In Derelict Sidings The Poppies Entwine

by Unoriginality

Summary

It's only taken the public a year and a half to figure out who Bucky was, but once they do, his past begins catching up with him in the worst ways.
Mid-November mornings were cold, enough to be biting on Bucky's face as he and Steve raced around the Mall at just past five in the morning. It wasn't as cold as December through February, but it was cold enough to make Bucky's eyes water as he went full speed, matching Steve's every step. They usually ended in a tie, although they'd both had their victories from time to time.

It wasn't any different from any other morning for them, until the text tone on their work phone went off. "Hold up, Bucky," Steve said, slowing to a stop.

Bucky was already stopping, practically skidding as he fought inertia. He walked back to Steve, putting his gloved hands over his nose to try to warm it while Steve checked the phone. "You stopped us for a text?"

"Who sends us texts on this phone if it isn't important?" Steve asked, studying the phone. "It's from Tony."

Curious, Bucky moved around to look over Steve's shoulder. So 'Bucky Barnes' is trending right now. Care to guess why? it read.

Bucky felt his face go numb, though not from cold, and he swallowed tightly, feeling bile in his stomach. "Guess someone took that right photo," he said quietly.

"Looks like it," Steve said. He started replying to Tony. "Let's make sure, though, before we panic." The right photo?

Bucky looked around, paranoid that there might already be press, looking for him. He didn't care to deal with that so early, if at all. And it wouldn't be hard to find them, they had the same route every morning. His mind was already racing to figure out what he'd do if someone stopped him. Ignoring them was the preferable option, but the more someone ignores the press, the more persistent the press gets. Which meant he'd eventually have to say something.

But even thinking about the truth coming out made his brain shut down and his ability to speak go out the window. Now he'd have to face that.

He looked over when the phone pinged. Good guess. If you're not home, you might want to get there before the press swarms it.

Steve sighed, and looked at Bucky. "I'd say 'race you home', but I think I'm more interested in racing the world home."

Bucky nodded. He gave Steve about five seconds to put the phone back in his pocket before he took off for home.

It was about a quarter to six by the time they got home. Or at least to the right street. They stopped and ducked behind a building when they saw people crowded outside of their apartment building, including a few news vans. "Just in time for 'Good Morning America,'" Steve said, tone hushed, peeking around the corner at the crowd.

Bucky sighed, thunking his head back against the brick he was leaning against. "It's too damn early for this," he said, just as quiet as Steve was. "They move fast."

"Annoyingly so," Steve agreed.
Bucky stepped away from the wall, looking around for an escape. "There's a fire escape ladder over here," he said. "We can go up and get from this roof to that one over there, then across the street to ours. They might not notice people jumping buildings over their heads."

"Hopefully," Steve said, studying the fire escape Bucky pointed out. "And if they do, they still can't get up to our window or into the building." He glanced back around the corner, then turned back into the alley and walked over to the fire escape. He went up first; he'd only recently resigned himself to the fact that Bucky would always make Steve go first, although he'd bitched about it.

Bucky followed him up to the first level of stairs, taking care with each step to minimize the noise he made on the rusted metal steps. Six stories to the top. A jump to the building immediately to the south. Steve went first, followed by Bucky. They stopped on that roof, turning west and looking over the edge of the roof at the crowd below.

"They seem to still be focused on the ground," Steve said quietly. He looked over at the roof of their building. "This is a longer jump."

"We've made longer," Bucky said, mentally counting the distance between the two buildings. "Easily."

Steve backed up, and Bucky moved to the side to give him room. Bucky kept one eye on the reporters, and the other on Steve as he took a running leap across the street, onto their own roof. Once Steve had landed, Bucky looked down over the crowd. None of them had reacted, which meant none of them were looking up. Good.

Bucky walked to the far end of the building, giving himself room for a running start, then sprinted for the edge of the building. He pushed off against the concrete, every muscle in his legs tensing and releasing as he sailed over the street below.

He hit the roof hard, drawing himself up into a roll, easing the force of the impact, and then up on his feet. He felt like he'd scraped his knees a bit, but without looking, it was hard to tell. He wasn't exactly dressed for rooftop jumping. "Anyone notice?" he asked Steve, walking over to the edge where Steve was keeping watch.

"No," Steve said. He glanced over at Bucky. "We're going to have to break the lock on our window."

"It's fixable," Bucky said, dismissing the concern. "Better than getting mobbed trying to get in the front door."

Steve started down the fire escape, each footstep soft against the metal. "Can't argue that," he said, keeping an eye on the crowd.

Bucky followed him, being just as careful to not make enough noise to draw the attention of the news reporters below. He stood quietly while Steve yanked up the window, snapping the lock in the process. He worried that the noise might alert people to their presence, but the people below seemed to be loud enough amongst each other that they didn't notice. He slipped into the apartment after Steve.

Once inside, he closed the window, feeling his body want to shake from the adrenaline crash that inevitably followed finding safety after a stressful situation. He concentrated on quieting his nerves.

"I'm checking the news," Steve said, shedding his gloves and ear muffs onto the couch.

"You're a slob," Bucky said, picking up after Steve, and taking his winter items to the coat closet.
While Bucky put those and his own scarf and gloves away, Steve sat down at the table. "I have more important things on my mind," he said.

Bucky reluctantly joined Steve at the table, watching Steve boot up his laptop. He looked down at his tablet, hesitant to actually face the news. He glanced towards the window, in the general direction of the ruckus outside, then sighed and turned on his tablet. Might as well face the music.

Bucky's tablet was a bit faster than Steve's laptop; the laptop was a few years old at that point, and the tablet had been designed by Tony, so it had a few advantages. Scrolling through the news sites pointed to one major story: Bucky Barnes was back from the dead, seen frequently in the company of Steve Rogers.

There went peace and quiet.

He clicked on a video and pulled up the 3D imaging to display the video for Steve to watch. Steve leaned around his laptop a bit. A woman with cropped blonde hair and a microphone stood just outside their apartment building, surrounded by other reporters looking into their own news cameras, or holding digital recorders, or otherwise being annoying reporters in general.

"-where it is thought that James 'Bucky' Barnes, Captain America's childhood friend, is reported to have been living the last two years in secrecy. No word yet on how he might be alive after so long, and neither Mister Barnes or Captain Rogers have appeared to offer a comment. The news broke about an hour ago, starting with a picture taken by an internet user going by the name 'CapWinterFan13' that got posted on a picture-sharing service called Imgur. The image is one of Captain America's so-far anonymous partner, known only as 'the Winter Soldier' that appears to have been taken candidly. It was Photoshopped side by side with a known picture of Barnes. Other such images began to surface within about ten minutes of the original picture, all of them different, all of them comparing the images of the Winter Soldier to old pictures of Barnes."

Bucky turned off the video. "Well, that's disgusting," he grumbled.

"We knew it'd happen eventually," Steve pointed out. He glanced back towards the window. "Care to deal with them?"

"Not really," Bucky said. He studied his tablet, debating about looking up the pictures of him that the news reporter was talking about. He had a feeling some of them were probably none too flattering, but that wasn't even what was stopping him. "Screw this, I'm not dealing with this without a shower and breakfast." He got up. "I'll let you cook while I clean up."

Steve flashed him an annoyed look. "You're going to let me cook? How generous of you."

"How about we go out for breakfast?" Steve suggested.

Bucky paused, halfway to the hallway. He looked back at Steve. "Why?"

"Because you can't dodge them forever," Steve said, motioning towards the window. "I've dealt with the press, they're going to get worse if we don't at least give them a bone to chew on for awhile. We'll shower, go out, give them an appearance, and get it over with."

"You act like that's all it'll take to get it over with," Bucky said. " Somehow, I doubt that."

Steve shrugged. "No, it's not, but it might get people to ease off a bit today."
"I'll think about it," Bucky said, turning back towards the back of the apartment.

It was sorely tempting to remain in the shower longer than strictly necessary, letting the hot water work out the knot in his right shoulder and the back of his neck that stress was actively tying. But Steve would want to shower, and Bucky wasn't the sort of asshole to use up all the hot water and leave nothing but cold water for his roommate.

Bucky grabbed his comb after wrapping a towel around his waist, heading out towards the bedroom to get dressed. "Shower's free," he called to Steve.

"Thanks!" Steve's voice replied, just as Bucky disappeared into the bedroom to dress.

He was still combing the snarls out of his hair when he heard the water shut off from Steve's shower. Whenever Bucky showered, he became sorely tempted to cut his hair back to its original length; long hair took way too much damn shampoo to clean, and it tangled after being towel dried. He flat-out refused to use a hair dryer, not after spending years waiting on his sister to finish in the bathroom because she was drying her ungodly long hair. Hair dryers now made him break out into hives.

But, he also knew he'd probably look strange with his uniform and short hair. It was a weird holdover from the years as Hydra's assassin, but it was one he actually didn't mind having. It was harmless, just sometimes frustrating.

"Why don't you do that in the bathroom, where you have a mirror?" Steve asked, walking back into the room, dressed for the day.

"Would you rather I take more time in the bathroom?" he asked. "You'd never get to shower if I did."

Steve sat down at the table, studying him. "Okay, thank you for that, but how can you tell what it looks like?"

Bucky frowned, working out a particularly stubborn tangle. "I double check when I put the comb away," he said. "It's not like I choose a complicated style or anything." He gave Steve a sideways look. "I'm not the one that puts gunk in my hair."

Steve made a face, glancing upwards, even though he'd never be able to actually see his hair that way. "It keeps it from falling flat," he said. "I've gotten more compliments from women with this style than what I had before." He rested his chin on his fist, watching Bucky. "You'd probably get more female attention if you cut your hair, you know."

"There are women who like longer hair on guys," Bucky protested, finishing with his hair and eyeing his comb. It was full of tangled hair. "My hair is falling out. I'm not old enough to be going bald yet."

Steve laughed, like a complete asshole. "Bucky, you're almost a hundred."

"Shut your mouth," Bucky said, standing up. "You're not any younger than me. At this age, one year doesn't count anymore."

"I hold stubbornly onto that year, the older we get," Steve said.

"You're a jackass," Bucky said. "Did you still want to brave the storm outside?"

Steve looked back over his shoulder at the window. "We should probably check if they're still out there. I wouldn't doubt it, but it's been a half hour since we got home, and they were there for who
knows how long before that."

"You do that," Bucky said. "I'm going to go put this away and see how long I can put off going out."

"Seriously, Bucky, relax," Steve said, getting up and heading for the window. "Nobody that knows the truth is going to talk without your permission, so nobody's going to find out. You don't remember, simple as that."

Bucky made an unhappy noise that didn't entirely agree with Steve, but didn't entirely disagree, either. "Just check to see if the coast is clear," he said, disappearing down the hallway.

"They're still out there," Steve called back.

Goddamnit. Bucky tossed the hair stuck to his comb into the trash, and put the comb away in its drawer under the sink. "Fine," he said, joining Steve in the living room. "Let's just go and face the press. I have no intention of saying a word to them, though. They can take all the footage they want, I'm not giving them any comment."

"That's fine," Steve said. He was at the coat closet by the front door, pulling on his coat. He grabbed Bucky's old Army coat layered over a zip-up hoodie and tossed it to him. "I can talk, if you want."

"Do we have to talk at all?" Bucky asked as he shrugged on his coat. He had to pay attention to what he was doing to button the outer coat up; the lack of sensation in his left fingers made it hard to do that blind.

Steve gave him a tired look. "Once again, I must point out that this was inevitable. We're lucky it's taken them this long."

Bucky made a vaguely conceding face, but said nothing. Just because Steve was right, didn't mean Bucky had to like it. He knew it was probably irrational, but he couldn't shake the fear that somehow, the public would know. They'd know what he did. Who he worked for. What was done to him. It wasn't something he was ready for, if ever.

It was stupid; soldiers were POWs all the time, the tortures they went through were known more often than they'd probably like, and all it ever did was outrage the public on their behalf. That didn't stop the feeling of shame. He was supposed to be stronger than that, he was a soldier, held to a higher standard than civilians. He was a Howling Commando. He was supposed to be stronger. He wasn't supposed to break. Soldiers weren't supposed to become monsters. They protected the innocent victims from what war and enemies and monsters tried to do to them.

Maybe once upon a time, he was one of those innocent victims. But he couldn't see it that way. With the thought of the public finding out about Hydra, he could only see what they'd turned him into. He couldn't see Bucky Barnes, he could only see the Winter Soldier. The ghost assassin.

He felt safer being a ghost.

"Bucky?"

Bucky jerked back as Steve's hand passed in front of his field of vision, his mechanical hand already raised to block any incoming attacks. He took a breath, letting his arm drop. "Sorry."

Steve looked concerned. "You okay? You went unresponsive for a minute there."

Bucky shrugged, wrapping his scarf around his face to hide the burn of embarrassment. "I'm fine.
Let's just get this over with."

After giving him a considering look for the longest three seconds in history, Steve pulled on his ear muffs. "Whatever you say, Buck."

Bucky concentrated on keeping his feet moving, leading Steve down the stairs. Up, behind him, better to have to wait through an asthma attack than get two stories up and realize Steve was no longer with him. Down, in front of him, in case Steve fell, knocked over by an asthma attack, or his distinct way of walking due to the scoliosis made him trip, Bucky could catch him.

Bucky was probably never going to get rid of those habits, no matter how batty they drove Steve.

They paused down on the sixth floor when the work phone went off again in Steve's pocket. Steve made a rude noise, grabbing the phone. His eyebrows shot up when he looked at the caller ID. "Were we expecting a call from the president?"

"Just answer it," Bucky said. "Might be a job." Not that he was counting on that, it probably had something to do with the news.

Steve didn't argue, putting the phone to his ear. "Hello, Mister President. No, you didn't interrupt anything. Is this about a job?" Steve frowned, glancing at Bucky briefly. "Yes, we can be there in about thirty minutes."

Bucky's shoulders slumped. "So not only does he want to interrogate us about this, he couldn't call ten minutes ago before we got ready to go and halfway down the stairs," he said after Steve had hung up.

"You should be used to our luck being like that," Steve said, turning around to head back upstairs.

Bucky focused on being annoyed by the inconvenience as they went back to the apartment, unwrapped from their winter gear, and went to the bedroom to change into their uniforms. It kept him from wanting to upend his lack of breakfast with nerves.

Normally, they'd go down to the garage to get the bike together, but Bucky decided to face the press, just enough to get them to back off a bit. Steve gave him a dirty look when Bucky told him what he was going to do, but they both knew that Bucky was going to win that fight, so Steve went down to get the bike himself without further argument.

Bucky counted off two extra minutes for Steve to get around front, before grabbing his weapons, holstering his derringer, and the Intratec. His combat knives were put in their places, then he grabbed his Skorpion. He didn't holster that just yet, nor did he load the magazine, carrying it separate.

He hurried down the stairs, to the second floor, then slowed his walk, knowing that he was at least partially visible through the glass front door. To no surprise on his part, the reporters were crowding around the door, watching him with microphones already held out to get a comment.

He pushed against the glass door, forcing some reporters to move to give the door room to open. Just as people began to crowd in on him, he held up the Skorpion, making a very firm point of loading the magazine, inspecting it for a moment, then holstering it on his back. That seemed to part the Red Sea some.

He'd feel bad about being an asshole, but since the press never felt sorry for acting that way, he couldn't build up a lot of guilt on his part for scaring the shit out of them.

Right on time, Steve pulled around the corner, weaving past news vans and stopping in front of
Bucky, who had a very nervous group of reporters behind him. Bucky hopped onto the bike behind Steve, glancing over at the reporters that had regained some of their confidence now that Captain America was there to keep things calm.

"Sorry, folks," Steve told them. "Duty calls." He revved the bike, then they took off through the city, leaving the crowd behind them.
Chapter 2

Captain America and the Winter Soldier were probably the only two people alive that could get away with approaching the president while armed. Well, maybe not, Bucky had heard about the Iron Patriot, but he was a military special force unto himself. While Steve was Captain America, and the Winter Soldier was accepted by extension, they still were free agents, getting away with walking into the White House armed with no less than three guns, two knives and Steve's almost deceptively dangerous shield.

Bucky wasn't entirely sure how Steve had arranged that, but it was nice to not get accosted and made to give up his weapons just to go in to talk to someone who usually wanted to hire him to use said weapons. Sure, he still had his hand-to-hand, and he was no less lethal with that than with his weapons, but it wasn't as efficient as a bullet to the brain.

He'd been trained to be efficient. Not being efficient made Pierce angry. Made Hydra angry. Never make your handlers angry.

But it wasn't much concern, somehow they got away with it, nobody ever stopped them as an office professional would lead them through the White House to the Oval Office. "Mister President," the office worker said after leading them in. "Captain America and the Winter Soldier are here."

"Thank you, Julia," President Ellis said. He was watching out the window, back to them. Awful trusting, Bucky thought, but then, they'd never given the president reason to not trust them. Still, one would think a head of state wouldn't turn his back on two very dangerous mercenaries.

Julia left without a word; she was the same woman that escorted them to the office every time they came in, which was alarmingly frequently. While they flat-out refused to ever help the US with anything in the Middle East, America had its fingers in a lot of other countries, some that it seemed the public had no idea about. It kept Steve and Bucky busy, though.

They waited silently, watching the president. He looked to be holding something in this hand, alternating between looking out the window and down at whatever he had in his hand. Finally, the president turned just enough to look at them over his shoulder. "Good morning, Cap, Winter Soldier." He looked back down at what Bucky realized was a tablet. "You know, when I woke up this morning, I was expecting to hear more news about ISIL, or Gaza, or the Ukraine. Or the Ebola crisis. Those are still waiting on my desk." He motioned to his desk. "But that wasn't the news that greeted me."

Bucky focused on breathing and keeping his expression completely neutral, unaffected. He knew what was coming next, and he wasn't really wanting to react to it too much.

The president turned fully, walking closer to the desk, and held up the tablet to display two pictures of Bucky side-by-side, one from his days in the military, one more recent. "So. Bucky Barnes, is it?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bucky saw Steve look at him, then back to President Ellis. "Sir, we can-"

"I wasn't asking you, Captain," the president interrupted, staring pointedly at Bucky. "I asked your partner." He put the tablet down, resting his hands on the desk, slightly stooped. "Are you Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes?"

For a long five seconds, Bucky couldn't get his voice to cooperate. "I haven't been Sergeant Barnes
since I died," he finally said. "It's just Bucky now."

President Ellis straightened, nodding just slightly. "Is there a reason you couldn't tell me before?"

"Plausible deniability," Bucky said, although he knew that the president wasn't likely to buy that.

Which he didn't. The president tilted his head to the side slightly, giving Bucky a barely tolerant look. "You expect me to believe that?"

Another few seconds ticked by before Bucky answered. "No."

"Then what's the real reason?"

Bucky kept his jaw tense, almost too much to speak. "There'd be too many questions."

"Like how you're still alive," the president said, raising his eyebrows. He walked around to the front of the desk, putting himself closer to Bucky and Steve. He leaned back against his desk, crossing his arms. "Which is a good question. I don't suppose you're going to answer that one?"

"I don't remember," Bucky said, an easy lie that tumbled off his lips like he'd been practicing it forever. He'd been mentally preparing for it, but saying it was far different. If he were anyone else, he might feel ashamed for how easy that lie was.

President Ellis didn't react at first, like he was waiting for more. Once it became obvious that Bucky wasn't going to give him more, he drew in a deep breath. "Amnesia. You don't remember anything about the last seventy years? At all?"

Hearing it put like that, Bucky realized he'd have to throw something out, just enough to be believed without giving away anything he didn't want out. "I have a few vague impressions, nothing that makes sense. I remember falling, being found, and not much else until Steve found me." Which wasn't entirely true; he remembered far more than he'd care to, but it was a rawhide for the president to chew on for awhile.

The president looked at Steve. "And where did you find him, Captain?"

Aw, shit. Steve was a terrible liar. Bucky silently begged him to be as vague as possible. "On a causeway here in DC," Steve said. "He didn't know who he was."

There, a truth that Steve would be comfortable with. Bucky wished they had developed some sort of stupid telepathy like Tony had joked about, just so he could mentally thank Steve for not making things worse.

"That was around the time you were arrested by Hydra," the president said. "Any guesses on why he was there?"

Bucky wanted to throttle the president. He knew Steve was an awful liar and was deliberately preying on that. Asshole.

"He was just there," Steve said, and Bucky hoped that the president wouldn't pick up on the subtle change in Steve's voice that Bucky knew meant that he was lying. "I couldn't say anything more."

A smooth lie, especially coming from Steve. Not that the president wouldn't be able to see right through it, he probably got told a variation of that numerous times and knew exactly what it meant. Not being able to say something didn't mean that something was an unknown.
President Ellis didn't look particularly impressed with Steve's answer, but he turned his attention back to Bucky. At that point, once Steve said he couldn't say something, it would be easier to address Bucky. When Steve decided to be quiet, he got stubborn about it. Not that Bucky wasn't, but in some ways, he wasn't quite as stubborn as Steve could be.

"Do you know how you survived?" the president asked.

Bucky kept that bland, unreadable expression on his face. Not even a facial twitch. A weapon, not a person. "Dumb luck?" Okay, so maybe a bit too flippant to be completely just a weapon, but at least he was able to keep a straight face.

"Very dumb luck," the president said, standing up again. "You know you were never listed as KIA, right?"

That broke Bucky's otherwise flawless expression, causing him to look over at Steve in confusion. Steve shrugged. "I saw the files," he said. "You were listed as MIA because we never found a body."

"Did anyone even look?" Bucky demanded, then looked at the president, expecting an answer to that.

"I don't know," the president admitted. "Your file didn't say. Just that you were listed MIA. Which means that you're technically still in the army."

Bucky felt the blood drain from his face. "I'm not a soldier anymore."

"According to the law, you are," the president said. "Of course, if you let us keep you, we'd owe you roughly a million dollars in back pay, and enough promotions that you're probably a four star general by now." He sounded vaguely amused, a break in the seriousness he'd been interrogating them with a moment before. "Not to mention whatever medals and honors I decide to clip onto your uniform."

"I don't need any of that," Bucky said, hoping for something that would get him out of having to go back.

"Wouldn't he be up for a discharge by now, sir?" Steve asked. "And he was part of the Howling Commandos, that put him under the SSR's authority, and they were taken over by SHIELD. SHIELD isn't around anymore to take custody of him. Would the regular Army really be able to claim him as a soldier still?"

The president made a disgusted noise. "SHIELD. Good riddance to them." He motioned to the chairs on either side of the desk. "Take a seat." He continued as Bucky and Steve moved the chairs to sit more opposite the president's chair. "As far as the Army, they could. At least in theory. As you said, he was under the SSR's authority, but the SSR was still part of the Army at the time. It was easiest to let SHIELD handle you, Cap."

"So you're going to let the Army take Bucky," Steve said, almost an accusation as he set his shield on the ground in front of him. Bucky made sure to sit on the edge of the chair; he didn't need his weapon on his back digging into him.

The president sat down in his chair. "I could," he said. "They'd want him to run tests to see why he's suddenly a super soldier like you. Someone experimented on him, that much is obvious. It's a matter of who."

Bucky expected that much to be figured out. "I don't know," he said. "And nobody's putting me in a lab."
"No," the president said. "Nobody's putting you in a lab. I don't care what sort of information we could get from your DNA, I won't allow those advances to be made at the expense of a national hero. I didn't allow it with Cap, I won't allow it with you."

Bucky had to grip the arms of the chair he was in to keep the relief from showing too much. "Generous."

"I don't approve of human experimentation," the president said, leaning back in his chair. "As grateful as I am for the effects of it that Captain America is still with us, and now you, if I'd been in charge back when the super serum was created, it wouldn't have happened."

"To be honest, sir," Steve said, "I don't think President Roosevelt knew about it."

President Ellis looked confused for a moment, then chuckled, shaking his head. "I know how old you are, but sometimes it doesn't really mean much until you talk about history like you lived through it."

"Talking with Thor makes me feel young, sir," Steve said.

"If what the reports of Thor say are correct, he makes everyone feel young," the president said. He looked off over Steve and Bucky's heads, clearly lost in thought. "I'm not going to make you stay in the military. Whatever's happened to you, whether you remember or not, was obviously not a romp through a park. I think you've earned your honorable discharge. If any of my generals want to argue with me about it, they can leave their jobs. I'm the Commander In Chief for a reason." He sat forward, folding his arms on the desk in front of him. "That only leaves one thing. Your back pay. It might take awhile to calculate just how much you're owed, given inflation over the last few decades."

"Donate whatever it would be to the VA," Bucky said. "I don't need it."

The president smiled. "If I had any worries that you weren't still the man that we knew from the films, that just dismissed them." He looked at the tablet still sitting on his desk, clearly lost in thought again. He grabbed the tablet, looking at it, then turned it to show the pictures to Steve and Bucky again. "Nice picture, by the way," he said, turning it back to look at it himself. "Nice to see what you look like without that mask." He turned off the tablet and set it aside. "I'll start the process of getting you that discharge. It shouldn't take terribly long for it to go through, and in the meantime, you're on leave, and you answer to nobody but me. For a few days, you're still a soldier in the United States Army. So I recommend staying out of trouble and turning down any jobs you get until that discharge comes through."

"I have a feeling we'll be hiding from the press a lot," Steve said. "We wouldn't want to do anything that'd increase that spotlight by going out."

"Smart idea," the president said. "I'll be asked for comments on this, I'll come up with a press release that will hopefully keep them off your back for awhile. I did it when Captain America came back, I'll do it for you."

"Thank you, sir," Bucky said, keeping a flat tone, like his gratitude were a social expectation and not real, even though he really wanted to melt into a puddle of relief.

"No need to thank me, soldier," the president said. "We're just glad to have you back." He glanced at his watch. "If you leave now, you might get to catch 'Good Morning, America' and see what they run on you. Should be interesting."
Bucky resisted the urge to make a face of annoyance. "Then we're dismissed?"

The president smiled. "Yes, dismissed, soldiers."

Steve grabbed his shield and stood, hooking it back onto his back. Bucky stood and followed him, neither saying a word as they left. It wasn't until they were back on the bike and on their way home that Bucky realized they'd both forgotten to salute upon dismissal. So much for being soldiers.

The press had gone by the time they got home, all except one young woman with red-brown hair and thick-rimmed glasses that were too dark and contrasted sharply with her pale skin, who sat on the front steps, hiding under layers of winter clothing and shivering. Bucky wasn't even sure at first if she was press or not; the only thing she had that indicated she might be was a notebook and a recording device sitting on the cement railing next to the stairs.

"Drop me off here," he told Steve.

Steve glanced over his shoulder at Bucky, pulling the bike to a stop outside the front door. "You sure?"

Bucky hopped off the bike. "Go put that away, I'll meet you upstairs," he said in answer. While Steve drove off, Bucky studied the young woman, who'd been watching them a bit cautiously. She looked like she was a bit intimidated by him, which he didn't blame her for. Most people saw a mercenary armed and in their uniform, and felt a bit small by comparison. "Reporter?" he asked.

She looked like an animal trapped in a cage, then looked at her notebook and recorder, then stood up. "Oh! Yes, um, yes, I am. I'd ask if you were the Winter Soldier, but that'd be a dumb question." She tucked some of her hair behind her ear. "I know you turned everyone else down, but I'd really like to ask you a couple questions. If you don't want to, that's fine, just say so."

"Who are you with?" he asked, walking closer, stopping just outside the front door.

"Nobody," she said, picking up her notebook and recorder. "I'm a free-lance writer. If I could be picked up by a news site, that'd be great, but right now, I'm just feeding my baby and I on what I can get."

He didn't know whether or not that was true, but either way, throwing that out there was a good guilt tactic. Appealing to the human side of someone that some people didn't even think was human. He bit back some annoyance. "And talking to me might get you noticed."

She looked a bit sheepish. "Well, yeah. But it's not just that. Most of my pieces have been on Captain America and you. Well, if you're really Bucky Barnes. But even if you're not, a lot of my more recent stories have been on you, too."

A theoretically single mother making a meager living who was also a fan. Goddamnit, Bucky didn't have the heart to say 'no', although he really wanted to. "Ask your questions. I won't be able to answer most of them."

She brightened, fumbled with her notebook and recorder. "Sorry, my fingers are cold."

"How long have you been out here?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Since just before everyone else left," she said. "So it's been awhile. I was actually about to give up and go home." She finally managed to get her notebook open and her recorder on. "So are the rumors true, that you're Bucky Barnes, Captain America's childhood friend?"
"They're true," he said, not changing his expression.

She didn't look terribly surprised. "Do you know how you survived?"

"No." He knew he wasn't giving her much to go on, but he'd already said more than he cared to that day. Although she was definitely prettier than the president was. Too bad she hadn't found him before the president did, he might've given more to her than he currently was.

"Not at all?" She still held a serious look, not even showing anything but earnest curiosity at his answers.

He couldn't help but a tiny smile behind his mask. She was reminding him a lot of his younger sister; Rebecca had always been determined to be a journalist, too. "I got lucky," he said. "And no, I don't remember much about the last seventy years. Not enough to tell anyone."

She didn't seem bothered by the fact that he probably just answered half her questions without giving her any story. "Why did you decide to stay hidden for so long?"

"Because people ask questions," he said.

The irony was lost on her. "Where did you get the name 'Winter Soldier'?"

That was a good question, actually, one he'd not been prepared for. "I don't know," he said after a few moments of thinking how to answer that. He wasn't sure where that name had come from. Hydra agents mostly called him 'the asset' to his face, but the project that created him had been called the Winter Soldier Project. He wasn't entirely sure where Hydra got the name. "Look, I know you want a story, but you're not getting one from me. I don't have the information you want. I remember falling, and then I remember running into Steve. The rest is fuzzy."

"You're talking to a reporter," she said. "That alone is story enough. I know you don't remember much, but do you know anything about what happened to your arm?"

He glanced at his metal arm briefly. "I tore it up on the way down the mountain," he said. "Someone replaced it, not sure when."

"Do you think the communist star has anything to do with whoever rescued you?"

Bucky did his best to now show his internal alarm at her question on his face. "Maybe. You can theorize all you want."

She paused her questions, tilting her head and studying him like he was some sort of new species. "Were you always this hard to question?"

"No," he admitted. "But I was never under this kind of scrutiny, either."

"Completely fair," she said. She juggled her notebook and recorder, managing to slip the thin device under her glove. "One more question." She pulled the pen she had clipped inside the spiral of the notebook out and held it and the pen out to him. "Mind if I get an autograph?"

There was that smile again, even though she wouldn't see it. "So how much of this interview was an excuse to ask that?"

She shrugged with a smile. "Not all of it. I really am a free-lance writer. But a chance for an interview and an autograph from my favorite hero was too good to pass up."
That surprised him, and he drew his head back slightly, looking at her. "Your favorite? You mean Captain America isn't?"

She shook her head. "No. I mean, he's my hero, too, but not my favorite. I couldn't really say why. I guess those of us who follow you superhero types just have our preferences." She moved the notebook and pen slightly, drawing attention back to it. "Would you? Please?"

"If I do, do you promise to go inside and warm up somewhere?"

"Cross my heart," she said.

He took the pen and notebook, eyeing the page it was opened to. It had a series of questions written down, all intended for him, but most not asked. His stubborn insistence that he didn't remember anything had made it impossible to ask them. "My sister wanted to be a journalist," he told her, scribbling down both of his names. "I'll tell you what I told her. Keep trying, you'll make it." He handed the notebook and pen back.

That seemed to make her day, if the way sunshine and sparkles practically glowed on her face was any indication. She took her notebook back, closing the cover, then clipped the pen back in its former place. "Thank you," she said, pulling out the recorder and fiddling with it. "I mean that, thank you very much."

"Go get warm," he told her.

"I will!" she said, hurrying down the steps. "Thank you again!"

Bucky waited a minute until she crawled into a car that looked about ten years old that was parked down the block. Deciding that she'd be fine at that point, he turned to punch the security code in, only to get whacked in the face with the door as it opened. He staggered back a step, his right hand reaching for one of his knives, left arm drawn up to block another hit.

"Sorry!" Steve said, looking terribly guilty. He propped open the door against his hip, looking like he wanted to fuss at any potential damage.

Bucky yanked off his mask, pressing a finger against his nose, checking for blood. His nose was bleeding. Damnit. "You jackass," he said. "Thanks, I'm going to be snorting blood for the next hour."

Steve pursed his lips, looking torn between guilt and amusement. "Sorry. I thought you moved enough for the door to open."

Bucky shoved by Steve, pinching his nose shut. "I'll believe that later," he said, stepping to the side to let Steve go up the stairs ahead of him. "After I have a chance to plug the leak."
"This is like watching paint dry," Bucky complained, slumping down in his seat to rest his head on his folded arms on the table.

"The press conference isn't even supposed to start for another minute or two, Bucky," Steve said, reaching over and patting Bucky on the head in a distinctly condescending manner.

Bucky lifted his head enough to glare at Steve. "What're you going to do next, scratch me behind my ears? Do I get a bone to chew on while I wait for the president to decide to show up and start talking?"

One corner of Steve's lips quirked upwards. "If it'll keep you from complaining."

Bucky sniffed, still trying to breathe out of the side of his nose that had bled earlier. "I could complain about the fact that you gave me a goddamn bloody nose," he said. "I still can't breathe."

Steve sighed. "Bucky, it was an accident. I said I was sorry."

"I know," Bucky said, sniffing again. "And I forgave you. I'm just pointing out that I could complain about something you'd like even less."

"How about you not complain at all?" Steve said.

"Because it's more fun to drive you nutty," Bucky said, glancing at the video broadcast on his tablet's 3D display. The podium with the sigil of POTUS took up the middle of the screen, flanked by a lot of nothing. There was the sound of people talking quietly in the background, but nothing distinguishable. Normally, he'd be patient when waiting for the president to make his entrance, but given the subject that was going to be addressed, he felt more nervous with every second that ticked by.

"Bucky?"

Bucky looked back over at Steve. "What?"

"Stop that."

Bucky stared at him in confusion. "Stop what?"

Steve motioned towards Bucky's left hand. "You're tapping your finger and it's very obnoxious."

Having it pointed out, Bucky realized he had been tapping his finger on the table. He looked at his hand like it'd betrayed him, then lifted it to rest his chin on it to keep himself from doing that again. "Sorry."

"Relax," Steve said. "This isn't going to be anything bad. You're not standing in line at the executioner's block."

"Easy for you to say," Bucky, looking back at the video.

Anything that Steve might've been about to say got cut off as President Ellis appeared from behind the curtains that sectioned off the news room from the rest of the White House. Bucky had to force himself to keep breathing, air trying to catch in his throat with nerves.
The president shuffled a couple of note cards on the podium, studying them, before looking up at the various cameras. "Good evening. We received news today that a national hero has been living among us in secrecy. We have confirmed that the identity of Captain America's partner, the Winter Soldier, is former Sergeant James Barnes, of Captain America's Howling Commandos."

Cameras clicked and Bucky had to admire President Ellis's ability to not go completely blind with those flashes on his face. "We do not yet know why or how he has survived. We will be launching a full investigation, pending his cooperation. In recognition of his courageous service in World War II, I am granting him an honorable discharge. I am also asking the press and my fellow Americans to give him privacy until he is ready and willing to say something."

There wasn't much more to say before questions were opened, and naturally, the first question was, "Mister President, why wouldn't Sergeant Barnes be willing to cooperate with an investigation?" Bucky made a face at the video, wishing death on all the reporters.

The president looked like he was taking a moment to very carefully consider his words. "I spoke with him and Captain Rogers this morning, and Sergeant Barnes said that he remembers very little between the time of his death in 1945 and when Captain Rogers found him two years ago. I believe it's less a lack of cooperation, and more an inability to give us any answers."

More camera clicks. Another reporter spoke up. "Mister President, any thoughts on how Sergeant Barnes may have survived?"

"I cannot speculate on that right now," President Ellis said. "I believe we will find out in due time."

"Not if I have a say, you won't," Bucky grumbled.

Steve reached over and patted Bucky's arm. "Nobody's going to find that file. We've got it safe." Steve's laptop on the other side of the table from Bucky's tablet pinged with an incoming call. Steve looked over. "Tony's calling."

Bucky muted the video on his tablet. "If he's delivering more bad news, I'm flying out there and hitting him."

Tony's face appeared on screen as soon as Steve accepted the call. "Hey, old guys," he greeted.

"Tony, the press conference is going on, why are you calling right this minute?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, I've got it playing in the background," Tony said, glancing off screen. "But I found something that you might find interesting, especially you, Bucky."

Bucky scowled. "What now?"

"Well, if you're going to have that attitude, I won't tell you," Tony said, looking like he was having fun dangling a secret over someone's head.

"Tony." Bucky gave him a vaguely threatening look.

Tony held that smug face for another second, then let it go. "Have you heard of someone named Peter William Barnes, born June 12th, 1929?"

"You know I have," Bucky said. "Tony, you'd better have a good reason for dragging my family up like this."

"That's your little brother, right?" Tony asked, clearly not sorry for dredging up a sore subject. "The
one whose shoes you stuffed with crickets?"

Bucky sighed. "Yes, that one. What's the damn point?"

"Well, this may or may not interest you, but he's alive and looking for you."

Bucky felt his heart stop and his lungs stop taking in air for what felt like forever, and he had to pretend that his eyes weren't getting wet. "Peter's alive?" He swallowed tightly. "What about Paul and Rebecca?" That was probably too much to hope for. Paul had already been on the downhill slide to thirty when Bucky died, that'd put him well into his nineties. Rebecca hadn't been far behind him.

Tony shook his head. "According to the records, they passed away some time ago. Paul died in '91 from a heart attack, and Rebecca died back in 2004 from lung cancer. But Peter is apparently still alive and kicking. He's made it a long time, it looks like."

Bucky had to stare down at the table a moment, breathing unsteadily. He'd known that he'd long-since outlived his siblings, but hearing it was a bit more difficult than just theorizing it. Once he was sure he could talk again, he looked back up at Tony. "Where is Peter?"

"He's living in Annapolis," Tony said. "Transferring the address and route from your place now."

The program pinged, a map showing up in the corner, with a clear route between their place and Annapolis, with Peter's current address under it. That was only an hour drive, hour and fifteen, if traffic was awful. Close. He'd been living an hour away from his little brother for the last two years and never knew it. Two years he could've spent with his brother. Two years he'd never get back.

Hell. It wasn't like he didn't have a million other regrets, what was one more? He shoved that one aside.

"Save that to my tablet, Steve," he said, turning off the video of the press release. It was basically over, anyway. While Steve did that, the map and address taking the press release's place on his 3D imaging over the network, Bucky looked at Tony. "How did you find out about this?"

"He sent in a photograph and a statement to the major news sites," Tony said. "Here, here's CNN's run on it." An article popped up over Tony's face. Bucky minimized the map and address, setting it aside to access later, and motioned for Steve to move the article over to his tablet. A few clicks later, and he pulled the article back up on his tablet, Tony's face no longer obscured by it on Steve's laptop.

The first thing Bucky noticed was the picture of an elderly man, presumably still in his eighties, if he was Peter. He still looked strong and much younger than that. He looked in his sixties, at oldest. He was holding an old photograph, one that Bucky recognized of himself and a twelve-year-old Peter, taken the day before Bucky shipped out for England. If it wasn't for that photo, he wouldn't have recognized the man as Peter at all. But the eyes were the same.

Peter. Peter had gotten old. Bucky had trouble reconciling that old man with the boy in that photo, the boy he remembered. Peter hadn't even been an adult when Bucky last saw him, and now he was old enough to be a grandfather, possibly a great-grandfather. He was old. He wasn't the same.

He forced himself to read the article instead of focusing on that, not really wanting to cry in front of Tony. Steve had seen him cry, that was fine, but Tony didn't get to see that, not yet.

"Is that him?" Tony asked.

Bucky nodded mutely, not trusting his voice.
Steve knew Bucky well enough to know when he needed to step in. "Thanks, Tony. Any other interesting news to send us today?" Bucky silently thanked Steve for taking over. Bucky wasn't sure if he'd been able to hold his composure if he'd had to speak.

"No, that was it." There was silence, and Bucky just barely saw Tony studying him out of the corner of his eye. He sent mental daggers in Tony's direction to make him stop that. Thankfully, Tony wasn't a social dunce, far from it, so he looked back at Steve. "If JARVIS runs across anything else while I'm asleep, I'll have him buzz you."

Bucky sincerely hoped that nothing else came up. He wasn't sure he could handle any more right then.

The article had a lot of nonsense that CNN had put in, which wasn't a big surprise. He wasn't even sure if they'd included everything that Peter had said, but they'd included the important part.

"I was sixteen when my brother died," Mister Barnes said. "I've spent the last seventy years mourning the loss of a man I looked up to, wanted to be like. A man who'd been there all my life. When I saw the news this morning, I couldn't believe it. It seemed too good to be true. But I saw the pictures. I'd know my brother anywhere. I don't know how, but he's alive. And I'd give anything to see him again."

