selvig looked mildly dotty, but that was usual for him – guy was brilliant, no doubt about it, but he was a couple crayons short of a box. Bruce was calm, and Sam looked encouraging, like therapist encouraging. Maria had her usual disbelieving look, so he really couldn’t tell what she was thinking. But then, he never could – she was a consummate spy, after all.
He couldn’t see Bucky’s expression, but he could feel him, his coiled attention, and he willed himself to calm.

“Look guys, I appreciate the support, really I do.” That prompted a general murmur of positive feeling. “But I am more than my dick.”

Well, if he hadn’t had their undivided attention before, he did now. He felt more than he saw Bucky’s head snap up, his eyes widen and lock on Steve. Okay.

Pepper was the first to recover. “Steve, I –“

“I appreciate everyone’s attention to my penis, honestly I do, but there is more to my life that getting laid. A lot more. There always has been. I have more than enough flavored lube, textured condoms, books on dating, sex guides, and a wide variety of sex toys than I will ever need. Seriously, enough is enough.”

“Ooh! Ooh! When are you going to do show and tell?” Darcy called out with her characteristic cackle.

“Darcy!” Jane admonished.

“What is this ‘show and tell’?” Thor asked curiously. “Is there revelry involved?”

“Probably not,” Steve countered, wresting control of the conversation again. “So Clint, I’d love to go to a bar with you, but it doesn’t have to be a gay one – how about one with good craft beer on tap and a decent dart board? Maybe a live band? Karaoke, even?” Clint shrugged non-committally in reply, but his face betrayed his genuine interest.

“And Darcy? I do appreciate the, um, sacrifice you’re willing to make,” she cackled again at that, smacking Ian on the back, “but I’m a one person kind of guy. Call me old-fashioned, call me boring, call me vanilla, but I want to be one person’s special fella, and I want one person to hold at night. No matter what shape that person takes.” He glanced meaningfully at Pepper, who smiled at him and nodded.

Tony’s eyes tracked the exchange, and he pulled Pepper closer to kissed her hair. She smiled, a genuine smile that lit her eyes. Okay. They were back on track. Steve couldn’t help the flash of smile he gave them both before he reined it back in to continue on.

“But all of this doesn’t define me. My whole existence isn’t focused on this,” he gestured at his groin with both hands. “Doesn’t anybody wanna go to a museum with me, or take a road trip to Cooperstown with me, or even just spend an evening playing Monopoly or some other board game? Or poker? Even pinochle? I don’t want to be all about my looks and clubs and what kind of guy or gal makes me hard. You people are my friends – can’t you see that?” There was a susurrate undercurrent of agreement from the group, whose collective attention was now riveted to Steve.

“Just tell stupid jokes, they don’t have to be dripping with innuendo – that’s what we have Tony for, after all.” That got a rippling chuckle, and Tony raised both fists in the air triumphantly in a victory symbol.

“So, you know, it’s okay to treat me like I’m more than my cock, okay? Y’know, treat me like you did before you knew I actually knew what sex is and what parts go where, okay?” A mutter of “okay” circulated through the group. “’Cos you know, the only that’s changed is your perception of me – I’m the same person I always was. I have the same preferences and experience and hopes and dreams that I had before New Year’s Eve. Maybe I’m a little more open about some stuff, but
fundamentally, I’m still the same me you knew before the ball dropped. So can we go back to you treating me like you did in 2014?” Again, a murmur of assent cycled through the room. “And that goes for you, too, Tall, Dark, and Sulking in the shadows!” Steve called out deliberately to Bucky, but he schooled himself not to look. He was still there, anyway. That was progress.

“Okay, so how about we watch something with explosions?” Clint suggested with a grin.

“After SING,” Natasha countered.

“SING?” Sam repeated.

“Solar plexus, instep, neck, groin – Gracie’s talent,” Natasha provided helpfully. “SING.”

“Oh yeah. I love that scene!” Sam exclaimed, earning him a fond look from Natasha, and an amused arch of Maria Hill’s eyebrow.

“You okay with explosions, Bruce?” Steve asked gently.

“Yeah, sure. Place was getting kind of boring anyway. I could watch some stuff blow up. So long as it’s not Harlem, okay?”

Clint grinned wider. “I can work with that. Cool, man?” he directed to Steve.

“Cool,” Steve replied with an answering grin.

“Independence Day it is! After SING …” Clint amended with an affectionate grin toward Natasha.

“Well, if we’re watching Hollywood explosions, I need a drink. They’re just too unrealistic,” Natasha announced, hauling herself up from the dogpile that was the couch. As she sidled past Steve, he arched a warning eyebrow at her. “Chill, Rogers,” she told him softly. “I’m just going to get a drink. I promise no more dating advice. Until you start shooting the Bachelor. Then all bets are off.”

“Fair enough,” he told her with an affectionate smile.

“And by the way? He’s still there, and he was paying attention.”

&&&

That little fucker.

Claiming to be the same guy he was before the ball dropped … yeah, right.

But.

Was that true? He’d said as much that night, the night they’d fought, the night James had gone on the offensive. Could it really be true, that nothing had changed except the perception of Steve?

Could it really be that simple?

Could he salvage the whole thing just by admitting he’d been perceiving wrong?

But had he? That was the core question. He knew he could stop this simply by apologizing. Steve would accept it, and they’d move on. But he couldn’t do it, not if he didn’t mean it.

Ever since Sam had turned him on to learning about the history of the past 70 years, understanding
the social, political and yes, sexual changes in the culture, he’d been trying to find a way back. And
yet it remained tantalizing outside his grasp. He wasn’t there yet. He couldn’t guarantee he’d ever
be. He still didn’t understand why he was so angry in the first place.

If he couldn’t let go, there was no hope.

Fact was, he wanted to fix this. That was a revelation in itself. He didn’t want to spend the rest of
his life at odds with Steve Rogers. He just didn’t know how to get there.

The thought left him feeling unmoored, lost, falling. Like that day in the Alps, 70 years ago. Very
much like that day. Falling, losing sight of Steve, screams torn from his chest, fear blossoming
exponentially as the train slipped further and further from sight …

He shook himself. He couldn’t afford to lose himself in that memory.

But there were so many memories floating around his head, flitting just out of his reach. He
glanced over to the couch area, where Steve was standing there talking to Wilson, arm slung round
his shoulders while he laughed at something Maria Hill said. He patted Wilson’s left pec absently,
and Wilson thought nothing of it – in fact, his arm was circling Steve’s waist. Then Hill must have
said something really witty, because Steve let go of Wilson and grabbed Hill by the elbows, both
of them bending over and laughing hysterically at each other. Wilson turned away, scrubbed his
hand over his bearded chin, and crumpled into laughter. That’s when Romanoff and Barton came
over, demanding to be let in on the joke, and Steve backed up, trying to get himself under control,
but dissolving into giggles once more.

A smile twitched at the corner of James’s mouth. He remembered that giggle. He remembered that
sense of humor, and the way that Steve would try to use it to cheer James up when something
made him unhappy. A break-up, a loss in football, hours cut at a job he liked, a dame he liked who
wasn’t interested.

Marylou.

James had told Wilson the bare minimum about the situation, but the fact was, James had been 17,
stupid, and terrified out of his mind.

There’d been no excuse for having sex without protection. They were both in a hurry, both a little
tipsy, off old man Weaver’s moonshine, fresh off the still. Well, the way Steve saw it, they were
both so blind drunk it was shocking they’d even found each other, let alone managed to insert one
part into another.

Funny how that came out equal parts insult and compliment.

It had been ten days since the night he and Marylou Kowalski had risked it all.

“I dunno, Steve. She wasn’t in school today. I dunno what to think.”

“Maybe you think too much, Buck. Ain’t no use borrowin’ trouble ‘til you know for sure.”

“Jesus, Steve, I’m only 17. I ain’t fit to be nobody’s father. Ma and Dad’ll kill me if they find out.”

“Shit, Buck, you know that ain’t true. Sure, your Dad might be angry at first, but your Ma wouldn’t
let anything happen to you. And you know her – she’d as soon take the baby in and raise it as her
own. No way are they letting you face this alone. And y’got me, y’jerk.”

They were sitting together on the sofa in Steve’s apartment, James folding in on himself in misery,
Steve’s hands wrapped around his bicep trying to pull him out of himself. Steve’s Ma was at work at the hospital, taking a night shift for the extra money, and they had the place to themselves. No need to censor their conversation, a small mercy in a sea of despair.

“Gonna be my babysitter, Steve? I’m gonna have to get a job, a good payin’ job if I’m gonna support a wife and kid. And Marylou has plans, y’know. She wants to go to college, and she’s got a good shot at a scholarship.”

“Guess I could do that. But if she’s goin’ t’college, where’s she goin’? Would you have to move?”

“Hell, no. I ain’t leavin’ here. Ah, shit, Steve … what’m I gonna do?” James demanding, head sinking into his hands. He felt sick and frightened and so full of tears he was afraid once he started, he might never stop. Not ever. The idea of leaving Brooklyn, leaving Steve, his folks, his sisters … no way.

A soft rap at the door broke through the haze, and James lifted his head, frowning. “You expectin’ somebody, Steve?”

“Nah, Ma’s at work, and nobody else comes over this late at night. I’ll see who it Is – you okay?” Steve let go of his arm, and James immediately felt bereft of that small contact, that anchor. He nodded to Steve, silently encouraged him to find out who was at the door.

It was Marylou. She looked a little wild, curly dark hair fighting its way out of the bow at the crown of her head, sweater askew like it had been hastily thrown on. Her dress was pretty, a flowered thing with a cinched waist and a butterfly collar. Her face was closed, and he couldn’t read the expression there – an end to everything he’d known, or a reprieve? Her face was uncommunicative stone.

“Your folks said you were over here,” she announced, brushing past Steve to confront James on the couch. He awkwardly got to his feet, right hand worrying the left as he nodded a greeting.

“I don’t see any homework,” she added, eyes narrowed and voice accusatory.

“Hadn’t started yet,” Steve interjected, as he closed the door quietly and came over to join them. “I guess you got a lot to talk about. I’ll just go –“ he started to exit the living room for his bedroom, but James’s hand shot out and grabbed Steve by the wrist.

“No. Stay.”

“This is private, James,” Marylou pointed out. Perhaps reasonably, but James couldn’t stand the idea of facing this end to his childhood without Steve present.

“Buck, I should really go, let you both have some privacy –“

“Stay,” James said softly, his eyes never leaving Marylou’s. “So?” he prompted.

“You’re off the hook,” she said flatly. “I was home with cramps today. Bad. It started. I ain’t pregnant.”

James stood there staring at her for a long moment, then he heard Steve say, “That’s great news, Marylou. I’m sure you’re relieved.”

“What d’you know about it? You told him? Who else you tell, James?”

“Not a damn soul,” James retorted. “I’d never tell. I ain’t that kinda guy.”
Boy who brags about sleepin’ around, he’s a hero to other boys. Careless word can ruin a girl’s reputation, ruin her life – “

“I didn’t tell no one but Steve. And Steve’s a real gentleman – he’d never gossip about a girl.”

“Not sure about no gentleman, but Buck’s right, I’d never say or do anything to hurt you, Marylou. You have my word.”

“Like anybody’d listen to you,” Marylou lashed out. “You ain’t nobody, Steve Rogers. You don’t count.”

“Why, you –“ James started, but Steve grabbed him by the forearm and hauled him back.

“It’s okay, Buck. You’re both a little worked up, it’s nothin’. Why don’t you see Marylou home, huh? Make sure she gets home safe, right?”

“I can see myself home. Wouldn’t want to interrupt anythin’,” she added with a sneer, her eyes raking up and down James and lingering where Steve’s hands held him back. “I won’t say nothin’ either. I was never here. We never did nothin’. Right, James?”

“Right,” he agreed readily, eager to see the last of her. He felt sick at the thought that he might have been stuck with this harridan the rest of his life. Steve looked up at him, and apparently found what he was looking for, because he let go of James’s arms and followed Marylou to the door.

“Good night, Marylou. I’m glad it worked out for you. Be safe,” he told her as she went out the door. She just glanced over her shoulder at James, her face angry, and when her eyes lit on Steve, she just sniffed and stalked away. Steve stood there for a moment watching her go, then he closed the door gently, turned and rested his back against the door.

“It’s okay, Buck. You’re okay.”

“Christ, Steve, that was a close call! What a bitch!”

“Nah. Just a scared girl who had an awful upset. I don’t take offense. I bet if you try to talk to her at school tomorrow, she’ll be fine.”

“Nah. She ain’t worth my time, Steve. Not with a cussed attitude like that. You never done nothin’ to her – why’d she have to be so mean?”

“Cos I was there, I guess. I think she had to take it out on somebody. You were scared – imagine how she must’ve felt, Buck. You coulda been a real creep, walked away, not taken responsibility. But she’d still be stuck, either way. She had to be terrified out of her mind, Buck.”

“Mebbe. I can’t believe you can see her side when she was such a shit to you.” Steve just shrugged, a little half-smile on his lips. “It’s done now, though,” James added, and that’s when the shakes snuck up on him, rattling him all over. The look of alarm on Steve’s face was enough to tell James he looked a sight.

And then Steve crossed the room and reached out to hug James. It was awkward, the height difference, but Steve circled James’s waist and James melted into an embrace around Steve’s shoulders, crying into his hair and his shirt, fingers bunching the cheap fabric. “God, Steve, I was so scared!” He slumped down on the couch, dragging Steve with him.

“I know, Buck, I know,” he murmured, rubbing soothing circles on James’s back, just like James did for him when his asthma kicked up. “It’s okay. Y’just gotta be careful in future. Y’don’t wanna
take risks. Y’gotta future ahead a’you. You’ll be okay.”

Circled by those skinny arms, comforted by those slender fingers and cool hands, lulled by that deep voice, James believed. He needed to hear Steve tell him it would be okay. James believed because he needed to believe. James believed because Steve never lied to him. Steve would never lie to him.

Was that still true?

He hadn’t told James about how he felt about … people. But was that lying?

Was not telling something private lying? Or just protecting yourself?

Could he still trust Steve to not lie to him?

Did he trust Steve?

James thought that maybe … maybe he did. But equally, it was clear that Steve didn’t trust James the same way.

Because if the Steve that liked both men and women was the Steve he’d known all along, Steve had never felt he could be honest with James, he’d always held a part of himself back.

And that thought no longer made James angry. It made him sad.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm going to take a day or so before I start working on the next chapter, Fever. In which filming happens. And Steve discovers a new passion. Expect it in a week or two.

Remember - comments inspire me to write!
Chapter Summary

Steve discovers modern animation, Bucky discovers modern dance moves, Tony gets a new best thing in the world, and Sam just goes with the flow.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to update! Every time I think I know where this story is going, the boys have something to say.

This was a fun chapter to write. Hope you enjoy!

20Oct14 - Made some quick edits to this section, fixing some incorrect word choices, attribution, added a few phrases and sentences mostly in the section starting after the Avengers walk into a bar ... nothing major changed, just did another editing pass.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 7: Fever

“Hi, Steve,” Pepper Potts greeted sweetly, arms clasped around her ever present clipboard and documents.

“Hey, morning Pepper. How are you today?” Steve asked, looking up from his work at the dining room table and smiling brightly at her.

“Out of patience,” she replied no less sweetly, head tilted expectantly as she smiled down on him.

“Oh,” gosh, I’m sorry, Pep. I was just finishing up some details –”

“Steve, there will always be details. That’s why I got you that –“ she pointed toward the windows, where something sat under a cloth drape. She nodded for him to go check it out. He got up without breaking his gaze with her, and moved away several feet before he turned his attention toward his destination.

She followed sedately, heels clicking across the hardwood floor as Steve trotted over to the dropcloth covered object. Curiously, he snagged two fistfuls of the drape, and grinned at her as he pulled it off with a flourish, magician style.

“A drawing table! Oh, and a utility cart! Natural light lamp? Pepper, these are awesome! Omigosh,
is that an ultrasonic cleaner? And pens? Oh, Pep,” he breathed excitedly.

“The light is even better here. And when you’re ready to return to your apartment, you can move all this down there. But in the meantime, I get my dining room table back. And now I can plan that dinner party,” she announced simply, grinning at him.

He grinned back, and leaned over and kissed her cheek. “You’re the best,” he told her and she patted his shoulder.

“I know. Now, when you meet with your filmmakers, you’ve got conference room B on the third floor. That’s yours, signed out to you for the next month, okay? So, no more commandeering my dining room table anymore?”

“No more commandeering,” Steve agreed, still grinning. He reached out and snagged her hand as she started to go. “So, we’re okay, right?”

“We’re more than okay, Steve,” she told him warmly, reaching up and touching his cheek gently with the tips of her fingers.

“And Tony?”

“Very attentive,” she admitted with a widening smile as she nodded appreciatively. “Your speech was … inspiring.”

“I want what’s best for you, Pepper.”

“I know. I want what’s best for you, too. Which is why I will be supervising the selection of your dates for The Bachelor.”

“Ugh,” Steve groaned. “And Tony’s gonna help?”

“Not if I can help it, no. Natasha, maybe, if she behaves herself. But Steve, I know you’re not looking for someone simply pretty or flashy. Certainly not trashy.” They both chuckled over that – it’s nearly guaranteed that’s what he’d end up with Tony doing the selection, at least one or two for a laugh. “I know you’re looking for someone strong, with an inner beauty, someone who can be a partner for you, not just a … well, a good lay.”

“Y’know, that speech I made last night? Well, I wouldn’t say no to someone beautiful-minded and pretty and a good lay …”

“Steve!”

“Remember, 97, not dead.” He giggled and circled her waist with his hands, planting a chaste kiss on her forehead. “Miss Potts, I trust you. For the first time, I’m not so nervous about this whole thing. Thank you.”

“Well, good,” she said, patting his chest above the heart lightly. “Now clean up my dining room. I have a dinner party to plan, and some matchmaking to do. Oh, yes, and I also need to spend some time running one of the largest companies on the planet.”

“Yeah, sorry about that –“

“Who knew you coming out would turn into a full time job for me?” She shook her head and kissed him on the cheek. “Now. Stuff. Gone!”
Steve wasn’t the only one to be gifted with new furniture that day. James awoke to find an envelope slid under his door that morning, with his name written in a curling script. He opened the envelope curiously, to find a note from Pepper informing him that she’d had his stacks of books, magazines, and papers organized in a desk with a small bookcase, and that he’d be able to dock either his laptop, StarkPad or both in the desk whenever he used it. Implicit in the note was her expectation that he would contain himself to the desk and bookcase, dammit. He shifted his eyes from one side to the other, puzzling over this strange note.

Gifts?

What was the protocol, was he supposed to get her a present now? What did you get the woman who controlled one of the most powerful companies on the planet – and Tony Stark?

He was relieved to find a postscript on the back side of the note.

“I’m trying to organize our living space. This is as much a gift for me as it is for you. Keep your work area tidy, that’s all I ask. P."

So. Not so implicit. Just more polite. He grinned to himself. That he could do.

When James arrived at his new desk, he was surprised to find that it not only included a docking station, it also boasted a 32 inch flat screen monitor, and a color printer all in one. Including a scanner. He still owed Stark scans of those photographs. The photographs of him and Steve. They were back in his rooms, so he dropped his stuff off and ran back down to get the photos before the communal area filled up with curious gawkers.

He dashed down the stairs and dug out the photos, and vaulted up the stairs two at a time. A quick scan of the seating area and the dining room table confirmed the room was still empty, so he dropped into the seat at his new desk and started scanning the pictures, pleased to see there was a decent photo manipulation software on the laptop so he could enhance and clean up the scans.

Steve was happily trying out all the new toys Pepper had provided with the drawing table, feeling more like a kid than he ever remembered feeling when he actually was a kid. He glanced up when he heard a sound across the room, and saw Bucky cross the space and discover a desk that no doubt Pepper had set up just for him. Steve had to stifle a giggle at the thought of Pepper sitting up at night plotting furniture wars against the encroachment of soldiers out of time and their stuff. He had to admit that between his art projects and Buck’s growing book collection, they’d pretty much taken over the common area of the Tower. Trust Pepper to take back her house in the nicest way possible.

Bucky disappeared back through the stairwell, and Steve went back to work, shrugging. He was tightening up some of the drawings, making sure they were clean, before he met with the NYU students to lock down his PSA and short film. Heck, he was just enjoying tinkering with them. It had been a long time since he’d had the chance to really enjoy his art. Not since Pearl Harbor. Not since war had broken out in Europe. He’d kept at it after Hitler had invaded Poland, but his heart hadn’t been in it, not like before. Even with everything that had gone down with Bucky, Steve found that he’d rediscovered his joy in art. And tonight he had tickets for the animation festival. Whether he went with Evan or not, it didn’t matter. He was looking forward to the films
themselves, the opportunity to view and discuss them with fellow animation fans.

He smiled to himself as he bent over another piece, emphasizing the edges and touching up the shading. He didn’t notice at first when Buck came back, surreptitiously slipping back to his desk, where he started working on the computer. But when Steve glanced up again later, his breath caught. On that big screen monitor Pepper had provided, he could see the picture of him and Bucky from his 18th birthday. Big as life. Bigger.

His breath caught, and he had to swallow a little whimper.

How had he gotten that one? Only the photo of his family was supposed to go to him – that one was his, Steve’s. He felt a stab of betrayal. That was his memory, his special birthday present. But as he watched, tears pricking at his eyes, he saw what Bucky was doing – he’d apparently scanned the photo and was retouching it on the computer. And at one point, Steve saw Bucky’s hand lift and his index finger press against the screen, touching the point where Bucky’s lips pressed against Steve’s temple, tracing the line of … his face? And trailed down to rest over his left pectoral in the photograph on the screen, over his heart. Just like Bucky always used to do, rest his hand over Steve’s heart to feel it beating, to reassure himself that it still beat strong enough to keep him alive.

It was a habit Steve had picked up by accident, resting his hand on the left pectoral of people when he spoke to them, testing for a heartbeat. Okay, men, he didn’t dare do it to a woman, that would be rude. Although, sometimes his hand would move of its own volition it seemed, and he had to catch himself. God forbid Captain America copped a feel, even by accident! He’d be mortified. But it had been Buck who’d started it, a nervous tic when Steve’s body could fail him at any time.

And Buck’s hand shook a little as he pulled it away from the screen, glancing over his shoulder. To see if anyone saw him? Steve was glad that he was off to the side – Bucky would have to make an effort to see him where he sat now, enjoying the play of natural light through the floor to ceiling windows.

Steve’s hands shook too with the realization that it wasn’t over. Bucky still felt something for him. Something that wasn’t hate. There was hope that their friendship could be repaired, salvaged. He just had to give him time. Steve could be patient.

And hope that somehow, that photo found its way back to him. Even if it hadn’t meant anything to Bucky, even though the kiss was just on his temple, it had been the most important kiss of Steve’s life. It had been Bucky.

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“So. Dude,” Clint greeted, dropping onto the sofa closest to James’s new desk in the common room. “Looks like you’re working on your doctorate.”

“Not yet – need my bachelor’s first,” James replied absently, continuing to type on his laptop, a pen captured between his teeth.

“What, seriously? You’re a college student?”

James looked up and smiled slightly. “Working with Wilson to get into an online program, yeah.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. We got a scholar amongst us.”

“Couldn’t you tell?” James picked up Barton’s grin and returned it, palms outstretched to embrace his desk and bookcase laden with books, magazines, and brand new office equipment.
“Yeah, but I thought all that was so you could understand Steve – ah, y’know, historical context and all that shit.”


Clint snorted at that. “Right. I’m good with it.” At Barnes’s disapproving eyebrow, Barton chuckled and added, “Seriously, dude, it makes Stark happy to have all his buddies in one place. Narrows the security net, and makes it easier to point us when there’s an emergency. And with SHIELD out of the game, don’t have a secure location of my own anymore. Like I said, I’m good with it.”

“Focus all assets in one location. Simple strike to take ‘em all out with one offensive.”

“Offensive’d have to be pretty fuckin’ good to take us all out. Not saying it’s impossible. But we got a god and a Hulk. Not to mention you and Cap, me and Nat. Stark himself. And Pepper is pretty fucking scary when she gets heated up. None of us is easy to kill.”

“Kill, no. There are worse things than dead.”

It was a loaded statement if ever there was one, but James was calm about it. It was a statement of fact. But Clint was uncomfortable. “Hey, man, I’m sorry – didn’t mean to bring up crap memories.”

“Sometimes crap memories are the only memories I can rely on. Look, why’d y’stop by? Got an essay I gotta write for a college application.”

“Shit, you really are serious about this education shit, aren’t you? Nah, I stopped by to see if you wanna go to the shooting range with me. Gets boring by myself.”

“Thought Nat did the firing range with you.”

“Pistols, yeah. No fun in that. She’s shit with a rifle, and she won’t touch a bow. Nah, need somebody with an eye for distance.”

James’s eyebrow arched in surprise. It had been a while since anyone has invited him to do something one on one. Other than Wilson. Wilson had been pretty consistent. Group, lunch, group, lunch. But those lunches were one on one, and the drives when they got stuck in traffic were, too. They felt more like therapy sessions than social things. Certainly not what he’d call fun. But to do something actually fun? Nope, that hadn’t happened in weeks, and never with Barton. James was intrigued. “Yeah, sure. Wouldn’t mind some competition.”

“Competition? Hah. Admiration society, son. I need somebody who can appreciate how awesome I am.”

“Like that’s gonna happen. Gimme 20, so I can finish this and I’ll meet you at the range. See if you can keep up, old man.”

“Who you callin’ old, fossil boy?”

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“So, I was thinkin’,” Sam announced, crowding up against Natasha on the couch a little while later. Barton and Barnes were off the floor, and Sam was pleased that Barton had invited Barnes to the range without being prompted.
“Bad mix, you and thought,” Natasha commented, touching her finger to her tongue, then using the finger to turn the page of her book. She didn’t look up from the page, simply continued reading.

“No, seriously. When’s the last time this crew got out of your not so ivory tower, hmm?” Sam pressed, jostling her shoulder with his.

With a sigh, she put down her book in her lap and twisted to look at him. “You got something in mind, Wilson. You’re crap at subterfuge – come right out with it.”

“Let’s all go to the local bar.”

“Seriously, you want to take Thor, Stark and Barnes, not to mention Barton, to a bar?” Natasha scoffed. Her fingers inched back toward the book.

“Wanna get Barnes out of an environment where everyone’s judgin’ him. Now, I know you’re all tryin’ but let’s face it – everybody’s on Team Steve. I checked with his therapist, and she says Barnes is stable at this point. Nightmares are a part of recovery – he might never get over those completely. Hell, I haven’t. He’s shown no signs of dissociation for months, no indication of substance abuse – weaning off those drugs Hydra had him on don’t count, they weren’t consensual. And he has the occasional beer here in the Tower. We go to a diner after group – and he’s actually participating in group now. He’s handling all of this really well. My assessment is the risk is low.”

She laid her hand on the book cover and gripped the book tightly. “Low. To take a previously brainwashed ex-assassin to the local dive? That’s a lot of sensory input –“

“You handle it okay – I’ve seen you. And don’t tell me it’s not comparable. And he handles movie night just fine – ain’t nothin’ more overloadin’ than watchin’ movies with Barton in full throat.”

That made her relax a little, and she shrugged slightly. “True.”

“Relax, we got this,” Sam told her grinning, turning away and flopping back on the sofa.

“We? Speak for yourself birdman. Barnes cracks and takes out Manhattan, it’s all on you.”

&&&

Sam mentioned the idea to the others before broaching it with Barnes. Thor was enthusiastic; he liked public Midgard drinking establishments, and enjoyed carrying his friend Erik home from them. Barton was also on-board, talking excitedly about his shooting range experience with Barnes. It was the first time he’d gone one on one with Barnes in a long-distance scenario, and Barton was so jazzed from the experience, he was literally vibrating. Or it could have been too much caffeine.

Everyone was willing with some degree of interest, except for Stark, who made noises about importing the bar into the Tower. He was even willing to import patrons, until Sam explained, slowly and for the third time, with commentary from Pepper, that the point of the exercise was getting Barnes through the exit door and out into the world beyond.

Eventually, Tony admitted he’d be down for it, provided he didn’t actually have to touch any of the unwashed. Pepper told her she’d arrange for people for that, and Tony grinned a conspiratorial grin with her. Fact was, Tony had no problem about public bars, and had a few favorites dotted through Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs. They all were willing to put the drink on the bar so he could pick it up on his own, rather than insist on handing it to him. He, in turn, tipped very well.
Finally, with the team lined up, Sam asked Barnes. He’d showered after the session with Barton, and was freshly washed with damp hair and clean clothes, back at his desk, polishing off his college entrance essay. It was kinda pathetic, really, how much the dude’s face lit up and then immediate shut down when Sam asked him. “Nah. I mean, won’t St – Rogers be there too?”


He knew that Barnes found the Asgardian to be highly amusing, and Thor had an endless capacity for non-judgmental acceptance and enthusiasm. If he weren’t a, well, god, he’d make a hell of a therapist.

A grin burst across Barnes’s face, a rare enough sight these days that Sam felt warmed from his core to his extremities. Warmed by the confirmation that this was a hella good idea.

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Art Cummings was a guy with big dreams. And equally big fantasies. Big dreams meant he aimed high, worked hard, and drove himself to achieve more and greater each time he started a new project. Big dreams meant he didn’t listen to the small voices telling him he wasn’t good enough or that so-and-so was just a little bit better. Big dreams meant he never stopped trying, never stopped reaching.

He was a realist about the fantasies, however. He could look himself in the mirror and see his own face looking back, long, hawkish nose, lips a little too full, hazel eyes masked by the tinted lenses of his glasses, hair always just this side of unkempt – he just couldn’t be bothered with “product.” His body wasn’t spectacular, but it wasn’t bad, and he took some care in what he put into it – until all night editing sessions robbed him of any nutritional awareness, and he just lived on Red Bull and pizza or whatever was in the editing suite vending machines. But he biked everywhere he went, unless there was a timetable, and then he’d either subway or cab it. He walked a lot. There was a lot of ground to cover in Manhattan. So he was a pretty fit guy. Not bad looking, just not great looking.

And of course, he was gay with an eye for blue-eyed, muscular blonds. Most of the time, they had eyes for someone else.

And he’d had a crush on Captain America since he was five and his Bubie got him his first pair of Captain America footie pajamas.

And his favorite porn was Captain Ameriporn. Because, you know, blue-eyed muscular blonds.

So, yeah, when his proff Evan Cantwell told him he had a chance to do a short film with Captain Fucking America himself, he definitely had to excuse himself after the call to take care of business. Because it wouldn’t do to meet Captain Steve “I’m Bisexual” Rogers with a chub. At least not the first time.

So Art dealt with the problem, showered, pulled out an outfit – shit, who says that? Clothes. He pulled together clothes. Dressed. Looked at himself, and stripped everything off again. Frowned at himself for a good 10 minutes before he dove back into his closet to find some other clothes. Tried those on. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Finally, after an hour of frowning, changing, and worrying, he settled on a checked button down, form-fitting dark jeans, new suede boots, and his good leather jacket. Yeah. Not too flashy, kinda old-fashioned like Cap, but a good color choice. And the boots were waterproofed, so they
wouldn’t dissolve in the New York slush. He wound a colorful knitted scarf around his neck, pulled on his favorite leather gloves, and nodded decisively at himself. He would do.

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Art met Evie Stewart in the lobby of Stark Tower, feeling suddenly much more confident and at ease. They may compete for top honors in their program, but fact was, Evie was Art’s best friend, they had a surprising tendency to bring out the best in each other, and they often talked about their future successes as partners rather than adversaries.

The Coens, the Russos, and the Wachowskis had nothing on Cummings and Stewart. Pity there was no workable mashup of their last names. Stumming or Cewart just didn’t work, nor did Stewings or Cumart (although Art did find that last one pretty funny). Yeah, they were gonna have to stick with their full monikers, like Merchant and Ivory. Could be worse.

Evan met them a few minutes later, and they all went up to meet Captain America – er, Steve Rogers.

And wow. Just wow. The guy was even more gorgeous in person, and so nice! And it became really, really clear in the first few minutes that this guy was really talented. Like, in the wrong business talented. Like, maybe Evie would want to change her plans for who to partner with talented.

After they signed the confidentiality agreements Ms. Potts insisted they had to sign, they got down to business. They went over his ideas, and Art was happy to paw through the storyboards and the artwork, listen to Steve talk with passion about what he wanted to accomplish with the first PSA and the film he’d already started shooting footage for, the web site, the outreach, and Evie and him were just buzzing with the possibilities. He looked over at Evan at one point and mouthed, “Thank you!” and then went back immediately to watching this blond hunk of adorable outline his plans for world domination and the elimination of bullying everywhere. All while being seriously bisexual.

He was so on board. So on board. All aboard the Steve train.

Yeah, Art was really gonna have to learn to rein it in.

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In the end, Evan bailed on them, claiming a late evening confab to go over some breaking news that would have to be the lead in the morning’s broadcast of Good Morning, America. He’d been apologetic and shit, and looked seriously disappointed when Steve agreed so readily to attend the first night of the animation festival with just Art and Evie. Art had a feeling there might have been some tentative date action in the offing there, but since Evan didn’t come right out and say anything, he didn’t feel like he was bound to any kind of bro code regarding the delicious and presumably available Steve Rogers.

Fact was, Art still wasn’t exactly clear on what Evan’s role in all this was. He didn’t have time to work with Steve on all Steve’s projects, and as Evie and Art’s instructor, he’d recommended them both to take on some of Steve’s stuff. But why he was talking to Steve about all this in the first place, or why Even had a film crew hanging around Cap, Art had no clue.

Didn’t matter. He, Art Cummings, was meeting Steve Rogers in the Village for the first annual Garage Door Animation Festival. Yeah, sure, Evie’d be there, but y’know … fantasies, man!
Of course, if he was smart, he’d keep those fantasies to himself, since working on Steve’s film was going to help him with his grade this semester. And listening to Steve talk about the things he’d like to do … there could be other films, videos, vlogs, the whole deal. He could make a career out of putting Steve Rogers on film and video.

And didn’t that thought start off another thread of fantasy. Art was really gonna have to try to keep it together if he was gonna get through this with his dignity intact.

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If Art had thought that Steve Rogers was attractive before, it was nothing on what he looked like tonight. His jeans were stone-washed, his boots were dark lace-up Doc Martens, his sweater a soft and form-fitting (and what a form!) ivory-colored crewneck, all embellished with a buttery soft bomber-style leather jacket and a royal blue cashmere scarf draped around his neck. He even had clunky looking hipster glasses (a disguise, no doubt) and a slouchy fedora that made him look kinda rakish and old-fashioned and hot as fuck all at the same time. But that wasn’t what made him so mind-bendingly beautiful. No, that would have been enough, and Art would’ve had a difficult time keeping his head out of the gutter. No, what made Steve Rogers literally melt Art’s brain was his pure sense of delight.

Steve readily admitted that this was his first film festival in the new millennium – so first time since waking up from the ice. And anyone who read the news, even just Google alerts like Art did, knew that Steve had been kinda busy in the last couple of years. So to see him wandering around the Village warehouse space, flitting excitedly from screen to screen to watch the various animation offerings was an experience one step down from seeing the face of God. Or maybe, just maybe, a step above.

His blue eyes were dancing as he stood before the installations, queuing up the videos and watching them with that dimpled grin and an expression of delighted awe. He carried his festival program like a religious icon, carefully writing his observations down and grading each entry.

He paused to discuss many of the films with Evie or Art, asking what they thought of something that had caught his attention, or inquiring as to the technical aspects of a particular animation style or film sequence. He loved stop-motion animation, and spoke for an extended period of time about Willis O’Brien and how exciting it was to see King Kong the first time at the pictures. How happy he was that the art form had endured, and had grown in complexity and depth. Conventional animation really got him stoked, and he talked about the thrill of seeing Snow White on a Saturday afternoon, wishing he could see the colors but limited only to grays and the odd blue tinge thanks to his color blindness, but knowing that the film’s palette was rich and varied by the incredible gradations of gray that he could see. How he’d snuck to a movie theatre after the serum had gifted him with full spectrum vision – and, he suspected, the ability to see things that maybe normal people couldn’t – to see Bambi, reveling in the colors and the depth of the animated reality. And he practically bounced over the possibilities of CG animation, talking excitedly about seeing Avatar in 3D the first time, and how thrilled he was to see how realistic and fantastic animation could be simultaneously.

Steve was genuinely interested, and actively engaged. His enthusiasm for the art form was seriously contagious. Art felt himself experiencing the festival, and animation as an art form, in a whole new way, and it was like being a kid again, filled with hopes and dreams and possibilities.

Art exchanged a glance with Evie that confirmed that she was having as much fun as he was. This guy was so unexpectedly and completely adorable, it was all Art could do to keep himself from dropping to his knees and going down on the guy right then and there. At the lustful gleam in
Evie’s eyes, he kinda had the feeling she was having the same problem. Art was pretty sure that Captain America was not looking for a blowjob in the middle of a busy film festival where everyone and their grandmother would video it and upload to any number of social media and video sharing sites. Even if he was sorta in disguise and so far no one had really matched the gorgeous dude to America’s new bisexual icon.

So yeah, he really needed to start thinking about puppies. And laundry. Socks, mostly. Where did socks go when they disappeared in the wash, anyway?

The festival had actually been born on Tumblr, with entries submitted via e-mail, by snail mail, YouTube, and Tumblr ask box. There was no geographic limit to the entries, and animated films from around the globe were represented. The organizers had arranged for laptops and tablets to present many of the films, with a select few slotted for the big screen in the area set aside as a theatre. They were the longer form entries, films running more than 10 minutes in length.

The laptops and tablets were setup with the shorter videos themselves, with Tumblr or e-mail links to the filmmakers, and in a number of cases, actual Skype links. It allowed filmmakers in far flung countries to participate virtually in the festival, and for festival goers to interact directly with the filmmakers.

Art counted it a special win when he got to watch Steve watch his first tentacle porn – another fantasy checked off the list. But Steve hadn’t found the tentacles to be very arousing, and scrunched up his face in distaste, claiming they reminded him too much of Hydra. So, okay, that was a dash of cold water in a scenario that was kinda sorta heating up. Okay, Art could work with that. Tentacles, not a turn-on.

But Steve was definitely interested in some of the Hentai, especially one featuring a couple of deliciously androgynous looking men fucking each other stupid, bodily fluids visibly collecting on their heaving animated abs and running down their chins.

“That’s a thing now? Blue animation?” Steve had asked, wide-eyed and with pupils a little blown.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Art had said. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t hoping that Steve would ask him to show him more – he had a number of outstanding links saved directly to his browser on his phone, so it wouldn’t have been a bother, not at all. And that would have been a great pretext to invite Steve back to his apartment, to check out the collection of files on his laptop and DVDs in his collection. But Steve had simply nodded appreciatively, pulled out his notebook from his ass pocket (how the hell did he fit that thing there?), and made a note to himself. Then the notebook disappeared back in its impossible location.

Evie had given Art a look like she thought he was corrupting a minor, but really, Steve was older than his Pop, so like there was no harm no foul here. Dude was old enough to get into an X-rated film, after all. Shit, dude was the subject of more than one X-rated film.

But the best part of the festival was when they stumbled across a nifty animated short featuring none other than a chibi-sized Captain America and his adventures in modern-day Tokyo, complete with animated Godzilla and Gamora. Steve was so delighted by the film, he played it again, peppering Art and Evie with questions about the references in the film, trying to grasp all the nuances. When he’d watched it twice, he asked what the time would be in Tokyo, and they realized it was mid-day the next day. Grinning like a loon, Steve clicked on the Skype link, and a few minutes later, a young Asian woman with spiky magenta hair appeared on the screen and shrieked.

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It was pretty neat watching someone else get the shock of their life answering a Skype call to find
themselves looking into Steve Rogers’ impossibly blue eyes. The filmmaker, Michi Sato,
hyperventilated for a solid five minutes before she got her breathing under control, and continued to
mutter Steve’s name as he calmly and enthusiastically told her how much he liked her video. And
then when he asked her if she’d be willing to let him feature it on his web site – and that he’d be
interested in seeing more of her work for the site – she practically fainted. When he sent her an e-
mail from the link on the laptop, and included his personal e-mail address for a response, she
slumped against her chair, and just kept fanning herself, muttering. She did agree – punctuated by
breathy shrieks – to allow Steve to use the video, and honest to God cried when she agreed to
develop more content for him.

Steve was really pleased with himself, and genuinely excited about the possibilities. He made the
rounds of several more short films, and then asked if they’d mind sitting in on one of the longer
films with him.

A chance to sit in a darkened room next to Steve Rogers, munching popcorn and fantasizing about
munching on something else? Yes, please.

And when Steve shifted in his seat to ask Art a question, his arm casually stretching out behind
Art’s seat? Well, hello there.

And if Art’s fingers just casually brushed Steve’s knee – you know, completely by accident and
that’s my story and I’m sticking to it? Could I have a hallelujah?

And when the film was over and Steve headed for the subway going the same direction as Art?
Why, thank you. Evie lived in Brooklyn, so she was on an entirely different trajectory on the train.
Well, truth be told, Art lived in Brooklyn, too, but he was apartment sitting for a friend, so that put
him closer to downtown for the next couple of days. He wasn’t going to complain if a good deed
earned him a little bit of solo time with the man who was too good to be true.

And that’s how Art found himself sitting next to his childhood idol, his ultimate crush, grinning
stupidly while the man himself burbled – literally fucking burbled – about how excited he was
about the festival, and weren’t the technological advances in both filmmaking and content delivery
just the best fucking thing since the invention of the blowjob? Okay, the comparison was Art’s,
and he wasn’t thinking clearly, lost as he was watching Steve’s tongue swipe over his lips as he
talked.

So, when it was time for him to get up and leave as the train trundled into his station, could he be
blamed for seizing the moment and planting one on the Star Spangled Man with the Plan?

No, he did not think he could.

&&&

“Come, friend Erik. We retire to the bar known as Vinnie’s. There we will drink to our ancestors.
And to friends past and present, no?”

“Yes! You’re a good friend, Thor,” Erik said, patting the god of thunder on the tummy.

“D’you think Erik is drinking too much lately? I can’t think of two days in row I’ve seen him sober
since before the holidays,” Jane asked Darcy worriedly, her voice soft so it wouldn’t carry the few
yards between them and Thor and Erik.

“Are y’thinkin’ about an intervention?” Ian asked with concern. Ever since the incident with the
Dark Elves, and Ian pretending to be Erik’s grandson to boost him out of care, Ian had felt a kind of familial kinship with the mercurial physicist. He was protective of Erik, and Erik had developed a fondness for him in return.

“I’m thinking Erik’s bored,” Darcy shrugged. “He needs a project. Livin’ in the Tower is nice and all, and I totally love the Steve and Bucky Sad Gay Boy Show, but I’m about to freakin’ lose it, too. Jane, y’gotta get us a new project!”

“Well, I have a number of ideas I’d like to pursue, but they’d all involve leaving New York.”

“Then let’s get the hell out of Dodge!” Darcy exclaimed enthusiastically, earning her an odd look from both Erik and Thor. She grinned and waved, then shooed them on toward the bar.

Vinnie’s was a local place with a long bar, with an array of pictures of employees and families and the stray celebrity who fell through the door, “to Vinnie – best beer on tap in Manhattan!” and “to my friend Vinnie – thanks for everything!”

Mid-forties and florid, Vinnie raised a hand and waved a friendly, “’Bout time you got your ass back here, Stark!” as the Avengers and friends shuffled in from the cold. Sam shot Stark a withering look, and started unwinding his scarf to hang it in the little coat room off the entryway. The rest of them shed their winter layers in short order and surged toward the bar. Stark announced he was opening a tab, earning him a few pleased looks and an actual “Huzzah” from Thor.

Vinnie’s was old fashioned in that there was an ancient looking jukebox that was really a glorified MP3 player, and the beer was craft, and the whiskey was aged, and if you asked very, very nicely, Vinnie’s had a back room where you could smoke a Cuban or pick up a friendly – definitely friendly, not organized, not illegal – card game. There were booths built so they almost became little rooms when you sat down, and open tables with comfortable chairs, and stools that swiveled at the bar, and no kitschy theme to distract from the honest smell of quality liquor, good beer, and the best wings in the neighborhood.

It had all the earmarks of a neighborhood dive, with the comfort and security of a private club.

There was a small dance floor by the jukebox, and it was full of bodies moving to the beat pounding out of the player. Barnes tapped two fingers on the bar, ordered a drink, and made a bee-line for the dance floor. He stood at the edge for a few minutes, watching the dancers move, listening to the beat, studying the steps, and then he moved into the fray, capturing the waist and hand of one of the young women, dancing old-fashioned steps to new-fangled music.

“Huh. I never would’ve pegged that as a jitterbug song,” Natasha said, staring out on the dance floor. She turned back to the bar and downed her shot in one go.

“Don’t watch Dancing with the Stars, huh?” Sam asked, chuckling, taking a long pull from his beer bottle. He hadn’t ventured into the craft on tap yet, preferring something familiar and national to start the night off.

Natasha eyed the stable of ready females circling Barnes with disdain as she toyed with her drink. “I thought the point of all this was to get Barnes into Rogers’s arms.”

Sam shook his head. “Nope. The end game was always to help him get to the point where he could accept Steve as he is – as he always had been. Or admit it’s over. But always to be make is own damn choices.”
“That may be your end game, but mine –“

“Natasha, it’s not fair to put that on him. If he’s not into dudes, he’s not into dudes. And no amount of sexy Russian frowning is gonna change that. Ain’t fair to him to pile expectations. Nobody can live for someone else. Look at Steve, how different he is now he’s not livin’ his life to suit Barnes.”

“Yes, but he did that even when he thought Barnes was dead –“ At Sam’s arched eyebrow, she deflated. “And yes, he was in mourning. He told me as much. Okay. I’ll give you that. It’s just … it’s just such a shame. I want to see Rogers happy. I’d like to see Barnes happy.”

“Me, too. I think we all would. Nobody wants to see anybody miserable. Well, except for every fucking asshole in Hydra. But no guarantee they get happy together.” Sam took a swig from his beer. “And besides, ain’t that what this whole Bachelor thing is about? Finding Mr. or Ms. Right for Steve Rogers?”

“Yes. Can’t help feeling Mr. Right is closer than we think.”

“Ah-ah-ah! Expectations. You let Barnes be. Be whoever he needs to be.”

“And if that’s not in Steve’s life?”

“It’ll suck. And it’ll hurt. But not half as much as being with someone who doesn’t want to be there. And we’ll help him get through it. Steve’ll deal.”

“This free will of yours … sometimes it’s very inconvenient.”

“And after everything that’s been done to Barnes?”

“I get it, I do! He has the right to make his own choices. That was one of the things Hydra took from him. And I know Steve gets it. For an old fossil, he’s really highly evolved. Remarkably so. My God, did you hear him talking about his dick?” she giggled.

“To be fair, everyone did go overboard. Nobody needs there anal vibrators, small, medium, and large.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She turned around and leaned back against the bar, body stretched and catlike. “It’s always good to have options.”

He grinned wolfishly at her and shook his head, taking a long draw on his beer. “Gonna be the death of me, woman!”

“How so?”

“You keep stretchin’ like that and Imma do something Maria’ll kill me over! If you don’t do it first!”

“Hah. In that case, Wilson, let’s dance!”

&&&

The beat wasn’t quite what he was used to, but after a few minutes, he could pick out a familiar rhythm. Now that, he could dance to. He sidled onto the dance floor, shimmying past the coupla guys gyrating on the parquet, and spinning so he was swaying his hips in time with the attractive dames who immediately turned to eye him up and down, smiling and shaking their asses just a
little more attentively. He smiled, pouring on the old Barnes charm, surprised at how easily it came back to him, how easily his body moved to the music, and just how much he enjoyed the sensation.

He knew it was January – walk from the Tower was fucking cold, and he’d half agreed with Stark’s complaint that they shoulda brought the car. Romanoff had just let loose with a string of Russian curses, questioning Stark’s parentage and gender, while Barton had merely snickered. Guy did a lot of snickering when Romanoff was in high dudgeon. It was pretty funny, really, that the guy could laugh at the Black Widow. Most guys would feel their balls shrivel, and Barton was laughing it up. James wasn’t sure he’d really want to face Barton on a dare …

Anyway, thanks to the cold, there wasn’t a shapely ankle in sight, and he’d give his left nut for a flash of a creamy gam peeking between a silk stocking and a lacy garter belt – girls here were all denim and sweaters and boots. But those jeans left no question as to the curves beneath, and the way those curves moved! And the loops and pockets gave him more options to latch onto. He could get drunk on the way their asses sketched pictures in the air. James figured the future had its good points …

So James threw himself into the tangle of bodies on the dance floor, first capturing a pretty girl and guiding her through a modified Lindy. And with it came the memory of other women in his arms, the whisper of nylons, the sway of skirts around their legs, the bounce of curls around their faces. He couldn’t remember the individual faces, but he could remember how they made him feel – free and powerful and floating in a haze of want. The beat and the buzz and the booze and the band and the beauty of the dance, frantic and heartfelt, grabbing moments as the world careened from one disaster to the next.

He worked his way through all the dames, pausing every so often to take a swig of beer, or down a shot, and then there were hands on his hips, fingers through his belt loops, bodies pressing close, shimmying down his chest and pressing back into his crotch, promises made with sinuous bodies, invitations launched in the air, heat and energy spooling around him, making him feel drunker than alcohol ever could since Hydra remade him so very long ago.

He was vaguely aware of Wilson and Romanoff dancing off to the side, Darcy and Ian, too, but they didn’t try to invade his territory or engage him on the dance floor. He did notice the Widow casting glances in his direction. He decided he was better off ignoring her, at least for a while. He knew what she wanted of him. He wasn’t ready for that, really he wasn’t. He just needed … he just needed to dance, without thinking. Just dance.

So he focused on the other dancers and it didn’t take long for James to get the rhythm of the dancers around him, the sway of hips, the shimmy of bodies, the grind and the bump. It didn’t take long for the dancers around him to gravitate to him, and he grinned as he touched the hip of the willowy blonde gyrating on his left, or the sultry brunette grinding on his right, or the Reubenesque redhead with her hands on his shoulders, twisting her hips in time with his. Or the hips that surged just out of reach of his ass, hand resting possessively on his hip. He could feel the heat of the body behind him, to the left of him, to the right of him, right in front of him, keeping pace, mirroring his movements, shoulder to hip.

The women smiled at him, touched his face, flipped their hair and spun, two of them reached out for each other and drew close, hands roaming possessively over soft curves, kissing each other, slow, tongue-twisting kisses leaving their lips shiny with spit and swollen with desire. They came up for air and reached for him, and he stumbled into the embrace of the pretty brunette, skating his hands down her back to rest on the swell of her ass as she pulled his face down into a kiss, all tongue and teeth and tension. And his body never stopped moving, never stopped being driven by the beat. Her hand slid up his chest and pushed ever so slightly so he fell back out of her arms as
she and her friend slid back into another kiss.

And he felt his mouth go dry, felt his skin grow warmer, tighter, more fevered. Felt his lips burning with the ghost of her kiss, felt his chest ignite along the trail of her fingertips. Felt. Felt. Felt the music pound up through his feet, bubble through his blood, felt the alcohol warm him, felt the warmth of desire bloom and spread and set fire to his body. Felt, no ice to numb him, no blackness to snatch away the welcome buzz of sensation. Felt.

Hydra never let him feel. Feeling was something that belonged to him.

He felt the mystery dancer press in, grinding against his ass, hand on his hip, other arm snaking around his waist, closing the gap between his back and her front.

Only he couldn’t feel the soft pillowing of breasts against his shoulder blades. He could feel the seductive drag of hardened nipples against his skin through his shirt, taut over toned muscle, and the heat of the gyrating groin. And something else. Something hard, lining up and pressing against his ass.

And if he was really honest with himself, it felt good. Really good. Blood flushing to his groin good. Pants too tight and pressure building good. His therapist recommended always being honest with himself.

He could lose himself in this sensation, ride the wave of desire building in him a few moments longer before he had to acknowledge the truth of that dancer, of that it meant. He could claim ignorance for a few seconds more and revel in the wanton sensation, the bite of want, the spark of lust that trembled through him.

Two of the women coiled back around each other, legs tangled as their hips gyrated, their bodies moved. Hooded eyes watched him with open desire, open speculation. They reached for him.

He could give in to this maelstrom of want and need and promise.

He felt fingers thread into his hair, lips ghost up the line of his throat, then breath hot and demanding at his earlobe.

But the sudden silence, the swallowing vacuum over by the bar warned him that the others had noticed and were waiting for … what? For James to turn in the guy’s arms and belt him? Or kiss him? Or rip his head off?

He knew it wasn’t Steve. He’d woken in an awkward tangle of legs and arms with Steve often enough to recognize the feel of his hands. Been held and comforted and supported by those hands when he’d cried and screamed and vomited memory and pain and self-loathing.

He knew Steve’s hands.

The hands touching him now weren’t Steve’s. And a part of him was sorry they weren’t. Because if they were, it would have lifted a choice from his shoulders. Made everything easier. Made everything clear.

He was surprised at the revelation.

But not really.

But he wasn’t ready.
The Avengers and their friends were still gawking, still watching, still, still still, waiting. What were they expecting? A fucking explosion? Sorry to disappoint, kiddies.

He quietly took the hand on his hip and lifted it away, and did the same with the arm wrapped around his torso, plucking it away by the wrist. And simply walked away, snagged his jacket from the back of the bar stool, and calmly exited the bar.

No bloodshed today.

&&&

Natasha and Sam had danced to one song then opted to sit it out. Darcy and Ian had held out longer, and then Darcy dragged Ian off the floor and to their booth where they proceeded to drink and make out, giggling and chuckling at each other. The dance floor had just seemed too crowded with civilians to feel comfortable. But Barnes … well.


But for the residents of the Tower, and Sam in particular, time seemed to grind to a halt and sound was swallowed whole.

A guy, an attractive, androgynous looking guy, but a guy nonetheless, had grabbed Barnes by the hip, wrapped his arm about Barnes’s middle, and was fucking grinding on his ass, practically groping him, and working up his neck with his mouth.

This could not end well.

But Barnes didn’t erupt into violence.

Body parts did not go flying in all directions.

That cybernetic hand did not crush anyone’s windpipe.

And the walls were not suddenly painted in blood.

Barnes didn’t seem to notice at first. He was flirting with several women, kissing, even, and the ladies were clearly interested in more than a twosome. Then there it was, the moment of recognition.

His eyes flew open and he seemed to simply freeze for a heartbeat. Then he calmly removed the hands, stalked forward, grabbed his jacket without a single glance, and was out the door before anyone could react.

The guy just shrugged and flung himself back into the writhing mass of bodies on the dance floor.

Earth’s mightiest heroes, a visiting god, and all their friends stood staring, mouths working like beached fish. Seriously, the bad guys should just monitor Barnes for their opportunity to take over the world.

“What the fuck?” Tony swore, and Pepper touched him on the hand to shush him. “Is he cleared to be on the street by himself?”

Fact was, Barnes’s therapist had been encouraging him to leave the Tower and venture out into the city beyond, by himself, at least for short periods, and then gauge his reactions. But this was the first time he was on the streets without anyone, since he’d first come to the Tower.
They had a responsibility to the public to ensure that it was Barnes walking down the street, not the Winter Soldier. Right?

Yeah, it sounded lame to Sam, too. But he still announced, “I’ll get him,” as he shrugged into his own jacket and raced after Barnes.

The cold gripped him and he felt his privates shrivel at the sensation. “Jesus!” Sam swore, quickly shuffling on his gloves and pulling his scarf up over his face. DC winters definitely had not prepared him for January in the Big Apple.

He scanned around him desperately, relying on years of situational awareness to help him place Barnes. Really, he could have just looked toward the route they’d taken to the bar. Barnes was steadily and calmly walking back toward the Tower.

Hydra’s Asset had not gone all Winter Soldier on New York.

Sam was more than a little proud.

James Barnes was walking briskly, fists shoved in jacket pockets, head down against the chill. One foot in front of the other, no engagement, no threat. Just steady, quiet progress.

Was that what this was?

Progress?

Yeah, Sam was definitely proud. He pulled out his phone and quickly texted Pepper – the adult of the group and the only person he trusted to be sober enough to read the text.

S – B hedging home all ok
P – Thanks, Sam. RU coming back?
S – Nah thnk I’ll stik w him see if hes ok
P – Let him know I’ll stop in to check on him when I get back.
S – will do

Sam started running to catch up with Barnes, welcoming the heat generated by the sudden consumption of calories.

“Barnes!”

Sam could see a momentary hesitation in Barnes’s forward motion, but then he was loping forward again.

Gritting his teeth, Sam leaned into it and put on a burst of speed, coming up behind Barnes and finally coming abreast. And he couldn’t help himself.

“On your left!”

Barnes just stopped, turned, and stared at him.