Some time while he was reading, Steve and Tony had exchanged good byes and hung up. He jumped when Steve touched his flesh arm. He stared at Steve, startled, until he realized his vision was blurring a bit, and he turned away, resting his forehead on his metal hand. "Sorry. Did you say something?" he asked weakly, reaching over with his other hand and turning off the display on his tablet, closing the article and turning off the tablet entirely.

"You know I didn't have to," Steve said.

Bucky made the mistake of looking over at Steve- Steve, who'd grown up as another member of his family, as much a brother to Peter as Bucky himself had been. He'd probably missed Peter just as much, but he was holding a brave face.

Bucky closed his eyes, letting the tears that had blurred his vision fall, ignoring them for a moment before lifting his flesh arm and rubbing his sleeve across his face to sloppily dry them. He offered Steve a weak smile. "My brother's alive," he said, then looked back towards the tablet. "And I almost couldn't recognize him."

"He got old, Buck," Steve said. "It's not your fault what happened. Honestly, if we'd both come home from the war, we'd probably be dead of old age by now. This way, he gets to have you around before he's gone."

Bucky drew in a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds, then released it shakily, looking over at Steve. "I don't want him to be gone," he said, voice catching on the last two words.

Steve looked helpless, reaching over and putting a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "I know," he said. "I don't either. There's a lot of people I've wished weren't gone. One came back. The others didn't. But you have a chance for some time with him now. Instead of worrying about when that time's going to be up, worry about using the time you have now. Do you want to go see him tomorrow?"

He did. He wanted to go right away, right then, right that minute, as if his brother might disappear if he didn't get there as soon as possible, as if tomorrow might be too late, but he knew that was ridiculous. And even if it wasn't, it'd be just one more thing that'd eat at Bucky's guilt. "We're supposed to be keeping our heads down," he said, not really answering either way and hating the
words coming out of his mouth.

Steve gave him a stern look. "Bucky, don't lie to me, it's not nice. I'm sure people would understand a day trip to Maryland at this point. Honestly, I think people would be more surprised if we didn't go. Besides, you'll probably make him upset, the longer you put it off."

The idea of upsetting his baby brother after making him mourn for so long made his stomach do uncomfortable flip flops. He looked up at the clock. It was ten. He'd been up since four that morning. He'd gone longer, could go longer easily, when he had to. But with how the day had been, he wanted nothing more than to hide under the covers and wait for the morning before thinking again. Sleep wouldn't come that easily, he knew that, but that didn't mean he couldn't want it.

Before he could even think of a response, Steve let go of his shoulder. "Don't you dare try to hide behind the time," he said. "Do you want to go to Annapolis tomorrow or not?"

Bucky looked at him, trying to stop his mind from running in circles long enough to answer. "You know I do."

Steve smiled. "Then we'd better get some sleep. You get cranky without it, and you don't wanna get cranky at Peter when you see him for the first time in seventy years."

That made Bucky laugh, just a bit, just a half-hearted smile on his face. "He wouldn't be surprised," he said.

"Well, no, but you could be a nice big brother for once in your life." Steve gave him a shit-eating grin.

Bucky looked at him in disbelief, then kicked his ankle. "I'm a perfectly nice big brother," he grumbled. "How many bullies have I chased off all of you? Huh? You were all trouble magnets."

That smile stayed plastered on Steve's face as he stood. "That doesn't mean you couldn't be a royal jackass," he said. "Come on, you need sleep, you're getting violent again."

"I'm always violent," Bucky protested, standing up and following Steve back to the bedroom.

"Not always," Steve said, flicking on the bedroom light. "But definitely more when you're tired."

"Shut up, Steve," Bucky said, changing into his night clothes quickly to try to avoid having any skin exposed to the cold longer than necessary.

Steve laughed. "Good night to you, too, Bucky," he said, waiting until Bucky had crawled into bed before turning off the light. That darkened the room almost completely; there was a night-light plugged into an outlet in the hallway, giving just enough light to get them from the bedroom to the bathroom at night without killing themselves, but other than the red glow of the alarm clock numbers, that was it.

But it was enough. Enough that Steve would be able to see that Bucky wasn't asleep if he happened to look. Bucky was forced to lay on his right side- his left arm dug into his ribs too much to sleep on that side, and he was never comfortable on his back -and that put him facing Steve across the room. Which meant if he couldn't sleep, he either had to just keep his eyes closed and fake it, or he had to hope that Steve didn't notice he was awake.

Which never happened. Steve had this uncanny ability to sense if Bucky was awake. It was outright annoying.
And of course, as Bucky had predicted, he couldn't sleep. He knew he should, he was tired, but there was just too much on his mind. Even if the only thing that had happened that day was his outing, that would've been enough. That left that haunting little fear that the truth would get out whispering in the back of his mind.

But that was secondary.

Peter was alive.

His baby brother, the littlest one, the one he'd taught to fight, taught math to, took care of when his mother was busy trying to do any of the other million little things that their home required of her. He and Paul had been close in age, they'd grown up a horrible trio of friends with Steve, always giving their respective mothers headaches. Rebecca had been the darling of the bunch, being the only girl, but Peter had always been Bucky's favorite. He never would've told any of his siblings that. He didn't want anyone's feelings hurt, and Peter was young enough that he might've let that go to his head.

Peter was alive, but Paul and Rebecca weren't. He'd known, he really had. He was actually surprised to find out that Peter was alive. He'd simply figured they'd all passed away while he was in cryo, while he was out being Hydra's weapon, pulling the trigger on innocent people without any thought to the morality of his actions. Actually, that little nagging fact had made him almost grateful that he'd outlived them. He'd never have to face them with what he'd become.

But now Peter was alive, and Paul and Rebecca had died, and he hadn't been there for them like he should've been.

"Bucky?"

He closed his eyes, sighing deeply as Steve flipped on the light. "Go back to sleep," he said, voice thick. He'd started to cry at the loss of his siblings and Steve had noticed. Bucky probably should've kept a lid on his mind's thought train until he was reasonably sure that Steve was asleep and gone out to the living room to mourn in private, but he also knew that wouldn't have been successful. Even if it had been, Steve would've woken up and followed him to the living room anyway. Because he was obnoxious that way.

Steve's bed creaked slightly, and Bucky knew he'd gotten up, even before he opened his eyes. "Sit up," Steve said.

Bucky gave him a weary attempt at a glare, not really wanting to comply. But even that was half-hearted, and once he'd tried to outwait Steve for about fifteen seconds, he gave up and sat up, pulling his sleeves up over the palms of his hands so he could use them to dry his eyes.

Steve sat down next to him. "You didn't have to wait until you thought I was asleep," he said. "If I'd actually been trying, I might've made it to the living room," Bucky said, sniffing hard, then made a frustrated noise. "Because I didn't have enough problems breathing today."

Steve laughed, just a quiet burst of air. "This time, it wasn't my fault."

Bucky looked over at him, trying to look annoyed, but knowing he probably looked pathetic, with red eyes and a wet face, and constantly sniffing to keep from adding a drippy nose to that mess.

Steve had the grace to not comment on that, although he did look like he wanted to be the big brother for a change. He put his arm around Bucky. "You didn't have to try to face it alone, you know," he said.
Bucky felt his expression crumple again as he leaned against his friend. "My brother and sister are gone and I wasn't there for them," he said, trying to keep from sounding like he was whining. He didn't sound whiny, he just sounded like a kid crying on his mother's shoulder about a nightmare again. Not much better.

For a second, Steve didn't reply, just kept his arm around Bucky's shoulders, then sighed. "Bucky, that wasn't your fault. And even if we'd both come home from the war, there's a good chance we would've been gone before either of them. We were older than them."

"Paul died young," Bucky half-heartedly protested, sniffing again. Goddamnit, he was going to have to go find some tissue or toilet paper or something.

"Okay, maybe we would've been there for Paul," Steve said. "But not likely for Rebecca. And Peter is still alive, we definitely wouldn't be there for him."

Bucky decided to set that one aside. "She died of cancer. That's an awful way to go." He swallowed to keep from coughing. "It was probably those damn cigarettes. I told her not to start that shit." He felt helpless, and when he felt helpless, he got angry, and at that exact second, anger seemed better than helpless sobbing.

Steve wasn't buying that. "Bucky, stop," he said. "You know she never did anything you told her. There's no point in getting angry about it now. I hate to keep pointing ages out, but even if she hadn't had cancer, she might not've made it this long anyway. Peter is probably the only one that was young enough."

The tension left his shoulders, and he felt his throat tighten with the threat of more tears. "I should've been there for them," he said again, weakly.

This time, Steve didn't try to argue, didn't try to point out how Bucky's emotions were in conflict with reality, he just tightened his grip on Bucky. "I know."
They’d taken the car to Annapolis. It was way too cold to go at highway speeds across the states on the bike, and Bucky was just as glad. It was one thing to go around the streets of DC without helmets, but Steve and Bucky both knew better than to go on the highways without them, and Bucky hated the damn things. They were worse than hats, and as much as he knew he'd look different to Peter when he saw him, he didn't need to look ridiculous on top of it.

Steve pulled to a stop alongside the curb. Across the street from them was a tan, one-story house, nothing special. Two windows flanking a small front porch, a tiny front yard, and it didn't look like there was much more to the backyard, as crowded as the street was. On the front of the house, by the door, were the numbers for Peter's address.

Bucky stared out the window, not moving to get out. He was so close to seeing his brother, and he was afraid of actually doing it.

"Bucky?"

Steve did that a lot.

Bucky didn't look at Steve, just kept staring at the house. "I'm not sure I can face him," he said quietly.

If Steve hadn't been touching his shoulder just past where the metal met flesh, Bucky wouldn't even had known that Steve's hand was there. "He doesn't know," he said. "And even if he did, he wouldn't blame you for it."

"But I know," Bucky said. "I caused some of the worst things to happen last century. And now I have to look him in the eye."

"You didn't cause those, Bucky," Steve said, voice firm. "Hydra did." Bucky didn't argue, but as true as that logically was, it didn't change the fact that Bucky remembered being the one to pull that trigger, to hunt down those targets. When he didn't say anything in reply, Steve spoke up again. "We can go back, if you want."

Bucky finally tore his gaze away from the house to look down at his mismatched hands in his lap. "No," he said. "He said he wanted to see me." He grabbed his gloves off his lap and pulled them on.

"And you want to see him," Steve said. "Deny it."

Bucky couldn't help but smile, glancing over at Steve. "I deny everything, you know that."

"Get out of the car," Steve ordered, opening his door.

"Yes, Captain," Bucky said, unbuckling and getting out. He locked his door behind him, waiting by it for Steve to come around from his side of the car. "You know, it's going to suck if he's not home."

Steve joined him, hands in his coat pockets. "Guess there's only one way to find out," he said. "Come on." He started for the door.

Bucky took a second to follow, his feet not quite willing to cooperate at first, before catching up. He stayed just behind Steve, letting Steve approach the door first and ring the bell. Bucky's stomach tied itself into knots as they waited.
From the other side of the door came the sound of footsteps, then the door unlocked and opened. Peter, just as he'd looked in that picture on the CNN article, startled, staring at them. "Steve!"

Steve and Bucky were both forced to step back as Peter practically threw open the screen door. If Steve hadn't been so big by comparison to Peter- who was hardly little -Bucky half suspected that Peter would've practically lifted Steve up into a hug.

Steve laughed, returning the hug. "Sorry it took so long to visit," he said. "I didn't realize you were even still around."

Peter stepped back, hands still gripping Steve's arms. "Don't put me in my grave yet," he said sternly, then glanced at Bucky, the wide grin on his face softening to an affectionate smile. "Bucky."

As nervous as Bucky had been, and still was, that didn't stop him from smiling a bit. "Hi, Peter."

For a second, neither Barnes brother moved, time ticking backwards, until Peter stepped over to Bucky and hugged him tightly. "I missed you, big brother," he said quietly.

Despite the age, despite the size difference, despite everything wrong about everything, Bucky recognized his little brother, recognized his voice, had heard him say that so many times whenever Bucky would come home to visit after he'd moved out. He wrapped his arms around his brother, closing his eyes. "I thought you were dead."

Peter pulled back, holding onto Bucky's shoulders and giving him a wet-eyed glare. "You have room to talk!" he snapped. While Bucky gave him a somewhat contrite look, Peter's gaze went to Bucky's left shoulder.

Bucky looked over at Peter's hand, which had loosened its grip, and rolled his shoulder back away from his brother's hand. "Let it go, Peter," he said.

Peter dropped his arms, studying Bucky a moment. Then he shivered, looking around. "Come on, get in here," he said, holding open the screen door for them. "Too damn cold out here for us to be flapping our jaws."

Bucky followed Steve into the house, Peter pulling up the rear. While Peter closed and locked the door, Bucky studied the living room they'd stepped into. It was small, although bigger than his and Steve's. There was a couch, a coffee table, and an old recliner that looked like it'd seen better days. Bucky had a feeling it was Peter's usual spot, with how well-used it looked. There was a TV, modern-looking, but not very big, and a squat bookcase that had pictures on it, but other than that, the living room looked mostly empty.

Bucky pulled off his gloves, shoving them into his coat pockets, and wandered over to the pictures. There were more of them than there was furniture in the living room. A couple he recognized; some pictures from their childhood, pictures of their parents and siblings, a few of Mary and children he assumed were Mary's younger brothers. Nephews he'd never known. There was a picture of Rebecca with two young girls, girls he assumed must be her daughters. More family he'd never had a chance to know.

"Bucky, give me your coat," Steve said from behind him.

"Hm?" Bucky looked back at Steve. "Oh." He shucked off his coat, letting Steve take it as he looked back at the pictures. There was a few of Peter as a younger man, pictures that made it easier to draw the line between the kid he remembered and the retiree who was standing next to him. "Who's this?" he asked, picking up one of the pictures. There was an unfamiliar redheaded man, about as tall as
Peter, with his arm wrapped around Peter's shoulders.

Peter took the picture from him, looking at it. "That's Frank," he said.

Bucky looked at him. "Who's Frank?"

Peter took a deep breath, setting the picture down. "My partner."

Bucky stared at him, trying to process that. "You don't mean business partner, do you?"

"No." Peter looked over at him with a defiant look in his eyes that Bucky knew all too well.

For another few seconds, Bucky could only stare at him more, trying to reconcile what he remembered with this news. Then he gave his brother a dirty look. "You had me teach you how to approach women, and you were homosexual the whole time? My wisdom was wasted on you, boy."

Peter laughed, and Bucky heard Steve snorting like he was trying not to himself. "Glad to hear you don't seem to mind."

"Why would I mind?" Bucky asked. "But seriously, why'd you ask me about girls when you weren't interested?"

"A few reasons," Peter said. "For one, I was trying to hide. You know how hard it was in those times. I seem to recall you had a gay roommate at college."

"Who, John?" Bucky said. "Yeah, he was. Didn't bother me any, but he was a bit paranoid about it. Constantly asked me if I was going to kill him after I found out." He glanced around for Steve, suddenly feeling a little rude that both he and Peter were ignoring him. Steve was sitting back on the couch, listening politely. He waved off Bucky's concern without Bucky even having to voice it.

"How'd Mom and Dad react when they found out?"

Peter shrugged. "Mom cried. Said she'd never wanted such a hard life for me." Then he looked like he wanted to laugh. "Dad said 'good, means I won't have any more grandchildren.'"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Because Dad hated a chance to spoil people."

"I think he got tired of it after the fourth one," Peter said. "Then Rebecca went and gave him number five."

"How thoughtful of her," Bucky said. "So how long were you and Frank together?"

"Fifty-three years," Peter said. "We met and got together in 1951. Met in the Navy."

Bucky gave him an incredulous look. "You enlisted? Didn't my death teach you anything?"

"Hell no," Peter said, giving him a smarmy smile. "I didn't enlist, I went to Annapolis. Retired a lieutenant. I outrank you."

Bucky looked over at Steve, motioning to Peter. "You hear this?" he demanded. Before Steve could do more than laugh, he looked back at Peter. "We're not military anymore, you don't outrank shit."

"According to the president, you're still in the service," Peter pointed out.

Bucky made a displeased face. "Only for a few more days," he said. "And you aren't, so you still don't outrank shit." Peter put on that too-innocent face that Bucky never bought. Peter was never innocent. "Did you meet at Annapolis?"
"No." Peter shook his head. "We met during the Korean War. He was a petty officer onboard the ship I was serving on."

"Fraternization in the ranks," Bucky said, then applauded his brother in a slow and completely sarcastic manner. "Good job, you make us all proud."

"I never did like following the rules," Peter said, looking distracted by Bucky's hands. Or rather, his metal hand.

Bucky sighed, dropping his arms. "You want to ask about it."

"I'm trying not to," Peter said in a roundabout confession.

Bucky looked at Steve, almost looking for help, but knowing he wouldn't get any. Steve was a terrible liar, he'd be even worse at fielding that question than Bucky would. At Steve's lost look, Bucky sighed in frustration, and motioned to Peter's chair. "Go sit down."

Peter's eyebrows raised. "That bad?"

"No," Bucky said. "I'm just tired of looking at you so close to eye-level. I don't remember giving you permission to grow up."

"You weren't around to give it," Peter said, and while Bucky doubted his brother had meant to, it caused a stab of guilt to settle in his gut.

"There's a lot of things I wasn't around for," Bucky said. "Wasn't exactly my intention."

Peter settled down in his chair. "I know. I didn't mean-" He cut himself off as Bucky took a seat on the edge of the coffee table, putting himself catty-corner to Steve and Peter. "You know, Mom used to take the switch to you for that."

Bucky laughed. "She took a switch to my ass for a lot of things," he said. "Never stopped me. Besides, she's not around to do that anymore. And I can guarantee that you wouldn't catch me to do it yourself if you tried."

"I'd try anyway," Peter grumbled. "That table was clean a minute ago."

"Oh god," Bucky said, holding his head in his hands. "What is it with you people getting weird about butt germs? You're as bad as Steve was about his candy."

Steve finally spoke up in the conversation. "You sat on my candy," he said with pointed annoyance.

"I did not sit on it," Bucky said. "We established this. It was behind my back."

"Twenty years of habits, Steve," Bucky said, a bit cross. "We keep having this discussion, and yet, you never get over it. We've been around each other precisely four years since a German doctor decided to give you a miracle cure to everything wrong with you, that's not enough to break twenty years of habits."

"I'll get over it when you break those habits," Steve said.
Bucky took a deep breath, looked at Peter and pointed at Steve, silently demanding his little brother side with him in that particular conflict.

Peter shook his head. "I don't get involved with your lovers' spats," he said. "You know that."

Bucky scowled. "You're the worst little brother," he said. "You're supposed to be on my side."

"I am in every way except when it comes to you two," Peter said. "Anyone with any brains knows to stay out of things when you and Steve start bellyaching at each other. Mom gave up on trying about the same time you managed to break her of calling you 'James;' according to Paul."

"You know, I wouldn't have even bothered with that, if she didn't have that tone problem," Bucky said. "I could never tell if she was yelling my name because I was in trouble, or because she just wasn't sure if I was close enough to hear her. When she called me Bucky, I knew she was just making herself heard. When she called me James, I started running."

"Is that why you did that?" Peter asked with a laugh. "I always did wonder. Mom just said it was because you were a strange child."

"You were all strange children," Steve said, completely unhelpfully.

Bucky pointed at him. "You have no room to speak, you're Irish. And of course we were strange kids, we were her kids. Insanity runs in the family."

"It practically gallops," Peter said, looking up at the ceiling with an entirely too amused smile.

Bucky raised an eyebrow, thinking that what Peter had said was familiar, but not quite able to place it. "And you got that from where?"

Peter stared at him. "Arsenic And Old Lace? Cary Grant? Peter Lorre? It came out in '44, you were still around."

It took a minute of racking his memory to figure out what Peter was talking about. "Oh, that. I think I saw that all of once and was half-asleep through it. We were on the front lines, Peter, we didn't get a lot of recreation time, and we saw more local films than films from back home."

"You need to rewatch it," Peter said. "The humor's your type. Weird."

Bucky looked at Steve. "We can make that date night."

Steve just rolled his eyes. "You're something special, Bucky."

"Only if I'm special to you."

Steve grabbed a couch pillow and smacked Bucky soundly in the face with it. While Bucky laughed, Steve put the pillow where it'd been before. "Sorry to abuse your furniture, Peter, but he requires a firm hand to keep him in line sometimes."

"He thinks I'm a dog," Bucky griped, giving Steve a side-long look.

"Then he doesn't take you to the groomers often enough," Peter said, earning a betrayed look from Bucky. "Honestly, why did you let your hair grow out? You look like a hippie."

"I do not," Bucky said, tucking his hair behind his ears, a bit self-conscious. The only person to comment on his hair was Steve, and Bucky understood that. Peter didn't understand, Peter only knew him from before the war. Being around his little brother took him back in time a bit, and pre-Hydra
Bucky would've rather gone sewer swimming with New York's famous rats than let his hair get like that. Different time, different person.

"You didn't answer my question," Peter said. "And yes, you do."

"You're right, I didn't," Bucky said, still not answering. "Astute observation."

It became painfully apparent, then, that Peter had been brass; he had that look of a commanding officer about to run an enlisted man through the ringer for mouthing off. "Which means you know more than the president let on that you did."

"Not really," Bucky said. "When I ran into Steve two years ago, I had no idea who he was. I didn't even know who I was. Why do you think I'd know anything more than that?"

Peter looked conflicted, torn between two roles, that of a concerned brother and that of a soldier on a mission. Bucky hated seeing that on his brother's face, hated seeing that the military had given him that split personality that only people who'd gone through what Bucky had should have. "Because you're not giving me a straight answer," Peter finally said, the words that of a naval officer, but tone that of a scared younger brother watching something awful happen to his family.

"When have I ever?" Bucky said, trying one more time. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve with his eyebrows raised, looking tense and like he wasn't sure if he wanted to intervene somehow to keep Bucky's secret just that, or if he wanted to get away before there was a nuclear blast from two Barnes brothers about to butt heads.

"Bucky."

Bucky took about three seconds to figure out how to lie in a way that would let him live with himself. "I tore up my arm going down the mountain," he said. "I remember being found, I remember seeing doctors, and I remember having this arm. There's not a whole helluva lot else there for me to remember." Which was true, technically. He'd spent a lot of that time in cryo, there wasn't much there to have in his memories. Years-long sleep didn't give a lot of touching moments to file away in the mental photo album. "I looked like this when Steve found me. Like I said, I didn't remember anything."

When Peter looked over at Steve for confirmation, Steve shrugged. "He's right, he didn't recognize me, and he didn't know his name. He's told you about as much as he's told me." Not entirely true, but the 'about as much' qualifier made it a palatable enough lie for Steve to get away with it.

Tension visibly drained from Peter's face and shoulders, Lieutenant Barnes leaving behind a retired old man who only knew something horrible had happened to his long-dead brother. "It's too bad you don't remember," he said with a weary sort of smile. "If you did, I'd have to get back behind the helm to hunt down whoever did that to you. Whatever they did."

Bucky was just as happy to let him have that assumption. "Easy there, Captain Ahab," Bucky said. "Let the Navy keep their tug boats, you're retired."

"I don't have to be," Peter said. "But you're right." He looked over at the bookcase. "Would you like to meet your family?" he said, flipping topics.

Bucky looked over where Peter was looking, spotting what looked like albums on the shelves. A few of them, from the looks of it. "So how many generations are you going to dump on my head?"

"Only a couple today," Peter said, getting up and going to the bookcase. He flipped through a couple albums, finally selecting one and taking it back to his spot. Bucky moved off the table to sit on the
floor and give the table space to Peter for the pictures.

The three of them spent the next few hours going over the pictures, Peter giving names and telling the stories that each picture had captured as if they'd happened yesterday. He had the Barnes memory, crystal clear, which was something Bucky was grateful for right then. The family had gotten big after he'd died, and there were a lot of names to remember. Bucky filed names and faces away for later, on the off-chance he got to meet any of these people.

Dinner time rolled around without them noticing, until Steve's stomach decided to loudly announce the time. Steve looked frozen, slowly glancing down at his watch, while Peter smothered a smile. Bucky gave him a bland look. "Dinner time?"

"Past," Steve said.

Peter glanced towards the next room, and Bucky could only guess that he was looking towards the kitchen with his next words. "I don't have anything that'd make a big enough meal for three of us," he said, sounding a bit desperate. "I could treat you two out?"

He didn't want Bucky to leave, Bucky could tell that much. Bucky didn't entirely want to leave himself, but at the same time, he needed a break from the past for awhile. "No, we should get back," Bucky said. "I'm technically AWOL. We never asked permission to leave DC."

Peter gave him an aggravated look. "And you made me party to this?"

Bucky flashed him an ornery grin, getting to his feet. "Like I wouldn't make sure to get you into trouble with me."

"You remain the asshole I remember," Peter said.

"That's what I say all the time," Steve said.

Peter pulled each of them into a hug in turn. "When you get that discharge and have more freedom, come visit more often. I don't want to get to see you just once before old age carries me off."

Bucky shoved the lump in stomach at that thought aside and gave his brother a smile. "What, and let you die peacefully? Screw that, I'm going to harass you until you're begging for death to give you a break."

"I'm holding you to that," Peter said, walking them to the door.

Steve and Bucky said goodbye, bundling back up in their coats, and headed back for DC. Neither really spoke, not until the last twenty minutes or so, when Steve commented on the size of Bucky's family. Bucky barely acknowledged him, watching out the window and trying to untie his brain from the knots it'd gotten snarled up into from the day.

He almost felt back to his new normal when they got back to their apartment. He waited patiently at the door for Steve to unlock it and let them in, then froze as the door opened. He grabbed Steve's arm, holding him still. He heard tapping from inside the apartment. He frowned, looking up at Steve.

Steve looked confused, then glanced into the apartment, and then tensed. He heard it too.

Bucky suddenly wished for one of his weapons, or even Steve's shield. It was probably just one of the appliances deciding to misbehave, but there was that chance that someone or something had gotten in, and Bucky didn't like facing unknowns without some measure of defense.
Without giving Steve a chance to argue, Bucky slipped in past Steve, moving with the silence of a well-trained assassin, mind completely submersed into the Winter Soldier, the best defense he could ever ask for. He crept just past the edge of the coat closet, able to see into the living room and dining area, although the kitchen remained obscured.

Natasha Romanov tilted her head back over the arm of the couch, where she was laying as if she belonged there. "Hi, guys."
"So I figured you could use my help," Natasha said, sitting at the table with Steve, while Bucky made dinner.

Bucky didn't feel comfortable around Natasha. The fact that he'd shot her twice probably didn't help his paranoid suspicion that she might not be comfortable around him, either. So, for both their sakes, he stayed out of the conversation, trying, and mostly succeeding, to alter a recipe to accommodate a third person for their meal, occasionally glancing over whenever the food didn't need immediate and constant attention.

"Well, that explains why you're here," Steve said. "But that doesn't explain what you think we need help with. Or how you got in."

Natasha tilted her head slightly, and if she'd had glasses, she would've been looking right over them at Steve. "You left your window unlocked."

Steve looked over at the window over his shoulder. "We broke it, actually," he said. "I'd forgotten about it."

"Why'd you break your own window lock?" Natasha asked, raising one eyebrow. "That seems like a security disaster."

Steve looked at Bucky briefly before turning back to Natasha. "We were avoiding the press. They had the front door swarmed."

"So you jumped the roof," Natasha said, less of a question and more of a statement. "And then forgot to have the window lock repaired."

"We had other things on our minds," Bucky said, a bit distracted by glopping dough balls into the chicken broth cooking on the stove, and hoping he sounded less invested in Natasha's line of not-questioning than he actually was.

Natasha looked over at him. "So I've heard. Did you spend the day in Annapolis?" At Bucky's cold stare, she shrugged with a dismissive expression. "Stark's not the only one who can read the news. I found your brother in the white pages, not exactly hard. When you weren't here, I figured you must've gone to visit. Steve doesn't know how, but you've managed to keep your head down for two years in plain sight, so I assumed that you'd know better than to chance running into the press unless it was for good reason. Family's a good reason."

Steve gave her a wounded look. "I feel insulted."

"You probably should be," she said, giving him a little smile that reminded Bucky vaguely of the Mona Lisa. "Which is why I'm here. There's some evidence, mostly rumors, that the Winter Soldier was responsible for all those kills I told you about. That information gets out, you're going to have to get underground until we can figure out how to prove his innocence, and let things blow over."

Bucky looked back to the food, giving the broth a bit of stirring, pretending to not really care about the question he was about to ask. "All those kills? You say that like I'm a mass murderer."

"No," Natasha said. "Just a very good assassin. Over two dozen assassinations in the last fifty years, not a bad record in the business, given that you were a ghost that nobody believed in."
That made Bucky pause, and look over at her, forgetting about the food. "Is that the official count?"

Natasha raised her eyebrows. "Is that wrong?"

"A bit." He went back to tending the food.

"You might want to tell us these things, if anything gets leaked, so we know how much we have to work against," Natasha said.

Not something Bucky wanted to do, but he couldn't logically argue that, and as awkward as he felt with Natasha, she made a good point. "I was working longer than fifty years."

"So more targets. Where were you operating?"

"The Soviet Union, mostly. At least at first. Then we expanded to the western allies." Bucky dumped the mostly cooked, deboned chicken he'd set aside after shredding it into the pot with the broth, noodles and dumplings. He left the food to simmer, leaning against the counter next to the stove and crossing his arms. "First ten years were mostly test runs of the reset procedures. They put me out almost as soon as my arm healed and the chemicals had gone to work."

"About seventy years, then," Natasha said, sounding impressed. Bucky wasn't sure why that was something to be impressed by. "How often were you on the job?"

"Couple times a year, in the early days," Bucky said, glancing at the food to make sure it hadn't tried to boil over without his supervision. "History needed a bigger nudge at first. After that, the dominoes went down on their own. If my memory's to be trusted, that number should be somewhere between fifty and a hundred, counting eliminating witnesses."

Both Steve and Natasha looked disturbed. "A hundred? That's a lot of assassinations, are you sure about that number? The intelligence community couldn't have been that wrong about your count," Natasha said, sounding more horrified than she probably wanted to let on.

"Not every target was a major public player," Bucky said, trying to act unaffected, not really wanting to show much emotion to Natasha. As if it didn't bother him. As if he wasn't anyone she should turn her back on. "Some were staged to look like accidents, which means nobody would be looking for a killer. And some were just people who happened to know the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Natasha was the first to visibly recover from that upsetting news. "Hydra did a number on you."

Bucky flicked a glance to Steve, forcing himself to look Steve in the eye, even though he really didn't want to. "Maybe." Steve didn't look mad, he looked like he was mourning something intangible, something long since lost. "I killed more people in the war."

"So did I, Bucky," Steve said, trying and failing to be comforting. "That's how war goes."

Bucky chose to not argue. Steve didn't and couldn't understand the difference between being a soldier and firing an M-1 at a crowd of enemy soldiers and downing several at a time, and being an assassin or a sniper and making the kill up close and personal.

"You two are making me feel like a slacker," Natasha said, not sounding terribly serious or hurt by that.

"That's not something you want to excel in, Natasha," Steve said. "You're a spy, not a soldier."

She gave him that subtle little smile again. "I can be a soldier on demand. Unless you forgot about
"I think New York's going to stay with me awhile," Steve said. "But that was different, and you know it."

While they talked, Bucky turned off the heat on the stove, and carefully grabbed three bowls out of the cupboard.

"We spies kill people, too," Natasha said, sounding completely unaffected by this fact.

Bucky wanted to grab them both by the shoulders and shake them until they stopped trying to compare kill counts like a bunch of teenage boys having a dick-waving contest. "Food's done," he interrupted, setting the bowls down on the counter by the stove.

"What did you make?" Natasha asked, getting up and walking over. "I smelled the chicken."

"Chicken noodle soup with dumplings. Basically." Bucky stood back out of the way to let her and Steve dish up first.

Natasha looked at him, a pleased sort of surprise on her face. "Chicken and dumplings? When would a Brooklyn kid learn a Midwestern dish?"

Bucky motioned for her to get some food before Steve decided he was hungry enough to forgo chivalry. "My aunt lived in Iowa," he said. "She'd make it every time she came to visit. Fed a lot of people."

"Can't argue that," she said, serving herself a rather impressively large bowl of soup and dumplings. "My god, these dumplings are huge. I don't know if I need a fork or a spoon here."

Bucky grabbed some silverware out of the drawer and handed her one each of a spoon and a fork. "Use both," he said.

"I'll take the advice of the expert," she said, taking the offered silverware, then headed back for the table.

"I don't think you've made this since you moved in, Buck," Steve said, stepping over with a full bowl and taking some silverware from Bucky.

Bucky grabbed the remaining bowl for himself. "I haven't made it since before I went to boot camp," he said. "Pray I didn't screw something up."

"Should I cross myself?" Steve asked.

Bucky glanced over at him to see that Steve looked way too amused for his own good. "Only if you want me to laugh at you," he said, going back to paying attention to scooping a portion of soup and dumplings into his bowl. "Besides, I thought you weren't Catholic anymore." He joined Steve and Natasha at the table.

"You were Catholic?" Natasha asked, looking at Steve. "I didn't know that."

Steve idly stirred his soup, letting it cool. "My mother was an immigrant from Ireland, she raised me in her church. I sang in the choir and everything, growing up." Then he gave her a stern look, pointing at her. "I know what you're going to say, and no, I was never left alone with a priest. Those were the altar boys."
Natasha choked on her food, trying to cough without spitting out a mouthful of chicken and noodles. Bucky had to bite his lip to keep from laughing at her, and Steve wasn't bothering to even try. Natasha took a deep breath, her fist lightly smacking the table as she chewed and finally swallowed. She glared at Steve. "I owe you for that, Rogers."

"Can't wait to cash in," Steve said, flashing her a bratty smile. "I'm sure you'll make it creative."

Bucky raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he watched their exchange. He hadn't seen Steve exchange that kind of banter with a woman since Peggy had died earlier that year. Steve had been largely unsuccessful with the dating scene, and now Bucky was idly wondering if it wasn't because of Natasha.

He'd have to ask Steve later.

"You expect anything less from me?" Natasha said, still giving Steve a dirty look. "I'd be insulted if you did."

"I expect nothing but the best from you," Steve said, stabbing a dumpling with his fork. "Now eat, and try not to choke on it this time. Bucky worked hard on that."

Natasha looked at Bucky. "You dumped dough into chicken noodle soup."

"Don't look at me," Bucky said. "He doesn't speak for me. He shouldn't even speak for himself."

"I stand up for you and that's my thanks?" Steve said. "You're on your own in the future. Word of warning, she's a tough opponent."

Natasha and Bucky studied each other across the table for a moment, both of them sizing each other up and ascertaining threat levels. Bucky had a feeling she couldn't be as bad as Tony, nobody was as bad as Tony, but she was easily keeping up with Steve, who had a very sharp wit. Usually. Sometimes something went by him.

Finally, Natasha smiled, stabbing a dumpling with her fork and holding it up. "You worked hard on it," she said, taking a bite.

Bucky decided he liked her. At least for the moment.

Natasha studied the dumpling on her fork while she chewed. "This is good. What'd you add to that dough?"

"Secret's in the sauce," Bucky said, trying desperately to sound like he wasn't purposely quoting something with that.

No such luck. Natasha stared at him. "You've seen Fried Green Tomatoes."

Bucky couldn't help but laugh a bit, poking at a bit of chicken. "Once," he said. "I'd read the book, decided to see how the movie was. I need to learn to stop expecting good movie adaptations out of Hollywood."

"I don't know," Natasha said. "I thought the movie was okay. But I've never read the book."

"The director thought he'd be cute and try to censor Idgie and Ruth's romance," Bucky said. "I have never understood people's hang up about that kind of thing. Nobody's getting hurt, what the hell does it matter?"
"It doesn't," Natasha said. "But I'm a bit surprised to hear such a progressive attitude from a man who grew up when homosexuality was still classified as a mental illness. Stonewall was about twenty years off from when you died."

Bucky shrugged. "I never grew up with the religious garbage. My family wasn't even Christian enough to show up for Easter services. We had a Bible, but it'd been Grandma's. I think we kept it more as an heirloom than as something we took seriously. I started to read it once, and decided it'd be a good idea if I didn't continue."

Before Natasha could do more than give him a curious look, Steve spoke up. "Why? I know you never liked going to mass with me, but you didn't even want to get the cultural references?"

Bucky gave him a flat look. "Because that book was important to you, enough at the time that it would've just devolved into a fight that I didn't want to have. You know how I get when I have an opinion on a book. Keeping our friendship in one piece was more important."

Steve gave him a patiently tolerant look, and Bucky couldn't decide if Steve was about to bait him, or if he was actually amused for some reason. "And what's your opinion now?"

"I haven't read it, I have no opinion," Bucky said firmly, following his words up with a pointed spoonful of soup so he didn't have to answer any more questions.

"Relax, you can read it if you want to dissect it. I'm not going to be offended. Might've been back then, though, so good call."

"Kinda what I thought," Bucky said, no longer having food in his mouth as an excuse to not answer. He noticed Natasha watching them with that goddamn inscrutable smile. He couldn't tell if he found it attractive or just irritating yet. "Yes?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." She looked at Steve affectionately. "It's just nice to see things go Steve's way for once. Now if I could just get him to find a girl to settle down with."

"I keep bugging him," Bucky said before Steve could do more than make a couple syllable-like noises in protest. "He says there's someone he keeps meaning to ask, but I've yet to see him go out to actually ask her."

Natasha set her spoon down, sitting back in her seat and crossing her arms pointedly. "And which one is this? This isn't Sharon, is it? I told you to ask her out over two years ago."

Steve looked caught between a rock and a hard place, or rather, between two friends who were grilling him on the status of his love life. "We've kept in contact."

"Didn't work out?" Natasha asked, sounding vaguely disappointed.

Steve looked like he was considering his answer carefully, then smiled. "You're going to hate me, but we're too busy." Natasha gave him a frustrated look, but didn't say anything as Steve held up a hand to shush her. "She's doing a lot of field work in her job right now. She joined the CIA after SHIELD went down. And even before yesterday, Bucky and I have been pretty busy off and on the last couple years. There's this thing called schedule conflict."

"Where the hell are these conversations taking place?" Bucky demanded. "I have never once heard you on the phone with anyone."

"I told you, she's in the field a lot," Steve said. "Computer's the only way she has of contacting the outside world sometimes."
"How is it that you've managed to have entire conversations without me even noticing? These have got to be really boring conversations if I haven't seen you reacting to them."

"You get involved in those books and the rest of the world stops existing," Steve told him. "You just aren't noticing."

Bucky desperately wanted to deny that, wanted to pretend that nothing but keeping himself and Steve alive would take that much attention from him to the exclusion of all else, but he couldn't, not without being dishonest. He gave Steve a snitty look. "Fine, you win this round."

"Looks like we both owe him now," Natasha said, and it almost took Bucky a second to even realize she was speaking to him and not Steve. "Care to join forces?"

Bucky looked at Steve, watching him grow more and more nervous. "Depends on him," Bucky said, then went back to his food.

Natasha gave him an approving look, then focused on her own food. Steve gave them both dirty looks, then tried to pretend he hadn't just been caught in a trap of his own creation. Bucky let him have that delusion.

Food distracted them from further conversation for a few minutes, until their bowls were empty. Both thanked Bucky for the food, and Steve offered to clean the kitchen since Bucky cooked, but Bucky waved him off. "Keep her entertained," he said, pointing to Natasha with his left hand, balancing their dishes in his other.

"You think I'll get in your way?" Natasha asked, raising an eyebrow at him. She was testing him, seeing if he'd say something that sounded more like the Winter Soldier than like Bucky Barnes. An enemy rather than a friend. Is that what she wanted? A friend? From what Steve had told him, she was hard to befriend, hard to trust without having put her through the fire.

Somehow, Bucky doubted she wanted a friend. She just wanted to watch for a knife in her back. Or maybe a bullet to the gut.

"You're a woman, every woman gets in the way," he said, turning away with the bowls and walking to the sink.

"Well, chivalry is dead," she said. Something in her tone said that for the moment, Bucky had passed her test.

He hoped she wasn't sticking around long, so he didn't have to worry about many more of them. Steve had done it a few times, mostly in the early days, just a gentle prod to keep Bucky on the right track towards healing. Steve hadn't done it out of concern for his own personal safety. His tests had been for Bucky's benefit, little pushes to keep him working towards getting away from Hydra.

But Natasha's tests weren't for Bucky's benefit. They were for hers. They'd tangled twice as Winter Soldier and Black Widow, and both times, Black Widow had lost. She knew how dangerous he was, and they'd barely had contact in a real fight. They'd been more predator and prey, with her running and only surviving out of sheer luck. She wasn't his equal. Just because Steve trusted him didn't mean she had to.

But she'd come of her own free will to offer her help, even though he highly suspected that was far more for Steve's sake than any other. She had no reason to care if Bucky was indicted and imprisoned for Hydra's work. So he took that as a tentative offer of an alliance, at the very least, and decided to tolerate a few more pokes. He doubted she was staying long, anyway.
"So where are you staying?" Steve asked. "We can give you a ride."

Bucky grabbed the mostly-empty pot of soup, with all the dumplings pilfered and nothing left but broth and the occasional piece of chicken or stray noodle.

"Right there," she said, and he glanced over just in time to see her point to their couch.

He nearly dropped the pot on his foot. He caught it mid-air, but the metal clack of the pot hitting his left hand was loud enough to draw attention. Natasha looked at him, and Bucky couldn't entirely tell if she was amused that she'd just kicked a hornet's nest, or completely indifferent to any reaction he was having to her inviting herself to stay with them.

Steve stared at Bucky a moment. "Uh..." He looked back at Natasha. "I- I don't know if that's a good idea, we only have the couch, it won't be comfortable."

"I don't know," Natasha said, and now Bucky was certain she was amused. "It was comfortable enough earlier while I was waiting for you guys."

Steve took in a deep breath, looking at Bucky, who made a point of turning away and dumped the pot into the sink, knowing what was coming next. "So this is going to be very unsubtle, but Bucky, can I talk to you?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Guys, stop. I'm not here to intrude on your privacy, and where you sleep and why is not my business, I don't care, and I'm not going to be telling anybody. Yes, I know, I found the bedroom trying to find the bathroom earlier. If that's the issue, relax."

Bucky's jaw clenched so tightly, his teeth hurt and his temples began to pound. His face burned with humiliation. She didn't know why his bed had been moved into Steve's bedroom, she didn't care, but she knew it was there. Knowing the what was the first step towards knowing the why, and he would've been just as happy if nobody ever found out the what to get to the why. Even if they didn't care, one might lead to two. If she found out why, she'd find out about his weakness that had led to the arrangement in the first place, and that was unacceptable. He'd rather she just assume that he and Steve had a somewhat dysfunctional relationship going on.

Steve hung his head, his hands folded on the back of his skull, shaking his head slightly. "Natasha, it's not-"

"I wouldn't be here more than two weeks at the most, I have a job I'm skipping out on to be here," Natasha said, interrupting him. "You need me here. If I get a notification from my source that any of the Winter Soldier's activities over the last few decades have been leaked to any governing body in the world, I need to be here to extract you immediately. You can't afford for me to have to travel from a hotel or something. You boys are just going to have to put up with a little extra estrogen around. I promise I won't bleed on anything."

Bucky's nose wrinkled, the embarrassment and fear momentarily forgotten. "You're disgusting."

"At least I put the toilet seat down when I'm done with it," she said with that smile that was definitely leaning towards 'irritating'.

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Steve sighed, lifting his head enough to look at Bucky, expecting an opinion on the matter. Bucky hated Natasha's logic, it was obnoxious and also very right. If they needed to run, they couldn't wait for her to catch up to them. It was a preventive measure, nothing to worry about, more than likely, but that little chance made it impossible to ignore the wisdom of her suggestion. So he gave Steve a look that he'd refuse to admit was a pout, then turned back to the sink to rinse the dishes and load
them in the dishwasher.

"We have some spare bedding in the linen closet," Steve said. "Not a lot of extra blankets, but I can lend you one of mine, if you need. The bedroom doesn't have a window right next to it like the couch does."

"I grew up in Russia, cold doesn't bother me," Natasha said. "But thank you."

It was going to be a long damn two weeks.
Chapter 6

Natasha had been there all of a week, and Bucky was about to crawl up the wall, across the ceiling, and right down her goddamn throat. The stress from her being there was making him come undone at the seams. Some of it wasn't even her fault, it was having his privacy invaded. It could've been anyone staying with them, and he would've been ready to throw the guest out the window to see if they could fly.

He never really liked sharing his living space after moving out on his own. Living away from a crowded household had given him a taste for the freedom of having his own space where nobody really cared if he walked around the house half dressed, his hair sticking up in a million directions and had a bowl of ice cream for breakfast, if he wanted to really be a successful adult. Living with Steve didn't really feel like losing that privacy, although occasionally having to wait for the bathroom was a disadvantage over his time living alone.

But now they had a house guest for no longer than two weeks, assuming nothing worrisome happened. And if they had to run, he had no idea how long he'd have to be in close quarters with her.

As if his own neurosis about his privacy wasn't bad enough, she spent the entire time pushing at him. She was subtle enough that Steve didn't seem to pick up on it, or maybe he did and he simply let Bucky and Natasha work it out on their own, Bucky wasn't sure. He could understand the wisdom in that; Natasha needed proof that she could trust Bucky, and Bucky had never given her reason to in the first place.

But she didn't have to push. She didn't have to set up little tests to see how he'd react.

She never called him by his name, just called him 'you', which felt as dehumanizing as when Hydra had done it. That alone was enough to make him want to rip out hair. But then she'd make a remark about his sniper skills, specifically dragging up missions she knew about, the Iranian nuclear physicist, Nick Fury, even her. She never mentioned anything about his abilities as Bucky. She made him approach her almost entirely as Hydra's Winter Soldier, and while it was possible it was simply because she wasn't familiar with anything he'd done before Hydra got ahold of him, it wasn't likely. She did her research, she was a spy. A spy could die if they didn't do their research. So he highly doubted she didn't know. She was just refusing to approach him as Bucky. He knew she was only doing it to get him to either prove her right, or prove Steve right. She probably hoped he proved Steve right, for everyone's sakes, but she was still pushing. Pushing, pushing pushing.

And in all of it was the stress of the news constantly plastering his face around, and the weird conspiracy theories people came up with to explain where he'd been and how he'd survived, and the commentary and the mud slinging and the praises being sung and that nagging worry that Natasha represented: that he might have to hide. That someone would find out the truth. That he'd become a wanted man and everything he and Steve knew would be flopped over sideways and break its neck upon impact. As long as Natasha was there, that threat was real and haunted the back of his mind.

Bucky was rapidly nearing the end of his rope.

Steve felt the stress too, although he was able to keep his cool a bit better. But they'd argue. They became like a bickering old married couple. Steve used the last of the milk without telling Bucky. Bucky accidentally broke Steve's favorite mug. Stupid little things that normally wouldn't have resulted in anything more than a sarcastic remark ended up causing an argument that left Bucky's stomach in unhappy knots.
At least Natasha had the sense to stay out of those situations and quietly melt into the couch.

Glasses clanked against the bottom of the cupboard as Bucky unloaded the dishwasher from the now-clean dinner dishes. Grab, thunk. Grab, thunk. Grab, harder thunk. So many dishes, approximately five million more with a third person in the household. Another sore reminder that they might have to run. Another sore reminder of the way his safe privacy had been invaded. One more damn source of the stress he had since the beginning of the week when Tony texted them the news. Bucky was irrationally wanting to fly out to California and throw Tony around for awhile for starting this whole mess with that goddamn text.

Not that he actually blamed Tony, but it sure as hell might make him feel good for a few minutes.

"Bucky, you're going to break a glass," Steve said from the table. He already sounded on edge, the promise of another argument looming.

Bucky drew in a deep breath, trying to keep his hands still before he could relax enough to safely grab one and not just throw it somewhere. "I am not." He grabbed another glass, slammed it down in the cupboard, then grabbed another one.

"Bucky, would you please-"

The glass shattered in his mechanical hand's grip as he tried to curl it into a fist, sending roughly a million pieces scattering around the floor, in the dishwasher, on the counters. Bucky's head began to pound, the tension taking a trip down his whole body until everything ached.

Behind him, he heard Steve sigh in anger. "I told you-"

Bucky threw the last of the base still somewhat in his grip into the sink. "Fine, you told me so. You do it." He had to get out. He needed out of that apartment and away from Steve and especially from Natasha, but also definitely from Steve, who he saw set his book down with more force than strictly necessary as Bucky turned away from the sink.

Steve looked ready to spit nails at Bucky. "I never said you couldn't do it, just don't do it with that much enthusiasm."

Bucky decided to ignore him, storming past the couch where Natasha was sitting quietly and watching him. He all but ripped the window out slamming it open, crawling out onto the fire escape. "Damnit, Bucky!" Steve called after him.

Bucky continued to ignore him, the metal of the fire escape making a satisfying whine of protest as he stomped up to the roof. He should've been just going up there the last week, instead of trying to stick it out inside. He knew his temper started walking on a tight rope when he got exceptionally stressed, and he was taking it out on Steve, making Steve get wound up in turn. It had turned into this horrible, infinite loop of feedback between them and while none of this could ever threaten their friendship, it was sure as hell pushing them towards an all-out screaming match if Bucky couldn't bring his stress levels down.

At least enough to apologize without trying to do it from behind clenched teeth.

He skipped by his usual spot, pacing around in agitation. He was never going to survive two weeks, not without slipping, not without backsliding. The only person on the planet who'd be able to trust him then would be Steve, and quite possibly not even then. He'd never gotten this riled for this long, not since his memories first started returning and he was caught between the programming in his brain and the memories trying to overwrite the damage.
He hated returning to that place. It was a bad place. A dangerous place. He couldn't afford to go there.

On his fifth pass by it, he paused at the divot that marked his usual spot. It was pretty much stripped of loose concrete. Easily fixed with another liberal application of force from his metal arm, and he had more chunks of rock to fling into the building across the street. He really wondered if anyone who lived over there would notice the concrete bullets embedded in the side of their home.

After about the third rock, he felt some of the tension leaving his neck and flesh shoulder, felt the computers in his left shoulder responding in a facsimile of the same. Now that some of the angry energy had been worked off, he felt a sense of guilt mixing with the lingering annoyance, turning his emotions back in on himself, eating away at his brain. But at least his teeth had stopped hurting from grinding them.

He'd been seated at his usual spot, kicking the heel of his bare foot into the new hole, shifting around broken pieces, for all of a minute before he heard footsteps on the fire escape. He bit back a sigh, trying to untangle his brain enough to deal with Steve.

It wasn't Steve that appeared over the edge of the roof, it was Natasha. You must be goddamn kidding me, he thought, staring at her. He was too shocked to even give her a proper glare.

"I'd ask if you minded if I joined you," she said, walking over. "But I think we both know that I'm the last person you want to talk to right now."

Bucky made a point of looking away from her, off towards the very end of the sunset, the skies just barely violet in that direction, blackness blanketing overhead. No stars to see, not with the lights in the city. Nothing to really stare at that might give a distraction from whatever she was there to say. "Then why'd you come up?" he demanded.

She sat down next to him, and that made his teeth jangle like he'd just bitten into aluminum foil. His last private space that she hadn't already violated, and she was just inviting herself into it.

"Because I think you need to talk, even if you don't want to," she said. "I know it's not easy having me here. I don't know you, not as Steve's friend. But even I can tell that how you two have been fighting since I got here isn't normal. And I never meant to cause that division."

Bucky wasn't sure what he could say to that; he wanted to demand once again why she'd shown up at all, if that wasn't her intent, but he knew damn well why she'd dropped herself in on their couch, and again that pesky beast called logic reared its head at him and threatened to bite off his other arm if he didn't listen to it. So he didn't say anything, just continued to look away from her.

"You shot me, you know," she said after a short stretch of silence. "Twice."

He finally looked over at her; she didn't seem to be particularly bothered by her statement, completely blank, completely unaffected. Another goddamn test. "You gonna hold that against me?" he asked, turning her pushiness right back onto her.

"That depends on you," she said. "I saw the file, I know what they did to you. I'm the one that gave it to Steve."

"I know," he said, wishing desperately that she hadn't read it before handing it over to Steve. That made six people who knew what happened, and that was six too many.

She looked over at the building across the street. "Impressive aim you have," she said.
"Are you surprised?" he asked, glancing over at the various spots where concrete had left a hole in the building, before looking back at her.

"Not really." She studied the hole his foot was still digging at nervously. "My partner was brainwashed. Not the same way, but he attacked me. He didn't recognize me any more than you recognized Steve. Good knock to the head cleared it up."

Bucky sighed. "Barton? Believe me, a concussion wasn't ever enough to help me."

"I know. I haven't talked to Steve since I gave him that file. I've been too busy." She crossed her legs underneath her. "But I don't need a regular status update from him to know that it's been slow going for you. It took decades to make the Winter Soldier, it's going to take awhile to unmake him."

He drew in a deep breath, not really wanting to face that fact. "You really think he's going to go away? He's a scar, he'll never go away."

She smiled, just a faint quirk of her lips. "I never meant that you'd ever be the same James Barnes that grew up in Brooklyn. You were a soldier, you saw things. Even if Hydra had never found you, you would've been changed permanently. Everyone in the business is." She reached out and smacked his foot away from the divot. "You're going to scrape up your heel."

He jerked his leg away. "Don't touch me."

Natasha sat back. "If I hadn't stopped you, you would've made your foot bleed, and Steve might get fussy."

Hearing the affection at Steve's name, he frowned, deciding to bring up the subject that had occurred to him her first night with them. "You love him."

She laughed, the first time he'd really heard that. Even if she was actively pissing him off, he had to admit that she had a nice laugh. "Not the way you're thinking. I'm not interested in that kind of love. But yes, I do care about him. He's one of my only friends, one of the only people that knows and trusts Natasha Romanov. Or Black Widow, for that matter."

"Is this kind of split personality a common problem around here?" he demanded, feeling a bit unnerved by how easily she separated herself as a person from herself as an assassin and spy.

"It comes with the job having a code name. You have to learn to separate your work from yourself, or else you'll lose yourself." She finally looked away, her demeanor changing. "Sometimes, it's too late. And if you're lucky, maybe you'll get yourself back."

He could read her tone, even without knowing her, he could recognize that her statement wasn't a general proclamation, she was speaking from experience. "Did you?"

Natasha looked at him, and he couldn't tell if she'd expected that response or not. "I don't remember not being Black Widow. I can't go back to myself. I have to create a new self. You stand a better chance than I do. You have something to go back to. Something worth going back to." Then she smiled, looking somewhat amused. "Even if you did just break one of his glasses."

Bucky sighed. "At least it wasn't a favorite one this time."

"Get the worst out of the way, and nothing you do afterwards seems that bad." Wise words from a woman that seemed to have a death wish, following an assassin that almost killed her twice up to his private space when he was angry.
He decided not to say anything to that, not even entirely sure what to say to begin with.

"I know you don't trust me," she said. "And I don't trust you. But we're going to have to trust Steve's trust in each other. I came here to help. I know how hard Steve took it when he realized you were alive. And I know what you've been through to change into what you were. And even with the fighting, I can see plain as day that you've found the way out. So this is the deal I propose: let me help. You can ignore me the rest of the time, I know how to stay quiet and blend in with the upholstery. But when I say it's time to go, trust that I am looking out for Steve and his interests, which includes you. So for right now, I'm looking out for you. Give trust to that, since I don't expect you to trust me directly. After this is over, we'll go our separate ways and that will be the end of it. In return, I'll trust that Steve won't let you shoot me again."

She was trying. She was the first to reach out a hand. No matter how much he was angry at her, he couldn't spit on that. Someone other than Steve was showing genuine concern for him, even if indirectly. Someone who had every reason to hate him. Tony didn't and would never know that his parents' death had been at the hands of Hydra's Winter Soldier, so he'd never have a reason to hate him. Pepper probably didn't hate anyone, and Bruce had only talked to him on the video phone a couple times and didn't seem to have a problem with him. As far as Sam went, Bucky figured as long as Steve was around to sit on him and tape his mouth shut, he didn't have much to worry about on that front.

But Natasha had every known reason to hate him. And she was the first one to extend an offer of trust. Something Bucky should've already done, knowing damn good and well that she was helping him.

Finally, he sighed. "Fine."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a phone pinging. She frowned, reaching into her pocket awkwardly and pulling out her phone. She looked at it for less than three seconds, then got up. "Speaking of time to go, it's time to go."

Without hesitation, he got to his feet, his irritation and stress levels disappearing as his brain focused on a new mission, focused on moving, on getting out before he was found. An old, comfortable, and familiar security blanket to hold onto when things got rough. He led her back down the fire escape, ducking in the window, the glass of which had apparently cracked when he opened it getting out.

"Steve, it's time to move," Natasha said, following Bucky in.

Steve didn't question, not any more than Bucky had. They knew how to fall in line, how fast to move when things started happening. The hurry up and wait period was over. They had a routine, a plan set out for how to move when it came time. Bucky would gather up their uniforms and their weapons, not leaving them for anyone to find and confiscate, while Steve packed a bag for each of them for the more mundane things people needed when traveling. Neither packed their electronics; Natasha had recommended they leave them all behind. Anything that could access any sort of network would give away their position. She promised that there would be a reliable and secure device and network where they were going.

Bucky took just an extra minute to grab Steve's two sketchbooks off the shelf, as well as the Hydra file on the Winter Soldier project, and shoved them into one of their overnight bags, then they were out the door. As planned, Steve drove them, Natasha sitting up front to direct him to a place neither he nor Bucky had any idea where it was, or what was waiting for them there. Not the safe house, Natasha wasn't stupid enough to try to hide them in DC.

Natasha directed Steve into a run down parking garage that looked like it'd been abandoned and
condemned. Up to the third level. There was an old-looking red four-door waiting. "Stop here. We're taking that car."

"Taking it to where?" Bucky demanded, getting out of their car once Steve had turned it off.

"Let's get out of town safely before we start talking," Natasha said, moving around to join Bucky at the trunk. Once it was unlocked, she grabbed her bag and walked over to her car, unlocking its trunk and tossing her bag in.

Bucky didn't like that vagueness, that purposeful dodging of his question, but for now, he tolerated it, tucking the weapons and uniforms into the trunk. Steve added their other bags, then slammed the trunk shut.

Steve claimed the passenger seat silently, banishing Bucky to the backseat. That made him nervous. It meant he couldn't see where they were going, only what was around them as they passed it. But he trusted Steve, trusted Steve's trust in Natasha to get them to safety in one piece.

Natasha navigated them through the well-lit streets of DC, until they had exited onto the interstate and left the city behind. Bucky twisted in his seat, the seat belt biting into his chest and shoulder as he did, watching the road behind them, wondering if they'd ever be back.

Deciding that it probably didn't matter, he turned back around and watched the road pass them by.
Chapter 7

It'd been dark already when they'd left, chasing the sunset into the west. Steve hadn't asked Natasha where they were going, so Bucky didn't either, not yet. He had no idea how long they'd be on the road, or what they might have to do once they stopped, so he dozed, letting the sound of the road under the tires lull him to sleep.

He jolted into artificial awakeness when he felt the car stop and lurch a bit as it was put into park. He had no idea where they were, and no concept of how long they'd been traveling. The landscape around him told him nothing, not with how dark it was. That was the first thing he noticed, actually, the lack of lights beyond the building in front of them, and a flickering and dying neon sign naming the building as a hotel with vacancy.

"Where are we?" Steve asked, sounding like he'd been taking advantage of the quiet of travel to sleep a bit too.

"We're in Indiana," she said as they got out. "We're just off I-80 right now."

Bucky stretched once he was out of the car, then looked up at the motel sign, listening to the hum of electricity as the 'O' blinked in and out of apparent existence. "I take it this isn't where we're staying."

"No," she said, sounding tired as she unlocked the trunk. "We've been driving about nine hours, I need sleep before I run us off the side of the road."

Neither Steve nor Bucky protested, although Bucky wished they knew where she was taking them, he could volunteer Steve to take over and get them to wherever they were going faster. But Natasha was in charge of their extraction, he knew what it was like to be a mission head. You didn't just delegate things, you took that responsibility yourself. So he didn't say anything as they grabbed their bags, including the weapons and uniforms, and headed into the lobby.

It was sixty a night for a two-bed standard room, which was cheaper than Bucky was expecting, even for as off-brand as the place was. He'd only ever operated in hotels that had a much higher rate. But, they were in a shoddy building, getting what was probably not a glamorous room, somewhere in the Midwest, away from most commercial tourist traps.

Either way, he didn't care, it was a place to sleep in a real bed. His neck hurt from the angle it'd been in for the past few hours, his head resting against the car window, and sleeping in a car never really rested anyone, it just took the edge off of drowsiness.

The room they dragged themselves into was, as Bucky expected, tiny. It had two doubles, neither of which looked terribly comfortable, and an even tinier bathroom attached. There was an old TV on an equally old stand. Between the two beds were two bare-basic nightstands and a small, wall-mounted lamp over each, that probably put out a lot less light than the overhead that they flicked on upon entering.

Natasha dropped her bag on one bed, leaving the other for Steve and Bucky. Unlike when they stayed with Tony and Pepper, Bucky didn't feel any onset of awkwardness at the prospect of sharing a bed overnight; they were on a mission, and in a mission, you don't worry about things like personal comfort when it might be detrimental. With no idea how long it'd be before they could sleep again, they both needed to get proper rest whenever they could.

"Dibs on the bathroom," Natasha said, pulling out her night clothes, a pair of old sweat pants and a
tank top that fit her a little too snugly for Bucky's comfort, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Bucky stowed the bag with the weapons over by the TV, getting them out of the way, before sitting down on the edge of his and Steve's bed, rubbing his hands over his face. The left hand was uncomfortable against his skin, cold and rigid, but he was used to that. He was tired, his brain felt stuffed with cotton, and he would've almost given anything for the days in the military, when coffee actually did something for him. But he didn't really need it anymore, he just was stuck halfway between body shut down and a second wind to keep going.

But neither he nor Steve knew where they were going, and Natasha seemed intent on not telling them, which was really starting to annoy Bucky. He understood need-to-know information, but that didn't change the desire to have that information. Natasha was a spy evacuating two targets. Keep the destination secret, even from the targets, until you're already there. Keeps things safer for everyone involved.

It still annoyed him.

"Hey," Steve said quietly, and Bucky looked up just as Steve sat down next to him. "How're you doing?"

Bucky shrugged. "Better than I did at home. Doing something is better than doing nothing."

Steve made a noise that might've been agreement, might've been the sound of his brain trying to turn a corner. "Look, Bucky, I'm sorry, I've been getting short with you."

Bucky shook his head. "Don't. It's my fault. I was the one acting like an ass." He glanced the closed bathroom door. "Any idea where she's taking us?"

"No," Steve said. "She hasn't told me anything."

The dryer lint in his brain floated around to another train of thought. "You know, all I can think right now is that it's a good thing we didn't keep that cat."

The bathroom door opened, and Natasha stepped out with her day's clothes in her arms. "What's this about a cat?"

Instead of answering, Bucky grabbed his bag and started digging in it for his own sleep clothes. Steve took Bucky's silent claim on the bathroom as his hint to answer Natasha for him. "Bucky found a cat that a neighbor dumped on the roof. We gave her to Tony."

Natasha's head whipped around to stare at Bucky, who paused at the foot of her bed, halfway to the bathroom. "You managed to get Tony to take in a pet?"

"I convinced Pepper," Bucky said.

Natasha's shock quickly disappeared. "That makes more sense."

Taking that as the end of the conversation, Bucky walked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him. He changed quickly, wanting to just crawl into bed and hit the snooze button on his brain for awhile.

By the time he left the bathroom, Natasha was already under her covers, propped up on a couple of pillows and looking sleepy. She glanced at him, then looked over at Steve. "Looks like it's your turn, Rogers."
Steve made a noise of agreement, stepping around Bucky with his night clothes in hand. The bathroom door shut behind him.

Bucky sat back down on the edge of his bed, stuffing his dirty clothes into his overnight bag. He glanced up at Natasha. Her eyes were closed, but her breathing didn't sound like the relaxed and even breaths of a person asleep. "You look tired."

Her lips quirked a bit, and she opened her eyes, turning her head to look at him. "I've been up longer than you have, Mister Gets To Sleep In The Car."

"You know, if you'd tell us where we're going, you could've had a chance to sleep in the car while we took a turn driving," he pointed out, turning on the lamp next to his bed.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," she said, watching him walk over to the door and flip off the overhead light. "I've had to go longer."

Bucky sat back down on his bed, glancing at the bathroom door before looking back at Natasha. "So have we."

"I know." She pushed herself up a bit, rolling her head back. "God, my neck." She turned her head to look at him, which made her look vaguely like a cat trying to twist its head upside down. "I'm not trying to make you dependent," she assured him. "This is my part of the mission, that's all."

He found that acceptable. He glanced up at the sound of the bathroom door opening, interrupting whatever thought he might've been about to give voice to, as Steve walked out. "You're on that side," Bucky said, jerking his thumb towards the other side of the bed, closest to the door.

"You're putting me near the door?" Steve asked in surprise as he tucked away his clothes from the day. "I'm surprised you're not trying to make Natasha take this bed to put me as far away from danger as possible."

Bucky scowled at him. "Bite your tongue, jackass. I'm not that bad." Then he held up his left hand. "I can't sleep on this side, remember? And as much as I like you, I don't want to be snuggled up against your back just so I can lay comfortably."

Steve glanced over at Natasha as she made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a giggle that she'd tried to strangle with mixed results. She put her weight back off her arms, settling down on her pillows and trying to look far more innocent than she'd probably ever been. Bucky glanced up at Steve, raising an eyebrow, wondering if Steve had ever heard her make that noise.

Steve shook his head and walked around to his side of the bed. "Go to sleep, both of you, before I'm forced to smother you in your sleep."

Bucky turned to glare at him even as he pulled back the covers. "What the hell did I do?"

Steve crawled into bed, watching Bucky as he joined him. "You kick in your sleep, consider it preemptive."

While Natasha made that noise again, Bucky got settled and made a point of kicking back at Steve's leg. "I do not. Not unless you deserve it."

Steve kicked back. "Just turn off the light and go to sleep, Bucky."

Bucky reached up and turned the switch, the light disappearing and leaving behind an eerie level of blackness. The only light was the dim flickering of the motel sign through the closed curtains. No
sounds of people, or of traffic. Even nature seemed quiet, the louder creatures already migrated or bedded down for the winter. And the room was cold. Bucky curled up tightly, feeling grateful for the body heat of Steve's back pressed against him in the entirely too small bed.

It wasn't anything like being in cryo, he had no memories of his time in the chamber, but he remembered the thawing process, how dark and silent everything seemed until his brain was able to jumpstart the ability to process sensory feedback, how cold it was before he got hosed down with temperate water to slowly bring his body temperature back to normal.

If it weren't for the relative softness of the bed and covers, and that one source of heat behind him, his brain might've gone down that unpleasant trip even further. The attacks had been more infrequent as time went by, but he might just have to leave and walk back to DC if he had one in front of Natasha.

Slowly, light filtered into his awareness behind his closed eyes. It was cold. He felt himself begin to shake as muscles began to respond. Something tugged on his left shoulder, and he automatically yanked himself forward, away from whatever was pulling on him. He was jarred into full wakefulness as his head struck something hard and sharp before he landed on the ground with a hard thump.

"Bucky?" Steve sounded worried, not quite panicked, but definitely worried.

A lamp switched on, filling the room with more than the faint light of the sun through the curtains. Bucky blinked, his eyes adjusting. He didn't even know when he'd fallen asleep, but he must've, and fallen out of bed again. His head hurt. "Ow." He put his flesh hand against his temple, where he'd gotten hit, glancing over at the nightstand. He'd hit the corner on his way off the bed.

Steve crouched down next to him, leaving Bucky to wonder when he's gotten around the bed. "You okay?"

Bucky made a grouchy sound, grateful that his back was mostly to Natasha so she couldn't see the burn of humiliation on his face. He could still see her out of the corner of his eye, sitting on the edge of the bed and watching quietly. "I'm fine. Just hit the nightstand." He looked at Steve. "You woke me up," he said, somewhat accusingly. If he hadn't been grabbed, he might've just been able to ride out the disquieting nightmare instead of falling off the bed and hitting his head, and all in front of someone who was barely more than a stranger.

Steve glanced at Natasha, and Bucky could see his brain trying to figure out how to answer without lying outright. He looked back at Bucky. "You were kicking me," he finally said. "I told you that you still kick in your sleep."

"Kiss off," Bucky said, pulling his hand away from the injured spot. "Damnit." He was bleeding, not much, but enough to annoy him.

Natasha moved, getting up, and Bucky finally looked at her as she headed into the bathroom. He wasn't sure if he was insulted or not that she'd made no inquiry into his well-being. On one hand, he didn't want the fussing. On the other, that was a bit rude. He got to his feet, careful not to knock Steve over as he did, and sat down on the edge of the bed, putting his hand back over the wound, as if that might make it throb less.

Steve got off the floor and sat next to him. "Let me see," he said, grabbing Bucky's hand and pulling it away. Bucky silently put up with Steve's examination, feeling too tired and a bit too strung out to protest. "It doesn't look bad," Steve finally said.
"Any dizziness?" Natasha asked, returning from the bathroom to stand in front of them. She held out a damp washcloth. "Here, put this against it, stop the bleeding."

Bucky almost argued that he knew how to put pressure on a wound, but his nerves were just too frayed to give a damn as he took the washcloth and did as instructed. "No, no dizziness. It'll be a bump at best. Probably gone in a few hours."

Natasha sat down on her bed. "So you actually do kick in your sleep. Don't feel bad, I'm not a good bedmate, either."

Bucky didn't answer, staring blankly at the ground at her feet, trying to just keep the washcloth in place and not shiver. It was cold. Why was it so damn cold? He should probably shower once his wound was done bleeding to wash the blood out of his hair, but the thought of water spraying on him didn't sound terribly appealing just then. The idea of curling up in a tub of hot water and not being cold for awhile sounded nice, though. Not something he'd do, not out here, not away from the privacy and comfort of his own home.

He glanced at the clock. It said ten past ten in the morning. "What time is check out?" he asked.

Natasha turned the clock to face her, then frowned. "In forty-nine minutes," she said, then picked it up, fiddling with the back. "I set it to wake us up at ten, why didn't it go off?"

Steve stood, grabbing his bag off the floor. "While you figure that out, I'm going to get changed."

Natasha didn't say anything, just kept frowning at the clock. Bucky watched her with very little interest, more to focus his eyes on something while he tried to force down the building headache. Finally, she tossed the faulty alarm clock onto the nightstand with a disgusted sound. "These dumb things never work in places like this."

He raised the eyebrow that wasn't currently partly covered by a washcloth. "Are you sure you set it right?"

She looked insulted. "I set it fine. The alarm's broken." She glanced back over her shoulder when the tap turned on in the bathroom, then turned back around, holding her face in her hands. "I thought he had a ladies first policy."

"Not when said ladies are bitching about something dumb," Bucky said, pulling the washcloth away from his head and testing the wound site gingerly to see if it'd stopped bleeding. He couldn't see any signs of fresh bleeding on his fingers, so he set about washing the blood already on his hand off.

"What a gentleman you are," Natasha said, sounding somewhere between amused and concerned. "Stopped bleeding?"

"Yeah," Bucky said. "You going to be okay to drive? You've had all of four and a half hours of sleep."

She gave him that enigmatic smile that he still wasn't sure if he liked or not. "I've gone on less." She ran her hands through her hair, the faint curls sticking up slightly when she did, and looked over her shoulder again at the bathroom door. "He doesn't take long in the bathroom, does he?"

"No."

"So if I bat my pretty eyes at you, will you be more of a gentleman than Steve was and let me go before you?"
He stared at her a moment. "I'll let you go first if you promise not to bat your eyes at me."

Natasha got a look that Bucky knew to fear, the look of a woman about to bait a man and if he didn't say just the right thing, he was toast. "What, you don't think my eyes are pretty?"

"Is there any way I can get out of this?" He didn't feel like engaging in gender relations with her, especially not when his head hurt.

She smiled, a genuine one this time, not that obnoxious little secretive smile that was already driving him nuts. If he weren't currently trying to run for his life, and he didn't have a currently love-hate relationship already established with her, he might have to find that smile attractive. "You know, Steve said you used to be good with women."

Bucky sighed. "That was also before I killed about half the world's population."

"Now you're just exaggerating," Natasha said, once again glancing over her shoulder at the closed bathroom door. She looked like she wanted to go pound on it and demand Steve open up and let her in.

"Are we counting the people who died in wars I started?"

She looked back at him. "Still not half the world's population. Besides, that was Hydra, not you."

Bucky was silent for a few seconds. "So you've finally decided that? Good. You can stop pushing at me about it."

"That was never in question," she said. "What was in question was how much you'd recovered. Just because you could work and play well with Steve, didn't mean you could with anyone else, including me."

Bucky didn't get a chance to answer before the bathroom door opened, and Steve stepped out. "Told you he didn't take long," he told Natasha.

Natasha grabbed her bag. "Thank god," she said. "Steve, you're terrible with women."

Steve paused, looking at her in confusion, before realization dawned on his face. "Sorry. You were doing something else."

"You didn't offer," she said, then went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Steve studied the closed door. "She's a confusing woman sometimes."

"You're the one that's friends with her," Bucky said.

"You two didn't try to kill each other while I was in there, did you?" Steve asked, digging around in the weapons bag and pulling out sixty bucks. Natasha had no idea how much they had, didn't even know they kept their savings in cash, rather than trusting the banks. Bucky figured Steve had pulled the money out to help with gas.

"The room's intact, and the only injury so far is the brain damage I'm going to have from that nightstand."

Steve shook his head, zipping the weapons bag back up. "And Peggy used to call me dramatic."

"You are," Bucky said.
There was no more talking after that, not until Bucky had had his turn in the bathroom and the three repacked and were back at the car. Natasha made them wait long enough for her to check them out at the lobby, then returned. She didn't let them load the bags right away, dug under the thin carpeting on the floor of the trunk and produced two Illinois plates and a screwdriver.

"What're you doing?" Steve asked, stepping back to watch as she unscrewed the DC back plate.

"We'll be passing by Chicago," she said, removing the old plate and starting to replace it with the new one. "Best way to stay out of law enforcement's eye is to not stand out. Which means until we're in Iowa, we're from Illinois."

Steve and Bucky exchanged a look, and followed towards the front of the car. Bucky leaned against the front passenger door, claiming shotgun before Steve could banish him to the backseat again, while Steve walked around to watch Natasha remove and replace the front plate. "So we're going to Iowa."

"We're going through Iowa," Natasha corrected. "I'll tell you where we're going once we're past Chicago." She paused, dropping the DC plate on the ground. "No offense, but you're a terrible liar. If we get pulled over, I'd rather you not know anything."

"Are we expecting to get pulled over?" Bucky asked.

Natasha grabbed the old plates off the ground and got up. "No." Bucky watched over his shoulder as she dug around in the trunk again, presumably putting the old plates into the hiding spot she'd pulled the new ones from. "But I don't like to get caught off-guard."

Steve started to help Natasha stow their gear, then gave Bucky a mildly dirty look when he realized that Bucky was taking the front seat. He gave Steve an innocent smile, or tried to, anyway, but with his headache, it probably looked more like a twisted parody of that clown from that Stephen King book that Bucky had read and promptly decided that he never wanted to see a clown again upon finishing.

Once they were secured in the car, Natasha pulled away from the dingy hotel and headed for the interstate again.
Chapter 8

Indiana quickly faded into Illinois and the land was very, very boring. There were some patches of trees, and a lot of farmland. Fields of dead, brown earth with the leftover stalks of corn patterning the seemingly endless dirt. How did people live out there?

They'd stopped for breakfast shortly before hitting Chicago; neither Steve nor Bucky were pleased with an on-the-go meal that amounted to fast food on the road. Bucky was almost tempted to just not eat at all and toss it out the window, but his stomach told him that it'd rebel violently at him if he did, so he choked it down.

Natasha glanced between him and the road a few times, catching his attention. Once he was looking at her, her lips curled up in an amused smile. "Don't like the food?"

Bucky wrinkled his nose, chewing slowly because if he chewed any faster, he might throw up. He glanced back at Steve, who looked about the same. Then he looked back at Natasha, forcing himself to swallow. "How the hell does the twenty-first century stand this shit?"

"Personally? Necessity," she said. "It's not great, but it's better than nothing when you're on a mission and you don't have the time and freedom to eat at a proper place or cook for yourself."

Steve leaned around the driver's seat. "What about a grocery store deli? They'd have better food than McDonald's."

Natasha started to answer, but paused before more than a word could get out, looking up at her rearview mirror. She swore in Russian, then turned on her turn signal and started pulling over to the shoulder.

Bucky half-turned in his seat, feeling the blood drain from his face at the flashing lights of a patrol car. "Steve, pull up your hood," he said, doing the same and tucking his hair back in it as much as possible. He dumped what little was left of that awful thing they called food in the to-go bag, then put on his gloves, and kept his hands still in his lap.

"Hand me my purse, Steve?" Natasha asked, reaching back while keeping an eye on the patrol car behind them. Once Steve had grabbed it off the floor behind Bucky's seat and handed it to her, she started digging in it, pulling out her wallet. "Just stay quiet, you two," she said, grabbing an ID. "Especially you, Rogers."

Steve made a strangled noise of indignation, but didn't say anything as Bucky shot him a warning look. He slumped back in his seat and pulled his hood down over his eyes. Satisfied that Natasha would only have to worry about dealing with the law and not about how Steve or Bucky might foul things up, Bucky pulled is hood forward a bit more, just enough to mostly hide his face without keeping him from seeing what was going on.
Natasha opened the window, letting in a blast of cold wind. She made a point of rubbing her arms when the officer ducked his head to talk to her. "Is something wrong, Officer?"

"Afternoon, ma'am," he said. "Did you know you were driving with a broken taillight?"

Bucky met Natasha's eyes as she looked back at him, pretending (at least he thought she was pretending) to be very confused, before she looked back at the officer. "Which one? I just changed them both."

"Your driver side light," the officer said.

Bucky studied him, taking note of the dark green pants and the brown coat that hid everything of the tan shirt but the collar, and the flat, wide-brimmed hat. It was a strange combination of colors, although Bucky had definitely seen worse. He was small, and probably very easy to overpower, even without needing to be a super soldier or a seasoned assassin.

There was always the matter of the officer's gun that Bucky couldn't see from that angle, but that didn't seem much of a problem; all three of them would be able to get that gun before the officer could, if it came to that.

Bucky had a feeling Natasha would prefer it didn't come to that. Bucky wasn't particularly interested in tangling with law enforcement, especially not when he was supposed to be keeping his head down. But it was good to size up a potential threat before it became a real threat.

"I think I have a spare in the trunk," Natasha said. She waited patiently while the officer moved out of the way of the door, his hand hovering just over his hip, then got out. Bucky glanced back at Steve, who'd been watching out of his window, then turned a bit more in his seat to watch Natasha and the officer move around to the trunk.

The trunk popped open, blocking the view through the back window, which made Bucky very nervous. Natasha could more than handle things if it went south, but Bucky didn't like not being able to see what was going on in a potentially hostile situation. It helped absolutely nothing that the bag with their weapons- including Steve's very recognizable shield -was now right under the nose of an officer of the law.

"Oh, here we go," Natasha's voice said, just barely audible over the traffic noise. "It wasn't screwed in tight." There was some clunking in the back of the car, then silence from her and the officer for a moment. "There, does that work now?"

"Looks like it to me, ma'am," the officer said. "Thank you. Drive safely, it's a holiday."

"Thanks for the warning," Natasha said. "You stay safe, too. Holidays bring out the loonies."

Bucky had to admit, Natasha was very good at sounding completely not like herself when she wanted to. He didn't think she'd normally use the word 'loonies', but she sounded like any other normal person and not an emotionally reserved spy and assassin.

The officer's voice was too distant by that point for Bucky to hear what was said, but he assumed it was nothing bad, as Natasha rejoined them in the car. She sighed, thunking her head on the steering wheel. "I hate false alarms almost more than the real ones," she said, then sat up and rolled her window up.

Bucky watched the patrol car turn off its lights and pull back out on the road, then looked at Natasha. "'Loonies'?"
Natasha smirked, putting her ID away and dropping her purse on the floor behind Bucky's seat. "Just showing concern. And speaking truth. People get crazy on the roads around holidays."

Steve leaned forward. "How long before we're past Chicago?"

Natasha buckled, then pulled back out onto the interstate. "About fifteen minutes, assuming I don't get pulled over again." She shook her head. "I don't know how that light came loose."

"Old car?" Steve suggested. "This thing looks like it's seen some mileage."

"It's an '02 Chevy. But the engine is brand new. It blends in with where we're going better than a nicer car would."

"So we're going to the slums," Bucky said.

Natasha frowned. "No. Just here in the Midwest." She looked over at him. "Don't insult my car, she's getting you to safety. And no, I'm not telling you where in the Midwest until we're past Chicago."