“What the fuck, Wilson?”

“You left early, Barnes,” Sam replied, a little breathless. “Don’t like the company?” Sam asked, jogging in place. His breath puffed out and hung in front of his face, shimmering crystals a promise of snow in the air.

“Company was okay,” Barnes allowed gruffly, flipping up his collar then stuffing his fists deeper
into his pockets. “Then it wasn’t.” He turned smartly on his heel and marched off with his shoulders raised and his head thrust forward.

“Barnes!” Sam barked, trotting alongside him.

Barnes stopped suddenly again, turned, and fell to attention, snapping an automatic salute. “Sir, yes sir!”

“Stuff it, Barnes. I was about the same rank as you in the Air Force. Don’t sass me like I’m a fucking officer.”

“Staff sergeant?”

“Master sergeant,” Sam corrected with a grin. “And I know you would’ve had a field commission if it hadn’t been for –“

“Catchin’ a certain train. Huh. Never knew that was in the cards. Lieutenant’s salary woulda been nice.”

“Says the man who could buy Liberty Island if he wanted.”

Barnes seemed to relax, and turned back to walking, Sam keeping pace easily. They walked in companionable silence for a few moments.

“Don’t need an island with no tight-assed dame on it.”

“No way to talk about Lady Liberty.”

“Lieutenant woulda had a nice ring to it. Woulda settled down, had a family. Had a life. Coulda gone to college, made somethin’ of myself. Prolly lived next door to Steve, taken the train together into the city every day.”

“Could still do all those things, man. You’re here, out in the world. Pretty soon you’ll be cleared to do whatever you want. Go wherever you want. Havin’ a life would be a fine fuck you to Hydra.”

“Stark says I can stay in the Tower, as long as Steve doesn’t tell him I have to go. If he was gonna … if he was gonna kick me out, it would’ve happened by now, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Unless you come up with some new and really horrible way to be an asshole to him. But you gotta know you’d have to push him pretty far.”

“Thought I had. Thought I’d messed up so bad there was no comin’ back from it. But I’m still here. Still livin’ in the Tower. So I’m guessin’ … guessin’ I haven’t fucked up so bad there’s no fixin’ it.”

“Think you may be right, man. But whatcha gonna do about it?”

“Still workin’ that out,” Barnes said softly, and Sam turned to examine Barnes’s features. There was no anger there, just concern and confusion. And Sam felt more hopeful of someone getting a happy ending than he had in the past couple of weeks.

“But you don’t wanna go, right? You want to stay in the Tower.”

“Yeah. I … shit. It’s all still so complicated.”

“You didn’t hurt anyone tonight. Someone came into your personal space, someone you hadn’t
expected, someone you hadn’t given permission to, and you handled it like an adult.”

“Like an adult who hasn’t been brainwashed and used for 70 years? Yeah, trying to find a different theme. I, uh …”

“Not even. Regular people react when someone comes into their space uninvited. Just every day folks. And sometimes they don’t handle it with peace, love, and understanding, either. I don’t need to tap your tragic back story, Barnes. I’m congratulatin’ you for acting like a mature, normal human being, period. But all that other stuff – you wanna talk about it? About how you feel?”

“Confused.”

They were at the foot of the Tower, and Sam pulled out his keycard and let them into the lobby. He waved at the security guard at the big circular security desk with the big honking “S” dominating the façade. Sam rested his hand in the small of Barnes’s back as he guided him silently toward the bank of elevators that gave access to the upper residential levels. Once they were in the elevator, they were greeted by Jarvis, who asked them how their evening had been.”

“Great, Jarvis, thanks,” Sam answered, then turned back to Barnes. “Confused by the social situation in general, or by the guy dancing with you?”

“Little bit of both.” They were coming up on Barnes’s floor, and Sam was anxious to get this out in the open. He felt like they – Barnes – were close to an epiphany, whichever way it led.

The elevator door opened and Barnes got out, but Sam followed. Barnes didn’t seem to mind. In fact, Sam saw a small smile quirk at the corners of his mouth, and he nodded slightly, leading Sam toward his suite.

“I don’t have any alcohol, but I can offer you a bottle of water?” Barnes offered, and Sam nodded, smiling. Barnes went to his fridge and fished out two bottles, tossing one to Sam, and opening the other, drinking it down gratefully. He squashed the plastic bottle into a flat disk between his hands.

Sam took a pull on the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “How’d it make you feel, havin’ a guy dance with you like that? You handled it well, by the way. I’m proud of you.”

Barnes grinned at that, a heartfelt, open grin that slipped off his face as quickly as it had formed. “Confused,” he repeated. “Sound like a broken record. You have those things still – records?” Sam nodded, gesturing with his bottle for Barnes to continue. “Nah. I mean, I didn’t agree to it, but considering the dames – the women – maybe it seemed like I invited it. I dunno. It felt … it felt kinda good. I hate to admit it, but it felt good. But …”

“But?”

“But I realized I was sorry it wasn’t Steve. I knew it wasn’t him. I, uh, I know his touch.”

“Guy’s held you through enough nightmares, it’s not surprising.”

“Yeah. Yeah, exactly. But don’t you fucking tell him, I’m not ready. Seriously I’m not. I don’t know … I don’t know that I’ll ever be ready. I’m serious man, I’m fucked up and I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what I believe any more.”

“Y’gotta do what feels right to you, Barnes. That’s all. So long as you don’t hurt anyone, y’gotta do right by you.”

“What if I do? What if I hurt Steve? I mean, more than I have.”
“You mean by not bein’ friends with him anymore?” Barnes nodded. “Well, that’s different. Even Steve doesn’t expect you to be somethin’ you’re not.”

“But he was. He was somethin’ he’s not. For a helluva long time. I hurt him, didn’t I? By making him make that choice.”

“No. No, you didn’t hurt him, and you didn’t make him do anything. Steve made that choice, not you. You hurt him by what you said, by the way you acted. But once it was out in the open, Steve’s free. He’s living his life. But you know, he’s not lookin’ for a declaration of love. He’s not lookin’ for you to be like him. No one is. Well, maybe Natasha, but I think she’s been payin’ too much attention to all those fucking romantic comedies Steve was complainin’ about. All Steve wants is to know you accept him as he is. Y’don’t gotta do anything more than that.”

The tension in Barnes’s stance relaxed slightly, the fists at his side opened and flexed. He nodded. “But what if … what if I want more?”

“Then that’s between you and Steve. Or whoever, if it’s not Steve you want. You’re an adult. You get to make your own decisions, your own choices. Your own damn mistakes, too. We’ve been over that, right? Nobody’s choice but yours.”

Barnes nodded, flipping the flattened disk in his metal hand, poising it to spin in the metal palm like a top.

“Yeah, nobody’s choice but mine.” He watched the disk continue to spin, then pinched it between thumb and forefinger of his flesh hand, peering through the crumpled plastic of the disk again. “Until it’s not.”

“Maybe that’s the place to start then.”

“What?”

“Figurin’ out what love is. What it means to you. What your choice is.”

“You mean in relation to Steve?”

“I mean in relation to you. What does love mean to you? How do you define it? What do you want from it? And love ain’t just romance, ain’t just ‘I wanna fuck you’. Love is friendship, too. Like what you had with Steve. ‘Cos man, I ain’t never seen anything like what Steve feels for you. It’s … I don’t know. It’s like he was only half here without you.”

“Looks to me like he’s doin’ better without me. He smiles more. A lot more. And I swear I heard him laugh yesterday. How often does that happen?”

“He tells jokes all the time – fucker’s got a hell of a giggle –”

“I remember. But I haven’t heard it lately. Not in this century. Not for anything I’ve said to him.”

&&&

Sam had assured James that he had nothing to be embarrassed about, and that there would be no free passes for him regarding his presence on the public level of the Tower. Besides, James had an assignment.

Sam had looked over James’s essay for the college application and had made some suggestions for improvement – a better way to package James’s specific experience that might appeal more to a
college entrance reviewer. “Spent 70 years in captivity” wasn’t necessarily going to earn him any points, as the story was too fantastic for most civilians to wrap their heads around. So James had taken the critique and was now working on revising his essay to make it more “marketable.”

So James was at his desk, struggling with finding a nicer way to say “torture, rape, and degradation” to describe the last 70 years of his life, when his superior hearing picked up Sam Wilson’s voice sing-songing, “So. How was your date last night?”

“Wasn’t a date, Sam,” answered Rogers. Now James sat a little straighter, focused a little more on the voices.

“Oh, come on – I know you and cartoons. You get a woody any time anyone mentions Disney. C’mon, give!”

“First of all, not cartoons. Animation. Stop-motion, CGI, and yes, cartoons. And second, I do not get a woody every time someone mentions Disney. It was just that one time, and y’gotta admit that Tarzan is cut in that film –“

“And all this time I’d thought it was Jane who got your motor runnin’,” Wilson teased. “But seriously, how was it?”

“The festival was amazing,” Rogers gushed, and launched into a detailed description of the films he saw, some animated thing about him and some crazy-ass girl in Tokyo, and James started to just tune out the details of the rapid-fire commentary about something that didn’t really interest him even though Steve’s enthusiasm was downright cute, right up until Rogers said quietly, “And then he kissed me.”

Wilson sputtered. “He … what? Doesn’t he know you’re spoken for? Like by Disney itself? Y’know, for the Bachelor?” Steve sighed heavily in response.

James, on the other hand, felt an unfamiliar tightening of his chest, a tautness seize all over his body, a chill seep into his bones. It took him a moment to recognize it for what it was. Jealousy. Not the kind of jealousy he felt when a dame he’d taken to a dance chatted up another fella. He couldn’t remember any girl he’d stepped out with who’d taken his fancy to the point where he cared beyond saving face about it. No, what this felt like was …

… the first time the double date he’d fixed Steve up with didn’t dump the poor sap, and danced with him all night, leaving him lit up like Macy’s on Christmas eve.
… the first time Steve asked a girl out for a date on his own, and she accepted, not out of pity for the little guy, but because she was genuinely interested in the fireball that was Steve Rogers.
… the first time Steve came home from a date, all dreamy looking and smiling stupidly, tie askew and lips red and swollen and stained with lipstick.
… the first time Steve had stayed out past midnight, and come back to the apartment smelling of beer and sex.
… the first time a girl had made him cry by breaking up with him, and nothing and no one could make him feel better, not even James. James wasn’t enough.
… the first time he’d seen Steve look at Peggy Carter, like he’d seen something he couldn’t live without, and she look at him like she was ready to devour him whole.
… the first time James wasn’t the center of Steve’s attention, wasn’t enough for him, wasn’t holding him back any more because he’d found someone else who suited him better.
… the first time James realized that he was jealous. Jealous not of Steve but of the person who was the object of his affection and undivided attention. Because that was James’s place in Steve’s life, his full-time job, and he wasn’t happy about relinquishing it to some part-timer.
Yeah, these memories were starting to really be a pain in James’s ass, because he was gradually realizing that if he’d thought Steve wasn’t who he’d thought he’d been, that hadn’t been the half of it. He was discovering that he himself wasn’t who he thought he’d been.

Steve was talking, and that drew James's attention back. “No, I don’t think he does. Now that you mention it, I don’t think he does, no. It’s touchy – I asked them not to publicize my involvement until we know it’s going to happen, until I know for sure I’m comfortable going past the pilot. So it’s really possible he doesn’t know. Huh.”

“So … how was it?”

“It was … nice.”

“And then …”

“And then he got off the subway. It was his stop.”

“Dude! So nothing happened. Yet. But did you want it to?”

James felt himself tensing, straining to hear as Steve paused for a moment considering his answer. Finally, he heard Steve say, “I don’t know. I don’t think now is the right time – we’ve got work to do, I’ve got the Bachelor coming up, it would be too complicated right now. But …”

“But?”

“It was nice to be wanted. It was a nice kiss.”

“So you’re gonna let ‘im down easy, then.”

“I think I need to. Don’t you? I mean, it’s not very nice to start something that I may end up unable to continue once the Bachelor starts. If I end up doing the show past the pilot. But I kinda feel like I need to give it a chance. It’s a platform to get people’s attention unlike anything I could engineer on my own.”

“I think you underestimate your ability to hold a room, dude.”

“I have a contract. For the pilot at least. It just wouldn’t be fair.”

“If you didn’t have a contract. Would you be interested?”

Steve sighed deeply. “Maybe. He’s cute. He likes animation. He’s fun to talk to. He’s certainly interested. But …”

“Oh dude, don’t tell me.”

“Yeah, pretty sure he’s a card-carrying member of the Captain America fan club.”

“Star-fucker?”

“Not that bad, but still … I’d always wonder if it was Steve Rogers or Captain America that he wanted. So yeah, there’s that.”

“And that sucks.”

“Yeah. Unfortunately, comes with the suit. Always did. So how was your night? Do anything fun?”
“Yeah, we went out to a local bar.”

“We? You mean?”

“Yeah. Your boy did good.”

“Don’t have a boy, you know that, Sam.”

“You guys have been friends for what, 85 years? You’re just goin’ through a rough patch. Happens to everybody. I have faith that 85 years of friendship will win out. So okay, maybe not your boy now, but for a long time, the most important guy in your life, your best friend. In the meantime, it’s a good time for you to get on with your life. Your big gay life.”

“My big bisexual life,” Steve corrected with a chuckle. “Moron. Yeah. Sam, I’ve loved Bucky Barnes since I was ten years old, before I had any idea was love was. I loved him so much, I never burdened him with the knowledge of that love.” James found himself releasing a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. A smile tugged at his lips as a warmth spread from his core to his extremities. He’d never heard Steve talk about him that way before. Hell, he’d never heard Steve talk about anyone that way before. James was honestly surprised at how happy Steve’s words made him. A part of him wanted to get up and go over to him, yet warred with the part of him that wasn’t willing to accept this new Steve. He was frowning at himself, swearing at himself internally, when he heard Steve add, “We could be friends then, as long as I hid my soul. I can’t do that anymore. And I don’t have to. The world has changed. And if he hates my soul, hates who I am, it’s done, it’s over. I’m not going to die by inches just to keep him. It’s dishonest and it’s cruel.”

It knocked the air out of James’s lungs. There really could be no coming back from this. Why couldn’t he move? Just move, dammit, tell Steve he was sorry, tell him he didn’t want to be out of his life. Why?

If he knew that, then he could have fixed this already. Honestly, it was really starting to piss him off.

“Damn, Rogers, if I swung that way, you’d’ve had me at ‘hello’.” Sam waited a beat, two, then prompted, “Jerry Maguire, Tom Cruise flick?”

“Yeah? I’ll add it to my list,” Steve answered with a chuckle, and there was a pause while James knew he was fishing out his notepad and scribbling the film title down. “He say anything to you, Sam?”

James stiffened, eyes wide as he waited for Wilson to rat him out. His metal hand tightened on the arm of his desk chair, and thankfully the whirring of the gears and plates warned him that the hand was tightening before he had a chance to do any real damage. He deliberately and carefully flexed the hand open, and concentrated on calm.

“Privileged information,” Sam warned.

“You’re not his therapist.”

“Sorta am. Through group. But more’n that, I’m a friend. He needs one right now. Seein’ as he, y’know.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m glad, Sam. I’m glad you can be a friend to him. You’re a good friend, the best. So … he’s okay?”
“Yeah. I’m kinda proud of him. He did okay on his first trip to a social scene. Better than I expected, to be honest. He’s gonna be okay,” James smiled at that in the moment of silence that followed, then Sam asked, “Are you gonna be okay?”

“We’re gonna shoot my PSA tomorrow, work on my films in the next couple of weeks, and we’re doing the pilot for The Bachelor next month – in time for Valentine’s Day. Honestly, Sam, I’m getting excited about the possibilities. I’m ready to get on with my life.”

James’s brows knit worriedly. Could Steve get on with a life where there was no room for James Buchanan Barnes? He knew now he really didn’t want to find out, and he realized it was up to him to do something about it.

He just had to convince the rest of him.

&&&

Art was excited to meet up with Steve – and Evie, and Evan at his crew – at the Tower that afternoon. Maybe he’d been a little too forward stealing that kiss right before the door opened in the subway car, but he’d dreamed about it all night, and most of the day so far. So, when he got to the Tower and found Evan waiting for him, he was in too good of a mood to actually be concerned. That is, until Evan started talking.

“I know that Ms. Potts had you sign a confidentiality agreement to work with Steve, so I don’t need to have you sign anything else. But there’s something you need to know about how and why we’re working with him.” And Evan explained about The Bachelor, and Steve making history as the first bisexual Bachelor. And that Steve was off limits until the stupid series pilot was shot, and if he liked it, he’d be off limits until the damned thing aired.

So any illusions Art had about squiring Steve Rogers around town – or sharing kisses over a good film – were effectively dashed, boxed up, and stored somewhere in New Jersey. The Pine Barrens, most likely. Next door to Jimmy Hoffa.

To say that he was monumentally disappointed was an understatement. To say that he was wholeheartedly mortified was putting it mildly. To say, even so, he was damned if he was missing his chance to work with Steve Rogers, was spot on.

He could do it. He could work with the most perfect man in his universe, and not feel a thing.

That breeze overhead? Yeah, that was a squadron of World War II pigs flying.

&&&

Art’s smile was maybe a little less than genuine when he got to the third floor conference room to meet with Steve and everyone else. Steve’s handshake was warm, and he touched his hand briefly to Art’s left pectoral before he caught himself and shook his head ruefully. “Sorry. Old habit. My best friend growing up used to do that to me, to check for my heartbeat. I had a bad heart as a kid, and it could get dicey pretty quickly. It’s an invasion of your personal space – I apologize.”

So he was giving him an opening. Not surprising with what he knew of Steve already. “Like a kiss on the subway?” Steve blushed. He blushed, goddammit! How fucking cute was that? How was he supposed to keep his mitts off this adorable cutie pie the size of a linebacker? Seriously? But instead, Art said, “Sorry about that. Heat of the moment, you looked so fucking kissable – er, yeah,” he finished lamely.
Steve grinned at that, his dimples flashing and then holding. “Thanks. Nice to know I’m fucking kissable. It’s just … right now, there’s some stuff going on that would kind of interfere with anything … romantic. It’s not at all personal, it’s something contractual for me — “

“Evan told me. You’re going to make history and bring television to the bisexual masses. You know a lot of gay boys are going to be watching, too.”

“I’m counting on it. I’m counting on them and the bisexual kids following me to this spot we’re doing today, and the films we’re going to make, and my Twitter and Facebook and Tumblr, and everything – they’re why I’m doing it. I need to reach those kids to help them understand that it’s worth it. It’s worth it to stick it out.”

“Like you did?”

“Sorry?”

“Well, there’s been speculation for decades that when you landed that plane in the water, you didn’t’ have to. That you did it because of your friend dying.”

Steve sighed and shook his head. “There may be some truth to that. I was definitely depressed about losing B – er, my friend. I wasn’t thinking straight. And it’s kids who are in that type of situation that we have to reach, Art.”

“So you’re doing the whole rose thing as a way to reach kids at risk.”

Steve nodded.

“Well, shit, man. I can’t compete with that. But I sure as hell am on board with it. Let’s go make some movies, dude!”

&&&

“Captain Gramps looks pretty good,” Tony observed from his vantage point in the back of the conference room, out of reach of the film crew and the set Steve’s team had assembled to shoot his PSA.

“Of course he does,” Pepper agreed serenely. “I dressed him myself.”

Tony gave her a sidelong glance and cleared his throat theatrically. “Excuse you?”

“I selected his wardrobe. Don’t worry, I remain completely and wholeheartedly monogamous, Tony. You’re the only one that I want. I know where I’m happy,” she told him, squeezing his bicep and settling her head against his shoulder.

“And this,” he gestured toward the room. “Did you have a hand in this?”

“I scheduled the conference room and let them know what they were allowed to scavenge. Other than that, it’s all Steve and his crew.”

“Hmm. These kids any good, d’y’think?”

“I reviewed their resumes and their portfolios – they are. Good. I wasn’t about to let someone substandard work on this project. Why?”

“Well, maybe we’ll have some work for them after all this is done. PR could use some new blood, don’t you think? Especially for the Stark *Foundation.”*
“Hmm,” was all Pepper said in response, but she had a small, sly smile on her lips nonetheless.

The crew had quickly converted the conference room into a quasi-soundstage. The big projection screen had been pulled down from the ceiling until it touched the floor, they’d trained a spotlight with a tinted, patterned gel on it to soften the background, and they’d borrowed a sleek wooden bench and some potted plants from the hallways to create a little environment where Steve could sit and address the camera. They were still fiddling with lights, so Steve was standing around joking with the crew, sipping at his coffee and … shit, was Cap flirting?

Wait a minute, was Cap actually flirting? Tony’s mouth hung open in disbelief. “Call the insurance people, Pep. The end of the world is coming.”

“Why, because Steve’s got his flirt on? Of course he does – I’ve been coaching him.”

“Oh, now you’ve got to explain.”

“He doesn’t think of himself as attractive. Did you know that? He thinks of himself as the tiny, sickly man he was for the first 23 years of his life – that’s what he sees when he looks in the mirror. Someone small and broken. And we’ve seen photos of him from that period – he was attractive in a small package, but he was convinced he wasn’t. I made him look closer.”

“Were there whips involved? Leather? Latex? ‘Cos if there were, we seriously have to talk.”

“I just pointed it out to him. You know he’s never actually come home from the war? From World War II. He went directly from the frontline into the ice, and then into SHIELD. Fury recruited him to SHIELD as soon as he was on his feet after the thaw. Like minutes after he woke up. Captain America has never been discharged, never given leave.”

“I did actually know that, yes. In my head I knew that. Right now he’s on hiatus for this Bachelor thing. But what is your point?”

“I think you need to rethink Steve’s role in the Avengers. You need to allow him to come home.”

Tony looked at Pepper soberly, his eyes flitting around her face, looking for a deeper answer. He leaned back and folded one arm across his chest, resting his elbow in the fist, and grasping his lips and chin with the free hand. He frowned as he stared straight ahead at the crew still muddling about.

And then he heard it.

Clear as the proverbial bell, in full Dolby with surround sound. DTS and THX and technology Tony had yet to invent.

*Cap giggled.*

Flirting and giggling? Tony’s life really was complete!

“Oh, do it again,” Tony breathed, pulling out his phone and thumbing on the recorder.

At the other end of the space, Cap obliged, giggling again.

“What are you doing?” Pepper demanded, staring at him incredulously.

“I am recording my new ringtone. The most awesome, embarrassing, and delightful ringtone ever. Hey, J, you still have that in your buffer, right?”
“Yes sir,” JARVIS responded immediately.

“Save it to the server. I’m gonna want to do some sampling on it later.”

“Of course, sir. Should I acquire Captain Rogers’s consent, sir?”

“Yes,” Pepper replied tersely as Tony announced, “No!”

“Tony –“

“No need. He’s already being recorded, remember – the Bachelor ‘color package’ shit. This is fair game,” he added, grinning evilly. Pepper just huffed a sigh and went back to observing the shoot, but she allowed herself a snarky little smile.

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“Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special guest. Direct from Avengers Tower, here’s Captain America himself, Mr. Steve Rogers!”

Steve strode out onto the stage and waved, grinning at the crowd that erupted into applause, and the Roots house band that spun off a riff of “Star Spangled Man with a Plan.” Host Jimmy Fallon stepped down from the dais and held out his hand to Steve, then dropped into a mock boxing crouch, but Steve hauled him up to his feet and into a rough hug, then patted him on the left pectoral with a grin.

He spun and waved at the crowd again as the last notes of his theme music faded away, undid the button on his royal blue suit jacket, flicked the jacket back over his hip, and dropped into the seat next to Jimmy.

“So. You’re like, here,” Jimmy breathed, obviously star struck.

“Yes, yep, I am,” Steve agreed, looking around like a country bumpkin.

“Yes,” Jimmy agreed, looking uncomfortable.

“Oh! Did you want to talk or something?” Steve asked with a devilish chuckle.

“Well, yeah,” Jimmy replied with a laugh, letting the audience in on the joke that they’d deliberately played up the awkward. “So thanks for coming. You haven’t done a lot of talk shows. Really glad you could make it, man.”

“Yeah, thanks for having me. I haven’t done a lot of press because I haven’t had much to say, and besides, Tony Stark talks enough for all of us put together.” Fallon and the audience laughed at that, and Tony Stark laughed the loudest. “But now that I’m working on these projects, I have a lot to say.”

“Yeah, so I hear you’ve been really busy since New Year’s.”

“Oh, you mean since my big bisexual coming out? Yep. We just shot a spot for the It Gets Better web site that goes live today, and I’m launching my own web site, YouTube Channel, social media – the whole nine yards.”

“And why are you jumping head first into social media? I mean, that’s a leap for a guy who –“

“Was born in 1918? Yeah. It’s great, though, all the ways people can communicate and share
today. But I may look like this today, but I didn’t always. I got beat up a lot, and I got harassed. I was a target for bullies and my life was threatened more than once. It wasn’t easy to feel any kind of self-esteem. And I’ve had a lot of questions and shame in my life – I’d like to help kids who are facing the same kinds of questions and doubts that I’ve struggled with find something better.”

“Wow, man, that’s really cool. And we have the spot to show, and your handle is?”

Steve grinned at the camera and said, “You can find me therealsteverogers on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and YouTube,” he counted off on his fingers.

“Didja miss any?”

“Probably. The YouTube thing is the most exciting – we’re working on a short film that I hope to have ready in a few weeks, and I’ve got a lot of ideas. Oh, and we’re launching a web site. Therealsteverogers.com. It should go live in another week or so.”

“And there’s something special about this film that you’re doing, right?”

“Yeah. I did all the art for it myself. Part of it will be animated.”

“Wow, Captain America draws, paints, doodles?”

“All of the above. I was a commercial artist before the war. I worked on comics and science fiction magazines before I enlisted.”

“Oh? Any titles we might have heard about?”

Steve hesitated only a moment, “Maybe. I worked on Action and Detective, among others. You know – Superman and Batman?”

“Shut the front door!” Fallon exclaimed, slamming his palm on the desk. “Where can we see your work?”

“Well, we’re putting together a show. Well, Tony Stark is,” Steve corrected himself.

“And that would be Iron Man –“

“Yeah, sometimes. And Ms. Potts – Pepper. She’s the art expert for Stark Industries.”

“And the CEO,” Fallon prompted.

“Yep. She’s a busy lady,” Steve agreed. “She helped me pick out my outfit,” he offered, standing up, tugging on the lapels of his jacket to show it off, and spinning around to give everyone a good look. This maneuver was met with applause, whistles, catcalls, and several “I love you”s and “Will you marry me?”s. Steve waved, blew a kiss to the audience and grinned.

“Wow. She has really good taste,” Jimmy observed as Steve dropped back in his seat.

“She does. Way better than I do.”

“You’re not really gay, then, are you? I mean every gay friend of mine consults on my wardrobe and gives anything I wear off the show a solid ‘F’.”

“I’m bisexual. I think I missed the memo on being a sharp dresser. I can’t dance either. I think, though, that good taste and talent on the dance floor may be part of the gay stereotype.”
“Wow, you’re really not much of a catch, then, are you?”

“Guess not. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

“Hey, I’m just a kid from Brooklyn. My folks are from Sunset Park –“

“I’m from Red Hook. I live in Manhattan now.”

“Yeah, I grew up in Saugerties. But hey, I’m straight, and I’d do you.”

Steve just looked at Fallon with an arched eyebrow, and then the two men dissolved into sputtering giggles.

“Okay, okay, let’s watch your It Gets Better spot – and this features some of your art, right?”

“Yes. I did a lot more, so we’re using that in the longer film we’re still developing.”

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The spot ran and earned a lengthy round of applause from the audience, at which point Steve stood up, grinning stupidly, and waved at everyone. Then Fallon announced a break for commercial. The two men leaned in toward each other, chatting easily, while the Roots played a jam of jazz and percussion as the broadcast cut to commercial.

“How you doin’, Barnes?” Sam asked, leaning toward James in his seat in the audience of the Tonight Show. On James’s other side was Barton, tapping impatiently on the arm of his seat. The rest of the Avengers were elsewhere in the audience – Sam had decreed that the full set was more than he could handle, although everyone knew he was talking on behalf of Barnes.

“Why we here again?” James asked, tilting his head toward Wilson.

“To see Steve work a room,” Wilson said softly. “You know – see him in context.”

“Context of what?”

“The world.”

James lifted his face and peered at Sam, his brows furrowing. “What’s that meant to prove?”

“Sometimes it’s easier to see how something or someone when you can see it in relation to the world.”

“So. He’s more at ease now than when he was 90 pounds of nothin’. He was during the war, too. Commanding. But the little fucker could charm the wings off an angel when he wanted somethin’ done, even when he was knee-high to nothin’. I should know – he got me into more shitstorms than I could count, and then I had to get us out of ‘em. Always been a devious little bastard,” James grumbled under his breath.

“No wonder you guys were friends,” Barton chimed in. “Cos I’m pretty sure I won that last round on the range, but you cheated.”

“I do not cheat.”

“Pretty sure you did.”

“I. Do. Not. Cheat. You are simply not as good as me.”
The band started up, and Fallon looked up as the director came out on the stage, counting down to the return from commercial.

“Rematch, tomorrow,” James told Barton, and then turned to Wilson. “You’re officiating.”

“I am, am I? How’d I get dragged into this?”

“You’re the neutral party, Wilson. It’s your job to judge shit,” Barton hissed at him as the house lights dimmed again.

They were cut off by the Roots launching into Steve’s theme song again, leaving Rogers wincing in recognition on the couch on stage.

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Coming back from the break, Fallon challenged Steve to a round of beer pong. Fallon arranged for Steve to have a yard, a yard-long blown glass drinking vessel ending in a substantial bulb at the bottom – you couldn’t put a yard down on a flat surface, you had to hang it in a special stand. Or drink the entire thing down in one go. It was a significant volume of beer, and could easily get a normal person seriously buzzed or even drunk by the time they reached the bottom of the yard.

Fallon had a shot glass of beer, and grinned saucily at Steve.

“You know I can’t get drunk, right?” Steve asked, eyeing the full yard glass suspended in its cradle.

“Nah, that’s just a rumor. Ever drink one of those?”

Steve lifted the yard up to peer into its amber depths and shook his head. “Still don’t think it’s gonna get me drunk, Jimmy.”

“So let’s find out!”

They played a couple of rounds, and when Steve lost, he downed the entire yard in one go. Just tipped the thing up to his lips, opened his mouth, and down it went. Gaping, Fallon asked how he could do that.

Steve explained mildly, “Got no gag reflex. I just open my throat and pour.” He grinned while Fallon’s mouth dropped open even wider.

Around the country was heard the sound of millions of lube caps being thumbed open. From another part of the audience, Tony Stark cackled and was shushed by Pepper Potts. At the same time, Darcy Lewis also cackled, more evilly, and was shushed by a chorus of Jane Foster, Erik Selvig, and Ian Boothby. Thor rumbled. Banner sniggered, but did it quietly enough that he flew under the disapproval radar. Next to Barnes, neither Wilson nor Barton dared make a sound if Barnes didn’t. Barnes didn’t.

Then Steve challenged Jimmy to a round where if Jimmy lost, he had to drink the yard. Jimmy chuckled nervously. “You do know I’m the host of a national talk show, and we’re live, right?”

“Yep.” Steve stood there, holding his paddle, bouncing a ping pong ball in his palm, waiting for Fallon to make his decision. The host’s eyes kept flicking between the full yard and the ping pong ball for a good thirty seconds. The audience started to get a little antsy, muttering amongst themselves at the uncharacteristic delay. The Roots started riffing on the Psycho theme, and finally Fallon grinned, tossing up his paddle.
“I concede! You win! Is that how you won the war?” Fallon demanded, chuckling.

“Pretty much. Now, you lost, so you owe me,” Steve informed him with a grin, picking up the yard and its cradle and handing it to a stage hand to clear it out of the way.

James found this especially funny, saying that Steve was always a sneaky little shit. And he clearly still was, even if he wasn’t so little anymore.

“Oh, now, we didn’t agree to that beforehand –“ Fallon protested.

“Be in one of my films – help me with my mission,” Steve said, turning on the earnest charm.

The entire audience erupted into, “Awwww,” and Jimmy Fallon had no choice but to laugh and acquiesce. “Okay, we gotta take a break, but come on back! We have a special surprise for Captain Rogers!”

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Steve and Fallon continued to joke around during the break, and it was pretty clear from where James was sitting that Steve was enjoying himself. Fallon was a good host, and he was genuinely funny. That beer thing kind of backfired on him, but not before he and Steve played some awkward and pretty funny beer pong. The audience was pretty mellow, and James had to admit he was kind of enjoying himself. He always liked shows when he was younger – another little slice of his past he’d forgotten until he was in a similar situation in the present. This wasn’t vaudeville, but it wasn’t far off – comedy, music, all it needed was the guy with the dancing dog, or the lady with the parrots. And some dancing girls.

The lights dimmed twice in rapid succession, warning that the show was going out live again shortly. Stage hands who’d been tidying up the set and moving things around stopped to listen to their headsets, made a couple of adjustments, and then scurried off stage.

Fallon looked up from his desk and asked into his mike, “Are we back yet?” and the director gal counted down with sweeps of his arm leading up to the end of the break.

“Okay, and we’re back!” Fallon announced, grinning into the camera that maneuvered to the front of the stage. “Now, I said we had a special guest. It’s someone you know, someone I think who’s been a big influence on you.”

Steve frowned mightily – there was no one left in the world who would have any influence over him. Not that anyone could influence Steve Rogers when he had something stuck up his ass. One constant in the universe was that Steve Rogers was a determined sonovabitch.

“Yeah, I can’t think of anyone. All the Avengers are here tonight,” he gestured out to the darkened audience, which was suddenly illuminated by spotlights seeking out the Avengers – to the applause of the audience, the lights picked out Stark, Thor, Banner, and Romanoff, and then another one wandered through the audience until it found Barton, then panned across him and Wilson. James could see their images up on one of the big screens on either side of the stage.

“Anyone else who would have influenced me is long gone,” Steve concluded with a shake of his head.

“Well, gee, Steve, there’s no one who’s influenced you recently?” Steve shook his head again. “Okay, well, I guess it’s going to be a surprise, huh? Here’s someone who’s prepared a special song, just for you.”
Steve sat forward in his seat, peering over to the area of the stage near the band. The curtain remained still, even as the band launched into a heavy metal riff that spun out into a rasping snare beat, and a soaring, drawn out vocal.

“Who’s strong and brave, here to save the American Way?”

“No way!” Steve cried, rising from his seat as the curtain drew back to reveal that guy from New Year’s – Adam Lambert – in a silver and black, metal studded and distinctly futuristic looking outfit, practically felating the microphone as he spun the lyrics into near operatic heights.

James frowned. He hadn’t counted on this guy being a factor in any equation related to Steve.

“Who vows to fight like a man for what’s right night and day?”

Two columns of scantily clad dancers, both male and female, poured out from backstage. The women’s outfits were red, white and blue glittery midriff tops and silver lamé tap pants, with silver heeled shoes, while the men’s costumes were red bowties, blue suspenders, and tight-fitting silver pants, and similar shoes. The men were topless, and the women were barely covered.

James sat up straight, grinning. He got his dancing girls. And dancing boys. He had to admit the combination intrigued him, and he’d bet Steve was enjoying the view from where he stood. The dames were gorgeous, and the boys were all young with cheekbones and hairless chests – they each could pass for a willowy dame.

“Who will campaign door-to-door for America, Carry the flag shore to shore for America, From Hoboken to Spokane, The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!”

They marched out onto the stage and took up formations very similar to the ones the old USO dancers did. James had seen Steve’s old stage show in old reels – one time Phillips had a couple flown in to entertain the guys. One dancer carried a shield decked out in pulsating lights, and when the boy carrying that made it out onto the stage, he tossed it toward Steve, who caught it in mid-air with a flourish and a cheeky grin toward the audience, like he was letting them in on a big secret.

Steve could take a hint.

He joined in with the dancing, shuffling his feet and striking poses with the shield, and actually started reciting some of his old USO schtick, much like he had for the fashion show back at the Tower, but in time with the slower, more deliberate beat that Adam set with his vocals.

The dancers swirled around him, more sinuous and sensual than the USO dancers had been, and Steve grinned at the girls and boys who trailed their hands over him, shimmied closer, and spun around him like satellites.

“Who will campaign door-to-door for America, Carry the flag shore to shore for America, From Hoboken to Spokane, The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!”

The audience was going crazy. James could see Fallon, wearing a crappy Hitler mustache, tip-toeing his way among the throng of dancers. He almost took an elbow to the face once or twice as he dodged among them.

“We can’t ignore there’s a threat and a war we must win,
Who’ll hang a noose on the goose-stepping goons from Berlin?
Who will redeem, head the call for America,
Who’ll rise or fall, give his all for America,
Who’s here to prove that we can?
The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!”

Steve turned as the audience started shouting, “Hitler!” and practically doubled over laughing. Fallon did look pretty stupid, and when Steve popped him a fake punch, Fallon’s arms threw up in the air, and he made a big deal about being punched in the face by Captain America.

Steve had made his way across the stage to where he was only a couple of feet away from Lambert. They looked at each other, and James felt a stab of jealousy that was white hot and piercing in its intensity. Lambert took a step to the right and reached for Steve, pulling himself toward the microphone stand. And suddenly the song shifted to two part harmony, with Steve’s lower notes blending seamlessly with Lambert’s higher range. Steve had the ability to harmonize pretty much instantly, thanks to all those years he sang with that barbershop quartet.

The audience went nuts when Captain America started signing harmony with Adam Lambert.

“Stalwart and steady and true,
(see how this guy can shoot, we tell ya, there’s no substitute!)
Forceful and ready to defend the
Red, White, and Blue!
Who’ll give the Axis the sack, and is smart as a fox?
(far as an eagle will soar)

The audience pretty much had a stroke when Fallon joined in, threading a third voice and another layer of harmony into the vocals.

“Who’s making Adolph afraid to step out of his box?
(He knows what we’re fighting for!)”
Who waked the giant that napped in America?
We know it’s no-one but Captain America,
Who’ll finish what they began?
Who’ll kick the Krauts to Japan?
The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!
(Who’s strong and brave, here to save the American way?!)

As the last notes of the song faded away, the three men were all kinda hugging each other – Fallon behind both Steve and Lambert, his arms around their shoulders, and Steve and Lambert had their arms around the other’s waists.

“We’ll be taking our act on the road – you can see us in Vegas, Tahoe, and the Poconos. Steve Rogers and the Captones!”

“Capettes,” Adam corrected with a chuckle that crinkled his eyes.

“Cappers?” suggested Steve with a shrug.

James laughed softly at Steve, whispering with some affection, “What a punk!”

“Whatever! Steve Rogers and Adam Lambert, ladies and gentlemen! Best show ever! Thanks everyone – have a great night!”
Less than a minute later, the director called out, “And we’re out!” and the lights over the audience came up.

Wilson knocked his shoulder against James’s and grinned. James ducked his head, embarrassed, as Barton asked, “Who knew Rogers could sing? He sounded pretty damned good with Lambert!”

Wilson laughed out loud. “Hell, yes. He should go on tour with Lambert – let him see something of the country today. Be good for him.”

James was about to answer when they heard clearly through the sound system, “SO’s here with me tonight. He wants to meet you. Come out for a drink with us?”

“Yeah, sure, no one’s expecting me at home. I’d love to meet your boyfriend.”

Lambert put his arm around Steve’s shoulders, and James felt a surge of possessiveness as they exited the stage into the wings, and then he lost sight of them. He nearly growled, the view of that arm around Steve bothered him so much. And feeling Wilson and Barton’s gazes on him didn’t help.

“How ‘bout we go back to Vinnie’s?” James suggested. Wilson beamed at him, obviously thinking this was progress for James, voluntarily entering a social situation. But he just wanted to keep drinking until he could drown that lingering image on his retina. And dance until he couldn’t think at all.

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Chapter End Notes

Next up is chapter 8, Sure Fire Winners. In which Pepper and her minions select the participants in Steve’s season of The Bachelor, and Steve begins building his media empire, with a little help from his friends. And Bucky starts to find his way back.
In which Steve's media empire grows, James becomes a fixture at the local bar, and Pepper makes her selections.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

James didn’t comment on Steve heading out with Lambert and his “SO,” although he did ask Wilson what the acronym meant, since he couldn’t imagine that Lambert had a supervising officer – there was nothing military about him by any permutation of the term. When Wilson had explained it stood for “significant other,” James had asked a few other questions, and ended up with his curiosity satisfied, but little else. By the time they got to Vinnie’s, he was ready to cut loose a little – a lot, really. He still wasn’t allowed out of the tower unsupervised, so he was grateful that Wilson and Barton were willing to drop in at the local for a drink or two. James had every intention of getting more than just a drink while he was here.

The girls he danced with the last time weren’t there, but there were other attractive women, women whose eyes undressed him, whose bodies were more than willing to share some airspace with him. That guy wasn’t on the dance floor yet, and James had to admit he was nervous about sharing the parquet with him. Not fearful, but nervous. Maybe even a little disappointed he wasn’t here. But he wouldn’t admit to that to anyone, not even himself.

That night, it was just him and the girls on the dance floor, and he enjoyed the sensation of their warm bodies grinding up against him, their hands roaming over his body, and their bodies responding to his touches and movements. Enjoyed their kisses and their caresses, their soft curves undulating under his hands, and their not so subtle pressures against his groin, fingers in his belt loops guiding him where they wanted him to be.

He really wanted to bring one of them home with him – hell, maybe both – but there was no way he could work out the logistics. Not with his watchdogs sitting at the bar debating whether or not to have a go at the dart board, all the while keeping their attention uncomfortably focused on him. No way were they gonna let James have a booty call – what a term! – at Stark’s tower.

Then one of the girls started making noises about the bathroom, and how he should come along. Took him a few seconds to get the gist, and then he realized she was suggesting sex in the toilet. Well, he’d been in the bathrooms here, and they were spotless and really pretty nice – soothing décor, scrupulously clean, a sitting area with comfortable chairs, probably a good place for someone really, really drunk to settle while they sobered up enough to stay on their feet long enough to get into a cab. He figured the ladies’ was probably even nicer. It wouldn’t have to be a rough fuck against the tiles – unless that’s what they wanted.

As he continued to dance with the girls, enjoying the bounce of their delicious breasts, the wriggle of the swell of their asses against him, he felt a sudden sensation of lurching sickness. It had been a long time since James had fucked anyone by choice – over 70 years. He was suddenly awash in nerves, igniting a little tremor in his flesh hand, and an anxious whirring in his prosthetic. He focused on breathing, matching his rhythm to the rhythm of the very fine ass shimmying under his
The idea of sex, right there, feet away from the dance floor and the bar, certainly sparked interest on the part of his dick, even as it frayed his nerves. Then he realized he didn’t have any protection with him. Then he remembered the machines in the bathroom. He just needed some cash. Which meant he was going to either have to tell Wilson the truth of what he was up to, or some elaborate lie. Truth was better, but there was no telling if he’d cooperate. Maybe he wouldn’t, and it would be no-go this time. Next time he’d be ready, in more ways than one. Either way, James felt like the room was emptying of air, as he tried to get the nerve up to approach Wilson.

Since when was James Buchanan Barnes paralyzed by the idea of sex?

And how hard could it be to ask to bum a coupla bucks off a buddy for a rubber?

James didn’t have the opportunity to find out, because right then, Barton and Wilson were walking toward him, shrugging on their coats and holding out James’s coat to him.

“Gotta early meeting at the VA tomorrow, gotta get some sleep tonight,” Wilson explained as James stopped dancing, his hands still on the hips of the tall brunette, Cindy, Candi, or something. She glanced up at him warily, eyes darting from the offered coat to James and back again.

Suddenly, James could breathe again. Fuck if he wasn’t goddamned relieved he wasn’t going to get laid tonight!

“What’s your deal? House arrest?” she asked teasingly.

“Something like,” Wilson answered. “James is recovering from an unpleasant tour in the military. Therapist hasn’t cleared him for solo missions.”

“Nah, maybe you’re a serial killer,” her friend, Emily, or maybe it was Emma he thought, added with a leering grin. “The Manhattan Winter Soldier Dude,” she added, giggling.

James immediately tensed, the breath knocked out of him again. This was getting old! How could she know? How could she know Hydra’s designation for him, had they found him, was he compromised, what – he stopped suddenly at the pressure of Wilson’s hand wrapped round his wrist, the reassuring look in his eyes as he pulled him back to the present.

“Not exactly,” Sam said soothingly. “James here is doing really, really well, but we can’t leave him here without one of us due to doctor’s orders. Sorry, man, but I gotta get some shuteye.”

“Yeah, and we got that rematch tomorrow, too,” Barton interjected with an evil grin.

James returned the grin, looking forward to taking his frustrations out on Barton’s ass. He grinned back, just as evilly. “Yeah, right. I’ll see you girls later?” he asked, and took each one in his arms and kissed them thoroughly, earning him a happily dazed look on each of their faces, and equal parts jealousy and desperation on Barton and Wilson’s. He figured their girls were in for it tonight, and that gave James some satisfaction – at least someone was getting some! He’d be jerking off for sure, and pretty certain they would be too if their ladies weren’t interested.

His dick was definitely standing at attention, happily snapping a salute in maybe-Cindy and could-be-Emily’s direction. He smiled to himself.

*See? Not gay.*

“You guys coming back tomorrow?” maybe-Cindy asked hopefully.
“Can we?” James asked, barely hiding the desperation in his voice.

“Yeah, sure, we’ll see you then,” Sam promised, his expression odd as his eyes flicked between James and the girls.

Shit, Wilson knew something was up, and it wasn’t just James’s Johnson …

&&&

A: SO loved meeting you last night. Wants you over for brunch. I may be jealous.
S: Enjoyed meeting him – he’s a keeper!
A: Kinda planning on it – unless you steal him away.
S: No worries.
A: Not so sure, baby bi!
S: Hah. Got some invites I want to go over with you.
A: Shoot.
S: Grammys.
A: Take it. We’ll duet.
S: I thought you didn’t want to.
A: That was before Fallon. We sound amazing together. We should think about recording something. But I’d love to do Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy with you.
S: Old song, big hit my time. You think people today would like it?
A: I’ll send you YouTube link. You will love it. 3 part harmony.
S: We need Jimmy.
A: I’ll ask him.
A: Here’s link
S: I’ll take a look. Now, how about CMAs?
A: Fuck yes. Country music? You’ll reach a lot of kids you can’t any other way.
S: ESPYs?
A: Yes, jocks can be queer, too. And bi. And you’re bigger than them – you may scare some of the bullies into being nicer. Definite yes.
S: AMAs?
A: Think I’m still banned for life.
S: What did you do?
A: Was myself, middle America didn’t approve
S: Sucks.
A: You have no no idea.
S: AVAs?
A: Don’t think so. Unless you want to expand into porn.
S: Not right now.
A: I like it. Keep your options open. Tell them maybe next year.
S: Oscars?
S: Going to be doing a lot of awards shows.
A: No Tonys?
A: But you’re a New Yorker. Wait and see – once they hear you’re doing other shows, they will want you. Play hard to get. We can maybe do a song there 2.
S: You just want to sing with me.
A: Hell yes. We do an album. EP at least. For your cause. Think about it.
S: Seriously?
A: Seriously.
“So, tall, dark and grumpy.”

James glanced up from his computer screen to find Darcy Lewis staring at him pugnaciously, wild curly hair framing her bespeckled face, and fists planted belligerently on her narrow hips.

“I assume you mean me, since there isn’t anyone else nearby.”

“Damn straight I do. Look, I love sad gay boys pining for each other as much as the next girl – it fuels the blogosphere and inspires reams of explicit fan fiction. It fills my soul. Seriously, I totally heart it. But you, my grumpy friend, need to get your sorry butt in gear and tap that ass before someone else beats you to it! He’s not gonna wait around forever for you to realize you really do get it up for him, y’know?”

James stared at her, mouth working soundlessly for a long moment, before he sputtered out, “I’m not … he’s not … uh –“

“Bullshit. You are, he is, and the two of you belong together. Dude, get it together! Don’t make me come back here and tase you!” she jabbed her finger warningly at him, practically growling at him.

“Bu –“

“No buts. Unless it’s you two getting it on with your very fine butts. Those are good butts. With great butts comes great responsibility. Or great sex. Probably great sex. So, good butts. Use them wisely,” she concluded, and flounced off. “Tap that!” she commanded over her shoulder.

A few minutes later, Dr. Foster came over, smiling apologetically. “I’m sorry about Darcy. She means well, but when she and Thor get into the Pop-Tarts, all bets are off. I really need to find a way to keep her away from sugar, or better yet, find a way for her to metabolize sugar that doesn’t involve manic episodes. You know, that would be a really promising field of research – the health benefits alone could be enormous – I’m going to have to talk to Dr. Banner about that before I forget …” she muttered to herself and wandered off. James was left staring after her, smiling bemusedly.

A little while later, Erik Selvig stopped by on his circuit of goodbyes. James was surprised to find him sober, and Selvig shared a conspiratorial smile. “I normally am sober,” he admitted. “But if I act drunk, they leave me alone. Sometimes it’s nice to have a break from being the parent figure, you know? And it’s nice to see Darcy’s maternal side come out.” Selvig flashed him a brilliant if shit-eating smile.

James chuckled, then speared him with a look. “What advice do you have to offer me?”

Selvig laughed softly, ruefully. “Only that no matter how long you live, it’s not much of a life if you don’t have friends. You have a remarkable friend in Steve Rogers. So what if he’s a bit of a nancy boy, hmm? Does it really hurt you in any meaningful way?”

“It makes me question my memories, because I don’t remember him like that. And if I can’t trust my returning memories, how do I know I can recover? That I really am recovering?”

Erik shifted back on his foot at that raw honesty of James’s response. “Well. Memory is subjective, isn’t it? Except perhaps in the case of an eidetic memory – like Steve has – memory is unreliable as a witness to history. But memory isn’t the whole story, it’s just one perspective of millions of permutations. Non-sequential memory – sense memory – is more powerful and reliable.
When you remember, how do you feel? What sensations do the memories evoke? What emotions? When you look at Steve Rogers, what do you feel?"

“I, uh—"

“You ponder that, my friend, and you’ll figure it out. Trust me,” he added, tapping the side of his nose with his finger. “Good luck,” Selvig added, thrusting his hand to James, who took it enthusiastically. “And don’t tell Jane – she needs to mother-hen me every so often, makes her feel like she’s in charge. It’s good for her, okay?”

“Okay,” James agreed with a wry smile as Erik bade his leave, and continued around the public area saying goodbye.

Thor was the next to find him, and he had to admit that he was always sorry to see the big guy go. “Friend Barnes,” Thor greeted with a grip to his right shoulder and a clap to the metal arm. “I will return once my Lady Jane and our friends are situated in their new lab.”

“You’re not staying?”

“No, I wish to learn more about why you do not wish to be joyous with friend Steven.”

“Joyous?”

“Yes. You are shieldmates, are you not? You have gone into battle together, watching each other’s, um…”

“Six.”

“Six. Watched each other’s six. I am told you were both friends as children, up until the night of the falling ball of light. You are so very sad, friend Barnes. I wish that you could be happy, and embrace the joyousness friend Steven offers.”

“Ah. You mean gay.”

“Gay, yes! Gay. It is a happy word, and you are not happy, James. I believe you could be happy with Steven. I believe you could be joyous and gay.”

“Thanks, Thor. It’s something to ponder,” James said with a dubious frown. It wasn’t like he was going to pick a fight with a god, for fuck’s sake.

Thor clapped James on the flesh shoulder this time, and it was a point of pride that James didn’t even shudder at the impact. With a wide, generous grin, Thor nodded gravely and said, “We will celebrate your joy when I return, friend Barnes. I wish you great happiness.”

And with that, the god of thunder took his leave, and James reached over and absently massaged the flesh that would briefly bear a bruise in the shape of the god’s hand.

Okay, so that was nearly all of them. James figured that Ian would eventually make his way around to him, so he deliberately didn’t work on anything important. He assumed he’d be interrupted, and Ian didn’t disappoint him.

“It was an honor meeting you, Sergeant Barnes,” Ian said in his self-effacing way. “You’ve been a hero to me for, well, my entire life, sir.”

James stared at the offered hand for a long moment, struck dumb. Then he shook his head.
“Somehow, I doubt that,” he countered with a lop-sided smirk.

“No, sir, it’s true. My grandfather always spoke very highly about you. He’d be pleased to learn I’d met you, and especially that you survived after all – not all you went through, of course, but that you’re here, now. He’d wanted me to thank you for everything you’ve done. And sorry what’s been done to you. I like to think if he’d had any idea that you … well, he would’ve gone back. They all would’ve.”

James stared at Ian for a moment longer, and finally blurted, “Kid, who’s your grandfather?”

“James Montgomery Falsworth. You served together.”

James nearly sank to his knees at that news. Monty! Monty made it home and had a family and a grandson that somehow ended up with the fucking Avengers? Fate had a fucking twisted sense of humor, that was for sure. But Monty’s family! James felt a surge of excitement and pleasure. “Hell, we did more than serve together. We got drunk together, patched each other up, made up dirty limericks and told each other blue stories. Monty. Why the hell didn’t you say something sooner? And Captain Rogers, Steve – he’d want to know, too.”

“If I see him before we leave, I’ll let him know. But I think we’re leaving shortly. Maybe you could tell him for me? Tell him Monty’s grandson passed on Monty’s good wishes and affection? He talked about the two of you often, you know. Part of the family legacy, having served with Captain America and his Sergeant Barnes.”

Odd turn of phrase, that. “His?”

“The way Granddad told the story, everyone in the Howling Commandos knew, sir. Knew about you and Captain Rogers.”

“Knew what?” James asked with a sudden cold spot in his gut, growing and radiating outward.

“That you were in love with each other, sir. Said it was the greatest love story no one ever knew. He’d be happy to know you both found each other again, Sergeant. Happy to know that you both woke up in a world where what you felt for each other wasn’t illegal any longer. Don’t understand why it was, honestly – makes no sense when you think about it … Sir, are you okay?”

James was silent for a long moment while he digested this information. Monty and the others had assumed that he and Steve were a thing. His comrades in arms had assumed that they were both that way, when being that way was considered sick, disgusting, illegal. Deviants, inverts. Fags. Why? How?

He’d never even considered it, back then. Had he? Certainly never did anything that could have been interpreted … well, there was sharing the tent, he supposed, but they did that because they were used to bunking in together like brothers, and Steve was so fucking hot blooded after the serum, James could actually get warm just sharing the tent with him. The others shared tents, too, so it couldn’t have been too outrageous for Rogers and Barnes to share a tent, being childhood friends together as they were.

He couldn’t remember them doing anything unusual, nothing they hadn’t done all their lives together. He and Steve had just fallen back into the same rhythm they’d always had since childhood. Hadn’t they?

“We weren’t. We aren’t. But Monty was a good friend, someone I was proud to serve with. Where is Monty now? Is he still …?”
“He passed a few years ago, sir. He’d’ve been chuffed to see you again, though. Funny about him
getting it wrong, though – he said all the Commandos were convinced of it. Said that’s why
Captain Rogers sunk his plane after you – after you disappeared. Couldn’t bear to live without
you.”

James considered the idea, and found he believed it. He wondered, if Steve had gone first, what he
would have done. Would he have taken the first chance that presented itself to end it all?

He just might have done.

No, he *would’ve*. He suddenly felt the conviction down to his bones.

And wasn’t that a kick in the head?

He didn’t even realize he’d risen until he felt his arms tighten around the slight young man, pulling
him into an unexpected hug. “Thank you,” he whispered to James Montgomery Falsworth’s
grandson. “Next time you’re in town, let’s do this properly, huh?”

And James ignored the sudden vacuum that was the silence that rippled through the space, as
people realized that the terrible Winter Soldier was embracing a young British intern he’d barely
spoken to in the last month to say goodbye. He let Ian go, and cuffed him behind the ear as he told
him, “Take care of yourself. Don’t let Darcy be in charge all the time – grow a pair, for fuck’s
sake.”

“It’s okay, I *like* it when she’s in charge. If you know what I mean,” he added with a comical
waggle of his eyebrows.

“You dog,” James chuckled and nodded. “Good trip. Thanks, Ian.”

&&&

As the others bid the Foster-Selvig team goodbye, James sat and let the memories wash over him,
moments captured in the amber of memory, preserved so he could examine them in the present.

… The feel of the hillside under his belly as he took position to watch over Steve’s six while he
snuck into a Hydra facility on foot.

… The sensation of breath in, breath out, taking the shot and the grim satisfaction of the bullet
finding its target in one clean, silent volley.

… Fear when Hydra agents surged out of the rubble of an apparently abandoned base, pulling
Steve under like ants swarming a picnic. Rapid-fire calculations in his head to determine the best
targets to take out to maximize Steve’s chances of eeking out a victory, and his relief when Steve
fought his way to the top of the heap, and took it down.

… Shivering into Steve’s embrace to ward off the terrible cold outside a snow-crusted town in
Austria, the chill permeating every cell of his body as it leached away body heat. Bones aching
with the cold, fever robbing him of strength and reason. Steve the only source of warmth, and him
falling into it.

… Watching Steve leave the comfort of the campfire to take first watch, eyes following him into the
darkness, worrying about him by force of habit, having to convince himself that Steve was strong
now, healthy. Able to care for himself. Then turning back to the firelight and his team. The knowing
smirk on Dum Dum’s face, the glance that passed between Morita and Jones. The calm appraisal
of Dernier. The serene smile on Falsworth’s face.
All he could remember was love, the way they’d always cared for each other. Best friends. Brothers. Partners.

But the men had seen more. Had it been there, and James was too used to habit to see it for what it was?

*The Captain and his Sergeant?*

&&&

“Fucking hell, Barnes! You did not just do that to me again!”

James hopped down from his perch 30 feet in the air, and landed gracefully on the balls of his bare feet, and smirked at Barton. Nay, he power-smirked. He turned on the wattage and fucking smoked Barton with his power smirk. Barton was gonna be a smear on the concrete after exposure to his power smirk.

“Sorry, Barton – I gotta give it to Barnes,” Wilson said, shrugging apologetically. “And I categorically do not want to award this fucker any points, but he totally nailed it.”


Barton went up to the target, hand shaking, and reached out to touch the precise hole in dead center of the bullseye, fingering the clean edge of the bullethole. “Fuck, it’s still warm!”

“Told you. I don’t cheat. I don’t have to.”

Barton’s arrow tip was embedded in the target a scant few millimeters away, but clearly off the geometric center of the target.

“I never miss. I never miss!” Barton complained, wide-eyed and clearly falling into shock.

“By any other measure, you didn’t, Clint,” Sam reminded him. “Against Barnes here, it’s a photo finish, and he edged you out by a fraction. Just a fraction –“

“It’s a fraction too many! I demand a rematch! I am not going down without a fight!”

James let his lips wrap around a predatory smile and sauntered over to deliver his smirk in person to Barton. “Help me smuggle a dame in tonight from Vinnie’s, and I’ll give you your rematch. I’ll even spot you an extra try.”

“Whoa, son, hold on there!” Wilson cried, hurrying over to join them. Barton was gaping like a gutted fish, and James couldn’t help the way his smirk went wide. But Wilson was wearing his buzzkill face, and James kinda knew what was coming. “Ain’t nobody bringing anybody home to the tower, man. Not without a security background check and approval from Stark and Hill.”

“Fuck that! How’m I ever gonna get laid, huh? It’s not like I can pick up some chippie from the typing pool – I’m not even allowed on the corporate levels.”

“First of all, at a later point in the very near future, we’re going to review the politically correct and socially acceptable ways in which you can reference women in the 21st century, man. Second, sorry. I don’t mean to cockblock you, but there are security protocols in place.”

“Stark used to bring home women all the time. And then he let the wrong woman into his Malibu home and it kinda got blown up, and Pepper got hurt. And pissed. And kidnapped. And altered,”
Barton informed him. “So Pepper’s a stickler for security now.”

That completely stilled the wind in James’s sails. Total calm seas. If this was something Pepper wanted, he wasn’t going to argue. He’d heard a little about Pepper’s capture by AIM, the conversion to Extremis. The security restriction suddenly made perfect sense. “Okay. Didn’t realize.”

“Seriously, it’s that easy?” Wilson challenged with a quirk of his eyebrow.

“Miss Potts. She’s nice to me. If this makes her feel safer, I ain’t gonna argue. What about letting me get a hotel room, huh? You know, one of those rent ‘em by the hour places –“

“Well, that’s an easy answer. Hell to the no,” Sam responded with heat.

“Why not –“

“Again, security – yours. And there’s the whole world of STDs and nastiness you could pick up in places like that.”

“C’mon, Wilson, you can’t get the clap from a toilet seat!” Barton laughed, his eyes continually flicking back to his arrow and the bullethole in the target. Dude was not gonna let that go!

“Nah, but you can get crabs and shit from sheets that don’t get changed after every new ‘guest by the hour’, y’know? No way am I letting this idiot bring home any of that crap to Pepper’s nice clean tower.”

“Oh, now you know I’ll do anything she wants, you’re gonna use her as the excuse for anything you want, huh? That’s fightin’ dirty, Wilson –“

“It is what it is. You think she’s gonna be happy you bring back critters in your drawers? No. Keep it in your pants until you’re cleared to fly solo. And make sure when you do, you do it smart.”

“Shit, man, you really know how to kill the mood,” Barton chuckled. “Guess you’re just gonna have to get friendly with Mr. Right for a while,” he grinned, nodding toward James’s flesh hand.

“Maybe I should introduce you to Lefty,” James answered, taking an aggressive stance and fistng his prosthetic hand.

Barton looked warily from the hand and back to the target. “Hah! That’s it – you have an unfair advantage with a robot arm. Rematch, left arm tied behind your back!”

“Only if you do, too,” James replied with narrowed eyes.

“Can’t hold the bow with one hand –“ Barton complained.

“Then no go. Equal handicaps or not at all.” He looked at Barton for a long moment before the archer shook his head. “No go. Good. Now, I’m hittin’ the showers – grab something to eat at Vinnie’s, knock back a few beers?”

“Yeah, sure. Maria’s out of town for a coupla days checking out the venue for a meeting Stark’s got in Tokyo next month.”

“Yeah, and Nat went with her. Said she needed some time away from too much testosterone. Hell if I know where she gets that idea,” he muttered as he wandered off to the shower room.

“Seriously?” Sam asked no one in particular. James just snickered and followed Barton.
Three days after the Fallon appearance, James entered the communal floor and immediately felt a change in the air pressure, knew that something fundamental had changed. He fell back into sniper mode and scanned the floor critically, and noted the difference within the first 30 seconds.

Steve’s drawing table, all his drawing paraphernalia, was gone. Steve was gone.

James fought down a moment of panic, bile bubbling up the back of his throat.

Where was Steve?

He might never speak to him while they shared the expanse of the floor, but James had always found it oddly comforting to have Steve so close at hand. Like he could give himself the illusion that they were still close, could still sit in silence together, not needing to fill it with words and meaningless sounds and gestures.

That Steve Rogers was still his best friend and the most important person in his life. And that he was the same for Steve.

But his stuff was gone, and there was no sign of him.

The illusion was shattered, and James felt oddly bereft, lost. He stood there staring at the spot where Steve’s table had been, coffee cup in hand, and blinked.

“We moved everything to the third floor,” he heard Pepper Potts say just a few inches away. “He’s got an entire team working with him now, so we relocated everything to a suite of offices on the third floor.”

“Oh. Thanks,” James answered non-committally, taking a sip of coffee to mask his discomfort.

“Yes, I’m one step closer to having my living room back,” Pepper said with a grin, sipping at her coffee. “How’s that essay coming along?”

“This … this looks great,” Steve breathed a couple of days later, his eyes flicking across the screen as a smile widened on his face.

“You like?” asked the perky dark-skinned woman with the thick glasses and dancing eyes.

“I like very much,” Steve agreed. “This is great. How soon are we ready to go live?”

“We’ll be ready whenever you’re ready to pull the trigger, Cap,” she shrugged, grinning. The woman, Annie Frederick, was another NYU student, this one a web design major. Art and Evie had introduced her to Steve when he mentioned he needed someone to build and maintain the web site therealsteverogers.com. She was also kind of a wiz with social media, and was helping Steve launch his Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts. Evie was taking point on the design of his YouTube channel, and Art had started cutting together his first longer film, as well as helping Steve put together his introductory clips for the web site and YouTube channel.

Everything was coming together thanks to these wonderful, funny, generous people. His It Gets Better spot had already reached over a million views in the week since it went live. The appearance on Fallon had helped a lot, and word of mouth – plus blogging on Tumblr and other social media sites – was getting the word out. Reblogs, likes, and shares had plastered Steve’s spot across the
Internet, and it was still expanding. Steve was excited about the launches they were counting down to, more so than the Bachelor pilot he’d be shooting in a little more than a week’s time. Pepper had assigned them a space on the third floor, offices, equipment, and a conference room for their exclusive use. Office supplies, phones, the stuff of daily office life. All on Stark’s dime. So far. And it made Steve’s skin crawl.

He benefitted from so many people’s kindness, and they never asked anything of him in return. Even the NYU kids were still working for nothing, just the credit of interning with Steve Rogers. Captain America. But Tony and Pepper most of all kept giving without asking. Sure, if there was something that threatened the planet, Tony naturally expected him to pitch in and lead the Avengers. After they got past their pissing match on the helicarrier, he and Tony had actually found a way to work together pretty seamlessly. And Tony had been amazingly supportive of this whole Bachelor thing, and everything Steve had planned for outreach to kids at risk.

That was why Steve had an appointment to meet with Pepper Potts later that afternoon. When he arrived at her tastefully decorated office overlooking the expanse of New York, he stepped into her office hesitantly. Pepper was on the phone and held up a finger to indicate she’d be with him shortly.

He smiled briefly and went over to stand silently at the window. The view was only slightly different from that on the communal floor, since Pepper’s office was in the top-most floor of the tower before the residential floors began. He was face to face with the Chrysler Building, and he spent his time studying the graceful arches of the building’s spire. Once the tallest building in New York City, it had been dwarfed the following year by the Empire State Building. But even the clean lines of the Empire State couldn’t erase the beauty of the Chrysler, and he never tired of looking at it.

“You know, Steve, I’m going to have to ban you from my office,” Pepper told him with a wry chuckle. He whirled around to face her, a question on his face. “The final batch of audition tapes and CVs have arrived,” she added, gesturing toward her laptop. “I’m going to be reviewing the candidates to let the folks at ABC know who they can extend invitations to. They’ll only have a couple of days to assemble the cast.”

“And I’m banned because …?”

“Because I don’t want you to see any of them before the big day.”

“Not a wedding, Pep.”

“Could lead to one.”

Steve tilted his head and regarded her. He’d never thought of that. If this really worked, he could be looking at his life partner.

A wedding.

A wedding.

The idea made him feel giddy and nervous and nauseous all at the same time.

Married.

A grin split his face wide open, and she returned it with interest, toying with a pen as she swiveled slightly behind her desk.
“But that’s not why you’re here, is it. I’m always happy to see you, but it is unusual. What brings you up from your offices on the third floor, Steve?”

“That’s it, really. The offices, the equipment, the supplies. I need to pay for it, Pepper. And I need to start paying my staff. These kids are working their asses off for free –“

“Stark Foundation will pick up their salaries. Retroactive to when they started working with you.”

“Pepper, I can’t ask you to foot the bill for my activities –“

“Steve, we can afford it. It’s good press for Stark Foundation. And Tony thinks your team would be good for Stark Foundation – we could keep them on the payroll permanently, have assignments they can work on when they’re not working on your projects. It’s a win-win, for everyone.”

“I should be contributing something –“

“Steve, you do. You’re doing good in the world, and that’s the purpose of the Stark Foundation. But, if you really want to do something …”

“Yes?”

Pepper took a deep breath and looked at him for a long moment. “I’ve seen your art, and you are remarkably talented. I’ve got a team working on tracking down copies of the comic books and pulps your art appeared in – the exhibit is going to be something when it’s ready to go. But I was wondering … would you be willing to do some work for me on commission? I would love to have an original Steve Rogers for the Stark Collection. Even more, I’d love something for our personal collection.”

“Seriously? That’s all you want?”

“Well, that and for you to be happy, Steve. This is what you want, right?” she asked gravely, gesturing toward her computer, with the audition videos and biographies of potential suitors for Steve Rogers.

“Well, we’re committed now, aren’t we? At least to the pilot. And after that, we’ll see. So, yeah. It’ll help get the word out.”

“A million views in a week – I don’t think you’re going to have to do much to get the word out, Steve,” she told him, grinning.

He grinned bashfully back, rubbing at the back of his neck. “The response has been good so far. I’ve got invitations coming out of my a – er, um, ears. Half of them, I don’t know who they are, and – “

“You need an assistant to help coordinate. Someone who’s savvy. I’ll lend you mine for a few days to help you get through the worst of it, while I have HR pull some likely candidates.”

“Pepper, you can’t just keep giving me stuff –“

“Actually, Steve, I can. And what you can do is accept graciously. You’ve presented a wonderful opportunity to Stark Foundation. Stark Industries. You can do so much more than we can, simply by being you. Let me help with this. Okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed, and took her hands in his and placed a sweet kiss on her forehead. “Okay.”
“Okay,” she beamed up at him. ‘Now, unless there’s something else, you need to leave so I can start snooping into the lives of people who think they’re good enough to date you.”

“They shouldn’t even know it’s me – “

“They don’t. All the show has said is late twenty-something ex-military, bisexual commercial artist –“ at his mouth opening to protest, “you were, you are doing art, and you do that piece for me, it’s not a lie or an exaggeration –“ so he subsided. “It also said that you are based in New York, and involved in charity work and have some dangerous hobbies.” His eyebrow quirked up at that. “It’s hard to provide a generic description of someone who routinely saves the world.”

“Hmm.”

“There’s nothing untrue in the description. We don’t want people in the mix who are looking to fuck Captain America,” she added, and both eyebrows went up. “We want people who are ready to love Steve Rogers,” she concluded with a sweet smile.

“You really are too good for me,” he murmured.

“You haven’t looked in the mirror lately, have you? You’re too good to be true! Now, get out of here before I call security!” she grinned.

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Later that day, Pepper’s assistant Helena Justice arrived with a large manila envelope, which she placed, grinning, directly into Pepper’s hands. Then Helena stepped back, fists on her hips, and waited. She was a plus size woman who was comfortable in her own skin, a few years older than Pepper, but not quite as old as Tony, with salt and pepper hair and a ready smile and an even readier wit. Pepper relied on Helena to insulate her from nonsense and to know when to let the nonsense through, and Helena was good at her job. She never brought Pepper anything that wasn’t worthwhile.

Pepper arched a doubtful eyebrow in the direction of her assistant, who simply continued to stand there, smiling delightedly as she dropped into the chair opposite Pepper.

Pepper teased out the first piece of paper and gasped, drawing it all the way to stare at it grasped in one hand while her other one flew to her mouth. “Oh my God.”

It was a charcoal portrait of Tony, his head thrown back in laughter, eyes crinkling with joy, no hint of darkness or fear or the abyss, a moment in time caught perfectly on the creamy paper.

“Take a look at the other one.”

The other one was a portrait of Pepper herself, head cocks to one side, lips curled in an affectionate smirk, eyes dancing with mischief. She could almost see the messy ponytail bobbing with laughter just about to strike.

“I just need to know how you want them framed,” Helena told her.

“Did he just do these?” Pepper asked in wonder, slowly dragging her attention away from the drawings to Helena.

“I think he’s been working on them for a while, but he said it was time they went home. It’s okay to touch them – he sprayed them with fixative, the charcoal won’t come off on your hands.”
“Then let’s have them framed in the floating frames like I have in my bedroom. These will go on the wall opposite our bed. But, Hel – your first official act as his assistant is to bring me art?”

Helena nodded. “Thanks for that, by the way. It’s going to be a fun assignment. Not that I’m looking for it to be permanent. But it will be fun for a few days.”

“What do you think, is it a full-time job?”

Helena shrugged. “At first, maybe. He really does have a lot of invitations to vet. So catching up to do at first. Then … maybe not so much. Probably.”

“Think you could handle it as a side job, or do we find him his own assistant?”

Helena’s eyes gleamed. “Actually, if I could, I’d like to try both. For a while, at least.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d feel that way. And you can report to me on how he’s doing. I worry about our Captain.”

“He’s a good guy. You’d never expect him to be such a little punk, y’know?”

Pepper grinned widely at that. “Oh yes, I know.”

Helena got up to go, and then remembered something, turning back to Pepper, grinning. “Oh. Got a call. Natasha Romanoff is due back in the tower tonight. She said you’d better not have finished picking Steve’s dates yet.”

“Hmm. Happy will be running background checks for another day or two yet. There’s still time for her to play.”

“Thought the network would’ve run checks –“

“This is Steve we’re talking about. I’m not leaving anything to chance.”

“Of course not,” Helena answered with a grin, and let herself out.

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“Fox News.”

“Not yet.”

“CNN.”

“Didn’t I already do them?”

“They want a follow-up.”

“That can wait.”

“TMZ.”

“Hell, no. Never.”

“Some friends of Art and Evie’s at the NYU radio station would love to do an interview with you.”

“That sounds good – set it up. Thanks – same rules as usual.”
“Same rules as usual” meant no discussion of Barnes, questions about the personal lives of any of the Avengers, or anything classified. Other than that, Steve was willing to go with the flow. He’d done a number of interviews lately, on TV, radio, online, and in print, and it was amazing how much he had to say nowadays – and how much people wanted to ask. It was like the more he put himself out there – Steve Rogers rather than Captain America – the more people wanted to know. Wanted to know about him, about his projects, about the things that made him proud, made him angry, made him passionate.

It was like he’d finally arrived in this century, and found that he fit better now than he did in the time he was born.

It was a strange and wonderful feeling to suddenly find that he was more at home in the present than he’d been in the past.

And if he felt a pang for not having someone special from his past to share it with, well … he sucked in a deep, calming breath at the thought – at least he wasn’t entirely alone. He had new friends and new challenges, he was making a difference. And now they were only a couple of days away from shooting the pilot for his Bachelor thing.

He could wish it weren’t necessary. If he had even one small inkling, an infinitesimal indication that Bucky might be interested … he’d call the whole thing off. He’d take that tiny ember of hope and he’d nurse it to a flame. And be satisfied with just that.

But Bucky – or James, as he insisted everyone call him nowadays – hadn’t said a word to him since their fight on New Year’s. Beyond that one acknowledgement of his mother’s brownies, there hadn’t even been eye contact, no contact at all. Even that moment of weakness when Buck had been scanning his photos had been just that, a moment of weakness, done and gone. He’d never seen another. And since he’d left the communal floor for the offices Pepper provided on the third floor, he hadn’t even seen Bucky for several days.

He lived for Sam’s reports.

Hung on every word as Sam recounted with humor or concern or dispassion the latest on Bucky’s forays out into the world, his growing ease thanks to the neighborhood bar, his widening repertoire of modern dance moves, his expanding taste in modern music. Even his exploits with the beautiful women who crowded him on the dance floor, although those stories made Steve’s heart ache and his limbs feel heavy and awkward.

Just like always. Just like when Bucky would bring girls home, or stay out all night on a date, dragging back in the morning all mussed, and lipstick-stained, and fucked out so his eyes were still glazed with pleasure.

Pleasure he’d never find with Steve. Pleasure he’d never wanted with Steve.

And the memory, the thought of it, could still bring tears stinging to Steve’s eyes, still tighten his throat and clench his chest and make his skin, no matter how large, feel like it was two sizes too small.

Fuck, he still had it bad.

Same rules as usual. Because Steve couldn’t bear to hear questions about Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes because he might let it slip how much he still desperately, completely, and forever loved him.
“Steve? Steve, are you okay? Do you want me to reject the request, or … ?” Helena was saying, her head tilted sideways and brows bunched up in concern.

“Sorry. What? Sorry, I got to thinking – what was the question?”

“High school LGBTQ club in Brooklyn. They’ve requested you come and speak at one of their meetings. Actually, they’d like to do an assembly if you’re willing –“

“Yes! Absolutely! It’s Brooklyn, it’s kids. This is why we’re doing all of this,” he gestured around him at the busy team they’d assembled. “When?” he asked eagerly.

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“Shit, first night she’s home in a week, and all she wants to do is play with Pepper,” Clint was grousing into his beer, playing with a toothpick like it was a drum stick.

“Tough break, man,” Wilson agreed. “Maria blew me off because she wanted to finish up her assessment and take a bubble bath. Alone. She was very definite about that. Waste of good bubbles, if you ask me. You work your people too hard, Stark,” Wilson added pointedly to the third man at the bar who was frowning into his scotch. Vinnie kept the good stuff under the bar for when Tony came in. In fact, Vinnie had several caches for select clients, but Tony’s was the most used these days.

Tony sighed theatrically into his own drink. “My girl is playing with your girl, Barton, and not in a fun way. No, they’re going over Steve’s dates. Picking the stable. Won’t even let me play. I could pick out some nice ones for him. I’m bisexual, I know what’s what.”

“Steve’s not looking for fuck buddies, Stark, he’s looking for happily ever after,” Sam pointed out reasonably.

“Happily ever after takes time, Wilson,” Tony riposted. “It takes work and stamina. Fuck buddies in the meantime aren’t a compromise, just a diversion. A pick me up. He could do with a fuck buddy or two. Or three. Tide him over. Deserves a little happiness, y’know?”

“Yeah, well, we’re all gonna find out soon, huh? Only a week away.”

Barton turned and stretched his arms out along the edge of the bar. “Really think he’s gonna find somebody? Somebody special? I mean, through a fucking reality show?”

Tony turned too, sipping at his drink. Across from the bar, couples and groups filled the booths with their high sides, little oases of calm and privacy in the middle of New York. Down the bar on the dance floor, Barnes was grinding rhythmically with a trio of women, pausing every so often to suck face, collect a hickey, or cop a feel. Tony shook his head slightly and turned away. “Pepper’s good. Romanoff, too, but not as good as Pepper. She could be a yenta. She’s aiming for real. So, yeah. There’s that.”

Sam pivoted as well, resting back on his elbows against the bar, his foot hooked on the foot rail. And that’s when he came into the bar.

Hair slicked back, dressed in an expensive gray suit with a dark blue silk tie and dove gray suspenders, the guy who’d danced with Barnes a couple of weeks back came sidling up to the bar next to Tony and nodded. “Mr. Stark.”

“Joel.” Tony turned his attention – fully – to his drink, emptying the tumbler as the corners of his
mouth quirked up.

The guy – Joel – had caught Vinnie’s attention, and was putting in an order for food and drink while Barton and Wilson rounded on Stark, forming a three-point closed circle of menace.

“You know this guy?” Wilson asked urgently in a hoarse whisper.

“You would, too, if you ever got yourself in trouble, Wilson,” and took a step back to open the circle to admit Joel into it. "This is Joel Henderson from Stark Industries’ Legal department. Wilson, Joel, Joel, Wilson. Barton, Joel, Joel, Barton,” he introduced quickly, the quirk now a full-blown smirk.

Joel leaned back on the bar and smiled at them, offering his hand in greeting. “Saw you a couple of weeks ago, didn’t get a chance to say hi. Consider yourselves lucky you haven’t had to come visit me.”


“I’m the attorney who makes it all go away,” he drawled lazily. “I’m the guy you don’t want to see on the other side of a lawsuit.”

“He’s good at his job,” Tony said simply, putting his tumbler down on the bar and tapping two fingers toward Vinnie to indicate a refill. Vinnie grinned, set down Henderson’s glass of wine, and complied, then moved off again to serve other customers.

“You should know, I’ve pulled your ass out of more than one scandal over the years.” He nodded thanks to Vinnie and picked up his glass of wine and sipped it appreciatively. Henderson wasn’t as young as he initially appeared. His face was youthful, but in the clearer light at the bar, the silvering in his temples and threaded throughout his hair was evidence of a life lived. Tiny crinkles at the corners of his eyes revealed both laughter and experience. He tugged at his impeccable tie, loosening it, and flipped open the top two buttons. “I suppose I should thank Ms. Potts for lightening my workload.” Glancing out at the dance floor, he shook his head. “Still hasn’t worked it out, huh?”

They all followed his gaze to take in Barnes, who was now dancing with only one of the women, her body wrapped around him in ways that would be illegal in several southern states. Henderson arched an eyebrow and sipped.

“Worked out what?” Wilson asked suspiciously.

“That he’s gay. As a rainbow flag.”

“Nah, man, he’s like totally straight,” Barton corrected him. “Like, aggressively straight.”

“Sad pretty gay boy in denial say what?” Henderson teased, and then put his glass down. “He wants to be straight. But trust me, my gaydar is flawless. That boy wants dick more’n you want pizza,” he replied, sending Clint’s eyes wide.

“How’d you know I like pizza?”

Henderson shrugged his elegant shoulder. “Who doesn’t?”

Wilson chuckled softly and looked at Stark. “He was a plant.”
Tony shrugged with a little grin. “We all know how Cap feels. Needed to get a temperature on the situation. With someone I could trust, someone who wouldn’t go running to the tabloids. Someone who could handle him if it got out of hand. Joel here is the best. It’s his superpower, sussing out weakness, getting a handle on someone’s sexuality, sexual kinks. Makes him a hell of a laywer when you’re in the middle of a scandal.”

“And dancing with that?” he jutted his chin out toward Barnes, who was rotating his pelvis in a way guaranteed to melt brains, regardless of their persuasion. “That was no trial, trust me. He’s confused, he thinks she should like women. Stuck in the 1940s, dude. So, maybe he does, a little, so he’s a little bi. But trust me, he is mostly gay.”

Wilson turned toward Stark again, who shrugged. “He’s been briefed. He knows who we’re talking about, how he fits in. Prepped in case there is something to handle.”

“Okay, so if your gaydar is so finely tuned, read us,” Barton challenged, frowning, standing straight and planting his feet shoulder width apart, like he was falling to parade rest.

“Well, Mr. Stark is easy. Don’t need to say any more than that,” he added with a toothy grin at Tony, who pursed his lips and shrugged, giving him the point. “And you … hmmm,” Henderson narrowed his eyes and licked his lips. “Poly and bi,” he said, surprised and pleased. “Really. That’s intriguing. Your Avengers are more interesting than I gave them credit, Mr. Stark,” he commented to Tony, as Barton’s face grew red. It grew redder still when Henderson flicked out his business card toward him.

Wilson turned toward him and gave him an incredulous look. “Seriously?”

Barton shrugged. “Yeah,” he admitted. And palmed the card.

With a twitch of his lips, Henderson then walked right up to Wilson, practically touching chest to chest, and raised his hand so that his finger was poised over Sam’s heart. He looked into his eyes and smiled. “Straight. Until something better comes along. And if you didn’t think Steve fucking Rogers was better, you are relentlessly straight, my friend.”

“Hmm,” Sam agreed, arching his eyebrow again, flattening his hand on Henderson’s chest to push him away.

With a smirk, Henderson took a step back and lifted his glass. “See? 100% accuracy.” He nodded toward the dance floor again, took a sip. “That boy is gay.”

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James danced. James undulated. James grasped and kissed and licked and sucked and threw his head back to howl at the moon. The music pounded through his veins and quieted the beast for minutes at a time. The feel of soft, jiggling flesh pressed against him whited out his brain for fleeting seconds. The smell of perfume and floral shampoo and styling mousse and all things female set his heart racing, but it didn’t take it far enough.

Sure, his heart was pumping, he’d got a little blood flowing down south, but not enough.

They’d been doing this every night since they’d gone to watch Steve do that TV show. Every night, beers, whiskey, loud music, fast dancing, faster women, and still his Johnson was only slightly interested. A twitch now and again, a remembered longing. The interest was more in his head than it was between his legs. He wanted to have sex. He wanted to lose himself in the wet heat of a woman, but as time went on, he recognized that wasn’t as likely as he’d hoped.
He was gradually coming to realize, as memory came back and feeling intensified, that there was only one person he really wanted. Maybe one person he’d ever really wanted. And even though he hadn’t seen him in days, didn’t even move in his orbit any longer, just the barest thought of him was enough to send blood surging to his cock.

He closed his eyes and snaked his arm around the woman closest to him, hauled her closer and ground against her. She tossed a delighted, lust-filled look over her shoulder at him as she felt the force of his erection against her ass, no doubt thinking it was just for her. If only she knew.

And then he saw the guy. Dressed like a toff slumming it on his way to the opera house, striding confidently across the bar toward the bathrooms. He flicked a look in James’s direction and smirked, and kept right on going.

James didn’t even realize he’d let the woman go, and had pivoted on his heel to follow until he was standing outside the men’s room door.

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By the time James entered the bathroom, the guy had already finished up at the urinal and was washing his hands at the sleek slate countertop punctuated by graceful swirled glass bowls and artistic looking fixtures. He glanced up from the long framed mirror along the slate-tiled wall and smiled. “Make up your mind yet?” he asked in a voice that was urbane and self-satisfied.

James held back the urge to shove his mug into the mirror and squish it around in the shards. Instead he asked in a voice steadier than he would have expected, “About what?”

“To fuck or not to fuck,” the guy answered as he made a show of drying off each individual long, slender finger. Artist’s fingers, James thought incongruously. Steve’s were better. “Me, that is.”

“Not.”

“Well, that’s something. Kudos for making a decision. So, if not me, then who?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Not a woman. You play the part, but not all the curtains are rising, are they? Someone tall, dark and handsome? One of your friends out there, maybe? I’d do any one of them. Might try it on.”

“Leave them alone,” James growled, pacing around the bathroom while the guy stood there, casually drying his hands. Seriously, how long does it take to wipe your friggin’ hands off?

“I never do anything without consent. If not verbal, then tacit. You didn’t seem to mind dancing with me that night.”

“No.”

“Ah, an admission. That’s a step. You didn’t mind. Or you actually liked it?”

“Liked it.”

“I guess we’re playing twenty questions then, hmmm? Well, I’m good at games like that. Ever been with a man?”

“No.”

“Ever wanted to?”
James hesitated to answer, unsure himself. Finally he settled on, “Maybe.”

“Getting somewhere then. Someone special?”

Again hesitation, again a resigned answer. “Yes.”

“Does he know?”

“No.”

“Would he welcome it?”

“He says he loves me.”

“Oh.” That seemed to knock the arrogant right out of him as his eyes widened in genuine surprise. “I hadn’t realized. When Mr. Stark asked me – oh.”

James suddenly tensed all over, rage boiling up from the center of his burning soul, propelling his body forward. The guy took a faltering step back toward the sinks. “Stark? Stark put you up to – whatever this is?”

“No. I work for Stark. He asked me to do a risk assessment. I chose the methodology based on my initial impressions. He had nothing to do with any particulars.”

“Risk assessment for what?”

“Whom. The man who loves you … he’s someone Mr. Stark cares for. A great deal, if my analysis is correct. And it always is. Not necessarily romantically, although I suspect he wouldn’t kick him out of bed. He wants what’s best for him. Mr. Stark does. And his friend wants you. So you see the problem, hmm?”

“Enlighten me,” James answered, flexing his prosthetic arm. In the stone-lined space, it was louder than usual, bouncing off the unyielding walls.

“You’re confused about what you want, but you don’t pose a specific danger. For what it’s worth, I’m convinced that you are more gay than not, and I’m never wrong. Your friend who loves you. I think you should love him back.”

“Yes. And I’m never wrong about these things. It’s what makes me very successful at what I do. You’re luckier than most, Sergeant Barnes. Many people make do, accept less than they want or need. Many people never meet anyone. Few get to have the real thing. You have someone who’s loved you across decades and continents and lifetimes. It doesn’t get realer than that. Let yourself be loved. Love in return. What’ve you got to lose? Some 1940s sensibility that’s outmoded and buried under laws that refute the fear and the hatred? You don’t have to be afraid and you don’t have to hide. You died for your country. Others died for your right to love. You can be who you’re meant to be.”

James shifted his weight back on his back leg and simply regarded the guy. “Who are you really?”

“An attorney for Stark Industries. I specialize in damage control, containing scandals. I’m very good at my job, but what makes me good at it is my ability to read people. And I read you as someone who is very much in love, but afraid to let yourself experience that love. It’s my professional opinion that your interests are best served by giving in. Give in and let go. My risk
assessment? You have nothing to lose. And everything to gain.”

The next day, the tower was alive with energy. All of Steve’s social media platforms went live at the same time his new film launched on YouTube. Barton insisted on watching it on the big screen in the communal area, and James found himself drawn in – drawn in to the story of their lives together, although Steve had been careful to leave his name out of it. James felt sad for that. Sad that he and Steve had drifted so far apart that even their shared history went nameless now.

At his desk, he watched and touched a finger to his eye to wipe away the tear that formed, rubbed across his upper lip to swipe at the moisture that collected there. Turned his head away when the others began chattering about Steve’s animation and how talented he was and what an inspiring story it was and …

Finally, he couldn’t take any more. He closed his laptop, undocked, and quietly left the floor for his own. He’d put in his time, he wasn’t obligated to be around people any more for the day.

He went back to his apartment and watched the film again and again in the privacy of his own living room, a box of tissues to wipe away his tears, and a pillow to crush his face into, to swallow the howls of pain that erupted out of his fractured soul. The growing regiment of fallen soldiers of the brewed variety, an empty tub of ice cream, and the heaped bowl of popcorn that he steadily devoured gave testament to James’s agitated state. He watched the film again.

He followed the social media trail, and found that the film had already amassed over half a million views in the few hours since it was released. It was trending on Twitter, and there was already Oscar buzz, although critics were arguing over what category it should be nominated in (documentary or animated short), while others insisted it needed to move into a theatre in order to qualify at all. Steve’s Facebook page had already zoomed past a million likes, and his Instagram already had a couple of goofy photos of Steve with his team, Steve mugging for the camera, and Steve holding up a tablet showing the film. Each one already had more than 50,000 comments and three times that in likes.

Therealsteverogers.com crashed four hours after it went live, and James could just see the IT guys freaking out over the server load. He was pretty sure that was running Stark tech, and Stark would be insane over it not being able to carry Cap’s traffic.

Steve Rogers had exploded onto the world, tall, golden, and proud.

James Buchanan Barnes sat in a silent, darkened room, hunched, dark, and ashamed.

“You know, the money said it was you.”

James froze with his hand halfway to his mouth, popcorn tumbling into his lap. He didn’t ask how she’d gotten in – there was no point with the Black Widow. If she wanted to be somewhere, she was there. There was no keeping her out. No keeping her in. You just hoped you survived the encounter.

“Me what?” he asked warily, not moving, not turning.

“If either of you was gay, everyone’s money was on it being you. No one ever would have bet on Rogers. No one did. Not the icon of American virtue.”

He tracked her progress around the room, circling him, like a wildcat stalking prey. She almost lifted her face as if scenting blood on the rocks. He smiled inwardly. “Shows that looks can be...
deceiving. He wasn’t ever an icon of virtue – a good man, but if he needed to get his hands dirty to get the job done, he did. And I ain’t no pantywaist. What made you think I was … one of them?”

“Hey, just sayin’. You’re the one who crawled into Steve’s bed and snuggled up close, big spoon, wrapped yourself around him,” she said as she plopped down beside him on the sofa, nudged him where he held his laptop on his thigh, browser open to therealsteverogers.com, and pulled his bowl of popcorn into her lap. She tossed a few pieces in her mouth and chewed, grinning at him.

James felt a flutter of panic, of betrayal. “He promised he’d never –“ he rasped, his voice a broken thing.

“Never tell. And he didn’t. Doesn’t mean we didn’t have you under surveillance. Cap might’ve trusted you, didn’t mean the rest of us did. It was for the nightmares, right?”

“What the fuck –“

“Language, Barnes. You’re beginning to sound like a wind-up doll with only one saying. We only reviewed enough footage to confirm you didn’t pose a danger. And Jarvis continued to monitor metabolic functions to ensure there was no threat. No one’s been counting how many times a night you jerk off in the bathroom, or whose name is on your lips when you cum.”

“I, uh –“

“You know, if you didn’t want people to think you’re ‘with Steve’, maybe you shouldn’t have always curled up with your head in his lap and your arms wrapped around his waist on movie nights.”

“Hey, I – “

“Or maybe, just spit-balling here, maybe you shouldn’t have sat so close at dinner, or slung your arm around his shoulders, or ate off his plate. And I’m pretty sure that feeding him should’ve been right off the table.”

“That was habit. He always held back on food so I’d get more, and he needed it more’n I ever did.”

“That was 70 plus years ago, when he was a skinny asthmatic with a heart condition. What’s your excuse now with big, strong, healthy Steve Rogers?”

“What’re you saying?”

“That maybe you’ve been so angry because you feel more than you’re willing to admit, James.”

He glared at her, jaw grinding. He’d come to the same conclusion, but he wasn’t thrilled that she had as well. He was still trying to figure out … things.

“You need to make up your mind, and soon. Steve may have been carrying a torch for you these past 85 years, but he’s serious about moving on. And we’ve done a hell of a job vetting participants for this Bachelor thing. Well, Pepper’s done a lot of it. She could do covert ops, she’s so observant. Caught clues and tells I never saw. Says it’s from years of being Tony Stark’s assistant. I believe it. These are good people we’ve picked. No one’s perfect, but this group – this group is pretty fucking close. Anyway, there’s a good chance he’s going to find someone through this. His happily ever after.”

“Yeah?” he challenged belligerently.
“Without you.”

She fell silent, watching him intently. He chewed on his lower lip, but looked up at her through his long lashes and didn’t reply.

He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know exactly how he felt. But he knew he didn’t feel good. The idea of a future without Steve in it at all … he felt the air in the room quietly disappearing, the edges of his vision going dark. Life without Steve … wasn’t life.

“We didn’t know, you know,” she told him quietly, gently, her hand straying so it laid over his. “What he was like before. We all thought he was always like that. Quiet. Sad. Closed off.”

“He was loud-mouthed and in constant motion. Like a dervish. Opinionated sonovabitch, just as likely to talk with his fuckin’ fists as his big mouth.”

“You admired that about him.”

“He made me a better person. A better man. He never backed down from a fight. Never. Never thought I’d be lookin’ in *those* eyes. Fightin’ Steve.”

“You *miss* him.”

James frowned, picking at a thread. Finally he allowed one sharp incline of his head. He’d acknowledged this feeling in himself already, but that wasn’t the same as acknowledging it to someone who knew him and Steve both. So. There it was.

“Does he … does he ever say anything?”

“Not in words. He’ll answer questions, but he never brings you up directly. But now that I know you both better, I think … I think you’re there in everything he says, everything he does. He doesn’t mention you by name in his film, but you’re there, in every frame. I don’t think there’s really a Steve without James.”

“Bucky,” he corrected in a small voice.

“Bucky,” she repeated, smiling.

&&&

Bucky called and asked for a few minutes of Ms. Potts’s time. She chuckled into the phone, and told him he needed more than a few minutes, and she was happy to give it to him.

&&&

Chapter End Notes

Ah, thanks for your patience waiting for this chapter! My life was hijacked suddenly by a story I never intended to write, *I, Barnes*. Seven chapters posted so far, with an eighth explicit chapter in the works to tidy things up. And there are seven chapters up for my Steve and Bucky adopt tale, *It Takes a Village* now too.

Too many stories, not enough time! I'm hoping to get back to my series Take Up Your
Shield and Follow Me, and finally get (Kisses) Sweeter than Wine finished and posted. Plus, there's an AU swirling around my brain demanding to be written.

But with this chapter, leaps have been made, and next chapter should prove very interesting for our heroes. All of them.

Thanks for sticking with me, and for all your kudos and comments! Please do take a moment to comment - it really helps me to know what you like and don't like as we move the story forward.
Chapter Summary

Sam gets wind of all the "advice" people have been giving James, and he lays down the law. In the meantime, James - or rather, Bucky - makes his first tentative steps back to friendship with Steve Rogers.

Chapter Notes

I have to thank everyone who's left comments, and especially the comments that offered honest criticism. I love the compliments, but the criticism makes me think, and I hope helps to make this a better story. This may not be the chapter you were hoping for, but I think it serves the characters the way they need to be served.

Thanks, too, for everyone's good wishes in the wake of my Mom passing. I have to say that this fandom is a gift. When my Dad died, the fandom I was in at the time revolved around parent-child relationships, and I just checked out - it was too painful. But this fandom is so wonderfully supportive and mostly positive (taking into account the occasional darker work), it's like a warm blanket I can burrito-wrap myself in as I cope with losing my Mom. So thank you to everyone.

And, as a result of some of the thoughts triggered by comments, I've made some changes in my plans for the story. There will be an alternate ending, in addition to two "extras," and a chapter of deleted scenes. Hey, just like a movie on blu-ray! :) So I hope the two endings will ultimately satisfy everyone's wishes for the story - or at least the folks who've expressed their wishes. I appreciate everyone sharing their thoughts on where they think the story is going, where they would like it to go, and what they haven't liked about what I've written or intimated so far. I truly appreciate the time you've taken to leave comments - so, throw a girl a bone, leave more! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ve been doin’ good lately, Barnes. Not so much today. What’s goin’ on?” Sam asked as he swirled a fry into the ketchup on his plate. He arched an expectant eyebrow toward James, toward Bucky, as he grinned around the fry.

“Nothin’,” Bucky answered, staring into the reflection of the coffee shop’s overhead lights in his coffee cup. Beside him, the untouched cheeseburger on his plate cooled, and the fries sat in a sad little pile of salt and cooking oil.

“Yeah, that’s a load of horse shit. You been doin’ real well in group the past couple of weeks, but today, it was like you’d completely checked out. And you’ve been starin’ in the cup like you expect it to answer the question of life, the universe and everything – the java’s decent here, but it ain’t that good. So spill, Barnes – what’s got up your nose, huh?”

Absently, Bucky rubbed at the bottom of his nose and considered his answer. “Deadlines.
Deadline. Comin’ up. Fast.”

Sam popped another fry in his mouth, and asked, “Yeah? Which one?”

“Steve’s … thing.”

“Steve’s got a lot of things goin’ on. Care to name one in particular?”

Bucky lifted his cup to his mouth and took a sip, wrinkling his nose. It was cold and tasted like ash on his tongue. “Bachelor. Runnin’ out of time.”

“For what?”

“For me.”

Sam half-chuckled at that, frowning. “What the hell you mean, Barnes?” He pushed his plate forward and leaned onto his forearms, waiting.


“Be with him. You mean a romantic relationship. Sexual. Is that what you want, or is that what you think you want?”

“It’s what everybody’s tellin’ me I want.”

Wilson’s whole body went rigid, and his face went hard. “Who is everybody?” he demanded urgently.

“Romanoff. Thor. That lawyer guy. Even Darcy’s intern Ian? He’s Monty’s grandson, for fuck’s sake. Montgomery Falsworth, of the 107th and then the Howling Commandos. Served with him for years. Ian told me that Monty told him that my entire team, all my men, believed that Steve and I were a thing. The Captain and his Sergeant. My own men thought I was, I dunno, takin’ it up the ass from Steve. Down on my knees for him. I don’t know how they figured it, but they did. Everybody’s tellin’ me I’m gay, that I belong to Steve –“

“Fuck that.”

“What?”

“I said fuck that. You’re not what people tell you you are.”

“But if everyone thinks it –“

“Everyone can fuck the hell off. Nobody can tell you who and what you are. Nobody can tell you who to love. Nobody gets to tell you what to think. Son, didn’t you get anything out of all that research I assigned you?”

“I thought you wanted me to get that it was okay to be gay –“

“That’s just one of the things I hoped you’d figure out for yourself based on the evidence, yeah. So you could learn to accept Steve, accept his life choices, and let that go as something to interfere with your friendship. If you wanted to remain friends.

“But that’s not all. The twentieth century was a century of massive social change, of people saying hell no to what other people thought was right for them, who they were and what they deserved to
have. What their limits were. If what other people had to say about us defined us, women would still be owned by their husbands and not have the right to vote, my Mama would be riding in the back of the bus, and I’d be using a toilet for colored only. You and me? We wouldn’t be allowed to sit together in public. Not because of who you love or who you are, but because of the color of our skins.

“So, no, it don’t mean shit what people are tellin’ you. You need to make up your own damned mind, Barnes, and ignore these assholes who think they have the right to tell you what to think and feel. What do you want?”

“I told you before I don’t really know –“

“Then that’s the fucking answer, Barnes. You don’t know. There isn’t any timetable, there’s no countdown to destruction. Nobody knows if Steve is gonna find somebody on this thing –“

“Romanoff says it’s a sure thing. Pepper’s making the choices, and she’s scary good –“

“Pepper is scary good. How she puts up with Stark is beyond me –“

“Love. She loves him. He loves her too – you can see it when they look at each other. Kinda sweet, really. If y’didn’t have the urge to punch ‘im in the nose every ten seconds.”

Sam grinned at Bucky then, and Buck gave him a little smile in return. “Be that as it may, a) it doesn’t mean Steve is gonna find anybody, and more importantly, b) none of this puts you under any obligation to be something you’re not, or feel something you don’t.”

“But what if this really is my only chance?”

“What of it? If it’s not something you know you want, then what are you doing worryin’ about it? So, Steve. Let’s keep to the basics. You guys were friends a long time. A hella long time. Is that something you want?”

Bucky felt on steadier ground with this question, and nodded quietly. “Yeah. Yeah, that I know for sure.”

“Then focus on that. Focus on reaching out to Steve and fixing that relationship. All y’gotta do is say you’re sorry. Are you?”

“For getting mad? For treating him like shit? Hell, yes.”

“Can you tell him that?”

“That’s harder.”

“Well, you wanna salvage that friendship, there’s the place you start. Everything else, well, if it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen. But don’t let people define you, dude. We talk about this in group all the time – civvies expect us to get over the battlefield, put it behind us, and go back to a ‘normal’ life right away. It ain’t that easy. It never is. Normal doesn’t mean squat, and their normal ain’t applicable to you. To any of us. You been through hell like no other, Barnes, and you’re here, but you don’t gotta live your life to suit somebody else’s view of you. You gotta live it for yourself. Y’gotta figure out what that means for you, and you alone. Anybody’s got an opinion, they can keep it to their own damn self.”

Sam crammed a couple of fries in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. After a long, silent spell, he finally spoke again, quietly, earnestly. “And that lawyer dude? He doesn’t know everything.
Looked me in the eye and told me I was relentlessly straight because I wasn’t tapping Steve’s ass. Truth is, my old buddy Riley? We were more than just partners, more than just friends. Y’face death with someone enough times, it strips away all the shit, and we were left with the realization we really cared about each other, loved each other like brothers. And more. We’d just started a physical relationship a coupla months before he got killed. So lawyer dude? Not 100% accurate. Not even fucking close.”

“Does that make you gay?”

“Makes me bisexual, like Steve, I guess. Although, I tend to like women more than men – Riley’s the only guy I’ve ever felt that way about. I don’t find myself checkin’ out other guys, so maybe I’m something else, like biromantic, or whatever. The thing is, he doesn’t see as clearly as he claims. And he doesn’t define me. And he sure as hell doesn’t define you, Barnes.”

&&&

After their talk, Barnes had seemed to be doing a bit better, and had even got it together to ask the waitress if she wouldn’t mind heating up his burger and fries for him, since they’d gone untouched and cold while they’d talked. Barnes had turned on the charm, and she wandered off in a daze with his plate in hand, and brought it back a few minutes later, hot and with an added pile of fries fresh from the fryolator.

Barnes had surprised Sam by bringing up his performance anxiety with women, something that really shouldn’t have caught him off guard, but it did. Not that it was happening, just that he’d brought it up to him – and admitted he hadn’t mentioned it to his therapist. It wasn’t uncommon for men who’d been through stressful situations, especially multiple tours in war zones, to feel anxious and inadequate when they came home. Some were genuinely compromised, their emotions and their bodies out of synch and disconnected from the world they found themselves back in. For some, it was a physical thing. And like he’d said, Barnes had been through more than most. Hell, he’d been through more than anyone, like, ever. And with all the bullshit getting tossed his way by their well-meaning but clueless friends, it was no wonder he was going through some extra added shit.

Sam was beginning to wonder if living in the tower was the best thing for James Buchanan Barnes after all. If maybe he wouldn’t be better off somewhere out of immediate reach of superheroes who were too interested in his and Steve Rogers’s sex lives, who clearly didn’t have enough to do, and who didn’t know enough to know they fucking well didn’t know enough.

That was something he might need to broach with Barnes’s therapist. In fact, he really needed to have a heart to heart with Barnes’s therapist about a lot of stuff, because clearly these issues weren’t floating to the top during his sessions, and they were starting to really cripple the guy. He’d been listening to so many people urging him toward Steve, he didn’t know his own mind at this point. He’d lived too much of his life without agency, this “helpful” crap was not contributing to his recovery process one iota.

He left Barnes on the guest floor and continued to the main communal level alone. In fact, he’d urged Barnes to take a nap or do something for an hour or two on his level, because frankly, Sam had some business to attend with the assembled Avengers, and he didn’t want Barnes within earshot. He’d encouraged him to come up to the level around dinnertime, and he’d also encouraged him – hell, he’d damn well ordered him – to actually say something to Steve, something to break the ice at last.

When he got to the group floor, he found most of the people he wanted to speak to assembled there. There was Barton and Romanoff slumped down on a couch watching Will and Grace on the big
screen, with Stark, Potts, and Banner over by the kitchen area chatting over snacks. Okay, Banner wasn’t an issue — the guy dealt with his anger issues and uneasy alliance with the Other Guy in such a way, he was the least judgmental person on the planet. He kept his heart rate in the green and his skin in the pink by not getting excited about things, and that included sexual agendas and matchmaking.

He couldn’t do anything about Thor and his team while the god of thunder was on the other side of the world, but he could do something about the one person he knew had pushed the line until it snapped. He strode across the space and stopped in front of Natasha, crossed his arms across his chest, and practically growled at her, “I told you Barnes was off limits.”

“He just needed a nudge, that’s all,” she waved her hand negligently and shrugged, absently toying with the fingers of Barton’s hand at the end of the arm slung over her shoulders. Barton glanced up and frowned, eyes darting between Romanoff and Sam.

“He doesn’t need anything from you. Or any of the rest of you,” he pitched his voice to carry, and was gratified that he’d caught the attention of the trio over by the kitchen, and now they were drifting closer. “So many people have been telling Barnes he’s gay and he needs to be with Steve and he has no time to make his mind up or he’s going to fuck his life to hell, he’s fucking traumatized by it. That lawyer of yours, Stark? You tell him to stay the fuck away from Barnes. Or I’ll have him up on ethics charges, and you can bet I’ll make ‘em stick.”

“Now wait a minute, dude —” Barton started to protest, but Sam leveled him with a look, and the archer subsided back into the couch. Romanoff watched Sam warily, the self-satisfied smirk gradually dimming from her face.

Pepper was the first to join them, her face creased with concern, with Stark and Banner drifting behind her. “What’s wrong, Sam? James came to speak with me, and he seemed subdued, but okay. He had some questions, I tried to answer —”

“Answering questions is fine. Offering unsolicited opinions? Hell the fuck no.”

When Natasha opened her mouth to protest again, Sam cut her off savagely. “Do any of you get what he’s been through? I mean, we only know bits and pieces about it, but for the entire period of his captivity, choice was something he didn’t have. None. He had no control over his body, not even his mind. They told him what to do, where to go, who to kill, who to be. You had it rough in Afghanistan, Stark, but it’s nothing on what Barnes has been through.” Stark nodded gravely, brows bunched behind his safety goggles. Sam didn’t even want to know what he’d been working on that he was still wearing the damned things. “He needs to be able to make his own decisions, his own choices. No pressure, Natasha. No agenda. You of all people should understand that. He needs to make his own mind up, and if you don’t like his decisions, that’s just tough shit for you. They’re his decisions to make, not yours.”

“But I just want him and Steve to be happy —“

“So do I. I don’t think anyone wants either of them to be unhappy. But happy doesn’t mean they have to be together, in a sexual relationship. Maybe they will be, who knows? Happy may be the two of them separate from each other, living in different cities. I’m beginning to think we should move Barnes out of the tower, set him up in a place on his own. Or maybe it is together, Steve and Bucky forever. But it’s gotta be their mutual decision based on it being what they really want, not because everyone who stomps through the tower tells Bucky Barnes he’s really a gay dude pining for his best friend and so he’d better get his act together to snag Steve before he finds the love of his life on the fucking Bachelor.”
Stark nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve already told Joel he doesn’t need to engage any further. I was more concerned about Barnes presenting a threat to Steve than anything else.” At the confused looks turned his way, Stark shrugged and grinned wryly. “What can I say, Captain Khaki grows on you after a while. And yeah, I’d like to see them both be happy, and I get it. Is Barnes okay?”

“He will be. If some people learn to keep their opinions to themselves,” Sam said pointedly to Natasha, who shrugged an elegant shoulder, but nodded decisively toward Sam.

“I wanna hear you say it, Natasha,” Sam pressed.

“I won’t try to influence Barnes any further.”

“I’ve got my eye on you, girl. And you,” he gestured toward Barton, “your job is to make sure she doesn’t mess this up any further. Can I count on you?”

“Shit, no. I’m more afraid of her than I am of you. But Nat, I agree with Sam. Y’gotta let Barnes make up his own mind. He doesn’t need the pressure from any of us. And if it’s the wrong thing for Barnes, Steve won’t thank you for it. Let nature take its course.”

“For two genetically enhanced super soldiers who’ve both somehow managed to leapfrog two generations?” Natasha scoffed. “Yeah, nature’s had a big part in that –“

“And that’s the point. That’s why the decisions need to be theirs, too much has been done to them. They need the control now – they need to make the choice about what happens next. So, just chill, all right? Promise? All of you?”

“Promise,” came the chorus. And Sam pointedly looked around to ensure it was every one of them speaking.

&&&

Interact.

That was the deal. In order to get what he wanted, he needed to interact. Open his fucking mouth and use his words. Engage. Look ‘im in the eye.

With Steve.

Hell, they’d been friends since they were in short pants, roommates for years, they’d served together in Europe for a couple of years (before they’d both died, for fuck’s sake), and they’d slept in the same bed since James – since Bucky – had come back to himself. Up until six weeks ago, that was.

Saying hello shouldn’t be that difficult, should it?

How hard could it be, right?

Yeah, except for the thing. The thing that happened on New Year’s. And the nearly 6 weeks since then. The rift, the chasm that had opened between them, forced open between them by Bucky’s own insecurity and anger and pain. Held open by his ego and stupidity and bullheadedness. And now … seemingly uncrossable. Impassable.

Talking with Sam had really helped, and truth was, Bucky felt some of the pressure lift off his shoulders. But not all. There was still the whole thing about interacting, engaging. Face to face.
Journeys begin with one step, though, right? Wasn’t that what they said? One foot in front of the other. Keep moving forward. Or was that from one of the Disney movies Stark marathoned one weekend? Still, good advice, even if it came from a cartoon. Lotta sense in cartoons.

So that’s what he did. One foot in front of the other, hands loose at his sides, his mind as blank as he could make it as he crossed the space (which, 70 years of brainwashing – pretty fucking empty), crossed the void, crossed from the dark of his own thoughts (no thoughts, blank!) into the light of Steve’s regard.

He stopped, inches away from Steve. Tested out muscles in his face he wasn’t used to employing around him. Smiled. Had it been only six weeks since he’d last smiled at Steve Rogers? He heard the voices around him fall away into shocked silence. Felt Pepper’s gaze on him, a faint smile touching her lips as encouragement and strength seemed to flow from her kind eyes. Or was that Extremis blooming?

He felt Sam’s gaze on him, too, nudging him gently forward. Baby steps. This didn’t have to be anything more than a friendly gesture. He could do friendly. Right?

“Yeah, uh, sorry. You know, for before. Um. New Year’s and all. Hear your film is getting good reviews. It woulda been okay to use my name, s’okay – but you made me look good. Congratulations.” He waited a beat, two, as stunned realization broke across Steve’s face, followed by a dawning, shy smile.

“Yeah, thanks, um, James,” Steve acknowledged, nodding.

He could correct him. Let him know he’d gotten past the anger and the prejudice. Let him know he remembered who he was, who Steve was to him, who he wanted to be. Let him know he was Bucky, his old friend. Maybe more. Let him know how sorry he really was, not just words, but every piece of him, down to smallest part of him. How desperately fucking sorry he was. He could. He just couldn’t find the words, couldn’t find the courage. Couldn’t find the voice. So as Steve’s hand rose to reach out for his, he turned abruptly and stalked off, the voice in his head screaming for him to turn back, throw himself against Steve, swear he was sorry, beg his forgiveness, cling to him and never let go, never ever …

As he fled toward his desk, he glanced back over his shoulder and caught Sam’s eyes. The warmth in the smile in his eyes told him he’d done something right, and the way that Steve kept glancing shyly over his shoulder at him only confirmed it. If he were thinking strategically, he’d have to admit that right now, the tactical advantage was his, but he didn’t have it in him to press it. He felt like the air was being pumped out of the room, not unlike that time Hydra had turned his cell into a vacuum to underscore a particular lesson they wanted their Asset to learn. As black started to burn at the edges of his vision, he shoved down the image, nearly tumbling over the furniture to get to the safety of his desk, the touchstone of his space, his rightful place.

Safely back at his desk, he was breathing hard as he undocked his laptop, gathered up his books and magazines and notebooks and detritus, and juggling the pile, made his way quickly toward the elevator.

That was the other part of the deal. Clear the floor of his stuff. Interact without hiding behind his computer. Apologize to Steve. Give Pepper back her living room.