"That's more than you've told us so far," Steve said, sitting back.

Bucky looked between them, but Steve wasn't pushing Natasha, and for her part, she wasn't doing anything but focusing on the road. Bucky decided if Steve thought he wouldn't get anywhere with her, Bucky probably wouldn't, either. So he sat back and looked out the window, watching the twists and turns and exits of the interstate passing by a large city and the endless amount of traffic.

He decided to shut his mind off, to go into total standby mode, like he had before on missions for Hydra. He knew about as much, taken from one location to another, not sure where he was, or even really where he was going until it was needed. It was an unpleasant trip down memory lane, but it was exactly what was happening this time. He didn't know where he was going, he didn't even really know why except that it was part of 'the mission'. His mission this time was to hide. Something had gotten out, what exactly, he wasn't sure, but something that linked him to Hydra's work, something that would set him up as Public Enemy Number One, would endanger him, and probably Steve, as well.

But he had no idea what had gotten out. How much. Who had leaked it. And it bothered him that someone else knew before he did, someone knew to be watching for it.

A lot of questions, and so far, not one answer forthcoming. If she weren't the one responsible for getting him to safety, he'd be tempted to beat the information out of Natasha and then act upon it on his own. But no matter how frustrated he was with the situation, right now, she was his best chance. She had the contacts set up, she had the safe house set up, she had the resources.

So he was best off not thinking and focusing on their surroundings in case something happened that he might be able to do something to fix. It wasn't likely, but you never knew when a masked assassin might jump on your car and steal your steering wheel.

Bucky was pretty sure he was probably the only one weird enough to think of that.

It took a bit longer than fifteen minutes to get past Chicago; there was a wreck that closed down the right two lanes, leaving traffic crawling. Bucky bit back on his irritation at the slowed pace, making himself disappear behind his unhealthy self-defense mechanism of turning off everything. To where nothing bothered him. To where there was no sign of humanity. To where there only existed the Winter Soldier.
He'd pay for it later, but it was the only way he knew how to deal with the anxiety that didn't result in locking himself in the bathroom, or hiding up on the roof. Neither of which was an option.

It was the captain that finally snapped him out of that distant place, not by addressing him directly, but by addressing the mission head. "Okay, we've been past Chicago for ten minutes," he said. "Where're we going?"

Bucky looked back at him, realizing that he had no idea how that much time had passed without him noticing, but the question brought him back from that dark place he'd been hiding in. He looked at Natasha, who was no longer 'the mission head', but a person with a name again.

"Nebraska," she said, signaling a lane change and passing a particularly slow truck with a tanker trailer that had the words 'Haulin' Liquid Chicken' painted on the side. Bucky quickly decided he didn't want to know what constituted 'liquid chicken'.

Steve - no longer 'the captain' - looked at Bucky. "So," he said, and Bucky couldn't tell if Steve looked amused, or was trying to be amused and actually wasn't. "Maybe you shouldn't have vetoed it when we were looking for a place to go on vacation, Buck."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Because I'm sure I'd love the opportunity to visit a cornfield twice."

Natasha glanced just over her shoulder, in a direction somewhere between Steve and Bucky. "You'd better learn to love that cornfield. I don't know how long we're staying."

"Okay," Steve said. "You've got my attention. Why Nebraska? There are a billion other places to go."

"Few reasons," Natasha said, keeping her eyes on the road. "For one, I've already been living there awhile for the job I temporarily abandoned to get you two. Clint and I are working for a division of Homeland Security that handles the dirty work. He's in Syria, passing intelligence along to me, and I pass it to Homeland. The Islamic State already knows most of the division's normal contacts, so I'm playing the unlisted number."

Something didn't add up right there to Bucky. "So again, why Nebraska?"

"Nebraska's got the most advanced and secure telecommunications system in the nation, especially in Omaha. You boys should remember SAC getting set up in Offutt. That was back in your time."

Steve and Bucky exchanged a look, before turning back to Natasha. "What is SAC and are you sure that was back in the forties?" Steve asked, sounding about as confused as Bucky felt.

Natasha looked surprised, glancing between them. "Strategic Air Command? It was set up wait, what year did you two go under?"

"Nineteen forty-five," Steve answered.

"That'd explain it," she said. "SAC came a couple years later. Anyway, the lines offer the security we needed. We're not going to Omaha, that's too close to camping in the military's backyard. Homeland would be very cross with us if we let on to everyone else what we're doing. So I'm using the lines between Lincoln and Omaha. We'll need these lines to keep a secure connection to my contact in this mess."

"You said there were other reasons," Bucky said.

She smiled faintly. "The lines are the main one. But Lincoln is a good place to hide right now. It's
still football season, and every Saturday home game, that stadium houses over ninety thousand people. Third biggest city in the state, and that's not an exaggeration. We'll get you two some Husker clothes, you'll blend in." Then she made a noise that might've almost been a laugh. "Besides, Clint already had a place set up there. He likes college football and Lincoln is college football's Mecca."

Since Bucky didn't know Barton personally, had only heard a few things about him here and there, he had no real reaction that, but Steve sure as hell did. "Clint likes football?"

"Just college," Natasha said. "I have no idea where that interest came from. He's never said. He's just told me that I am morally and legally obligated to keep him up to date on the Huskers' scores. I have to listen to those dumb games every Saturday."

"The things we do for love," Bucky said, under his breath but not really.

Natasha glanced at him, then up into her rearview mirror. "You would know."

Bucky declined saying anything.

They made two stops in Iowa: one at a rest stop off I-80 to stretch, use the facilities, and so Natasha could change their Illinois plates for Nebraska plates, and then one in Des Moines for gas, which Steve insisted on paying for, and for some road food. And that road food just made Bucky's black little heart go pitter-patter.

It was another three hours from Des Moines to Lincoln, and Bucky sorely wished for his tablet to read on, or something. Natasha was quiet, focusing on driving, and Steve seemed to be in the same boat as Bucky: nothing to do, but nothing really to say, either. They were on a mission, they knew where they were going, and they'd find out more once they got there. Nothing to do in the meantime but wait.

So he simply shut down again.

Omaha passed by quickly; it may have been a 'big' city as far as the Midwest went, but by east coast standards, it wasn't much to look at. And then it was more cornfields, empty and stripped bare by the cold weather, and dead, yellow prairie grass in the ditches. Although there were a surprising number of trees. He made a mental note to find out why a farming state on the Great Plains had so damn many trees.

They eventually turned off the interstate and onto a highway that presumably led into town. He eyed the horizon critically, seeing very little that indicated that Lincoln was bigger than any other rural town they'd gone by. They passed another cornfield.

"Didn't we just pass a city limits sign?" Steve said from the backseat, and Bucky glanced back at him, then back out the window.

"We did," Natasha said. "And yes, there's a cornfield in town. A couple, actually. One's for the agriculture college, though."

What the hell kind of city had a cornfield inside city limits?

Lincoln, apparently, and he was going to be spending an undetermined amount of time there. Bunnies and goddamn flowers.

Signs of life slowly appeared, the farther in they went, until Natasha was driving along a busy street, and right into downtown. Downtown was, fortunately, a bit more exciting than the cornfields had been, but it was small compared to what Bucky was used to, growing up in Brooklyn, and later
living in DC. But it had some tall buildings, and a ton of one-way streets, just to make things confusing. It was almost like a real city.

Almost.

Bucky switched mental gears, pulling himself back from the proverbial coma he'd tossed himself into, noticing that there were a lot of people walking around downtown- most of them in dressed in red- for being Thanksgiving. Then he realized why: there was a different bar or restaurant every few building suites. Most of the people he saw looked roughly college-aged, and road signs indicated that the university was very nearby.

So much for people getting the holiday off. Bucky still didn't understand that.

Natasha pulled into a parking lot marked 'private parking' in what looked like an older part of downtown. Nearby, Bucky could hear a train. "Sorry it's not glamorous," she said, putting the car in park and shutting it off. "We didn't want to stand out."

"Our place wasn't exactly a penthouse either," Steve said, getting out.

Natasha and Bucky joined him at the trunk. "It was nice enough," she said, unlocking the trunk. "Bet my place is cheaper, though. How much do you pay? Couple thousand?"

Bucky grabbed the weapons bag again, leaving Steve to take care of their regular bags, neither of which were very big, nor very heavy. "Little less than that. Why?"

"Mine's four hundred, with cable included."

While Bucky's eyebrows about shot up to his hairline, Steve looked over at him. "We're living in the wrong part of the country."

Bucky shot him a dirty look. "Let's move here and be neighbors with farmland and football fanatics. Sounds like my idea of a good time."

"And college students who will drive you batty," Natasha said as she shut the trunk, her bag shouldered. She glanced around, then led them down the back street about a block. "It's not so bad, as long as you aren't allergic to corn pollen." She paused outside a building with a secured entrance and typed in the code by the door. "Like I am."

Steve grabbed the top edge of the door over her head once she got it open, allowing her to lead them in. "This is a bad place to be if you're allergic to corn," he said.

"I live on benadryl during the seven months of the year where it's not too cold for pollens," she said, heading up the stairs. "This place isn't my first choice. But, like I said, we needed the state's telecomm systems, and Clint has a better chance of not getting targeted out in Syria as a man than I would as a woman. So, here I am."

"Here you are, listening to football games every week," Bucky said, oh so helpfully and not laughing at her at all.

She rolled her eyes, stopping in front of her apartment and unlocking it. "My life's joy," she said, letting them in. "Excuse any mess, I packed and left as soon as I saw the news."

"What mess?" Steve asked, looking around.

The living space was smaller than their own apartment, and even less furnished, with a couch
somewhat near the door, a rather large desk against a wall, and on the opposite side of the room from the front door was the kitchen that seemed to have the mandatory fridge, stove, and dishwasher with sink by it, and about three square feet of counter on which to work. Off to the side was a split hallway that Bucky assumed led to the bedroom and the bathroom, respectively, with what might've been a linen closet in between.

"That mess," she said, motioning to the kitchen. There was a half-full coffee pot sitting on the counter, and it looked like a skillet and a couple other small dishes in the sink. "Put your stuff on the couch for now. We'll find a better place for it later."

Bucky set the bag he was carrying down on the floor between the couch and the wall. He eyed the couch and the floor in front of it, and then pointed at Steve. "You get the couch, I'm claiming the floor, and don't you dare try to argue with me this time."

Before Steve could do more than scowl and open his mouth to argue, Natasha cut in. "It's a sleeper couch," she said. "Unless you two have serious objections to sharing a bed for more than a crash in a hotel, it's big enough for two."

Steve shot Bucky one of those 'I won neener neener' looks that he'd had perfected since childhood. "You're not sleeping on the floor."

"No, you don't," Steve said with a shit-eating grin. "You're just glowing with love for me."

Bucky looked at Natasha. "Mind if I smother him? I know how to hide bodies."

Natasha looked like she wanted to smile, but was just too tired to. "No killing in my apartment. I'm trying to avoid the law right now." She sat down at the desk, looking up at the computer monitor that was mounted up on the wall and tilted down towards her, like she wasn't sure she wanted to turn the system on. Bucky didn't blame her, she'd just driven eighteen(ish) hours with only four hours of sleep in the last almost forty. That'd wear almost anyone out.

But finally, she booted up the computer, and looked over at the sink of dishes. "We're going to have to go grocery shopping tomorrow," she said, sounding like she was thinking aloud rather than to them. "Everything in the fridge is probably spoiled." Her face scrunched up in annoyance. "And tomorrow's a home game. That should be fun."

Steve and Bucky said nothing as they walked over to flank her, letting her talk, and occasionally watching the monitor. "Natasha," Steve said, then pointed up at the screen when it showed the login page.

"Hm?" She looked up at him, then up at the screen. "Oh." She logged in, and fiddled around with some programs that Bucky didn't recognize, but didn't need to to see that they were, in order: a music player, a telecomm program, and a ready game of solitaire in the background.

"Please be around," she muttered, typing away in the telecomm program. A Homeland Security sigil showed up in a large box to one side, Natasha- with Steve and Bucky partly visible -on the computer's camera in a smaller one in the corner, and a text box under the sigil with a scrambled number. After a second, the program pinged. "Thank god," she said. "Talk to me, Carter."

Bucky barely had time to process that the name 'Carter' was entirely too familiar when a blonde-haired, brown-eyed woman's face appeared where the sigil had been. She looked familiar, not as much as her name was, but he couldn't place her.
Steve recognized her, though. "Sharon?"
"I'm sorry, Steve," Sharon said, although she didn't look as sorry as Bucky thought she should've been at that particular moment. "I couldn't tell you what job I was on. But I wasn't lying about being on assignment."

A woman lying to Steve was a capital offense, in Bucky's mind. Especially from one who was not-dating him.

But at least Steve had a good eye for attractive women. Bucky taught him well.

Steve took a deep breath. "And how long have you been assigned to watch out for me this time?"

"Since the beginning," she said. "We have agents watching Sam Wilson, too. We even managed to track down Romanov. She was kind of annoyed."

"You cheated," Natasha said. "You had Homeland help you."

Sharon smiled. "You need someone to watch your back while you're watching everyone else's, Romanov." The smile disappeared. "After Hydra and SHIELD went down, the CIA started datamining those files that Agent Romanov uploaded. We weren't terribly surprised to discover that there are plenty of other bases and agents out there, and given your track record for annoying them, we knew you'd need help staying safe. But, we also know that the best protectors are the ones nobody knows about, so we couldn't approach you directly. Again, I am so sorry, I wasn't trying to lie to you."

Steve looked like he wanted to say more, to question her on more personal matters, but Bucky knew he wasn't likely to do that, so he wasn't surprised when Steve stared down at the floor, lips moving slightly as he counted to five, an old habit he had when he was avoiding certain topics, then looked back up at the monitor. "How'd you know about Bucky?"

"We didn't," Sharon said. "At least, not at first. We had no idea he existed until he showed up in your company. Honestly? He scared the hell out of us. We don't like unknowns when it comes to protecting our charges."

When Steve looked at Bucky, Bucky shook his head. "I'm not sorry."

"You never are," Steve said, then looked back at Sharon. "So how'd you know to be watching for the news to help Natasha get us out?"

Sharon pointed down at Natasha, mouthing the words 'her fault,' then gave Natasha a far too innocent smile when Natasha flipped her off. "When the name Winter Soldier became public, we started trying to cross-reference it with any known information in the community, and only got some ghost stories from over decades. We figured it must've been a borrowed name. Since he was obviously your friend and keeping up with you in your job, we decided keeping him safe would be a good idea. Then the news broke that he was Barnes, and the theory of his name being borrowed blew out of the water and sank the battleship. It was too much of a coincidence that a decades old super soldier would be taking the name of a decades old master assassin without being connected. I contacted Romanov, and asked her to come get you. I knew you'd trust her more than you would me, once you found out what my job was."

Steve sighed. "Sharon, that's not-"
"Besides, we had no safe place to take you," Sharon said, cutting him off. "Romanov did. That frees us up to try to run damage control."

"And how are you going to do that?" Bucky asked, finally saying something relevant to the conversation. He'd been content to let Steve deal with his not-sweetheart; her focus had been more on him to begin with, and Bucky had become a secondary mission, but now the topic was on him, and damn right he'd say something.

Sharon looked over at him, and Bucky couldn't tell what exactly her reaction to him was. He'd been an unknown to her in her mission, and Bucky knew how it felt to deal with that. And he was a boogeyman in her profession. Her internal reaction could've been anything, and he doubted he would've been surprised by any of it.

"Our first move?" she said. "To try to contain how much gets out, and discredit what does. The only evidence against you is old rumors and a handful of blurry photographs. Those will be the hardest to deal with, as they all have your arm featured pretty prominently."

"Don't bother," Bucky said. "You'll be lying to discredit them. Don't put Steve in a position where he has to lie like that. He's terrible at it."

One corner of her lips quirked up. "I know." Bucky appreciated the obvious affection in that tone. Her smile disappeared. "It would help us a lot if you'd tell us what you know about these assassinations and how you're still around and can do the things you do."

Bucky looked down at the ground, feeling all eyes on him and it made him uncomfortable. Finally, he looked back up at her. "Too many people know as it is. Find something else."

"Sergeant Barnes, it doesn't mat-"

"I'm not 'Sergeant' anything," he snapped. "I'm not military anymore."

She took his interruption with grace. "Well, right now, you are, and you're AWOL and wanted for potential crimes against the state. That discharge hadn't gone through yet. You've got the whole country looking for you, and we're the only ones keeping you safe right now. I suggest you try to cooperate." She paused. "For Steve's sake."

His ire had been rankled, until she pulled out the only weapon that would ever work against him: Steve. Do it for Steve. Do anything for Steve, anything to keep him safe. He clenched his teeth, his jaw starting to ache. He didn't want that information in anyone's hands, and he couldn't see how it wouldn't somehow become public if he turned it in to the government to pull his ass out of the fire. And he still didn't feel he could count on anyone to keep the government from trying to turn him into a lab rat- more than he'd already been -to figure out what Hydra did so they could replicate it. They'd left Steve mostly alone, but how much of that was because he was a national hero and they couldn't get away with shadowy experimentation? If Bucky's information became public, if the various jobs he'd done for Hydra got out, he doubted anyone in the public would even give a rat's damn ass if he disappeared somewhere into the system.

It was probably an irrational fear, he was too much in the public's eye, and Captain America's friend and partner, but he couldn't help the fear that he'd disappear again. That he'd find himself locked in a lab again until everything he knew was gone. He'd been through that once, he wouldn't go through it again.

"What got out so far?" he finally asked, not quite surrendering to her point, but getting there.
"The 1967 murder of Eva Volkov, the leader of an underground resistance in communist Soviet Union, which led to the 1968 riots in Moscow. Left 192 people dead, and tightened the Soviet Union's legislation against such groups, leading to several hundred more deaths across the Union. And the 1991 deaths of Howard and Maria Stark. We're not sure how that connects, that was ruled an engineering failure."

Bucky looked away, glancing briefly at Steve, then Natasha. Neither looked surprised that the Starks were associated to him. "Guns aren't the only way to kill people," he said, trying to flatten his voice into an unaffected attitude. "How'd that one come out?"

Sharon looked vaguely surprised, where the other two hadn't been. "We don't know," she confessed. "When Volkov's case broke, we assumed it was released by intelligence agents in the Russian community. You really were responsible for the Starks' deaths?" Bucky didn't answer, didn't even twitch a muscle on his face to give her a non-verbal answer. It was answer enough. "Who hired you?"

"I wasn't hired," Bucky said, a bit evasively.

Sharon didn't seem deterred by Bucky's complete lack of cooperation. "Then who was behind it? Why was it done?"

"I don't know why it was done." He couldn't tell if it was disgustingly easy to slip back into that old skin of showing and even having no emotion, or if it was draining everything he had in him to do it.

Sharon seemed to be doing her best to hold onto a professional face, but it was clear that she was getting frustrated. "You don't know? You didn't ask questions before you took the job?"

"There were a lot of things I didn't question."

She took a deep breath. "Mister Barnes, who were you working for?"

Before Bucky had to regress any further, Steve, mercifully, stepped in. "Let it go, Sharon, it's not important right now."

"Steve, we need this informa-"

"Sharon," Steve interrupted. "We'll find another way." He took a deep breath, looking at Bucky. "If Howard and Maria's deaths came out, Tony would know about it."

Bucky felt his insides frost over. Tony wasn't always the most forgiving person; he'd dismissed Bucky's crimes due to the brainwashing with ease, but now it was personal. Something deep inside him told him that he might've just lost Tony's- and by proxy, Pepper's- friendship. That left him no one but Steve again. He was just getting used to the idea of having friends, he didn't want to lose that.

In the three seconds it'd taken for that fear to manifest itself in an icy lump in his gut, Sharon had spoken up. "Speaking of Tony Stark, he's been trying to contact you on your laptop pretty much nonstop since the news hit."

Bucky looked at the ground. "I'll take care of it later, just ignore it."

Sharon nodded once. "All right." Then she took a breath and Bucky braced himself for a question he didn't want. "Mister Barnes-"

"Call me James," he interrupted. "It'd be safer to not go by any recognizable name right now."
"You're going to spend the next forever thinking you're in trouble," Steve said.

"I am in trouble," Bucky said. "Better than someone hearing you call me 'Bucky' and them connecting the dots. I'd prefer a stable hiding place than running all over the country. Romanov's car has shitty shocks. If I have to take another eighteen hour trip in it, I'm going to be a giant bruise."

Natasha looked offended. "Don't make fun of my car, or I'll dump you in the ditch and make you walk."

Bucky snorted. "It'd be preferable." He looked back up at the monitor to Sharon. "You were saying something."

Sharon glanced over at Steve before focusing her attention back on Bucky. "I know he told me to drop it, but I'm going to ask one more time: who were you working for?"

"You already know," Bucky answered. He looked at Natasha. "I'm going to clean your kitchen for you. Feel free to keep up the girl talk." He walked away, taking himself out of camera range.

"You have a funny definition of girl talk," Natasha called after him.

Steve sighed. "And to think, he used to be good with women."

Bucky studied the dishes in the sink, and the plate sitting on the counter with dried and completely disgusting food on it. It'd been sitting there about a week, and it looked dead. Toast that probably would be like eating cardboard, a bit of dried-solid butter around it, and some scrambled eggs with penicillin growing on them. Bucky stared at it like he'd stare at a squished rabbit on the side of the road. It was completely repulsive, and he didn't want to touch it, lest he get flesh-eating gunk on him, but it wouldn't clean itself.

"Keep us posted, Carter," Natasha said behind him and Bucky hunted for a trash can to scrape the old food into.

"I will," Sharon said. Bucky glanced back just in time to see her face disappear, to be replaced by the Homeland Security sigil again.

Steve looked at him. "Bucky, you hate doing dishes."

"I also hate antibiotics growing on them, and it's James, now," Bucky pointed out, dumping the food into the trash he found on the other side of the counter. "Besides, I didn't want to deal with your girl anymore."

Natasha got up and walked over to him, holding her hand out. "I'll do the kitchen. I have to take stock of what I have to feed you guys anyway. You go sit down."

Bucky didn't hand over the plate. "Are you going to actually call me anything besides 'hey you'?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Well, right now, I'm calling you 'James'. I wasn't sure what you'd be comfortable with being called before."

"Very considerate of you." He knew he didn't sound it, but he was grateful for that. He wasn't sure he liked her enough to let her call him 'Bucky', but his first name set his teeth on edge, and being called by his last name alone made him feel like he was back in boot camp.

But not being addressed by name at all was equally annoying as any of her other options. He hadn't really given her much choice in the matter.
They argued a minute about who'd do the dishes, until Bucky managed to twist her arm into focusing more on getting dinner than worrying about the dishes. After inspecting the state of her fridge and freezer (and dumping an almost full gallon of milk down the sink), she grabbed her phone and ordered delivery. Pizza, it seemed, was their only choice at that time of night, or even at all, as Natasha said that nobody but pizza places delivered.

"I thought this was a college town," Bucky said, drying the last of the dishes. There hadn't been enough to warrant using the dishwasher. "Why is pizza the only delivery option, and why is there only one place that's still open?"

Natasha put her phone down on the desk and swiveled in her chair to look at him. "Because most of the businesses in delivery distance of the campus are bars, or non-franchise restaurants that aren't big enough to offer delivery," she said. "And aside from Wal-Mart and the occasional Walgreens, this town shuts down by midnight. Lincoln tries to be both a major college city and a small town at the same time. It has mixed results."

"Sounds annoying," Bucky said, poking around in the cupboards for where she kept her plates.

"Second cupboard over from the sink," she said. "Above the dishwasher." He followed her directions, putting the plate away and turning to face her, leaning back against the counter. "And yes, it's annoying, but only sometimes. I don't usually eat so late." She paused. "And I usually have food in the fridge to cook."

"So delivery it is," Steve said with a note of resignation in his voice. He'd never cared for pizza much. "Please tell me the restaurant is at least decent?"

Natasha turned her head to look at him. "It's Papa John's, so no."

Steve looked like a small child told to eat his brussel sprouts. "This town can't offer better?"

She tilted her head back against her chair, swiveling slightly in it. "Well, there's Pizza Hut, Godfather's, Valentino's, Domino's, DaVinci's, a few local places like Big Sal's and Piezano's, but again, places within delivery distance that are still open. It's past ten, most of those places are closed."

"You know a lot of pizza places and when they close for someone who usually cooks," Steve said.

She chuckled. "I've been here a bit over a year, I made a point of learning this information in case it was needed. Just because I usually don't get delivery doesn't mean it hasn't happened." She grabbed her purse off the floor by the desk and dug around in it, finally tossing a wallet on the desk. "I'm going to go shower. The cash for the pizza's in there. Give the driver a ten dollar tip, make up for having to work on Thanksgiving."

"How long did they say it'd take?" Steve asked, frowning and sounding confused.

"About twenty minutes," she said, standing up.

Steve gave her an incredulous look. "That's a long shower, Natasha."

"Not that it's your business," she said, sounding amused, "but shaving takes more time than just washing up."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "It takes you that damn long to shave your legs?"

Natasha flashed him one of those smiles that he loved/hated. "Girls can shave more than just their legs, you know."
He stared at her. She didn't just imply—she did. She actually did. "That's a thought that's going to stay with me," he said, not sure if he felt violated or turned on. Maybe both.

"As long as it gives you sweet dreams, James," she said, heading for the hall. "There's bedding in the closet here, feel free to make the bed while I'm using up the hot water."

Bucky waited until she'd disappeared behind one door, then reappeared in a robe and disappeared into the other room, before he looked at Steve. "I think I hate her," he said.

Steve snorted, choking down a laugh. "No, you don't. Just be glad she hasn't made you kiss her and pretend to be engaged to her."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "When did this happen?"

"When the STRIKE team was looking for us," Steve said. "We were at the mall, using the computer station to try to read the files on Project Insight. Apparently, public displays of affection make people uncomfortable." He had a long-suffering look on his face.

"And you just feel so unfortunate to have to kiss the most attractive spy in the business," Bucky said dryly, not buying it.

Steve shrugged, although Bucky noted with amusement that he was turning red. "I prefer to be dating a woman before I kiss her," he said. "But, she wasn't bad. She didn't think the same of me, though."

Bucky laughed. "You haven't had enough practice, then."

Steve scowled. "Don't you start. You do not need practice."

"The hell you don't," Bucky said. "I taught you better than that." He pushed away from the counter. "Pull out the bed, I'll get the bedding. I don't want to have to mess around with it after dinner."

Steve got up off the couch and pulled off the cushions, dumping them in the corner on top of their bag with the weapons and uniforms. Bucky waited until he'd pulled the fold-out couch out, judging the size to grab linen that would hopefully fit. It looked like a standard double. He inspected the shelves in the closet, pulling out a couple sheets, and decided they'd fit. He grabbed a blanket to go over the top sheet; the apartment was cold, still slowly heating up with the furnace on. And if Natasha was anything like them, she'd be turning the thermostat down overnight, which meant a sheet was going to be far from sufficient.

"Here," he said, tossing the bedding on the bed. "Think you'll want anything warmer?"

Steve grabbed the blanket, feeling the underside. "You get cold easier than I do," he said. "This would be enough for me, I think."

"It'll be good enough, then," Bucky said, walking over to help Steve make the bed.

The food showed up about ten minutes later, and like Natasha had predicted, she was still in the shower when the buzzer rang. God, she was taking a long shower. She hadn't taken that long back in DC. It idly occurred to him that she'd probably been skipping shaving while in DC, and hair took more time to shave when it got furry.

Steve had located some paper plates and both he and Bucky were on their second round of food when she finally emerged from the bathroom, steam following her. "Your food's cold," Steve said.
She paused between the bathroom and her bedroom. "I'm not surprised," she said. "I hope you saved some."

Bucky grunted. "Believe me, no matter how hungry I am, I'm not interested in eating that much crap food."

"Told you it was bad," she said, then went into her bedroom, closing her door behind her.

Bucky looked at Steve. "She's good at the 'told you so' thing, isn't she?"

Steve nodded slowly. "She revels in it."

Natasha must've been tired, because she barely said a word as she got food, didn't bother with conversation after, either. Bucky wasn't really up for talking with her, or even with Steve, and Steve knew when to follow the group desire for quiet.

Natasha gathered up their plates after they were done and threw them out, put the leftover pizza in the fridge, and yawned. "I'm going to go to bed," she said. "I recommend you two do the same. We have to get food tomorrow, and downtown's going to be a mess. It's an afternoon game, which means we can expect a lot of traffic and pedestrians all day, and I need to be back in time for kick off." She smiled tiredly. "Clint would be very stern with me if I missed it."

They bid each other good night, and Steve and Bucky took turns changing into night clothes in the bathroom- which was still very muggy from Natasha's shower -then turned out the light and crawled into bed. There was a bit of squabbling as they tried to occupy the same space in the middle- the bed wasn't actually quite as big as the double they'd shared at the hotel, and with both of them being on the broad side, there wasn't much room for both of them.

Once they were settled, Bucky tried to sleep, wanted to sleep, and while his body was exhausted and completely ready for sleep, as usual, his mind didn't want to cooperate. All he could think was that he'd disappear again, become a laboratory experiment. That nobody would find him, and few would even care to. Including Tony, and Pepper, both of whom were probably lost to him now.

"What's the matter?" Steve said, turning slightly against Bucky.

Bucky glanced back over his shoulder at Steve. "Nothing," he said. "Why?"

"Because you're being a heat seeking missile over there. You're crowding me."

Bucky took in a deep breath and shoved his thoughts back down into that black little corner where they belonged before they spewed out where Steve could see them. "I'm just cold," he said. "And you're a goddamn furnace."

Steve sighed, turning back over. "Just don't kick me out of the bed," he said.

"I promise nothing."
Chapter 10

Bucky awoke to the smell of food and the sounds of a quiet conversation, and after a second to kickstart his brain, he realized that, one, people had gotten up without waking him, and two, Natasha almost had to have gone out to do some minor grocery shopping to have food to cook. Or picked some up from a restaurant somewhere.

The fact that this had all happened without waking him disturbed him, and worried him. He'd slept so deeply that a potential threat could've gotten by him. This was unacceptable.

"Does he usually sleep this hard?" Natasha's voice.


Actually, it was a program in his brain to expect a deep cryo sleep after a mission, and his body had simply found a more mundane way of resetting in a similar manner. But he wasn't going to correct Steve. Maybe later, if it came up again, but not in front of Natasha. "I can hear you, you know," he said, still not opening his eyes.

"Good morning, James," Natasha said, sounding entirely too chipper for... well, whatever time it was.

He made a noise that was more appropriate to come from Frankenstein's monster than a human being.

"Translation, he hates being awake right now," Steve supplied helpfully.

Bucky finally opened his eyes, sitting up and glaring at Steve. "Kiss off, Rogers."

Natasha snorted, then coughed, covering up a laugh. "Your hair is a mess."

Bucky turned that glare on her. "Yours wasn't so great yesterday morning either, sweetheart," he grumbled, then ran his flesh hand through his hair. He knew that probably had minimal effect. "What're you cooking?"

"And the man thinks with his stomach," she said. "I ran to the Walgreens downtown and picked up some basics, like milk and fresh bread. What I had was getting kinda green. Nothing special, just scrambled eggs, pancakes, and toast. We'll have something more substantial for lunch. After grocery shopping."

Bucky made a noise of acknowledgment. "Do I have time to take a shower before food's ready?"

Natasha looked at the skillet on the stove. "If you can take a five minute shower, sure," she said.

"Doable," he said, crawling out of bed and grabbing his overnight bag. He had one change of clean clothes left. "There's a washing machine in this complex, right?"

"In the basement," she said. "We'll worry about it later, once we're safely hidden in here and away from game day crowds."

Another noise of acknowledgement. "Good." He looked at her. "Are game day crowds really that bad?"

She glanced at the food, then back at him. "Remember what I said about over ninety thousand
people in one stadium? There'll be people tailgating and listening to the game outside. Restaurants will be crowded, so will bars. Everyone in Nebraska is here, and that's not counting Miami's fans." She frowned. "I think it's Miami." She looked at a magnet on the fridge. "Yeah, Miami. Which means we might get to hear them throw another punch. Sore losers."

Bucky decided he wasn't going to comment on how bad a team had to be that they felt the need to punch an opposing player in a game that didn't involve punching, and made his way to the bathroom.

The water in Natasha's building ran a bit hot, which Bucky didn't mind. It was so damn cold in that apartment, and he couldn't figure out why. The warmth leached into his bones and threw out the creeping memories of coming out of cryo, when everything was cold and dark.

He didn't take time to shave, he wasn't sure he had time before the food was done and something more than scruff was an unusual look for him, which would make it harder to recognize him when they went out. He'd shave later, once they were, as Natasha put it, safely hidden away in the apartment for awhile.

Although a beard felt very weird and itchy. He'd never liked having one.

He emerged from the bathroom- which was not as steamed over as it had been after Natasha's shower last night -still combing his hair. He had a hair tie around his wrist to pull his hair up once it was free of snarls. He didn't normally pull his hair up, but once again with the whole not wanting to be recognized thing.

"You don't have lice, do you?" he asked Natasha, watching her serve up plates of food.

She looked offended. "Of course not, why?"

He showed her the hair tie. "Because I'm stealing this."

Natasha made a frustrated noise. "Didn't your mother teach you to ask before borrowing things?"

"Not borrowing," he corrected. "Stealing. And yes, she did, but that never stopped me."

She held a plate up for him. "Come get food. You must've been a ray of sunshine to deal with as a child."

Steve wasn't the one being spoken to, but that didn't stop him from beating Bucky to that plate of food. "You'd be surprised how often our mothers took a switch to him for things like that."

Bucky shot him a dirty look as he got his hair securely pulled back.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't be surprised at all, actually." She looked at Bucky. "He's got a smart mouth."

"Yeah, but I'm good with it," Bucky said, grabbing a different plate and a fork and wandering back to sit on the edge of the bed. There wasn't anywhere else to sit besides at Natasha's desk, and he had a feeling there might be an argument over it if he tried to take it.

"Do tell," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"You don't get to find out how," he told her, starting to pick at his food.

Other than Steve complimenting Natasha's cooking, the three were mostly focused on their food and not on conversation, so without having to use words between bites, breakfast went quickly. Natasha
collected their plates, putting them in the sink before grabbing some paper and a pen from a desk drawer and starting to make what Bucky assumed was a shopping list.

"Will one of you two wash the dishes while I do this?" she asked, staring into her fridge.

"Bucky will," Steve said, like a complete jackass.


Steve gave him an entirely too innocent smile. "Why do you think I volunteered you?"

"You're a punk."

"And you're a jerk, so you deserve it."

Natasha chuckled. "This sounds like an old exchange."

Bucky looked over at her, then shot Steve a dirty look as he stood and headed to the kitchen to do the chore he'd been handed against his will. "You have no idea," he said.

"Pretty much since we first knew each other," Steve said. "So a hundred years, give or take."

Natasha turned her attention to the cupboards. "Cranky old men," she said, sounding more distracted than smartassed. "You two make me feel like a baby."

"How old are you?" Bucky asked, looking over at her and trying to get out of her way without moving from the sink as she looked in another cupboard almost right over his head.

She paused, lowering her notebook and pen. "You're not supposed to ask a lady that."

"When I see a lady, I'll be sure not to ask her," Bucky said, scrubbing at the skillet. *What a shitty skillet,* he thought. Natasha was getting paid by the government and she couldn't afford a proper nonstick that wouldn't require steel wool to clean it?

Natasha turned to look at Steve. "How much trouble would I get into if I hit him?"

Steve laughed. "A lot, but if you have to, get on his other side. Hitting his left arm will just leave your knuckles bruised."

"He still hasn't learned," Bucky said, stacking wet dishes on the counter to dry once he could get his hands out of the sink. "It's been a year and a half."

"Slow learner," Natasha said, checking her list. "I think I've covered enough variety to get us through a week." She looked away from her notebook and over at Bucky. "The only question left is quantity. I know Steve has an accelerated metabolism, what about you?"

Bucky drained the sink, grabbing the towel he'd dried dishes with the night before. "Not far behind his."

"So in other words, I'm going to have to triple the amount of food I get." She looked at her list again. "My cupboards can probably only handle a few days' food at that amount, then. So we'll be going out more often."

Bucky didn't normally mind the idea of going out, and even in a strange town, it didn't terribly bother him. Except that he didn't want to be recognized, so the less he was out, the better. He paused in drying the skillet, one metal finger tapping against it. "Why don't you two go?" he said. "I'll stay
"I'm not sure it'd be safe to split up right now," Natasha said. "If I get a notice from Carter again, we'll have to make a run for it."

"And come here first to pick up our things," Bucky said. "Even if we could just buy new clothes and such, we still have to get that bag in the corner." He motioned towards the corner the couch cushions were piled up in. "The last thing we want is for someone to get ahold of our uniforms or Steve's shield. It'd be better if someone was here and could grab that and rendezvous with you elsewhere."

"He makes a point," Steve said. "Maybe we should stay here. Stay out of the public eye."

Bucky hadn't entirely wanted Steve to stay with him. He'd planned on hijacking Natasha's computer to call Tony and face the music. Music that was warbling and off-key, and generally likely to make the ears bleed. But he knew Steve wasn't likely to leave him alone. Maybe Steve'd be able to talk Tony into not trying to reach through the computer to strangle Bucky.

Bucky would deserve it.

Natasha looked hesitant, but she was clearly considering their arguments. "You don't know your way around the city to meet me anywhere," she said.

Bucky wished there was still water in the sink to flick some at her. "Your computer has the internet, right? We know how to read a map, all we need is Google, fer chrissakes."

"And I didn't exactly want to give you unfettered access to my computer and the information stored there," she said. "Just because you two are a mission for me, doesn't mean you're my only mission, and I'm not letting you get your hands on Homeland's intel."

Bucky crossed his arms, feeling the cold of his metal arm through his shirt sleeves, how unyielding it was against his flesh arm. "It's not Steve you distrust with the computer," he said.

She drew in a deep breath, clearly caught in her untruth. "I can trust Steve to do anything but lie," Natasha said.

"And I thought we were trusting Steve's trust in each other since we can't trust one another directly," Bucky pointed out. He gave her a challenging look. "Do you trust Steve to keep us out of the areas on your computer you don't want us on? We'd need a basic browser and the telecomm program in case you call us for a rendezvous. That's it. Unless I feel like seeing how awful your taste in music is."

When Natasha looked at Steve, Steve simply shrugged. "He's right, you know. I wouldn't let him play around with anything but those three programs."

She frowned, looking back at Bucky. "At least I can assure you that there's no Nicki Minaj on my playlist."

"I have no idea who that is," Bucky said, "and the way you say that makes me glad you don't. Just don't say you have AC/DC in there and we're fine. I don't expect that garbage from anyone other than Tony," Bucky said. "And quite frankly, you're prettier."

She got that smile again. "Prettier than Stark. There's an underhanded compliment."

"At least it's a compliment," Bucky said, putting the last of the dishes away. "I'm staying here, it'll be smarter to have at least one person here to grab the stuff and meet up somewhere." He silently
pleaded with her to just agree and go away.

Natasha sighed, looking down at her shopping list again. "I'll take Steve with me," she said. "I think we're more likely to get things done with minimal snarking at each other. Traffic's going to be enough of a headache, I don't need witty and annoying banter to make it worse." She looked at Steve. "I trust you to figure out how much we need. I've never had to cook for more than one person." She pointed a finger at Bucky without looking at him. "You get into anything forbidden on the computer and I will shoot you in places you don't want shot."

"Name one place someone would want to get shot," Bucky snapped.

"And there's the witty banter I want to avoid," she said. Then she finally looked at Bucky, studying him like a mannequin at a department store.

"What?" he demanded awkwardly.

She didn't answer, looking over at Steve. "Do you know what size shirt he wears?" she asked Steve, jabbing her thumb out in Bucky's direction. "We'll stop somewhere and get you guys some Huskers shirts to wear so you blend in better."

Thus the mannequin-like studying. Steve looked at Bucky. "He's about a size smaller than I am, but he likes baggier shirts. Hides his shoulder port better."

"I'm standing right here," Bucky said. "I could've answered the question myself."

Natasha looked at him, pushing away from the counter. "You could've, but I wanted to make sure Steve did, so I didn't have to take you along to try on things. You don't look like the sort of person to enjoy the fitting rooms too much."

"Your logic still makes no sense," Bucky said. "Get out of here, get us food before I'm forced to get creative before you get back."

"You don't want him to get creative," Steve said. "Buck- James has an interesting sense of creativity."

"He's your friend, he'd have to," Natasha said, completely without irony.