He could do that. Really, he could. He just had to go stow his gear in his apartment and scream at the wall for a while first.

At least Pepper would take care of having his desk and stuff moved to his apartment later.
And he’d taken the first, most important, most terrifying step back. Later, when there was oxygen reaching his brain, he’d allow himself a moment of pride for that.

&&&

The Bachelor pilot was looming ahead in only a few days’ time, and the energy in the tower was shifting in odd ways. It was quieter without Thor and his crew – jokes were less blue with Darcy gone, and the air was a little less warm without the big lug and his open-hearted affection for everyone. At least Thor was coming back for the Bachelor shoot – he’d expressed a desire to watch Midgard mating rituals in the wild, and this was likely to be the closest he’d ever come, given his all-but-sworn-by-clergy commitment to Jane.

Steve was on the verge of a grin almost all the time, while Tony was scowling and skittish just as frequently. Surly Tony made Banner nervous and guarded, while Pepper became wary and worried. Red and gold flashed sporadically in her eyes, banked embers of Extremis flickering at the edges of her awareness. Her eyes would close suddenly when Tony would glance her way, the fires dampened in an instant. Banner’s eyes would shade green every so often, his lips drawn in a taut line of concentration as he fought to get emotion – and the Other Guy – under control.

Happy, during the brief periods he’d surface out of his security office, was watchful and concerned. Hill frowned a great deal – it was clear she’d never trusted Stark’s mercurial moods anyway, and not-so-secretly suspected that Tony was bi-polar (she’d spilled the beans one whiskey-soaked night at Vinnie’s), and expected a manic high every bit as wild as his low promised to be. That in turn made Wilson grumpy, because Hill was focused on Stark and not on him. Guy was saint-like, but not truly a saint, after all. Nice to see him with a few human warts once in a while.

Which really left only Romanoff and Barton to behave normally, which meant they regarded everyone else with thinly disguised cynicism and suspicion. Which in turn made the others nervous, because that could only mean that practical jokes were in the offing. And what Romanoff thought was actually funny was really not what the others considered to be … but at least she wasn’t in Bucky’s face telling him what to think and do, for once.

All in all, the denizens of the tower were caught up in an emotional feedback loop that threatened to destabilize the most unstable population on the planet. Except for Steve. Steve was a happy little camper, with his movie crew and his web site shit and his suitors lining up for his fucking hand in something or other.

And James – or rather, Bucky as he’d really started to think of himself again – felt unsettled in the midst of the maelstrom of emotion, but his commitment to Ms. Potts meant he couldn’t keep slinking off to the privacy of his apartment. And his commitment to Sam was that he’d make an effort to heal the breach with Steve, completely in the friend zone.

So, he was required to stick out dinner on the community level of the tower penthouse. He quietly worked his way through his meal with single-minded devotion – it was delicious, but Ms. Potts wouldn’t allow anything less to be served at her table, so really, it deserved his undivided attention.

This was the first dinner party held on the communal floor since Pepper had successfully evicted both Steve and Bucky. She’d managed to pull the entire thing together in what seemed like minutes, since it was only this afternoon that Bucky had taken his stuff back to his apartment. She looked around her regally, surveying her kingdom once more returned to its rightful condition. If the muscles around her mouth were tighter than usual, well, that was the price of keeping the fire under control.
The meal was winding down into an uncomfortable and extended silence, punctuated only by the drumbeats that Stark hit his knife and fork against the table. Finally, Potts reached over and stilled his hands by laying hers over his, giving him a look that was equal parts stern and concerned. “Tony, what’s wrong?” she asked quietly, but everyone around the table strained to hear his reply. “Nothin’,” he shook his head dismissively. “Tony, it’s not —”

“It is the place? Your parents’ place?” Steve asked suddenly. Stark glanced up at Steve with a desperate expression in his eyes. The look that passed between Stark and Rogers was electric, fraught with something indefinable. Steve nodded to himself, holding Stark’s gaze. “Say, I know it’s short notice, but why don’t we christen the place, huh? Bachelor shoot starts on Saturday afternoon – how about we all go out there Friday night and have a party? Us, a few friends, my team, maybe – blow off some steam before this shit gets started. Can we do that?”

Now that sounded like a good idea, a party. He’d heard about the old Stark place, mostly from Tony, but he had to admit he was curious to see the place where old Howard had made a shrine to the memories of Captain America and Sergeant James Barnes.

In the meantime, Pepper shot Steve a grateful look, curling her fingers around Stark’s wrist and tugging it toward her. “I like the idea of christening it. Bring it into this century with friends. What do you think, Tony?”

The wild look in Stark’s eyes seemed to still, the tautness of his skin relaxed as his eyes shifted between Ms. Potts and Steve.

“Organizing a party for Friday – isn’t that a tall order?” Banner asked doubtfully, pushing food absently around his plate. He’d already formed his food into geometric shapes not unlike Greek characters; Bucky wondered if he was actually writing equations in vegetables.

Now Stark really did seem to come back to himself as he snorted, and Pepper chuckled. “Two days to plan a party? Really, Bruce?” she chided him with a coquettish smile.

Bruce glanced around him and shrugged. Everyone, including Bucky, sat a little straighter, waiting for the punchline.

“Zero to gala in thirty minutes. Personal best,” Tony pointed out proudly.

“Twenty-five. And that was only because the caterers got caught in traffic,” she sniffed haughtily, but her expression was warm, sweet.

Then Barton piped up with, “So if we go out on Friday, can we stay for the weekend? Watch Steve get seduced?”

Bucky felt the floor tilt crazily. Seduced. He honestly wasn’t sure how he felt about that. And no matter what Sam said, he really did feel like he was running against the clock. He couldn’t go on like this forever – he really needed to figure out how he felt, what he wanted, once and for all.

“Not if you’re gonna sabotage it,” Steve countered with a good-natured grin.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Lookin’ forward to seein’ your moves, old man.”

“Yeah, you know the art of seduction has come a long way in 70 years,” Romanoff added with a sly smile. “Clint could give you some pointers on what not to do.”
“So maybe I’m not looking for seduction. Maybe I’m looking for romance. That’s never gone out of style – never will.”

A small warmth bloomed in Bucky’s chest hearing Steve talk like that. Like nothing had ever changed. Faced with challenges that would dampen the ardor of most men, Steve had always pursued romance with the few girls who’d date him back in the day – scraping pennies together for flowers, penny candy, drawing little cards of his own on carefully husbanded good quality paper. He’d always been a romantic, but few of the girls he’d courted had ever really appreciated the gesture. And they’d all felt the need to trade up as soon as something “better” had come along. All except Carter, and Steve had hardly been smooth where she’d been concerned – not that she’d minded, or even noticed.

“Roses, candy, and poetry?” Romanoff scoffed. “Please, you Americans are such children. That’s not love, that’s play-acting.”

“Yeah, yeah, and love is for children, I remember. But you’re right, it’s not roses, candy, and poetry. Well, maybe the poetry. It’s connection, listening when someone speaks, hearing what they have to say, seeing who they really are. Forging shared life experience and hope for the future. Opening yourself to what someone else can offer you, what you can offer them.”

“Once a sap, always a sap,” Bucky said softly, and he was rewarded by a bright smile from Steve, an encouraging nod from Pepper, and a wide grin from Wilson.

So Wilson fed him the lines. “Yeah, Barnes, so tell us all about Cap’s moves back in the day. Before the serum. Was he a ladykiller, or a wallflower?”

“Wallflower,” Steve answered immediately, but Bucky held back a moment.

“Dames were too busy lookin’ at his height to see any further. The ones who stuck had a good time – Steve knew how to treat a girl like she was special.”

Steve shrugged, blushing. “They were few and far between. People don’t like to spend time lookin’ past the surface, y’know? And I’ll admit that’s got me nervous about this weekend.”

“Why, Steve?” Pepper asked, a worry line forming between her brows.

“Soon as anyone sees me, they’re gonna know I’m Captain America. Does that mean they’re gonna stop looking for Steve Rogers?”

The question fell into the silence and hung there until Tony piped up with, “Hey, Cap – think your singer friend would like to perform at the party on Friday night?”

Right then, James – Bucky – would’ve liked to have belted Stark one. That was one complication he really didn’t need right now. The idea that Lambert would be on hand only made the pressure feel more insistent, like he really was running out of time …

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Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be ending number one, and it will be a long one. So it will probably be a couple of weeks before I have that ready to go. Parts of it are written,
but there are still large parts of the chapter - there is a surprising amount of action coming - that are just sort of "and something happens here." So please be patient while I work through the logistics of the days leading up to Steve's debut as the first bisexual Bachelor - and shooting the show itself.

And remember ... comments give me life! :)

Chapter Summary

The Avengers and Stark Industries descend on Rinascere for the party of the year. Tony learns to let the past go, and Steve discovers what his friends have been up to while he's been building a future.

Oh, and the character of Adam Lambert has a bigger part in this chapter. He is a character, not a reflection of the real person. Not a fan of RPF, and it's not my intention to write RPF, but why invent a glam gay rock icon when there's a perfectly good one already being gorgeous and fabulous?

Chapter Notes

So, I was going to hold this with what I'd originally planned as the entirety of this chapter, but I'm already at over 10,000 words, and there is still a lot more to come in this chapter. This seemed a good place to break - the next chapter will find the boys finally having a serious conversation. And discovering things about each other they never really expected. And yes, I just extended the number of chapters out to 16.

Thanks for your continued patience! I do appreciate all the support and good wishes I've received from everyone for the story, and for the loss of my Mom. Writing really does help, even though I have found I just can't wrap my head around the promised smut of the last chapter of I, Barnes right now. I am still chipping away at what is now the next chapter of this story - it's shaping up as my favorite so far. I hope to keep making progress with it and post it in the near future as well.

In the end, the party was thrown open to all Stark Industries staff and guests, Steve’s media team and guests, and the Avengers themselves, including Sam, Rhody, and Barnes. Pepper, with her assistant Helen’s help, organized luxurious motor coaches to take people directly from the tower out to Rinascere, and arranged for a block of hotel rooms at a number of nearby hotels and inns, for staff who didn’t want to deal with transit back into the city plus commutes home. Natasha still knew her way around Stark Industries from her undercover stint a couple of years earlier, so she pitched in with arrangements, calls, and general administrative support. All expenses were picked up by Stark Industries, and labelled a thank you for making 2014 a great year.

Friday was a wash in the tower, with energy and excitement buzzing on every floor as everyone chattered about the party, what they were wearing, whom they were bringing, and just what triggered this unexpected and welcome surprise from Ms. Potts. The motor coaches started pulling out from Stark Tower at 4:00 p.m., giving everyone an early end to a lamentably unproductive day. Steve and his team from the third floor rode out together, and the remaining Avengers piled into Tony’s limo to travel in style with Happy at the wheel.
Thor brought Jane and the entire team back with him that afternoon because Darcy refused to miss a fucking private concert by Adam Lambert, dude! Sam went out early and met them on the landing pad at Rinascere, and read them all the riot act on Barnes, and secured promises from each of them to lay off. Thor was suitably chastised, while Jane was confused until Sam looked pointedly at Darcy, at which point Jane nodded her head sagely and wandered off muttering to herself.

Selvig noted he just wanted Barnes to realize that Steve was still his friend regardless of his sexuality, while Darcy complained – loudly – that they were wasting perfectly good sexy-fun time. Sam threatened to bar her from the party – and the Lambert concert – if she didn’t behave. Finally, she gave in, reluctantly, and Sam confiscated her taser to ensure compliance.

Then he cornered Ian and told him he was holding him accountable for Darcy’s actions, and he didn’t care if Ian was the grandson of a Howling Commando – Staff Sergeant Samuel Wilson, Pararescue, could fucking well do some damage if he had a mind to. Ian had stammered assent, wide-eyed and clearly terrified, but Sam judged it better to put the scare in him than to let him think he could mess with Barnes’s head any further, good intentions aside. Didn’t matter what their old unit thought about Steve and Barnes – all that mattered was what Barnes thought about Barnes.

Sam had no intention of visiting physical vengeance on anyone, but he wasn’t averse to putting the threat out there if it advanced his cause. In this case, shielding Barnes from anymore well-meaning but ill-advised matchmaking.

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The ABC staff started setting up at the “old pile,” as Tony often referred to Rinascere, on Friday morning, so when the party began to take shape and catering staff started to arrive on site, the producer and Evan Cantwell called Steve to request permission to do some “color work” at the party. Steve deferred to Tony, and let him make the decision regarding the network people. Tony shrugged and approved it, but Steve could see the tightness around his eyes as he did.

When he arrived at Rinascere ahead of the crowd with his own team, Steve pulled Evan aside in the big room where the Bachelor contestants would congregate the next night, and warned him to use a light touch in any coverage – background color only, nothing in depth. And the ABC team was to leave the party when Steve gave them the signal. Evan started to grumble at the restriction, but Steve reminded him that he could easily rescind any and all permission, since the party was a corporate event for Stark Industries and Stark Foundation staff – completely unrelated (technically) to Steve’s stint on The Bachelor. The guests were regular people, hard-working employees of the Stark companies, and were to be treated with respect. Nothing embarrassing, nothing revealing. Steve watched Evan carefully, and realized he’d need to be more precise. “I get to review and approve all footage taken at the party. I don’t approve it, you don’t use it, period.”

“Steve, c’mon, man, that’s not fair –“

“Fair to the people at the party. That’s my concern. These are my colleagues and my friends. I’m not risking them for the sake of a TV show. Take it or leave it,” he added, jutting his chin out slightly, lips firmly pressed together.

Evan grinned at Steve, eyes dancing. “Done. Dude, you drive a hard bargain. Still kinda regretting the fact we met working on the fucking Bachelor.” He took a step closer, hand involuntarily reaching for Steve’s as he started to say, “I’ll bet you’re a tiger in –“

Steve cut him off, stepping back. Evan halted, hands braced in front of him, then lowered them slowly, watching Steve’s face. “Enough. You already made it clear that your contract prohibits you from even going out for coffee. What’s the point in the flirtation, then, huh? To get better footage?
You forget, Evan, I performed with the USO. I did Hollywood back in the studio days. I did the newsreel circuit, smilin’ for the folks back home. Hell, y’might have noticed I brought down the world’s largest security agency. I’m not a novice to politics, and I’m not a virgin to manipulate. Done the whole political song and dance, and trust me – nothin’ changes, no matter the decade. Don’t try to play me. I appreciate all you’ve done introducing me to Art and Evie, and they brought in Annie and some of their friends – I have a great team, and you started me off. But I’m pretty sure you got something out of that, too.”

Evan took a step back, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t Captain America in full throat. His mouth worked silently a few times, then he cleared his throat and said, “Yeah, sure, there’s been some great footage, and Art and Evie’s projects are gonna be fantastic. And it’s great that you’ve been able to hire everyone – I’m really happy they’re taken care of.” He lowered his voice and took a half-step closer, head tilted and brow furrowed. “But Steve, you think I’m just interested in footage?”

Steve held himself rigidly. “What else can you be interested in? You have a contract, right?”

Evan blew his breath out with a whoosh, eyes closing as he shook his head. “Yeah. Never would’ve met you otherwise, but that contract’s a real ballbuster. And like I said, kinda regretting that. You do, too, and I gotta feeling when you met Art you were just a teensy bit sorry you’d signed on the dotted line, huh?”

“Not the first time,” Steve let a small smile play at the corner of his mouth. “Yeah. Thanks for that. Steve Rogers is a helluva guy. Woulda been nice to’ve been my guy.”

“Evan –” Steve sighed heavily.

“How’d we get to this point, huh? Look, I get it. You want to protect your people. You know the network – they’re gonna want something juicy, something to put in the promos to pull eyes in. They’re gonna want anything that’s embarrassing, compromising, sensational. But I promise, we’ll come for 15 minutes, shoot some background stuff, low-key, get some of Lambert singing, and get out of your hair. I’m not going to betray your trust. Because Steve … the offer still stands. You don’t find anyone on this show … well, I’d still love to have that coffee with you someday.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Evan assured him, stepping into his space, leaning in, and kissing Steve gently on the lips. “Yeah, woulda been nice,” Evan added softly. Steve nodded with a sad quirk of his lips, stepped back, and turned to go. “See y’later, Steve,” Evan called after him; Steve just lifted his hand and waved, making his way back through the house to the residential floor.

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Steve went back to the room that Pepper had assigned him – the room Tony claimed was Howard’s favorite for assignations – and closed the door behind him, and pressed his back against it, focusing on his breathing. The only sound beside his labored breathing was the thud of the back of his head hitting against the solid door.

What the fuck was he doing?

Christ, six weeks ago, Steve’s attraction to men was his silent little secret. Something he indulged in rarely and with absolute discretion. And privately – Steve hadn’t been “with” anyone this century, nothing since the USO. Six weeks ago, he had a best friend, a team of assholes who sort of
respected him, and a treasured home in the heart of Fox News.

Okay, so maybe it hadn’t been all wine and roses, then. He could certainly do without Fox News, and after his last appearance, they were happy to be rid of him, too.

But his life had made sense. A weird kind of sense, but sense just the same. He ran, he worked out, he barked orders at Stark, who in turn ignored them. He dodged matchmaking attempts by Romanoff, and she ignored him, too. He ran some more. Any interview requests were politely rebuffed by Pepper and her team, so he could ignore them. And he beat the living crap out of punching bag after punching bag. Stark kindly ignored the punching bag replacement bills. And he still had Bucky to hold through the night when nightmares rocked his foundation. And he’d ignore the coil of want stirring in the pit of his stomach and the twitch of his dick and will it out of existence every time. He was a supersoldier, after all. He could super ignore.

It wasn’t a bad life. Beat hell out of freezing to death in a plane sinking below the surface of the ocean.

Yeah, sure, it was a life based on … well, not exactly a lie, not really, but some important, private facts simply weren’t shared. With anyone, at least anyone still living in this new millenium. And then Adam Lambert grabbed his face and reminded him of something and someone he’d always wanted.

And then he’d lost him. Not Adam, he’d never really had him. But Bucky. And his fucking temper had flared like it did back when he was five foot nothin’ and ninety pounds of bad mood. Only Bucky hadn’t been there to bail him out, pull him out of the melee and patch his broken nose.

Bucky had been the source of the anger.

The heat of the anger between them was enough to engulf the world, it seemed. And for a while, it seemed that all would be left would be ash.

Steve was unmoored. Without Bucky holding him in place, he just … he just let go.

And letting go, he wasn’t blinded by the light that was Bucky Barnes, just for a minute. And not being blinded, he could see. See possibilities he’d never noticed before.

And so Steve let himself look, look beyond Bucky, look beyond the job and the shield and self-imposed burden he carried, and look. And he liked what he saw. Even better, there were people who liked what they saw when they looked at him. Liked it enough that they reached out and touched. Kissed. Wanted. Made him want.

He liked Evan, and if it hadn’t been for that contract coming between them, there might have been something, something real. But like it or not, that contract would always be there. Thing was, without that contract, they probably never would’ve met. And Steve couldn’t look at Evan and not be conscious of how Evan had observed him the past several weeks through his viewfinder. He was a subject, not a potential lover. Not even a friend, really. No matter how much Evan might want it to be different, Steve knew. And it made Steve a little sad.

And then there was Art. Sweet, enthusiastic, fanboy Art. He was fun, and they had so much in common, but Art was always hyper-aware that he was hanging out with Captain America, patent pending. So even as Steve could slip into having a good time with Art, he was always aware that Art could never see him as just Steve, kid from Brooklyn. He’d always be Captain America, American Icon and Superhero to Art.
And what about tomorrow, with this Bachelor thing? Would it be any different? Did it really matter? If he was honest with himself, he’d admit he’d gotten the better end of this deal with the devil, even if it was all for show, and every last one of the contestants just wanted to fuck Captain America. Or even just get their mugs on TV to launch some kind of reality show career. The exposure he’d gotten – the exposure he continued to get – for his cause was worth it, wasn’t it? The fact that there were kids out there, kids like he’d been, alone and questioning, ashamed and frightened, the fact that those kids might get a better handle on themselves and how they fit, might know where to turn for answers and support, might get that it really could get better, that was worth it all. And the Bachelor helped him start it all. And even if it all went south, it was worth it for that.

But there was still a part of Steve Rogers that just wanted to be loved for himself. Nerdy, art-loving, bashful, hot-tempered and sharp-witted Steve Rogers. Not a shield. Not a hero. Just a kid from Brooklyn. A kid from Brooklyn that hoped that the love of his life might find him and take him away from all this.

And then something happened this week, and Bucky started to actually look at him again, spoke to him, made apologetic sounds. Not a real apology, not one from the heart, but a start. The fire was cold, and it was time for life to return.

And with it came hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe, Buck might yet feel something for him. It was an age-old ache, settled deep in his bones. He’d loved Bucky Barnes since the moment he’d met him, and yearned for him nearly as long. And recognized he couldn’t have him just as long. But he’d always hoped.

He still hoped. And that made him feel weak. But at the same time, he had to know. He had to know for good or ill whether … well, just whether.

And something told him tonight was his last chance. Because tomorrow, everything changed.

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All the buses had arrived, disgorging excited and hyperactive Stark employees to the garish halls of Rinascente, the palatial Stark home outside New York City. The ABC crew people were closeted away in their base of operations, and the Avengers themselves hadn’t come down to join the party just yet – they’d all agreed it would be nice for the employees to have some quality time just enjoying themselves before gods and heroes walked among them and competed for the buffet tables.

So Tony tucked himself quietly in an alcove off the main courtyard, a paved, open space kept warm in February through a clever application of arc energy and a geothermal bubble made of a material Tony hadn’t even patented yet. He sipped silently from his drink as he watched his employees – well, technically, Pepper’s – chatter and laugh and smile. Drink, and dance, and enjoy.

The entire first floor had been opened to the party, and employees and their guests wandered freely, sampling the food arrayed on heavily laden tables, the art and pricey toys littering the house, the alcohol that flowed freely, and the music piped into every space, courtesy of Tony’s own playlist. When Lambert arrived later on, his concert would be shared just as readily, with a video element streaming to big screens throughout the residence. The mood was downright jubilant, relaxed and happy. Tony could not remember ever seeing such a thing here, within these walls.

He did remember parties from when he was small, doomed to sit them out in his room with a beady-eyed nanny on Tony-watch, while Mom and dear old Dad whooped it up with the hoi polloi,
the glitterati of Manhattan and its surrounding, exclusive suburbs. Wall Street tycoons, ambitious politicians, aggressive military types, and the idle rich, all tossed together at Casa Stark like expensive flotsam. And there was always a dangerous undertone to such gatherings, the darker side of Howard Stark always within reach. Slender, dead-eyed women on the arms of Howard’s friends, avaricious boys clustered together sending sidelong glances at the captain of industry that was Tony’s father, sharp-tongued floozies with too much makeup and not enough sense to avoid a playboy to whom no one held permanent value.

At least at military school, he hadn’t had to watch his father kill his mother’s spirit with every assignation. Although coming home to what was left each time hadn’t been easy. Finally, by the time he was killing it at MIT, there wasn’t anything left to come home to. He’d always believed it had been some jealous husband or lover, or maybe even one of the hard-eyed women or doe-eyed boys Howard had used. Until the SHIELD/Hydra data dump, and the translation of the files in Russian identified the shooter as the Winter Soldier, Mom and Howard’s death a Hydra hit.

Tony’d read the file, and all the supporting data they’d been able to track down. He didn’t blame Barnes, he blamed Hydra. He took special joy in any action that he contributed to in bringing Hydra to a permanent end.

Developing tech to take out Hydra at the same time he was guiding Stark Industries into the new millennium, leaving dear old Dad’s weapons mojo behind? Even better. He saved the really cool toys for the teams taking on Hydra. Yeah, he still had it.

Retooling Stark Industries from the world’s premiere weapons maker to the peacetime conglomerate it was today hadn’t been easy, and Wall Street hadn’t always been kind. But it had been worth it. They’d found a way to keep everyone who wanted to stay with Stark, expand into new technologies, and start to make a difference in the world. As he looked at the faces of the people who helped make that happen, he realized that they needed to do more to thank them, to show his appreciation for how they’d saved his soul and given him back his humanity.

The Hydra hunt salved his savage side, the Avengers stoked his need to be a super hero, but Stark Industries saved his soul and let him be human.

He had to admit that Cap was onto something here. He’d never seen his childhood home filled with actual happiness, joy. But seeing those people who helped him affect change every day streaming into the courtyard, eyes wide and mouths agape with wonder, seeing those people cluster and chuckle and nudge each other to see the next amazing thing, seeing those people smile and relax and simply enjoy … this was something new. This was something precious.

Tony smiled to himself as he took a swallow of his drink, thinking that old Howard would hate the mundane quality of the guests tonight – well, except for the Avengers themselves, but they belonged to him, to Tony, something he didn’t have to share with Howard. Not even Steve or Barnes any longer. They’d become Tony’s friends in their own rights, not simply a bleed from Howard’s life. No politicians, no men of influence or women of low morals present. No one was here to cut a deal or grease a palm. Just hard-working, smart people, talented, the guts and grist of the empire that Tony had remade, rebuilt from the ashes of the weapons designer to reshape the world.

“Yes,” he murmured to himself over the rim of his glass, smiling. He took a drink and let his eyes roam across the courtyard, lines crinkling around his eyes as the smile settled in, took root, and blossomed.

A slender, warm hand snaked around his mid-section and pressed him back against a tall, lithe body. “Ruble for your thoughts?” Pepper whispered into the curve of his ear. His smile deepened, a
sense of joy bubbling up from his soul.

“Huh. Care to explain why my thoughts are only worth a devalued currency? I have big thoughts, you know. World-changing thoughts. Thoughts for later on, too. Earth-moving thoughts. Surely that’s worth a stable and flourishing currency, Ms. Potts.”

“I’ve been negotiating with a Russian consortium the last two days. Rubles on the brain. Natasha’s been helping. She helped with this, too,” Pepper said, nodding toward the party. “Like it?”

“Love it. This was a great idea.” He raised his glass to toast the assemblage, turning in her arms to plant a sweet, chaste kiss on her lips. “Don’t tell Cap. He’ll get a big head.”

“I don’t think it’s possible for Steve Rogers to get a big head. If it hasn’t happened so far …”

“Yeah, I know. Makes y’ sick, doesn’t it? All that goodness? Who could stomach it, huh?”

“Tony …”

“No, I get it. I understand now. Why Dad was so gone on him. I mean – look at him. Who else would take the biggest heartbreak of his life and turn it into a mission to save at-risk LGBTQ kids, huh?” Tony sidestepped to slide in behind her, circling her waist with his arms and settling his chin on her shoulder. “Look up there,” he said, pressing his cheek against her hair. He raised an arm and pointed to a small window on the second floor overlooking the courtyard.

Her hands slid warm and protective over hers as she leaned back into his embrace. “What am I looking at, Tony?”

“That’s where little Tony Stark would watch Mom and Dad party-hardy with the cream of New York society, and the dregs of humanity.”

“Oh. You didn’t get to join in the fun?”

“Nah. Children are better locked away than blowing up the guests. You know – that sort of thing. And while we’re tripping down memory lane, look over there,” he added, pointing to nondescript door hidden in partial shadow across the courtyard from the bedroom.

“You escape route?”

“Close. Howard’s. One of ‘em. Go left, you’ll find yourself en route to his mad scientist lair, by way of his Captain America shrine. Go right, takes you up to his playroom.”

“Playroom.”

“Where he’d fuck his brains out while Mom entertained his guests for him. I’d see him slip away, coupla times every party. Mom would stand over there, near the fountain,” he indicated a gaudy but graceful dolphin-tailed fountain and its gentle cascade of water sparkling in the floodlight, “and Dad would drag some girl or guy or group through the door. Always claim he was showing off his workshop, but she knew where he was going. And so did I, just by the look on her face.”

“Oh,” Pepper breathed, that simple word laden with sympathy, support, and understanding. Her hand tightened slightly against his shoulder, and he smiled. “And that’s the room you put Steve in?”

Tony could feel his grin grow feral as he nodded. “Serve the bastard right to have to watch Steve fuck someone other than him, and not be able to touch. Send his ghost screaming back to hell.”
“You don’t believe in ghosts, Tony,” she whispered, breath ghosting over his ear. His grin softened into a smile at how, even now, such a light touch, a mere breath, from Pepper could light up his senses.

“You’re right. I don’t.” He looked around at the faces of the people who made up his company, interspersed with actual friends and colleagues, and his smile widened. He turned back toward her to brush his lips across hers. “And tonight I don’t have to.” He took her glass out of her hand, and set it on a nearby tabletop along with his own. “So let’s dance.”

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Chauffeured by Happy, Adam and his partner arrived a little while after the Stark Industries employees and their guests arrived, and Steve greeted them both at the entrance to welcome them to Rinascere. Feeling only a little self-conscious, Steve kissed each man directly on the mouth and hugged them in turn. “Thanks so much for doing this – and on such short notice! It’ll be a big treat for everyone, I know.”

“Valentine’s day dance at Tony Stark’s ancestral home? Dude, I’d’ve been insulted if I wasn’t invited! Geeze Louise, this place is unbelievable! And damn, something smells really good!”

Adam’s partner excused himself to go check out the buffet while Adam and Steve caught up with each other. A uniformed waiter swung by with a tray of champagne flutes, and Steve and Adam both snagged a glass, clinked glasses, and sipped. Steve wrinkled his nose, and announced, “I like beer better. Or whiskey.”

“The bubbles can be fun,” Adam observed with a wicked smile. “So, I had some ideas for the concert I wanted to run by you.”

“Yeah?” Steve prompted, taking another sip of the champagne and letting the bubbles play over his tongue. He tilted his head and smiled at Adam. The bubbles could be fun.

“So. Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy. You and me.”

“It’s a three-part harmony,” Steve countered.

“So how about Stark? Think he’d be game?”

Steve shrugged. He’d heard Tony sing a few times around the tower, mostly along with his awful rock and roll, but sometimes just singing to himself to a playlist in his head, and he had to admit he wasn’t bad. Their voices might blend together better than their personalities often did, and it would certainly make the party memorable. Another thing to wipe away the stain of life growing up as Howard Stark’s son, maybe. “Let’s ask him,” Steve said with a grin and turned to go, but Adam caught him by the wrist and pulled him back gently.

Adam’s hand slid sensuously down Steve’s wrist to twine with his hand, fingers laced together, and Steve was instantly very much aware of Adam’s proximity, his beauty, his inherent maleness. “In a minute,” Adam said softly, drawing Steve closer. Steve could feel his heartbeat accelerate, pounding against his ribcage as his breath suddenly left him. “I had something I wanted to talk to you about first. Remember when we met, I told you I was in a committed relationship?”

Steve nodded slowly, eyes widening with dawning alarm. His heart rate was definitely increasing, and he felt a blush rising from his sternum. And a corresponding pressure a little further south. He swallowed tightly and willed the pressure away.

“Well, I still am. This one really is a keeper. Thing is … he’s interested. And so am I.”
“Interested?” Steve repeated, mouth dry and eyes wide.

“In a threesome. With you.”

Steve blinked. And blinked again. He quickly took a too-large, too-fast gulp of his drink and found himself coughing as the bubbly alcohol went down the wrong way. Adam patted him on his back while he caught his breath.

“Seriously, Steve, y’okay?” Adam asked, half-chuckling as Steve struggled to calm the coughing. He hadn’t felt like this since before the serum, before his lungs had been healed along with all his other ailments.

“You … you want a threesome? With me? I, um, I’m flattered, sure, but … you know I’m under contract. This Bachelor thing –”

As Adam patted his back to help him breathe, he told him, “Sure you are, Steve. Sure you are. When you get that little problem cleared up, lemme know – it’s not often that SO suggests a three-way. In fact, this is the first time, and I gotta say, I’m interested, too. If you ever change your mind, we’re there. So there. With bells on. And leather. Lots of leather. Or nothing. Lingerie – ooh, please. Whatever your pleasure. Hmm, I think that might be a good lyric –”

Steve frowned, trying to quell the images bubbling up in his brain of Adam in leather, or lingerie. Or himself – he’d tried it a few times back in the USO, and he had to admit he liked the way it felt. But that wasn’t solving the problem at hand. Or the problem he might have to take in hand. “What is it with people and threesomes lately? I have been propositioned by couples more than once in the past six weeks –”

“It’s because there’s so much of you, Steve. More than one person can handle.” Steve peered at him for a moment, searching for the punchline, but Adam’s face was serene and earnest.

“Because I’m Captain America,” Steve finally concluded, feeling a sadness creeping up on him again.

“Because you’re Steve Fucking Rogers, dude. Y’got the biggest heart of anybody I’ve ever known, Steve. My career takes me all over the world, and I’ve met a lot of people – good people, crazy people, fuckin’ crazy people, people even I don’t wanna think about people, and there is nobody like you. Anybody else in your shoes would’ve given up a long time ago. But you face every day with hope and, well, joy. Even when your boy treated you like shit, broke your heart, you found something to be joyous about. You’ve got so much love bursting in you, you’re fuckin’ givin’ it away. The kids of America and the world are lucky to have you in their corner. Can’t help it if people want a little taste of that. My SO? He’s never interested in having someone else in bed. But you … baby, if I didn’t know better, I’d be jealous.”

“I, uh. Well, I –” Steve blushed, feeling the heat of it rise up his neck and ignite his face like a roman candle. He rubbed at the back of his neck nervously. Adam was serious. It was him, Steve, he wanted, not the shield, not the persona. Not the dancing monkey. And that made Steve feel … well, kinda fluttery. And scared. And, Jesus, excited. But … “I appreciate the offer, Adam. And the vote of confidence. I just … I … I’m old-fashioned I guess. I’m looking for, well … I’m looking for my significant other, my SO. My one and only. I want … shit, I want romance and cuddling and someone to look into my eyes and tell me I’m the most important person in their life,” he sighed.

“I get it. And you deserve all of it, every bit. I hope you find it. Shit, I know you will. But if you change your mind, there’s always room for Steve Rogers at my house. At our house. In my bed, our
bed, if you want it. We’re friends, Steve – nothin’s stoppin’ us from being friends with benefits, if you’d ever be up for it. And nothin’s stoppin’ us from being friends, period. Right? We good?"

“We’re good. And thanks. Y’know, I’m really glad I met you. You’ve helped to change my life, Adam.”

“Me?” Adam laughed out loud at that. “I’m just a singer, Steve. An actor sometimes. Never saved the world, not even once.”

“No, but you may have saved me. I was living a lie. Closed off the most important parts of me. You helped me realize that. And open up. And the future is scary, but, well, it’s exciting, too.”

“Then maybe I have helped to save the world,” Adam said softly, curling his arm around Steve’s waist and pulling him closer to plant a soft, chaste kiss on Steve’s lips. “Now, I’d better get ready – you check with Stark, okay, and I’ll call you up when we’re ready to do the song, okay?”

Steve nodded, and Adam grinned at him before trotting away to collect his band who’d arrived separately, and set up. Steve stood there watching him go, lifting his fingers to trace along his lips. The future might be exciting, but it was getting really confusing again, too. In a good way. He thought. Maybe. No. Definitely.

&&&

“I can’t believe you can dance to this!” Pepper gasped breathlessly as Tony spun her around the grand ballroom floor in a fast Lindy Hop to the sound of Big Band music piped throughout Rinascere. “And where did you find this music?”

“Picked it out for Cap – thought he’d like it. Old-timey shit and stuff. He is guest of honor tonight after all, even if he doesn’t know it. And blame Mom. She thought a well-rounded young billionaire in training should have some social graces, and that meant dance lessons.”

“Well, I am … I am impressed. I thought all you could do was shake your bootie to Aerosmith,” she admired with a grin.

“I’ll have you know that my bootie can shake to any kind of music – well, except for contemporary dance. I never understood contemporary dance. Too much like mime. And my plié – not worth mentioning. Seriously. Never mention it. I will glance askance at you if you do.” He handed her off to kick and flick, and she followed his lead with an infectious grin, her hair bobbing wildly as she leapt from foot to foot.

“There’s something Tony Stark can’t do well?” she yelled over

He grabbed her hand and pulled her close. “There are many things Tony Stark can’t do well, Ms. Potts, but few he will admit to.” As he swung her around and dropped her into a breathtaking dip, he added, “This isn’t one of those things.”

She looked up at him in adoration, her hands held lightly on his biceps as he grinned wolfishly down at her. He tightened his hold and then they were off, whirling around the dance floor, lifting her into the air where she kicked delightedly, and the other guests pulled back into a rough circle clapping and cheering them on.

Tony felt the energy feed back to him, and smiled. It wasn’t like the bad old days, when hangers-
on would goad him to bigger and better explosions. No, this was pure, this was good. The people around him cheered his achievement and urged him to aim higher, all in a “you can do it” kumbaya kind of way. Without the irony. Or Starkasm.

As Pepper held him close, fingers tightening on his arms as they spun past some people he thought he recognized from Accounting, Tony realized that these were the people he needed to spend more time with, not those fuckwits from Washington, or the vapid and callous glitterati. These were good people, people who grounded his company and gave him the opportunities he took for granted. They were good for him. And he was glad they were here, at Rinascere, with him.

Take that, Howard.

The music came to a close and Tony unfurled Pepper along one arm, and then fell to one knee to kiss her knuckles theatrically, much to the delight of the crowd. Amidst the awwws and the ahhhs and the ooohs, he stood, grinning at her, and pulled her close to kiss the tip of her nose. “That was fun.” A slow song started up, one of those romantic old orchestrations, slow and sinuous, and Tony’s smile softened as he slid his arm around Pepper’s waist, taking her other hand up and holding it against his chest. They swayed quietly to the music, and around them, couples paired up and swayed, too.

“You’re a natural,” she commented with a sweet smile. “You might have a future in reality TV, too.”

“Nah. I’m an A-lister – don’t need Dancing with the Stars to revive my not-so-dead career.”

“Hmmm. Are you saying Steve Rogers isn’t an A-lister? Or that his career is over?”

“Mmm, no. Steve Rogers has a goal, and reality TV is going to help him achieve it. Guy like him games the system. Me, I already know I’m fabulous and I don’t need judges and votes to tell me that.”

“Oh?”

“Nope. So long as you look at me the way you are right now, that’s all I’ll ever need.”

“Oh, Tony,” she whispered, leaning in to press her lips against his. “Howard could’ve learned a thing or two from you, you know.”

“Oh? Like?”

“How to win the girl.”

“And keep her. Keeping is important.”

“Very,” she agreed as the song drifted to its end and they simply stood there, smiling at each other. Then, an energetic war era tune started up, and suddenly the crowd flowed away from the center with a collective, “Ooooh,” breaking Tony and Pepper out of their moment. Confused, they looked around to see Barnes snag the hand of a game-looking woman from PR as he spun her away, then sidled up and caught her around the waist to lead her in an enthusiastic and acrobatic Jitterbug. When she started to look tired, he kissed her cheek with a grin, let her twirl off his hand, and grabbed another from the audience.

“Somebody finally got rid of his grump,” Tony observed, nodding toward Barnes who was sliding his partner between his legs and back again, then lifted her into the air, legs kicking. “Who knew?”
“Steve said James won a number of dance competitions back when they were young. Apparently dancing was something he always loved, was always good at."


“Yeah. It does.”

By now, the crowd had stepped back as a ring of pure bystanders as Barnes led his succession of partners through complicated choreography that included kicks, flicks, lifts, rolls, and spins. Tony and Pepper stood close enough that they could hear the soft instructions that Barnes gave each of his partners as he maneuvered them into yet another trick. His face was alight with joy, a joy that was contagious as the crowd clapped and stomped and hooted its approval. When Barnes showed no signs of tiring, trading partner in for partner, the crowd finally started to drift back onto the dance floor, a few brave souls attempting to dance along. With a situational sense honed by years as a sniper, Barnes just kept dancing, never once bumping into any of the other slower, less accomplished couples.

“Guess expensive dance lessons can’t hold a candle to a lifetime of dancing, huh?” Pepper said, leaning her head in toward Tony as she clapped along, smiling broadly.

“Guess not. Now him? He could win Dancing with the Stars.”

&&&

Steve stood in the alcove fidgeting nervously. Stark’s mansion was littered with private places, little niches with seats, alcoves hidden from view, quiet spots perfect for assignations or clandestine meetings. He could easily see Howard Stark here, drawing a pretty woman from the floor for a quick kiss and a grope. Or a pretty man. Steve knew from personal experience that Howard wasn’t picky, not that he’d ever admit to Tony how he knew that.

The party was in full swing, and in more ways than one. Earlier, he’d watched Tony and Pepper dominate the dance floor in the ballroom with some pretty smooth moves, cheered on by their employees with enthusiasm and affection. He wondered if Tony realized how much his employees actually liked the man he’d become. The smiles that passed between him and Pepper said it all though – they didn’t need anyone else, because they had each other. It made Steve smile at the same time it made him a little sad.

He’d slipped away quietly to change, and now he straightened his shoulders and tugged down at his jacket hem at the same time. He’d thought long and hard about how he’d present himself on the Bachelor, and had enjoyed some spirited discussions with Pepper over the past few weeks as they prepared for this weekend, and quite a lot of stink-eye from Natasha when he’d refused to show up in a Speedo. In the end, the whole thing with Captain America was off the table. If ABC wanted to show archive footage of him in action, there was nothing he could or would do about it. But for that first impression he’d make on his prospective dates … well, he and Pepper had finally agreed that a tux was overkill, a suit was nice, but the best choice was his uniform. Not his Captain America uniform, but his Captain Rogers, US Army uniform.

It hadn’t taken much – just the force of Pepper’s personality and the cadre of Stark Industries lawyers backing her up – to get his things returned from the Smithsonian. A lot of it he hadn’t gone through yet, but he’d pulled out his uniform – lovingly cared for by the museum over the years, and put it on with a sense of pride and love. He hadn’t worn it often, preferring his field gear most of the time, but those times he had, he’d mostly been surrounded by the Howlies, his comrades in arms, his pals. And Bucky. Until that last time, that night in the bombed out pub. After. That was the last time he’d worn this uniform before he’d gone down with the Valkyrie. Well, time to make
some good memories again in the uniform he was most proud to wear.

Smoothing down his jacket and twitching his tie into position one more time, Steve Rogers took a deep breath and stepped out of the shadows and into the light of the celebration at Rinascere, only to find himself staring open-mouthed at James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes, Sgt. Retired, toss a lissome young brunette up into the air so high her curls nearly grazed the crystal dripping from the chandelier. The girl shrieked with delight as the audience – the crowd forming a ring around the dancers – clapped and cheered over the brass howling on the recording ringing through the mansion. Off to the side, Steve could see Tony and Pepper standing there, arms wrapped around each other’s waists, watching the exuberant gymnastics of Bucky’s performance.

*This* was the Bucky he remembered. The boy who danced with such joy, it couldn’t be contained. He hadn’t seen that boy in well over 70 years – he’d been ground down by struggle and then by the war, his spark all but snuffed, until finally Hydra had extinguished it entirely. As Bucky flung himself into the air and somersaulted into a split, Steve felt his heart stop, time stop, air stop. He was dimly aware of Pepper smiling at him, waving him over.

*This* was the Bucky he’d fallen in love with all those years ago.

*This* was the Bucky he still loved.

He turned on his heel and headed out of the grand ballroom, through the house, and out to the courtyard and the stage where Adam Lambert and his band were setting up.

*Jesus, he was fucked.*

&&&

“Itesting, one, two, three.”

As one, the entire audience turned toward the source of that voice, the courtyard.

“Free concert in the courtyard, folks! Bring your dancing shoes with you!” Tony called out, grabbing Pepper by the hand and racing through the house toward the concert stage set up out in the massive courtyard.

“Let me guess, your Mom never let you run in the house!” Pepper gasped as she bolted alongside him.

“Nope. Nannies. Nannies didn’t like running boys. My first invention was a shock-absorbing suspended walkway on which I could run without interference. And no nanny could follow. No one over four feet tall. You can still see the molly bolts in the wall up there,” he gestured toward a protruding something from the smooth plaster.

“Please tell me you don’t want kids,” Pepper breathed fervently, and that caused Tony to stop, pull her aside and out of the path of the oncoming stampede.

“Did you just say the k-word?” Tony demanded breathlessly.

“Yes. As in, you don’t want any, right? Because I really don’t think I could deal with multiple mini-yous building scaffolding in the tower to avoid capture and, and walking tightropes to the Chrysler Building and —“

He cut her off by kissing her. “If we have any kids at all, they will all be girls, and they will all be exactly like you. I promise.”
“You promise?”

“I promise. I couldn’t take another me, either. We’ll have Bruce cook up something to ensure it. Okay? We’re okay? We’re not having kids right now, Pepper. We’re having a party, and we’re going to go enjoy it. Together? Right?”

“Right.”

“Right. I know a shortcut. Let’s go.”

&&&

“Ladies and gentlemen, help me in welcoming to the stage our very own Captain Steve Rogers!”

The audience went wild as Steve shyly ascended the steps to the stage and joined Adam awkwardly at the mike stand. Adam gestured toward one of the roadies, who brought out another mike stand, this one looking vintage from Steve’s era. “Thought you’d like something familiar,” Adam teased, grinning.

Steve accepted the mike, settled it in place, and spoke into it, “Funny guy. They were bigger in my day.”

Adam’s eyebrow shot up as his grin grew wider. “So that’s how it’s gonna be, huh?”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about,” Steve countered, a sly grin starting to form on his face.

“Uh-huh. Well, folks, Steve and I have a special treat for you. It’s a song my dear friend Bette Midler made famous, oh, about a hundred years ago, and it’s still as much fun today as it was then. But we need a third! Hey, you, Tony Stark! Get your pretty little ass up here and join us!”

A spotlight suddenly turned on, picking Tony out of the crowd. He held his forearm up to shield his eyes from the glare, and shouted back, “Since you ask so nicely, asshole!” And he trotted through the crowd that suddenly parted for him, and made his way up to the stage in record time.

With a little fumbling and elbowing each other for precedence on the stage, Adam, Steve, and Tony launched into a lively if sometimes out of synch rendition of *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*.

&&&

*He was a famous trumpet man out Chicago way*
*He had a boogie style that no one else could play*
*He was the top man at his craft, but then his number came up*
*And he was gone with the draft, he's in the army now a blowin' reveille*
*He's the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B*

[Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy is written by Hughie Prince and Don Raye]

Until the concert started, no one realized just how many people were present in the Stark mansion – they’d been spread out throughout the courtyard and expansive first level, mingling outside in the frost-crusted gardens having a smoke or snatching a clandestine kiss. Or, like the Avengers and their companions, up in their rooms in the upper levels, getting ready for the party. When Earth’s Mightiest and entourage finally made their collective appearances, all looking dapper and shiny and otherworldly, they were met with a throng so dense, not even the Other Guy could’ve made it through without casualties. Even Thor had to raise an impressive eyebrow at the sight of so many well-dressed people pressed into such a large space made to look small.
Lambert’s band and backup singers were settling in on the stage as he welcomed everyone to Stark Industries who-cares-what-it’s-for-let’s-party. Then he launched into a series of hits and covers, and the crowd bebopped in time to the music, many of those in attendance singing along. Darcy quickly shrugged off her jacket revealing a sleeveless T with Glambert plastered across it, pulled out studded leather cuffs and slid them up her forearms, and started bellowing out the lyrics with abandon.

As Tony and Steve joined Lambert on stage for their raucous rendition of *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, several of the Avengers and their companions made a bee-line for the buffet table, while Romanoff stood on tiptoe, on pointe, scanning the crowd avidly. Maria Hill came up behind her holding a plate of food and a flute of champagne, and said matter-of-factly, “My people are on it. I’m getting regular reports,” she added, tapping the StarkBone receiver on her ear with the hand holding the glass. “Everyone present has been vetted, IDs cross-checked. Perimeter is secure, my people in the mix are reporting all is clear.”

“Yeah, sure, I trust you,” Romanoff answered absently, still craning to find … something. Someone?

“You trust me,” Maria repeated flatly. “Romanoff, you are world famous for not trusting anyone. And you trust *me*?”

“Yeah, sure, girl power and all that,” Romanoff agreed absently, suddenly going taut as though she’d found whatever or whoever she was looking for. “We’ll do lunch, it’ll be great,” she muttered as she launched herself into the undulating crowd.

Maria took a giant step back and turned toward Sam, grabbing him by the bicep. “Romanoff’s on the move.”

&&&

*They made him blow a bugle for his Uncle Sam*

*It really brought him down because he could not jam*

*The captain seemed to understand*

*Because the next day the cap’ went out and drafted the band*

*And now the company jumps when he plays reveille*

*He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B*

Sam nodded, and tapped the StarkBone on his face. “Hawkeye, you got eyes on Natasha?” He glanced up toward one of the balconies overlooking the courtyard. Barton slipped out of the shadows to look down into the shifting crowd, moving to the music in a constantly changing formation.

“20 degrees counterclockwise from your position. She’s tracking Barnes, but everybody’s moving so she’s having to change course constantly.” There was a moment of silence, then Barton added, “Can somebody get me a drink and something to eat? Gotta feeling I’m gonna be stuck up here for a while if Nat’s on the hunt.”

Sam turned around to the others and ordered, “Formation Widow. We gotta get to her before she gets to Barnes.”

Without another word, Thor, Banner, Sharon Carter, Rhodey, Maria, Ian Boothby, Jane Foster, and Sam all hurried away, each aiming for a different position, leaving Darcy to man the buffet table and block that exit. “Hey, I could be more effective if I had my taser!” she called after Sam, but Sam didn’t respond. Instead, he drove right through the crowd on Natasha’s six, while the others
made their ways around the perimeter of the courtyard to take up spots at the various entrances so they could all converge on Natasha’s location.

“I could, you know,” Darcy said to his retreating back, and Erik Selvig just patted her shoulder soothingly.

&&&

A root, a toot, a toodlie-a-da-toot, he blows it eight to the bar
In boogie rhythm, he can’t blow a note unless a bass
And guitar is playin’ with him and the company jumps when he plays reveille
He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B
He was some boogie woogie bugle boy of company B

“Where is Barnes?” Sam asked Clint.

“Other side of the courtyard. Found himself a pretty girl, his situational awareness seems to have gone south along with his bloodflow,” Barton chuckled into the earpiece. “Any updates on that drink?”

“You’ll have to hold on until after I get to your lady friend, Barton. Don’t know why you couldn’t have accompanied her and kept an arm around her.”

“Wouldn’a worked – she’d’a dragged me along for the ride. There’s no stopping Nat when she’s on the scent.” A pause, and then Barton added, “So I guess I’m goin’ thirsty, huh? Geeze, no respect.”

“Keep an eye out for one of those waiters – they’re everywhere. Maria’s team.”

“Hey, so you think I could ask one of them to get me something to eat? I really should’ve swung by the buffet table before I took up my position.”

“Go ahead. And Barton? Let’s leave this channel open for actual surveillance updates, huh? I don’t need to hear you chewin’ in my ear.”

“Yeah, fuck you, too, Wilson. Hey, hey you over there – gotta minute?”

Shaking his head, Sam pushed deeper into the crowd, bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet trying to catch a glimpse of flame red hair.

&&&

When he played his boogie woogie bugle, he was busy as a busy bee
And when he played he made the company jump eight to the bar
He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B
Andata toodliata-toodliata toot toot, he blows it eight to the bar
He can’t blow a note if a bass and guitar isn’t with him
And the company jumps when he plays reveille
He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B

The band was doing an instrumental riff while Adam Jitterbugged with one of his back-up dancers, and Steve pulled Tony aside to whisper hoarsely, “What the fuck, Tony?” as he nodded toward the audience where the Avengers were pushing their way through the crowd toward a point Steve hadn’t yet sussed out.
“What, you discover you have gonads and now you swear like a sailor?”

“I swear like a soldier, and I always knew I had gonads. What’s your excuse? Now what’s going on?”

“Romanoff. She’s got her sights set on Barnes.”

“What, I thought she and Clint – “

“No, her matchmaking sights. On Barnes. And you.”

“No, that’s not right, he’s not –“

“Whatever, we’ve all been pressuring him – some more than others – to make nice with you and maybe take it a little further. In Romanoff’s case, a lot further. But hey, Wilson set us all straight, so the team’s on it. But Romanoff just won’t give up on it.”

Steve turned back toward the audience, and now that he knew what the objective was, he immediately picked Natasha out of the crowd. She was still pushing her way toward Bucky, who was at the far end of the courtyard talking with Annie, his web site specialist. He ignored the clenching around his heart at the way Buck looked at her, and set his jaw. He looked happy, relaxed, more like his childhood friend than he’d seen him since Buck had shipped off to England. He told himself he was happy for him, that his heart wasn’t breaking a little at the sight.

That was enough for him to make a decision.

“Great. You’re on,” he told Tony as he took a couple of steps to the edge of the makeshift stage.

“What are you doing –“

“Hitching a ride!” Steve answered as he launched himself into the audience, and was immediately caught up in outstretched hands that carried him across the audience. When he was in sight of Natasha, he twisted and dropped out of the people’s reach and landed lightly on his feet. Within a breath, he had his hand around Natasha’s upper arm, pulling her back toward him.

“So, Nat. What’s up?”

&&&

He puts the boys to sleep with boogie every night
And wakes ’em up the same way in the early bright
They clap their hands and stamp their feet
’Cause they know how it goes when someone gives him a beat
Woh, woh, he wakes ’em up when he plays reveille
The boogie woogie bugle boy of company B

Without Steve as the third voice, Adam grabbed one of his backup singers and pulled him up to the mike, as he cast a frown in Tony’s direction. Tony shrugged and jumped back into the song with gusto, but his attention was riveted on Cap’s progress. He could see the entire team converging on Romanoff’s position, inexorable and really pretty fucking obvious – it was a wonder none of the Stark employees – or that camera team from ABC – had noticed a bunch of superheroes pushing their ways through the crowd. Then again, the crowd was jumping up and down, dancing in place, singing along, and generally too distracted by the performance – and the novelty of Tony himself performing – to notice the Avengers amongst them. Still, you’d think someone would notice Thor, but apparently observational skills were on the wane among the Stark initiate. He’d have to talk to
Pepper, maybe they needed to have a seminar or a class or some such shit. Whatever.

Ah. Steve had reached Romanoff, caught her by the arm, and spun her around to face him. Tony smirked. The Avengers and their friends formed a ring around the pair, just far enough to be able to snap into a cordon if Romanoff were to break off and run.

So, of course, Steve slipped his arm around her waist, grabbed her free hand in his, and started dancing.

&&&

A root, a toot, a toodli-a-da to toot toot toot, he’s blowin’ eight to the bar
Can’t blow a note if a bass and guitar isn’t, woh, with him
And the company jumps when he plays reveille
He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of company B

“So. This is a new look for you, Rogers,” Natasha commented, eying Steve’s Army uniform as they moved gracefully together.

“Old look, actually,” he corrected.

“And you’ve kept your girlish figure,” she pretended to simper. “Not that I mind – you dance better than I expected – but what’s up?”

Steve could see her eyes flicker, take in the team’s positions he’d marked as he’d dropped out of crowd surfing, the spot where Bucky and Annie are still laughing and talking at the edge of the crowd. Steve sensed that Buck’d gone tense, his own attention distracted from the performance as he scanned the crowd. He felt rather than saw Bucky’s eyes fall on him, register his presence, and Buck relaxed slightly. Huh. Situational awareness for him, eh? That’s … that’s kinda reassuring actually.

But Natasha was tense, wary, and Steve drew her closer as they dance. “Barnes,” he said simply.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think he’s gonna hit you or anything tonight,” she replied lightly, but her eyes were calculating, her posture expectant.

“I understand you’ve been trying to play matchmaker. Putting some pressure on Buck.”

She shrugged. “He needs some guidance, that’s all. Wilson’s overreacted.”

“About what, Nat? What’d you do?”

“I may have pointed out some truths to him.”

“Like?”

“Like if he didn’t get his head out of his ass and admit that he was in love with you now, he could lose you forever. Pepper did an amazing job on selecting your ‘dates’, Rogers.”

Part of Steve wanted to beg her to tell him what Bucky said to that, at the same time another part of him burned with rage for the invasion of Bucky’s privacy and agency. The fingers of the hand resting on her lower back tensed, pressing into her flesh.

“Little tight in the grip, there, Rogers. Wanna let up?”

“Wanna explain to me why you’d risk his recovery to pressure him to admit something that isn’t
“It is true, we’ve all seen it. The way you two are together – you’re meant to be together.”

“Not like that.”

“Like that. He’s just too stubborn to see it. And I wasn’t the only one –”

Steve stopped then, staring down her with barely controlled rage. “Who else?”

“Everyone, really. None of us thought there was any harm, we all want what’s best for you –“

“And what about what’s best for him?”

“He hurt you Steve, he was horrible to you. I don’t get –“

“You of all people should understand, Nat. You have a better idea than anyone what he was put through. Don’t you dare use me as your excuse for treating him like that.”

“I – I thought you’d appreciate it –“

“I could never appreciate anyone hurting Bucky. Even if he won’t have anything to do with me, I’d never condone anyone harming him. But you don’t do things just to please others, Nat. What was your reason for interfering? Your real reason, the reason you haven’t admitted to anyone else?”

She stared downward, breathing slowly through her mouth. She drew in a long, steadying breath, and lifted her face to look into Steve’s eyes. “I don’t believe in true love. Certainly not true love.”

“Yeah, I know. Love is for children.”

“And fairy tales are to frighten. Disney has subverted cautionary tales the world over. I don’t believe in true love. But I want to. I want to. And when I look at you and James … I see it. I see it there, in both of you, plain as day. I want you together – I need you together – so I can believe in true love.”

“Love takes many forms, Nat. What you see when you look at us is true love – the love between brothers, between friends. What we had – what I hope we still have – is true friendship. Just as rare if not rarer than true romantic love. You’ll have to make do with that.” And he lifted the arrow necklace she toyed with constantly and looked at it seriously, then glanced over his shoulder and up at the balcony alcove where he knew Clint stood, waiting. “I think you already know what true love is, Nat. I think you just need to let yourself believe in it. You don’t need Buck and me for that.”

He took her hands in his and squeezed her fingers gently. “You need to learn to trust your heart rather than try to change someone else’s.”

She sniffled slightly, and nodded once, her eyes cast down to the floor. “Read that in a Cracker Jack box, Rogers?” she asked, lifting her face toward him again.

“Ovaltine, actually. With the secret decoder ring,” he shrugged, then grinned at her. “So. Hands off, right? Don’t try to make him something that he’s not. For me, Nat. Do it for me, if you can’t do it otherwise.” She nodded again, and his grin broadened. “Great. Then maybe you might want go ask that Barton fellow for a dance.”

“Clint’s got two left feet – even you dance better. But yeah, maybe it’s time he and I talked. A
little. Not too deep. I’m not admitting anything, mind you –“

He shut her up with a kiss to the forehead and a squeeze of her arm. “Go. I’m gonna go apologize to Buck for my so-called friends. I need to make sure he’s really all right.”

“Steve, I – “

“Go. I’ll see you later. This is something I need to do.”

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Chapter End Notes

So, admissions abound, and ghosts are laid to rest. What'd you think? Please, hit the comments and let me know how you liked this chapter, and please feel free to speculate on what happens next!
Is Anybody Listening?

Chapter Summary

Two chapters in one week! The Earth may tip off its axis! Actually, there are two chapters because I broke this chapter into two parts. Here's the balance of what was supposed to be last chapter. It's mostly talking. Some dancing. Some crying. Some drinking.

Steve and Bucky finally talk.

Chapter Notes

I apologize if this chapter seems talky. There's a lot to be said between these two goobers, a lot that's gone unsaid for too long. And yes, you may notice some stuff that remains unsaid.

I'm actually pretty happy with this chapter. It's one of those chapters I just sort of recorded what the boys wanted to say and got out of their way. In some ways, it went better, but in others, there's still more work to be done down the road. But overall, this really satisfied me, and I hope you'll find it equally satisfying.

This is the last chapter - for real this time - before the alternate endings. I'm going to focus on completing one ending (the original direction) totally before going back and reworking the alternate ending.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve still felt the warmth of Natasha’s embrace as he pushed his way through the crowd that was still dancing to Adam, Tony and the backup singer’s riffs on Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy. Too bad Jimmy Fallon hadn’t been able to make the party – family commitments, and his show, he said. He would’ve made a great third or even a fourth on the song. Steve smiled a little sadly to himself – he liked the song, and would’ve liked to have finished it, but this … this was more important.

He’d scoped out where Bucky was while he was talking with Nat, gauged the distance and made sure he moved at a leisurely pace, no aggression, no tension, nothing that could spook Bucky. Arms loose, expression open, holding the anxiety at bay. There might be détente, but they weren’t at a complete cease-fire yet. Especially now he’d learned what his well-meaning but really fucking clueless friends had been up to.

He was a few feet away from where Bucky was grinning and joking around with Annie – touching too, gentle, light touches to her shoulder, her hand, the back of her neck. Affectionate touches. Leading touches. Touches that promised more touches, more intimate touches.

Steve swallowed bile. He’d seen Buck with countless girls, had heard him fuck one or four back in their days living together. Why did it bother him more now, when Bucky knew that he was …
well, he might be interested?

And that was it. Now it felt more personal, like Bucky knew and understood that Steve might be interested, and the touches were more a message than simply natural affection between a man and a woman.

He knew that Buck sensed his presence, but it was Annie who acknowledged him first, turning and spying him, her pretty face alight with a big smile that crinkled around her eyes and made her look impossibly young.

Had he ever been so young? Or had infirmity and privation made him old before his time? Had he ever lived with so much joy as she embodied in one simple, welcoming expression?

And he realized that he hadn’t embraced joy for a very, very long time. Like Bucky when he was dancing, the first time since they’d been teenagers, still in school, still living in their parents’ homes, still with the future wide open before them, where their only limitations were the scope of their own imaginations. Both of them had bowed beneath the weight of so much as that future had swallowed them whole, then thrust them into war and horror.

No more.

Steve smiled back at Annie, trying to pour every iota of joy he could draw from his soul. Her smile brightened, and she pivoted in Bucky’s loose embrace to reach out for Steve, her fingers closing on the lapels of his uniform jacket as she pulled herself toward him. “Steve! You were wonderful! We shoulda got that for YouTube, loop it on the site! You could be a rockstar, Steve. I could be your groupie! Will you sign my boobs?”

Oh. Not natural joy. Alcohol-fueled joy. Steve noticed alarm flash across Bucky’s face as his attention zeroed in on Annie. Then she started to pull up her top, but Steve grabbed her hands and lowered them gently but firmly, retaining her modesty even as she was eager to give it up. He was aware of the puzzled frown on Bucky’s face, his eyes flicking back and forth between Annie and Steve. “I know you like boys, Steve, but you’re bisexual, right? That means you like girls, too. I do, too. But I really like you. I love working for you. And you,” she twisted around to grab Bucky by his half-undone tie. “I’m bisexual, too. And Steve is my hero. Is he your hero, too, Bucky Bear?”

“Yeah, sure, doll,” Bucky answered, the formerly open expression on his face a memory. In its place was a guarded look, almost dour in its disappointment. “He’s a regular Clark Gable. Think maybe you should get yourself some coffee?” Bucky suggested, starting to steer her gently toward the drink service table, hand cupped possessively around her elbow.

Steve fought down a moment of panic; Bucky was going to escort her to get coffee, and Steve would lose his chance – and likely his nerve. He glanced around frantically, found Pepper nearby – no doubt she’d been assigned blocking duty closest to Bucky since Nat would never mess with her. Girl power trumped by Extremis bloom. He caught her eye and poured all his desperation into his expression, and she responded with a furrowed brow and a slight shake of her head, but started over to join them anyway. “Hey, here’s Pepper – maybe she can help Annie out. Whaddya say, Annie? Ms. Potts’ll help you get some coffee, make sure you’re feelin’ okay?”

He turned toward Pepper and asked softly, “Would you mind?” just as Anne lurched forward and planted a sloppy kiss on Steve's lips. His hands instinctively went for her waist to stabilize and draw her in, and she pirouetted in his hands to grab Bucky’s face and give him a big smacking kiss too, pulling Bucky with her as she stumbled back against Steve’s chest.

“Pretty boy sandwich,” she burbled, then giggled. Then she sighed, slowly turning to one and then
other of Steve and Bucky, reaching out to graze her fingers against Bucky’s cheek and Steve’s chest. “So pretty …”

Just what was it about Steve that had everybody thinking to the power of three?

“C’mon, Annie. I need you to have a cup of coffee with me. Right now,” Pepper commanded in that cheery, friendly, tougher than vibranium tone of hers. She slid her arm around the small of Annie’s back and steered her away from Steve and Bucky, and toward the promise of the coffee urn. She glanced back over her shoulder at Steve and mouthed, “You owe me!”

They’d hardly stepped away when both Bucky and Steve started talking over each other, Steve earnestly, Bucky angrily.

“I coulda taken care of her, wouldn’t’a done anything ‘less she was sober. There was no need for you to fuckin’ butt in –“

“Buck, I wanted to apologize to you –“

They both fell silent, regarding each other warily.

Bucky’s angry glare smoothed out into a puzzled frown and he was the first to speak again.

“Apologete? Wait, you want to apologize to me?”

“I didn’t think you couldn’t take care of her, I know you wouldn’t do anything inappropriate – I just … I just wanted to apologize for my dumbass friends.”

Bucky’s eyebrows drew inward as he frowned, and then his eyes automatically lifted to scan the crowd. From the way Buck went still, coiled, he knew he was running threat assessments against the crowd, could see the various members of the Avengers and their friends standing in a rough semi-circle around them, obvious in their lack of attention to the concert, and their tension radiating toward him.

Since when had this become their reality? Threesome and threat assessments? Against each other?

Bucky focused his gaze back on Steve, speared him with his intensity. “Steve … what the fuck is going on?”

Steve sucked in a breath and whooshed it out. “Natasha was on a mission to … um, ah … play Cupid.”

“Cupid. I already had a girl – and you messed that up –“

“Not with a girl. And sorry about that, I just needed to make sure you were okay. No, Nat wanted to play Cupid with you and, um, well, with me.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I didn’t know they’d all … well, they’d all been putting pressure on you. Tony just told me. I’ve been so busy with my own things, and we weren’t talking, so I didn’t really see – he said Sam knocked some heads together ‘cos they were pushin’ and pushin’. That wasn’t me, I didn’t ask them, I would never, I promise you, I respect you more than that, hell, I respect anybody more than that –“

“Shut up.”
“What?”

“Shut up, Rogers. I never thought … well, maybe for a minute,” Buck corrected himself, frowning, his gaze turned inward as he puzzled over what Steve had said.

That hit Steve in the gut harder than any opponent he’d ever faced, before the serum or after.

Oh.

Bucky thought that he’d been behind the constant pressure to fuck him. He trusted him that little.

Cold spread through his entire body as though he’d been injected with ice, making him dizzy and nauseous.

“That you thought it at all for even a minute, I guess that says it all, doesn’t it?” Steve asked, crestfallen. He swallowed hard and started to turn away, but paused to say, “Yeah, I’m, ah, I’m really sorry about it all. Nat won’t bother you again about it – she and I had a talk. She knows where I stand. And Sam’s got everyone on the same page now – no screwing with your choices. So, you can rest easy. No one’ll bother you again, I promise. About me, I mean. Yeah. Sorry.” And with that, Steve turned to push his way back through the crowd, all thoughts of reconciliation abandoned.

&&&

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!

Steve was standing right there, tracked him down to apologize to him for all the crap their bone-headed friends had been raining down on him the past few weeks – apologize to him, who blew up and called Steve all manner of shit names, fuckin’ took the friendship of a lifetime, broke it to pieces, and pissed all over ‘em – and Bucky just put his head up his own goddamned ass by saying that he thought Steve might have been behind all that pressure and bullshit.

Which, yeah, in his blackest moments, he did kinda think. He thought a lot of stupid shit at that point, paranoia on high alert, and not trusting anyone or anything. Made him sick to remember.

But in his defense, his head had been 100% jammed up his own asshole at the time then, too, completely running blind on panic and confusion and fucking stupidity, and he was most definitely not thinking clearly.

But he was now. And he was watching Steve Rogers part the crowd and disappear into it, and all of a sudden, he felt sick to his stomach and if he didn’t do something right now he’d have made the biggest mistake of his long, fucked-up life and then what’s the goddamned sense of having survived it all if he’s going to be without his best pal for the rest of his godforsaken life?

“Steve!” he called, his flesh hand reaching out for him as he lurched into the crowd behind him. His fingers closed around Steve’s wrist as he shouldered past some jiggling partygoers, and he yanked, spinning Steve around to face him. “Fuck, I’m sorry,” he said and hauled Steve close and wrapped his arms – flesh and steel – around Steve’s back as he pressed his cheek against the side of his head, “I’m sorry, Steve. I didn’t mean it like that. I –“

“Maybe we just gotta talk, Buck,” Steve answered soothingly, breath warming the curl of Bucky’s ear, his own arms gingerly circling Bucky. And didn’t that make Buck feel oddly safe, oddly at home? Steve pulled back and stared at Buck, his eyes bright with tears that slid silently down his cheeks. “Maybe not now, but –“
Fuck no. They were not missing another opportunity to make this right.

“Why not now? You got someplace you gotta be? I mean, y’know, other than your Bachelor thing? Y’got a few minutes for an old pal?” Steve nodded slowly, eyes widening in wonder. It’s the only way Bucky could describe the expression in those baby blues. “So let’s do it now. We gotta. But not here, though –”

“C’mon – Tony showed me Howard’s old hidey hole – one of ‘em anyway. There’s an entrance over there, and it’ll be quieter there, but we can still hear the music and if y’want, we can watch the party from there –”

Bucky nodded eagerly. There was still a chance. Maybe he could still salvage this.

&&&

Tony had given Steve a master key to everything in the house and outbuildings, and had instructed Jarvis to allow Steve free access to all areas of the house and grounds, including Howard’s old lab, and the Captain America shrine. Steve really couldn’t think of it any other way, and it made him feel even sadder for Tony – and a little creeped out that his old friend and colleague Howard had thought of him that way. It kind of made both Phil Coulson’s fanboy adoration, and Art’s Cap obsession tame by comparison, really.

But Steve knew that the passageways that led to Howard’s domains – both sacred and profane – were off limits to the partygoers. Tony hadn’t even planned to allow the Avengers and their guests access unless Steve specifically requested. So Steve was surprised to find the doorway closed but unlocked, and lights on in the passage as he led Bucky into the quieter, private corridor leading to Howard’s Cap collection.

“Hello? Anyone here?” he called out tentatively, holding his hand up to stay Bucky’s progress.

“Y’really think anyone’s gonna stand a chance against the two of us?” Buck whispered, leaning in and breathing across what used to be Steve’s good ear. Steve had to smile at that – old habits really did die hard.

“It’s unlikely, and I trust Maria and her team, but I’d never discount the idea of Hydra infiltrating an event this big,” Steve shot back, his voice pitched low and soft, but he knew that Buck could hear him – they’d conversed like this many times in the field back with the Commandos.

Without further words between them, they pressed into the shadows, Steve to one side of the corridor, Bucky to the other, and Steve gestured forward sharply with two fingers, then hooked a thumb left, and gestured at Bucky and pointed right. Bucky nodded, and they began to move forward as one until suddenly there was Tony, holding a couple of bottles of something clear and lethal looking, grinning maniacally.

Well, grinning like Tony.

“Hey, Cap and Winter Twinkletoes – just the guys I was looking for. After you went surfing, I remembered this,” he held up the bottles for their inspection. “Your stunt reminded me of my younger days when I did shit like that under the influence. And not. Mostly just did shit.”

“You do realize I called out to you,” Steve started, straightening and eying the bottles with extreme prejudice. Tony just shrugged, still grinning like mad.

“I could have killed you without making a sound,” Bucky added with a growl, “and I would have enjoyed it.” But he looked at the bottles with more interest. “What is that stuff?”

“Some new gimmick,” Steve said disgustedly, starting to turn to leave the passageway. There wouldn’t be any private conversation with Tony Stark around.

“Actually, old formulation. This is from dear old Dad’s still. He was trying to brew something that would get even you drunk. Y’know he was always hoping he’d find you.”

Steve looked at the light sparkling within the clear fluid, and blinked a couple of times, feeling immeasurably sad for Howard Stark in that moment – always searching, never finding, and missing out on time with his son. Cheating himself out of the greatest treasure in his life, while chasing a ghost.

Bucky huffed a half-laugh, half-grunt. “Really think that’ll cut through the serum?” But he was looking at the bottles possessively, longingly. Bucky used to love to go out drinking on a Friday night, come home all loose and sloppy and relaxed. Steve loved to watch him like that, unrepentant, uninhibited, unconcerned. It had always been a welcome change from the weighed-down, ground-under look Buck often carried as the work week progressed.

“No one knew the serum better than my Dad. No one living, after Dr. Erskine was killed. He didn’t fully understand it, but he did have a small sample of Steve’s blood that he very carefully husbanded through the years. In fact, he did some very early work on cloning in an effort to extend the supply.”

“Oh, that’s not even a little creepy,” Steve said, following Tony back toward the Stark Museum of Rogers.

“Y’think? Hmm, truth is, he developed some pretty decent technologies in his search for you, and in his efforts to understand how the serum worked. Thank God he never tried human trials – we can thank the US military for that shitshow. Only good thing to come out of that is Banner – may never have met him if it weren’t for the Other Guy. Silver linings and all that.”

“I’m sure that’s a great consolation to Bruce. Y’know, considering how his life got turned inside out when the Hulk manifested,” Steve observed.

“Sometimes y’gotta find the good, even in the bad,” Bucky said softly. “Sometimes that’s all y’got to hang onto.”

Steve and Tony turned to look at Bucky, and Steve couldn’t help the hand that reached out and clasped Bucky’s shoulder sympathetically.

“Yeah, exactly,” Tony agreed without a hint of snark or sarcasm. “You find the good, the light, and you try to let it guide you out of the shit and the dark.”

Bucky looked at Tony with surprise, nodding slowly. “So, where’s the hooch?” he asked after a moment of silently grinding his teeth.

“Here we are, gentlemen – your very own supply of StarkShine. And yes, I can make more. If it works. So, consider this phase I trials,” he added, handing each of them a bottle of the stuff. They’d stopped just a few feet away from Howard’s Cap collection, and as Bucky and Steve took the bottles doubtfully, Tony pressed a button in the wall, and the panel receded into the wall soundlessly. Behind the wall was another room, with a complicated arrangement of tubing, glassware, and what looked like barrels and heating elements. On the other side of the room were floor-to-ceiling shelves full of bottles as full and pristine as the ones in Tony’s hands. “Howard’s still and his ‘shine cache. Even if nothing else gets you two drunk, this might. It’s pure alcohol, stronger than Everclear. Hell, I’ve used it to strip paint of an old tank once.”
“Ever drink it yourself?” Bucky asked, eyes narrowed.

“I value my life. That stuff is guaranteed to cause alcohol poisoning in a normal human being. Yes, I tried it when I was 17. Almost swore off booze for life, but then I discovered Ripple. When my taste buds grew back, I started to develop a more discriminating palate.”

The music from the concert followed them into the passageway, carried clearly by speakers mounted on the old brick walls, even within the still room. Bucky slid past Tony to go into the room to look over Stark Senior’s contraption. “You ever actually run this thing?”

“Can’t be any worse that old man Mitchell’s still back in the old neighborhood,” Steve commented, leaning down to peer at the copper curlicues and glass piping. “As I remember, you were apprenticing with him until the damned thing blew up and took out his shed and half his porch. Mrs. Mitchell wouldn’t let him out of her sight after that.”

“And there went my career as a bootlegger if Prohibition was ever voted back in. Coulda put you through art college on what we coulda made if he hadn’t miscalculated the mash mixture. Yeah. Yeah, I might be able to run this – could be fun.”

Steve straightened and looked quizzically at Bucky. “Was that … was that why you did it? To help send me to school?”

Bucky turned and glanced at Steve, his eyes gone wide and panicky. “I don’t remember,” he said too quickly, and Steve knew that in that moment, Bucky had had a new memory surface. “Hey, what’s that?” he asked suddenly, moving away from the still.

“Dad’s porn collection. There are stashes all over the house. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve located all of them yet. You may have heard I don’t spend much time here.”

“Maybe you should make a game of it, then. Treasure hunt. Anyone who finds an unknown stash of porn gets a prize,” Bucky said absently as he picked up a few of the yellowed old magazines.

“Damn, Barnes, that’s not a bad idea. But not while Cap here’s shooting the Bachelor. Dad had some kinky tastes later in life – wouldn’t want any of that found live on network TV.”

“This stuff’s not so bad – good art, and helluva storyline,” Bucky commented, holding up the yellowed 8-pager he was looking through.

“Hey, lemma see that,” Steve said, reaching for it.

“A whole pile there, Rogers, get your own,” Bucky huffed, pulling the magazine out of Steve’s reach.

“No, seriously, that one. I think I recognize it.”

“What, you jerk off so infrequently, you remember the material you used?” Tony teased, but a glance in his direction confirmed for Steve there was no heat or malice behind the remark, just reflex.

Steve gave Bucky the patented Captain America glare, and Buck relented with a theatrical sigh, handing over the magazine. Then he grabbed another from the pile and started looking through it.

“Yep, just as I thought.”

“Care to share?”
Steve held up the magazine and pointed to a small box at the bottom of the cover page. The box contained three letters. SGR.

“Fuck me,” Tony breathed. “You drew porn?” Tony made grabby hands for it while Bucky swiped it back to study it more closely.

“That looks like me. And that looks like Sarabeth Walker!”

“Yes. Drawn and written by Steven Grant Rogers – based on this one’s tale of conquest,” Steve said proudly, hooking a thumb toward Bucky. Tony was doing one of his impressions of a big mouthed bass right then, looking from Steve, to Bucky, to the magazine in Bucky’s hands, and back to Steve again.

“Shut your mouth, Stark, you’re attractin’ flies,” Bucky commented with a grin, still looking down at the black and white images in the magazine. “I remember telling you about this, but it sure as hell didn’t happen like this – you got a helluva imagination on you, Rogers,” he added, lifting his face to look directly at Steve. Steve felt himself heat up at the attention, the warmth in those blue, blue eyes.

“Artistic license,” Steve shrugged, hoping his voice was steadier than he felt.

“Yeah, ‘specially since I made it all up,” Bucky added, flipping through the pages, and then suddenly froze.

“You made it up?” Steve nearly squeaked, rounding on Bucky and staring open-mouthed, not unlike Tony a moment ago.

Tony took advantage of the moment of awkwardness to grab the magazine from Bucky’s lax hands, cackling. “I gotta show Bruce. Captain America drew porn! Wrote it! And my Dad bought it! I’ll bet he didn’t even know he was jacking off to the adventures of Bucky Bear as drawn by Captain Pornerica! This’ll make a great addition to the art exhibit – Steve Rogers’ greatest tits!” And he was off down the passageway toward the courtyard, chuckling to himself. Either one of the super-soldiers could have caught him easily if they’d wanted to, but they were still caught in their own bubble of awkward.

So Steve barely registered Tony’s departure as he turned toward Bucky to regard him seriously.

“How many of ‘em were actually true, Buck?” Steve finally challenged.

Bucky shrugged. “I dunno. Possibly. I did a bunch of them. Y’know, you told me a lot of stories, thought they were worth sharin’.” Steve stood there rigidly, waiting for an explanation that was apparently not coming if he didn’t pry it out of Bucky.

“Yeah. Don’t remember you doing blue magazines, though, Steve – didn’t know you’d immortalize ‘em.” Steve couldn’t believe it – Bucky was actually scuffing his feet on the stones of the floor beneath their feet, just like he used to do when his Ma caught him doing something he shouldn’t’ve.

“How many of ‘em were actually true, Buck?” Steve finally challenged.

Bucky shrugged. “I could say I don’t remember. But I do. At least I think I do.” He raised his face and looked directly at Steve, emotions shifting uncertainly in his expression. “It’s not always reliable, you know, the memories. They come back best when you’re around. But sometimes it’s just flashes, no context, just an image or a sound or a smell. Sometimes a voice. A touch. I didn’t
remember that my story about Sarabeth was made up until just now. I kinda think maybe most of them were. After Marylou … after that scare. I just … I was more careful than I let on, I think. It scared me, thinkin’ I might be a dad. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t take chances so easy. I did other stuff, never left a lady hanging if she wanted to, you know, but I didn’t do that as often as I claimed,” he added, nodding toward the image of the two figures entwined erotically in intercourse. “But,” he hefted the magazine, “you did a great job with Bucky’s Sexy Fairy Tales.”

“Huh. I believed every word you ever said to me. Figured Buck’d never lie to me, never boast. Didn’t have to. We were best friends, there wasn’t any need, right? But I guess maybe … maybe I wasn’t the only one keepin’ secrets, huh?”

Bucky stared at the magazine in his hand for a long moment in silence, and then shook his head. “No, I guess not.”

“I felt so inadequate, listenin’ to your stories about how you … did all those things with all those girls. Hearin’ you in the bedroom with ‘em some nights.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember why I made up the stories. I really don’t, Steve,” Bucky added earnestly, urgently as he turned back toward Steve, his eyes genuinely pleading for understanding. “I only remember that I did. Maybe I needed to make myself feel better about myself, maybe … I don’t know. I don’t know why. I’m sorry if I made you feel bad. Did you … did you ever … I mean, I think I always assumed you were, y’know, a virgin –“

Steve drew a long, slow breath and nodded once. “I was. As long as we lived together. I was.”

“Yeah, I figured if that’d changed, you’d’a told me. We used to tell each other everything, right?” Again, the pleading look in his eyes, but this time, Steve wasn’t sure what Bucky was pleading for.

“Well, not quite everything, it seems. We both fudged the truth a little, didn’t we?” Steve asked, nodding toward the 8-pager in Bucky’s hands.

Bucky glanced down at the yellowed pages, the careful detail in the scatological images and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess we did.” He set the old magazine down carefully in the pile and looked up at Steve. “So. Virgin or not?”

“Not.”

“Yeah? Before or after the Army got a hold of ya?”

“After.”

“One of them USO girls I never got to see? ‘Cos y’know, they skipped town by the time I got back to base,” he said with the ghost of his old grin, nudging Steve in the ribs with his flesh elbow.

“That’s ‘cos I ditched ‘em to come find you, y’jerk. Dragged Howard along so he couldn’t take the whole troupe out fonduing.”

“Yeah. Yeah, y’did. Saved my life then, too. But y’didn’t answer me, punk. One o’them, or – never, Carter. You weren’t that smooth!”

“Nah, never Peggy. Wanted to. Woulda married her if I could.” And Steve knew that was true, would’ve been happy, even. Might’ve felt incomplete, like something vital was missing, but he’d’ve been happy. “Nah. USO dancers. Girls … and boys.”

“Oh. So, you already knew, um, then. That you liked guys,” Bucky’s voice fell quiet, and if Steve
had been someone else, he’d’ve had to strain to hear him as Bucky’s attention drifted back to the pile of magazines.

“Always knew I liked guys, Buck,” Steve answered gently. He ducked down to capture Bucky’s eyes with his own. “Always. Just had a chance to find out how much. Like ‘em as much as I like girls. Never was a problem, y’know? I liked ‘em, but I didn’t do anything about it, not ‘til it was on offer. Could do without if I needed to, y’know? Did. Just like I did with girls.”

“Now, see, that I don’t get. You know me – always had’a have a girl on my arm,” he replied with forced bravado.

The smile strained around the edges, and went crooked, soft, and finally Bucky’s smile was bittersweet and a little haunted. Steve’s heart broke a little in that moment. “Yeah, I know.”

Something in Steve’s voice seemed to catch at Bucky as he peered at him through the lattice of his lashes, leaning in to say in a low voice, “Y’coulda told me, y’know. I really wouldn’t’a minded. I think … I think if you’d told me then, I’d’a been okay with it. For real. But to find out like I did … was a shock, like I couldn’t trust my memories. And if I couldn’t trust my memories … well.“

“Yeah, Buck?”

Bucky stood there rigidly, his expression closed and flicking through emotions like pages in a book. Finally he seemed to make up his mind and he looked up, stared directly into Steve’s eyes, and after swallowing hard, he said, “If I couldn’t trust my memories of you, who you were, what you stood for, what mattered to you, I couldn’t trust myself. Couldn’t trust the evidence of my senses, or any of my memories. And if I couldn’t trust those things, then maybe I wasn’t out, maybe I wasn’t free. Maybe I was still on the ice, waiting to be thawed out and aimed again. That none of this is real. Another Hydra trick to fuck with my head. And I’d never be more than a weapon to be used by them.”

Bucky was trembling by the time he finished speaking, and there were tears glittering in his eyes as he shut them hard against the horror that had to be replaying against his eyelids. “Shit, Buck. I never thought – I didn’t want – I –” Steve reached for Bucky then, folding him into his arms, and Bucky’s arms grabbed onto him like he was going under for the last time. They clung to each other for a long, shivering moment. “Why didn’t you say?” Steve whispered into Bucky’s hair.

Bucky’s fingers dug into Steve’s shoulders through the fabric of his clothing. “Why’d you never say anything, huh? Why’d you never trust me?”

“I did, honest,” Steve assured him, smoothing his hand over Bucky’s hair over and over again as he scrunched up his face and pressed his cheek against the side of Bucky’s head as tears started to leak from his eyes. “I did trust you. I. I guess I didn’t trust me, really. If you didn’t know, then I didn’t have anything to lose, y’know? I could always hope, and I never had any reason to be disappointed.”

Bucky pulled away, his own face blotchy and red, shiny with tears. “Disappointed about what?”

“That you didn’t want me,” Steve said softly. “Like I wanted you.”

For a long moment, Bucky was silent, eyes flicking back and forth under furrowed brows. “Wanted,” he repeated softly, not moving.

Steve breathed in through his nose and nodded sharply, once.

“I never knew,” Bucky answered, his expression pained for a moment and then it was gone,
replaced by a neutral blankness.

“I didn’t want you to. I didn’t want … I didn’t want to hurt our friendship. You were the most important person in my life, after Ma. And when she was gone, you were all I had. I wasn’t gonna do anything to hurt what we had. Our friendship. Til the end of the of the line, right?”

“Right,” Buck said softly, and now his expression crumpled into a pained grimace as his hand sought out the back of Steve’s neck, drawing him close so their foreheads rested together. “So, you held it all in. All those years. All those nights I brought someone home, and you sat out in the parlor while I – geeze, Rogers, you’re a fucking saint.”

“Ain’t no saint,” Steve answered with a chuckle and smile. “But I know how to abstain. Good Catholic boy and all that.”

“Til you hit the road with the USO. Den o’sinners, huh? All them stories our mamas told us about loose women and shit –“

“Think I was a special project for a coupla them. Virgin Steve. Pretty sure there was a competition among the chorus to pop my cherry.”

“Oh, now you’re just makin’ shit up,” Bucky said, the moment of intimacy suddenly over, replaced by an easy playfulness as he let Steve go and stepped back. Confession delivered, accepted, moved on. Steve felt his heart beating again, as though everything had been on hold waiting for Bucky’s reaction.

Wasn’t this better? Better than possibility? Knowing. Real, tangible. Friendship.

“Nah, pretty sure a coupla people lost their liquor ration stamps ‘cos a me,” Steve answered, shrugging a shoulder bigger than it ought to be. He always felt so absurdly large around Bucky, out of synch with his body. He always felt the urge to be small when he was with Buck. Guess that might never change, really. Reflex.

“And they thought bein’ your first was worth losin’ their booze rations? Are you serious?” Bucky asked with a genuine laugh.

*Why’d you never pick me?* That’s the question Steve yearned to hear in Bucky’s voice. *Why not me?*

But he didn’t. He heard Buck’s easy laugh, the throaty chuckle so often released at his expense, and he smiled, bright and easy. In this moment, Steve remembered that Bucky’s friendship was the most important thing in the world to him. It really was. And fact was, in his heart, it was always Bucky, had always been Bucky. Always. Steve watched the lines crinkle around Bucky’s eyes, the smile slide easy as you please across his lips, and he held his silence. He didn’t tell Bucky how completely his heart belonged to him, didn’t admit that he’d been in love with Bucky since they were small. Didn’t want to risk what they had on a hope, a dream. Had never wanted to risk it.

Instead, he blurted out, “Yeah. Yeah, they did. Guess it was funny. You’d’a laughed at how dumb and naïve I was. Had a lot of willin’ teachers, though. But they knew I was interested, Buck. Y’live that close to people week in, week out, y’don’t got secrets. No one ever forced me, no one ever tried to make me into something I wasn’t. Well, there was this one dame who really wanted me to wear stockings and high heels, but I couldn’t get the hang of walkin’ in ‘em –“ he glanced shyly at Bucky, and frowned – was that heat in Buck’s eyes at the mention of Steve in women’s clothing? Nah. Couldn’t be. “I just wasn’t comfortable.
“I never wanted to put you in an uncomfortable position, and I’m really sorry my dumbass friends didn’t realize how much damage they could do. You don’t ever have to be or do anything you don’t want to. Not with me, not with anyone.”

And that killed the laughter. Drew Bucky’s brows together and dimmed the light in his eyes.

There was silence between them then, not the comfortable silence of pals, of friends who don’t have to fill the empty spaces in between, but awkward, painful, tense silence. Bucky shifted from one foot to the other, seemed to remember the bottle of hooch Tony had handed him, and cracked the seal and took a long pull on the bottle, nearly choking from the burn.

“How is it?” Steve asked curiously, watching Bucky worriedly as his complexion went florid and his eyes bulged uncomfortably.

“Smooth,” Bucky gasped. “Think I just downed a gallon of lighter fluid,” he added with a raspy cough. “Go on – try it. Let’s see if Howard actually came up with something that works in our favor for once.”

Steve stared at Bucky for a moment longer, and then relented. Okay, maybe they wouldn’t talk about the gang and their unreasonable expectations. He’d put his apology out there, maybe that was the best he could hope for. So he opened the bottle, took a whiff, choked on the fumes, and then opened his mouth and poured the searing liquid down his throat, just like he’d done that yard on Fallon’s show. Bucky watched him do it, eyes widening as the fluid line in the bottle fell lower and lower.

“Steve, you could kill yourself with that rotgut –“

“Nah, super-soldier, remember?” pulling off the bottle and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He could already feel the spread of warmth out from his gut. It felt nice, it felt like something he barely remembered, to be honest. He hadn’t drunk much before the serum – his stature and health profile made heavy drinking a difficult proposition at the best of times – and after, alcohol wasn’t much more interesting than water or a soft drink. But there’d been a few times, best times, when he and Buck had gone out, had a few, and had stumbled back to their apartment together, leaning into each other, chuckling quietly between them at jokes only they knew, and singing softly under their breaths. They were treasured memories, so Steve found he was riding the wave of warmth with fond nostalgia, an unexpected benefit.

“Super-soldier rotgut!” Bucky countered.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. You’re still standin’,” Steve pointed out reasonably. And damn if he didn’t feel that pleasant fuzziness starting to nip at the edge of his perception. “How you feelin’?”

“Damn, I think I’m gettin’ a buzz,” Buck said with a dawning grin. “How ‘bout you?”

“Same. I think. Let’s see what happens – sometimes I’ll feel it for a second or two and it fades right away. But this … this feels kinda nice.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, falling into a less uncomfortable silence as he flipped through the pages of the magazine.

“Y’know, we don’t have to stay here – there’s a party goin’ on out there, dancin’, girls –“

“Nah, I kinda like the quiet. Well, the music’s decent, I guess. Your friend, he’s got good pipes, even if he does dress like, I dunno, somethin’ out of a science fiction movie.”
“Leather and studs. Guyliner. Apparently these are things in the gay community. And rock and roll, too.”

“Oh.” Bucky idly flipped over the page and stared at it for a long moment. “Somethin’ you’re into?”


Bucky nodded, and set that magazine aside, grabbing another from the stash. He seemed like he was really studying it when he spoke up softly, “I didn’t realize what was happening at first, you know. Everybody telling me what to feel. Who I was and what I wanted. I started to believe it was true, and it was just … it was just my memory is so full of holes, it all must be true, I just don’t remember it all.

“And … bein’ told what to do, what to feel, what not to feel … takin’ orders. Felt natural, felt right. Been doin’ it so long, I have to work at it to remember when I could make up my own mind, choose things for myself. It just felt … it just felt like you were gonna be my new handler. So I’d better just get used to feelin’ what they told me to feel, do what they told me to do. Bein’ treated like I had no rights, no choice … I felt like I deserved it, you know? For being such a shit. I –”

“No,” Steve answered emphatically, taking Bucky by the shoulders and pulling him to look directly at Steve. “No, you never deserve to be treated that way, do you hear me Bucky? James Buchanan Barnes, you are worth more than they could ever know. And no one, no one! deserves to be treated like they have no choice, no say in who they love, who they’re with.”

Bucky lifted his face, resolve tightening his features as he stared into Steve’s eyes. Steve felt his face burning under the intensity of Bucky’s gaze. “You always have a choice,” he added, gentler, softer. “And if anyone ever makes it sound like you don’t, you tell me. No one’s ever taking anything from you again, you hear me?” Steve pulled Buck roughly into a fierce hug, and Bucky returned the embrace with equal desperation.

“What if … what if they were right?” Bucky whispered, again to Steve’s old “good” ear.

“Do you think they might be?” Steve whispered, sick with sudden hope.

“If I say yes, what does that mean? For us, for our friendship?”

“I don’t know. Is it a yes?” Steve cursed himself inwardly for how needy, how desperate his voice sounded. Every cell in his body strained to hear Bucky say, “Yes.”

Every cell waited, poised on the precipice, waiting. Waiting while Bucky considered the question. And died the moment he shook his head without really answering. “You got that thing tomorrow. You been looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, but …”


“What if opportunity is here?”

“I ain’t gonna hold you back, punk. You deserve to be happy.”
“So do you, Buck.”

“So, we can be happy at the same time. Don’t need to screw to be happy. Right? We always planned we’d marry and settle down side by side, raise our kids together, grow old together surrounded by our families, maybe our kids would get married … that could still happen.”

“Yeah, sure, jerk.”

“Y’know, I think I’m getting a buzz off Howard’s old ‘shine.”

“Y’know, I think I might be, too. Forgot what it felt like. Coulda used this 70 years ago.”

“You’n’me both, fella,” Bucky replied with more than a hint of darkness as he took a healthy swig from the bottle. He was silent for a long moment, his eyes shadowed and gaze far away.

“Saw you dancin’,” Steve said with a chuckle, trying to pull him back. “You’re still the best I’ve ever seen, Buck. Nearly took out the chandelier with one of your tosses.”

“Didn’t realize how much I remembered until the music started playing. Not like this modern shit. The good stuff. And my feet were movin’. Felt good. Felt great.”

“So dance with me,” Steve asked softly. “Here, nobody has to see, if you’re gonna be embarrassed. Just once, dance with me. Like when we were kids, just pals, nothin’ more.”

Bucky looked at Steve like he felt the breath punched right out of him at that request, but he nodded silently and put out his arms to take the lead. Steve stepped into his arms and they swayed to the music, not quite touching except where their hands joined, but not very far apart.

“You used to try to teach me to dance, remember? Said I had more left feet than a fella oughta have. But you always tried to get me ready when we’d go out to the dance hall.”

“Didn’t want you breaking any toes. Better to be breaking hearts.”

“Didn’t do that, Buck. Better to focus on the toes. Only had one girl who limped home.”

“Don’t need me to teach you how to dance anymore punk. You’re doing just fine. You’ll do just fine.”

“Yeah. SHIELD made me take dance lessons to help with my control in a fight. Helped. And I don’t embarrass myself as much at parties.”

“Not what I’m talkin’ about,” Bucky corrected him gently, looking into his eyes.

Steve sighed. “Yeah. It’s scary. But I’m excited too.”

“That’s good, right? I mean ,who wouldn’t be? Y’gotta helluva dame there pulling for you – if Pepper wants to pick out dates for me, I wouldn’t say no. Woman’s got crazy good taste.”

“Cept for Tony.”

“Yeah, go figure. ‘Cept for Stark. Never could see what women saw in Howard, either – who needed all that wit, charm and dough, huh? But he never lacked for company when he wanted it.”

“You know Tony said that his Dad was a little in love with me. Maybe more than a little. Tony hated me when we first met. When Tony was growing up, Howard never stopped talkin’ about me, drove Tony crazy. Never stopped lookin’ for me, either. Hell of a way for a kid to grow up,
y’know? Always compared to a ghost?”

“Tony don’t hate you, punk. He looks up to you – you can see it in his eyes when he thinks no one’s lookin’. May be a little bit in love with you, too, but he’d be crazy to dump Pepper for your sorry ass. He wants your approval and he wants your friendship. Can kinda get that, you know?”

“He’s got ‘em both. He’s been a good friend – to both of us.”

“Yeah. Y’know, Wilson is recommending that my therapist release me to move out of the tower. Get away from all the superheroes and the craziness. The … pushing. Gonna need a place to stay if that’s the case. Think Stark’d let me bunk in here?”

Steve wanted to scream, pound his fists against the wall until they bled, and beg Bucky to never leave the tower. For a moment, he was ridiculously furious with Sam Wilson, and then his better self reminded him that Sam was always the one who looked out for Bucky, even when everyone else was a certified asshole. So instead, Steve said evenly, “Leave the tower. Huh. Sam didn’t mention it.”

“No, it’s just an idea. Y’know, remove the temptation from Romanoff, right? Although … think she’s gonna leave off now? Now Captain America has spoken?” he asked with a grin.

Steve made a disgusted face and shoved at Bucky shoulder, and Bucky’s grin widened. Then he added, “Truth is, I’d miss it – gotta keep Barton in his place. He’s the world’s second best sniper. I’d hate to miss Thor when he’s in town, too – fella’s quite the cut-up when he wants to be. And if I have to live off my own cookin’, well, I won’t last long.”

Steve snorted at that. “Yeah, you were always a terrible cook. Good thing I had Ma’s cookbook. The girls saved that for me, you know.”

“That where the brownie recipe is hidden?”

“Nope, that’s in my memory. Liked ‘em, huh?”

“Was hoping there might be some here tonight.”

“Ah, missed opportunity. I’ll have some made for ya.”

“You tryin’ to seduce me, Rogers? ‘Cos your Ma’s brownies … could be hard to turn down.”

And if Steve’s stomach flopped over and launched the dance of a million butterflies, who was going to know besides him. Seduction by brownie? If it could work and he wouldn’t lose Bucky’s friendship … But he just replied blandly, “Nah, just lookin’ out for a friend.”

“That what we are?”

’I hope so. You’re my best friend, Buck. And I’ve missed having my best friend – are we good?”

Bucky pulled back and looked at Steve in silence for a long moment. For one brief, incandescent second, Steve thought maybe Bucky would kiss him, but the moment passed without lips, without touching. Then Bucky wrapped his hand around Steve’s neck and pulled him close, into a desperate hug, and whispered against Steve’s ear – the good one again – “You tell me. I am sorry. I just … I don’t know. It was a shock and I had no idea it wasn’t illegal any more – I thought … hell, I don’t know what I thought. Fame went to your head, you’re flaunting the law in front of millions ‘cos you’re Captain fucking America. I was wrong about that. I understand that now. And I understand it doesn’t have to be something separating us. I just … why didn’t you say somethin’ if
you felt that way, if you liked guys? Why didn’t you trust me?”

“Told ya. Didn’t wanna risk losin’ you. Cost was too great. Figured it wasn’t nobody’s business but mine, like when you kept it secret that you weren’t the playboy you claimed to be, huh?” Steve elbowed Bucky in the ribs and got a chuckle. Steve rested his chin on Bucky’s shoulder, leaning into the embrace, eyes closed as Bucky murmured again against his skin. It would be impossibly easy for him to just turn his head, capture those lips in a kiss, satisfy 80 years of curiosity in one single moment. But impossible was right. This, them, their rapprochement, was too fragile, too new and delicate to risk. As always, too precious to risk.

“Ain’t you figured out no matter what, you’ll never lose me? I always come back to you, punk. Even fallin’ off a train ain’t enough to keep us separated forever. I wouldn’t be alive today if it weren’t for you – you pulled me back from the abyss, more’n once, Steve.” Bucky’s arms tightened around Steve’s neck and shoulders. “I’m sorry, Steve. I’m sorry for being an asshole and not trusting you to be you. I’m sorry I didn’t understand and I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry I ever doubted you. I love you, punk. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, you’re the best friend I could ever hope for. I gotta hear you say it, Steve. Do you forgive me?”

“Done, jerk. Ain’t nothin’ left to forgive. An’ I love you too – always have, always will. Can’t help myself.” Steve had to forcibly contain the trembling in his limbs as his arms tightened around Bucky. So close, he could feel the heat of Bucky’s skin through his clothes, the play of his muscles, even the line of his dick in his dress pants. And damn, if there wasn’t something going on there. A thickening, a stirring. Interest? Or was Buck just so touch-starved even holding Steve close could make him half hard? Steve really had to force down the awareness before his own dick perked up and said hello.

So close.

Just a breath away. A slight turn, a moment of pressure –

Steve forced himself to think about ice, causing his face to twist in a grimace. He never liked to think of ice.

Ice cooled his blood and cleared his head, though. A little, at least. But Bucky was so close, arms wrapped around Steve as they shuffled from foot to foot in a general rhythm to the music, heat suffusing Steve’s entire body, his nostrils flared and full of the scent of Bucky, and he could just feel the fog closing in on him again, so he thought about Chitauri and everything ugly he’d ever fought since taking the serum. An involuntary shudder travelled through him, a fine tremor just below the surface of his skin, caught and tamped down before it shook him.

Bucky must have felt the shift in Steve’s demeanor, the tensing of his muscles, the shiver through his skin, because he pulled back and searched Steve’s eyes thoughtfully.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Just a little nerves. Big weekend, huh?”

“Yeah. Big. You’re gonna do great, punk.”

“Thanks, jerk.”

“Yeah, punk. So, we’re good?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”
They realized they’d been dancing through several songs, and they separated, suddenly self-conscious. Bucky recovered first, and said, “You’re not as awful as you used to be. You should be able to dance a song or two with a dame and not kill her dogs with your big ass feet. Or dance with a fella, if that’s what you want, and not break his feet.”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For dancin’ with me. For being honest. For helping me check off something on my bucket list – that’s a thing nowadays, you know. A bucket list.”

“What was the thing?”

“Dancin’ with you. One more time. Y’know, before.” And then he dragged Bucky in for another hug, and found himself in Bucky’s tight embrace as Bucky clung to Steve as though his life depended on it. When they finally broke, Steve said he had to get back to the party, but maybe they could come back down here later and look through more of Howard’s porn together, and drink some more moonshine together.

“I’d like that. Think Stark would mind if I borrowed some of these?”

“I think Stark would consider it an insult if you didn’t. And if you find any more of my art, save ‘em out for me, okay? I don’t want Tony to get ‘em all.” Bucky smiled and nodded, his expression a little wistful, a little far away, but genuine nonetheless.

Steve left Bucky standing there with the porn and moonshine and made his way back to the party, feeling like they’d made a huge step forward to save their friendship, but his blood was still fizzing and his head was muddled with desire.

Why couldn’t he say the words? Why couldn’t he tell Bucky the truth, that he’d only ever wanted him, there’d never been anyone else who occupied that part of his heart the way Bucky did.

He’d told the truth. He couldn’t risk losing him. Even when they were angry at each other, there was a chance of reconciliation. He couldn’t risk that tenuous link.

But … what if?

And what the hell was he going to do about the show?

&&&

Chapter End Notes

Well, hopefully this makes you feel better about Bucky's motivations, the future of Steve and Bucky's friendship, and what comes next.

So ... I would love to read your speculation on what happens next. The next chapter will take a while. I don't have a whole lot of the next chapter written, beyond the original draft which will appear in the "deleted scenes" chapter. It just doesn't fit how the story has evolved at this point. And there is going to be a lot of action coming up that I hadn't originally planned on, but at this point, simply has to happen.
So - hit the comments, tell me what you think of what's gone down so far, where you think it will go next, and what you'd like to see. I will catch up on responding to comments soon. I have to say that some of the comments have had a major impact on the direction the story has taken, and I appreciate each and every person who's left a comment, a kudo, or made a bookmark. And I will appreciate you even more if you leave more comments! :)

Seriously, you have no idea how precious all of the comments, kudos and bookmarks are to me. Thank you for sticking with me and inspiring me.
Cuckoo

Chapter Summary

The morning after the night before. What happens when two super-soldiers imbibe a mysterious alcoholic beverage brewed just for them by Howard Stark?

Security lockdowns, confiscated images, and PR spin. And queasy stomachs and dry-swallowing aspirin.

Super-soldier hangovers ...

Chapter Notes

So ... this happened. This whole chapter came out of left field, completely unexpected. But I have to admit I love it. I hope you do too.

Next morning, Bucky and Steve were both hungover and suffering. Roused by insistent knocking on their respective doors, they both staggered into the sunshine-filled courtyard where brunch was being catered, both groaned at the bright light, both flinched at the raised eyebrows and snickers of their companions, and both fell heavily into their respective seats looking miserable and feeling worse. Fortunately, catering meant servers, and both super-soldiers were quickly nursing both hot black coffee, and downing aspirins from the bottle the server'd left with them while their so-called friends dissected the night before the morning after.

Tony was completely beside himself with delight over the predicament of both super-soldiers, crowing about the efficacy of StarkShine and trying to convince Bruce to try some to “soothe the Other Guy.”

“Yeah, that’s what Manhattan needs – a drunk Hulk. That’ll go well,” Bruce observed sourly. “Tony, y’gotta stop tryin’ to get me drunk – it’s not worth the collateral damage.”

“This StarkShine – mayhaps I may try this concoction, friend Stark?”

“You may want to rethink that, Thor – look at what it did to those two,” Maria Hill pointed out acidly, her sour expression loaded with venom for both boys from Brooklyn.

“Ah, c’mon, it was just a few drinks –“ Buck started to protest, but Tony’s giggle cut him off.

“You both drank the equivalent of two gallons of conventional alcohol. 100 proof alcohol. Why either of you is still standing is beyond me – you should have both needed your stomachs pumped last night –“

“Instead, we got shenanigans. Super-soldier shenanigans,” Pepper pointed out with disapproval. “Seriously, Steve, I always thought you were better than that.”
“Then you never knew this knucklehead very well,” Bucky snorted, then grabbed his skull with a grimace. “Fuck me, that hurts.” Steve slid the bottle of aspirin over wordlessly, and Buck just grabbed it and dry-swallowed a fistful.

Maria then went on to inform them that her team and Jarvis had had to suppress hundreds of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Twitpic, and Snapchat uploads of photos of Steve doing a striptease on stage with Adam, and macking on Adam, his SO, and a bunch of Stark employees, and even on Tony himself. Tony was beside himself with glee, while Pepper had her “you had to live down to Tony’s level” mad on.

“Every last person who was here last night was required to sign a waiver before they were allowed to leave – affirming they would not share any images, moving or still, anecdotes, reproductions, or any references to what occurred during the evening. All were required to surrender their phones so any relevant images could be locked. All Stark Industries staff were informed their employment would be terminated if they breached the agreement, followed by the full force of Stark Industries legal team to seek recompense,” Maria informed them, arms locked behind her back as she stalked back and forth in front of the big screen where she launched a slideshow of images confiscated from Stark employees – lots of Steve kissing, lots of Steve’s skin, lots of potential three-ways with Steve where he was kissing one partner, with his arm locked around the neck of the other – there were a lot of happy, doe-eyed couples smiling hopefully. Lots of Steve going meatball photobombing, too, his face alight with mischief and his grin infectiously stupid. Steve was growing increasingly more embarrassed while Bucky just kept laughing. Truth was, Steve was chuckling under his breath, too. It was so stupid, it was funny.

“Don’t think you got off scott-free, either, Mister. “ The next image was of Bucky literally swinging from a chandelier a la Tarzan, mouth wide and legs tucked up near his chest. “Somebody dared you.”

“First mistake,” Steve chuckled loud enough to be heard that time.

Then there was a photo of Bucky racing around with a bundle of magazines under his arm, leaping over the civilians like an old-time quarterback (which Bucky was), with Tony and Bruce trying to tackle him, with Barton up on the balcony with an arrow trained on him.

“You got away,” Tony grumbled. “Only because Pepper wouldn’t let me put on the suit. And since when did you subvert my AI and get him on your side? You asked him to lock me out, and he complied. He never locks me out. Of anywhere.”

“You got away with a stack of 8-pagers?” Steve whispered to Bucky.

“Apparently.”

“How were they? Any of mine in there?”

“Don’t know, but I woke up covered in my own dried jizz and my fist still stuck to my dick, so I’m thinkin’ they were really fuckin’ good.”

Steve snorted and had to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from making any more noise and drawing attention to himself.

“Steve, your uniform has been sent to an emergency dry cleaner. Fortunately, thanks to Tony, I always have one on call,” Pepper announced archly. “Despite the array of stains – I don’t even want to think what some of them are – it’ll be ready for you to wear tonight for the arrival ceremony.”
“And thank goodness we’d already seen the ABC people off the premises before you pulled this stunt.” The image on screen was Steve, surfing the crowd again, wearing nothing but red, white and blue Speedos and a shit-eating smile. He blinked at the picture of himself.

“I don’t remember putting those on. I was wearing boxers …”

“I win,” Natasha said softly, smirking.

“How …?”

“Man, I don’t even know, and I was there,” Barton grumbled.

All eyes turned to Natasha, and she just grinned at them. “A lady never tells.”

Barton snorted at that, and she gave him the Look, but he just gave her a cheeky grin that dissolved into a dopey smile. Within a moment, Nat’s expression softened to match.

“Finally,” Steve muttered to himself, feeling lighter and freer. If Nat and Barton had finally admitted to their feelings for each other, the depth of their feelings for each other, Nat was going to be too busy – and hopefully too happy – to harass Bucky.

Argument over how anyone could manhandle a six foot two super-soldier weighing more than 200 pounds out of his clothes and into a Speedo kept the rest of them busy while Steve and Bucky chased their pancakes around in twin seas of syrup. As the melee grew louder and seemed to leave them further and further behind, Bucky leaned toward Steve and asked in a low voice, “So I wanted to ask – the artwork in the 8-pager. Was pretty detailed. If you were a, y’know, virgin, how’d you, um –“

“Remember Tessie, down the block?” Bucky nodded slowly, as though the memory wasn’t coming fast to him. “Well, she had a ‘gentleman caller’ who liked to be watched. By another guy. So, we had a deal, I watched and I sketched. If I asked them to try something, they would. So I more or less had a life model.”

“So, wait – you helped Tessie turn a trick by watching her do some john, and you just sat there and drew? You can’t have been a virgin – surely you would have had sex with her –“

“She offered. No charge. But y’know, she did that to put food on the table. And she had a mom who wasn’t well. And brothers and sisters. I couldn’t take it. I just didn’t feel right about it, knowing how she felt about it. I got what I needed out of that – made some decent money on the 8-pagers, enough to pay my share of the rent, cover some classes, until I started getting those comic assignments.”

“A lady of the evening offers you sex for free, and you don’t take her up on it. You really are somethin’, Rogers.”

“Wasn’t free. She worked for a livin’, Buck. Wasn’t like she did it ‘cos she was havin’ a good time. She needed that money to take care of her Ma, her brothers and sisters. Dad was a deadbeat, took off years ago. You know leadin’ up to the war, women didn’t have a lot of employment choices. Hell, none of us did, really. I ended up being one of the lucky ones.”

“Yeah, I guess you were, huh.”

“Yeah. And I was lucky you helped me out when I got sick – never would’ve been able to keep my job with the comics companies if you hadn’t helped me deliver my stuff and pick up new assignments.”
“We were a team,” Bucky said softly.

“Yeah. Rogers and Barnes. Boys from Brooklyn.”

“Barnes and Rogers. Mebbe when this is all over, we put out a shingle, names painted in gold on a door, be a pair o’ gumshoes like Sam Spade, huh? Partners. I look pretty good in a trenchcoat.”

“You look pretty good with a dame wrapped around you, is what you mean.”

Bucky shrugged. “You do too. Always did.”

“Yeah, like that happened outside my dreams.”

“Can’t cure stupid,” Bucky observed.

Steve glanced up at the big screen at an image of him body-surfing the crowd in practically nothing, and he sighed. “Nope, I guess not.”

The others were still bickering when Steve turned in his seat to look more closely at the images still churned by. Selfies of Stark employees kissing and being kissed by him. A few of Bucky kissing women. Another of Bucky on the chandelier. All in all, fun or funny pictures. None of them were damaging to national security.

Suddenly, Steve stood up and called out, “Let them have their pictures back.”

Silence dropped like a steel door on the group, and Maria Hill was the first to turn toward Steve, glaring incredulously. “Let them have them back?”

“Yeah, let them have them back. They aren’t doing any harm. I did that stuff. I can’t speak for Buck, but I’m okay with it. Tony, Pepper, these are the people you trust every day to support you, to keep your company going – to allow you things like this,” he gestured toward the property as a whole. “Yeah, I look goofy or stupid, but that’s human. I don’t see anything up on the screen that was done in malice. So, let ’em have their pictures back.”

“But what about your privacy –“ Pepper started to protest.

“I kinda think the first time I went on a talk show to talk about being bisexual, I knew I was giving that up. And doing this TV show? That horse is long since gone.”

“But –“ Maria started to protest.

“Can you link the pictures to the people who took them?”

“No need. Photos are still on the phones, just locked with Stark encryption – my own code, not someone developed. Can’t be broken without frying the phone,” Tony answered, a grin trembling on his face. Steve could tell that he liked this idea, liked getting out in front of the potential scandal and owning it.