Bucky made a point of waiting silently while Steve and Natasha got ready to go out, and barely gave more than a grumpy acknowledgement when he was told to behave himself. He watched the clock for five minutes, using the regular ticking of the second hand to calm his nerves, to dismiss his thoughts, to simply mark time. He could've gone all afternoon like that, lost in the sense of the passage of time, like counting down to a target arriving at the predetermined location, or the way he counted his heartbeats before a snipe.

But the five minutes passed, with no sign of Natasha or Steve coming back, and the waiting was over. It was time to engage the target.

The target, of course, being Tony, and the mission being to contact him, and then stand there and let Tony hurl whatever abuses he wanted at Bucky. The mission, ultimately, was to lose his friend.

Getting into Natasha's computer was easier than she probably would've liked, and it didn't take long for him to get the telecomm program open. He hesitated, staring at the input box for a number. One last chance to back out. To run and let whatever happened, happen.

But Tony deserved better than that.
So he typed in the number to contact JARVIS, and waited. It took a minute and three seconds-Bucky counted—for JARVIS to answer through the security protocols. He must've recognized the encryption as a military set up, because the first words out of his 'mouth' were "I'm sorry, but Mister Stark no longer consults for the armed forces."

"It's me, JARVIS," Bucky said. "I think Tony's been trying to get ahold of me."

There was a hesitation that made Bucky wonder-not for the first time-just how artificial that intelligence was. "He has, Mister Barnes. One moment and I'll connect you."

It was another twenty-four seconds before Tony's face appeared on the screen, and Bucky didn't bother trying to say anything, even if he had, Tony would've beaten him to it. "You've got a lot of damn nerve calling me," he snarled.

"You tried first," Bucky said, keeping his tone as flat as possible. "I haven't been home to answer your calls."

"Hiding?" 'Livid' couldn't even begin to describe the look on Tony's face, betrayal and anger and all other manner of negative emotions rolled into one ugly, wet-eyed scowl. "When were you going to tell me, huh? How long were you going to go on letting me be friends with my parents' murderer?"

Bucky winced, tried not to, tried to stay as still and steady as a stone, but this was too personal, this was a friend taking him to task for something he'd done. "I didn't-"

"Didn't what?" Tony interrupted. "Didn't know them? Didn't remember anything? Didn't question orders? How about when were you going to tell me?" He looked away from the camera, and before Bucky could even hope to begin to come up with a reply, Tony looked back at him. "So how'd you do it? It was an engineering failure, I thought your modus operandi was to shoot at people through brick walls."

Bucky made himself not look down at the table, to look Tony in the eye. He deserved as much. "The gas tank didn't explode from an engineering glitch. It was deliberately detonated."

Tony stared at him, then laughed, just one sharp bark of disbelief that sounded like it might be trying to stop a sob. "So what, you just let them burn to death in there? Hoped that they didn't walk away? Let them suffer?"

"No!" Bucky was quickly failing to be able to simply answer Tony's questions without his own emotions getting in the way. "Maria died in the initial explosion, she didn't suffer."

"And my father?" When Bucky couldn't answer right away, Tony banged his hand on the screen, like that might reach through and hurt Bucky. "Answer me!"

Bucky closed his eyes. "His neck was snapped." He couldn't bring himself to quite say it, couldn't bring himself to say 'I snapped his neck', didn't want to place himself back in that memory.
Tony's breathing rate had increased, had started to become unsteady, and Bucky didn't have to open his eyes to know that it was taking all of Tony's strength to not scream and cry and maybe try to throw things through the internet at Bucky. "So you walked into a burning vehicle and made the choice to grab him-"

"Yes, I did," Bucky interrupted, opening his eyes just in time to see Tony flinch as if struck. "Don't act like I had a choice at the time. You think I would've killed a friend if I'd known what I was doing?!" He could hear the servos in his fingers whining in protest at how tightly he was trying to clench them, and his fingernails on his other hand were digging into the palms of his hand. "Howard was my friend-"

"Don't you say his name, you don't get to say his name, you sonuvabitch," Tony snapped. "So when were you going to tell me? Huh? When?"

"Would it have done any good if you'd known?" Bucky asked, resignation in his voice, his fists unclenching, but his hands starting to shake.

Tony took in a deep breath, like he was trying to calm himself down enough to answer, before making a sound of disgust and cutting the connection.

Bucky stared at the Homeland sigil that replaced Tony's video feed, not really seeing it, trying and failing to control his breathing, his heart rate.

Out. He needed out. He needed air, needed a place to get away; if Tony called back, Bucky didn't care, didn't want to be there for it. He felt every muscle start to tremble, and his stomach to clench. He felt lightheaded, dizzy, unable to swallow. Not now, he thought, resting his head in his hands. Don't do this to me now. He didn't think he could handle another attack, not then.

He almost upended Natasha's chair, sending it sliding across the room as he headed for the door, grabbing his double-layered coat and pulling it on. He barely remembered to pull on his left glove before leaving the apartment, unable to even think about the valuables he was leaving unguarded, unsecured, behind him as he slammed the door shut and headed out. No roof to climb up onto, so he ran until he found a back alley in the part of town the street signs labeled as the 'historic Haymarket.'
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

"We've all been there. We've all seen it. Don't let yourself be alone in there."

It used to be easy.

The weather was cold. That wasn't a cause for a front page headline, it was the day after Thanksgiving, it tended to be cold in the northern latitudes around that time of year. But there was something special about the Nebraska cold. It sucked into the lungs and exhaled in frozen puffs of ice. The wind bit into the skin like needles, making the cheeks sting and the eyes water. Hell, even the inside of his nose felt cold and dry.

He tugged his hood up, trying to retreat into his coat's depths in an attempt to keep warm. He was still shaking, though how much of that was from the cold now, and how much was from the anxiety attack that wasn't abating, he couldn't tell. Everything about the attack was made that much worse by the cold. He couldn't breathe, his stomach muscles clenched, both from cold and the desire to upend his breakfast, and his hands were shaking. Even the metal one.

Bucky could hear and see sounds of life off to the east, cars lined up on a street just a couple blocks away. The sidewalks were crowded. He shied away from that part of the Haymarket, finding some back ways closer to the apartment where there didn't seem to be any businesses. There were back alleys, alleys with dumpsters to hide behind, where he wouldn't be seen by the general populace a few blocks away. He huddled down behind one, grateful for the way it blocked the wind.

"Fucking cold," he whispered to himself, just barely remembering to pull on his other glove before slipping his hands under his hood to cover his ears. It wasn't even to warm them, it was to try to stop the sounds of screaming in his head. It wasn't a physical sensation, just a buzz in his mind that made everything tilt at funny angles, but the activity helped him slowly block out the excess noise to find where his thoughts had gone.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw motion on his right, coming from the direction of the rest of downtown. He curled up tighter, glancing around the edge of his hood to see what the movement was caused by. At that exact moment, making himself seem small and harmless felt like a better defense than to brace himself for an encounter to fight back in. With as tight as his nerves were pulled, trying to fight back would result in someone or something being very dead.

"Easy, buddy," the man who'd approached said. He was wearing a thick, beat up old Army coat, not entirely unlike Bucky's, with a threadbare stocking cap, and a scarf around his neck, partially hiding his face. He looked like he needed a shower and a shave. "We don't hurt each other around here. Mind if I sit here?"

Bucky wasn't entirely sure who 'we' were in this particular context, but the man was being non-threatening, and just distracting enough that Bucky's stomach had stopped trying to heave. He shrugged, motioning with his elbow to the spot next to him, and huddled down closer to the dumpster on his left.

The man sat down. "You must be new here," he said. "I haven't seen you around."
Bucky studied the ground in front of him. "Do you make a point of knowing everyone who comes here?"

"No," the man said. "Just those of us who hide in the alleys. Name's Derrick." He held out his hand.

Seeing no reason to ignore the man- he was being kind, so far, and was offering something to focus on besides his own internal issues -Bucky took his hand. "James."

The man made a noise of acknowledgement, huddling down near Bucky, but leaving a courteous distance. He studied Bucky. "So tell me, James. That jacket the real thing, or did you scrounge it at Goodwill?"

Bucky studied the coat. "Technically, it's from Goodwill," he admitted. "I lost mine some years back." He looked at Derrick. "You?"

"It's the original," he said with what looked like a thoroughly ironic smile. "What unit you with?"

"The one-oh-seventh," Bucky said. "Served a few years. Just got home a couple years ago."

"You been out here that whole time?" Derrick asked.

Bucky frowned slightly. "Out here? You mean in Lincoln?"

"No, on the streets, like most of us poor dumb bastards who the government tricked into joining."

Derrick sighed, resting his head against the brick wall behind them. "Sorry, man. I tried working with the VA when I first got back from Iraq. They couldn't do shit. Lost my wife and little girl in the divorce, couldn't hold down a job. No one would hire someone who's only real skill was to shoot to kill." His face twisted into a bitter smile. "Except the cops, but they don't want a black man doing that."

Bucky decided to not comment on the racial politics; his agreement aside, it was something that had Derrick upset, and not something Bucky wanted to listen to. He had enough of his own problems right then. "Didn't go to college or work before joining?"

"Dropped out of high school a month before graduation to take care of my girl and our baby," he said. "Got my GED while I was working Subway, pulling in enough hours to make being home for her hard, but not enough to be considered full-time and get benefits. Pretty common ploy for those bastards. Army got ahold of me, told me I could have a stable income, a place for my wife and little girl to live, food to eat, if I just signed up and served a few years, hunt down Saddam Hussein for them." He snorted. "Biggest bunch of shit."

"It's not bad, until the country abandons you," Bucky said quietly. He didn't blame anyone for not looking for a body after he fell from the mountain, but he knew that Phillips and the rest of the Army had given up on him and most of his unit when they were captured the first time. He'd thought he'd understood back then, but Steve had been upset by it a few times since. Now he wasn't sure what he thought.

"Preaching to the choir," Derrick said. He glanced towards the busier streets. "You're smart, getting on this side of ninth. All the crazies are over there."

"Hm?" Bucky leaned forward, looking around Derrick to the crowds. "I just picked a place that wasn't crowded and wasn't windy."

"Sometimes, that's the best criteria you need." Derrick looked over at him. "You're new, so I'm going to guess you aren't familiar with the local resources. They don't do much for most of us, but you
might get lucky."

It was taking Bucky a much longer time to figure out that Derrick meant resources for the homeless than it should've, but his brain was starting to reset, the little hamster in the wheel coming back to life and running again. "I'm staying on a friend's couch, actually," he said. "It's not for long, but it'll do for now."

Derrick nodded. "Take advantage of that while you can," he said. "Hopefully your friend will let you stay through Christmas. It sucks being on the streets around then. Sure, people will surrender quarters to you easier if you sit with a cardboard sign on the corner around that time, but it's nicer being inside with a good cup of coffee."

Bucky made a faint noise of agreement.

When nothing else was forthcoming, Derrick leaned forward, looking at Bucky around the edge of Bucky's hood. "Stay focused, man. Out here isn't the greatest place to have an episode."

Bucky pulled back his hood a bit, looking at Derrick in alarm. "What the hell do you mean?" he snapped. Had it really been that obvious? He thought he'd been calming down, could finally hear a semblance of coherence behind the panic.

Derrick sat back. "We've all seen it," he said. "We've all been there. You learn to recognize it when others do it. You're still shaking. Thought talking might help you before something got ugly. Keep talking, don't let yourself be alone in there."

Bucky snorted, shaking his head. "You sound like my friend. He's constantly poking at me to talk."

"It helps," Derrick said. "Sometimes it helps more to talk to a stranger than a friend. You don't want them hurt by what's hurting you. So talk to me, man. We've both been out there. Where'd they put you? I was running protection detail on supply runs. Probably safer than some places they could've put me, but still saw plenty of action."

Bucky had to fight with himself to answer, not entirely sure how to answer. He'd done a lot of odd jobs in the Howling Commandos, although the position of sniper was one he was in more than others. And he wasn't about to talk about his time with Hydra. "I was a sniper in a special ops," he finally said. It was truth enough.

Derrick made a sympathetic noise. "That's rough. I've always heard that the snipers have it the hardest." Then he raised an eyebrow. "Thought you said you were in the one-oh-seventh, not a special ops."

Bucky laughed derisively. "I was assigned to the one-oh-seventh when I finished boot camp. After some 'exemplary' service, I got tapped for a special ops group and handed a rifle and told to have fun." He felt himself shrink into his coat a bit more. "Wasn't all that fun."

"It never is," Derrick said, voice quiet. "Unless you like long periods of boredom punctuated by fifteen seconds of sheer terror."

"Only the dangerous ones do," Bucky said. He couldn't say that the Winter Soldier particularly liked the long periods, and he never thought of those fifteen seconds as terror, but neither part bothered him. It was part of the job. It was what he did. What he knew. He frowned. "Worst part is, most of those don't start out that way. Soldiers aren't supposed to become the monsters."

Silence passed for almost a minute, nothing but the noise of the crowds blocks down and the wind whistling through the alley to be heard. Finally, Derrick spoke up. "We were riding supplies through
a little village in northern Iraq. Don't remember the name of it. Intel said the village might be housing insurgents, so we were on guard. Woman came out to greet us, waving something. We didn't know if she was signaling enemy fighters or not. We told her to back away, to put the cloth down and walk away. She didn't listen." He turned his head to watch the passing crowds to their right. "We opened fire. Dunno if it was my bullet that got her or not, but someone got her. We investigated. The cloth she was waving was a white flag. She was surrendering for the people in her home."

Bucky couldn't tell if this whole talking to a stranger thing was working. On one hand, it made him feel less alone to hear that other soldiers had taken innocent lives. On the other, it was making his hands shake more, and his throat to try to close. He laughed, a not quite right sound. "It was easy, wasn't it?" he asked. "They make killing easy. It's easy or you die." He nudged the ground in front of him with the back of his heel. "Then you come home and realize it wasn't as easy as you thought."

He didn't see Derrick's hand until it was already on his shoulder and he jumped back, smacking into the dumpster, his metal shoulder making a loud clang against it. Derrick held up his hands. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said. Then he offered a knowing smile. "Cold's getting to you. Go back inside."

"What about you?" Bucky asked.

Derrick motioned off towards the crowd. "I'm gonna hit up the Union, see if I can't get me a cup of coffee. If you decide you need something, or you get kicked out, ask around for me. I'll help hook you up."

Bucky couldn't help the grateful smile. "Thanks." He took a deep breath, getting to his feet. "Go get that coffee." He felt Derrick's stare as he walked away and around the corner, as if he were waiting to see if he'd be further needed. Bucky heard footsteps behind him once he was out of the alley.

He wasn't suprised to see that the apartment was still empty when he got there, but he wasn't happy with himself when he realized he'd left the door unlocked. Brilliant, James, he thought, realizing how easy it would've been for someone to find their weapons and uniforms, the money they had stored, Natasha's computer with Homeland intel on it. He got lucky.

Deciding that he'd been stressed enough that morning, he forced that thought out of his mind, shucking out of his coat and boots. He still felt cold, and cold was not making his brain a happy space full of rainbows right then, so hoping that Natasha wouldn't try to beat him senseless for raising her electricity bill, he wandered over to the thermostat and bumped the heat up. The furnace rumbled to life. It'd take a few minutes before that heat circulated enough to warm Bucky up, so he went back over to the bed.

He wasn't sure where his thoughts were as he dug into his night bag, pulling out Hydra's file on the Winter Soldier Project. He'd read it a few times, early on, but he'd mostly avoided it since about the fourth month of living with Steve, when his memories had stabilized enough that reading it just sent him into flashbacks.

Having just had an attack, he probably would've been smart to leave it be, to maybe nap off the crash from the attack, but his thoughts wouldn't let him. They weren't even really thoughts in that they weren't words, they were feelings and impressions and images and the occasional burst of color that meant things to him, but couldn't be put into words.

The first thing in the file were the pictures, two vastly different men, one a young sergeant fresh into the military, ready to fight for his country, and one under ice, an experiment being preserved until the next time it was needed. Thaw, shoot, kill, wipe, freeze, repeat. A weapon, nothing more.

There was far more than that, of course, reports of chemicals doing damage to his brain that was not
intended, more chemical warfare against his body's attempt at defying them to fix what they broke. Bucky half-wondered if there wasn't anything permanently damaged in there that he just hadn't stumbled upon yet. He'd mentally argue with himself that the attacks were a result of these botched chemicals, but he knew better. Even Steve had these moments. Tony had had these moments. It wasn't anything abnormal, just very annoying.

Actually, he wondered if Tony had ever figured out those chemicals or not. Tony'd been busy with a lot of his own things, Bucky hadn't been in any hurry to find out how much permanent damage there might be, so he hadn't pushed.

Tony.

Bucky bit back a sigh. He'd probably never know now, and somehow, he wasn't sure how bad he felt about that. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know if his brain and body were a ticking time bomb, ready to go off at just the right time, when casualties would be at the maximum.

He glanced over at the computer that had gone to sleep, considering the very tiny starts of a plan. He needed to talk to Carter, but he didn't know how to contact her. The only one that did was Natasha, and good luck getting Steve away for Bucky to talk her into it. What was forming in the back of his mind wasn't something Steve would approve of. Natasha would understand, would help, but Steve was as overprotective of Bucky as Bucky was of Steve.

Fucking mess, the both of them.

Brr. Why was it still so fucking cold in that apartment?

He crawled under the blanket, propping himself up on his left arm as he flipped through the file, trying and only kind of succeeding to read it objectively, to not let his brain remember what was being written about as something he was part of, but as a story that happened to someone else. Neural scarring fixing itself after coming out of cryo. Need for a wipe before being put back in to keep the subject loyal. Reset process, date 4 March 1947, subject hesitates when going up stairs for less than a second, but does not show this hesitation scaling walls. When working with others, subject stays on the right flank, but stands on the left side of someone speaking to him. Reasons for these aberrations are unknown, but as they do not impeded the subject's ability to follow orders, nor do they seem to be signs of defiance, the reset procedures are declared complete.

Bucky wondered how he'd missed that in his earlier readings. Always let Steve go first up the stairs. Stay on Steve's left side when speaking, he can hear better. When in a potentially dangerous situation, become his ears on his weak side and take the right flank.

It kind of relieved him that they hadn't taken everything. Even if they were only little things, they were still there.

There was a scientific description of the wipes, what they were supposed to do, how they did it. He supposed it was interesting on a purely objective level, but he couldn't quite get to that level. Every detail it described, he felt pain in his head. Pain that traveled, stabbed, throbbed, made everything in him hurt until his vision wanted to black out.

Somewhere behind him, he became only vaguely aware of a noise, the tumble of a lock, but he thought it was a neighbor, it seemed far away. A door opening, sounds of sacks rustling.

"Oh my god, why does it feel like an oven in here?"

Natasha's voice.
Bucky snapped awake, not sure when he'd nodded off, but the crick in his neck and the dull ache on the side of his head where he'd been pillowed on his metal arm told him it must've been awhile. "Hm?" He sat up, trying to crack his neck. "Sorry, I was cold."

Steve studied him in concern, probably only not stopping to bug him because he had bags of groceries in his hands. He followed Natasha to the kitchen area. "You could've gotten another blanket," he said.

"I didn't think there were any," Bucky said.

Natasha set her bags down and walked over to the thermostat and stared at it. "James, you set it on seventy-six. It's no wonder it felt like walking into a sauna." She turned down the dial and then looked at him. "You'd think you were cold-blooded, can't function in the cold."

Bucky stared at her distantly. "Cold means total shut down."

Natasha went quiet, looking at him as if for the first time. He wasn't sure what was going through her mind, nor did he care. He was past the point of caring what people thought of him. "I have more blankets in my room that I'm not using," she said, voice soft. "I'll bring them out. I didn't realize what was in the closet wasn't enough."

He waved her off. "It's fine. I could've asked for more."

She didn't answer, just held out a finger at Steve, signaling she'd be with him in a minute, then disappeared into her bedroom. She returned about thirty seconds later with a few afghans folded under her arms. "Steve, you help James set up the bed. I'll put away the food."

Steve took the blankets obediently, walking over to the sofa bed where Bucky was sitting up, but still under the covers. The open Hydra file sat next to him. Steve set the blankets down on the foot of the bed, looking at Bucky. "You slept on your metal arm," he said, pointing vaguely at Bucky. "You have imprints on your face."

Bucky reached up with his right hand and felt his left cheek. "Dunno how you can tell," he said. "I need to shave."

Steve glanced over at the open file, then sighed, looking back at Bucky. "Why are you doing this to yourself? Looking at that has never done you any good."

Bucky grabbed the file and shut it. "Can't run from it forever, Steve," he said, scooting off the bed to sit on the edge and tuck the file back into his overnight bag.

"There's a difference between running away and taking care of your own well-being," Steve said.

Bucky looked up at him. "How long did it take you to contact Peggy? She was the only one of us left alive, did you contact her right away? Or did you avoid it?"

Steve sighed, opened his mouth to speak, pursed his lips in frustration, then tried again. "James, that's different, and you know it."

"You stopped running, though," Bucky said. "You have to face it eventually. What have I told you about you not living in my head? When I'm ready to face these things, I should, before I just start running forever and never stop."

"And what are you going to do now that you're facing them?" Steve asked.
"I don't know," Bucky answered.

He was saved from anything else Steve might've tried to prod out of him by Natasha's voice. "Steve, here," she said, holding out a thick book. "Why don't you give James the gift you got him. Give him something to do that doesn't involve turning my apartment into Satan's personal apartment in hell."

"You think he only has an apartment?" Bucky asked, watching Steve take the book from Natasha, then walk back over to Bucky. He frowned, looking at it. "A Dance With Dragons. Oh, good, I can finish it." He took it, flipping through it idly. "Thank you. It was getting kinda boring here."

"Well, my apartment isn't set up to entertain multiple people," Natasha said as she stuffed food into the freezer and fridge. "So I had to find something. Steve said you liked to read and you were in the middle of that series. Good series, by the way."

Bucky made a noise of agreement, flipping through the early pages and skimming for something familiar. Then he looked up at Steve. "What about you?"

Steve shrugged with a lopsided grin. "We picked up some pencils for me. I have my sketchbooks, and those aren't exactly expensive if I run out of paper."

Bucky looked around him at Natasha. "Careful, you'll have a fridge full of art stuck up with magnets by the end of the second day."

"Oh? Good. It could use some decorating." She didn't turn around or pause in her work to say that. Steve gave Bucky a weary glare. "I bring you a book and that's how you thank me?"

Bucky gave him a grin best reserved to be given to younger siblings. "You know I've always been the most ungrateful cuss around. Now go get your sketchbooks and start drawing. It shuts you up."
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bucky stared at her, first taking in the knowledge that the most deadly female spy in the modern day liked girly-smelling shaving cream, and second, trying to decide if he cared or not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bucky actually slept through lunch; the food had smelled good, but the cold, shaky feeling that had plagued him all day was still making his insides feel like ice, so he'd burrowed under the extra blankets- much better than before -and napped. His body needed the fuel, but his brain needed the downtime more.

"James?"

Bucky slowly roused himself out of sleep at the sound of his name, forcing his eyes open and peeking out over the edge of the blankets. It'd been Natasha that had said his name, and she was looking at him from her desk. On the computer, the telecomm program was up, and the winamp was playing something softly, a duet of some sort that almost sounded like it was a rock ballad, but wasn't quite what he'd come to think of as rock thanks to Tony.

"Who did you call?" She motioned to the screen of her computer.

Oh. That. "Tony," he said, laying his head back down. "Told Carter to ignore his calls, I'd take care of it. So I took care of it."

Natasha sighed deeply. "If you'd called anyone else, I'd have to strangle you for compromising me," she snapped. "You could've asked."

Bucky closed his eyes again, intending on not dealing with her. "I wanted it to be a private call. It wasn't any of your business. And like you said, anyone else. You know Tony can keep his line just as secure."

"Which is exactly why I'm not asking Steve to smother you," she said. "I'd ask how it went, but I have a feeling you won't tell me."

Bucky quickly realized that he wasn't going to get her to leave him alone, and he felt rested enough to wake up anyway, so he sat up with a noise of frustration. "I think you can guess how it went," he said. He rubbed his chin, grimacing at the feeling of fur there. He wanted a shave. He looked at her. "I don't suppose you two bought anything for us to shave? I don't want to reuse your razors."

"Don't like beards?" Natasha asked, looking and sounding vaguely amused.

"I don't think I've ever seen him with one that wasn't against his will," Steve said, not looking up from whatever he was drawing.

"They itch," Bucky complained.
"And they look funny," Natasha said. "I have disposable razors, you can grab a new one. As far as shaving cream goes, I hope you don't mind if your face smells like tropical flowers."

Bucky stared at her, first taking in the knowledge that the most deadly female spy in the modern day liked girly-smelling shaving cream, and second, trying to decide if he cared or not. He decided on the latter "Couldn't care less," he said, emerging from under the blankets. He grabbed his comb out of his bag to take with him; his hair was probably a mess and he could feel that the ponytail had fallen halfway down his head. Obnoxious.

Fortunately, Natasha didn't make comment on it as he went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He studied his reflection in the mirror. He was a goddamn mess. He felt like a goddamn mess. He had a headache from sleeping too much, but his mind still felt fatigued and he wondered sometimes exactly why it took so damn long to recuperate from an attack. But at least he was only fatigued instead of wound up tighter than a spring, ready to snap at any time.

He felt much better after he'd gotten his face smoothed and his hair combed back to its usual style. He felt human again. But Natasha was right, his face smelled strongly of flowers. Steve would probably have a good laugh at his expense, but the feeling of not being a wild cave bear was worth it.

"You look like you're feeling better," Natasha commented as he walked back into the main room.

Steve crinkled his nose. "Natasha, that is the most perfumed shaving cream I have ever smelled. I can smell him from here."

"I can and will kick your ass, Steve," Bucky warned him. He looked at Natasha. "Have you had contact with Agent Carter today?"

Natasha grabbed her phone off her desk and looked at it, scrolling quite a bit. "Got about ten messages of new hits that have come out. Looks like most of your work was posing as a Soviet. Although there was a hit that looks like it was done by SHIELD that's getting credited to you. All together, counting the first two, we're at twenty." She looked over at him. "It's about five minutes to kick off, I'll contact her after the game, unless it's an emergency. We can talk then. But I promised Clint."

Bucky nodded. "Yeah, I'm not going to ask you to break a promise." He sat back down on the bed for lack of anywhere else to sit, careful to not jostle Steve's drawing. He looked over Steve's shoulder, knowing that Steve hated that.

Steve paused, looking back at Bucky. "You know I don't like that."

"Doesn't stop me," Bucky replied. "Gimme your other book, the one that's full."

Steve set down his pencil and current sketchbook, and grabbed his overnight bag. Bucky was polite and refrained from sneaking a look at Steve's unfinished work while his attention was averted. Steve handed the older sketchbook to Bucky. "Here. There's some really old stuff in there of the Howling Commandos and us. Second half is mostly the Avengers."

Natasha looked over from where she was changing the radio channel on her computer. "Aw, you drew us? How adorable." The music stopped, changing to the sounds of a couple of talking heads discussing people Bucky assumed to be Husker players. Football stats that meant nothing to him.

Steve shrugged. "I don't like taking photographs. They're always too staged, and candid shots look awkward."
Bucky ignored them, flipping the book open to the early pages. Several pictures of the Commandos, profile studies, names written in Steve's neat script next to the finished pictures. They looked more like snapshots, posed pictures like the kind that Steve hated, but Bucky had a feeling that Steve had to go on photographs to get the details, so many years had passed. They felt forced.

But not the pictures of the two of them. Some were old memories from before the war, memories, some of which Bucky recognized, others, not so much. He smiled faintly at one that wasn't actually of Steve and Bucky, but rather Steve and Rebecca, the latter trying to teach the former to dance at Bucky's request (and bribe, she accepted nothing less than three rolls of Lifesavers and one Hershey's bar). Steve was twenty-one, still trying to learn and failing horribly, and Rebecca was fourteen, hair was done up in braids, too long for some of the more popular styles of their day. Bucky used to tell her she'd never get a date if she couldn't make herself more fashionable. Steve had actually told Bucky off on the matter, telling Rebecca that she'd find the right person if she stayed who she was, because anyone who wouldn't date the real thing without shallow frippery wasn't worth the effort.

He laid his metal hand down on the picture, next to Rebecca. His flesh hand might've only smudged the pencil lines. He missed her, hadn't been there for her like he should've. He hadn't been there to give whoever she married tips on how to make her puff out her cheeks in anger, because then the whole situation seemed funny, no matter how angry she got, because she just looked like a chipmunk with an attitude problem. He wondered if Paul or Peter had done it in his stead.

In the background, he heard the sounds of an audience screaming, and those talking heads, and Bucky could only assume without actually paying attention that the game had begun.

"Is that just the radio?" Steve asked, his voice jarring Bucky out of the trip down memory lane he was taking.

Natasha got that not-smile. "Not just the radio. We're about four blocks from the stadium, you will be hearing every touchdown before the radio even broadcasts it."

Steve looked over at Bucky. "Just like back in the days when we'd listen to the games from outside the stadium, hm?"

Bucky chuckled. "Did the Dodgers ever win?"

"Only on Halloween," Steve said, going back to his drawing.

It took Natasha a second- Bucky had almost completely gone back to the pictures -but she spoke up, frowning. "I didn't think baseball played on Halloween."

Steve snorted, laughing hard enough that he had to set down his pencil. Natasha didn't look amused at his laughing, nor when Bucky joined him. Before she could make an indignant statement to burn their ears off, Steve waved it off. "It's an old joke from our day, Natasha, that's all. It used to be said that the Dodgers would only ever win if they played on Halloween precisely because they never won."

Natasha shook her head. "You sports fans are some of the strangest people."

"I'm sure you have room to talk," Steve said, pointing the eraser end of his pencil at her.

Bucky decided to tune them out, returning to the sketchbook. Very few of the pictures actually went back before the war, most were of Captain America and Bucky Barnes, and there were pictures of Peggy, exactly as Bucky remembered her. Even though he'd seen her one last time before she died,
he couldn't bring to mind the image of the old woman in a bed, senility all but destroyed her mind before her body had caught up. It was always that young woman with the painted lips and the brown eyes and the smile she seemed to save just for Steve.

Then there were the pictures of Howard. Howard trying to explain girls to Steve where Bucky had apparently failed him, Howard and Bucky working on weapons designs together. Bucky had worked for Stark Industries before America officially joined the war, worked as a weapons designer in Manhattan, and upon finding this out, Howard had taken Bucky under his wing and had Bucky design custom weapons for the Commandos to use, something Hydra wouldn't be prepared to fight against.

He wondered if Tony would ever know any of that.

There was a lump of lead that landed in Bucky's stomach at that thought. He'd been friends with both Starks, and had lost them both, all by his own hand. Maybe if he'd just fought Hydra harder, maybe if he'd found a way to kill himself so they couldn't use him, honorable suicide, or found a way out, maybe if he'd been honest with Tony from the start, although he thought that wouldn't have helped much. Tony would be stupid to not hold Bucky accountable for Howard's death.

He quickly closed the book and set it aside, hearing the thick crack of a snapped neck and not wanting to destroy Steve's work because he started clenching his fists without noticing that he was gripping something at the time.

Steve looked at him, frowning slightly. He glanced at Natasha, who was focused on a solitaire game and the play-by-play coming from the radio station that identified itself as KLIN, then looked back at Bucky. 'You okay?' he asked silently, moving his lips but not giving any voice to the words.

Bucky bit back a sigh, shook his head, and grabbed his book that Steve had gotten him and held it up. 'Gonna read,' he replied, then motioned to Steve's sketchbook so Steve didn't lose track of it.

He had trouble focusing on the book. He couldn't count how many times he re-read paragraphs, not parsing them the first few times. He knew he'd probably have to go back to the start and try again tomorrow, or maybe the day after, depending on how long it took him to make his peace with himself enough to do exactly what he knew he needed to do.

Time passed. He glanced up every time he heard cheers from the stadium, waiting for the radio broadcast to catch up and tell him the score. Nebraska thirty-one, Miami seventeen, end of the first half. Forty minutes later, end of the third quarter, Nebraska thirty-six, Miami still at seventeen.

Another half hour had gone by, when Bucky heard the sounds of artillery, and he automatically dropped his book, jumping and wishing he had a weapon in reach. Steve's reaction was about the same, the sketchbook landing next to A Dance With Dragons and his pencil suddenly an impromptu knife.

The artillery was accompanied by screams, and then the radio announcer started shouting, "he's at the thirty, the twenty, the ten- touchdown Nebraska!" and the screams they'd already been hearing blasted over the radio, accompanied by the sound of what Bucky now realized was nothing more than fireworks.

He put a hand over his heart. "These lunatics set off fireworks when they win?" he demanded.

Natasha had been looking at them in alarm, dead silent, like she was listening for whatever threat they'd heard, then relaxed, shoulders slumping. "Sorry, I didn't think to warn you. Don't worry, nobody's dropping bombs on Lincoln, that's just Nebraska being a bit enthusiastic about their team."
Steve sighed, rubbing his face with one hand, then looked down at the other, which held a snapped pencil. "Good thing we picked up a pack," he grumbled.

"Sorry, guys," Natasha said, sounding genuinely sorry. "I'm used to them, I don't think anything of it." She got up. "I'll cook dinner, you two try to unknot your nerves a bit."

"I'd ask if you had alcohol, but that shit doesn't work anymore," Bucky grumbled. Then he remembered something. "You said you don't know how to cook for more than one person. Maybe one of us better cook."

Natasha paused at the fridge, looking back at him. "If you want to go all domestic on me instead of read, don't let me stop you. Just don't ruin any of my pans or I'll have to hit you with them."

Bucky got up, once again being careful to not jostle Steve, who was already searching for a new pencil, and gave Natasha a scowl on his way to the kitchen. "Your pans are already shit, Romanov," he said. "Haven't you ever heard of no-stick?"

She smiled, passing him on her way back to her desk. "What, are they too hard for you to clean?"

He paused by the fridge and gave her a murderous glare back over his shoulder. "Being annoying does not mean difficult," he said. When she didn't respond except to give him that smile he really hated and loved, he made a noise of disgust and turned back to the fridge. They'd really stocked up, and it looked like Steve had had some input, rather than having been the guy to carry the bags when he and Natasha went out earlier. His brain just wasn't putting anything together yet, not without checking their vegetable stock.

They had potatoes. A damn lot of potatoes. Why did they have so many potatoes? Bucky immediately blamed Steve; the Irish bastard had grown up with his mother's cooking, and potatoes had been cheap back then. He noticed, however, that Steve had yet to volunteer to cook, not once since Natasha had plopped herself down on their laps.

If Steve wanted potatoes, by god, he'd get potatoes.

Natasha switched the radio- now nothing but talking heads discussing the game they'd just discussed in real time, why did sports shows do that? -to her music, and Bucky decided that was definitely some form of rock, but it wasn't nearly as bad as that garbage that Tony played. The main singer, whoever she was, was actually singing instead of just yelling and screaming. Modern music, what the hell was wrong with it.

Dinner was almost done cooking, Bucky waiting boredly for the apples to finish softening, when Steve lifted his head. "You're making one of Mom's recipes, aren't you?"

"Your sense of smell is terrible if you're just now noticing that," Bucky said, turning back to the stove to poke at the apples. They seemed soft enough. Mushy was the word Bucky wanted to use, it worked since the meal was called apple potato mush, but Steve would never let Bucky get away with saying that without a proper scolding. The potatoes were mush, but the apples were soft. Picky, picky.

Natasha looked over at Bucky. "Steve's mother taught you to cook?"

"No," Bucky said, paying too much attention to mixing the food to quip back at her. "I learned to cook from my own family. But Missus Rogers knew she wasn't going to be around forever to cook when Steve needed help, so she made sure I knew some 'home food' to make him. She was very intent on him not becoming fully American." He looked back over his shoulder at Steve. "And then
you went and became Mister Star Spangled Banner."

Steve laughed. "I think she would've laughed until she cried if she'd seen any of my USO shows," he said. "But it's fine, Captain America represents the part of America she liked. She just hated American food."

"It was more than just our food that she hated, but okay," Bucky said. "Romanov says she's a lady, so I suppose we'd better let her come dish up first." He turned off the stove and set the pot with the food on a cool burner, then stepped away to let Natasha get her own damn bowl.

"You're charming," Natasha said, getting up and walking over. She eyed the food. "What is this?" She seemed hesitant, but she was grabbing a bowl and dishing up anyway.

"Apple potato mush," Bucky said. "Basically, it's mashed potatoes with apple thrown in for the hell of it."

Natasha looked back at Steve, who'd walked over and stood hovering over her shoulder. "What is wrong with your people?"

Steve looked offended. "I don't want to hear it from you, I've sampled Russian food." Then he reached over and punched Bucky on the arm, yelping as his knuckles clanged off Bucky's metal arm.

Bucky laughed. "A year and a half, Steve. Really."

Steve shook his hand, glaring at Bucky's arm, then up at him. "There is nothing wrong with my mother's cooking."

"I never said there was anything wrong with her cooking," Bucky said, motioning for Steve to grab a bowl; Natasha had slipped out of friendly fire range with her food. "I just said what this particular recipe was. It's mashed potatoes and mashed apples mixed together. Deny it."

Steve looked grumpy. "I can't and I won't, but you don't have to be so insulting about it. You eat hot dogs at baseball games, and those are just meat fat in the shape of a-"

"You just don't like them because you couldn't eat one without gagging on it," Bucky interrupted.

Behind them, Natasha did that laughing and choking at the same time thing she'd done more than once since eating meals with them. "I hate you both," she finally said after managing to swallow instead of killing herself.

"That's why you're laughing," Steve said, shooting Bucky one more unhappy look as he walked away with his food.

"I'm laughing because everyone is secretly a thirteen year old boy inside," Natasha said. She eyed her food. "This is weird."

Steve turned that really not happy look on her. "Don't you start."

"No, it's not bad," she said. "Just not two flavors I'd ever think to mix together, that's all. It's good, just strange to me."

"Damn right, it's good," Steve said. Then he motioned to Bucky with his spoon as Bucky settled down next to him with his food. "It's good, but Mom's was better."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Excuse me for not being your mother."
After Steve had gone back for seconds, taking Bucky's bowl with him after Bucky gave him the puppy eyes to get some for him, too, Natasha made a noise that sounded vaguely like she was trying to say 'eureka!' or maybe just 'oh!' around a mouthful of food. Bucky looked at her patiently, waiting for her to swallow. "You wanted me to contact Sharon tonight, right?"

Bucky didn't answer right away, looked over at Steve, who didn't seem to notice, or at least was only listening without taking attention off the food. Now that Bucky was set in his decision, he wanted to get it done and over with, a mission in mind, so contacting Sharon right away was his first inclination.

But he really should convince Steve to help him before he started trying to recruit Steve's not-girlfriend to his cause.

Bucky looked back at Natasha. "It can wait until tomorrow. She's been busy today, if how many times your phone has gone off this evening is any indication. It's nothing urgent."

Natasha shrugged, acting nonchalant about it, but Bucky had learned to read her facial expressions, as subtle as they were, in the way too much time they'd been around each other. She was far more curious than she was letting on, but she knew to wait, and she'd find out later. "All right. Just don't wake me at stupid o' clock to call her if you change your mind."

"Heaven forbid I interrupt your beauty sleep."

She raised an eye at him. "You really think I need beauty sleep?"

There was one of those questions females liked to ask men just to watch them squirm. Bucky decided to take the blunt way out. "I'm not answering that."

"Good answer, James," she said, then looked at her empty bowl on her desk. "So who gets kitchen duty?"

"Not me," Bucky said immediately, glancing up at Steve and taking his bowl as Steve handed it over and then sat down next to him with his own food. "That's why I volunteered to cook. I don't do both."

When Natasha looked at Steve, he shook his head. "Don't look at me," he said around a mouthful of apple potato mush. "I'm the guest."

Natasha looked less than amused. "How magnanimous of you," she said. "Fine, when you two finish stuffing your faces, I'll clean the kitchen. Then I am taking a shower and heading to bed, so if either of you want to use the bathroom before I turn it into a steam room, speak now or forever hold your-" She cut herself off. "I'm not juvenile enough to make that pun, even by accident."

Bucky went still, a bite halfway to his mouth, looking at her. "And yet you're juvenile enough to point it out."

"You two were the ones making dick jokes earlier," she pointed out.

Bucky glanced at Steve, noticing he was pointedly staying out of this conversation, then looked back at Natasha. "We're Army, everything's a dick joke in the Army." He went back to his food, only pausing enough to motion at the hallway. "Go take your shower, then do the kitchen. Unless you want to run out of hot water in the shower because you used it all cleaning dishes."

She considered that. "Wise words," she said, then got up, and took her bowl out to the kitchen.
Yes, Husker fans are that damn crazy. And yes, that recipe is a real thing. Bucky has me browsing allrecipes.com far more than I should.