“Okay. So, we turn this into a charity event. People bring their phones to have them unlocked, and I sign a print of the photo on their phone. They kick in a few bucks to one of the charities we support.”

“I, uh … Steve, that’s brilliant. We could even spin it as a publicity stunt, something that was planned –“

“What about the photos of me?” Bucky piped up.
“Well, we can leave those locked,” Pepper suggested.

“No, what about me signing mine, too?” He pointed toward the screen where he was raising his metal fist to the photographer, a mock roar on his face, with two laughing Stark employees to either side. Neither looked bothered or frightened to be hamming it up with the ex-Winter Soldier.

Pepper looked to Tony, who raised an eyebrow. “We have any compromising photos of anyone else from the party? We could make it a group thing. I love this idea.”

“I do not believe I did anything photo-worthy, but I would be willing to try for a good cause,” Thor announced solemnly.

“I’d be willing to pay good money for a picture of Iron Biceps here being silly,” Darcy threw in. “It’s hilarious.”

“I’d love to have my picture taken with Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes,” Ian piped up nervously. “Mum would love to have that autographed from two Howling Commandos to another.”

Steve glanced over at Bucky, frowning. “What’s he talking about?” In the background, the others were still discussing possibilities for charity.

“Monty’s grandkid. Sorry, forgot to tell you. Did you know that the Howlies thought we were a thing? The Captain and his Sergeant? I sure as fuck didn’t.”

“No. I don’t know why they would think that.”

“Jumpin’ out of planes, marchin’ behind enemy lines, takin’ on the whole fucking Nazi army, all to track me down – none of that rings a bell?”

Steve grinned at Bucky. Really grinned. Okay, maybe all his dreams weren’t coming true, but his fondest one was – Buck and he were friends again. The easy teasing and jostling that had always been there between them, it was back. And the grin that Steve gave back was a happy and contented one.

Yeah, he could do this.

&&&

Pepper and Maria agreed that if Steve was really serious about letting the employees have their photos back, they’d support the decision. Timing was discussed, and Steve asked why they couldn’t do it on Monday. Tony pointed out to him that he’d be busy with a certain television commitment.

“Well, they do those group dates, right? Let’s make this a group date. Everybody comes back to the tower, and pitches in with the charity stuff. Good way to find out what they’re made of.”

“You mean like if they complain about breaking a nail –“

“Not for me, right,” Steve replied with a grin.

“So, no roses for assholes, check,” Tony observed.

Steve went back to eating, while Bucky came back from the buffet with another plate laden with food. Tough break about being a super-soldier – the accelerated metabolism translated into a massive need for fuel. Buck dropped back into his seat across from Steve and tucked in, eating in
silence for a few minutes while Steve polished off his meal and drained his coffee cup.

Around them, the conversation continued without them, as it often did. Tony, Pepper and Maria put their heads together, no doubt discussing strategy and security to mount the event that Steve had suggested. Sam seemed to hover on the fringes for a little while, and then gave up, going off to do whatever it was he would do. Natasha and Clint had disappeared shortly after the slide show ended, and Thor had wandered off with Jane. Darcy had grabbed Ian by the wrist and dragged him out of the space. Steve had been marginally aware of Sharon and Rhody drifting off as well. Finally, it was just him and Buck finishing up their breakfasts, seconds or thirds from the buffet, and now the staff were starting to pack up.

The courtyard had grown quiet, just the homely sounds of dishes clinking and silverware rattling. Bucky looked up from his empty plate with a frown. “Roses?” Bucky repeated. “What’s with the roses?”

“Oh, this show, the bachelor gives a rose to the women he wants to keep in the competition,” Steve replied. “Y’know, like a token, or a prize, I guess.”

“And you’re going to be giving roses to women … and to men?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“And these people know you’re gonna be checking out both men and women? And they’re okay with that?”

“Guess so. Wouldn’t make any sense for ‘em to be on the show – it’s kind of the point.”

“What, bein’ able to pick men or women?”

“That, and showing that it’s okay. That’s the most important thing – letting kids who are confused or trying to figure themselves out know that it’s okay. Buck, if … if I’d known then, when we were kids, that there was a name for what I felt, and that it was okay, that I wasn’t … broken, twisted … I would have been a very different kid.”

“Is that such a bad thing? I liked who you were. You were my best friend. What if … what if you were different, and we never got to be friends?”

“Ahh. Never happen. You’n’mee? We were meant to be. ‘Til the end of the line, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Bucky replied thoughtfully, nodding. “How do you think you would’a been different?”

“More confident, I think. I think if I were a teenager today, knowing what I know, I’d be more willing to take the first step, I guess. Like you – you’d see a girl you liked, and you’d walk right up to her and ask her to dance. No music playing, no band, but bold as you please, ‘will you dance with me?’ – girls fell for it every time.”

Bucky was silent for a long moment, then he smiled, a soft, sweet smile like when they were kids. “I’d’a danced with ya, punk. Back then. If you’d’a asked.”

And with that, he got up, carrying his dirty dishes over to the basin where he scraped off the leftover bits, then set the dishes and utensils in the sudsy water, and left the courtyard.

Steve was left sitting there alone, staring after him, trying to decipher what he’d meant when his phone pinged with an incoming text message.
A: Hi baby-bi! hows the head
S: Hurts like a sonofabitch
A: Language! That any way for an American icon to talk?
S: Says the American idol
A: I got the reference
S: Haha
A: Srslly, u were hammered last nite
S: Apparently. I’ve seen pictures. Lots of pictures.
A: U R photogenic.
S: Sorry they confiscated all pictures.
A: Not all.

A moment later, Steve’s phone pinged with an incoming photo attached to the text. The photo was obviously a selfie taken with both Adam and his SO, a Steve sandwich where he was being kissed theatrically by both men, and obviously enjoying himself. Steve felt his face grow warm, and his stomach grow warmer. And further south still warmer still. Oh.

S: Did I do that on stage?
A: No! At the limo. No paps for miles. Your bro Happy made frowny faces at ne1 trying to get close. Good guy.
S: Happy is the best.
A: Still a little dizzy from kissing you. SO grumpy this am only me in bed.
S: Sorry?
A: Hah! No u r not. U put us both in car and told us to be good to each other. Nice sendoff.
S: Yay me?
A: Yay you. Great party. great show. You had good talk.
S: Good talk?
A: You said. With B. You were happy. Then you were loopy. Stark said something about StarkShine having delayed kick?
S: Hell yeah.
A: B was pretty funny. Expected dancing with lampshade on head.
S: Is that a thing?
A: Cliché for crazy drunk. Chandelier swing was good enough. Very Buster Keaton.
S: I got that reference!
A: Knew u would.
S: Did I make a fool of myself?
A: No. You were charming and funny and fun. Everyone enjoyed goofy Steve. He should come out to play more often.
S: Bucky called me a knucklehead this morning.
A: Good call. U OK?
S: Yes. We’re going to give back everyone’s photos on Monday, and we’ll sign them for people for charity.
A: Want another there? What charity?
S: Yes. Mine and Stark’s.
A: Let me know what time, I’ll be there. Gr8 idea. Oh, left you present.
S: Uh-oh.
A: Good present. Check phone – I left you a playlist. Mix tapes for the new millennium.
S: Mix tapes?
A: Playlist – music to be the sexiest fucking Bachelor ever to.
S: Thank you.
A: Don’t be nervous. You will be amazing. You are amazing.
S: Scary.
A: Best things are. Be scared. Be amazing. Strut your stuff and be yourself. And text me after the arrival ceremony – I want all the dish!
S: May be late.
A: Don’t care. Call, text, skywrite – I need to know! And text me if you need me. Pulling for you baby bi!
S: Thanks! Pulling for me too.
A: :)

Steve stared at the phone screen for a moment before thumbing it closed. It was already after noon, and the crew from ABC was settling back into their control room. He’d seen Evan poke his head into the courtyard a couple of times while he was finishing up his breakfast. Only a few more hours to go … only a few more hours to survive before … before his future happened. Opportunities knocks, as Bucky had said. Time to answer.

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Chapter End Notes

So ... the next chapter is the arrival ceremony. I am hoping to have it written and posted in time for Valentine's Day, which is exactly when it's supposed to happen!

At the risk of being greedy ... leave me some comment love! This next chapter is going to be tough to write - I actually have to sit down and watch episodes of The Bachelor, something I honestly try to avoid as much as possible. So your good thoughts and encouraging comments will help strengthen me in the ordeal to come ...

Leave me some comment love, y'all :)
Chapter Summary

The contestants participating in the first bisexual Bachelor arrive, and Steve is ready to great them. Well, as ready as a nervous super soldier can be with all his friends watching. Just how well did Pepper do selecting potential dates for Steve? And what surprises are in store for them all?

Chapter Notes

This chapter ended up being a lot more fun to write than I expected, and of course went longer than I expected as I spent time introducing each new character. So instead of a quick drive-by chapter of the actual show, there will now be at least three - count 'em, three - chapters covering Steve's Bachelor. So here's the first, and I'm working on the next two, and hope to have them posted in the next couple of days.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony sat on the bed in the room that had been his mother’s sanctuary, his back against the headboard, legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles, his hands clasped in his lap, and giggled.

“‘You could help, you know,’” Pepper admonished from the closet where she considered different outfits braced on hangers as she frowned at her reflection in the long glass.

“‘You could wear a gunny sack and you would be flawless. It’s in your DNA. You never need me to tell you how to look beautiful.’”

She quirked a smile but didn’t relent. “‘It’s not beautiful I’m aiming for. It’s commanding.’”

“Ibid.”

“Seriously, Tony?” she challenged, rounding on him in a swish of expensive fabric as the dresses lifted on the air and settled around her legs.

“Who are you trying to command?”

“Our friends from the network. I have a feeling they’ll need reining in.”

“Oh. Like we’ve been so successful with that this weekend.”

“If you’re talking about Steve and James, they were under the influence. Of something your father brewed.”

“Think about it, Pep. Since Cap’s been among us, he’s been a sad boy. Lost his best friend and his time and his best girl. Who wouldn’t be sad? Fuck, who wouldn’t be suicidal? Then Winter Cupcake comes along, and he’s even sadder. Broken little marionette with sawdust for brains. None of us were prepared.”
“For what?”

“For what they’re really like. But last night? Last night we finally got to see. Barnes and Rogers. Rogers and Barnes. Two scrappy kids from Brooklyn. Grew up hard and fought their way to the head of the line. The front line, square in the crosshairs. But two kids nonetheless.”

“Oh my God. You think they’re going to be that way all the time now?”

“Did you see the two of them at breakfast? Heads as big as Alaska, and yet they were still little shits. Yeah. I think we finally got to see who Cap really is. Barnes, too. For the first time, I think I get it. How Steve feels about Barnes. They’re either a match made in heaven, or hell on earth waiting to happen. Either way, we’re in for a bumpy ride, Miss Potts.”

Hugging a pile of dresses to her midsection, Pepper sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, causing Tony to bounce a little. “And this is what we’re about to unleash on the unsuspecting American public.”

“Well, Cap, at least. But yeah.”

“Oh my God, Tony – what have I done? He’s going to undo 70 years of American culture –”

“In prime time!” Tony chuckled gleefully.

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S: Freaking out.
A: You will be great. Just be you.
S: I think I’m going to be sick.
A: Strut, baby-bi. Strut.

*Breathe, Steve, breathe. You remember how to breathe, don’t you? Just open your mouth and … oh God.*

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Down the walk sashayed Natasha Romanoff, ex-KGB, ex-SHIELD – still SHIELD? Steve wasn’t sure – Natasha was loyal to Fury, not SHIELD, he knew. Sashayed was the only word for the deliberate sway of her hips causing the mermaid skirt of her shimmering pale yellow and cream silk dress to pool and ripple around her, the teasing and seductive tilt of her torso framed by the form-fitting silk bustier, the playful way she dangled her high-heeled shoes from her fingertip. A smile, slow and predatory, spread across her face. “Relax, Rogers. I’m not here to date you. I’m here as muscle. Gotta protect my investment. Put a lot of time into making you presentable.”

“Knew you couldn’t stay away. I wondered how you were going to be a participant – you’re pretty high profile after your appearance on the Hill.”

“Yeah, some things even a good wig can’t hide. Not the best choice for a spy, testifying on national TV. S’how y’holdin’ up, Old Man?” she asked, rising on her toes to kiss him gently on the cheek.

He slid his arm around her shoulders, tugging her into his warmth – she had to be freezing in that strapless dress! But she just smiled up at him like this was something they did every day, and snuggled in. “Clint’s probably about to take you out, you know. Got you in his sites, lined up in the crosshairs.”
Steve looked off into the distance, toward the higher vantage point of the bell tower on the south corner of the perimeter wall and saluted, grinning. “That would be unfortunate, if you’re here to protect me. Conflict of interest and all.”

“Fuck you, Rogers. Get your mitts off my girl,” Barton grumbled in the comm in Steve’s ear, and he just grinned even wider, raising his middle finger toward Barton’s vantage.

“Barton sends his regards,” he whispered, ghosting his lips over the curl of her hair across her forehead.

She snorted, an unladylike sound that seemed demure coming from her. “Don’t know how I keep collecting men who compromise me. Fury, Clint, you … Barnes, maybe. Heard you guys had a good heart to heart – feelin’ better now, Skippy?”

“Where do you get these names from? You been hangin’ around Stark too much?”

“We’ve all been hanging around Stark too much. Think I need a mission – if no one’s gonna assign me one, I’ll make up my own. Been idle too long. We’re foolish if we think Hydra’s gone, you know.”

“Way to kill the mood, Nat. You have some reason to be feeling itchy?”

“Always itchy. But it’s been too quiet. And here? Too many people I can’t control,” she answered, looking out into the darkness beyond the lit driveway and façade, toward the wall that edged the estate, and the world beyond. “As houses go, this one is a fortress. But …” She breathed out heavily. “I don’t trust easily.”

“I know.” He tightened his arms around her, willing his body heat to envelope her and warm her.

“You trust too much.”

“I know.” Her arms slid around his waist and hugged him.

“You were right, though. About … that stuff.”

“True love. I know.”

“If you must.”

“I must. And you’re going to leave Bucky alone now, right?”

She sighed again, reluctantly letting go and taking a step back outside the circle of his arms. He arched an eyebrow at her, radiating his “Captain America does not approve” vibe. She shrugged and smiled that secretive smile of hers. “Natasha?”

“Yes. I will leave your boy toy alone to make his own poor life choices.”

“Good.”

“Speaking of poor life choices, where’s your shield?” she asked, rubbing her hands over her upper arms.

“Up in my room.” He tugged her back into his warmth, and she settled her cheek against his chest, hands stuffed into the pockets of his uniform jacket as his arms closed around her.

“What good’s it going to do there if you need it?”
“I’m more than just my shield. Besides, I seriously doubt anyone is going to try anything on national television.”

“You’re taped. They can edit out blood. Your shield is your best weapon.”

“It’s just a tool. I can improvise. If I need to. I think fast on my feet.”

“Yeah, I guess you do.”

The headlights of the first limo to arrive cut through the darkness, illuminating the doors to the 10-car garage, then swiveled toward them, following the line of the driveway. As if on cue (maybe that was the cue), a sound guy with a boom mike and two other technicians with handheld cameras came out of the house and took up their positions, one camera at the head of the driveway, the other a few feet away from where Steve stood. The sound guy stood next to the closest camera operator. Evan came out with them, paused to take in Steve with his arms wrapped around Natasha, and asked, “Ready, Steve?”

Brushing his lips against the crown of Natasha’s head, Steve squeezed her shoulders one last time, and then looked at Evan, nodding. Natasha detached herself from Steve and straightened her dress nonchalantly. “I’ll be just inside. Watching.”

“So is that a warning or a promise?”

“Have fun. Do anything I’d do and then some. But anyone gets out of hand, I’m there.”

“Good to know you’re here to defend my honor,” he added with an affectionate smile, pressing a kiss against her hair. “Go get warm.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger.”

“You look beautiful, Nat. And happy.”

“Yeah, I’m feelin’ kinda girly tonight. Barton won’t know what hits him.”

He smiled at her, took a deep breath, and turned toward the car that had just come to a halt. Evan held the door for her, glanced back at Steve and nodded at him, and then disappeared back in the house with Natasha.

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The first contestant to arrive was a rugged and beautiful man with dark brown hair, expressive brown eyes, and the look of an old soul. Dressed in lived-in jeans, a white Henley, and a butter-soft and well-loved leather jacket, he was toned, athletic looking, and his face was alight with a wild grin.

“Oh my God. Oh my God!” he cried as he jogged up the path from the car to where Steve stood waiting.

“Let me guess, you’re a fan.” Steve felt himself shriveling at the thought, willing himself smaller as the stunning man stepped into the nimbus of the carriage lamp. Wow. He was even more gorgeous than he’d seemed a few feet away. Steve felt his chest tightening, and something waking up below the belt. Please don’t let him be a fanboy!

“Dude, Captain America poster up on the wall of my cell right next to Green Lantern when I was twelve.”
“Cell? Wait, twelve?”

“Monastery, grew up there. Sorry, Peter Caine,” Beautiful Man introduced, thrusting out a calloused, blunt-fingered hand. His palm was warm and dry as their hands clasped, his grip strong and … kind. There was an energy coming off this Peter Caine that was calming and kind. Steve had never felt anything quite like it, and he leaned in, eager for more.

“Yeah, I was raised in a Shaolin monastery in California until I was twelve, my Dad was the head priest there. Then terrorists blew it up, I thought he’d been killed, he thought I’d killed, and then I went into the system. Adopted by a cop. Dad shows up when I’m nearly 30, now I’m living in two worlds. Long, weird story, it’d take years to tell. So, now I’m a police detective – mostly homicide – and a Shaolin priest. Part Chinese, part Caucasian, all sass I’m told. Come to Toronto, come to Chinatown, ask for Caine – you’ll find me. Used to be my Dad, but he’s … somewhere,” Peter added with a wave of his hand. He grinned at Steve, and Steve found himself grinning back.

“What do you do when people find you, Peter Caine?” Steve asked, his voice huskier than he’d intended, as he took a step toward Peter like a tether was drawing him closer.

Peter seemed to feel it too, as he took one step closer, his voice dropping as he answered, “Help. It’s kinda the family business. We help.”

Steve’s smile deepened as he spoke with Peter Caine – vivacious, high energy, never still Peter Caine with that curious and delicious vibe that Steve found so alluring. Gorgeous Peter Caine. Whose priorities matched Steve’s. Steve felt the urge to reach out, take his hand, get to know him much better. But … priest?

“Police detective and priest. That’s an interesting combination. I take it a Shaolin priest doesn’t take a vow of chastity –”

“Oh. No. Definitely not. Or I would never – yeah, no,” he laughed self-deprecatingly, spinning away a foot or so. “No, I like sex. Like, a lot. Not that I’m coming on to you, although, that’s kind of why I’m here, I guess. But no, I’m not prohibited. Not particularly uninhibited, either, really,” he added with a twinkle and a smirk.

Damn, where had he seen just that kind of lethal combination in the past? And damn if it didn’t look good on this Peter Caine, too. And this guy was available?

“Good to know. Caine,” Steve repeated, tasting the name. “I knew a Matthew Caine in France –”

“My grandfather! Oh, buzzkill, huh? You must get that a lot, though, being frozen for so long and all. Sorry, I –”

“You talk a lot.”

“I do, yeah. Stillness … not my path. My Dad, though? You’d be checkin’ him to make sure he was still breathin’.”

“Okay. That’s okay. I was never one to sit still, either. I think I’m going to like getting to know you better, Peter Caine.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But before anyone else gets here, tell me how you ended up here on the show.”

“Always liked women, but never seemed to be able to stick a relationship, you know? Guys at the
precinct would tease me about ‘girl of the week’. And all this Zen and Tao and philosophy stuff of my Dad’s … well, I realized I was packaging people and putting them into kind of … artificial categories. And I was acting on expectation, not my real feelings. So, when I stopped looking at people’s packages, stopped being aware of gender, being restricted by it, then I started to be happier. And I realized that some of the best relationships I had were with men. It didn’t take a leap to figure out that was true sexually, too. So, like you, I guess, I’m attracted to people. I discovered that gender is secondary. Haven’t found the one yet, but I’ve been a lot happier.”

Steve chuckled. “That’s it, that’s it exactly. Yeah. And the show itself?”

“Ah, actually, guys at the precinct put me up for it, didn’t even tell me. So getting the acceptance e-mail was kind of a shock. And then I thought … why the hell not? Even if nothing comes of it, it’s a new and interesting experience. Although, I was hoping for a warmer climate. I mean, New York in February ain’t much better than Toronto! In fact, I think it may be worse.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. I know the show normally goes exotic places, but I kinda need to be close to New York City for my job.”

“Is that your job as up and coming artist, or Avenger?”

“You follow my art?” Oh, now Steve’s heart really was pounding in his chest.

“I subscribe to your YouTube channel, and yeah, I’ve got a few prints in my cart online. Your stuff kinda … well, it kinda speaks to me, I guess. If I’d known you were going to be the first bisexual Bachelor, I woulda checked out and had you sign ‘em for me.”

“Oh, that can be arranged. In fact, you’ll get your chance this week.”

Just then, Steve heard Chris Harrison’s voice in his ear warning him that the next car was coming up the drive. He embraced Peter warmly and promised they’d talk more later, then shooed him into the house so he could greet the next arrival personally.

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The woman approaching Steve on the walkway was breathtakingly beautiful, high cheekbones, almond shaped eyes, burnished skin, long, shining dark hair that undulated in counterpoint to her hips, and a sly, secretive half-smile gracing her deep red lips. Like she knew the secrets of the universe, and was just waiting to share them. With him. Steve felt a thrill of desire shoot through him. Were they all going to be like this, like this woman, like Peter? If so, Pepper knew him better than he knew himself, and damn if she wasn’t going to be the death of him. Eight more to go? He didn’t know if his heart – or his hormones – could take it.

Unlike so many of the women he’d seen in the recordings of past seasons of The Bachelor, she was dressed in tan suede trousers, black knee high leather boots, a tailored blouse, and a red suede lace-up vest. She looked like she was ready to sweep him off for an adventure, and damn, he hoped she’d try.

She walked right up to him and thrust out her hand. “Sydney Fox.”

“Steve Rogers.”

“They didn’t give out any information about you other than you were male, bisexual, and retired military. They didn’t mention which war.”

“Some wars aren’t over yet,” Steve answered seriously.
“No. Some have been waging for longer than any of us realize, too.” She looked him up and down appraisingly, then smiled at him, her cheeks plump and shiny like apples, her eyes crinkling with delight. “I’m a professor of history at Trinity College, and a relic hunter. One of the projects I’ve been working on has been tracking down artifacts stolen by Hydra, and either returning them to their original owners, or to the safekeeping of high security museums. I’d really love to sit down and talk about your experiences with Hydra during the war. The locations of their bases.”

“Well, I, uh … I suppose none of that is classified any longer. Most of those bases we destroyed, using Hydra’s own weapons technology.”

“Tesseract technology. I understand you were actually in the presence of the Tesseract –“

“No. More than once. I don’t recommend it.”

“Tesseract technology. I understand you were actually in the presence of the Tesseract –“

“No. The legends surrounding it are not stories of fluffy bunnies and nightingales. You’re lucky you survived.” She stopped and blushed. “Sorry. Shop talk. Not what you want to hear on a date.”

“No, I respect passion. I’d like to discuss this with you – it’s nice to know I have something interesting to say to such a beautiful woman. Doesn’t happen often to me.”

She grinned at him, wide and toothy. “I’m betting you think you have to put on a show for women, hmm? Well, Steve Rogers, if you just let yourself be yourself, I think you’ll do just fine.”

&&&

The Asian man coming toward Steve was relatively small in stature (most people seemed that way to Steve since the serum), but Steve could feel his personality radiating off him at twenty paces. Dark haired, with dark-rimmed glasses, a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie, he looked the model of the modern Asian businessman. But the colorful sneakers painted with anime characters, and the broad, confident smile he gave Steve told him that this wasn’t any normal businessman.

He stopped a foot away and thrust out his hand. “Hiro Nakamura. I’ve seen your work – nice. I understand Stark’s tracking down your old comic work to mount an exhibition – that’s epic, man.”

“Wait, Hiro Nakamura – the artist? I love your work. I saw an installment at the animation festival I went to a few weeks back. I wanted to get in touch with you to see if you’d be interested in doing any work for my web site and campaign –“

“Dude, that would be like my dearest wish. Here,” he added, pulling out a business card cut in the shape of a animated character’s head. “My card. Let me put down my cell,” he scribbled on the back of the card and handed it to Steve eagerly. “I know we’re gonna be talkin’, but even if this doesn’t work out, I totally wanna get on board with this. Your YouTube channel is like my favorite sub, and the stuff you’re doin’ – kids on my forums are talkin’ about it, wanting to get involved. It’s friggin’ exciting, man. Let’s see if we can carve out some time to brainstorm, yeah?”

“Yes,” Steve agreed, chuckling. “Yeah, definitely.”

“Yeah. This is cool. Talented, committed, and super-hot. Wow. Totally super-hot,” he repeated, grinning broader, gaze sweeping up and down. “I’d better go in before I, well, you know …” he said, his fingers waggling as he reached out toward Steve’s mid-section. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll see you later. Soon. Yeah.”

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The gorgeous dark-skinned woman with the bright eyes and the infectious smile gasped, slapping
her palms against her cheeks, and then pinched the bridge of her nose and turned away, laughing. Steve stood there feeling a little awkward until she looked back at him, broke into a broad smile, and trotted up to him, thrusting her hand out to him. “Sorry. I just … it figures. I have a thing for impossible heroes. Dr. Martha Jones,” she introduced with a lovely British accent. Not Peggy-lovely, but lovely just the same.

“Impossible heroes?” he echoed.

“Yeah, it’s a … kind of a thing with me, I guess. Heroes who can’t possibly exist. Like a man out of time. Sorry, let me start over. I’m Dr. Martha Jones, and I am very happy to make your acquaintance.”

“Steve Rogers, Captain, retired – sort of. I look forward to getting to know more about the woman and her impossible heroes.”

“Yeah?” she asked, grinning up at him a little breathlessly.

“Yeah. So, when you’re not hanging out with impossible heroes, what do you do, Dr. Martha Jones?”

“Third world countries, mostly. Sorry, I’m a physician with Doctors without Borders.”

“So you’re kind of an impossible hero, yourself.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that –“

“I would. You stand up for the weak and the people who can’t do it for themselves. That makes you a hero in my book.”

“I don’t like bullies,” she said simply, shrugging. “Anyone who interferes with mothers and children getting decent medical care – they’re bullies. They’re not going to win, not on my watch,” she added, her expression grown serious. Then she shook her head, and turned away, embarrassed. “Sorry, I get a little self-righteous about this sort of thing.”

His hand curled over her elbow to draw her back toward him. “I don’t mind. Not at all. I don’t like bullies, either,” he told her fervently.

&&&

“Wow, dude,” the attractive young black man greeted, his easy smile lighting his face as he stuffed his fists into the pockets of his dress trousers. His tie was askew, as though he’d been worrying at it, and his jacket was a little off-kilter, but he was adorable as he glanced up at Steve through thick dark lashes. “Sorry, wasn’t expectin’, well, you,” he explained, waving his hands to take in all of Steve’s … Steve-ness.

“Is that good or bad?” Steve asked with a throaty chuckle.

“Depends. Y’like basketball?”

“More of a baseball guy myself. Still a fan of the Dodgers, but I take in a Mets game now and again. And sometimes I’ll sit courtside for the Knicks.”

“Dude, we’re gonna get along just fine – Dodgers are my team, too. But come June, all bets are off. My heart belongs to the Lakers.”
“Yeah, you from LA?”

“Neptune. Sorry, Wallace Fennel, high school teacher. Sometimes get dragged into investigations by my best friend. But mostly, I deal with district syllabi and kids with more hormones than sense.”

“Huh. Sounds like Tony Stark.”

Wallace Fennel grinned at him and Steve felt his knees go a little weak. “Yeah, dude, only without the super-powered suit, thank God. I hate to think what some of ‘em might get up to with Stark’s tech.”

“I hate to think what Tony might get up to with his tech,” Steve agreed, his grin widening to answer Wallace’s.

&&&

The next guy seemed kind of confused about where he was, and took a long time to find his way out of the limo. When he did, he was fiddling with some device that looked like it could have come out of Tony’s workshop, his attention darting from the device to the building and back again as he muttered to himself. Steve wasn’t sure what the protocol was if the contestant didn’t actually want to meet him, so he was grateful for Chris Harrison’s voice in his ear telling him to go collect Dr. Stanz before he wandered off.

“Um, Doctor Stanz?” Steve prompted, putting his hands gently on the older man’s shoulders. “I think maybe you should come over here, whaddya say?”

“Hmmm, what?” Dr. Stanz murmured, tuning the dial on his device and turning toward Steve. His eyebrows rose as his eyes lifted to actually look at Steve. “Oh. Hello.”

“Hello.”

“You’re, um, you’re you.”

“Normally, yes,” Steve chuckled.

“So, um, happy Valentine’s Day?”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Dr. Stanz. Now, were you planning to hang out here in the cold scanning the building, or were you thinking about maybe joining the show?”

“Show?”

“The Bachelor?”

“Oh. Oh yeah. Yeah, the first bisexual Bachelor. Supposed to be some retired Army captain – oh. Oh! Then that would be you. Have you ever been exposed to any form of radiation?” he asked, running his scanner over Steve as it beeped.

“Um, yes. Vita-Rays. In 1941. Why?”

“Hmm.” Stanz tweaked the dial a little more. “Do you think I could get some brain tissue while I’m here?”

“We’ll talk about it later, okay? For now, why don’t we get you in where it’s warm?”

“Yeah, sure, okay. And don’t forget about that brain tissue.”

“Jonathan MacKensie. Professor of Physical Anthropology, Georgetown Institute,” the very attractive man with the longish hair and the British accent introduced. Steve was immediately charmed by the sparkle in his eye and the confidence in his grip.

“Steve Rogers, ex-art student.”

“Yes, I’ve seen your work. I’ve heard of several students in the cultural anthropology curriculum who’ve decided to make your art the subject of their research.”


“Mainly the fact that you were doing comic art at the birth of the industry, and now you’re doing it again, when the art form has, um, morphed, as it were, over the decades. Really, if the cultural stuff is your thing, you’re a fascinating subject.”

“Wow, thanks.” Steve wasn’t really sure how he felt about being a subject like that, but he supposed he should just get over himself. Captain America had been a cultural icon for over 70 years. But Steve Rogers, artist? He wasn’t used to that.

“You don’t have a much time for cultural anthropology, do you?”

Jonathan shook his head. “No. Give me a midden pile or a set of old bones, and I’m happy. I’m familiar with the field, of course. But I like the stories that old things can tell us – there’s a purity to artifacts. When you’re talking human culture, you’ve always got to allow for observer’s bias, and the unreliability of witnesses.”

“But isn’t there some human element in interpretation of the artifacts? Some bias?” Steve asked, genuinely curious, finding himself having a flash of memory about Schmidt and his fascination with “artifacts.”

MacKensie’s eyebrows shot up appreciatively as a genuinely delighted smile lit up his face. It was a nice face, an intelligent face. And as Steve looked into those lively eyes, framed with laugh crinkles and dimpling cheeks, Steve felt the urge to make him smile again and again. “Very good. I wish my students were half as observant. You’re absolutely right. We always apply our own cultural bias to the interpretation of artifacts. In fact, there’s a wonderful book I think you’d enjoy that addresses just that conflict – David Macauley’s Motel of the Mysteries. Genuinely funny book, sends up my profession brilliantly,” he added, his voice lowering as though sharing a secret. “And the art is fantastic. I highly recommend it.”

With a grin, Steve drew out his trusty notepad from the breast pocket of his jacket, and flipped to the List. “What was the name again?” he asked, and Jonathan MacKensie leaned in close to give Steve the details again. Could Steve be blamed if he breathed in the clean scent of Jonathan’s hair, glancing up at him and smiling a little broader?

No, he could not.

“Sarah Page, late of the British Museum,” the gorgeous woman with olive skin, dark hair, and sultry eyes told him. She reminded him immediately of Peggy – commanding, very much in control of her environment and her destiny. “And, unfortunately, a few projects that are so classified, even
you don’t have sufficient security clearance.”

Now that did intrigue Steve.

“I’ve got a pretty high security clearance.”

“I know,” she replied regretfully. “But I have lots of lovely stories about fun archaeological digs in hot and very uncomfortable locales. And crazy patrons at the British Museum. And my heavens, some of the docents!”

“I’ll take it,” Steve answered simply, grinning at her infectious enthusiasm.

“You think? I mean, it’s not like I can talk about every facet of my life –“

“You think I can? Whole parts of my life are classified. In fact, I think there are facts about myself that I don’t know because my security clearance isn’t high enough.” He looked at her seriously as her eyes grew large and larger still, and then he grinned and burst out laughing. She swatted him on the arm and joined in.

“Well, I guess you’re okay. For a Yank.”

“Well, then I guess you’re okay, too. For an … what is it you are again?”

“Egyptologist. And quite happy to be here, Captain.”

“Name’s Mac. Short for MacKenzie. That’s my last name. M’real first name’s Cindy, but I don’t answer to it. So don’t bother. Hacker, code monkey, new media slut. Lemme guess – you still trying to figure out your iPod?”

Steve looked at the petite redhead with the short, nearly mohawked hair, the row of studs up one ear, the silk blouse, tight jeans, sneakers, and leather jacket, and quirked an eyebrow. “Actually, I use a StarkPad. I’m pretty good with it – I can even find the off switch,” Steve mocked, his eyes wide and innocent.

She stared at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing. “Okay!” And Steve felt like he’d won some kind of prize from the delighted and surprised expression on her face.

“Yeah, everybody assumes old guy, tech idiot. Can’t figure out which end of the phone to plug into the wall, huh? I enjoy the illusion. No one expects the old man to have figured it out.”

“Y’know you just told all of America your secret, right?” she grinned at him, glancing around at the camera operators and sound technician.

“Have a feeling I won’t have many secrets left by the time this is done,” he shrugged. “That’s okay – actually, it’s more than okay. The whole point of this exercise is to help kids understand they don’t need to hide themselves, they don’t need to treat themselves as a secret.”

“That’s it, playing a role model for bisexual kids everywhere?”

“Bi, gay, trans, cis, ace, all the flavors of the spectrum. I know if I’d had any clue of all the ways people could be different and still be whole, it would have made a huge difference to me growing up. I want … I want my struggle to mean something, to give kids the advantage I didn’t have.”

“Huh. And here I thought you were just in it for the hot tub action and the sex,” Mac said,
considering him seriously.

Steve blinked once, twice, his mouth working silently. “No, I … I mean, I don’t even know if there is a hot tub here, and I would never – not for a television show, not unless – no,” he stammered, face growing red, his skin feeling hot.

She looked at him blankly for another few seconds, then her face ignited in a cheeky grin. “Wow, you really take this stuff seriously, huh? Old-fashioned kind of guy. I like that. You’re kinda cool, Cap, Mr. Rogers, sir. For an old guy.”

The tall man with the graying temples, full beard and mustache amidst the sun-creased face exuded confidence and calm. He was dressed casually, a crew neck sweater over a plaid shirt, comfortable chinos, and sturdy-looking boots. Boots you’d walk for miles in. The tan and the eye-crinkles said he did walk. He stuck out his hand and smiled broadly. “Andy Brown. Recently of Colorado, but happy to back home in New York.” Steve accepted the hand, enjoyed its strong grip, but was surprised at how smooth the hand actually was. He caught himself frowning at their handshake.

“Surgeons need smooth hands,” Andy explained. “I’ve been playing the role of country doctor for a few years, but I’ve kept up my credentials, kept up my hands.”

“Ah. Surgeon. So you’re a doctor, then.” Andy nodded, still grinning. “What kind?”

Andy’s eyebrows lifted as he inhaled to speak. “Uh, brain surgeon, actually. Neurosurgeon.”

“Wow. I feel dumber already.”

“Yeah, like I haven’t heard that one before. But I’m guessing Abraham Erskine’s serum enhanced your natural intelligence. Yeah,” he admitted with a faint blush, “I’ve read the research. He’s one of my heroes. He was a visionary.”

“Yeah. Nice guy, too. Liked schnapps.”

“Sorry, you actually knew him. You were there –“

“When he died. Yeah. Caught the guy, but he took the coward’s way out with a cyanide capsule.”

“They really did that back then, huh?”

“Still do. It’s still Hydra’s preferred method of checking out.”

“Wow. Don’t get a lot of that in the mountains of Colorado. You ever get to see much of the country?”

“When I was with the USO, but you don’t see much from a train or a bus. Someday, I’d really like to see the country, take my time. Yeah, someday.”

Andy leaned up into Steve’s space and said, “I used to feel that way. Someday I’d catch up with my wife, my kids. Someday I’d take a vacation, relax, show them how much I care. And then one day, I was too busy to leave the hospital to pick up my kid, and my wife drove instead. And on the way, a drunk driver took away our somedays. So, I packed the kids up and we went west, built a new life. And I learned to take the time today, not someday. I know you’ve lived a long time, Steve, and maybe with Erskine’s serum, you’ll live a lot longer, but don’t waste those somedays.” He rested his hand on Steve’s shoulder and squeezed reassuringly, then made his way into the
house without another word, leaving Steve to stare after him, frowning.

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Tall, lithe, serene, the Asian woman who languidly unfolded herself from the back seat of the limo was stunning. Her porcelain skin was flawless, her eyes lively and intelligent – a hint of mirth there, maybe mischief as she tilted her head and let a small smile light her face. Her dress swept the floor and she seemed to float down the walkway toward Steve. He found himself walking toward her dreamily, hands outstretched to take hers, and she fluttered her eyes shut a moment before nodding and placing her fingertips in his.

“Sun Kwon,” she introduced in a voice that was deeper than he expected, and with only a hint of accent. “I am honored to meet the great Steve Rogers.”

“No, ma’am, it’s I who am honored to meet you. You are … you are the most beautiful woman I think I’ve ever seen.”

The small smile flickered again, and she bowed her head slightly, a flush of embarrassment rising up her pale cheek. “Is it beauty that you seek, Captain?”

“Of the soul. Of the heart. But is there anything that says a beautiful spirit can’t manifest itself in outward beauty?”

The smile deepened, and she chanced a glance at him, held his gaze and raised her face so her chin was held high, and her eyes were directly on his. “No. There is only the rule of fairy tales and horror movies, I think. The only beauty worth having is of the soul. Some look at you and see a big man with many muscles. But what I see is kindness and strength of spirit. Eyes that have seen so much. Eyes that have known loneliness.”

Steve nodded at that, still holding her hands in his, still entranced by her loveliness. “What is it you do, Sun Kwon?”

“I am a businesswoman. I know your friend, Pepper Potts. We have met upon occasion. My company specializes in new technologies in recycling and reuse. We are committed to the environment, to stewardship of the planet. I thought perhaps this might be a useful venue to share our philosophy of care for our fragile ecosystem.”

“So you’re here with a mission.”

She inclined her head once. “I hope you do not mind.”

“Not at all. I appreciate a person with a cause. I look forward to learning more about your work, Ms. Kwon.”

“Sun. If I may call you Steve?” He nodded quickly. “Then I look forward to getting to know you, Steve.”

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When the next guy got out of the car, all Steve could think of was, “Wow.” Not particularly tall, not particularly broad, not particularly muscled, the guy was dark haired with the high-planed cheekbones of a Native American. Sun-darkened skin, sharp, dark eyes, and a brilliant smile that lit up his entire face, this man radiated energy – power unlike anything Steve had encountered before. Not the kind, calming vibe of Peter Caine, or the mesmerizing beauty of Sun Kwon. This was power, drawing from the earth and crackling around him. He moved deliberately, without haste,
without wasted movement, until finally he stood in front of Steve and waited patiently.

“Steve Rogers,” Steve offered, extending his hand.

“Jim Chee,” he answered, inclining his head once. “Of the Dinae.”

“Navajo,” Steve translated. “You’ve come a long way.”

“Flagstaff to Chicago, then non-stop to JFK,” he shrugged. “Worst part of the trip was getting across the rez. Rains washed out some of the roadway, had to take some off-road detours.”

“What do you do on the reservation, Jim?”

“Cop. Tribal. And shaman.”

“Ah. That’s what I feel. You’re drawing power from the earth.”

“Yeah. Not something white men can usually tell – how do you do it?”

It was Steve’s turn to shrug. “I don’t know. Sometimes I can feel energies. Maybe it’s something to do with the serum that made me this way. There was radiation involved. One of the other guys noticed something funky –”

“Yeah. Some of the old ones talked about you. About how you gave up your body so you could battle evil. How your heart was too big for your body, and the spirits made you their champion. The stories get passed down,” he shrugged.

“Stories? Oh. The Windtalkers. You knew some of them?”

“Yeah. Like you did. Maybe you knew them longer – most of them were gone by the time I knew enough to ask questions. The last left this earth last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We wouldn’t have had a chance without them. Good men. A couple I felt I could call friend.”

“Then you are my friend, too, Steve Rogers. Adopted by the clan, the People.”

“Thank you, that means a lot to me. So what brings Jim Chee to New York?”

“A chance to see. See beyond my own limitations. Walk a different path. An opportunity like that comes along, you don’t turn away. So, here I am.”

“Here you are. I am glad you’re here, Jim Chee. I’m looking forward to getting to know you. I expect you’re cold, though. You should get inside –”

“Desert gets cold at night, saps a man’s strength and bleeds the heat from his bones. I don’t get to see snow, much, though. It paints the world a new face. I look forward to hearing your stories of the Dinae in the Army, Steve.”

&&&

The woman stalking up the pathway at Steve looked like she could break most men in half without chipping a nail. She was tall, dark-haired with her hair drawn back in a ponytail, a dark suit and a soft silk blouse of a creamy white. Her cheekbones were high, and her eyebrow twitched upward as she came to halt in front him, naturally falling into a parade rest position.
“Steve Rogers, Captain, US Army, retired. Sort of. What branch?” Steve asked immediately, snapping off a salute to her that she returned with a grin.

“Special Forces, sir. Josephina Lupo, reporting for duty, sir.”

“At ease. So, Josephina Lupo, what brings you here, hmmm?”

“Well, Captain, I’ve spent the past 10 or so years of my life in a secure facility so secret, even your clearance isn’t high enough. Kinda had it with wacky scientists and things that go boom. Or to other planets without a forwarding address,” she added sourly. “So, saw the ad for this program, thought, what the hell?” she shrugged.

“What the hell indeed. Y’do know that this is Tony Stark’s childhood home. We got more than our fair share of wacky scientists and things that go boom here. You might feel like you’ve never left home.”

“Well, in that case, sir, guess I’ll just have to enjoy the peace and quiet while it lasts, hmm?”

Steve grinned at her. She was cheeky and beautiful and felt like something coiled and about to strike. “I guess so. I’m hoping the science brothers will be on their best behavior, but I can’t guarantee it.”

“No, sir, you never can. Scientists just don’t know when to quit.”

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So, there were two additional contestants over what Steve had been told about, and he could hear Pepper letting her displeasure be known in the background. Directly in his ear, he could hear Chris Harrison informing him that the last of the contestants was en route up the driveway now, so he only had to hang in there for a few more minutes, and then he could come in, and Chris would do the formal kickoff, announce the ground rules, and Steve could try mingling.

The person who disembarked was surprising on all counts. Petite – tiny, compared to Steve – dark-haired, with wide-spaced eyes and high cheekbones, and the direct stare of eternity. She moved with the easy grace of a wild animal, a lope that felt less like stalking, and more like claiming territory. She was dressed comfortably in dark jeans, flat-soled, lace-up boots, a deep red shirt, and a puffy vest over it. Her eyes flicked to the side every few steps as though something was missing, and Steve frowned, asking, “Something wrong?”

“I miss my wolf,” she replied huskily with a shrug, and that’s when Steve noticed it – the play of light over the gnarled flesh around her throat, a deep scar nearly bisecting her neck. The husk in her voice wasn’t meant to be sexy – it was the result of damage to her vocal cords. This woman had faced down something unspeakably evil, and lived to tell the tale.

“Your wolf?” he repeated, feeling a little stupid.

“Mutt. Had her since she was a pup. We usually go out together, but the airline wouldn’t let me bring her down. So she’s hunting up in the Park, and I’m here,” she answered, glancing around her and frowning slightly, as though she disapproved. “Kate Shugak,” she introduced, pausing to consider her next move. Then, with deliberate grace, she extended her hand to Steve, and Steve had the odd sense that he was in the presence of royalty. He bent over the offered hand and kissed it gently, touching his fingertips to hers.

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Steve was about to make his way into the house, feeling buzzed and excited, when he was alerted over the comms that another limousine was making its way up the drive. In a moment, he could see that this was a Stark limo (license plate STARK069), and although he knew Tony was in the house – Tony had been heckling him every so often – Steve had a sudden feeling of dread.

As the Stark limo rounded the bend, Steve started praying (silently, so no one would hear!), “Please don’t be Tony, please don’t be Tony.” He knew where Pepper was in the control room, he knew where Natasha was with the contestants inside, and he knew where Clint was in his aerie. Bruce and Sam were enjoying the raw feed by the pool along with Thor and his crew. Rhodey and Sharon had gone into town for dinner, enjoying a rare opportunity to spend time together without Tony tagging along. The last he’d seen Bucky, he was with the pool crowd. Maria was doing security.

That left only Tony.

The car pulled up and Happy got out, acknowledging Steve with a nod and a quick flash of a grin. Steve felt himself suddenly damp with flop sweat and jittery with nerves that Tony was going to step out of the car. Pepper was silent. Everyone was silent. Not one person was teasing him or cajoling him or saying anything on the comms. That in itself was odd.

Steve swallowed down the sudden fear that gripped him and held his breath.

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In the control room, there was chaos. The ABC producer was yelling at Pepper about allowing the mix to be uneven, while she was quietly and concisely informing him of what would happen if anything happened to Captain Rogers as a consequence of ABC slipping in two of its own contestants, contestants that Pepper, Happy, and Natasha had not had the opportunity to review and vet. Gaping security holes in direct violation of their contract.

The producer assured Pepper that ABC and the production company were within the limits of the contract and it had been thoroughly reviewed by Disney’s attorneys, but Pepper pointed out the security clause, which allowed her to shut down the production without notice if she felt that Steve’s security was in any way threatened. By any person involved in any way with the production, right down to the ADR assistant or caterer. At her sole discretion.

“How do you know what an ADR assistant is?” the producer asked.

“I always do my homework when considering an acquisition.”

“Acquisition?”

“Oh, didn’t I tell you? Stark Industries is considering moving into the entertainment business. We’re thinking about buying Disney. I’ve always wanted a theme park,” she added sweetly.

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With a flourish, Happy opened the back door of the limo, revealing the passenger was Bucky. Bucky was dressed in his sergeant’s dress uniform, complete with cap and spit-shined shoes, and with a nervous glance at Steve, slowly unfolded himself from the vehicle. Then he walked up to Steve with his hands shoved into his pockets, looking sheepish.

“So. Turns out Romanoff was right.”

Steve’s hand immediately went to Bucky, as though to steady him. His fingers grazed lightly along
the wool of Bucky’s uniform jacket. “No, Buck. It’s too soon – you don’t know that –“

“Here’s the thing, punk. It’s just as bad when people assume I’m not qualified to make my own decisions as it is when they try to influence ‘em and make ‘em for me.”

Steve’s fingers closed around the fold of fabric, as Bucky raised his eyes to look defiantly into his own. “Oh, Buck, no, I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant –“

“Yes it is. You’re trying to protect me, I get that. But it still ain’t right. I got a right to my own decisions and I got a right to my own fucking mistakes. I’ve made some doozies, and I know I really hurt you. And I’ve been thinkin’ about it. Really thinkin’, tryin’ to figure it all out. And I realized that I think I lied about all those girls because I wanted to make you jealous. I wanted you to notice me, really notice me. And I know it would’a been illegal back then, but I think if I’d known how you felt, I would’a returned it.”

“You think,” Steve repeated dubiously, taking an involuntary step back. Now Bucky reached out, curling his palm under Steve’s elbow, and he smiled, sadly, earnestly. “Let’s face it, my memory ain’t the most reliable thing on the planet. It’s swiss cheese most of the time, and the rest of it, it’s cottage cheese. Holes and mush. But one thing I do remember, clear as anything – you mean everything to me, punk.”

“As a friend.”

“As a friend. I think as more than a friend. I ain’t askin’ for special treatment – I ain’t askin’ you to cancel the show. I’m just askin’ for my shot. Let me woo you, punk. I’ll woo the fuck out of you, you’ll see. And if you don’t choose me in the end, that’s okay. I’ll have tried. And I won’t have any regrets. And we’ll still be friends. ‘Cos if you haven’t noticed yet, not even death can get in our way. Or stupidity.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Now can we go inside? It’s cold as fuck out here, and I really don’t like the cold.”

Bucky started to go inside to take his place, but Steve caught him by the prosthetic hand and held on. “You don’t gotta do this, Buck, for us to be friends. I just wanted an apology, some understanding is all. I just gotta know you’re okay with me being how I am, that’s all. And you said …”

“I apologized. I understand. I do. And I … I want this. I realized that every good memory I have, you’re there. Bright and beautiful and loud-mouthed and full of shit. And I finally understand how that always made me feel. How it makes me feel. You weren’t you for a long time, Steve. You were closed off and shut down, too busy being Captain America to be Steve anymore, like your light was just gone. And then when you came out, when all this started on New Year’s, it’s like you came back to life, and the light filled my world again. And I remembered. I remembered how you always made me feel, and now I understand what that is.

“And I want this. I want you. I mean this. It ain’t Romanoff talkin’, or my shrink, or some fortune I found in one of those crunchy cookies you like so much. This is me. For real. Cards on the table. You gonna let me deal in, or you shuttin’ me out?”
“Deal in.”

&&&

In the control room, Pepper ignored the glare Tony was sending her way, and stood poised at the monitor, watching Steve’s reaction. Barnes had entered the house, but Steve had hung back – perhaps he was expecting another surprise. He stood at the entrance rigidly for a moment, then shook his hands out and started to pace.

“Who’s next? Loki?” Tony challenged aggressively from where he stood, arms crossed tensely across his chest.

Pepper turned calmly and shook his head. “I couldn’t tell you. I couldn’t tell anyone.”

“And why not?” Tony demanded, shoving off from the wall with his shoulder and stalking over to her.

“Because Barnes hadn’t made up his mind until the last minute,” Sam Wilson explained, coming into the control room with the crew in tow. All were in various stages of agitation and excitement at this latest development, many demanding answers on this surprise.

Pepper raised her hands to shush them and answered, “He asked if he could be considered as a contestant, and when we talked about it, we agreed that we’d leave it open. He’s been so confused, Tony. He was afraid he’d lose his last chance, but at the same time, he really wasn’t sure what he wanted. Exactly what Sam pointed out to us.” Sam had the good grace to look serious, not smug.

“And I suppose you knew all about this,” Tony spat at Sam, practically flouncing away in his displeasure.

“Yeah. ‘Cos Barnes needed someone to talk to who wasn’t going to try to convince him one way or another. Yeah, I know you’re all doin’ better, but that kind of thing can be subtle, and he needed to figure this out for himself.”

“Now I’m wondering if that was such a good idea after all,” Pepper breathed, her eyes locked on the monitor where Steve was raking his fingers anxiously through his hair, pacing back and forth on the driveway apron, his expression a masque of misery.

Sam came up beside her to watch, and Tony hovered a few inches away, looking over her shoulder archly.

“Looks like someone wasn’t as happy with the surprise as you thought he’d be,” Tony observed gently.

Pepper sighed heavily. “No,” she admitted sadly.

“He looks like he’s on his way to a full-blown panic attack,” Chris Harrison pointed out from where he sat at another monitor, half rising out of his chair.

“He was doing fine earlier. Great, even,” Evan said, frowning at the monitor. “Look, maybe we should cut this out, put things on pause and let him have some time to deal with this –“

The producer chuckled. “Who’d’a thought, Cap’n America gets panic attacks? This is gold.”

“Remember the agreement, gentlemen,” Pepper pointed out coldly, and the producer’s mouth snapped shut.
Harrison grimaced at the producer and shook his head. “One of us should get out there and see if we can talk him down. I’ll do it if you like –“

“No. I’ll do it,” Tony volunteered quietly. “I know a thing or two about panic attacks. And I think what he needs right now is a friend who can help put this in perspective.”

“And that’s you,” Sam said, deadpan.

“Yeah, I think it just might be, Wingless,” Tony sassed right back. Then he relented. “You’re on the comm – let me know if you think it’s going south.”

Sam smiled then, a genuine smile that lit his face. “Yeah. But I think you got this,” he nodded encouragingly. “And shut that damned recording off,” Sam commanded.

&&&

Steve was stalking back and forth in a rough circle across the front of the doorway, through the portcullis, and around the edge of the driveway and back. He was muttering to himself in an agitated, low voice, hands fisting and releasing, fisting and releasing.

He stopped short when Tony simply blocked his path, arms crossed over his chest, head tilted to one side quizzically.

“When I invited you out here, I didn’t expect to excavate a new trench with your feet.”

“No?”

“No.”

That seemed to break the pattern enough that Steve settled into a restless stance a couple of feet away from Tony, nervously shifting from foot to foot.

“Spill.”

“On national television.”

“You were being taped. They can edit out the Lifetime movie crap. Not recording right now, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Wilson told the Alphabet boys to put it on pause,” Tony said. “Pepper’s got it under control. And Wilson’s there as backup.”

“That’s right, everyone’s watching.”

“Everyone’s rootin’ for ya, Spangles.”

A tremulous smile tried to form on Steve’s lips, hung in there for a moment, then failed.

“What’s the sitch? I thought you were all gaga for Barnes. Now he shows some interest, and you’re goo.”

“I was peace with it, actually. That he wasn’t interested. We got our friendship back, and that’s more important than anything.”
“Not anything.”

“Yeah, anything.”

“Not more important than world peace. Or … finding the cure for cancer. Or … eliminating all memory of Justin Bieber.”

“I’ll give you world peace and cancer, maybe. But my friendship trumps Bieber.”

“Who?”

“Seriously, Tony,” Steve rasped, exasperated.

“Seriously, do you want him gone?”

Steve sighed, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Having him here, participating … complicates things. I just met 12 of the most interesting, attractive, and goddamned sexy people I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Pepper has excellent taste. But she didn’t pick two of them. ABC put in a couple of ringers. Amp the drama.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. That’s the fun of the game.”

“Nat would tell you that’s the hole in your security.”

“Hill’s on it. And Nat’s got your back. Speaking of, there’s a show in there. Kinda starring you.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay with Barnes being here?”

“I … I don’t know,” Steve admitted with a defeated sigh.

“Do you want him gone?” Tony asked again, this time a little more forcefully.

“I … No. I want him. I’ve always wanted him. I’m just afraid … afraid this isn’t real to him. Afraid I’ll get my hopes up, and he’s going to hurt me again. I don’t think … I don’t think I could take it again.”

“Steve, no one talked him into this. Everyone’s been hand’s off. Wilson’s made sure. I didn’t even know he’d talked to Pepper until just now. He talked with her couple of weeks ago, and they left it open as a possibility, in case he decided this was what he wanted. It was his decision, not one of us assholes influencing him. So he’s made his decision – now you have 13 beautiful people to choose from. Baker’s dozen.”

That didn’t seem to mollify Steve, and in fact made him more agitated. Tony looked at him a little more closely. “And that’s what’s bothering you. You like them.”

“All of them. Pepper knows me better than I even thought possible. Every last one of them – so different, from all walks of life, and yet … I could see myself with anyone of them.”

“And that makes you feel … guilty. Like you’re cheating on Barnes.” Steve nodded miserably. “Did he ever date?”
Steve stopped and looked at Tony like his was an idiot. “Of course he dated.”

“He lived his life, made his choices – didn’t stop for you. You’re friends, I get that – friendship is precious and all that. But you don’t owe him your ever after, Cap. He asked for a chance, you agreed to that. But you don’t owe him anything more, not here, not now. There could be someone in that group that is really right for you – not just comfortable and familiar, but right. Don’t you owe it to yourself – and to that person – to find out? If you hold back because of Barnes, aren’t you hurting yourself, and that person? And ultimately Barnes, too? Because if it’s not right, it’s not fair, to any of you.”

Steve stared at Tony for a long, silent moment, as a blush rose in his cheeks and a smile struggled to take control of his lips. Finally, he nodded, once. “Yeah.” The tension seemed to drain a little out of Steve’s face, and he nodded again, with more confidence this time. “Okay.”