Also! Since I'm posting this on Thanksgiving in America, Happy Thanksgiving to my American readers! You all (and non-Americans, too) are the best.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Does Captain America still believe in that 'and justice for all' thing?

Then Captain America knows the Winter Soldier has to turn himself in.

It was about one-thirty in the morning before Bucky gave up on sleeping and sat up, hoping that being upright would help his thoughts sort themselves out. He really needed to talk to Steve, but Steve had been tired and fallen asleep almost as soon as he'd laid down, and Natasha had only been in bed by that time long enough for Steve to have used the bathroom after she cleared out from her own routine. Which meant that there'd been a three minute span between Natasha going to bed and Steve falling sound asleep.

So Bucky had laid there, not sure if he hated himself for sleeping so much earlier, or if he knew better, that he'd be awake right then regardless.

Beside him, he heard Steve shifting around, and glanced over just in time to see Steve lifting his head and looking over at him. "Can't sleep?" Steve asked.

"Didn't mean to wake you," Bucky said, avoiding answering. He wanted to talk to Steve, but he also wanted Steve to go back to sleep, because Steve got cranky when he was deprived of sleep when it wasn't strictly necessary.

Steve blinked at him a couple times, then took in a deep breath, shifting around to face Bucky instead of laying with his back to him. "All right, talk to me. Something's on your mind."

"How do you know I'm not just restless because I slept too much earlier?" Bucky asked, giving Steve a chance to go back to sleep before Bucky grabbed his ear and held it for awhile.

"Because I've seen you after you have naps like that," Steve said. "They don't usually interfere with your ability to sleep at night. So what's going on?"

Bucky looked away, not really at anything, just not at Steve. "Do you remember the pledge we used to say in school?"

"What, the Pledge of Allegiance?" Steve asked, sounding deeply confused. "Yeah, sure. Why?"

"'One nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all,'" Bucky recited as if he were still in grade school, saluting the flag. "They've changed things since then, haven't they? They don't salute anymore."

Steve made an amused noise. "Well, it turned out that the Nazis liked our salute so much that they copied it, so we had to find something different."

Bucky knew he was about to trap Steve into something he knew damn well Steve wouldn't want to be trapped into agreeing to, and Steve would argue anyway, and Bucky felt horrible about it. He didn't like playing Steve like that, but he knew he wasn't going to win any other way. Steve was more stubborn than Bucky was; if Bucky didn't play his cards just right, he'd lose. "Tell me, does
Captain America still believe in that 'and justice for all' thing?"

Steve went silent for the longest twenty seconds in the world. "Bucky, what are you getting at?"

"Answer the question, Steve," Bucky said, still not looking over at him. If Steve didn't answer the way Bucky hoped he would, he'd have to come up with something else, and quickly, and he couldn't do that while looking Steve in the eye.

Steve sat up next to him, Bucky could see him just out of the corner of his peripheral vision. "Well, I don't think we're very good at it, but yeah, the idea of it. Why?"

Bucky looked down at his mismatched hands. The hands of a weapon, an assassin, a killer and little else. "Then Captain America knows the Winter Soldier has to turn himself in." He looked over at Steve, already ready to argue when Steve would inevitably protest.

Steve looked like- well, no, not like Bucky had just punched him, he'd made a different face when that had happened, but a sort of frightened disbelief was there. "Bucky, if you turn yourself in, you know there's a damn good chance you'd never see the light of day again. I'm not going to let you throw yourself into a prison for the rest of our lives."

"Steve, I can't run forever," Bucky said. He looked down at his hands again. He didn't think he'd ever get the metal hand to stop smelling of gunpowder to him."I found something, while I was reading about the Vietnam War. There was something called the Winter Soldier hearings. I don't know how they ended up with the same name that Hydra gave me, but it was a bunch of soldiers owning up to things they'd done in Vietnam, and calling out other soldiers for their crimes. They got it from one of Paine's writings. The spring soldier runs when the war gets difficult, but the winter soldier doesn't." He looked back over at Steve. "I can't run, Steve, I've been running for two years. That's not who I am, you know that."

Steve looked like he desperately wanted to argue, but couldn't, not entirely, but he'd sure as hell try. "All right, fine, turn in the Winter Soldier, justice is served. What about justice for Bucky Barnes? You're going to rot away in a prison for crimes that you're not anymore guilty of than a gun is guilty of murder?"

Bucky snorted. "Not intending on it, no. You know it's Hydra that's been releasing these, right?"

"I had a feeling," Steve said. "I didn't know how many rumors there actually were out there, though. Natasha didn't give me details. But why now? You've been back in the public light for a year and a half, why wait until now to start throwing you under the bus?"

"Because now their accusations will be believed," Bucky said. "You heard Carter last night. The CIA was operating under the assumption that I was borrowing the name, that it was impossible that I had any connection with the ghost assassin. If Hydra released those targets before now, nobody would believe them, and I could just change my working name and it'd amount to shit. But now that it's believable that the Winter Soldier is that old, and it answers the question of what I've been doing all this time, it criminalizes Bucky Barnes, and Steve Rogers, too, for harboring me. And for running. I may be in more shit with the Army because I'm AWOL and you're not, but they're still going to have to deal with the fact that you took a wanted criminal and ran and hid him."

Steve looked like he hadn't considered that, and he was not happy with himself for it. "You know they're not going to jail Captain America. They didn't even put Natasha in prison, and they had her on Capitol Hill."

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Then why are you so certain that they'll lock me away forever? I'm
Captain America's best friend, if they found arresting Romanov problematic, they'd have fun with me."

For a second, Steve didn't seem to know how to respond, then he looked annoyed that Bucky had just verbally danced around him. "All right, so we turn in the Winter Soldier, let the government decide if they want to press charges or not. And if they do? Hydra gets away with murder. And then where's the justice for Bucky, huh?"

Bucky couldn't help the self-satisfied little smile on his face at that. "I'm taking Hydra with me," he said. "We have their records of the Winter Soldier Project. Every dirty little secret about their best weapon and how it was made and it's getting turned in as evidence."

Steve didn't answer right away, not looking as confident as Bucky was trying to make himself feel. "You didn't want that to become public."

Bucky finally looked away, back to studying his hands. "I don't. I don't like the idea of people knowing what they did to me, but they already know what I was turned into, might as well make sure they understand how it was done. I may not be able to look anyone in the eye again, but-" He frowned, trying to figure out what words he wanted to use. "Without that file, I'll be considered a wanted criminal. That file gives me a shot at being classified as the longest-held POW in history. They won't hold a POW in federal prison for something he had no control over. Not without pissing off a lot of people."

"Assuming the government lets anyone know," Steve pointed out. "We only have one copy of that, Bucky, unless we get the copy that we both know Tony has made for himself."

Bucky shook his head. "I don't think we can count on Tony in this," he said. "We'll make a digital copy and send it to Carter. She said they're already trying to cover our tracks, which means they're on our side. If whoever this file gets turned over to decides to try to keep it quiet, Carter and her team can sink that idea like the Titanic."

"You've been thinking about this awhile," Steve said.

Bucky knew he'd won the argument. "Since a little while before you and Natasha got back with the groceries." He flexed his metal fingers, feeling the buzz of the nerve response in what was left of his arm under the computers and metal, in the shoulder and chest girdle and up into his neck and brain. He looked over at Steve. "So are you with me on this?"

"To the end of the line," Steve said without a microsecond of hesitation. Then he sighed. "I don't have to like it, though."

"Not asking you to," Bucky said. "I don't like it either. But if I don't do this, if I just keep running, I'm letting Hydra control me again."

That reason seemed to make more sense to Steve, who looked like he suddenly had fewer reservations about the plan. "Which won't happen," he said. "Anything else lurking in that thick skull of yours that you need to talk about?"

Bucky shook his head. "No. I didn't mean to wake you, I figured I'd just make some really lame and obvious excuse to get out of here and talk to you in private tomorrow, but this works. Go to sleep."

"You promise you're not going to kick me tonight?" Steve asked.

"I didn't kick you last night," Bucky said, frowning at Steve.
Steve suddenly looked like a giant grinning asshole. "No, but you were cuddling."

Bucky reached over and shoved at Steve. "You're a punk."

Steve chuckled. "Jerk. Come on, let's get some sleep. I'm not sure how much longer we're going to have a comfortable bed to sleep in, if you're dragging us somewhere to be arrested."

"I'm not dragging us anywhere," Bucky said, scooting down on the bed a bit to lay down without his head resting on the back of the couch. "We're walking willingly down the Green Mile."

"You make it sound depressing," Steve said, laying back down and turning on his side away from Bucky. "Now go to sleep."

"Yes, Captain," Bucky said, curling up on his right side, the weight of his left arm resting on his side like a comfortable security blanket.

He wasn't sure when he fell asleep, but he woke up to the feeling of someone pushing on his left shoulder, rocking the rest of him forward slightly. He opened his eyes and looked back at Steve, silently demanding an answer to why he was disturbing his sleep.

"Morning," Steve said, covering his mouth as he yawned.

Bucky lifted his head and looked around. Natasha's bedroom door was still closed, and the apartment had no windows, so with the lights off, it was impossible to tell what time of day it was. "How can you tell?"

Steve motioned to the kitchen area. "Her coffee maker just turned on. Unless she set that to go off during the night, the sun's probably up."

"Damnit." Bucky flopped his head back down on the pillow. "Can I just say that I'm jealous of the fact that coffee does anything for her?"

"You and me both," Steve said, then nudged Bucky again. "Get up. You've slept about twenty hours in the last thirty-six. You're going to get a headache from too much sleep."

"Meh," was his petulant reply, but he sat up, rubbing at his eyes to get the crusted sleep out of them. He stared blankly in the direction of the bathroom and bedroom, his eyes unfocused and sleep still fogging his brain. His mind was trying to draw some sort of connection between those two rooms, but he wasn't sure- "I'm taking a shower before she gets up," he said, finally figuring out what the hell his brain had been trying to tell him. "You get breakfast duty today."

Steve gave him a grumpy look. "Then you're taking KP, right?"

"Hell, no," Bucky said, crawling off the bed and digging into his bag. Steve and Natasha had done laundry while Bucky was asleep the day before, and Steve had shoved Bucky's clean clothes in haphazardly, instead of in the vaguely organized way that Bucky usually packed in, so it took a minute to find a set of clothes to change into. Not that he had a lot of variety, although he noticed that he now had a red shirt with a white 'N' on it that hadn't been there before, but it was the principle of the matter. He looked back at Steve. "She can do it."

"You're such a gracious guest," Steve said, rubbing his hands over his face. "Let me use the bathroom before you hog it," he said, getting up, scratching at his left cheek. Sometimes Bucky envied him the ability to do that without having to reach his far arm across to do it. Blunt metal fingers weren't particularly good at scratching an itch. But it was a very minor thing, so it usually warranted nothing more than a brief notice, then shoved aside.
He'd almost dozed off again sitting up by the time Steve came back out, and it'd probably taken him all of a minute at most. Bucky wanted to go back to sleep. He pried his eyes open at the sound of the bathroom door opening, saw that it was Steve and that Natasha hadn't woken up in the short time Bucky's brain had fuzzed up again, then moved quickly to claim the bathroom before Natasha could wake up.

Mercifully, the hot water woke him up, enough that he felt impatient to get on with the day once he'd left the bathroom. But Steve still needed to shower, and Natasha needed to get her butt out of bed and be useful for awhile. But if Bucky was honest with himself, there wasn't much to get on to. They had to contact Sharon, get a copy of the Winter Soldier Project file to her, which shouldn't be hard with the nice set up that Natasha had, and then figure out where to go from there. But he knew they wouldn't be leaving that day, travel- non-emergency travel, at any rate -required at least a bit of forethought.

And he had a feeling that Natasha might make them stay and help her get through the massive amount of food she had to buy to keep up with two grown males with accelerated metabolism. It would be rude of them to dump a bunch of food she couldn't eat before it rotted on her.

Without anything else to do- and hell if he was going to start on breakfast, he made dinner, damnit - he sat down on the bed with his book. He really wished there was somewhere other than the bed to sit, and maybe a closer light source than the overhead. There was a lamp on Natasha's desk, but he knew he was just going to be kicked out of that spot when Natasha got up, so there wasn't much point. She wasn't going to be allowed to sleep that much longer anyway.

Natasha had shuffled out of her bedroom a few minutes before Steve was done with his shower. She was in her dark red robe that looked like it'd seen better days, with her hair in a halo of messy bedhead, and she looked like she wasn't entirely awake. What was with the people in that apartment being grouchy in the morning? They were all a pleasant lot to look at.

"I'd say good morning, but you look like you'd rather hide under your covers for another hour," Bucky said, sparing her a glance.

She looked at him. "Who said you two get my bathroom before me?" she demanded.

He set his book down. "We got up before you. If you wanted it first, you should've gotten up earlier. Welcome to sharing one bathroom with other people."

She yawned, tugging her robe tighter around her. "Didn't your mothers teach you to let the ladies go first?"

"Hell, no," he said. "I learned to never let the woman go first when it comes to the bathroom. You females get in there and you never come back out. Especially those of you with long hair."

She suddenly looked amused. "Your sister, or your mother?"

Bucky made a very unhappy face. "My sister. I hate the sound of hair dryers now because of her."

"Never get married, James," Natasha said, trying to laugh and yawn at the same time. "Or cohabitate."

Bucky glanced at the bathroom door as Steve came out, hair still wet and not styled, but he otherwise looked ready to face the day. Bucky pointed at him. "He's a bad enough roommate, I don't need a woman making things worse."

Steve paused, looking between them, then immediately bee-lined for the kitchen. "I'm getting out of
"the middle of this," he said.

Natasha laughed, watching Steve. "Smart man," she told him, then went into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Steve stuck his head into the fridge, digging around for breakfast. "So what the hell brought up female roommates between you two?" he asked. "Or am I safer not knowing?"

"Eh. She told me not to get married because I don't like sharing a bathroom with females. They take too long in there."

"Rebecca ruined you," Steve said, setting some food down on the counter before starting to search the cupboards. He frowned, glancing back at Bucky. "Do you think she has a waffle iron?"

Bucky shrugged and motioned to the bathroom. "Why don't you ask her when she gets out at about noon?"

Steve gave him a tired look. "You know, for someone who likes women so much, you sure like to grouse about them."

"I like looking. I like dancing. I like kissing. I do not like having to fight with one for the damn bathroom in the morning," Bucky said. "You did not live with a little sister, you wouldn't understand."

"At least you didn't live with her when she was a teenager," Steve pointed out, still searching the cupboards, for what, Bucky didn't even know at that point.

"I might've had to do something rash if I had," Bucky said.

"What're you looking for?" Natasha's voice interrupted them. She was standing outside of the bathroom, still in her robe but looking otherwise presentable for the day. Bucky was impressed; that didn't take her nearly that long.

Steve looked over at her. "Huh? Oh, I'm looking to see what kind of pans you have around here. You have more than just that one skillet, right?"

"Bottom cupboard, to the right of the dishwasher," she said. She looked down at herself. "We don't have to go out today, do we?"

Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Technically, no," he said. "But unless you want to contact Agent Carter in your fuzzy robe and pajamas, you should probably get dressed."

Natasha looked like she was seriously considering that. "She's a woman, she understands."

Bucky wasn't sure what Sharon would understand that would justify staying in her sleep clothes all day that had anything to do with being a woman, but he had a feeling that asking might get him slapped, or given too much information.

While Steve started breakfast, Natasha settled herself at her desk, bringing her computer out of sleep mode. "Okay, so while Steve's making us food, what did you want to talk to Sharon about?"

"I need to get her a copy of Hydra's records in case they need to be released," Bucky said. "I'm turning myself in."

Natasha whipped her head around to stare at him. "What? Why?"
"Lots of reasons, but mostly because if I run forever, Hydra's controlling me again. I'm not giving them that power," Bucky said.

Like with Steve the night before, that reason seemed to sink in faster than anything else he could've said. Natasha sighed. "All right. But I can't help you with that. You're going to have to get out of Nebraska, I can't afford drawing any more attention to myself here than I possibly already have."

"I understand," Bucky said. "Just call her."

Natasha didn't give him verbal conversation, just started typing into her computer. Bucky walked over to stand behind her, watching the screen as the telecomm program popped up and dialed that same scrambled number that Natasha had called their first night in Lincoln.

While they waited for Sharon to answer, Natasha glanced into the kitchen. "Damn, should've gotten my coffee before doing this."

"Ask Steve to get you some after the food can be left alone," Bucky said.

"Thanks for volunteering me," Steve said.

Bucky looked over at him briefly, before going back to watching the screen. "Any time, buddy."

When Sharon's face appeared, she looked tired, like maybe they'd just woken her. She didn't look terribly unkempt, though, so either she was a fortunate person in that she could roll out of bed and look good, or she'd been up for awhile and just didn't want to be. "Good morning, Natasha, James," she said. "I take it there's news?"

Natasha motioned to Bucky. "He needed to talk to you."

When Sharon turned her attention over to Bucky, Bucky drew in a deep breath, committing himself to his idea. "I'm turning myself in."

Sharon groaned. "I can't let you do that, not until I have enough information to get you back out. Even if you don't care, Steve does, and the American government is not about to upset Captain America by arresting his best friend when nobody knows the truth behind these rumors."

"You need to know who I was working for." He said it as a statement, but it was as much a question.

"That would help, yes," Sharon said. "You said I already know, but I'm afraid I'm drawing blanks on that. Care to help me out?"

"I was working for Hydra."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

"And they did more than just experiment. They affected your mind."

The silence was deafening. The only sound was the whir of the computer fans and the sound of something starting to cook in the skillet. Nobody moved or spoke; Bucky could just barely see Steve watching from the kitchen, hardly paying attention to that food that was starting to sizzle, and Natasha was looking up at Sharon's image on the screen.

Sharon's expression didn't even change for about a second and a half, then she broke that brief stillness. "I'm sorry, I think my connection might not be working right. Could you repeat that?" She looked like she desperately wanted to believe what she was saying and not what she'd heard.

"There's nothing wrong with your connection," Bucky said. "I said I was working for Hydra."

For another two seconds, Sharon's expression remained frozen, like a snapshot, before animating from shock into disbelief. "Okay, you're going to have to walk me through this. Why were you working for Hydra? Hydra has been your enemy from the start, even before Captain Rogers declared personal war on them."

"They were trying to replicate the super serum when my unit was captured," Bucky said. "I got the unlucky draw as their test subject. After I fell off the train, they decided to finish the job." He was keeping his voice as flat and unaffected as possible, but he felt bile in his stomach. He so rarely spoke of it, even to Steve. He didn't need to; Steve knew as much as Bucky did, and describing the experience was difficult, even in the best of mindsets. Natasha knew, and Tony knew. Pepper had an idea, and so did Bruce. Bucky wasn't sure how much Sam knew for certain, but he didn't interact with Sam, so that didn't matter much.

But Sharon was a stranger. He knew of her, but had never personally met her before talking to her on the telecomm the night before. And he was telling her about it. A stranger. Better get used to that, he told himself. The whole damn world might know it soon.

That thought didn't sit well with him.

Sharon wasn't dumb, not by a long shot. Steve wouldn't fall for a woman that had no brains. "And they did more than just experiment," she added, extrapolating from what he'd said. "They affected your mind."

"My last target was Captain America," he said. "I nearly finished that job."

"I was there when Steve recognized him," Natasha spoke up. "Steve said his name and his reply was 'who the hell's Bucky?' Hydra wiped everything."

Sharon was quiet a moment. "Do you have any proof of this?"

"I have the records of the Winter Soldier Project," Bucky said. "It doesn't cover what was done in 1943, but it covers from 1945 onward. When they found me, they realized that their chemicals had some effect, enough that I'd survived, and they started the Winter Soldier Project. I don't know where
"If I had to guess, it was a reference to the Cold War, given where they put you working, from the
looks of the information we're getting," Sharon said. "That term was first used in '45. They may have
been specifically targeting you at that. An extended war between two world superpowers would-
well, history saw the effect."

"It gave Hydra what they wanted," Natasha said. "When Steve and I talked to Zola, he said that
they'd purposely been pushing the world into wars, using the Winter Soldier to shove things around
when necessary, to make sure that the world would give up freedom to Hydra for the sake of safety.
Thus, the Project Insight helicarriers."

Sharon looked confused again, something that Bucky had a feeling he'd be seeing on her face a lot
this conversation. They were throwing a lot of things out of left field at her. "I thought Doctor Zola
died years ago."

"He was living in a computer," Natasha said. "It was complicated."

"That's one way to put it," Sharon said, rubbing her face. "Please tell me Hydra doesn't have any
more computer people?" She looked at Bucky.

"No idea," Bucky said. "I only knew of Zola vaguely. He was in charge of the experiments, but I
didn't remember any of that at the time he was destroyed. I just knew he existed and was important to
Hydra and that's all I needed to know."

"Is there anything useful they told you?" Sharon asked. She sounded like she knew the answer to
that. "Like why any of these targets were selected? Some of them don't seem to have had the same
profound effect as others, like the Starks."

More bile. Bucky swallowed it back. "You don't tell your gun your plans for world domination," he
said. "You don't even tell it why you're pointing it at who you're pointing it at. It just fires where you
tell it to."

"That information isn't in those records?"

Bucky shook his head. "No. They're only records of the experiments themselves, not the missions. I
don't know where that information would be. We found nothing at the base in Kiev."

Sharon clearly didn't like that option, but she let it drop. "How can I get a copy of these records from
you? We can meet up somewhere, we can handle taking you into custody, get this information where
it needs to be to keep you from becoming Public Enemy Number One."

Bucky looked at Natasha. "Your computer can create a digital copy from our hard copy, right?"

Natasha gave him an incredulous look. "You have to ask? This computer will do everything but
dance, if you ask it to." Then she pointed up at Sharon. "She makes a good point, you know. If you
turn yourself over to them, you'll technically be in custody of the US government, they can sort out
the AWOL thing and get those records where they need to be. But I have a feeling you intended on
just riding a bus to the nearest government building and hoping for the best, weren't you?"

"Not the nearest, no," Bucky said. "I wasn't going to jeopardize your mission here. I figured I'd find
an Army base somewhere." He looked at Sharon. "As much as I appreciate the offer, I can't do it that
way. Hydra's the one releasing this information. They're trying to control where I can and can't go.
It's basically blackmail." Sharon started to try to reply, but Bucky walked all over that one by not
letting her get those words in. "The CIA is an intelligence agency, if they step in without us at least
trying to go to another source, nobody's going to buy that our accusations against Hydra are legit. If I do it this way, Hydra loses their power over both me and Steve."

If she could pull out the Steve card, so could Bucky. He felt a bit guilty using Steve as leverage, though.

"But we're a back up plan," Sharon said, and he could hear the question in it, but it sounded mostly like an order that she wasn't going to hear 'no' to.

"I wouldn't take the chance with Steve's life to not have one," Bucky said. "That's going to have to be good enough for you."

Sharon looked frustrated. "If I had a choice, it wouldn't be, but Steve is probably on your side, and I know how he is when he gets an idea in his head."

"Anyone who knows me does," Steve interrupted. He'd walked over, two plates with eggs, toast and sausage in hand. So much for those waffles. He must not've been able to find a waffle iron. He set one plate down in front of Natasha, and handed Bucky the other. "Hi, Sharon."

The smile Sharon gave Steve was half-hearted, genuine, but too tired and frazzled to be bright and shiny. "Hello, Steve. Tell your friend he's giving me a headache."

Steve made a derisive noise. "He gives everyone headaches. You learn to live with it."

Bucky looked at him. "You have absolutely no room to talk."

"I can agree to that, too," Sharon said. "I've been protecting you two for the last year and a half."

"How do you manage that without us catching on?" Steve demanded.

She smiled. "I take after my aunt."

Bucky didn't know who Sharon's aunt was, but Steve looked flustered, so he guessed that Steve did. He'd ask later.

"Did you have any ideas where you were going to go?" Sharon asked.

"Dunno. An Army base, likely. I'm still one of theirs, officially." Bucky set his plate and fork down on Natasha's desk, damned if he cared what she thought of that. "Hang on, let me get that file."

"How far away from the east coast are you?" Sharon asked, while Bucky walked over to the couch bed and dug into his bag for the file.

"Not as far as we could be, but far enough," Steve said. "We can get out there in a couple days, though. Why?"

Bucky walked back over, dropping the file next to Natasha. "You've picked out a base already."

"Fort Meade," she said. "It's a big base, and the NSA is housed there."

Steve and Natasha exchanged a look, and Bucky raised an eyebrow, wondering what that was about.


Steve shook his head. "That'll work. I know my way around there."
"I think I'm better off not asking," Sharon said. She studied them, or specifically, Natasha, who had started eating. "I'll let you three get to your breakfast," she said. "Send me that file as soon as you're done. I think I'll take a cue from you and get something to eat while I wait."

Natasha waved her fork at Sharon in a 'good bye', then disconnected the call. She looked up at Bucky, still chewing, and pointed at the file on her desk, then at her food.

"I'd tell you to chew and swallow first," he said. "But I think I actually understood that. I didn't expect you to let your food get cold to scan that."

"Speaking of food getting cold," Steve said. "I should probably get mine."

Bucky grabbed his plate and settled on the edge of the bed. "Whose brilliant idea was it to try to talk on the phone and eat at the same time?"

For a second, nobody answered, all three of them looking between each other. Nobody seemed to want to point fingers or accept blame.

Natasha was the first to speak up. "I think we all had a hand in that dumb decision."

Bucky considered that. "Acceptable answer."

In the name of not letting their food get any colder than it already was- the eggs were room temp, ew -they hurried through their breakfast, not bothering with that pesky thing called 'interaction'. When they were done, Natasha held out her plate for Steve to take. "You're the closest, take that to the kitchen for me so I can scan this file?" She gave him a sweet smile that didn't belong on her face. "Please?"

Steve took the plate without a word, stacking it on his own empty plate. Then, with a shit eating grin that Bucky instantly mistrusted, he walked over to Bucky and handed them both to him. "I made breakfast," he said.

Bucky took the plates, jaw dropped and staring at Steve in betrayal. That asshole had just managed to dump kitchen duty on him. "I did dishes yesterday morning."

"If you want this file scanned, I'm not doing it," Natasha said, not looking over from her work. She frowned. "I wonder if they need this translated." She looked at Steve. "Does Sharon know this language?"

"No idea," Steve said.

Bucky gave him a dirty look behind his back, but took the plates into the kitchen to wash them. Jerkface assholes, both of them. "I'm sure someone on the team would be able to translate," he said, deciding fuck it, he was using the dishwasher, even if there were precious few dishes to put in there. He wasn't submerging his metal hand into water more than he actually had to. "We don't know how big their team is, for one, for another, they have the resources of the CIA. If there's not some way of translating that for them, then the CIA is a failure and we need to find another back up plan."

Natasha raised an eyebrow, not looking away from her work, so she might've raised both, Bucky couldn't tell from his angle. But he recognized that smile again. "You make a good point. I think we'll be okay with Sharon's team. She's got personal reason to keep you two safe. That tends to motivate people."

"It can," he said, digging around in the cupboard under the sink. "Where the hell do you keep your dishwasher soap?" he demanded. Before she could answer, he finally spotted the baggie of tablets.
"Never mind." He yanked it out, staring at it in annoyance. It was a plastic resealable bag, with almost nothing for traction on the inside of the bag above the seal to grab onto. Which meant his metal fingers were going to slide right off it.

Sometimes, his arm was a miracle worker and had saved his life more than he cared to count. Other times, it was a handicap that was really fucking annoying.

He grabbed a towel and wrapped the edges around his metal fingers, then grabbed the bag and yanked it open. He'd used that trick before, before Steve realized why and started getting the little tubs of tablets, instead. Bucky hadn't asked him to, but then Steve had never asked Bucky to do any of the little things he'd done to make one of Steve's physical ailments easier to deal with.

Steve looked over at him as he rejoined his current partners in crime by the computer. "So. Fort Meade," Steve said. "That's not far from DC, up around Baltimore. It's a pretty big place, lots of civilians live there."

"Why?" Bucky looked at him.

"Civilian employees," Steve clarified. "We can't take a plane, your arm would stop us at security alone. Natasha can't help us anymore, she's got to stay here," He frowned. "That leaves us train or bus. And I don't think we'd be able to take our weapons with us on either, not with luggage limitations."

Bucky glanced towards the corner by the couch where their weapons and uniforms had remained hidden, thinking. "I don't think I want those in their hands anyway," he said. Then he looked down at Natasha. "Is there anyway you could arrange for someone from Carter's team to get them?"

Natasha tilted her head back, looking up at him. "I occasionally make trips to Omaha, I can arrange for it to be picked up there. That's close, but it won't look as strange for a government operative to go to Omaha. Lincoln's a bit odd, though." She went back to work. "The Amtrak station is walking distance from here, next to the giant arena you might've missed. I can look up routes in a minute. Cheaper alternative would be Greyhound. I'd have to drive you to the depot, it's on the north side of town."

"We're not needing to be stingy, just low profile," Steve said.

Natasha set a few pages to scan, then pulled up a browser. "Ending in Baltimore or DC?" she asked, pulling up Amtrak's site.

"Let's go with Baltimore," Steve said. "Rather than right in the middle of DC. Give us a chance to get to Meade before someone else decides to cuff us. Pretty sure they're both about the same distance away from the base anyway."

"Baltimore it is," she said, putting that into the ticket search. She scrolled. "Well, if you want to leave just before three-thirty in the morning, you can leave tomorrow and be in Baltimore by three in the afternoon. If you want low profile..." She clicked on the most expensive ticket. "They have single rooms, with all the amenities. Two beds, two nice seats, table, food, picture window. You'd have to share the bathroom and shower with other people on the car, but other than that, if you're wanting to keep as unnoticed as possible, staying in a private room might be best." She looked up at Steve. "Rather than mingling with the unwashed masses."

Steve chuckled. "I was born an unwashed mass, I don't mind them so much. But you're right, a seat where nobody interacts with us except to bring us food would be best." He studied the screen. "An eleven and a half hour trip. Not bad. Bus would probably take us longer, with lots of stops and
passenger changes. Too risky." He looked at Bucky.

Bucky shrugged. "You're the captain, Captain," he said. "I'm just a sergeant."

"I hate it when you do that," Steve said.

"Why do you think I do it?" Bucky asked. "Okay, so we take Amtrak. We don't need a card to get that ticket, do we? We can't use ours or yours, they'll track us back here and compromise you."

Natasha didn't answer right away, looking through the site's FAQs. "If you're lucky, you can get that private room with cash at the ticket counter, it looks like. That answer your question?"

"Well enough," Bucky said. "You want us gone that quickly? We made you buy a lot of food that you probably can't eat by yourself."

Natasha glanced towards the kitchen. "A few-" Her telecomm program dinged, coming to the forefront of the computer. She looked up at it. "Okay, get out of here," she said, waving them away quickly. "Out of sight."

Bucky didn't ask questions, grabbed Steve's arm and pulled him with him towards the bed to sit down. Steve sat down next to Bucky, leaning over a bit to try to see what was going on on the screen.

Natasha started speaking a language that Bucky didn't know, but thought might've been Arabic. It was hard to tell without knowing the language in question. He raised an eyebrow and looked at Steve, wondering if Steve understood, or at least could see what was on the screen.

Steve looked back at him and shook his head with a shrug. Well, dammit, they were both in the dark. But it was likely that it was a correspondence between Natasha and Clint, especially if Bucky was right and that was Arabic she and whoever was on that screen were speaking.

Steve leaned over to him and whispered in his ear, "it's Clint. I recognize his voice."

Bucky nodded once, wishing he could follow along with what was being said, but since he couldn't, he settled back on the bed, legs crossed underneath him, and reached for his book. He had no idea how long this was going to go on, might as well amuse his brain while he waited, instead of letting it struggle to try to translate a language he didn't know.

The book did little to distract him. He kept rereading a sentence because he'd look up to try to listen again every few seconds and then lose his place. Steve didn't even try to distract himself, still trying to watch the screen. Bucky finally gave up, nudging Steve's arm. 'Do you understand them?' he asked silently.

Steve shook his head.

Damnit.

Bucky studied Natasha's reactions, which were more subdued than they'd been the last day or so. He didn't realize how much having friends around animated her until he saw her in contrast at work. She didn't look pleased, though. But, she was in the middle of gathering intel on the Islamic State, who thought beheading journalists was for fun and profit, so it probably wasn't a terribly pleasant conversation she was having.

Bucky resisted the urge to tap his metal finger on the cover his now-abandoned book, knowing it'd make a very annoying and distracting noise that would probably just piss Natasha off at him, and he
didn't need that. He was still relying on her to finish sending that file, and then get their gear back to them. He had no desire to make her mad while she was in the middle of her real job.

It was about ten minutes, ten minutes where Natasha and Clint spoke in that language that Bucky really wished he understood, Natasha looking progressively more agitated and typing away furiously as they talked. Finally, she stopped and gave Clint an awful look, then snapped something at him in that language. He replied calmly, then the line disconnected. Natasha's hands balled into fists, resting on the top of her desk as she took some deep, even breaths.

She looked over at them. "I sincerely hope neither of you speak Arabic."

Steve shook his head. "I don't. And as far as I know, B- James doesn't."

"I don't," Bucky said. "But I can tell that conversation didn't go the way you wanted it to."

Natasha studied them both. "The situation's gotten bad over there," she said. "I want him to get out of there, he won't. We can't outstubborn each other. That's all." She turned back to the computer, returning to scanning the file. "Either way, it means you two are leaving on the morning train. I'm going to make sure your equipment gets handled, and then I'm going to keep doing my job. But I can't have you underfoot anymore."

Steve didn't look terribly bothered by her sudden change in demeanor, and Bucky understood it, but he still felt a bit put off by it. She could be really cold when she wanted to be.

Bucky had a feeling she was about to change her job and they would be at risk. He was starting to read her just well enough to know that regardless of her feelings one way or another about him, she was friends with Steve, and wouldn't treat him like that without good reason.

It was going to be a long day.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

"My name is Sergeant James Barnes. I'm the Winter Soldier, and I'm here to turn myself in."

Chapter Notes

So I might've messed up last chapter and I also apparently don't know how to read a train itinerary. So we'll pretend that what Natasha said last chapter about the train ride only being eleven hours long is my mulligan number one. Big, big big thanks to writer314 for pointing this out to me so that I could make this chapter less dumb.

The day had been, as Bucky predicted, a long one. Natasha was on edge, and Steve and Bucky had decided to try to camouflage themselves on their couch bed, being quiet and not interrupting her bad mood. She spent most of the day doing... something, typing a lot, but what, Bucky didn't know. She'd given him back the file she'd digitized for him early on, then said nothing else the rest of the day. Except 'please' and 'thank you' when Steve and Bucky would cook for her.

At least she still had manners.

Steve and Bucky decided to just stay up to catch their train and sleep on the way to Baltimore, so Natasha went to bed long before them. Her day-long demeanor of being generally upset softened briefly before she locked herself in her bedroom, long enough for her to give Steve a hug and put a gentle hand on Bucky's flesh shoulder and tell them to travel safe. Have Sharon contact her immediately if they needed her. Good night.

Staying up was easy; even though Bucky was tired, needed the sleep, he was prepping for a mission. A mission meant that his brain and body both needed to be functioning and prepared, so no matter how little sleep it'd mean he'd get, he was awake, at least until a scheduled rest time.

However, it was getting annoying to be rereading the same damn chapter over and over again and still not having it parse that well because he was tired or otherwise distracted.

At two-thirty, they unmade the bed, put the couch back together, and piled the linens in the corner where the couch cushions had been. They made sure they took their money out of their bag of gear, putting it in Steve's wallet, and left the weapons and uniforms hidden in the corner.

They locked the door behind them.

The train station wasn't hard to find, it was right next to an impressively large arena bearing a sign that said "Pinnacle Bank Arena." Bucky wondered if such a thing was really necessary for a city with less than a half a million people in it, but that obviously hadn't stopped them from building it.

Actually, he wasn't sure a place with less than a half a million people in it counted as a city, but in a
state that was mostly a cornfield, it probably did.

He stood back with the bags, hood pulled up and head ducked to hide under it as much as possible, while Steve got their tickets. Steve was easier to disguise than Bucky, with Bucky's long hair, and also the inability to safely take off his gloves to count out the cash. Even without the gloves, there was that whole problem with no traction on his fingertips, so counting cash was difficult for him.

He sometimes missed his flesh arm.

They got lucky. That private room had still been available. Apparently few people around here wanted to spend an extra five hundred bucks to get a private room that really only housed two people. At this time of year, it was probably more families traveling anyway, and those usually involved children, which meant that two beds were not enough.

Their loss, Steve and Bucky's gain.

The train arrived on time. Steve and Bucky boarded the train, finding their way to their reserved room and dropping their bags next to the two reclining seats. The seats sat across from each other, and folded together to make one bed, while the other folded down from the wall above them to make a sort of bunk bed. They both decided not to hassle with that, just recline in their respective chairs and sleep that way.

Bucky slept right away.

He wasn't sure what time he woke; the sun was out, at least, and the world outside was passing by outside their picture window. He glanced across from him at Steve, who was still asleep, and adjusted his chair, sitting up properly. Now that it was light and he was awake to look around, he noticed that the room was smaller than it'd seemed the night before. At past three in the morning, it hadn't mattered how little space there was, as long as they could dump their bags, recline, and sleep.

Bucky got up, careful to not wake Steve, and stretched, looking around the incredibly tiny room. It was about three and a half, maybe four feet one direction, and closing in on seven the other way, so there wasn't exactly room to wander. But there was a thermostat on the wall that he homed in on and adjusted. It wasn't particularly chilly, but Bucky had been having enough flashbacks and attacks lately that he didn't care to tempt fate with another one because he got cold.

With no room to really go anywhere without leaving the room entirely, he sat back down and yawned. God, he'd kill for some coffee. Or rather, something that would work as well as coffee used to.

That was when he noticed that the room managed to stock a couple bottles of water. He frowned, reaching over and grabbing one, staring at it. Well, it wasn't coffee, but at least it was something to drink.

"They sell that stuff, you know," Steve said.

Bucky looked over at him. "Yeah, pour some water into a bottle and sell it for five bucks. The modern world confuses me sometimes."

Steve sat up straight. "Still not used to it?"

"Still working on it," Bucky said. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

Steve shook his head. "No." He glanced up at the thermostat. "Seventy-four, huh? Bucky, you're going to cook us alive if you keep turning up the heat."
Bucky slumped in his chair, trying to look grumpy and not miserable. There was a substantial difference between the two. "I was cold."

"Is that really it?" Steve asked, standing and reaching over Bucky to adjust the thermostat. Bucky tilted his head back, watched Steve turn the heat back down to seventy. Steve sat back down. "I'd ask you to talk to me, but I know you won't."

Making a point of taking a drink of that overpriced, nasty-tasting stuff they pretended was water, Bucky looked out the window, considering if he wanted to answer or not. "I've been on mission too long," he finally said. "I'm supposed to be back in the chamber by now."

"We've been on long jobs before, Bucky. You never reacted like this before." Steve paused. "To this extent, anyway."

Bucky kept watching out the window. "This one is personal. And it's been going on for over a week now. Stay out of cryo long enough, and things start coming back. Which leads to wipes." He smiled bitterly. "Can't say those are fun."

"No one's sticking you in that chair again," Steve said. His voice was quiet, but his tone was firm. "Anyone who tries will have to get through me, first."

Bucky's smile turned from bitter to actually amused. "And you'd take on the whole world if you had to," he said, shaking his head. "You never learned to run away."

Steve nudged Bucky's foot with his own. "You wouldn't run away without me, either."

Bucky turned his head to look at Steve. "You know, this is why Tony gets disturbed by us sometimes." He frowned. "Used to."

"What makes you think that's only in the past?" Steve asked.

Bucky took a deep breath, giving Steve a tired look. He didn't think he had to explain this. "How would you feel if someone you trusted had murdered your parents, knew about it, and decided to let you go on thinking they'd died in an accident? I know you'd forgive me of just about anything, but Tony doesn't have the history. He doesn't have any reason to. And I doubt he ever will. And I don't blame him."

"Maybe," Steve said. "Maybe not. Tony's hard to predict sometimes. So's Pepper. Give them time, let's wait to see where the chips lie until after they're finished falling."

"What makes you think they're not finished falling?" Bucky asked, tilting his head. He wasn't sure if he was being derisive, or objectively curious, or some combination. Probably some combination; his head was never simple enough for it to be an either/or.

"Because I know Tony doesn't lose people easily," Steve answered. "Sometimes it takes him a bit of time to come around. Give him time to adjust, and I think he'll not be as willing to lose us as you think he is." Then he made a conceding face. "And, you're right, maybe not. Like I said, he's hard to predict. We lied, but considering he'd do the same thing for Pepper, he might come around."

Bucky looked down at his gloved left hand. "It's not fair that you should lose a friendship because of me."

"I know it's hard, but have a little faith. You dropped a bombshell on him, let him have time to process it before you write him off."
Now Bucky was being derisive. "Faith. That's something for you religious types."

"You don't have to be religious to believe in something, James," Steve said, with a brief pause before Bucky's name. He went quiet a moment, but the way he was studying Bucky told Bucky that Steve was contemplating the exact right way to say something that he needed to hear. "Tell me, if situations had been reversed, if it'd been me that Hydra got ahold of, and we ran into each other on that helicarrier, would you believe that you could reach me? That I was still your friend under the brainwashing?"

Bucky sighed. "Steve, that's different. You're you. You've always been farther away from what Hydra would've wanted. They would've had to destroy more to get you to that point."

"Even if that's true, and I think you're selling yourself short," Steve said, "that doesn't change the fact that what I took was a leap of faith. I trusted you, knew I could from the past, that wasn't faith. But I also trusted Hydra, and that was also not faith, because I knew them. So I had to believe that I could get you back. I did, because I couldn't fathom not believing, not getting you back, but it was still faith. That's all faith is, James." There was that pause again. "It's something you give to people."

Bucky turned his head to watch the passing scenery. "I'll leave you to have faith in Tony for me," he said after a moment. "I have the government to worry about, and I think they'll take a bit more."

"Fair enough," Steve said. "That reminds me. I still hate this plan of yours."

"It's one of my dumber ones," Bucky admitted, glancing at Steve's reflection in the window. "I just know it's probably my best bet right now."

"We had some pretty piss-poor options," Steve agreed. "And even if we had better options, you're right, it's not in you to run."

"Not forever, anyway," Bucky said. He eyed his bag where his book was. "You know, I still don't know what the hell was happening in that damn book."

Steve chuckled. "How far are you?"

"Bout a quarter of the way through," Bucky said. "I would be farther, but I haven't been able to focus on it and I keep rereading parts. Kinda hoping they let me keep it in jail. I don't like being bored."

"You won't be in there long," Steve said. "If I have to threaten to turn in the uniform and the name to make sure of it, I will."

"Well, now you're just being dumb," Bucky said. "You're never going to be able to get rid of Captain America. That kind of thing is a chain that'll run with you, no matter how far you try to run." He paused. "And I didn't say that, that was Nietzsche."

"Isn't he the one that said something about fighting monsters and becoming one?" Steve asked.

Bucky nodded. "That's him. He was the only philosopher worth reading about in class." He finally looked away from the reflections in the window. "Have you taken any classes since getting back? Catch up on things?"

"A few," Steve said. "I've mostly relied on my own research, but yeah, I finally went to college for awhile. Not a dedicated student, but I have credits now."

"You should go back," Bucky said. "For that matter, so should I. Once this is over, assuming I get to
back to civvie life." Then he flashed Steve a smartass smirk. "Think the Army will pay my tuition?"

Steve snorted. "You'd better hope they do," he said. "College costs an obscene amount of money these days. We could probably cover it ourselves, but it'd be easier if you can get government help."

Bucky made a face. "Like everything else these days." He wondered what happened to the economy that had hyper-inflated everything, but he had a feeling he could answer that with 'corporations and government teaming up,' which wasn't anything new. The Depression had been far worse, but it seemed nobody really learned from it.

He decided not to ask Steve to try to explain if it was anything more than that. Steve had a thing about economics, and even though it'd be distracting, Bucky really wasn't in the mood to listen to him rant for the rest of the trip.

"Welcome to the twenty-first century," Steve said, and he sounded like he might be gearing up for that rant anyway. Bucky gave him a dirty look, and Steve settled back down again. "Time passes, things change. You haven't gotten used to it yet?"

"Getting there," Bucky said. "Some things still give me heart attacks. I still refuse to look at our grocery bill."

"Smart man," Steve said. "That gives me a heart attack, too. I think it wouldn't be so bad if we didn't have to have more than two average men. Being a super soldier has its drawbacks."

They both went quiet as another passenger passed by their open door towards the showers with a nod of acknowledgement and a quiet 'excuse me.' Steve and Bucky both nodded back, waiting until the woman was gone, then looked back at each other.

Bucky reached forward and slid their door shut. "I can tell we were tired last night," he said. "We left the door open." He shivered, pulling up his hood and sinking back into his seat, hoping that by doing so, he might trap his body heat better. "How are you not cold?"

"Because it's not cold in here," Steve said. "But if you're genuinely that cold, we can bump the heat."

Bucky honestly couldn't tell how much of the chill he felt was physical, or purely psychological. "You can cook," he said, standing and turning up the heat again before sitting back down.

Steve sighed, then squirmed out of his coat without standing up to take it off properly. He tossed it over to Bucky, the coat smacking Bucky square in the face. "Wear that. Might warm you up enough that I can turn the thermostat back down to a low simmer."

Bucky yanked the coat out of his face, giving Steve a glare, then decided that he was going to take Steve up on his offer and draped the coat over his chest, huddled down under it. "You're funny, Rogers."

Steve grinned. "I try to be." He glanced at his watch. "It's eight-thirty, we woke up with a bit of time to spare. We won't get to Chicago until about three." He looked up at Bucky. "Why don't you try to get more rest, let yourself warm up a bit?"

"What about you?" Bucky asked. "You didn't get any more sleep than I did."

"I'll nap," Steve said. "I'm more concerned with making sure you'll sleep okay, rather than waking up in a panic because you're cold."
Bucky gave a half-hearted snarl in Steve's direction. "I'm not going to panic because of that."

"You know what I mean, James," Steve said, and he was right, Bucky did, but he didn't have to say it. "Get some sleep. We'll probably want it."

"Meh."

Despite his response, Bucky was grateful for the chance to rest further. They had another full day of travel, with layovers. The layover in DC worried him a bit, but as long as they kept their heads down, it shouldn't be trouble.

The walk to Fort Meade from Baltimore was only sixteen miles, a walk in the park for him and Steve, so he didn't need energy for that, but he was dumping his dirty little secrets into military hands in the hopes of getting a pardon and dismissal to go live in quiet again, or at least as much quiet as a mercenary ever got. That was going to be taxing, no matter how he approached it.

He woke up when they were entering a city, and he wasn't sure which city it was. The air in the room was noticeably cooler than it had been earlier, but Bucky didn't feel chilled anymore. In fact, he felt a bit overheated. He emerged from under the coats, looking over at Steve. Steve was asleep, so Bucky carefully leaned forward and draped Steve's coat back over him, before settling back down and watching out the window.

"Are we there yet?" Steve asked.

Bucky looked over at him. Steve had one eye cracked open, not coming out from under the jacket or bothering to wake up further. Probably not until he knew if they were at their stop or not.

Bucky shrugged. "No idea. Check your watch. Is it about time for us to be there?"

Steve pulled his arm out from under his coat, staring at this watch. "Yeah. We're here." He sat forward. "Good internal clock. Woke up just in time."

"Mm." Bucky stared out the window, watching the buildings going by at an increasingly slower rate, until they'd pulled to a stop at a station platform. He grabbed his bag, letting Steve take the lead as they disembarked.

A four-hour layover in Chicago. They boarded their new train at six-thirty. Another seventeen and a half hours from Chicago to DC. Exhausting.

A two hour transfer in DC. If walking around in DC wouldn't have been dangerous, he would've suggested they just skip the last transfer and walk to Fort Meade from there. Choosing to take that last train, they could stay back in the crowds at the train station and blend in with the other holiday travelers there.

Another forty-three minutes from DC to Baltimore.

Once at Baltimore, off the train, and away from the train station, he started counting minutes. It was about sixteen miles from city limits to Fort Meade. They could make that in about an hour if they ran, three if they walked. It was just past four, three hours would put them there past the rush hour for civilian employees who chose to live off-base to leave. Which meant the inspection booths might be relatively quiet, not overcrowded with keeping track of people coming and going. An hour would put them near the start of the rush, maybe just a bit before.

Once they were away from the crowds and moving in the direction of city limits- don't run in the city, that'd draw unwanted attention -Bucky looked up at Steve. "So the question is, do we want to
Steve's brow furrowed in thought. He glanced around, then at his watch like that might make the decision for him. "If we try to beat rush hour, we'll be running full speed. There's State Patrol to worry about out on the highways. We might run into trouble before we get to the base if we all out run. We'll take a bit longer, get there just past dinner. If a trooper pulls over to bitch at us for walking on the highways, we can maybe beg a ride. Hopefully, we'll have better luck with the State Patrol this time, though."

"Walking it is, then," Bucky said, strapping his bag across his chest. He counted more minutes and meters, then as they got out of town, miles. Just over five miles an hour walking, slow for them, but still fast enough to get them to the base about an hour and a half after sundown, and slow enough to keep from drawing attention.

Traffic on the highway was heavy, and got heavier as four gave over to five, then slowed a bit as six approached.

One more hour.

It was dark when the base came into sight, a few cars coming and going through the inspection lines, the LED sign above the roads stating the time and temp. Nineteen twenty-eight. Forty-three degrees Fahrenheit, six degrees Celsius. It felt far warmer than it had in Nebraska, and there was minimal wind, by comparison.

Steve and Bucky made sure to stay out of the way of the cars, neither taking the lead, nor following; it was Bucky's mission, but Bucky didn't like having Steve behind him much, so they compromised.

They walked into an empty lane, up to the booth where a guard was standing outside, watching them and clearly waiting for them. "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

Bucky eyed his stripes. Corporal, unless things vastly changed since his Army days. "You might as well get an officer, kid," he said. "I'm above your pay grade."

The corporal didn't look convinced. "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to give me a much better reason than that to-"

"My name is Sergeant James Barnes," Bucky interrupted. "I'm the Winter Soldier, and I'm here to turn myself in."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

"So I will ask, why the hell should I have trusted any agency of the United States government to handle that paperwork without the public knowing to hold them accountable?"

Chapter Notes

See that tag about lots of liberties being taken? They start here. I contacted the MPs at Fort Meade- yup, tracked them down -to ask about what the stockade looked like, the cafeteria, anything they could tell me.

For some strange reason, they decided that they didn't want a random person on the internet to have this information. So I'm fudging things. Don't think too hard on it, it's Marvel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky had had it with the damn flashbacks.

This one wasn't affecting him like others had, it was just annoying, as he sat in an interrogation room, Steve sitting next to him, with armed guards around them. The whole Steve thing was new, but being considered too dangerous to be left without a ton of guns ready to be pointed at him at a moment's notice was old hat, and it grated on his nerves a bit.

But it was a minor quibble, all told, and not very surprising.

It was taking a long time for someone to come talk to them; he and Steve were probably above the pay grade of everyone on that base, if not everyone in the damn Army. It was rather amusing, in a distant sort of way, but Bucky was on a mission, and Bucky on a mission was a Bucky that didn't overthink little things that were inconsequential. It distracted from his focus, and right now, he needed to be focused.

Steve had thrown around the weight of his name to keep them from getting separated, reminding the MPs that they probably didn't want to upset Captain America. There were political consequences that they didn't want to deal with, and the MPs had quickly agreed, though not through words as much as just letting Steve do whatever the hell he wanted and didn't argue when Steve chose to stay with Bucky and all but act as his lawyer in the case.

Bucky mentally ticked away seconds, staying silent, as still and patient as a sniper, waiting for a target. Someone would have to take the armed grenade he represented, even if it was long enough to decide to stick him in a holding cell until someone higher could make a decision. Which would probably be better than sitting in an interrogation room with a couple armed MPs. The only problem would be if Steve's name couldn't carry enough weight to keep them from getting separated in the stockade.
The door opened, and Bucky flicked his gaze over without moving his head, hiding back in that mindset that made everything seem much less frightening than it actually was. The man that entered was an officer, with a uniform that marked him as a lieutenant colonel. He looked to be in his early fifties, grey just starting to show at his temples, perhaps a bit premature, with eyes that were a startling shade of blue, pale enough that they almost looked white upon first glance. Unusual, but it obviously wasn't a condition that interfered with his work.

The lieutenant colonel studied them, a file in hand that Bucky instantly recognized. Good, they'd found that when they were inspecting his and Steve's bags. That made things easier. The officer dropped the file onto the table, the file making a slapping sound as it landed, and took a seat. He took in a deep breath, occasionally glancing down at the file, but mostly watching Steve and Bucky like he wasn't sure if talking might get him choked or not. With Bucky's reputation, that was probably a valid fear.

"How much of that is true?" he finally asked, motioning to the file.

"All of it," Bucky said, without further elaboration.

The officer made a thoughtful noise. "At the press conference, the president said you told him that you didn't remember what happened."

"I said I didn't remember much," Bucky said. "There wasn't much to remember."

The officer snorted. "A distinction worthy of a soldier." He opened the file, looking over it. "According to this, you had your memory taken away."

"My last target was Captain America," Bucky said. "I put him in the hospital."

"Assuming that's true, then I can believe the extent of the brainwashing," the officer said, sounding as neutral as he'd been from the start. He looked at Steve. "I'm hoping Captain America isn't going to lie on this matter."

"It's true," Steve said. "And I never lied to the president either. I told him I couldn't say anything more. I'd be surprised if he didn't know that meant I knew more than I was telling. He let us get away with it."

The officer frowned. "You were both trained too well for your own good."

"Thank you, sir," they somehow managed to say at the same time.

*Get out of my head, Charles,* Bucky thought, half-expecting Steve to reply 'no'.

"Why didn't you turn this in earlier?" the officer asked.

Bucky had braced himself for that question. "If you only barely knew who you were, would you turn in information like that?" Really, the answer was 'fuck you, I didn't want to,' but he felt that would not be in his best interests to say.

The officer frowned. "Not wanting to doesn't remove the obligation to."

"I don't get the insanity plea?" Bucky asked. "Name one rational person who would turn in something like that to a government institution after being controlled by one for decades."

"And after you started to remember?"
"I again ask who would go to a government agency to be locked up after being controlled by another one for decades," Bucky said. "And tell me I should've trusted the Army to not turn me into a lab rat to see what Hydra did. I'm in the public eye now, good luck pulling that off."

The officer looked on the verge of breaking his stoic poker face, the hints of frustration peeking through. "The Army isn't interested in human experimentation," he said.

Bucky pointed to Steve. "Then explain him."

"Sergeant Barnes, that was a different era-"

Bucky knew he was pushing things, but he wasn't about to let military politics swarm him under. "You're going to tell me that the military is so much more moral than it used to be? That Islam prisoners weren't really tortured in Gitmo? That civilians aren't targeted with prejudice in Afghanistan? What about the use of Agent Orange back in Vietnam? And the My Lai Massacre? Or were those flukes?"

Before the officer could cut in, Steve put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "Bucky-"

Bucky ignored him. "I saw the Cold War. I helped start the Cold War. I kept it going. I know what happened and it wasn't just the Soviets that did things that shouldn't have been done, so don't try to pull a morality act on me, sir, because it won't work. So I will ask, why the hell should I have trusted any agency of the United States government to handle that paperwork without the public knowing to hold them accountable?"

The lieutenant colonel drew in a deep breath, sitting back, and Bucky wasn't entirely sure if he was pissed, impressed, or seriously considering what Bucky said, or some combination, maybe. Either way, Bucky was probably about to find himself in Leavenworth if he didn't shut his mouth.

"We're waiting on word from Washington about your AWOL charges," the officer said, switching topics. "In the meantime, we're investigating the matter of these assassinations that have been credited to you. I trust we can get your cooperation?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Bucky saw Steve looking at him, silently begging him to stop being stupid. He had a feeling that Steve was internally applauding him, but Bucky's method of handling things probably wasn't doing him any favors. So Bucky settled his gaze on the lieutenant colonel questioning him. "What do you want to know?"

The officer pulled a sheet of paper out of the file, one that hadn't been in there before, and slid it over to Bucky. "This is the list of victims that's come out since the news first broke of your identity."

Bucky picked up the paper, studying the names. The only ones that looked familiar were the Starks and Nick Fury. He put the paper back down and pushed it back over. "I only recognize two of those names. I was never told my targets' names. I'll need pictures to help you."

The officer nodded once, but he didn't look annoyed anymore. "Who all knew about these targets?" he asked, taking the paper back.

"Hydra," Bucky said. "There were rumors here and there, but most people didn't believe I existed." He shook his head. "I don't have any idea which ones were rumored and which ones nobody knew about, except the Starks. The only ones who could've known about that is Hydra themselves." He raised an eyebrow. "You realize that means that Hydra has to be the one releasing this? What are you planning on doing with that?"

"I plan on doing nothing, Sergeant," the officer said. "I'm not in charge of dealing with you. You're
above my pay grade. We're waiting on word from Washington. I'm just here to gather information so they can conduct a thorough investigation."

Bucky narrowed his eyes. "In other words, the Army plans to try to bury this completely."

The officer smiled, and it was completely unpleasant. "As you said, Sergeant Barnes, wish us good luck with that."

Bucky swallowed tightly, jaw clenched, staring at the officer as if he were on the other end of a scope. He wasn't actually afraid, or even that angry—Sharon had the information, the Army couldn't cover it up and pretend nothing happened, even if they wanted to. It wasn't even that things would be more annoying to deal with that plan. It was for show. Let the officer think he held the only copy of those records. Let him think that the Army, that the government, were the ones in control.

If Bucky had to be executed, it'd be on the block of public opinion, not in the government's shadows. It wouldn't be the government that got him. He'd make damn sure of that, even if he had to take them all with him.

The officer tucked the sheet with the target names back into the file. "I will arrange for those photographs, Sergeant," he said. "We thank you for your cooperation on the matter. In the meantime, you will be shown to a holding cell here in the guardhouse. You will not be locked in, but you will be under watch every step you take. I would much rather have better security measures than that, but," he paused, cracking a smile that wasn't as unpleasant as the last one, but looked rather amused in a sick sort of way, "Washington has warned us not to give you a tight leash, lest you decide to break it. I highly doubt that even Leavenworth could hold you." He looked at Steve. "I would ask you to stay as a guest of the base, and not as a prisoner, but I have a feeling you won't."

Steve chuckled. "You want him to stick around, you're going to have to have me underfoot. We served together. You're a soldier, you should know you don't leave each other behind."

Something, something very faint, softened in the lieutenant colonel's expression. Maybe personal experience, a former comrade, or maybe just a soldier's creed that'd been ingrained into them from day one of boot. Although he was an officer, he probably got it drilled in at West Point.

But whatever the reason, that hard edge in his expression disappeared. "Then I will make sure there is room for you both. The holding rooms, unfortunately, are not built for two. But you will not be far apart."

"That's all we ask," Steve said.

"It's a simple request," the officer said, standing. He looked at the armed MPs. "Show these two to their holding rooms. Make sure they are nearby to each other. Lieutenant Goldman will see you shortly with rotation." He looked at Steve and Bucky. "Thank you, Captain, Sergeant."

Something popped into Bucky's head, and for better or worse, it was coming out his mouth before he could second-guess himself. "Hey, do I get a phone call? Or is that only for the civvies?"

The officer stopped at the door and looked back at him. "That depends on who you wish to call."

"My brother," Bucky said. "Former Navy officer, lives in Annapolis. He'll want to know I'm not dead." He paused. "Again."

The officer considered a moment, then nodded once. "I will see to it that you get your call." Then he left.
Bucky looked over at Steve. "That went better than I thought."

"Could've gone worse with your mouth," Steve told him.

The MPs moved into position to escort them, so they obediently rose from their seats, and followed one of the guards out, the other taking up position behind them. They'd have to get used to being flanked like that for awhile. The lieutenant colonel- who was probably at the top of the MP food chain around here -had granted them run of the building, so they wouldn't be locked in their cells, but they would be under watch, he'd said.

Bucky glanced back at Steve. "Eh, it was fun. I've never gotten to mouth off to an officer and live."

Steve gave him an incredulous look. "The hell you haven't," he said. "Or did you forget that I'm an officer?"

"You don't count," Bucky said. "I mean a real officer."

Bucky heard one of their guards smother a laugh just as Steve's hand connected with the back of his head. He rubbed the back of his head, looking back at Steve.

Steve was giving him a dirty look. "You're a jerk, Bucky."

"And things are back to normal," Bucky said.

"Except that we're in jail," Steve said. He glanced at the MPs, who stopped at a desk. One kept watch on them while the other spoke to his fellow MPs behind the desk, getting confinement room orders for Steve and Bucky.

Bucky looked over at him. "Jail wouldn't be half so nice. We're practically guests of honor."

Steve looked like he wanted to say something more, but was keeping his teeth firmly biting down on his tongue. Good. They were going to have to rely on silent communication at this point. Steve would better be able to get ahold of Sharon if the Army dragged its heels too long, and Bucky was the one making the call on how long that was. So anything Steve wanted to say about this plan would have to stay behind a zipped set of lips.

Besides, Bucky already knew Steve hated it.

There was some shuffling around of papers, a bit of confusion, then finally the MP escorts took Steve and Bucky to side-by-side rooms, decently sized, for being holding rooms in an ICF. Which didn't mean much, but at least they were bigger than the train room had been.

The MPs didn't close the doors behind Steve and Bucky, which made the rooms seem rather pointless, but they needed a place to sleep, if nothing else. Bucky sat down on his bed. The couch bed at Natasha's had been more comfortable, but it was passable, and he didn't have to share with anyone.

"Hey," he said, walking over to the doorway. "When do I get my phone call?"

"When we get notice of authorization," one of the MPs standing guard outside their doors replied. Which meant waiting.

Bucky frowned, then stepped around the corner, grabbing the edge of Steve's room's doorway and leaning forward to poke his head in. "Yours is nicer," he said, completely deadpan.
Steve was already sitting on his bed, one heel balanced precariously on the edge, looking like he was getting bored about thirty seconds into imprisonment. "They're the same, Bucky," he said.

Bucky made a point of leaning back to look into his room, then back into Steve's. "No, yours is nicer." He looked back at the guards, who seemed very uncertain of how to handle a situation where the prisoners got to move around like they weren't prisoners at all. "Hey, what're we supposed to do while we wait for Washington to figure out what to do?"

One of the MPs, a woman with ginger hair that reminded Bucky vaguely of Mama back in Washington, quirked an eyebrow. "I'd say you can sit down and shut up, but something tells me that suggestion will get ignored."

Bucky snorted, stifling a laugh, then looked back in at Steve, sticking his thumb out at the MP, whose uniform listed her name as 'Kovanda'. "I think I like this one. Better than any other prison guard I've ever had."

Steve sighed and looked at Kovanda. "I am so sorry for him," he said. "I think he hit his head. Be careful about interacting with him, he has a thing for redheads."

Before Kovanda could do more than sigh audibly, Bucky turned to look at her. "Don't worry, I don't date inside the service. You're safe."

"It wasn't my safety I was worried about," she said, and something about the way she said that and the not quite there smile reminded him vaguely of Natasha, but less annoying.

He stared at her, then looked in at Steve, then back at the soldier. "Can you retire?"

Kovanda gave him a level look. "Go back to your room and be quiet."

Bucky frowned, then turned back to Steve. "I'm out of practice?"

Steve nodded. "You're out of practice."

"Mm." Bucky made a face. "I'm out of practice." Then he shrugged and headed back into his room.

"You know," Steve said from the room next to him, "for someone who's in prison for several assassinations, you're in a better mood than you have right to be."

Bucky flopped back on his bed, leaning against the wall behind him. "They gave me a pretty guard. I take the joy where I can." He went quiet for a few minutes, ticking off time. "Hey, do we get the stuff from our bags?" he asked, getting back up and walking over to his door. "I had a book in mine I was reading."

Kovanda already looked sick of him. "We'll put in a request, Sergeant." She exchanged a look with her partner and then looked in at Steve. "Is there anything we can put in for you, Captain?"

"Hm?" Steve sounded like he'd been trying to tune them out. "Oh. Wouldn't mind my sketchbook and pencils."

The other MP, a black man named 'Jordan' who reminded Bucky vaguely of Derrick, but shaved and showered recently, looked wary. "We don't allow any objects that can be used as a weapon."

"What, my pencils?" Steve asked, sounding incredulous. "That's him that does that. I use them properly."
Bucky poked his head back around the corner. "You gave me that pen!" he snapped.

"If it will shut you both up, I will put in for the book and the drawing supplies," Kovanda said.
"Now go sit down, Sergeant, for the love of sanity."

"You're in the Army and you're worried about sanity?" he asked, then shrugged and headed back for his room.

He'd been seated on his bed for all of a minute before Kovanda spoke up again. "Barnes, you got your phone call."

"You couldn't announce this a minute ago?" he asked, getting back up and walking out to the hall.

There was a third MP waiting, a woman that Bucky assumed was of Vietnamese descent, with her uniform displaying a last name of 'Nguyen.' "This way," she said, moving to direct him without putting her back to him.

Smart woman.

Bucky walked along with her, his good mood sombering some. Peter was going to have a conniption fit at him, and rightfully so. He didn't know if his status as AWOL was public or not, he hadn't seen the news, but his crimes were public, and while he knew Peter wouldn't believe them, Bucky couldn't exactly deny them, either. This was not going to be a fun conversation, but Peter deserved to know that Bucky was alive and okay.

He had to have the woman behind the desk look up Peter's number for him, he only knew Peter's address. It didn't take long before he was on the phone, listening to it ring and waiting for Peter to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Miss me yet, little brother?" Bucky said, making himself sound more upbeat than he actually felt.

"Bucky, where the hell have you been?" Peter demanded, every inch a concerned Barnes trying to be angry when he really wasn't.

Bucky had to resist the urge to wince. "Around. My disappearance must've been in the news."

"Along with a lot of bullshit accusations," Peter said. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the stockade at Fort Meade," Bucky said. "I can't tell you what's going on right now, but I figured you should know I'm still alive and causing trouble."

"Damnit, Bucky, this is why Mom took the switch to you so often. You pull stupid shit like this." Peter sighed. "You've already cut off half the questions I want to ask, so I'll ask this, instead. Are you okay and are you going to continue to be so?"

Bucky couldn't help the smile that Peter couldn't see. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. Just keep an eye on the news. If the news doesn't say anything, I'll try to get ahold of you again and explain. I promise."

Peter didn't say anything for a pregnant three seconds. "You'd better," he said. "Anything else to report?"

"Don't sound military at me," Bucky griped. "I'm surrounded by people who outrank me right now. But no, nothing else." He paused. "Love you, Peter. Stay safe."
"Love you, too, Bucky," Peter said. "Keep me posted."

Bucky said goodbye, then hung up and let himself be escorted back to his room.

Chapter End Notes

Just to define: ICF - Installation Confinement Facilities. These are facilities at the local level for holding pretrial detainees and short-term posttrial prisoners. Source: http://www.globalsecurity.org
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

"And if you want to pursue charges against him, you're going up against me."

Chapter Notes

To mistersilver: Relax, this is beyond not the end of things between Tony and the Barnes-Rogers duo. I promise. In the meantime, everyone, enjoy the ride?

"Hey, Barnes," an unfamiliar voice said. "You made the paper this morning."

Bucky opened his eyes, staring out his door to see an MP that he didn't recognize with a folded up newspaper. "Haven't I been making it for the last two weeks?" he asked, not moving to get up.

The MP held out the newspaper with an impatient look. "You'll want to see this."

"Bucky, just get out of bed and get the paper," Steve said from the next room, sounding like he was still half-asleep.

Bucky grumbled at him, then sat up, running flesh fingers through his hair, trying to tame it. He got up and headed over to the door and held out his hand for the paper.

The MP, a young man that reminded Bucky of a younger Steve in a way, handed over the paper.

Bucky took it and unfolded it. "Oh hey, Steve, I made the front page."

While Bucky read, Steve left his room to read over Bucky's shoulder. "They didn't get your bad side this time."

"That's because I'm not wearing my mask," Bucky said, a bit distracted while he read.

SERGEANT JAMES BARNES IN CUSTODY
Associated Press

Sergeant James Barnes, known to many as the Winter Soldier, has been taken into custody at Fort Meade, the Pentagon has confirmed.

Earlier this month, the identity of the Winter Soldier, Captain America's unknown partner, came to light as Sergeant James 'Bucky' Barnes, childhood friend and fellow Howling Commando to Captain Rogers. Little has come out about how he has survived or where he has been the last seventy years.

The president promised an honorable discharge that never had a chance to go through before rumors began to surface that linked Barnes to several assassinations over the decades, many of which were considered turning points in history. One of these assassinations included Howard and
Maria Stark.

Barnes and Rogers disappeared when the first rumors began to appear. There is no lead on where these rumors are coming from, but some have blamed the Russian government, while still others lay blame on Hydra, though no evidence has been presented for either theory.

According to Pentagon officials, Barnes and Rogers turned themselves in at Fort Meade at approximately 7:30 pm last night. There is still no information presently available to explain where Barnes has been, or if the assassinations attributed to him were carried out by him, or by someone else using his name.

The Pentagon says it will be conducting a thorough investigation.

Bucky skimmed the rest, it was mostly just more background on his past, a brief list of some of the targets he had under Hydra, a brief few paragraphs about his and Steve's work as mercenaries, and then back around to his custody and the Pentagon's investigation, along with a line about the White House not commenting just yet.

He offered the paper to Steve in case Steve wanted to read it in detail, but Steve shook his head, so Bucky handed it back to the MP. "I see the Pentagon is going to drag its feet, as usual," he said.

The MP took the paper back and folded it up. "What do you mean? You just got here, they can't possibly work that quickly. No one can." He seemed eager to defend the institution he worked for. Poor, naive boy.

"I already gave them pretty much everything they need," Bucky said. "It was the first thing they did after tossing us in an interrogation room. They already know." He leaned back against his doorway. "And I think your superiors would be upset with me if I told you what they have."

"Which is why I'm not asking," the MP said. "I know better than that."

Bucky grinned. "Good, you've been here long enough to learn that." He studied the MP, taking note of his rank of corporal, and a last name of Loos. Weird name. He wondered what part of Europe that came from.

The other MP, a short woman with dark hair and a rather cute face, gave Loos a stern look. "Loos, you know better than to interact with the prisoners."

Loos motioned to the open cell doors. "These hardly count as conventional prisoners," he protested. "They don't even get their doors shut at night."

Steve glanced up at the clock. "It's six in the morning," he said. "Do we get escorted to the showers to clean up for the day?" he asked, stepping into the middle of the scolding Loos was getting diplomatically.

Both MPs fell back into proper attention, escorting Steve and Bucky to the showers and restrooms to clean up for the day. Before they had a chance to get into the showers, having taken care of brushing teeth and other necessities, they were given a change of clothing, a uniform that made Bucky crinkle his nose in disgust, but it was clean, and that was all he cared about. They showered, changed, and were led back to their cells.

Bucky decided to be a good prisoner for awhile and buried himself in his book, staying quiet for a few hours. He assumed Steve was drawing in the next cell over, he was just as quiet as Bucky was.

Bucky had gotten through a few chapters before he head footsteps coming down the hall. He looked
up, marking his place and setting his book aside. He saw Loos salute as the footsteps stopped just outside of Bucky's cell, off to the side and out of his sight.

The lieutenant colonel from the night before spoke up. "Escort the prisoners to interrogation room one," he said.

_Great, more bullshit._

Bucky set his book aside and obediently went to his door, waiting for Steve and the MPs to take their places. Up ahead, he could still see the lieutenant colonel, although he had a feeling that the officer wasn't going to go into the room first. They never did, at least not on TV. Having only been interrogated once before, very unsuccessfully, by some amateur cops in Ohio, Bucky didn't have a lot to go on as to how these things really worked, but he still somehow had the feeling he'd be left to stew.

He was glad when he was proven wrong, led into the interrogation room to see the lieutenant colonel already seated and waiting.

Once Steve and Bucky were seated, the officer slid over a folder to Bucky. "Here are the photographs you requested," he said. "I trust I will have your cooperation?"

"I said you would, didn't I?" Bucky said, then opened the folder. It was a stack of photographs, as the officer said, and Bucky immediately recognized the face on the top photo. He picked up the photo, flipping it over to see if there was a name on it. 'Eva Volkov 1967' it read. "This one's true," he said, setting it aside. The second picture was like a shot to the gut, a picture of Howard and Maria. He'd never met Maria, Howard was still single when Bucky last saw him. But seeing Howard brought back the crash, the heat of the fire, the loud crack of his neck, and it took all of Bucky's willpower to keep his hands from shaking. "This one too," he said, setting it aside.

All in all, there were about thirty pictures, and all but two were ones he recognized. Those two he admitted might still be true, he didn't remember everything, but since the others he'd recognized with absolute clarity, it was unlikely that they were his. He wasn't sure why Hydra would release false accusations, unless the two in question had just popped up because of the rumors going around.

It took an hour to go through all of the pictures and answer the officer's questions about each. He couldn't remember details, couldn't answer at all why they'd been targeted. "I was never told," he said. "I was just told they needed to be eliminated to continue Hydra's work towards a safe world."

"And you believed that?" the officer asked, his tone not revealing his opinion of Bucky's statement one way or another.

"I had no reason not to," Bucky said. "They were all I knew. There was nothing before them to give me reason to think they weren't on the level."

"The problem of the brainwashing," the officer said, asking for confirmation while still making a statement rather than a question.

Bucky crossed his arms and sat back. "You don't believe that, do you?"

"I don't think anything of it, Sergeant," the officer said. "My job is not to interpret the evidence, simply gather it and submit it."

"That doesn't stop you from having an opinion."

The officer looked like he was considering giving Bucky an answer. "I am not unsympathetic," was
as close as he came. He nodded at the MPs. "Take them to the cafeteria," he said. "I believe it's past their morning meal."

_Oh thank god._ Bucky was getting hungry; they hadn't been given food the night before. He didn't point out that oversight, though, just quietly let himself be led to a large room with some round tables and four seats around each one. The stockade was hardly bursting to the seams, but there was a cook on-hand that normally served the MPs. Bucky almost wondered why the place acted like they were a proper prison.

There was a TV in the cafeteria, leading Bucky to suspect that this wasn't actually where a prisoner would take their meals, but where the MPs on duty took their breaks. Weird set up, this place had.

He didn't complain, though. Their food was better than he would've gotten in a proper prison, at least. Not by much, but it was the military, one could only ask so much.

Their next few days fell into routine. There were a couple more questionings, but nothing new came of them, they were mostly more attempts at getting information about why the targets were chosen, and every time, Bucky had to remind them that he was the weapon, nothing more. They questioned Steve about Bucky's attempt on his life, which was an unpleasant trip into the past that Bucky forced himself to detach from, but other than more insistence at Bucky's lack of memory and complete brainwashing, not much came of that, either.

Which left them waiting for Washington to decide what to do. Bucky would give them a week before letting Steve know to contact Sharon and let the CIA take over. He knew he should logically give them longer; the government liked to drag their heels about everything, but he wasn't interested in hanging around prison any longer than that. He had to hope that Sharon and her group had everything already set up and ready to go.

It was day five of imprisonment before anything changed in the routine. Bucky had long since finished his book and was rereading it for lack of anything else to do, but even he was getting tired of seeing the word 'Hodor'.

"Barnes, you have a visitor," an MP said outside his cell.

He looked away from the ceiling he'd been staring at, on his back with his book resting open on his chest, abandoned for the past hour. He frowned. Who the hell was visiting him in the stockade? He closed his book and set it on the ground and sat up. "Hear that, Steve?" he said. "Someone's come to see me."

"That's because you're special, Bucky," Steve said, with that sort of tone that said 'special' had a few sparkles on it.

He shot the wall between them a dirty look, but got up and went to his cell door. Two MPs he didn't recognize from the rotation were waiting for him. They moved into formation to escort him, the rather large Hispanic man taking the lead, leaving a somewhat smaller than average white woman to pull up the rear. Bucky understood the need to have an armed guard behind him as well as in front, but it seemed rather pointless, given that it'd take him about a second to kill them both and escape.

Let them have their security blankets.

Like the rest of the place, the visitation room defied what Bucky was expecting from the media. There was no glass wall with individual cubicles and little phones inside, it was just a room with a few tables and chairs. It almost looked like the dining area in the cafeteria, just without a TV.
Bucky took a seat at the guards’ rather pointed suggestion, and tapped his metal finger on the table top in nervous habit while one of the guards stepped over to a phone on the wall and informed whoever was on the other end that ‘the prisoner’ was ready.

Bucky wasn’t sure who he was expecting, if he was expecting anyone at all, but somehow, he wasn’t entirely surprised when Peter was escorted in. He gave his little brother an exasperated look. "Peter, what the hell are you doing here?"

Peter sat down across from him, setting down a book and sliding it over to him. "I know how bored you get," he said. "I brought you something to read. You're welcome, you ungrateful jackass."

Bucky picked up the book, eyeing the title. 'Storm Front' by someone named Jim Butcher, marked as part of a series called The Dresden Files. "I've heard of this series," he said. "I'm going to assume my baby brother isn't enough of an asshole to give me a shitty book to read and that it's a good series."

"If you were at home, I might," Peter said. "But since you're in the brig, I thought I'd be nice."

"This is the first book?" Bucky asked, turning the book over in his hand to skim the back.

"I'm being nice, remember? Of course it is." Peter sighed, and didn't speak again until Bucky had set the book down and gave him full attention. "What's going on? I know you said you can't tell me everything, but for the love of God, tell me something. Why'd you run? You were gone before the press knew what was happening with the bullshit accusations about the Starks and the others."

Bucky sighed. "How'd you get in here, anyway?"

"I drove thirty six miles," Peter said. "You didn't answer my question."

Bucky frowned. "I'm trying to figure out how without saying too much. As far as why I ran, wouldn't anyone? Nobody wants to be arrested by the government for shit like that."

Peter sat back, folding his hands on the table in front of him, and Bucky could easily picture him in a Naval officer's uniform, a younger man, eyes as hard as steel and his kindness streak still a mile wide. "How'd you know to run before the government?"

"I had my ear to the ground," Bucky said. "It's been there pretty much since people figured out who I am."

It didn't take more than about three seconds for Peter to read between the lines. "Which means you knew these accusations were out there. How?"

Bucky hesitated. "Because they're not not true. But they're not exactly true, either." He shrugged. "Depends on your point of view."

Peter looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing, and he probably didn't. Bucky had never been the sort to pull punches or hesitate to pull the trigger when the time called for it, but he'd never been the sort for assassinations, either. Not before Hydra. "So you did kill those people." At Bucky's silence, Peter swallowed tightly, looking less and less like a former officer and more and more like the kid that Bucky remembered, despite the grey hair and the age lines on his face. Young, scared, and horrified. "Why? Bucky, one of those people was Mister Stark, you liked him, you never would've hurt him."

"Not willingly," Bucky agreed, keeping a neutral tone and expression.

That sank in pretty fast, too, and the fear turned into a hard, cold anger. "Who got ahold of you?"
"And that's the part I can't tell you," Bucky said. "You'll find out within the next week. That much I can promise you. In the meantime, try not to worry too much. You're already halfway to bald."

Peter was silent, studying Bucky in a way that made Bucky feel like he was being interrogated by someone far more effective at it than the lieutenant colonel that ran the place was. After a few seconds, Peter mercifully stopped drilling holes into Bucky's brain. "Do you need a lawyer?"

There was a good question. Bucky tilted his head back, looking up at the stark white ceiling. "I don't know. Maybe. Why, you got one?" He lifted his head. "You can't exactly get someone from the Pentagon, they're going to be the ones prosecuting me, if charges are pressed."

"It'll be the Army that's prosecuting," Peter said. "Maybe not even them. It's hard to say who would be filing charges. Either way, I have some friends, if they can without conflicting interests, I'll throw a call their way."

Bucky sighed. "If they're friends of the family, they're already at a conflict of interest."

"No, that's just bias," Peter said. "But I'm not going to argue semantics with you, Bucky. You have my number, call if you need help. Or another book."

Bucky smiled, grabbing the Dresden book again and holding it up. "This should last me until tomorrow, so get the second one ready."

Peter looked amused, though not quite as carefree about it as Bucky was, then glanced at the guards, then back to Bucky. "I suppose they'd shoot me if I tried to hug you."

"Probably," Bucky said. "So go on, just get out of here. Keep an eye on the news, you'll get your answers soon enough." He paused. "You know I don't like hiding things from you."

Peter's smile softened. "I know. You never did. But shit happens. I'll keep an eye on the news, and ear out for the phone. I can be here in less than an hour. Keep me in the loop."

"As much as I can," Bucky promised. He waved to his brother as Peter got up and was escorted out by a guard. He studied his new book, then glanced up at the MPs that stepped forward to take him back to his cell. "Don't suppose either of you know if this series is done yet?"

"It's not," the female of the two said, looking at least somewhat sympathetic. "Come on, Sergeant Barnes, it's time to go back. You can read that there."

Bucky sighed and got up. "Yeah, Steve's probably worried by now anyway," he said, falling into place between them.