“All right. You’re okay now, right?” Tony asked, sliding his arm around Steve’s shoulders. “Cos I need to be awesome somewhere else. Y’know, because if I’m on screen, no one’s gonna notice you. And we wouldn’t want all those hand-picked dates Pepper chose for you to suddenly lose all interest because I’m in the room. Am I right, or am I right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Steve shrugged. “I’m not sharing,” he added flatly. “They’re my dates, and I’m not sharing.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tony encouraged with a wide grin.

&&&

S: Adam you are never going to believe.
A: Barnes?
S: Yeah, how’d you know?
A: The way he looked at you other nite. Stars in his eyes. Eyes only for you. How you feel?
S: Confused. Met some amazing people tonight. Could see myself with any one of them. This will be harder than I thought.
A: A hard man is good to find.
S: I’m serious here.
A: I am too.
S: You are useless to me.
S: You think?
A: Know it. Go play, be adored. Then dish all later!
S: Okay. Thanks.
A: Anytime baby-bi!

Deep breath. In. Out. Steve turned to find Chris Harrison waiting patiently in the archway leading to the front door. He smiled encouragingly at Steve. “It’s time.”

&&&

Dressed in a simple but elegant dark suit, Chris Harrison, the host of The Bachelor, stepped into the parlor of Rinascere and clapped his hands once, drawing the attention of all of the contestants sitting around the room, all of whom had been chatting amiably amongst themselves. They suddenly fell silent, intent on him. At various points around the room, cameras rolled into new positions as the show officially started.

Steve stood next to him, adjusting the hem of his uniform jacket nervously, and to Steve’s other
side was a basket full of red roses. Chris Harrison smiled and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to The Bachelor!”

&&&

Chapter End Notes

So ... the contestants for the first bisexual Bachelor season have arrived. Can you identify them all? The characters come from television shows from the 1980s to the present, and from mystery novels. I'd love to see your guesses - and of course, your comments.

Did this surprise you? Please you? Confuse you? Piss you off?

Hit the comments! Chapter 14 is coming.

14Feb15 Update: And I've added some meta on Tumblr on the 12 (Non-Bucky) Dates of Steve Rogers.
With all of *The Bachelor*'s dates assembled under one roof, Steve Rogers finds himself overwhelmed with choices. And around him, the contestants begin to get to know each other. Does it all go smoothly? Seriously, this is Steve Rogers' life we're talking about here ...

Chapter Notes

So, so, so sorry for the delay in getting this written and posted. It's nearly 3 a.m. my time right now, and I was determined to get it posted before I went to sleep. I got the hideous cold virus that's going around this year, and it laid me low for weeks. Seriously, I'm still not 100%, and I first started with symptoms the weekend I posted the last chapter. I'm really hoping to tackle the next chapter in the very near future, a chapter that will bring us one step closer to Steve's choice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha was circulating, simpering smile plastered to her blood red lips as she waved and giggled and helloed her way through the contestants. She was definitely overdressed – not one of them was wearing a wildly inappropriate gown or overexposing bustier. In point of fact, everyone but her was dressed pretty conservatively, comfortably. Practically. She looked around and she realized she was surrounded by people that Steve could actually like, and her smile slid from fake to fabulous as it sank in … Pepper had done a bang-up job.

So she was overdressed. She loved the way the dress flowed around her, loved the softness and the lightness of it. And she’d love it even more when Clint peeled her out of it later with gentle caresses and reverent care.

“Smile any wider, and people are gonna start wondering when the teeth are comin’ out.”

She turned and there was Barnes. Dressed like something out of a recruitment poster for WWII.

“What the hell, Barnes.”

“Hello to you, too. What’re you all dolled up for?”

“Could ask you the same. I didn’t realize you were on Steve’s security detail.”

“’M’not.”

“Then what are you doing here?” It takes a beat, two, and then her eyes widened as her smile broke through, wide and delighted. “I was right,” she breathed.

“Maybe.”
“I was!” she crowed, grinning wildly, quickly containing her voice. Then her face grew very serious, and she looked at him with what she’d been told was her basilisk stare. “Fuck this up, and I will fuck you up. You hurt Rogers –”

“I won’t. I won’t. I’m serious about this, Romanoff. I won’t do anything to hurt Steve, you have my word on it.”

The smile on Natasha’s lips drained away as she took in the solemn, committed expression on Barnes’s face. Her eyes flicked around the room, at the assembled guests chatting amiably, and then back to Barnes, a furrow catching between her eyes. A moment ago she’d been thrilled with the selection here, but now …

“I know. Stiff competition. Maybe more ‘n I can handle. But I gotta try.”

“You should’ve tried harder,” she said softly, urgently, angling her body so no one would be able to read her lips beyond Barnes himself. “If you’d said something sooner –”

“And what? Asked him to cancel this? He’s not in this for the dates, Nat. He has a bigger agenda, a Captain America-sized agenda. You know that. But Miss Potts … she knows her stuff. The show, that’s Captain America. But these people? These … potential suitors? That’s all Steve. Steve Rogers. They’re all here for Steve.” He shook his head, his face a study in misery. “Thought I knew him. Thought I knew him better than anyone. Turns out I was wrong. In all the important ways. But Pepper? She knows Steve.”

Natasha let her eyes wander over the contestants again, and she had to – grudgingly – admit that Barnes was right. They might not have known who they were coming to compete for, but Pepper had selected each and every one of them because she felt they’d be compatible with Steve. Or more, good for him. Except for the two extras the network had slipped in, but she had to admit she couldn’t tell who they were, so even the network had apparently done a good job.

And then there was Barnes. Pepper had let Barnes participate. That meant that Pepper had to believe that Barnes was, well, good for Steve. Right?

“How long did you know you were doing this?”

“This afternoon. Well, maybe this morning. But I’d talked to Pepper a few weeks ago to ask if I could. Y’know, if I decided …”

“And you decided.”

Chris Harrison had entered the room with Steve, and clapped his hands for attention. Everyone in the room turned toward the sound, everyone’s attention focused on Steve, who fiddled with the hem of his uniform jacket. Cameras drew in around them as silence settled.

“God help me, I decided. It may be too late already, but I decided.”

&&&

“No,” Steve said simply but emphatically.

“Steve, you gotta understand – it’s what people tune in for. The elimination. The drama of who gets sent home, who gets a rose and gets to stay. They live for the tearful, bitchy exit interview. This is a competition.”

“They all just got here,” Steve countered with a hint of a whine in his voice. “Why would anyone
travel all that way just to go home the first night?"

“Steve, have you ever actually watched The Bachelor?”

Steve frowned, scrunching up his nose.

“Not even YouTube clips?”

Steve lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Been kinda busy lately.”

“I get that. I get that you’re a big-hearted kinda guy. But the network depends on the advertisers. The advertisers pay for the ratings. The ratings hinge on the drama. The bigger the drama, the bigger the ratings, the happier the advertisers, the more the network can charge per minute.” He paused and glanced around the room where the contestants were engaged in conversations, enthusiastically discussing issues that probably had nothing to do with bikini waxes, slut-shaming, or any one of a hundred topics that usually turned the communal space of any season of The Bachelor into a rancid pool of festering hormones and vitriol. This season of The Bachelor looked to be too light in the drama department already, and they couldn’t afford to lose anymore to Steve Rogers’ Mr. Nice Guy approach. “No elimination, no drama.”

Steve took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, taking time to scan the room slowly. “Any one of these people could be the right person for me. Any one of them. If I send someone home tonight, before I’ve gotten to know them, I could be sending the person I was meant to spend my life with, right out of my life.”

Harrison understood, really he did. Steve was different from most contestants – he wasn’t in this for the 15 minutes of fame, or the potential stepping stone to a bigger career. Steve had more fame than he’d ever wanted, and how do you do a step up from being the man who saved New York City from total destruction not once, but twice before he was thirty? Steve was in this for all the right reasons. Finding the right person. Reaching out. Being a role model and showing America the positive side of non-“traditional” romance.

He got it, he did.

But his producer was spitting nails in his ear bud, screaming that Rogers was going to piss off every advertiser they had and screaming about interest groups boycotting the show and all manner of mayhem.

“Steve, you have a contract,” Harrison prompted.

And that did it. The scowl cleared off his face and he smiled. “You’re right. I have a contract. For one episode, and after that, it’s at my discretion. That means that I call the shots. Everybody stays.”

“No, I meant –“ Harrison started, but inwardly he was smiling. He kind of liked the idea of a season of The Bachelor where no one’s heart got ground into dust in the most humiliating and public way possible, where viewers might get the chance to actually get to know some really interesting people. Where the discourse might be elevated from bitch fights and hair pulling to intellectually stimulating discussions of history, music, art.

And he could swear he could hear blood vessels bursting in the control room as the full import of Steve’s announcement settled in, but Steve was very much at ease now, very much in command.

Hell, if Chris weren’t straight and in a committed relationship, he might throw his hat in the ring. Steve Rogers in full Steve Rogers mode was something to behold!
“I mean it. Everyone stays, to the end.”

“The budget –“

“Everyone’s staying in Tony Stark’s house, for nothing. He’s even catering the event. This whole thing is on Stark’s dime. What budget?”

“Okay. Um, how are you going to choose, if you don’t eliminate at least some of them?”

“Everyone stays. Everyone gets to participate. I like these people. Even if I don’t choose them as a life partner, I want to get to know them all. I could use a few friends who aren’t, well, weird.” The grimace that flitted over Steve’s face told Harrison all he needed to know – Tony Stark was in the control room, on the comms, and he could hear him in his own ear giving Steve a ration of shit for his choice of words.

“Okay, maybe not not-weird, but more normal,” Steve corrected himself with a wince. Chris could sympathize; he could hear Stark’s tirade bleeding out of Steve’s earpiece standing a few feet from where he was screeching into Steve’s ear, plus the stereo version in his own comm. “Regular people, Tony!” he exclaimed, fists balled at his sides as the sudden swell of a vein his forehead betrayed his barely contained urge to scream.

Chris could barely contain the urge to laugh out loud, even as his producer was doing his own share of screeching.

“We don’t have enough roses,” Chris said flatly, knowing it would make no difference.

“We don’t need them.”

“It’s traditional, to give a rose to each participant who’ll stay. It’s Valentine’s Day, Steve. No way are we tracking down roses on the evening of Valentine’s Day. We’d be lucky to find a weed tonight.”

“No problem. I just need some paper, a pencil, and a red marker.”

&&&

Steve circulated among the guests after handing Chris Harrison the basket of roses, and accepting a small pad of Bristol board, a fistful of graphite pencils, and a couple of colored markers.

Natasha called out at one point, “Is anyone here Russian?” and was surprised when the Aleut woman Kate Shugak put her hand up and wagged her fingers. “Ekaterina Shugak,” she announced in that gravelly voice of hers that made Bucky’s nerves shiver. “Bering bought Alaska from the Russians – most Parkrats have some Russian in them, some are even pure blood. Call me Kate,” she said, got up and sauntered over to Natasha, letting her dark eyes sweep over Romanoff with a knowing smirk. Natasha responded in kind, her smirk spreading into a full-blown grin as she acknowledged an equal. Shugak was a remarkable woman, compact like Natasha, sinew and attitude and an indomitable spirit. He felt like he was in the presence of someone epic and eternal, and considering he routinely hung out with a frigging god, wasn’t that a kick in the pants?

Immediately, Natasha and Kate fell into quiet conversation, even – and this knocked Bucky off his pins – putting their heads together and giggling like schoolgirls. If it weren’t so frightening, it would be endearing.

Bucky went over to the sideboard and helped himself to a tumbler of whiskey, carefully fishing the ice cubes out of the bucket and watching them clink together as he poured the amber liquid. Like
Steve, he couldn’t get anything more than a flash of a buzz, but he’d always liked the taste. And while Stark hadn’t put out the truly mind-bending stuff, the routine stock was nothing to sneeze at. He took a sip, sighing appreciatively, and glanced around the room. Steve was still making the rounds, most of the others were socializing like this was a laid-back party of friends rather than a reality show. But one of the other contestants was making his way toward Bucky. He straightened, putting his drink down on the sideboard. “Yá’át’ééh,” Bucky greeted the compact young man with the long gaze and the loping walk.

“Yá’át’ééh,” he replied, inclining his head. “You know that I am Diné.”

“Was watching the feed in the car before I made my exciting appearance,” Bucky agreed. He held up the decanter to Jim Chee, who shook, his head. “Didn’t expect to see a Navajo in New York in February.”

“Didn’t expect to be a Navajo in New York in February,” Chee agreed. He looked over the drinks on offer and selected a bottled water. “But Sam didn’t say where I was going, just that I was going.”

“Sam. Sammy Nez? You know Sammy Nez?”

Chee nodded, breaking the seal on the bottle, lifting it to his nose, and sniffing delicately. He wrinkled his nose. “How can they call this spring water? This smells like city water. Chemicals and staleness.”

“Got me. I can’t figure out a lot of stuff everyone takes for granted. So, you know Sammy. How is he?”

“Dead. Ten years.”

“But he told you to come here.”

“Came to me when I was doing a cleansing ritual. Told me to sign up for this, and I’d know why when I got where I was going. Then I saw you, and I knew what he meant.”

“Huh.”

“You don’t seem overly surprised, Sergeant Barnes.”

“I’m 98 years old and standing here talking to you on a reality show to date my best friend, who’s 97 years old, and we both look like we’re in our twenties because crazy scientists jacked us both up on super-soldier juice, and we both ended up being frozen for years on end. He ended up with a pretty shield, and I got a fucking metal arm. Pretty sure your story won’t be as crazy as mine.”

Chee took a swig of the water and nodded, grimacing. “I knew Sam. Before he passed. He didn’t speak much about his time in the Pacific, but he talked about you and Steve,” he nodded toward where Steve was still making the rounds, “and the Commandos. Said his time with you gave him hope that someday, we’d all see ourselves as equals.”

Bucky gestured toward the couch, and he and Jim went over and made themselves comfortable. “Sammy Nez. Great kid. Got a raw deal when he was deployed to the wrong theater. Idiots couldn’t tell a Navajo from a Comanche. We wanted to keep him, tried to get him assigned to the Commandos permanently. Even if there was no one in our part of the world he could do code talking with, he was a hell of a tracker and a terrific guy. Even Philips couldn’t convince Command to let him stay. Once they realized they’d sent a Navajo to the wrong continent, they had him on a train, a plane, and a boat to the Pacific. I was real sorry to see him go.”
“He was sorry to go. They kept in touch with him, you know. The Howling Commandos. Wrote to him when he was deployed in the Pacific. Dugan mostly. And Jones. Told him about what happened to you, to Steve. After he got home, he didn’t leave the Rez often, but when he did, it was usually to meet up with them. He said they told him once a member of the team, always a member of the team.”

“Really? I had a good team. Good men. Didn’t give a shit about your color or your background. If you were good at your job – even if you were an asshole like Dugan – you fit. Sammy fit.”

“I remember him talking about you when I was young, but at the time, what he said made no sense. We all knew that you had died in Austria. Even on the Rez, it’s taught in our history books. But he used to talk about you and Steve in the present tense. I used to think it was an old man wandering, but now …”

“What did he say?”

“That you were both a long way from home, but one day you’d find your way back. And that he was sorry he wasn’t there to lead you home.”

“Huh. There was always something … more about Sammy. Like he could see something we couldn’t. I wonder … I wonder if he’d stayed, if he would’a found me. Before Hydra.”

“I think it worried him. That. And Steve crashing his plane right after. Like maybe he could’ve prevented it.”

“Huh. Well, you know what they say. If wishes were horses.”

“Beggars would ride. And Navajo would be friends with Frenchmen.”

Bucky scratched the back of his neck and grinned. “Dernier was a pistol. He couldn’t get over the fact that Sammy wouldn’t drink. Until one night he challenged Sammy to darts in the pub. And Sammy split Jacques dart right in half. Never questioned him stayin’ sober again after that,” he recounted, chuckling.

“He liked you very much,” Jim said, taking another swig of his water. And grimaced again.

“So you said you’d know why you’re here – why?”

“Message from Sam. For you.”

“Oh?”

“You’re where you’re supposed to be. No matter what happened, no matter what happens next, this is where you were always meant to be.” He frowned at his bottle and shook his head. “And the white man doesn’t know shit about decent water.”

&&&

“No, Dr. Stanz, I agree completely. Magnetic energies are ideally suited for that form of containment,” Dr. Sarah Page was saying to Dr. Raymond Stanz. He no longer appeared to be lost and befuddled, but was hanging on every word she said to him, preening at her professional assessment of his life’s work.

“You talk as if you’ve had real-world experience, Dr. Page,” he answered excitedly. “Would you mind telling me where you’ve seen this technology in use?”
“Ah. Well, there’s the rub, you see. Classified. Official Secrets Act, I’m afraid.”

“Oh. If you told me, you’d have to kill me, huh? Neat!”

&&&

“Seriously, are you two related?” Natasha asked, gesturing between Dr. Jonathan MacKensie and Cindy “Mac” MacKenzie while Kate Shugak hid a chuckle politely behind her hand.

The long-haired British anthropology professor looked down his aquiline nose at the spiky red hair and ear studs of the young West Coast hacker, and shook his head. “Absolutely not. My father was a Nobel-prize winning physicist. My family traces its roots to Domesday. We’ve only recently emigrated to the States. It’s hardly likely a Californian offshoot would spawn in so short a time.”

Mac scoffed. “Yeah, no way somebody this stuffy could be related to me! I’m way too cool for that!”

“Hmmm.”

&&&

“Seriously, dude, you need to check it out. Steve’s art is really amazing. This guy has seen the industry at its birth – imagine the stories he can tell!” Hiro gushed.

“I have to admit I used to read comics as a kid, but I haven’t touched any in decades – if you don’t count cleaning up after my son Ephram when he was younger,” Andy admitted. “Lots of dark colors and big splotches of black. Not at all how I remember comic books.”

“Betting that was Moore. Or Miller. Yeah, probably Miller. Or could be Ellis. Whatever, I’m telling you, you’ve gotta check it out. You won’t regret it! Maybe we should do it together, y’know?”

&&&

“I’m telling you, those clean water kits your company developed are a lifesaver. Literally. I saw an entire village in Botswana nearly die from contaminated water, but when those kits came through, it was a miracle. A bona fide miracle. And I’ve seen miracles, Sun – you wouldn’t believe. I can’t believe I’m talking to the woman who developed that technology.”

“There have been other clean water kits that are very effective,” Sun acknowledged. “The problem is chemical contamination in the groundwater. That’s what we were looking to combat – heavy metals, poison leaching from outdated and outlawed pesticides. We needed a molecule that would bind to those impurities, and drop them out as an inert precipitate.”

“It’s a miracle,” Martha repeated, wide-eyed. “We need to get more of those out there – even in this country, with all the groundwater pollution being triggered by fracking? Seriously, Sun – you could change the world with those kits!”

&&&

“Ladies, I didn’t say I could take you, I said I’d like to take you to Chinatown,” Peter Caine said, holding his hands up defensively, talking to Professor Sydney Fox and Josephina Lupo.

“Really. Because I distinctly heard you say –“ Sydney started, hands on her hips as she advanced menacingly toward Caine.
“Because that’s what you expected to hear,” Peter countered, chuckling. “Which proves my point. We all have preconceptions and biases that fill in lulls in conversations. People get into fights over what they expect to hear, not necessarily what they do hear –“

“If you’re such a martial artist, why won’t you take me on?” Jo challenged, chin lifted belligerently. “Huh? You seriously think you can take me? I’m Special Forces.”

“And I’m a Shaolin cop,” Peter snarked back. “So what?”

Jo suddenly stood down. “You’re a cop, huh. Well, professional courtesy and all that,” she shrugged.

“What, you’re a cop, too?”

“Was. Sheriff’s deputy. Now I’m head of security for … well, for a classified organization that doesn’t really exist, okay?”

“Hey, I’m outgunned,” Sydney said, raising her hands in surrender. “I just hunt for relics, I’m not concerned about weaponry unless it’s important in an historical context.”


“Did somebody mention guns? Now you’re talkin’, ” Bucky interrupted, leaping over the back of the sofa to join them. “Field strip? Wanna race?”

&&&

“So, y’think V’ll figure out we’re both here?” Wallace asked Mac as he lounged against the wall, stirring his drink with one of those little straws.

“Well, she knows I’m here. I had to take vacation from the agency to be here. She even helped me shoot my audition video. What I’m wondering is how come I’ve known you over 10 years, and I never knew you were bi, Wallace. Never even crossed my mind.” She took a sip of her drink through the straw and looked at him, eyebrows raised, awaiting him to spill all.

It didn’t take long. “Didn’t know it myself,” he admitted with a shrug. “Kinda been doing some soul-searchin’, y’know? Why my relationships don’t seem to pan out. Why it’s always, ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ kinda bullshit. And I figure maybe I’m bein’ too shallow, lookin’ at the outside. When what I really need to do is look at the inside. I mean, look at us. You, me, V. Who’d’a thought we three would be friends, even for a minute, and yet here we are, more than 10 years later, still friends. Best of friends. Two most beautiful women in my life, and friendship is where it’s at.”

“Don’t think that flattering me and Veronica is gonna save you, Fennel. You didn’t say a word to her, did you.”

“Not a goddamn peep.”

“She’s gonna figure it out. You know she will. It’s what she does. She’s even got a license. I know – I work for her. And so do you, don’t think you don’t.”

“No doubt. And V’s got scary weird powers of knowing all your shit.”

“Really,” Natasha butted in, eavesdropping shamelessly. “This V sounds like someone I’d like to
Bucky had been aware of Steve all evening as he made his way around the room, pausing to talk, to listen, share a laugh, share a touch, share a smile. Easy smiles, and easy laughter. Easy touches. A hand on an elbow. An arm slung around shoulders. Fingers twining, fingers sliding gently down a forearm, fingers dancing across a neck, fingers lingering a moment before moving on.

And then there were the moments where Steve would just step aside, step back, out of the field of view, and just look around him. Look around him with an expression of peace mingled with joy.

Growing up, Steve didn’t have an overabundance of friends. There was Bucky, of course. And a few other friends, arty types like Steve, left-leaning political activists, an anarchist or two, even a couple of Catholic priests and nuns from the old neighborhood. Not a lot of friends, but select friends, good friends. And Bucky could remember seeing that exact expression on Steve’s face two years after Steve’s Ma died, and Bucky’d insisted on having a potluck birthday party for Steve. All his friends had found they liked one another, and even though Bucky hadn’t had a lot to offer in refreshments, they’d all enjoyed themselves, because they’d found in each other the same qualities that Steve had liked. And Steve had stood in their little apartment with that self-same expression, counting his lucky stars and feeling blessed.

Bucky tried to swallow past the lump in his throat at the memory. At the sight that overlaid the memory. It was a quiet kind of happiness, the kind that filled you up and made everything possible.

And this was the first time he’d seen this expression on Steve’s face since he’d come back. He’d seen smiles, he’d seen Steve throw his head back in laughter. He’d seen moments of tenderness. But this, this absolute moment of satisfaction and happiness? In this century? Not until now.

Steve’s eyes shifted, found Bucky’s and his smile deepened. A quick glance toward the floor, and Steve was in motion again, and now he was on his way toward Bucky.

And Bucky found himself holding his breath watching Steve move. No longer sharp angles and barely contained fury, but softer, smoother, more at peace, at least in the moment.

“Pretty amazing, huh, Buck?” Steve asked, reaching out to touch Bucky’s arm, fingers leaving hot trails like molten steel spattering out from rivets driven home. “Reminds me of that party, the one you threw –“

“For your birthday. I remember.”

“Yeah. ‘S’nice.” Steve’s fingers ghosted down Bucky’s forearm and curled into Bucky’s hand, fingertips caressing the pads of Bucky’s fingers. “So there’s this thing they do on this show. The bachelor gives out roses to everyone he wants to keep on the show.”

“Yeah, I saw you with the basket earlier – what happened?” Bucky asked, letting his fingers knead against Steve’s, feel and be felt. Current passed up his arm, making his shoulders, his neck, his scalp tingle.

“Wanna keep everybody. They don’t have enough roses. So I made some.” Steve held up a stiff card with a beautifully rendered rose in pencil, its petals painted red with marker.

“Wanna keep me?” Bucky asked breathlessly. Steve nodded. Bucky took the card with shaking fingers. “So I get to stay.”
“So you get to stay,” Steve agreed, his fingers still rubbing gently against Bucky’s. Bucky just smiled at him, and Steve smiled back. And that’s all Bucky really needed in that moment. Steve’s smile.

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Steve had given everyone one of his hand-drawn roses, but that didn’t make Bucky feel any less special. He and Steve had stood there just smiling at each other for longer than was necessary, but he wasn’t complaining. Unfortunately, one of the other contestants, Jonathan MacKensie, did, and so Steve and Bucky dropped their hands and stepped apart as Steve mumbled apologies and Bucky’s face flushed red, more from frustration than embarrassment. Steve’s face was pleasantly pink, but the pursed line of his lips betrayed his irritation as well.

The other MacKenzie, Mac, commented that Bucky had too many advantages going for him, being Steve’s childhood friend, having access to him that the other contestants might not have, and she asked the question that Bucky supposed the others must be wondering, too.

“Are you a ringer? I mean, is this all a set-up, or is this a real competition?”

“I, well, um. No. I’m a contestant just like you.”

“Yeah? Where’re you staying?”

“Oh. On the residence floor. That’s where my stuff is. I, um, maybe I should move?” Bucky volunteered uncertainly. Steve looked a little alarmed at the suggestion, and Bucky had to admit he wasn’t thrilled about being surrounded by civilians if a nightmare hit, but truth was, Jarvis was everywhere, and Jarvis always had his back. “Is there an empty room on the guest wing?”

Chris Harrison stepped forward, smiling easily and said, “Yeah, there’s room. Thanks, man, for being willing to move. Mac’s right – staying on the secure level would definitely give you at least the illusion of an unfair advantage. And y’gotta admit, the fact that you two have so much history does seem to give you an edge.”

Bucky glanced at Steve, who had withdrawn when Harrison came over, and now was shifting uncomfortably over near a group of contestants. “Trust me, after the past six weeks, I think I blew any advantage I might have had. But I’ll warn you – I’m in this to win this. Knowin’ Steve like I do? Just makes me sure he’s the one I want. But I want to win him fair and square. No unfair advantage.”

Harrison broke into a grin and clapped Bucky on the shoulder – the left one, and Bucky had to give the guy points that he didn’t flinch or hesitate to engage the prosthetic. “Get your stuff and meet me back here – I’ll show you to your new room.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks.” With another glance at Steve, Bucky ducked out of the room and went back up to his quarters to gather his things.

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The rest of the evening went by in a technicolor blur awash in a heady cocktail of excitement, nerves, and outright lust. Steve could not believe how accurately Pepper had identified the type of person who could make Steve’s heart race and his dick take notice. Twelve different ways! Thirteen if you counted Bucky, and by God, he’d have to. He wanted to.

And yet.
But.

Well … ?

As Steve undid belt around his waist, slipped off the buttons on his jacket, and slowly peeled the uniform off, he felt that age-old flutter of desire burning deep in his gut at the same time his mind flicked through all the delicious possibilities open to him. He could see himself making a life with everyone of them. Every last fucking one of them.

Peter Caine. Oh my God, he was gorgeous! Yeah, okay, one could make an argument for him being part of the Bucky type, dark-haired, smirking, snarking, gorgeous, and good with the ladies. He hadn’t asked, but he’d bet Peter could dance. Well, all that martial arts training – he was probably very graceful. With great muscle control. He had an incredible ass. Eyes he could get lost in. A mouth he very definitely wanted to get lost in. And the energy that rippled off of him in a constant wave … it was addictive, delicious. Steve just wanted to get closer to him, wrap himself around him and just … stay.

And Peter served the people, as a police officer and as a priest. He fought for the disenfranchised, the little guy. Damn, if Steve couldn’t see him and Peter as partners, fighting crime and corruption together.

There would be no tights in that scenario! Unless for fun … Peter Caine in tights shifted subtly into Peter Caine in stockings and lingerie in his minds’ eye, muscular thighs and calves stretching the filmy fabric until it was taut and shiny against his skin … And what the hell was he doing? He was going to have to look him in the eye in the morning! So he squelched that image quickly and decisively, pressed the heel of his hand almost painfully against his suddenly awakening dick to calm it down, and strode over to his window and flung it open to let some cold air into the room and into his lust-sodden brain.

Steve had to shake himself out of that train of thought. He stood there for a long moment sucking in the chilly air, and when Jarvis inquired as to his well-being, he reassured the AI he just had a sudden need for fresh air to clear his mind.

Peter lived in Toronto, in Canada. How would the American public feel about Captain America emigrating? And did he actually care? After all, Captain America was a name that other people had coined for him, a propaganda tool to sell war bonds, and the media had always treated him like he was some jingoistic asshole of a conservative, when the opposite was true. It was never America right or wrong, it was fighting for the weak and putting a stop to bullies. In a lot of ways, Steve felt he was a citizen of the world, that the gifts Dr. Erskine gave him were to be used for the entire planet, not the agenda of a single country.

And politically? Yeah, he’d never been conservative that way. He might be a little old-fashioned in some ways, and he really did believe that manners matter, but when it came to politics, he found himself getting impatient that more progress hadn’t been made while he’d slept in the ice.

Maybe relocation would be a good thing. Pull him out of the public eye for a while. All that scrutiny couldn’t be good for a new relationship. He’d never been to Toronto before, but he’d seen photographs. The architecture was gorgeous. Suddenly, he really, really wanted to travel north. The possibilities with Peter were … intriguing. Exhilarating.

Steve found himself down to his boxers – boxers, not Speedos, Nat! – sitting on the edge of the bed that had once been Howard Stark’s staring bemusedly into the middle distance, a shit-eating grin on his face. He suddenly felt like he wasn’t really alone, and he wondered if all of Tony’s jokes about Howard haunting the “old pile” – especially the room he’d favored for assignations, this room – might not be true. That there might not be some lingering energy that was somehow
connected to Howard. When he thought he felt a feather touch along his shoulder blades, he glanced around and shook his head. “Not tonight, Howard,” he said to the room at large, flung back the covers, and snuggled down, counting suitors instead of sheep. Within moments, he was asleep, a soft smile curving his lips.

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“I apologize, Captain Rogers, but I believe your presence is needed in the guest wing,” Jarvis announced, voice laced with genuine regret as he broke through the very pleasant (and decidedly r-rated and escalating) dream he was having about Dr. Sarah Page. He blushed into the darkness, noted the bulge in his boxers, and groaned into his arm as he flung it over his face. More and more, he was realizing that he was going to be spending a lot of time thinking about ice and cold showers over the next few weeks.

But, oh, it was going to be worth it! Even if his ass did get chapped from all the cold showers …

“What’s going on, Jarvis?” he asked, squeezing his eyes shut, abandoning ice, and thinking about multiplication tables. Lots of multiplication tables.

“Sir, I regret having to wake you, but Sergeant Barnes is in the throes of a particularly difficult nightmare. He has been screaming for the past ten minutes, and the other guests are becoming alarmed. It appears that everyone on the guest wing is now awake and milling around in the corridor, but I do not think it would be advisable for any of them to go to Sergeant Barnes’s aid. If you wouldn’t mind, sir …” Jarvis left the question hanging in the air, but Steve was already on the move, muttering under his breath, reciting the tables he still remembered from childhood. That brought a sense of calm, and the hardness in his dick started to ebb away, as he yanked open the closet to grab one of Howard’s old robes – which must have been two inches thick if it was anything – shrugged that on, tied it off, and was out the door, heading for the guest wing.

When he arrived in the hallway, he found that Jarvis had been right – everyone was milling about uncertainly in the corridor outside Bucky’s room. Self-consciously, he hitched the robe up further on this shoulders and smiled tightly at the assemblage.

“PTSD. We both suffer from it. Nightmares are part of the package,” he said tersely, fully expecting a fight of some kind.

And was surprised when Andy Brown stepped forward, his lined face mellowed with a warm smile, and offered to go in with Steve. “I can’t speak for everyone here, but I’ve had my share of nightmares and cold sweats. Spent almost a year talking to my dead wife after the accident. You do what you have to survive inside your own head. I just didn’t want to do anything if there’s a specific routine he should follow –“

Steve let a relieved smile touch his lips as he took in the expressions of support and empathy surrounding him. Their pasts were the baggage that weighed on their present, and which they carried into the future, a constant presence no matter what the routine they followed. But Steve nodded gratefully to Andy, acknowledging his offer. “It’s been a while, we haven’t really been talking the past six weeks. But I’m going to check on him. Thing is, he could hurt somebody if he’s not approached the right way. Seriously hurt someone.”

“I’m here if you want backup, man,” Peter Caine offered. “If you need help, shout out. I’m stronger than I look, I promise.”

“Me, too,” Jo Lupo added. “Special Forces, remember?”
“Relic hunter,” Sydney Fox inserted. “I’ve had to deal with more than my share of criminal grave robbers. I can handle myself, and I’m not afraid to get into a tussle.”

“And between Dr. Jones here and myself, we’ve got the medical support covered,” Andy summed up with a smile that crinkled around his eyes and lit his entire face.

“I think what everyone is trying to say, Steve, is that we’ve got your back. Yours and Bucky’s. Right, Jim?” Martha Jones announced, stepping forward to speak, then turning toward Jim Chee.

“We’re all where we’re supposed to be,” he agreed with a small smile. “But shouldn’t you check on Barnes now?” he prompted, his smile growing.

Steve’s hand was on the doorknob, and he turned to look down at it. “Um, yeah,” he agreed, as another banshee wail erupted out of the room beyond the door. “I think, well, I don’t know that Buck would want, um …” His frown deepened as he struggled for the words.

“Ah. Privacy,” Andy interpreted. “I’ve raised teenagers,” he explained to everyone else. “I’m awake now, how about we raid the kitchen and see if there’s any hot chocolate?”

“And cookies. Can’t do hot chocolate without cookies, man,” Wallace interjected enthusiastically.

Steve nodded gratefully as Andy shepherded the other eleven contestants off toward the kitchen, chattering happily about cookies and pastries, and did Dr. Stanz just say something about free floating repeaters? Then, with a deep, steadying breath, he turned the knob and opened the door.

“Whadya think, does Stark have marshmallows and graham crackers? He’s gotta have chocolate. We could do s’mores over the fire pit on the patio, there’s an environmental bubble that keeps the cold out,” came Mac’s voice wafting back along the hallway as Steve ducked into Bucky’s room. “Come join us when you’re done, Steve! Bring Bucky if he’s feeling better!”

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All it had taken was the sound of Steve’s voice, and Bucky was suddenly back in contact with his own body, his own fears. His muscles fucking hurt as he turned into Steve’s arms and clung to him while the tremors gradually calmed, leaving him feeling like he’d gone eight rounds with Banner in a bad mood. The ice lingering in the air eventually dissipated as the warmth that radiated off Steve’s skin seeped into his bones.

A few minutes later, Bucky found himself spitting fuzz out of his mouth as he raised his head from where Steve had cradled it against his chest, his big hands rubbing soothing circles on Bucky’s naked back. “What the fuck is this?” Bucky asked, patting down the cushy material.

“Howard’s old robe. Didn’t wanna parade around half-naked in somebody else’s house,” Steve admitted with a faint smile as Bucky straightened up slowly to face him.

“So you look like a chorus girl whose sugar daddy’s got more money’n’sense?” Bucky asked, plucking at the thick pile. “You could hide a whole chorus line in there! You sure Howard’s not hiding in there, too?”

Steve shuddered theatrically, closing his eyes. “Ugh, you’re gonna give me nightmares for weeks! Nope, no Howard. But chorus girls?” Steve chuckled, “Pretty sure if Howard had a hand in designing this, it was used that way for sure.” Steve lifted his head to face Bucky. Eye to eye. Lips nearly touching. Air being shared. Bucky’s tongue darted out to wet his lower lip, but his mouth was suddenly dry. He could feel Steve’s hands still on his back, his fingertips pressing into the flesh of his torso, a slight tug drawing him closer as Steve’s eyes dropped to Bucky’s lips, lingered,
then with a frown, wrenched away. “Never know where you’re gonna run into cameras right now,” Steve explained, his hands shifting on Bucky to gently push him back, creating space between them.

Bucky wanted to surge forward and reclaim that warmth, that closeness, the electric hum between them, lock his mouth on Steve’s, but the cooling space between them, the furrow between Steve’s brows, and the nervous glance upward held Bucky in stillness. “You don’t think they’ve got the rooms bugged? On surveillance?”

“Jarvis?” Steve called, tilting his head slightly toward where Bucky imagined Jarvis lived in the ceiling.

“Yes, Captain Rogers?”

“Can you confirm there is no surveillance signal being broadcast from this room? Audio, video, still?”

“I’m afraid I cannot, sir. I apologize. The guest wing was set up with local cameras, audio devices, and recording equipment to broadcast signals to the Bachelor control room, set on a voice-activated trigger. In checking commentary on the internet, it would appear this is a typical situation, to capture ‘hanky panky’ between the Bachelor and his dates, sir.”

“Wait, they’re recording this? My panic attack?” Bucky demanded incredulously, pulling away completely from Steve and straightening, black edging back into his vision as the tremors started building again.

Steve laid his hand over Bucky’s, thumb absently stroking back and forth across his knuckles, grounding him, calming him. “They were. They won’t be any longer. Jarvis, block signal. From here on out, allow the signal from each broadcast point on the property only upon active verbal permission. Can you do that?”

“Of course, sir,” and Bucky had to chuckle to himself at the slightly miffed tone of Jarvis’s reply. “If I may say, sir, an excellent compromise. Explicit consent at all times. Very good.”

“Well, you’ve got Jarvis’s seal of approval.”

“He works for Tony – it’s not hard,” Steve turned and whispered faintly against Bucky’s ear, voice pitched so only someone with super-soldier hearing could hear. So Jarvis wouldn’t be insulted.

But what Steve’s breath against his ear did was something for the record books, though. Bucky had never thought a simple breath against his skin could make all the blood in his body race south, leaving him practically gasping for breath and dangerously light-headed. And yet, he actually felt as though he could fall into a fucking swoon if Steve didn’t move away. And he would cry if he did, he’d swear he would.

What the hell happened to him? How could he have ignored these feelings, these sensations, all these years? He’d never swooned in his life. And cry? In front of Steve? Not since they were … well, no, he’d done it since he’d been back, a bag of crazy and emotions spurting all over the floor. Big fucking mess. So yeah, crying he’d done.

But swoon?

And then Bucky felt another moment of panic, fear and self-loathing as he second-guessed himself, questioning if these feelings were real or something he believed he should feel.
The tremor started in his right index finger, and gained momentum as it jittered along his hand and travelled up his flesh arm into his shoulders, his rib cage, erupting into a tick in his face, and a shake in both hands. Even the prosthetic started whirring and grinding angrily as the emotion overtook him.

All this in the space of a heartbeat, it seemed, and Steve was immediately alerted to the change in his body language, his demeanor, and those iron-bound arms tightened around him, the flat plate of his hand rested gently against his skin, tracing circles and curlicues on his back as he murmured soothing noises against Bucky’s ear.

And didn’t that just make it worse? The puff of breath, moist and warm, the gentle way his hands slid along the skin of his back, firm and strong, yet oddly delicate. The way Bucky could feel Steve’s heartbeat, even through that ridiculous robe, steady, rhythmic, so alive and present in this crazy future. If Bucky just reached up, and slid his hand between the lapels, he could hold his palm against that heartbeat, touch that glorious skin Steve had hidden away to come to his rescue. As the heat of Steve’s furnace seeped into Bucky’s bones again, he felt himself relaxing into Steve’s embrace once more, his own arms circling the impossible expanse of Steve’s waist – had he really been so small once? Was that memory, or was that story? He couldn’t remember putting his arms around Steve like this when they were young, although a flutter in his chest made him think that maybe he wanted to. That no, what he was feeling wasn’t suggestion, implant, but real. True. That a part of him had always wanted Steve, even if he hadn’t known what it meant, what it was. What it was called.

He knew now.

He knew he wanted it. Wanted him.

But could he be enough? Could the broken thing he’d become be enough for Steve when Steve could see what he could really have? Would he settle for Bucky when all he had to do is reach out and claim someone better? All the bright and beautiful people Pepper had selected before she’d known what Bucky wanted? Was there any way that Steve could really think that Bucky was the best choice for him when he could have neurosurgeons and physicists and Egyptologists and police officers?

Bucky’s arms tightened around Steve, his face borrowing into the softness of Steve’s robe, he body shifting til he was almost sitting in Steve’s lap. He held on tight, unwilling to let Steve go. He’d come too close to losing him before …

Steve’s hands stilled a moment, halted their circular route for a breath, two, three. And then he felt Steve’s arms tighten around him, Steve’s hands slide around his waist, run up his sides, and back down again, as Steve leaned in closer, pressing his cheek against Bucky’s hair. The axis of Steve’s body shifted Bucky-ward, his touch segued from comforting to possessive. “Buck,” Steve breathed against his hair, the warmth of his breath tingling across Bucky’s scalp and down his neck, and all over.

Bucky shifted in Steve’s arms and raised his face again to look into Steve’s eyes, share air, more. Steve’s brow was furrowed as his impossibly blue eyes searched his, flicking back and forth under the veil of those long lashes. Bucky felt Steve’s hand slide up his side, graze over his shoulder, and up Bucky’s neck, confidence seeping away as Steve’s fingertips tentatively , reverently brushed across Bucky’s cheek.

The breathlessness Bucky felt in that moment had nothing to do with panic.

He sighed as he shifted forward, eyes dropping to Steve’s lips, open to say his name again,
glistening from the nervous swipe of Steve’s tongue, lower lip caught suddenly in a self-conscious nip of his teeth. Bucky’s right hand untangled itself from the robe and rose of its own volition, seeking out the curve of Steve’s cheek, the line of his jaw.

“Sergeant Barnes! Steve! Are you in there?” came the urgent voice of Chris Harrison following a loud knock-knock on the door of Bucky’s room. “The feed cut out and we saw that Sergeant Barnes was having a nightmare –“

As one, they exploded away from each other, twin blushes firing up their chests, enflaming their faces.

“Fuck,” Steve swore, and Bucky had to grin to himself. Too bad they weren’t picking that up on the recording, Mr. I’m-a-Virgin-American-Icon and his potty mouth. But when Steve launched himself toward the door, Bucky found himself suspended for a second, and then fell over on his face into the duvet. “Shit, Steve, give a guy some warning, willya?” he complained as he extricated himself.

But Steve wasn’t listening. He’d wrenched open the door and was glaring murderously at Chris Harrison. Buck swore he heard the wood crunch under Steve’s fingers – chalk up another necessary repair. “What the actual fuck?” he demanded, still holding onto the door. Yep. Middle America was not ready for the actual fact of Steve Rogers, US Army, Retired and his mouth of shame.

“Thank goodness, Steve, we were concerned –“

“You were surveilling Bucky without his permission,” Steve fired back tersely. Even though he was turned away from Bucky, Buck could imagine the muscles bunching in Steve’s jaw, his nostrils flaring as he breathed like that baby bull in the Disney cartoon they’d watched one Saturday before the picture started.

“No. Nothin’.” He thought quickly. He couldn’t remember signing anything for this shindig. Pepper didn’t ask him to sign anything because he was already covered under Stark Industries insurance policies, so … “No. Nothin’.” He scrubbed his hand over his face blearily, adrenalin, endorphins, and arousal draining away, leaving him feeling empty and tired, and a little nauseous.

“So you’re recording the private moments of an Army vet with PTSD without permission. There are laws regarding this type of behavior, Chris. And this type of invasion of privacy is not what I signed up for. Not what any of these people signed up for.”

“It’s part of the show, Steve. Anyone who’s participating in The Bachelor knows they’re giving up their privacy for the duration –“

“Not on my show. You want me, we do it my way. Respectfully. No one gets recorded without explicit consent, in real-time. Jarvis will be monitoring, and moving forward he will not release the signal if consent isn’t granted. Is that clear?”

“Steve, not to be contrary, but yeah, these people did each sign a blanket consent. Okay, maybe not Sergeant Barnes. And I apologize for that. But the show is covered legally –“

“This isn’t about what’s legal. It’s about what’s right. I won’t be party to invasion of privacy like
“I get it, you’re a good guy. But the network –”

“Network be damned. Lemme guess, your producer is talkin’ in your ear?” Steve flicked a finger toward Harrison’s ear, and the host nodded. “I’ll go talk to him.” Steve turned back and looked at Bucky. “Buck, you okay?”

“Hey, Steve and Bucky, you guys comin’ out for s’mores?” Mac asked suddenly, her voice preceding her down the hallway. She got to Bucky’s door and corrected herself awkwardly, “Uh, I guess not. Something going on, guys?”

“Chris and I are going to have a talk with the show’s producer. Did you sign a waiver to grant the show full access to your bedroom, everything you say and do?”

Bucky sat up, interested to hear what Mac said. He leaned forward and watched her expression.

She sighed. “Against my lawyer’s wishes, yeah. And by my lawyer, I mean my boss, Veronica Mars. She felt it went too far, but I I didn’t sign, I didn’t get to do the show. She kind of felt that if I needed to sue later, or needed to put a stop to anything, I might get some traction with coercion as a defense.”

Steve smiled and nodded, then turned toward Harrison. From where Bucky was sitting, he could see Steve’s eyebrow arching toward his hairline, a sure sign he felt he had the moral high ground and then some. “Shall we?” Harrison nodded dumbly, and Steve glanced back over his shoulder at Bucky. “Gonna be okay, Buck?”

Bucky started to answer when Mac interrupted. “I can stay with him. I’m no stranger to nightmares.”

“I, uh,” Steve’s eyes darted back to Bucky worriedly, so Bucky straightened where he sat on the edge of the bed and waved airily at him.

“Go. Be virtuous. Fight for the privacy of idiots like us everywhere. The world’ll be a better place for it,” he told him with a smile he knew Steve had to recognize as fake.

Mac hovered awkwardly at the periphery, but Steve nodded once, and edged Harrison out the door and then they were both gone.

“I guess I should close this? If you don’t mind? Or would you rather have it open?” Mac asked, gesturing toward the door.

Bucky looked down at himself, naked from the waist up, clad only in fuzzy sleep pants (don’t judge – they were soft and warm). The plates of his prosthetic arm gleamed in the low light of his room, the light spilling in from the corridor. The light cast the scarring around his shoulder, down his chest, around his scapula and along his side into relief. She’d seen it now, her eyes kept darting away, but he could tell she was fascinated by it, probably wanted to hump the tech like Stark did.

“Close it. No reason to scare anyone else with this,” he lifted the prosthetic and let it drop back to the bed. “You don’t have to stay.”

“I kinda do. I was shitty to you earlier. I’m betting moving to an unfamiliar room didn’t help any.”

“Not like I live here. We only got in the night before. And I don’t remember going to sleep, I was so drunk. First time since 1943.”
“Huh,” she observed, still slowly crossing the room, moving carefully like she didn’t want to spook a wild animal.

“So, I guess you want to talk, huh? Hear all about it? My therapists say that it helps to talk about trauma.”

“Therapists are shithheads,” she snorted, then clapped her hand over her mouth and giggled behind it. “I don’t want to relive my trauma, I wanna forget about it.”

He looked up at her and grinned, and she took that for an invitation, dropping onto the bed beside him. “Everyone knows at least some of what happened to you. It must be hard, not even having your trauma in private.”

“Can’t be a friend of the Avengers and expect privacy. ‘Course, I wasn’t counting on cameras in the bedroom,” he nodded toward the wall.

“Part of the ambiance of being on The Bachelor. Secret trysts and backroom deals. I’m only in it for the chance to meet Stark’s AI, though. Jarvis is my boo.”

“Yeah, but no one knew who the bachelor was gonna be, I thought. Unless –“

“No, no I didn’t know. No, that’s a joke. I would like to meet Jarvis, though. Think you could introduce me? I mean, a real, live AI – it’s a programmer’s dream, really. I –“

“Good evening, Ms. MacKenzie. I trust you are enjoying your stay so far at Rinascere?” came Jarvis’s soothing voice.

“That’s him!” she whispered with an excited squeak.

Bucky nodded, smiling encouragingly. It was an unconventional way to take him out of his head, but he had to admit it was working. There was something endearing about this feisty girl with the red mohawky hair. And Bucky didn’t have that itch under his skin, or the desire to run screaming into the night. He felt his system settling, calming, and he let the wave of relief wash over him.

“Say hello,” Bucky prompted, barely suppressing a yawn.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” she said out the side of her mouth, and then turned a million watt smile toward the ceiling. “Hello, Jarvis!”

A genuine smile tugged at Bucky’s lips as he scooted back on the bed toward the pillows rucked up against the headboard. Fatigue was nipping at the edges of his awareness. He might just be able to go back to sleep soon. Mac had a surprisingly soothing presence. She looked at him over her shoulder, grinning, and clambered up the bed to sit beside him, resting against the ornate headboard. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“For what? Jarvis is everywhere.”

“Yeah, but still. Thanks.”

“Right back at ya,” he said with a smile. “So, trauma, huh?”

She shifted a little closer and put her head on his metal shoulder, wrapping her arms around the prosthetic. Bucky couldn’t help but smile at how nonchalant she was about rest against the unyielding metal of his prosthetic, touching it, treating it like a real limb. She reached down and twined her fingers into his synthetic ones. “Yeah. First boyfriend was a serial killer. Fucked me up
pretty good for a while.”

“Yeah. Hydra turned me into a serial killer. Fucked me up pretty good for a while.”

“That’s rough, man.”

He tilted his head to rest his cheek against the spikey ends of her hairstyle. “You got no idea.”

“No, I guess not.” She turned to him then, grinning. “Hey, the others are out on the patio having s’mores – y’wanna go? Chocolatey goodness with ooey-gooey marshmallow, smushed between graham crackers. Mmm-mmm-yummy!”

“Nah, I think I’m about ready to crash again.” He lifted his head away from hers and leaned back against his pillows.

“Panic attacks take a lot out of you, too, huh?”

“Yeah, super-soldier serum means super-soldier panic attacks. Same effect, different scale, I guess.”

“You’re not alone, you know. I mean, nobody’s been through what you’ve been through. Like anywhere. Ever. But when we were all out in the hallway earlier, we got talking. Everybody’s got baggage. Yours might not even be the only nightmare tonight. Everybody gets it, though. Nightmares, night terrors, the shakes. The cold pit of your stomach and the sick taste in your mouth. The feeling you’re gonna shake right out of your skin.” She shook her head. “Not trying to trigger another! But y’gotta know, you’re surrounded by people who understand.”

“Thanks,” he said, feeling warmed by her assurances. He leaned over and kissed her chastely on the cheek. “I appreciate it.”

“Y’gonna be okay? I can stay if you want – “

“Yeah, I’m okay. Go, enjoy your gooey goodies. I’ll be fine. Think I’m really ready to sleep now. Thanks.”

She grinned at him, then bounced off the bed, danced toward the door, and stood there with her hand over the light switch. He nodded, she turned off the light, opened the door and waved at him in silhouette, and was gone, snicking the door shut behind her. He smiled, eased back the covers, and slid gratefully into bed. He was asleep almost immediately, and remembered no more dreams by the time he woke the next morning, feeling rested and alert.

&&&

Steve finished reaming out The Bachelor production team, laid down a few laws according to Rogers, and left the control room feeling itchy and restless. He stalked back toward the guest wing, wondering just what was happening with Bucky. Did he feel it too, the incredible pull? If Harrison hadn’t showed up, he was sure he would have kissed Bucky, and Bucky looked like he would have welcomed it. He’d been dreaming his whole life of that moment, and a stupid knock on the door had snatched it away from him.

The moment was past. He only hoped there might be another in their future.

Fuck, he was horny. Surrounded by beautiful people who were here to meet him, to woo him, to court him … Bucky right there, half-naked in his arms … what the hell had he gotten himself into?
And then he remembered Buck telling him about how effective the old 8-pagers had been for him, and Steve made a snap decision to detour to Howard’s old porn stash, and liberate a few volumes for his own use. Howard’s stupid robe had pockets big enough to hide several blue magazines – Steve couldn’t help but feel that the robe had been designed for that express purpose – so he loaded up, the scatological images safely hidden from view.

He’d liked Howard, but Howard had taken sex and made it a competitive sport, devoid of feeling. In a way it felt like that cheapened it, stripped it of its dignity and romance. Maybe that’s why he hadn’t let things get beyond a little experimentation with Howard back in Brooklyn, before he’d been shipped off to play dancing monkey for the USO. Never went all the way, because he was still hoping he’d be on the next troop carrier for Europe to be reunited with Bucky. Just kisses, groping. Okay, a hand job or two. Exciting and new for a kid from Brooklyn no one had ever looked at twice. But that was it. He hadn’t wanted to be another notch on Howard’s bedpost, though. Huh, he’d have to check the bedpost – maybe there really were notches there … he certainly would not be surprised.

But he had to wonder if he and Howard had had something more, would Howard have ended up the same person, ready to bed anything with an orifice? Or would Steve have been discarded as thoughtlessly as Tony’s mother had been? Or was the fact that Steve had “gotten away” the reason that Howard had been so obsessed with finding him?

It always came back to the same point. The right partner.

His steps had taken him back toward the guest wing, and he passed the patio where the others were enjoying their s’mores around the fire pit. He saw Mac out there, and felt a bloom of anger in his chest. Tamping it down, he walked over to the door and rapped on the glass. Mac looked up and grinned, hopped off her perch and rushed over to him.

“He’s okay, Steve. He wanted to go to sleep, said it was okay for me to come back to the party. Seriously, he couldn’t even keep his eyes open when I left.” She reached out and squeezed his hand encouragingly.

“Okay, yeah. Thanks, Mac. Go have fun. Sleep sounds like a good idea.” She grinned at him and went back outside with everyone else. Steve stood on the inside looking out, and smiled to himself. The people selected for him liked each other. They were comfortable with each other after only one evening. Andy picked that moment to look up, and he locked eyes with Steve, nodding slightly, the lines around his eyes crinkling affectionately.

Good people, one and all. And he wanted every last one of them.

“Jarvis, can you please confirm that Sergeant Barnes, ah, Bucky, is asleep?”

“Of course, Captain Rogers. Sergeant Barnes’s metabolic functions are that of someone with your enhancements asleep. His breathing is regular and his heart rate has slowed. I would venture to say that he is in fact asleep. Although there is a margin for error, in that both of you have enhanced control over bodily functions –“

“Let’s take it at face value. I’ll let him sleep. And Jarvis?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“If he or anyone else suffers nightmares or panic attacks, don’t wait to wake me. Let me know right away.”
“If you are sure, Captain?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. They’re my guests. Their well-being is my responsibility.”

“Technically, Captain, they are Sir’s guests, but he would be unlikely to try to assume responsibility for their care.”

“Yeah, pretty sure we can rely on Tony to stay out of that. Thank you, Jarvis,” Steve added, still chuckling to himself. “Good night.”

“Good night, sir.”

&&&

“Thanks for letting me know, Steve. I’ll alert Legal. I should have realized there would be no boundaries when the network team asked about installing cameras and audio pickups. I’m sorry I let you down,” Pepper was saying as her heels clicked loudly as she and Steve made their way down the corridor on the residence floor, heading toward the wide marble staircase that would take them to the main level and the catered brunch.

“Pep, you always apologize for stuff out of your control –“

“No, Steve. I coordinated this, I dealt with the network. I supervised the contract. I was in control. I am. I should have realized they’d do something underhanded –“

“Yeah, apparently this is standard operating procedure. It’s just … it’s just that it’s not healthy for Buck, Pepper. A person should have the right to suffer their own nightmares in peace, y’know?”

She snickered. Like everyone else who lived in the tower, she’d had her fair share of nightmares and terrors. Unlike most of the rest of them, her nightmares and terrors could trigger fire suppression and 911 calls.

“Yeah, I get it – you know. Hell, we could all be poster children for PTSD. And it sounds like the dates you picked for me could be, too.”

“It didn’t make any sense to select people for you who were … well, innocent’s not the right word, but who hadn’t lived. Who hadn’t experienced something significant in their lives. I’ve no doubt you’d be polite and gracious, but someone who’d never known any kind of conflict, who only knew it from movies or TV – that wouldn’t be a good fit for you. They’d never be able to connect with you on anything other than a superficial level. So, you like my choices?”

“I don’t know how you did it, but every one of them is … well, amazing. I wish I could be 13 different people so I could keep them all.”

“Anyone special?” she asked coyly as they reached the point just inside the French doors leading out to the courtyard, the buffet, the Avengers and their friends, and all of Steve’s suitors.

“Early days yet,” he shrugged, eyes following hers. Everyone was grouped around tables, eating and enjoying themselves. Cameras on dollies moved slowly around the perimeter, boom mikes under the control of slowly moving audio techs hung back out of camera range, as Evan directed from the sidelines. Steve’s gaze was drawn inexorably to Bucky, sitting at a table with Natasha and Clint, Jim Chee, Mac, and Kate Shugak. Bucky and Jim seemed to be sitting awfully close together, smiling and joking as Bucky shoveled eggs into his mouth, cheeks bulging. He looked up at Jim and grinned, showing a mouthful of half-chewed eggs. Chee balled up a napkin and tossed it at Buck, and bopped it off Bucky’s forehead. Mac dissolved into giggles, Clint slammed his
forehead into the table, shoulders shaking, and even Natasha arched an amused eyebrow. Kate crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head, but even from where Steve stood, he could see her lips quirking.