Another day passed. Peter had good taste in books, Bucky had to admit. Dresden was a smartass. Bucky could appreciate that.

They got their dinner at promptly six, three on the west coast, and the evening news was on. Bucky paid it little attention, focusing on his food and mentally taking notes on what the plan was for the next day. It'd be day seven, time for Steve to contact Sharon. They'd agreed that Steve would contact her under the premise of getting Bucky a lawyer. By tomorrow, it'd be obvious that they weren't planning on letting Bucky go, and it'd be time to call in legal counsel.

Steve nudged his arm. Bucky looked away from mystery meat that claimed to be chicken cordon bleu, looking at Steve. Steve motioned to the TV. Without question, Bucky looked up, and his stomach clenched up and threatened to fight back against that food. The news was on, cameras focusing on a podium that had the logo for Stark Enterprises on the front. There were camera flashes,
murmurs of reporters, and Tony walking from off-screen to stand behind the podium. He was holding something in his fist, something he set down on the podium. Cameras clicked.

"Looks like the press finally cornered him into a statement," Bucky said, then tried to return to his food.

Steve poked his arm. "Pay attention," he said. "Give him a chance to prove you wrong."

Bucky sighed, glancing at Steve out of the corner of his eye, then up at the TV screen.

Tony took in a deep breath, studying something on the podium, probably notes, then looked out at the reporters. "So, some of you have been all but knocking down my door to get a statement from me about the issue of Bucky Barnes. I've been doing my best to ignore all of you, but you're persistent, I'll give you that. So here's what you want to hear. Yes, I knew that the Winter Soldier was Bucky Barnes for almost a year now. I was friends with him. Visited him. Repaired his arm when it got damaged in the Ukraine."

Tony shuffled a card. "The news that he was responsible for the death of my parents, however, I hadn't known. He never told me. He let me go on thinking it was an accident, that he hadn't rigged their gas tank to explode, that he hadn't gone in and personally made sure the job was done. He called me, not long ago, I assume only to give me a chance to end our contact, to try to kill him with my brain. I haven't talked to him since."

He looked back down at the cards. "My legal team is encouraging me to press charges, along with the rest of the world. Yes, he committed those crimes. Yes, he pulled the trigger on those people. But I'm not going to do that." He lifted the small stack of note cards he'd been reading from and tore them in half. "And the reason is that he's not guilty. The reason is because he did none of them willingly."

"You know how I know?" He held up a tiny thumb drive. "I have on this drive a digital copy of something he and Captain America were given from a Hydra base in Kiev. It details the work done to him by Hydra as part of the Winter Soldier Project. It was Hydra that he worked for. They found him after he fell from the train. They replaced his arm. They pumped him full of chemicals, chemicals that did damage, then more chemicals to correct that, to enhance every bit of him to replicate- as closely as they could -the serum used on Captain America."

Bucky stared at the TV, jaw slightly agape, food forgotten entirely. Steve had been right, Tony was stepping up to bat for him. He was offering forgiveness. He was fighting for his friend.

"They did more than that," Tony continued. "They ripped open his head, they put in chemicals, they applied shocks to just the right areas, reducing them to shreds that removed all sense of self. They destroyed Bucky and inserted a weapon, instead. He spent decades going into cryo, being taken out, thawed, handed a gun, told to kill someone, had his memory wiped and then back into the freezer. You want to hold someone who went through that accountable for something they had no choice in? Then you are a worse person than those who did it to him in the first place."

He tapped the thumb drive on the podium a couple times. "I'm sure the Army has this information by now, and they aren't working fast enough to clear my friend of any charges for my liking. So here you are, world. The truth. Bucky Barnes is not guilty of those deaths. Hydra is. You want someone to hate, hate them. Bucky was an innocent victim."

Tony stood up taller, expression cold. "And if you want to pursue charges against him, you're going up against me."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

"So was that your first kiss since 1945?"

"Shut your mouth, Rogers."

It was around eight-thirty that evening when MPs—not Jordan and Kovanda, who'd been their nightly guards—showed up, Steve and Bucky's bags in hand. They were told to change and pack their things, and to do it quickly.

Bucky suddenly desperately wished that they had their weapons and tactical gear. Steve's uniform was basically useless except to look shiny, but Bucky's was made from nomex thread and kevlar fiber. Gave him a bit of an advantage against small arms, and made it easy to carry his weapons on his person. Here, he had no weapons, nothing he could grab in half a second and have killed his target in the latter half of that second.

And something was going on. Something very, very wrong was happening. They were being escorted somewhere, leaving the stockade in a hurry and put into the back of what looked like a normal vehicle, but this was the military. Bucky would not be surprised if it had more surprises to it than what its looks alone would account for.

Every time one of them tried to ask a question, they were either ignored, or told to be quiet. The knot of nerves in his stomach tightened. He slipped back into the old familiar skin of the sniper, the assassin. The Winter Soldier. He marked time, relative speed, as close as he could tell from watching the passing scenery, calculating how far they'd traveled, how far they were going. His internal compass showed them going south, a touch west.

Forty minutes passed, and they'd traveled just under thirty miles. They crossed into the city limits of Washington DC. Bucky wondered if the bank in the city was abandoned, rather than stripped by the government. If it had been left alone, damn the memories the chair would bring back, there'd be a way to open communications with Tony and get his help getting the hell out of there and to safety somewhere. He knew of a few other small places in DC they could go to, assuming they hadn't been raided after most of Hydra's information was dumped on the internet. They probably had been, but without any other plan, his mind fell back on 'find the safe house.'

Bucky found it somewhat comforting when they pulled into the back entrance of the White House. It wasn't damn likely that they'd get tossed into the Bog of Eternal Stench or anything from there. That'd be too many questions, and it'd be too easy of a situation for Steve and Bucky to get out of, and if any of these people had paid any attention to the news about their jobs, they'd know that. Hell, they didn't even have to know about the Winter Soldier's work, just Steve's. They would not get away with anything in the White House.

Not unless they wanted a repeat of the War of 1812.

It was past nine at night by the time they were escorted into the Oval Office, to a waiting President Ellis. Special Service remained flanking the president, something that wasn't often seen by Bucky. Usually, the president was discussing confidential affairs with Steve and Bucky when they
interacted, and the guards were not present. Obviously, they weren't taking any chances this time.

President Ellis was sitting behind his desk, watching them like a disapproving parent. He didn't speak for a minute, which invited nothing from Steve or Bucky, and neither were inclined to try to start this conversation. Finally, the president sighed. "I don't suppose you're going to explain why you couldn't just have told me any of this when I called you here weeks ago?"

"To be honest, sir," Bucky said, "I just wanted to be left alone. I didn't want any government agency having anything over me. Had a few decades of that, didn't want to go through it again."

"And yet you turned yourself in," Ellis said. "Why?"

"By that time, I didn't have much choice," Bucky said. "Hydra had pushed me into a corner. It was either continue to run, or come clean and remove their method of blackmailing me."

The president nodded slightly, frowning. "And you trusted that coming to us would grant you protection?"

"Not exactly," Bucky said. "I had that information set up elsewhere to be released if you guys decided you didn't want to do it yourselves."

Ellis raised an eyebrow. "Tony Stark." When Bucky refrained from correcting him, Ellis sat forward, leaning against his desk. "I've been contacted by an Agent Carter in the CIA. Her credentials passed muster. She says that the CIA is prepared to take charge of your protection and care. Mister Stark has volunteered to move you to New York and make you part of the Avengers at the Tower. Between the two of them, you'll be mostly safe from Hydra retaliation."

Bucky counted three seconds off before he steeled his nerve to pull out the accusation on the tip of his tongue. "And retaliation from the US government?"

Ellis sat back, blowing out a huff of frustration. "The government can't safely touch you anymore, your friend saw to that. My administration has no intention of pressing charges against the Winter Soldier." One side of his lips quirked up. "I'll even be nice enough to give you a pardon on going AWOL. You still get that discharge, this time effective immediately. You're on your own now, boys. As far as the Army's concerned, anyway. The CIA will still be shadows."

"I've worked with Agent Carter before," Steve said. "She's discreet, we won't notice her."

President Ellis didn't comment on that, just studied Bucky. "I'm just sorry you didn't trust me with that information. This whole mess could've been avoided."

"Don't feel bad, sir," Bucky said. "I didn't trust anyone with it."

"And Stark?"

Bucky took a second to figure out how to answer that. "A friend. He asked nicely."

That didn't seem to have amused the president much, but he didn't push it, either. "You'll be escorted back out. The CIA agents that are now in charge of your care are waiting. They'll take you back to your apartment. From there, I imagine they'll help move you from DC to New York." He was quiet a moment. "I do hope we'll still be able to call on you two when we need you."

"For the right price," Steve said, and Bucky had to choke back laughter. "Just as always."

"Very mercenary of you, Captain," Ellis said.
Steve shrugged. "Even mercenaries need to eat."

After giving Steve an unamused look, Ellis looked back at Bucky. "I'll refrain from making you appear on national television," he said as he stood, much to Bucky's relief. "But I'll say it now." He saluted. "Welcome home, soldier."

Bucky hadn't been expecting that, wasn't even sure what he was expecting at this point. Unlike weeks ago when he last saw the president, he automatically saluted. "Thank you, sir." He held his salute until the president lowered his arm, then had to resist the urge to relax into an at-ease position.

"Dismissed," Ellis said, and the escorts that had led Steve and Bucky in guided them back out of the office, and through the White House, until they were out back again. There was another car waiting for them, this one less ominous-looking, a regular four-door family car, simple, white, possibly a Ford. Bucky couldn't tell. It wasn't a very flashy car, though.

It was Sharon waiting for them by the driver's door. "Looking for a ride?" she asked, smiling in a way that made Bucky feel at ease. She was an ally, a friend, possibly someday more for Steve if Bucky could get them to stop worrying about their jobs so much. Shouldn't be hard now that Sharon wasn't deliberately keeping hers a secret.

Steve smiled. "Nice to see a friendly face finally," he said.

Sharon motioned to the car. "Get in. I'll take you back to your apartment, let you get some rest. We'll worry about moving tomorrow. You don't have a lot to pack, I hope?"

Bucky let Steve take the front seat to sit by his not-sweetheart, climbing into the back.

"No," Steve said. "If we're moving to the Avengers Tower, I don't think we'll have need for our dishes or furniture. So just our clothes, really." He paused. "And my record player and records. It took me forever to find those."

Bucky rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Steve, you can find all those songs on iTunes, fer chrissakes."

Steve made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a whine. "Yeah, but the sound quality is different. The songs just don't sound the same in digital sound. You have your hang ups, let me have mine."

Sharon laughed quietly, glancing in the rearview mirror at Bucky. "Taking the player and records with us is doable. Especially if all you have besides that are clothes."

"And one box of books," Steve said. "I mostly use the library, Bucky has a digital library on his tablet." He paused. "We can keep the tablet and laptop, right? They're not compromised or anything?"

"No," she said. "We've made sure of that. They're clean and ready for you to come home."

"Thank god," Bucky said. "I was getting bored without my books."

"Don't let him get bored," Steve said. "He starts acting like a toddler when he's bored."

Bucky could see Sharon pursing her lips in the reflection of the mirror, and he scowled at Steve's back. "Shut your mouth, Rogers," he said. "You get cranky, too."

"You were a sniper, weren't you?" Sharon asked. "How did you avoid boredom doing that? There's a long time between shots sometimes."
Bucky shrugged, although he wasn't sure she saw it, her eyes on the road. "When you're behind the scope, you're in a different mindset. You're counting seconds, heartbeats, keeping your breathing even. There's a lot to think about to take one of those shots. Trajectory, wind speed and direction, target motion. Even a half degree off and your target gets away and people can die because of that. There's too much on the line to get restless."

"Mm." They turned off into an area of town that didn't exactly qualify as the projects, but it wasn't middle class, either. "That sounds difficult. I thought keeping up with you two was hard."

Bucky watched the familiar buildings go by. They were almost home. "It's not for everyone, or for every reason. I was usually covering Steve's back, rather than looking for specific targets."

Unlike with Hydra.

That thought stayed unsaid, fortunately, as Sharon pulled up in front of their apartment building. Bucky looked up at the building through the window. Home for one more night. It was nice that they were getting one more night in familiar surroundings before setting down permanent stakes somewhere else. The CIA could've easily just whisked them off to New York and sent their stuff to them later.

Sharon had her own place to sleep, that mythical place in the ether that she'd been hiding in the past two years where neither Steve nor Bucky noticed her, so it was just them. Thank everything, he thought. He wanted one last comfortable night, where he only had to worry about sharing a bathroom with Steve, where they were nearby without practically having to snuggle each other in bed, where they could sit at their own table- a table! what a fucking novelty after Natasha's place - and read, passing hours in companionable silence.

It'd make more sense for them to pack than to do that, but it wasn't like they had boxes already.

Steve unlocked their apartment door and led Bucky in. Both stopped just past the coat closet and stared.

There were boxes everywhere.

Bucky heaved a deep sigh. "Do we have to?" he demanded.

Steve didn't sound any more pleased than Bucky was. "I think Sharon will forgive us if we don't start tonight. It's already past ten."

"Good." Bucky immediately walked over to the table, dumped a couple of boxes off it, dropped his bag full of clothes, some of which were dirty, some were clean, and at that point, it didn't matter, they were all getting washed, and sat down at the table. He grabbed his tablet. "I don't know how we survived without the internet, Steve," he said. "It makes keeping up on the news so much easier."

Steve put his bag on the ground next to Bucky's and sat down at his usual spot. "Well, I can tell you what's been in the news lately. Bucky Barnes is alive and well, Bucky Barnes may have killed a few people, and now Bucky Barnes was a POW and should be cleared of all charges." He paused. "Oh, and the Huskers won against Miami. But that might not be nationally noticed."

"Fucking fireworks," Bucky grumbled, booting up his tablet. "What crazy-ass state sets off fireworks when they win a college football game? It's not even professional football."

"Well, to answer that question, I'm going to have to remind you of Nebraska," Steve said. "God, it feels nice to be sitting at a table for more than to just eat and leave."
"No shit," Bucky agreed.

Steve was right about the news; even in the international community, his reappearance and the accusations and Tony's statements pretty much dominated everything. It was interesting to see the different opinions on the matter, some were favorable in his defense, there were a lot that were condemning, too. Well, Tony's press conference was only a few hours ago, the rest of the world would catch up and opinions might change.

Russia would probably forever hate him, though.

They didn't stay up long, didn't even bother to do more than a cursory inspection of the internet before calling it a night. They hadn't been sleeping poorly at Meade, but it'd still been a taxing few weeks. Sleep in their own proper beds sounded nice.

They both decided to sleep in. They actually woke at about the same time, the same time they'd been ordered up every day for the last week, but after taking turns in the bathroom, they both went right back to bed without having to discuss the issue. The CIA agents wanting to move them could just wait.

Bucky got up first. Their alarm clock said it was about ten in the morning. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in that late. Not that it mattered, he rather felt he deserved staying in bed until close to noon every now and then.

Since Steve was still asleep, Bucky decided to hole himself up in the bathroom for a shower where he didn't have to use shampoo stolen from a hotel, or shaving cream that smelled like tropical flowers. He had time to actually shave, for that matter. He'd gotten furry again in the stockade, to his annoyance.

He might've stayed under the hot spray for a lot longer than he already had, but he knew Steve would be up soon, if not already, and would want a shower of his own. Bucky liked Steve enough to not leave him with a cold shower. An unnecessary one, anyway.

Steve was no longer in bed when Bucky went back into the bedroom to change. He had a feeling that before he got done changing, Steve would already be in the bathroom. He grabbed some clothes out of his closet. Oh glorious clean clothes that hadn't been sitting in a bag for two weeks! It was amazing how the little things seemed like the best things in the world after a long mission. It was nice to be home. For at least part of the day.

Bucky had been right about Steve being in the bathroom, the shower running, as Bucky passed through the hall into the kitchen. He opened the fridge, and then scowled. It'd been about two weeks, it was past Thanksgiving and into December now, and that milk had expired on the twentieth. The eggs probably weren't any good, either, and he could see the wilting vegetables in the crisper. He closed the fridge door and eyed the bread on the counter. Growing a few different sorts of mold, one of which was about as blue as Steve's uniform.

"Looks like we're going to Mama's for breakfast," he said to himself, going back to the table and flopping down in his seat, turning on his tablet.

About ten minutes later, the water turned off, and he could hear Steve swearing. He glanced towards the hallway. He had a feeling the water had gone cold. Either that, or Steve hit his foot against the edge of the tub. Or sliced himself shaving. But probably the water.

"You're a jackass," Steve said once he was dressed and joining Bucky in the dining room.
"Not enough hot water?" Bucky asked, tone unaffected and attention on his tablet, although he really wanted to just be an asshole and laugh in Steve's face. God, it felt good for things to be back to normal.

"How long of a shower did you take?" Steve demanded, logging into his laptop.

"Not that long," Bucky said. "I just had the water hotter than usual."

"Jerk."

Bucky smiled. "I think after everything, I deserved a damn hot shower." He looked up at Steve. "And you look a thousand times better without that beard you were growing."

Steve made a vague noise in response. "I've never looked good with facial hair."

"Don't feel bad," Bucky said, going back to his tablet. "After a point, neither do I."

Steve looked over at the kitchen. "Our food's all spoiled, isn't it?"

Bucky nodded. "Yeah, I checked. We're probably going to be eating at Mama's." He smiled faintly. "Which is just as well, I wanted a chance to say goodbye to her."

"It's too bad you never got to ask her out for coffee," Steve said.

Bucky shook his head. "It's not like I could offer her much," he said. "A few months at best, put her in danger from anyone who doesn't like me. Pepper's gotten in trouble, and at least she's got a permanent relationship to make it worth it."

"Are you ever going to settle down?" Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. "If I ever find that right partner you keep talking about. But likely? No."

Once they were braced for the December cold, they took their car to Mama's. Bucky was sure they were followed by someone from the CIA, possibly even Sharon herself. Bucky didn't care. All he was interested in was some hot food and a chance to talk to Mama. Maybe find out her real name before leaving.

The hostess didn't look as happy to see them as she usually was. Bucky would accuse her of being afraid, and he supposed he couldn't really blame her. "I'll get Mama," she said. "Table's open."

They both felt uncomfortable with the sudden coldness, but all told, neither of them could blame the hostess, so they simply went to their table and waited. It wasn't Mama that came out to serve them, but a waitress that was acting as equally tense as the hostess had. She took their orders without a single smile, and left to put those in. She stopped by with drink refills occasionally, but that was it.

Not one sign of Mama.

They managed to go the whole meal without even seeing her, much less talking to her. Did people suddenly think he was more dangerous as a former assassin than he was as an active mercenary?

Feeling disappointed, Bucky dropped a couple twenties on the table to pay for the bill, with roughly a fifty-percent tip, and got up to leave with Steve.

They'd only just gotten to the door when they heard Mama's voice behind them. "Winter?"

Bucky paused and glanced back over his shoulder. Mama's red hair was pulled up in its usual bun,
stray curls escaping and framing her face. She wore her work uniform and a messy apron, but she still managed to look beautiful.

He turned, stuffing his gloved hands into his coat pockets. "Wondered if I was going to get to see you."

She looked on the verge of crying, her expression brave, but her eyes wet. "Did they really do those terrible things to you?"

Bucky had to resist the urge to walk out without answering. That was one bad thing about that information being public: questions from others. But this was Mama, she was a friend, not a stranger. He shrugged. "Yeah. Long time ago."

Mama crossed the few feet between them and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, I should've been out here for you, I was just scared," she cried.

He sighed, putting his arms around her soothingly. "It's okay, Mama. I'm used to intimidating people."

She pulled back, face wet, looking up at him. "But you'd never frightened me before. I wasn't even scared, I just wasn't sure I could face you without wanting to do this."

Bucky chuckled. "I'm not exactly the kind of guy to turn down a hug from a pretty lady."

That made her smile. "Does that mean I can expect an invitation for coffee someday?"

The faint smile on Bucky's face faded. "Afraid not. We're getting relocated to New York."

She looked like her heart fell out of her chest. "Oh." She looked down at the ground. "Will you visit, sometime?"

Bucky didn't bother looking back at Steve to see Steve's opinion on that; if Steve didn't want to, too bad for him. "I'll try, yeah."

Mama looked back up at him, wiping away tears off her face. "Well, I guess I get to say goodbye, Winter."

"It's Bucky," he corrected her.

Despite the red-eyes, the flushed cheeks and red-tipped nose, the smile she gave him was dazzling. "Maggie," she said, finally offering her real name. Before he could acknowledge that, she'd gotten up in her tiptoes and kissed him firmly. His nerves tingled at the warmth of her lips, though it lasted only a few seconds. It felt nice to kiss a woman again.

She was an even darker shade of red when she pulled away. "I need to get back to the kitchen," she said. "Lunch rush is coming. Stay safe, Bucky." She glanced around him. "You too, Steve."

"I've got him looking out for me, that's the best I got," he said.

She smiled. "Then I'm sure you'll both be fine. Goodbye, you two." She waved, then turn and went back to the kitchen.

"So was that your first kiss since 1945?" Steve asked once they were outside, like a complete jackass.

Bucky kicked his shin. "Shut your mouth, Rogers," he said. "Not all of us have had the freedom to
look for girls."

"I'll have to make you change that in New York," Steve said, getting into the car.

Bucky settled into the passenger seat, buckling his seat belt. "Let's let the news die down a bit," he said, not saying no. It was just a matter of finding someone that wouldn't be scared off by the name. That seemed rather daunting, but he wasn't going to let it stop him. He'd missed being with women, they were pleasant company, fun to dance with, and even more fun to kiss.

Maggie hadn't been too bad at it, either.

Steve put the car in gear and took off to their apartment to pack up and move.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

"So how does it feel to finally be a free man?"

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the feedback and views and kudos- you've made my holiday season awesome.

Packing what was going with them took only a few hours; clothes, a box and a half of books, and those records and record player. Dishes, furniture, all that could go. Food had to be thrown out, and they decided to be nice and not make whoever the CIA was bringing in to help them do that. There was nonperishables in the cupboards, so Steve sorted through those to send to a food bank while Bucky cleared out the bathroom. Wasn't much in there, their basic toiletries, that rubbing alcohol that they'd both thought they'd never had reason to use until Steve got an ear infection, and some hydrogen peroxide.

And Steve's damn styling gunk.

No hair dryer, though. After living with a woman for awhile again, he praised everything for that.

They briefly discussed moving Bucky's bed back to the second room, just for appearances, but at that point in the last month, neither cared enough for appearances. If the handful of people who were coming in had weird thoughts, that was on them. Neither Steve nor Bucky cared.

It was about two-thirty before there was a knock on their door. Bucky assumed that it was someone from the CIA, or a hired hand to help move, but he didn't work on assumptions much, not now, not with how paranoid he was. He moved out of sight, where the door would block him, and motioned to Steve to answer it.

"Hello, Steve," Sharon said once the door was open. Bucky relaxed, stepping out from behind the door. She tilted her head. "Hello to you too, James."

"Bucky," he said. "I go by Bucky to my friends."

She smiled. "Bucky it is, then." She glanced past them. "You got our boxes, I see."

"Hello, Steve," Sharon said once the door was open. Bucky relaxed, stepping out from behind the door. She tilted her head. "Hello to you too, James."

"Bucky," he said. "I go by Bucky to my friends."

She smiled. "Bucky it is, then." She glanced past them. "You got our boxes, I see."

Steve sighed. "In spades." He moved to let her in. "We've already packed what will go with us. We've been working on boxing up dishes and stuff, but those are going to a charity or someplace, because we won't need them."

She wandered around the small apartment, maneuvering around boxes. "We gave you too many," she said. "Don't worry about packing the things you don't need. We have crews coming in to take care of furniture, we'll have them take care of those other things." She looked up at them. "You said
"You have everything else ready to go?"

"Yeah," Steve said, glancing back at the less than a dozen boxes they had gathered with the words 'take' written on them in giant red permanent marker.

Sharon crouched by them, weight testing each of them, not flinching at any, not even the box with the books. She was stronger than she looked. Good, meant she was up for her job of trying to keep up with Steve and Bucky. "This'll fit in a small trailer," she said, standing. "We could fit it in a regular mini-van, but you'll want your bike, and it's best that we don't have three separate vehicles trying to keep track of each other on the interstate." She looked over at them. "So we'll take these and the bike, meet you at the Avengers Tower."

"You'll probably beat us there," Bucky said. At the puzzled looks on both Steve and Sharon's faces, he continued, "I want to stop in Annapolis and see my brother before we get to New York."

"Absolutely doable," she said. "I'll be near you, I'm keeping a personal eye on you two right now. But you won't have to worry about me being in the way. I'll have some of the people on our team get your things to the Tower. Tony Stark is waiting there, he can direct our men where to put things, so everything will be ready for you when you get there."

"Works for us," Steve said.

They sorted through a few more details before parting ways, although with her being their unseen shadow, 'parting ways' came with a different definition.

DC to New York was normally a four hour trip- they could be there by dinner time. But they took an hour detour over to Annapolis. This time, Bucky didn't hesitate in the car once they'd parked in front of Peter's house, unbuckled and got out and walked to his brother's door without waiting for Steve.

It was about thirty seconds between Bucky knocking and Peter answering the door. Peter's age-weathered face looked older, suddenly, marred by grief upon seeing Bucky. Bucky braced himself for Peter to fuss and worry and possibly rage at an institution that couldn't hurt him anymore. Peter let them in, shut the door behind them, and stared at Bucky like he wanted to hug him until all the bad things went away, or if he wasn't sure it'd be welcome.

Bucky sighed. "All right, get it out," he said, pulling his brother into a hug. Peter returned the hug, as Bucky predicted, like if he just held on tight enough, long enough, what Hydra did would be undone. Bucky patted Peter's back. "Hey, stop that. I can't breathe."

Peter let go and leaned back, studying Bucky. "Well," he said, voice a bit thick, but otherwise strong, "I see why you couldn't tell me before."

"Just do me a favor and don't try to go after anyone," Bucky said. "And don't think it's so bad. I wouldn't be here now with you if it hadn't happened. So it's not all bad."

"I can still wish it hadn't happened," Peter said. He motioned to the living room. "Come sit?"

Bucky glanced at Steve for a second, who had been staying quiet, then back to Peter. "We can't," he said. "Tony is forcibly relocating us to the Avengers Tower in New York, since DC's not precisely safe for us anymore. We just stopped to let you know that we're out of the stockade and safe and okay." At Peter's disappointed look, Bucky put a hand on his shoulder. "We'll visit, don't worry. You haven't seen the last of us. And Tony might even be nice and let you come visit us. Get a chance to see that ugly building he's moving us into."

Peter smirked, a bratty smile that Bucky gave a suspicious look to. "You mean that building in
Manhattan? Where you'll be living? As a Manhattanite?"

Bucky scowled. "I was trying to avoid that thought." Manhattanites were snobs, prissy, up-scale jackholes that Bucky tended to look down on, completely unironically. Brooklyn was infinitely better.

"Would I be a good little brother if I didn't point it out?" Peter asked, still with that grin.

"If you weren't old and brittle, I'd kick your ass," Bucky grumbled.

Peter laughed. "I'm old, but I'm not that brittle yet. And you're still older," he said. "Did you like the book?" he asked, switching subjects.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Pretty good book. Love how you gave me an incomplete series to read. I'm going to be waiting forever for the latest one to come out."

"I'm sure there's an end in sight," Peter said. "When you get settled, send me your new address, I'll start sending them to you."

"Peter, I can get them myself."

"Let me do this, Bucky," Peter said. "I can't do anything to fix what happened or make up for lost years, but I can buy you a damn book series."

Seeing that this wasn't an argument worth winning, Bucky smiled. "All right, you win."

Peter once again offered them a chance to sit and get some warm coffee or tea before going back out into the December cold, but they declined. He took it with disappointment, but grace. "Just don't let me spend another Christmas without my brother," he said.

That hit Bucky in the gut a bit. "Don't worry, I'll have you boxed and shipped up to the Tower for Christmas this year," he promised. "If Tony doesn't like it, tough. He can soak his head in his spiked eggnog."

They exchanged goodbyes and hugs, then Steve and Bucky returned to their car. Sharon was haunting them somewhere nearby, but Bucky pushed that out of his mind for the most part as they took the detour back out to I-95, heading up for New York City.

Bucky would've loved to say he missed the city, but so much had changed, it almost wasn't the same city to have missed. He made a point of not watching traffic, knowing that it'd only give him a headache- he had a bit of a problem about stupid drivers, and NYC was full of them -but watched the people go by, the Christmas decorations hanging everywhere, the sales advertised in store windows.

Steve followed their GPS, specially programmed with JARVIS, courtesy of Tony and passed along by Sharon, to what was going to be their reserved spot for the rest of however long they had to stay at the Tower, probably indefinitely. Manhattan. Damnit.

A tall woman with dark hair up in a twist met them on the first floor of the building. Steve seemed to recognize her. "Hi, Maria."

"Hello, Steve," she said with a smile, then glanced at Bucky. "And you, Mister Barnes."

Bucky looked at Steve. "We know her?"
"I do," Steve said. "Maria Hill, used to be Nick Fury's assistant."

Oh. Bucky pulled on a neutral expression he didn't exactly feel. He'd forgotten that it wasn't just the Starks that had been personal to the Avengers, but Nick Fury, as well. He nodded in greeting, saying nothing.

"Don't worry," Maria said. "The Avengers consider you as much a victim of Hydra as Director Fury was. There's no need to ask forgiveness." She held out her hand. "It's nice to finally meet someone who is so important to Steve. According to Sam, he's been happier since you came home."

Bucky took her hand. "Nice to meet you. You don't have to call me 'Mister Barnes'."

"What would you like to be called, then?" she asked.

He considered that for a second. "Well, I guess if I just got taken in by the Avengers, it'd be easiest if everyone just called me Bucky. Less confusion."

She smiled. "Very well." She looked between them. "This way." She kept talking as they headed towards the elevators. "The top ten floors are the R&D floors, except the very top level, which is a penthouse that is exclusively for Avengers use. There's really nothing up there but a bar and some seating with a view, but Tony likes his luxury and likes sharing it with his friends." She pushed the elevator button, then turned to them while they waited. "The living quarters are the five floors directly below R&D. Below that is a medical center primarily run by Doctor Banner. Unless it's an emergency, you'll be receiving all medical care here, from now on."

"Can't say I mind that," Steve said. "Public hospitals mean armed guards outside your room and even that might not be enough protection."

Maria smiled. "You'll both be in the best care. Doctor Banner is even working on some medicines that will metabolize slowly enough to be useful for you two. Basics such as painkillers and antibiotics. I'm sure he'll expand once he's had a chance to see if his current experiments are working."

Steve glanced at Bucky. "Hopefully, he won't have reason to," he said, looking back at Maria.

The elevator dinged, and Maria led them in. "Living quarters level five," she said once all three of them were clear of the doors.

"Right away, Miss Hill," JARVIS's voice said.

Steve frowned. "JARVIS runs the whole building?"

"To an extent," Maria said. "Mostly anything to do with the Avengers. The rest of the building runs on its own computers. But areas exclusive to members of the Avengers, JARVIS overrides the building's AI and handles things personally. Tony trusts him."

"A high honor," JARVIS said. Bucky had a feeling he only spoke up to be a smartass. Smartass computers. Welcome to the twenty-first century.

"The rest of the building has various purposes," she said as the elevator took them upwards. "You can ask JARVIS for a full layout later, familiarize yourself with your new home, but at least at first, you probably won't need anything outside of the living floors and the medical center."

"Mostly offices?" Bucky asked.
Maria looked at him. "And small businesses. Those will be of more interest to you, I'm sure, but for now, your needs will be taken care of by Stark Industries employees. Just until you're settled, then you'll be shown around the relevant areas until you feel comfortable on your own."

"That won't take long, it's hard for us to get lost," Steve said.

Maria smiled. "I'm sure," she said. She glanced up at the display that showed what floor they were on. She didn't say anything more as the numbers ticked by, leading them up further.

The elevator finally dinged again, doors opening, and Maria led them out. "This is the floor you'll be living on."

"The whole floor?" Steve asked, looking around the expansive lobby area, and sounding rather flabbergasted.

"Hardly," Maria said with a note of amusement at Steve's expense. "Each floor has ten apartments, more than enough for the team and any future additions that come along." She led them down a hallway, to a door labeled 'R-B'. "Tony thought he was being funny," she said, motioning to the letters. "He still thinks your taste in music needs work."

Bucky studied the letters a moment. They were obviously supposed to mean 'Rogers - Barnes', but he wasn't sure he understood the musical reference. He looked at Steve questioningly.

"Rhythm and blues," Steve said, catching Bucky's unspoken question. "Sam's introduced me to some, it's not bad. Still prefer Bing."

After Bucky had nodded in acknowledgment, but said nothing further, Maria opened the door and led them inside. "The door is locked by JARVIS, all you have to do to get in is complain at him."

Bucky studied the apartment, doing his own inspection while Maria led them through the rooms. A proper dining room. A kitchen about twice the size of their old one. A living room with a nice view out a large picture window that almost took up the wall. A large hallway leading to a bathroom that his sister would've loved, two linen closets, and their bedrooms, right next to each other. The bedrooms were unreasonably large. A laundry room. Their things were already there, boxes waiting to be opened.

Once Maria had given them the full tour, and pointed out that their fridge and cupboards were already stocked for them, she led them back into the living room. "If you have any questions, JARVIS can help you. Tony will be by soon to see how you like the place. We've already received authorization for entrance for Agent Carter, she should be here very shortly, as well."

"Agent Carter is here," JARVIS's voice said.

They glanced at the door. "Speak of the devil," Maria said. "Let her in, JARVIS." She looked back at Steve and Bucky. "I will leave you three to work out protection details. JARVIS will let you know when Tony gets here."

Sharon stepped in, and smiled in greeting at Maria as Maria passed her, leaving the apartment. Sharon walked over to them. "It's bigger than your old place," she said. "What do you think?"

"It'll take some getting used to," Steve said. "I've never lived in a big place."

When Sharon glanced at Bucky, he shrugged. "Not without sharing with two parents, three siblings and a ton of neighborhood cats that got let in during the winter."
She laughed. "Sounds like a houseful. Hopefully this place won't be intimidating."

Steve looked around. "Shouldn't be. We'll be fine." Then he looked at her. "And where will you be this time?"

"Just down the hall again," she said. "Not far. JARVIS can notify me of trouble before the shots are fired this time."

Bucky tuned that part out, studying them and the way they were looking at each other. He sighed. "Just kiss her already, Rogers," he grumbled.

Sharon grinned while Steve gave Bucky a look that wanted to be frustrated, but was too happy to really get there. "I don't kiss before the first date," he said.

"So ask her out, stupid," Bucky said.

Steve looked at Sharon. "After we're done settling in. I'd ask you out for coffee, but I don't actually like coffee."

"We'll find something," Sharon said. "I have to move into my own place, I'll let you guys unpack."

For a brief moment, Bucky almost thought that Steve would break his 'no kissing before the first date' rule, but they simply smiled, then Sharon walked off, leaving the apartment. Bucky gave Steve a bland look. "So how long has that flirting been going on?" he asked.

"Since before you came home," Steve said. He looked at the boxes. "Tony'll be here soon, do we want to get started on unpacking first, and just be interrupted?"

"He can deal with an unpacked apartment," Bucky said. "I'm going to check that penthouse out."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Interested in a drink?"

Bucky frowned and shook his head. "No, that shit doesn't work anyway. Just curious about the view."

Really, he just didn't want to face Tony yet. He knew he would soon, but Tony would almost definitely go over the place with Steve, first, before tracking Bucky down. Bucky knew things were forgiven, that Tony didn't blame him, or if he did, not enough to keep him from standing at Bucky's side and giving them a new, safe place to live, but Bucky just wanted a few minutes to himself before getting a chance to finally say 'sorry'.

Steve knew Bucky well enough to pick up on that. "All right, Buck. I'll work on unpacking. I'll leave your stuff in your room."

"Thanks," Bucky said, leaving without another word.

He took the elevator up to the top floor, stepping out into the penthouse. Its view was a thousand times better than the one from his new apartment, and that was impressive. One entire wall was windows, curved around with a walkway just outside of them. There were a few couches and a couple chairs gathered around a large coffee table, socialization amongst the Avengers the clear purpose. The bar that Maria mentioned covered a good portion of the far wall, and even though it wasn't going to do anything for him, he was tempted to pour himself a glass of vodka.

He walked over to the windows, crossing his arms and watching out over the sunset over Manhattan. The city had changed a lot, but it was still New York. The sunsets weren't quite as spectacular as
they'd been in the plains country out west, but they were home, the streets and sidewalks shadowing over as the sun dipped behind the buildings, and the sky lit up fire red.

"Like it?"

Bucky spun, staring at Tony. He wasn't sure how Tony had managed to sneak up there without Bucky hearing him. He took a deep breath, then turned back out. "It's familiar," he said.

Tony walked over beside him, a bag of some sort slung over his shoulder. "I thought you might like it," he said. "How'd you like the apartment?"

"Bigger than I'm used to," Bucky said. "But it's nice." He looked down at the ground and silently counted to three. "Tony, I'm-

"Don't," Tony interrupted. "I wouldn't have done what I did if you needed to say it."

Rather than argue the point, because arguing with Tony was like arguing with a brick wall, Bucky looked at him. "What changed your mind?"

Tony looked thoughtful, like he was trying to determine the best way to answer. Finally, he set the bag down and unzipped the front cover, proving that the bag had been the cat carrier, pulling out Tony Stark Junior. She meowed, sounding like she'd just been woken from a nap. "C'mere, Princess," Tony said, then held Junior out to Bucky. "Her."

Bucky took her, being careful with her. She made a few noises of protest at being handled, then started sniffing Bucky's metal fingers. After deciding she remembered him, she groomed them a little, then rubbed her face against them.

"I figured, any man that would go out of his way to make sure a sick kitten is cared for by friends he trusted wasn't the sort of man who could turn around and kill a friend without remorse. That'd take a very special sort of sociopath," Tone said. "And I knew you weren't that sort."

The relief was so heavy that it almost made Bucky want to cry, but he pushed that back, let it sit in the back of his mind where he could examine it later in private, and smiled instead, letting Junior squirm in his arms until she was on her back, curled up in the crook of his elbow. "She likes this position, doesn't she?"

Tony huffed. "Yes, it's her favorite. I keep telling her if she wants to lay like that, she's not allowed to get bigger. I'm not going to carry around a ten pound bowling ball."

Bucky chuckled, rubbing Junior's belly with his metal fingers. "If you wanted that, you'd have a human kid."

Tony shuddered. "Don't even joke. I mean it, I don't hear that joke ever again, or I'll kick you off the roof." He paused. "You're smiling. I'm witnessing a miracle. Every time I've seen you, you're rarely smiling."

Bucky looked over at him. "I have a purring kitten in my arms, hard not to," he said, still grinning.

"They have a sedative effect," Tony admitted. "It's purely psychological, it's a survival instinct. They're manipulative that way."

"Yeah, you sound completely sincere about that, too," Bucky said.

"You're an asshole, and I'm still mad at you for lying, but you'll make up for that." Tony said, and
Bucky heard a threat in that. Not everything was forgiven, but he was being given the chance to earn it. He'd take it. After a second, Tony added, "welcome home. There, now I've said my sap for the decade, you don't get to hear it again."

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone I heard it at all," Bucky said.

"Good man," Tony said. "Oh! Your gear is here, courtesy of one Natasha Romanov. She passed along a message with it. She said, and I quote, 'stay out of trouble while I'm gone.' I don't know where she's gone, but she seems to think you need a babysitter. I'm agreeing with her."

"I've already got one," Bucky said, wanting to gripe, but more distracted by Junior's sleepy purrs. "A blond-haired one that Steve really needs to ask out."

Tony scoffed. "Just one? You've got a bunch of us now," he said. "You're an Avenger now, you're one of us. You're going to be fussed at by an entire team of superheroes."


Silence passed for a few heartbeats. "So how does it feel to finally be a free man?" Tony asked.

Bucky frowned, looking at him, trying at first to figure out what Tony meant. He hadn't been in the stockade that long, Tony couldn't possibly mean that.

"From Hydra," Tony clarified. "They don't have anything on you anymore. The whole world knows, and quite frankly, we don't give a shit. We know they're liars."

Bucky looked back out over the city. "I hadn't thought of it that way." Then he smiled as that sank in more. "It's nice."

"Good," Tony patted his shoulder. "I'll let you take her off my hands for awhile, I'm going to have a drink and kick back. Feel free to enjoy the sunset."

Bucky nodded, glancing down at the now sleeping kitten - god, she slept a lot - then looked back out over the city from the top floor of his new home.

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