Bucky grabbed Chee’s napkin and tossed it back at him, laughing.

Steve felt jealousy pooling in his gut.

“Steve.”

“Huh?”

“Where’d you go? As if I don’t know. Anyone special?” she repeated, chuckling.

He glanced back at where she stood, elegantly dressed, hair perfect, watching him with undisguised affection and mirth. He shrugged. “There’s always been somebody special.”

“Mmmm. But?”

Steve turned back to watch Bucky. “But … I’m still … I’m still a little gun-shy, I guess. Keep expecting him to realize his mistake.”

“And if he does?”

“I’ll live, you know I will. Kinda my curse, I guess. It’d hurt like hell, though. As for the others, it really is hard for me to pick just one right now. I want to get to know everyone.”

“And you’re not going to eliminate anyone?”

“Nope. That’s okay, isn’t it? I mean, they’re staying here at your home, Stark Industries was footing the bill – I can take over –“

“You’ll do no such thing. No, it’s perfect. And I think the message you’ll get across is better than playing the show by the normal rules. If you can show kids how it’s possible for forge relationships, not just hook-ups, make genuine friendships, with people you’re attracted to, that has got to mean something, right? And the fact that your dates like each other? I don’t see a downside.”

“I gotta choose just one,” Steve lamented, pouting. “Just one.”

“And it’ll be the right one, Steve,” she beamed at him, planting a small kiss on his cheek. “I want you to be happy. So … be happy,” she ordered in her best CEO voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” he responded crisply, opening the door for her and ushering her through.

&&&

Steve had barely gotten through the door into the courtyard and gotten a whiff of the delicious food on offer when his phone pinged.

Adam.

In all the excitement last night, Steve had forgotten to text Adam about how the first evening had gone.

With a longing glance toward everyone clustered around the elegantly appointed tables and the sumptuous spread in chafing dishes and glittering crystal, Steve ducked into an alcove and brought
out his phone.

A: You owe me dish!
S: About to eat breakfast. Starving. Pity me.
A: No pity, need details.
S: I’m fucked.
A: You get some?
S: No! Too many perfect choices.
A: Where’s Barnes in all this? Still ahead of the pack?
S: Maybe.
A: Find someone better.
S: No one better. Still don’t believe this is real.
A: Believe it. You need to let go, baby-bi. Let it happen.
S: Easy for you to say. You don’t have 13 perfect dates to choose from.
A: No. Harder for me to find someone perfect did it on my own. Lots of not perfect in meantime. UR lucky.
S: I am.
A: U WILL call me later. Need dish like need air.
S: I promise.
A: I will find u & embarrass u if not.
S: I crowd-surfed in Speedo. Pretty sure nothing can embarrass me more than myself.
A: Ud be surprised. I am an artist
S: Don’t I know it.
A: SO says bring your date. We make it 4some. All bunk in 2gether.
S: Answer still no. Want my own SO.
A: Then go get him, baby-bi. And dont forget any deets – I want them all!
S: Pretty sure I’ll never forget this.
A: Make sure u dont!
S: Gotta go. Falling over from hunger.
A: If music be the food of love, play on!
S: Didn’t take you for a Shakespeare type.
S: Love you too, Adam. Xoxo to SO.

&&&

A cleansing breath, a shake-out of his hands, and a roll of his shoulders, and Steve was on. USO training kicked in, and he was On.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your Bachelor,” Chris Harrison announced with a flourish toward Steve as he strode confidently into the courtyard. He stood at a podium set up at one end of the courtyard, and his voice carried through the space on air and wire to speakers set up around the edge. “Hope everyone is enjoying themselves so far. Steve’ll have some announcements to make, so if we could have everyone’s attention?”

The smattering of applause was punctuated by catcalls and wolf whistles, and a curious ululation from Thor and a hell, yeah! from Sam. Steve grinned broadly as he crossed the distance and took his place at the mike.

“Mornin’! Everybody recover from their sugar rush last night?” Chuckles and giggles met his teasing. “Well, today we’re just gonna relax and take it easy, get to know each other. Although, looks like I need to do some catching up, huh?” Another round of easy laughter. “So take the opportunity to recharge, get over jetlag, get yourselves sorted, because tomorrow is a big day.
We’re gonna basically be doing one big group date, putting on a surprise charity event at Stark Tower.”

Murmuring and speculation and oohs and aaahs accompanied Steve’s announcement. Andy Brown called out, “What’s the charity?”

“We’re going to be raising money for a group of charities support by the Stark Foundation, including Sarah’s House, a project near and dear to my heart. A safe haven for LGBTQ kids everywhere, named in honor of my Mom.”

Bucky looked up sharply at that, catching Steve’s gaze with wide eyes. Then a grin split Bucky’s face, and he raised his coffee cup in toast to Steve’s announcement. Steve felt warmed and validated at Bucky’s gesture.

“We’ll be breaking ground for the first of Sarah’s Houses in Brooklyn this summer. In the meantime, my old friend Bucky Barnes and I will be signing autographs on compromising pictures taken by Stark employees at the party we had here on Friday night.” Buck shook his head ruefully as his tablemates all reached out to clap his shoulder, knock him upside the head, and otherwise tease him. Steve’s heart swelled at the sight, watching his old friend coming to life before his eyes. “My friends in the Avengers have offered to humiliate themselves on film for charity as well.” With that, Tony Stark rose from his seat and did a royal wave, while Thor stood up and grinned a food-filled grin, punching his arm up in the air as Darcy’s laugh rang out clearly. Steve held his breath for a moment, expecting Mjolnir to come flying through the house. When nothing happened, he continued, “And we’d like you to help us keep the event organized so that it’s a fun, smooth experience for everyone.”

“Well, can’t we do more than that? I mean, can’t we do something for the charities, too?” called out Peter Caine, and Steve felt that curious head rush that Peter inspired.

“Yeah, I could have some prints FedExed in, and do a signing,” Hiro Nakamura offered. “Love to help.”

Steve beamed at them, as the murmur built up in the crowd, possibilities being discussed excitedly. “These are great ideas, but the Monday event is just for Stark employees and there’s only so much these people can donate – how about instead, we do something for charity in another venue? Maybe more than one, smaller groups, all together? Maybe visit some children’s wards, or elderly homes, and different groups can do different things?”

Peter stood up and leaned against his chair, saying, “Sure, but why couldn’t we do some stuff to entertain the Stark crowd? Collecting donations and doing crowd control isn’t going to take up a lot of energy. We’ve got a lot of talented people here – what d’ya think?”

Everyone seemed to like the idea, so Steve agreed he’ll leave everyone to figure out what they want to do – entertain, help out with the crowd control, collect donations, etc. He felt overwhelmed with affection for each and every one of these people, and caught Pepper’s eye where she was standing behind Tony’s chair, on hand on Tony’s shoulder, one brushing a tear away from her face. She smiled at him and nodded.

The noise level was rising steadily as people discussed ideas for what they could do as part of the fundraiser, and Steve had to tap the microphone a couple of times to get everyone’s attention back on him. “So that’s Monday. And we’ll set up a series of group dates to do more charitable work, visits, etc. But … eventually, we’re gonna have to do one-on-one dates.” A collective ooooh shuddered through the crowd, and Steve would be lying if he claimed he didn’t feel that one all the way to his dick, root to tip.
“And your homework, each and every one of you, is to come up with plans for the perfect date. Money’s no object, time and space are no object. If you had unlimited resources, what would you do as the perfect date?” The enthusiasm level was bubbling over, voices chattering excitedly. “It can be romantic, adventurous, exciting, quiet – how do you define the perfect date? So, you’ve got until tomorrow evening to turn in your ideas. Write ’em up, and submit your proposal for the perfect date without signing it. Chris Harrison will collect the perfect dates, and he’ll know who submitted each one. And I will choose from among the dates for who gets their first date. I’ll choose after the charity event at Stark Industries. Gotta feeling I’m gonna be up all night, and someone will get lucky.” That statement is met with chuckles and groans and Steve takes it all in with a smile.

“And, just so you know, we’re changing the rules. I gave everyone a card with a rose on it last night. Everyone is staying. No one will be eliminated. You all will get to stay until the very end.”

“No elimination? Mac called out. “But how are you going to choose? How are we gonna know who’s in the running?”

“You’re all in the running. But more importantly, I want to get to know all of you. And I’m hoping that you feel the same way about me – and each other. Pretty sure what I saw last night of everyone partying with the s’mores, you do, right?” He was met with a susurrating sound of assent. “Well, what’s the point of sending anyone home when we’re just getting to know one another, huh? So yeah, no eliminations, and I’ll know who I’m gonna pick when it happens. In the meantime, I’m really hoping that we’ll all become friends, regardless.

“Oh, and I know most of you signed papers regarding privacy. New rule. When you’re in your rooms, there will be no recording until you give explicit, verbal permission, which you can also withdraw at any time. So you can feel safe in your rooms – your privacy will be protected.” The response to that statement was a quieter murmur of heartfelt appreciation, faces full of relief. Steve had a sudden realization that it was likely everyone congregated on the patio last night to escape the invasion of privacy that were their respective bedrooms.

“So thanks – I’m really happy you’re all here. Now, super-soldier metabolism? I gotta eat!”

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Chapter End Notes

Okay! Your homework is to post your ideas of the perfect date! I know what date Steve is going to pick, but I’d love to hear from you about which suitor you’d like to see win that first challenge, and what the date would look like. Be creative! And I’ll post something on Tumblr so folks can weigh in there, as well. I really want to see what you come up with!

So, please, hit the comments and brainstorm away!
Interlude

Chapter Summary

A brief moment of quiet for Pepper and Tony to reflect on the whirlwind that has become their life around Steve Rogers. Also a response to some of the comments. Is Steve's life completely without repercussions? Is he exempt from criticism, hate mail, conflict? Well, right now, he's living in a happy little bubble, courtesy of the organizational and management skills of one Virginia "Pepper" Potts and her inestimable assistant, Helena Justice. Don't think that's possible? You've never been a secretary then. They hold all the power! All the power, mind you!

And as for the selection of Steve's dates, I struggled with creating new characters, and frankly worried they all look the same. And then it occurred to me that I could use my favorite characters, characters I'd love to see with Steve Rogers. Honestly, I think I'd be happy with just about anyone of them with Steve, although I do have my absolute favorite whose name is not James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes ...

Chapter Notes

So what's happening with On the Air and my other stories? I'm writing in my head as I work through the details of my Mom's estate and the renovation of my home. Gah, i need to deal with replacing a 70 year old toilet! I am never far from my stories, and have worked out a lot of details of how to approach Steve's various dates, what's up with the network, and just how easy is all of this really going to be in the long run? I have not abandoned this story, but I kind of need to work through the stories of all the dates before I can post the next section after this. And I am working on it. When I next post, I will be posting a series of new chapters one right after the other, so trust me - I really think it will be worth the wait.

And in the meantime, I've got a boatload of new stories in the works behind this one, including one that I've been throwing up on Tumblr for grins. Link in the notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, Ms. Potts.”

“Yes, Mr. Stark?”

“Tell me why.”

“Why what, Tony?”

“Why them?”

“Them?”
“The dates you picked for Captain Tightass, you yenta you.”

“You mean why did I think they might be suitable for our dear Captain?”

“It sounds so much nicer when you say it.”

“That’s because it was.”

“Yeah, so. Why?”

“I thought about what I like in people, present company excluded,” she nodded graciously toward Tony, who graciously stuck out his tongue at her. “And what I liked about Steve.”

“What do you like about him? I mean, not to complain or anything, but you’ve sunk a lot of effort into this whole shebang – that’s a word, right? Shebang? It’s a grandpappy kind of word. Steve’d understand, right? So, spill, Miss Potts. What do you like about Steve Rogers?”

“His passion. His kindness. The fact that every obstacle put in his path only made him stronger. He doesn’t give up. Ever. That’s inspiring.”

“So, his ass in spandex had no effect on you.”

“Tony, I’ve been looking at your ass for years. As asses go, I know where my heart belongs.”

“Are we still talking about Steve, or have you changed the subject …?”

“Maybe a little. You don’t have anything to fear from my friendship with Steve. And you know that.”

“I do. So that’s it. Your friendship with Cap.”

“My friendship with Steve, yes. Not Captain America. Steve. He’s a good guy, with a big heart and bushel full of talent. He’s more than his shield, more than the suit. He could be so much more, and never lift the shield again. I opened my eyes to who he is. And I let that guide me.”

“So, are you telling me you’d like to date these people? All of them?”

“I’d like to get to know them, maybe become friends. Even the ones the network picked I like – those bastards hadn’t included their resumes in the stack, otherwise I think I might have picked them. But, you know, the show normally picks all the participants, so I’m going to wait and see. Natasha is paying very close attention, so if anything seems off, she’ll let us know.”

“So, no lawsuit against the network?”

“No, not yet. But I’m still thinking that Stark Industries should diversify into entertainment. We could add an Avengers ride to Disneyland, what do you think?”

“I think you could use a new hobby.”

“I could use a few more friends who aren’t Fortune 500 CEOs or rulers of whole countries. That’s why I like my picks.” She turned toward him, slid her hands gently around his waist and tugged him a little closer. “As for dating, I’m quite satisfied with the current arrangements,” she whispered low and sweet in his ear.

“Quite satisfied. Is that a good thing, or is there room for improvement?” he asked huskily, turning his face so his lips grazed over hers.
“There’s always room for improvement,” she smiled, lifting her face to ghost her lips over his cheek. “But the current status quo is not unacceptable.”

“Huh.”

She pulled back slightly and considered him with a furrowed brow for a moment. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous, Tony.”

“Of Cap? Pshaw. And pffft. Well, maybe. The way you coddle him, protect him from reality, pick his dates for him—”

“You miss it, is that it? You want me to throw a protective cocoon around you so you don’t have to deal with investors or the media or competitors? Or escort services?”

“When you say it like that, you make it sound like it’s a bad thing. I liked living in my own bubble of fantasy. With you taking care of me.”

“And that’s what this is. Reality will crash in on him soon enough. Let him have this. I want him to have this. Have you seen how he smiles? How he laughs?”

“Yeah, who knew under the spandex there was a kid waiting to get out?”

“No one. That’s the thing, we all expected him to be image. And he’s not that at all.”

“And the bubble?”

“Helena’s handling it. The correspondence, the protests. Happy’s team is keeping it away from the Tower for now. The hate mail has been surprisingly unpleasant – people who are demanding he be deported ‘back to where he came from’ like there’s an extradition treaty with the past. Homophobes, ultra-conservative nutcases, just plain batshit whackos. The calls for him to step down as Captain America just because he’s following his heart and putting himself out there as an example for kids to look up to. It’s going to get so much worse when the show airs. He needs this time to enjoy the experience before the crazies sour it.”

“Remind me to buy Helena her own country, will you? Can’t be easy.”

“No. It’s not. But it’s worth it, don’t you think? To see him come to life the way he has?”

“He’s like a little kid let loose in that proverbial candy store. Don’t you think he’s going a little overboard with his media empire, though?”

(Of course he is. He’s all over the place because he can be. He’ll settle down, eventually, find a groove. For now, it’s all so new, and he’s enjoying his freedom for the first time. Let him. Like I said, reality will crash on him soon enough. Or something invading from space. Or your lab.”

“Not me, I’ve taken the pledge. Bruce would sic the Big Guy on me if I didn’t toe the line,” he protested as he pressed his lips against her temple and smiled into her hair, sighing contentedly. “I knew I liked Bruce for a reason.” She turned her face and pecked him on the cheek. “Okay, I think it’s time we mingled, don’t you?”

“I don’t mingle. I have people who mingle for me.”

“These are your friends, Tony. And some potential new friends. You should be mingling. I should be mingling. Then report back here and clue me in on any juicy gossip you pick up, and I’ll do the
same,” she added with a twinkle.

“Why, Miss Potts! Well, I never!”

“Oh, shut up, Tony. You want the gossip just as much as I do. And don’t tell me the team doesn’t have a pool going.”

“Romanoff’s still putting money on Barnes, but Lewis is betting on Caine right now. He’s kind of Cap’s type, don’t you think? Dark-haired, rogueish, good with the ladies, knows how to move?”

“Been checking him out have you?”

“I’m only repeating what Darcy reported.”

“I’m sure Darcy’s report was saltier than that. I’m certain there was mention of unclothed body parts and illicit activities.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“I’m quite taken with Dr. Jones, myself. I think she’d be a great match for Steve’s compassion, don’t you?”

“An admirable choice, Miss Potts. I have to commend you on your taste. But my money is on Sydney Fox – she likes old things, after all. And failing that, I gave Happy money to put down on Ray Stanz. Hey, the guy saved New York years before Cap came out of the ice. They have way more in common than most people would think. Am I right?”

“You may have something there. But I’m telling that you’re loading the odds by having Happy bet for you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Watch me,” she flipped over her shoulder, slipping out of his embrace and the shadowed alcove where they’d been canoodling, and into the bright, chill sunlight of the courtyard. “Coming?”

Chapter End Notes

Come find me on Tumblr at http://debwalsh.tumblr.com - and check out my WIP there, Start Again. It’s my first modern day AU with the boys, very much rough and a WIP, but nearing completion. It’s been a great mental palate cleanser!

And look for updates soon on It Takes a Village, a new chapter of Take Up Your Shield and Follow Me, and maybe even the legendary ending of I, Barnes. Plus I’ve got a prequel to Considerations in the works, a fake boyfriend AU, another modern day AU, an archaeology AU, and lots more chapters to Take Up Your Shield and Follow Me - next up will be 21 Guns, and I hope to have Speechless written before the end of the year.

So no, never abandoned. Just busy. The first anniversary of my Mom’s passing is coming up, and I have responsibilities I have to meet in the next month or so. But expect me to write like crazy come the holiday season!
Ray Stanz and Sarah Page were talking animatedly when Steve wandered by. They’d found a table tucked into one of the alcoves off the courtyard, close enough to the food to forage easily, but far enough away that it offered a modicum of privacy. At Steve’s approach, Sarah smiled at him warmly, and excused herself to go get a mimosa, since they’d just been brought out. She asked if Steve or Ray want one, and they both begged off.

“Incredible woman,” Steve commented at Sarah slipped away.

“Brilliant scientist,” Ray countered with a smile, watching her make her way to the drinks. “And that accent …” he added dreamily.

Steve seated himself across from Ray and tilted his head, smiling at him. “You like her.”

“So do you.”

“Yeah, but I wondered – you seem so …”

“Absent-minded professor? Yep, that’s me. Not a practical bone in my body. But I have a great head for science. And an imagination to match,” he added with a wide, cheerful grin.

Steve gestured toward the seat across from Ray and Ray waved his hand in welcome. Steve pulled out the chair and lowered himself, holding Ray’s gaze as he grinned at him. “What are y’doin’ here, Ray? This doesn’t seem like your scene.”

“Excuse me, Mr. All-American Icon? Like this is your regular stomping grounds,” Ray snorted genially.

“Yeah, okay, but I’m in it for a purpose. What brings you to the ‘first bisexual Bachelor’?”

“Y’mean other than that fancy car that dropped me off last night? Yeah, I was kinda out of it,
sorry. Long week, not a lot of sleep. You know how it is – you get so bone tired, you’re doin’ your job in your sleep.”

“And your job is going around asking for samples of people’s brains?”

Ray giggled at that. “No. My job is containing paranormal manifestations. My hobby, however –“

“You don’t really collect people’s brains for a hobby!”

“My best friend Egon does. Even tried to take a sample of his own one time.” Ray grinned again, and Steve wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth, or bending it for shits and giggles.

“But why?”

“Well, this group here, for example. Treasure trove. Egon would lose his shit. You, you’ve been exposed to more than one type of arcane energy,” Ray said, whipping out his device and tuning it to Steve. Its little rabbit ears seemed to vibrate as it whirred to life. He swept it up and down in front of Steve, and Steve jerked when he heard it make a series of loud beeps.

“Well, you know I was exposed to an energy source in order to trigger the serum,” Steve explained, putting a hand out to gently push the loudly complaining device away.

“Oh. What kind? Based on your readings, a significant form of radiation, but not one I recognize.”

“They were called Vita-Rays. Even Howard Carter,” Steve gestured to take in all of Rinascere, “didn’t know what they were.”

“Well, I can tell you they weren’t gamma – the signature is too short,” Ray answered, shaking his head.

Steve leaned forward curiously. “You can tell that from that little thing?” Ray nodded proudly.

“Shit, you could have saved Bruce Banner a lot of pain with that. Then again, how big a sample would you need?”

“Vial of blood would be enough. Heck, even a trace amount with a radiation signature this strong.”

Steve sat back in his chair, chill running through him. “So if you’d scanned the sample of blood the government had from me –“

“If I scanned it today, I’d be able to eliminate gamma, yes. I can’t tell you what it is, though. I’ve never seen a radiation signature like this. Erskine was more talented than anyone else knew – he literally created a new form of energy to activate your serum. But could I have prevented what happened to Dr. Banner?” he continued, glancing over to where Bruce sat with Jane and Tony, no doubt talking incomprehensively about science, science, and more science. “No,” Ray said softly. “I couldn’t have. This technology didn’t exist then. It’s something we’ve been tinkering with for years, and we’ve only perfected it in the last few years. After Dr. Banner’s unfortunate transformation.”

“Oh. I guess that’s good then, huh?”

“To know that there was something that could have prevented all the horrible things that happened in your life? Or to know that it didn’t exist yet before those horrible things happened? Yeah, I guess that’s a lesser of two completely crapworthy options.”

Steve barked a laugh and shook his head. “You’re not who I thought you were when you arrived.”
“Told ya, man, whacked out tired.”

“But why are you here?”

Ray sighed, smiling gently to himself. “My friends. My partners. Pete’s a … well, he’s not exactly a born romantic, but he certainly can’t imagine life without women in it. And Egon … well, Egon is singularly focused, shall we say? But I do know that there’s one woman he’s very fond of. And she noticed that I never date. Never even look interested. So, she wondered if maybe my thing was guys. And she signed me up.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Is your thing guys?”

Ray fiddled with the controls on his device in silence for a long moment, then lifted his eyes to look directly into Steve’s. “You are a beautiful man, Steve Rogers. And your energy signature is … well,” he sighed, “intriguing, to say the least. But I think I’m … well, maybe I’m not interested in sex, y’know? I’m beginning to think I may be asexual.”

“How do you feel about kissing?” Steve asked, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the table.

“Kissing I like. I’m okay with kissing. It’s the messy bits I’m not interested in. The fluids and the skin and all that.”

“But kissing’s okay?”

“Yeah.”


Steve leaned across the table, half-lifting out of his chair, and Ray met him in the middle. The press of their lips was pleasant, warm, soft, maybe a little chapped where Ray worried at the corner of his lower lip with his teeth. Steve’s fingers gently touched Ray’s cheek, and Ray’s hand strayed to rest lightly on Steve’s chest. They parted as gently as they joined and Steve smiled at Ray.

“Pretty sure that guys aren’t your thing.”

“It was nice –“ Ray started to protest.

Steve glanced to where Sarah was chatting with Martha Jones and he shook his head. “I think you’re distracted. You really like her,” he added, turning back to Ray.

Ray blushed and sputtered, shaking his head. “She wouldn’t – ah, I mean, I can’t – ehhh, what I mean to say –“

“Talk to her.”

“She’s here to date you, not me,” Ray protested.

“I chose to not eliminate anyone because I really want to get to know everyone. I’m hoping we’ll all become friends. I can’t date everyone. But the sign of a good friend? He wants his friends to be happy. I’d like for us to be friends, Ray. So talk to her.”
“She wouldn’t be interested in a guy who doesn’t want to go all the way,” Ray pointed out, starting to hunch in on himself, his expression closing off. “I mean, look at her. She’s beautiful, she’s intelligent, she’s English for heaven’s sake! And she’s exciting and bawdy and —”

“And you need to talk to her. If you don’t, I will. Ray, if nothing else, the two of you get along great, and that’s the start of a beautiful friendship. Try. Ask. You might be pleasantly surprised.”

&&&

Sarah Page was chewing thoughtfully on a french toast stick and considering eggs benedict vs. a custom made omelet when Steve Rogers quietly slid up behind her with a soft chuckle.

She practically spat out the toast when she realized that he’d seen her prodigiously piled plate and the second one she was still filling. She chewed quickly and swallowed reflexively and prayed that there was nothing stuck between her teeth when she smiled at him. “Captain.”

“Steve.”

“Steve. Yes, of course. Steve,” she nodded. Then nodded again for emphasis.

His eyebrow arched expectantly, and she suddenly felt like she’d missed out on the beginning of a very complex and important conversation. “I’m sorry, did I, em, do you, er – um, what?”

He grinned at her. “Um, would you like me to help with that?” he nodded toward her overflowing plates, and she started guiltily. “It looks like you could use a hand, especially if you’re going to get a drink, too.”

“I, um, yes, sure,” she sighed, defeated. So much for looking alluring and sexy for the most perfect man on Earth, when what she really wanted was to chow down on this amazing food and listen to Ray expound on energy signatures and planes of existence.

He gathered up her plates and followed her over to the drinks table, where she selected a lovely multi-colored drink with fruit, a straw, and a little paper umbrella emblazoned with the Stark Industries logo. She sucked down a healthy swig while looked up at him through her lashes. His grin widened.

“So,” he said. “Dr. Stantz.”

Unbidden, her eyes widened and she blushed to the roots of her dark hair, her olive complexion tinged with dusk. At least that’s what she hoped she looked like, and not someone who’d gone all blotchy and frightening.

“Ray. Yes. And?”

“You seem like you get along pretty well.”

She shrugged, a little smile tugging at her lips.

“I wanted to remind you that I’m looking for friends as much as I’m looking for a … partner, I suppose is a good word. You two … well, you two look good together.”

She straightened, truly surprised. “You … you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’m a monogamous kinda guy. Out of all the amazing, sexy, really just how did I get so lucky people here, I’m going to pick just one, if I pick anyone at all. That doesn’t mean everyone else has
to go home empty-handed.”

“Hmm,” she replied, smiling to herself, casting her eyes back toward the plates balanced in each of his hands. “Yes, well, I do like a man with a PhD. And Dr. Stantz has several.”

“He likes you, too, you know. Just thought you should know,” he added with a soft chuckle.

“Well, then. I guess I’d better get back to him, shall I?”

“Lead the way. I’ll get you settled, and then I’ll be on my way. Okay?”

“Okay,” she replied, giving in to the grin that lit her face. Now she felt like she had to be glowing. “Care to share who’s caught the eye of Captain America?”

“Captain America? He’s no fun. Steve Rogers, though, Steve Rogers still has some great possibilities. And I’d like to see how they play out.”

“Well, then. I hope Steve Rogers finds what he’s looking for.”

“Me, too, Sarah. Me, too.”

&&&

“Hi, I’m here with Dr. Ray Stantz, one of the famous Ghostbusters who saved New York City a few years back. Before 9/11, and before the infamous Chitauri attack and the rise of the Avengers. How y’doing, Ray?” Chris Harrison asked as Ray settled into the hot seat under the glare of the stage lights.

Ray fumbled with the mike clipped to his collar, frowning at it as it came loose and fell into his lap with a crackle and a hiss. “Oh, sorry. I’m usually not so clumsy – well, maybe I am, maybe I’m confused about that, but no, I’m pretty sure I’m good with technology. I, uh –“

Chris reached across and snagged the mike and deftly clipped it back in place. “Let’s leave it there, shall we?” he suggested encouragingly. Ray nodded, mouthing, “Sorry.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. We can edit it in post. You okay now? Comfortable?”

Ray nodded, so Chris resumed. “Okay. So, Ray, what brought you to join the first Bisexual Bachelor?”

“My friends thought it would be good for me.”

“And has it?”

“Well, yeah, I guess it has been.”

“How so?”

Ray looked at Chris with his eyebrow raised, an implicit, “Really?” in the look he gave him.

“Okay, let’s try this again. Ready?” Ray nodded, and Chris rebooted his approach. “Okay. So Ray, a lot of New Yorkers know you and your partners from the paranormal invasion of the late 1990s –“

“It wasn’t an invasion. They were already here. They just sort of … got the band together.”
“They.”

“The entities. Ghosts, if you like.”

“Which is why you and your partners go by ‘Ghostbusters’.”

Ray shrugged. “That was Pete’s idea. Catches people’s attention.”

“Be that as it may, you and your pals are genuine heroes. You protected and saved New York before anyone ever thought of an Iron Man, or the Avengers.”

“I grew up reading Captain America comic books, though. And watching the old serials on Saturday mornings on UHF. I think part of me always wanted to be him. Or his sidekick, I’d’ve been satisfied with sidekick. Or the guy who created his tech – now I would have suited me –”

“Well, yes, I think we all grew up on Captain America in some way,” Harrison agreed, deftly stemming the flow of words. “But getting back to my point – and I did have one – you’re a bona fide hero. An ordinary guy who went up against impossible odds, and somehow won the day.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m an ordinary guy. I’m a scientist. We used science. We calculated the result, and applied the formula to achieve a result.”

“Okay, but again, New York considers you guys heroes, deservedly so. And here you are, participating in the first Bisexual Bachelor with another guy that a lot of people consider a hero.”

“Who?”

“We were just talking about him. Captain America?”

“Oh, yeah. Steve. Captain America’s a marketing thing. No, seriously, he was created to sell bonds. Steve Rogers is the real deal.”

“Yeah. Yeah, he is. So what does it feel like to meet another hero, another person who saved New York?”

“I dunno. We didn’t really talk about all that. But I guess we could. We have that in common, don’t we? Yeah, I’ll have to invite him over to the firehouse some Friday night, we can swap stories over pizza and beer.”

“That sounds like something friends do. Aren’t you interested in something a little more … romantic?”

“With Steve? Look, don’t get me wrong. He’s beautiful. I mean, he is really very aesthetically pleasing, very symmetrical. That’s an important quality in attracting a mate in the wild. But I realized that I don’t … I don’t like him like that. But I do … well.”

“But you and another of the contestants have found a spark, is that it?”

Ray ducked his head, blushing. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I never would have thought a woman as beautiful as she is would consider somebody like me –“

“Like you how, Ray?”

“Asexual. Pretty sure I’m asexual. And I’m okay with that. And so is she. She really is. Does this happen often on this show?”
“What?”

“Romances between contestants? I’ve never watched The Bachelor, so I don’t know. But it seems like it would be the perfect petrie dish –“

“Well, usually our contestants are all the same sex, all supposedly heterosexual. It hasn’t really happened in our regular seasons, at least as far as I know. So, you think this is going to last?”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely. We have science in common. Why? Have you heard something? Is there something I don’t know? You’d tell me if you did, wouldn’t you?”

“Ray, Ray! Breathe! No, I don’t know anything you don’t know. Other than you and Dr. Page make a lovely couple.”


And with that, Dr. Ray Stantz exited the interview room, leaving host Chris Harrison gulping at air, eyes wide. He turned toward the camera and muttered, “Cut?”

&&&

“Yes, you ready for me now?” Sarah Page asked awkwardly, hovering in the doorway to the room designated for interviews.

“Yeah, yeah, come on in, Sarah,” Chris Harrison waved her in, and she smiled at him, quickly swallowing down the last of the treats she’d snagged from the buffet before answering the call to do her “color” interview.

“And I’m here with Dr. Sarah Page. Thanks for stopping by. So, it’s been a wild ride for you, huh?” Chris opened with, grinning encouragingly at her.

“Well, it’s been quite an experience, that’s for sure. I didn’t really think it would be my thing, y’know, but I’ve met some amazing people, had some incredible conversations.”

“And I understand had a bit of a fling?” he suggested with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t call it a fling. No,” she replied soberly. “No, in fact, I would say it’s far more profound than a fling.”

Harrison sat back in his seat, clearly surprised at the vehemence of Sarah’s response. “Profound,” he repeated.

“Yes, profound. Deeply affecting and carrying far-reaching consequences for my life. No, Mr. Harrison, I’ve had nothing so … silly, I suppose … as a fling. No, quite the opposite. I’ve started a relationship that I expect will last me the rest of my life.”

“Really.”

“Look, I know this show is meant to be fluff, and people rarely form lasting bonds. But this experience has been … well. This experience has been extraordinary.”

“Well, that’s really … that’s really exciting to here. So you and Dr. Stantz –“

“Ray, yes. He’s lovely. Funny, smart, excessively intrigued by magnetic containment and extranormal activity, yes. He’s perhaps the sweetest man I’ve ever met, to be honest. Except,
perhaps, for Steve Rogers. I really can’t believe that I got to meet two such amazing men in the same place. And the others – it’s like you’ve cornered the market on decent and true.”

Harrison’s eyes crinkled as he smiled at her. “Wish I could take credit for that, but that was all Ms. Potts. She picked all of you, except for two that were added by the network based on the criteria she stipulated. I have to say this is my favorite season – no catfighting, no nastiness, just a bunch of really interesting people getting to know each other and do cool things together.” He leaned in conspiratorially and added in a low voice, “Of course, the network is nervous that no one is going to watch if there’s no conflict, but between you and me, it’s really nice to mix things up a bit, for once.”

“Yes, well, it’s been more like attending a really well organized conference of one’s favorite topics with one’s best friends, more than a reality show. Oh, we have them, too – where do you think they started?” she added with a cheeky grin.

“I guess it was advantageous, Steve letting everyone know he wasn’t treating this as competition,” Harrison prompted.

“Liberating is a better word, I think. And he was very encouraging. It’s thanks to him that I screwed up the courage to say something to Ray. He makes quite a good matchmaker, you know.”

“Yeah, he strikes me as somebody who wants his friends to be happy. Even if he’s not.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He still has quite a number of fantastic choices. He’s still quite eligible. And there’s no lack of interest in him, either. But I’ve noticed he’s got his eye on a favored few,” she added, narrowing her eyes and smiling slyly.

“Care to make a wager?”

“On who the dear Captain will choose? There’s already a couple of pools running. The Avengers, among the contestants – I even heard your own cameraman talking about odds among the crew. I’ve got my bet down,” she added, wagging her finger toward him. “So we’ll see when we see, won’t we?”

“We will indeed. Well, I’m sorry to see you and Dr. Stantz have taken yourselves out of the running, but congratulations – I hope it all works out for you both.”

She just grinned at him, feeling quite like the cat with the cream. There were challenges, certainly. Ray wouldn’t leave New York City. Sarah’s job held her down in England and parts of Europe. He was an open book. She was constrained by the Official Secrets Act. But she had a strange certitude that somehow, they’d make it work.

&&&

“Okay, so those two are out – you like playing Cupid, Rogers?” Harrison shook his head as he joined Steve Rogers in the study of Rinascere later that evening. “I’ve gotta be honest – it’s the nicest reason I’ve ever seen for suitors to drop out.” He flipped through the papers he’d collected from the date suggestion box, and shook his head. “Huh. There’s thirteen here after all. I wonder if they put in dates even though they weren’t going to go on them …?”

“Oh, if I pick their dates, they’re going. If I gotta take ‘em both, they’re goin’. C’mon, lemme see,” Steve added, wagging grabby hands toward the stack of papers in Harrison’s hands.

Harrison handed over the pile and then allowed himself to drop with a huff into a comfortable club chair across from Steve. He had to quell a chuckle watching Rogers eagerly scan the documents,
his face betraying excitement, puzzlement, surprise, and at one point, possible tears. He had a feeling he knew whose date that was, but he couldn’t be sure if he didn’t ask.

“Any of them appeal?”

“All of them. I want to go on all of them.”

“Well, that can be arranged. Any that would play well on TV? Exciting, daring, dangerous?”

“A couple,” Steve agreed with a sigh. “Coupla romantic ones. One or two corny ones. One that might be kinda hard to put together, but it would be fun.”

“Oh?”

“Practice with the Dodgers in LA. Only they gotta wear Brooklyn uniforms.”

“Oh. Oh, that’s good. We could get an ESPN cross promo on that. How’s your arm?”

“I could probably pitch an inning or two. Oh, God – y’think we could do that? Lemme pitch in an actual game?”

“Well, it is February. We’re off season. But maybe an exhibition game. For charity? Your charity? The bums who left Brooklyn give back? Oh, this is sounding better and better. We could turn this into a benefit, build a whole celebrity thing around it, raise some serious cash, and make the advertisers happy.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I want that. An LGBTQIA awareness day with the MLB. That would be great. Okay, so that’s a keeper, but we’re gonna have to put in some serious effort to make that happen.”

Harrison chuckled. “Turn it over to Ms. Potts, and it’ll be sorted by tomorrow. That woman is a force of nature.”

“More. She’s a goddess. With infinite patience. I mean, have you seen Tony?”

“Yeah! So what else strikes your fancy?”

“Well, there’s another one with baseball, but mostly it’s in Brooklyn. Batting practice at Chelsea Piers, but maybe we switch this up a little. Work with kids instead, then go on to do the other things. Coney Island, a gallery, dinner. Dancing. Huh,” he added wistfully.

“You don’t like dancing?” Chris asked, gesturing for Steve to hand back the forms. He pulled out his phone and started cross-referencing the proposals with the proposees.

“It’s not that I don’t like dancing. I just never really learned. So I’m kind of a blunt instrument on the dance floor.”

“Well, I don’t think that’ll be a problem. Your partner could certainly handle you.”

“Oh? Who’d I pick?”

“Barnes. And guess who suggested the Dodgers?”

“Who?”

“Caine.”
Chapter End Notes

So that last scene pretty much wrote itself, and surprised even me. Next up will be the charity event at Stark Industries, and then we'll get into some of the group dates as Steve gears up for his first solo date.

There are kisses in somebody's future ...

Oh, and those two interviews do NOT take place the same day as the rest of the chapter. They're about a week or so in there future. The actual Bachelor show does interviews with the participants and intersperses them with the filmed portions of the show. Rather than draw out the arc of these characters, I've shown where they started, and then allowed them to sort of reflect on where they've evolved to. I need to tinker with this a bit more, but that's the intent - I realize it looks weird the way it's currently written.
Can't Let You Go

Chapter Summary

In which Steve goes exploring, and finds more than he'd ever hoped to hold ...

Chapter Notes

So ... I've decided to stop trying to hit a specific mark in the next chapter, and I'm going to try to write shorter bites for all of my WIPs. So I started working on On the Air, and this happened. So, now I need to go rethink what follows, but I think it'll actually be better than what I planned. Let me know what you think ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After sifting through the date ideas – and Steve wanted to do every last one of them! – Chris left Steve to his own devices. Most of the participants were enjoying a lavish buffet in the ballroom, but Steve wasn’t feeling it. Instead, he wandered through the mansion until he found one of Howard’s secret passageways. Grinning to himself, he ducked into the hidden corridor, closing the door behind him gently.

This weekend had really been an eye opener regarding his old friend. He and Tony had been at odds since they’d met – earlier, even – thanks to Howard’s obsession with Captain America. Honestly, Steve was grateful they’d managed to become friends at all despite the pedestal polishing fervor of Howard’s adoration. It can’t have been easy growing up in the shadow of someone who had never existed, to spend your life being compared – and found wanting – to an impossible idea.

He never would understand why Howard had idealized him so. Back in the day, Howard was gleeful in his teasing and banter. He saw Steve as a project to sex up and modernize. Howard was happiest when he thought he could get Steve into trouble with Colonel Philips, and Steve’d swear Howard had been tap dancing that time that Peggy’d smacked Steve across the face, swore a blue streak because it hurt like hell, and then proceeded to slam her heel into his instep for good measure. All because he’d made the mistake of squiring one of Howard’s chorus girl friends to a party so Howard could have two dates.

Yet after he’d downed the Valkyrie, Howard had somehow made him his own personal saint, duly canonized and graven in marble.

At least Peggy had moved on, met someone, had a family, a life that she was present for. Howard, despite all the tabloid fodder, appeared to have lived a half-life, caught in a limbo of his own making.

Steve shook off those gloomy thoughts, trying to focus instead on the quiet here, the calm. He was enjoying himself, meeting all these amazing people, having these incredible experiences he’d never dreamed of back in his Ma’s small but relentlessly tidy apartment. And yet … someone else was in the labyrinth that was Howard’s world within the walls?
He found himself creeping along, his fingers brushing softly against the smooth walls as he moved closer to the source of the sound – nothing loud, just the unhurried movement of someone, a faint swish of fabric, a hitched breath.

A sob.

Steve froze, unable to move.

He recognized that sob.

Had heard it a hundred times when a girl had broken his heart.

Had listened to it get swallowed up in shame in the dark in a tent only marginally warmer than the frigid temperatures in the wilds of Germany.

Had heard it more recently as he’d tried to sift through the horror and the questionable reality that plagued his shattered mind.

Bucky.

And from the hiccupping noise, he’d descended into what the kids today called “ugly crying.”

Not that Bucky Barnes had been ugly a day of his abnormally long, horrifically troubled life.

He’d always be beautiful to Steve, even when it appeared Buck hated him and their friendship was over.

Truth be told, when Mac said that Bucky had the deck stacked in his favor, she wasn’t lying. No matter what, Steve felt that visceral pull, that undeniable and instinctual urge to always choose Bucky, whether it was on the playground, in study group, in life. In love?

As he crept closer, he felt the cold reality of the question that still haunted him.

Could he trust this? Was this real for Buck? Was this a forever commitment, or a game? Was Bucky in this for the long haul, or just testing it out to see if it fit? And if it didn’t, where would that leave Steve?

A gibbering mess of a heart-broken fool, simmering in his own humiliation and pain, that’s where.

“I c’n hear you, doofus. Y’still got the stealth skills of a rhino in heat,” Bucky called out in the darkness.

“I don’t think rhinos go into heat, Buck.”

“Doesn’t matter. They’re still noisy as fuck. Just like you.”

“Yeah, well, I could definitely hear you before I could smell you, asshole,” Steve replied, striding rapidly toward the room with Howard’s cache of Starkshine. “You started without me.”

“I started ‘cos I was without you,” Buck agreed sagely, nodding his head as he stared morosely into the middle distance. “I’m gonna lose you, ain’t I. You’re gonna be somebody else’s. Not mine. ‘Cos I’m stupid and slow on the uptake and I have less sense than a fucking fly on a shit pile.”

“Well, that was graphic. Any left for me?” Steve asked, nodding toward the bottle at Bucky’s elbow.
“Get your own. This one’s mine,” Bucky replied cradling the bottle to his chest, while flinging out his free metal arm to encompass the room and its neat rows of supersoldier moonshine.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. Don’t think I’m carrying you back to the house when you fall down in a Stark-induced coma again.”

“You will. We take care of each other, don’t we, Stevie? It’s wired in our DNA. Can’t help it.” Bucky let loose a mighty sniff then, and Steve turned in time to see fat, silent tears roll down Bucky’s cheeks. Another sob wrenched out of him then, and suddenly he covered his face with his metal hand as the tears overcame him.

Steve instantly took him into his arms, wrapping him in all the warmth and safety and love he could communicate in that hug. “It’s okay, Buck, really it is. Everything’s gonna work out, I promise you.”

“How can it, Steve? How can it work out okay if you pick somebody else? Every one of these people is perfect for you – more perfect than I am! They didn’t shit all over your choices, or call you names or –”

Steve shut him up the only way that seemed sensible at the time.

There was a crash and a splash as Bucky dropped the bottle of Starkshine, and it smashed against the concrete floor, letting far too much of a really good thing spread unheeded across the floor.

There was a hand in Steve’s hair, metal, whirring, gentle as it threaded through his hair, stroked softly over his scalp. There was another hand clutching desperately to his shirt, pulling him closer, closer, until he felt he’d join with the hot, hard, panting body in his arms.

There were lips against his strong, a little chapped, willing and warm and wet and beyond anything he’d ever imagined.

There was the taste of cigarettes, and the burn of pure alcohol, and the wash of salt from tears still falling down Bucky’s cheeks.

There was want, and desire, and adoration, and love beyond anything Steve could measure, pounding in his chest, bubbling through his veins, exploding through his being as at last, at long fucking last, Bucky Barnes was in his arms, and he was kissing him. And Bucky kissed back not with desperation, but with confidence, with determination, with commitment.

The world narrowed down to the points of contact where Bucky touched him and was touched by him. In the back of his head, he knew they parted to breathe, then dive back in again. Their hands roamed, explored, worshipped. He had the vague sense of being hard, of being impossibly turned on, but somehow that didn’t matter. This wasn’t about sex. This was about finally, finally, being made whole. Of finding the part of him that had always been missing, standing right beside him all the while.

And now, they were both where they were supposed to be.

&&&

Chapter End Notes
I know it's been a long time. And every time someone asks, "Are you ever going to finish On the Air," it pains me. This story is never far from my thoughts, honestly. And the way this chapter wrote itself and took control of the story right out of my hands ... well. Gotta thank characters who can think for themselves!
New Eyes

Chapter Summary

In which the contestants in Steve Rogers’s season as the first bisexual Bachelor learn who will receive the final rose.

This story is now complete, but the adventure is not yet over! There will be a sequel carrying on what happens next. And trust me - it’s not what you were expecting ...

Chapter Notes

Recently, someone left a very nice comment on the previous chapter, saying that they would be happy if the story ended there. It was kind of liberating to realize that yes, the story could end at this point. There is more story to tell - I have a lot of additional material sketched out - but the story of On the Air has come to a close. The tale of two boys searching to figure out who they are, and who they are to each other - that’s come to an end. But Steve’s experience with the many incredible people who came to Rinascere to woo him? There’s still more to tell. It’s just not part of THIS story.

So, thanks, Mammal, for your kind comment, and for showing me that I can end one story so that I can tell another.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chris Harrison was joined by the camera crew as they followed the contestants from the banquet hall out to the courtyard. There was no live band on tap tonight, but there was music, courtesy of the exceptional Stark sound system, and requests handled by none other than JARVIS himself.

The air itself was warm, the climate controlled by the AI and the heat held within by the force field that Stark had erected around the home. It was really remarkable - snow fell outside their bubble, but inside, it was warm, nearly tropical. But if you looked up, you could see the steady fall of snowflakes, until they touched the force barrier and sublimated into vapor on impact.

It was really sort of magical, and the possibilities inherent in the setting and the cast were pretty much limitless. So Chris enjoyed himself wandering through the crowd, pausing to catch a few moments with each contestant to see how they were enjoying themselves, what they thought their own chances might be, and who they thought the front runner might end up being.

Interestingly, neither Steve nor Barnes were on hand, and that of course, fueled a lot of speculation. For the most part, the responses were congenial, positive. Everyone liked Steve and wished the best for him. The combination of personalities was delightfully drama free, although there were one or two who weren’t quite as sold on the whole Kumbaya nature of Steve’s approach to the show.

It was fascinating to see how the contestants themselves seemed to be forming bonds. Friendship or romance, it was pretty clear that relationships forged during this extraordinary season were
likely to last well beyond the last rose.

If they even got that far.

He knew that Steve was excited about the potential, and he was practically vibrating with enthusiasm for the myriad dates that had been proposed. It was great watching him approach the beautiful and fascinating contestants who were here just to meet him - watching Steve, not Captain America, grow in confidence. Chris couldn’t remember an experience that was quite as uplifting and inspiring as this season was shaping up to be.

But at the same time, he knew that there was an underlying melancholy to Steve’s approach to the show. The whole thing with Barnes ... Chris was glad to see the two men were spending time together, rebuilding their friendship. And he could definitely see how Steve tracked everything Barnes did, following him like a flower followed the sun. It might be cliche, but watching Steve watching Barnes ...

Yeah, Chris agreed with the others who were betting on Barnes. History was a powerful motivator, especially a history as long as the pair of them shared. And having Barnes express mutual interest ... well that was a game changer.

So, in the end, it surprised pretty much absolutely no one when Barnes and Rogers stumbled into the courtyard from one of Howard Stark’s hidden doorways, Barnes practically climbing Rogers while Rogers appeared to be performing a tonsillectomy with his tongue. The two men were disheveled, hair tufted and messy from fingers and hands, clothes in disarray with shirttails pull out and buttons undone. And the sounds the pair of them were making ... well, his producer had been looking for something to spike ratings. Two supersoldiers making out like teenagers might just fit the bill.

It took a moment for the rest of the cast, as well as the camera crew, to notice the two men who were practically dry humping each other against the far wall. And then something extraordinary happened.

They all began to applaud. Catcall, whistle, whoop, laugh, and yell, too. But applaud. That was a first for The Bachelor. There wasn’t anything catty or ironic about it. The others were genuinely happy for them.

But it looked like neither of them heard the applause, or were aware that they were being observed. It looked like they existed in their own little world, and it was heating up pretty quickly.

“Um, guys? Fellas? Um, you know you’re on camera, right? You’re not alone -“

Barnes seemed to be the first to hear Chris’s pleas, pulling away reluctantly from kissing Steve senseless long enough to look at Chris with glassy eyes and a mouth that was sinfully red. Now that Chris had moved closer, he could see the bloom of bruises up and down Barnes’s neck, under his ear, at join of his neck and shoulder where his shirt had practically been torn to expose his skin there.

“Huh?” was all Barnes could manage, while Steve just grinned like the cat that got the cream, the mouse, and Grandma’s parakeet.

Now that he had their attention, he stepped aside and waved at the assembled contestants and crew, all of whom were still beaming at them, a few still clapping quietly.

Steve looked kiss-drunk, but he thought Barnes might actually be drunk-drunk, too. The pair of
them were swaying slightly, holding onto each other, their gazes dropping back to each other lips like the last thing on earth they wanted was an audience.

Chris heard Evan say softly, “Good for you, Steve. Not for me, but good for you,” as he came up behind him, camera settled comfortably on his shoulder. Chris saw the telltale light indicating he was recording. He smiled and cleared his throat, nodding toward the two men.

“So, Steve. Can we assume that you’ve already had your last rose ceremony?”

“Oh -“ Steve said, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Have you made your choice, or is everyone still in the running?”

That seemed to sober Barnes up, because he inhaled sharply and struggled to disentangle himself from Steve. Steve frowned as Barnes put mere inches between them, his big hands reaching for Barnes’s waist to draw him back.

“Buck and me ...” he started to say, and straightened as he looked around and saw all of the people who’d travelled to have a chance to date him. He sighed, like what he was about to say pained him. And Chris imagined it did - Steve had been clear that he was excited about the possibilities, that he found each and every contestant attractive in their own way. He hadn’t wanted to send anyone home, he hadn’t wanted to reject anyone.

“It’s okay, Steve. Making a choice isn’t a bad thing. You have a right to be happy. Are you happy, Steve?”

Then Steve’s gaze fell on Barnes again, and the smile that burst across his features was blinding in its joy. Barnes seemed to blossom in the radiance of that smile, and smiled back.

Well, it anyone doubted how the pair felt about each other, those incredible smiles should dispel those doubts.

“Yeah, Chris. I really am,” Steve answered then, putting his arm around Barnes’s shoulders to pull him close. “Happier than I thought possible.” He turned his face then to place a soft kiss on Barnes’s lips, and Barnes’s metal hand automatically reached up to caress Steve’s cheek.

Chris felt his own smile broaden, his cheeks nearly hurting at the sight of the two men so happy together. He glanced over his shoulder at the assembled contestants and crew. Then he announced, ‘Well, folks, I guess it’s official! Steve Rogers is off the market!’

Again there was applause, this time accompanied by cheers, demands for wedding invitations, and general celebration.

Chris waved Evan away for a moment, and stepped closer to speak directly to both Steve and Barnes. “I’m happy for you both. What’re you gonna do about all those date ideas, hmm, Steve?”

Steve had to visibly tear himself away from staring into Barnes’s eyes. Shaking himself like an errant puppy, Steve focused on Chris and grinned. “Oh, we’re gonna do ‘em all. As a group, right?”

“Well, I doubt the network’ll be willing to foot the bill if there’s no drama or anticipation left,” Chris explained apologetically.

Steve shrugged, his arm still draped around Barnes’s shoulders. “‘S’all right. My treat. Okay?”
Drawing Evan back to record it, Chris asked Steve to repeat himself for the camera, and then announced, "'Y'hear that folks? The bachelor might have chosen his partner, but the adventure is not over! Enjoy yourselves tonight. Tomorrow we start organizing your date ideas into group activities. Rest up while you can - we got some great options coming your way in the most extraordinary season of The Bachelor so far!' Then he made a cutting gesture with his hand, and Evan pulled the camera from his shoulder to let it dangle off one hand.

"Good luck to you both, huh? It’s good to see you happy, Steve," Evan said with a little wave, and then he turned back toward the crowd. Which looked like it was just waiting on the final signal to crowd Steve and Barnes with their enthusiastic approval and good wishes.

"Well, I’m going back to the control room. Gotta feeling the producer has some choice words to share."

"Sorry. For ruining the show," Steve said then. "Like I said, I’ll cover the expenses for the outings. Surely some of them would be worth recording. For the show."

"Maybe. This isn’t going to be a series, but a single show at this point. The season that wasn’t, I guess. But damn if it isn’t the most fun I’ve had doing this show. So nothing to apologize for, Steve. The show peddles love, but rarely delivers. It’s nice to see it happen for real for once," he added, putting out his hand to Barnes, who smiled as he accepted, shaking it warmly. "I’ll check in with you later.

&&&

In the control room, the camera zoomed in on where Steve Rogers and James Buchanan Barnes stood, arms around each other, catching their breaths after the marathon of well wishes from the other cast members and crew. The Avengers had come out to join them, Stark and Potts’s people, too. The courtyard was practically a mob scene.

Barnes nuzzled his nose against the soft skin behind Rogers’s ear, and said loud enough to be picked up by the mike, "You sure about this, Steve? You sure you want me?"

Rogers looked at Barnes like he had seven heads, all of which were decaying. "I’m with you. You know that. Tell me you understand that. This isn’t for show, Buck -"

"I know that, I do. But you have a lot of options here. Lot of people who wanna get to know Steve Rogers better - not Captain America. You sure you wanna throw that away?"

"I’m not throwing anything away, Buck. I’m the winner here. I get to have my best friend and I get to have the most beautiful man as my ... what are we? Boyfriends, I guess."

"Yeah, okay. You’re such a sap. I’ll be your boyfriend."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

In the control room, someone frowned, a hand reached out, and switch was thrown.

It was only just starting.

END
I’m struggling to come up with a name for the series that now contains On the Air and its subsequent sequel(s). So it’s got a lame name until I come up with something better.

I have to thank all the amazing people who’ve commented over the years - years! - that this story has been in progress. the artists who did art for it. Oh my God, what an amazing experience this has been. I stopped answering comments for the most part after my Mom died unexpectedly - five years ago today, in fact. But please know how precious each and every comment has been to me as we’ve gone on this long, weird journey.

On the Air started off as crack - it was meant to be 2,000 words in response to a comment made on Salvia_G’s Like a Cruel Mistress Woos. Still one of my favorite stories, but sadly we will likely never see its completion. But what is there ... so rich.

Anyway, somehow the idea of the first Bisexual Batchelor just took off once I started writing it. It’s had a life of its own. I had planned to write multiple versions at one point, where Bucky chooses not to become involved, or potentially where Steve chose someone else. I don’t think I’ll write those at this point. I’m happy with my boys getting together. But if I’d written anyone else getting Steve’s rose, it would’ve been Peter Caine. For many years, he was another love of my life, another man straddling worlds, with a deep conviction ... he’d’ve been perfect for Steve.

As for what’s coming ... I wrote a whole big chunk of story with group dates, some major plot stuff ... I plan to eventually get that finished so I can share. I also wrote about sharing “outtakes,” scenes and sequences that didn’t make it into the final cut. I might still do that - I have a lot of material that I wrote that didn’t make it into the posted version.

But most of all, thank you for sticking with me. This has been an extraordinary experience, made special by all the readers who left kudos, who made bookmarks, who left comments, who mentioned the story at cons, etc.

Thank you.

So, here's the comment thread that inspired this story:

**Me:** ... He's figured out he's not ready to sign on for the shitstorm that would be his life as the dude who deflowered Captain America. Who would be?

**Shingo_the_Pest:** HAH!!! Hahahaha, oh lord, that got me cracking up. HAH. Man, I kind of wish we could have that story. ;)

**Salvia_G:** There should be a reality TV show: a bisexual Captain America version of The
Bachelor. In fact, that's what the rest of the story will be! *tosses all drafts and starts from scratch*

Come find me on Tumblr!

For more information on the It Gets Better Project: www.itgetsbetter.org

For more information on The Trevor Project: www.thetrevorproject.org


For more information on Straight But Not Narrow: http://www.straightbutnotnarrow.org/

Don’t forget to bookmark the series for when more is written in this universe!

And again, most of all, thank you!

Works inspired by this: cover for "On the Air" by debwalsh by Lovesfic (me23)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!