No Protest From Me

by eden22

Summary

The first time Natasha Romanoff meets Steve Rogers he is hanging upside down from a tree. The second time, blood is matting his hair from being hit over the head with a broken bottle. The third time, well, she’s beginning to sense a pattern.
Chapter Notes

I have literally zero familiarity with being a paramedic, how they operate, or what their workspaces are like. Inaccuracies abound. My apologies.

Title and chapter titles taken from Hozier "Angel of Small Death and the Codeine Scene"

A note on casting: while everyone is welcome to picture the characters as they are presented in the MCU in terms of actors/actresses, I have differing casting for several characters in this fic, and will be writing them, and their experiences, as such. Also everyone is queer because, you know, its me.

For Natasha picture MIA.

For Tania, picture Rutina Wesley. Also this.

For Sharon, picture Lupita Nyong'o.

For Peggy, picture Nicole Beharie.

For Maria, picture Stephanie Beatriz.

s/o to slidingkinsey for being the best beta a girl could ask for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Clint,” Natasha tried to go for soft and soothing, but judging by the glare Clint shot her way when he slowly turned his head and cracked his eyes, she may have missed the mark a bit. Clint rolled his head back into its previous position resting on his arms.

“Leave me here to die,” he groaned, his voice rough and deep. She bit down on a smile as she hooked her foot around one of the other chairs, pulling it out. The click of the mug hitting the table as Nat set down the cups of coffee she had been holding managed to rouse Clint, who sat up just enough that he could drink his coffee without spilling it. Nat let the coffee do its work as she slowly sipped on her latte, looking around the waiting room of the dispatch centre with the casual detachment of familiarity. The pale blue walls, faded posters, and board covered in notices for training opportunities, pets for adoption, and caricatures, along with the mismatched tables and chairs, fridge at least as old as her, and coffee machine older than that were probably more familiar to Natasha than the walls of her apartment at this point.

A groan from Clint drew her attention back to her friend, who was now sitting up like an adult, and awake enough to be glaring at Natasha’s Starbucks cup.

“Why do you get Starbucks and I get shitty sludge from The Beast?” The pout would probably be cute on anyone other than a fully grown man. Nat smirked back at him, taking a pointed sip from her latte and sighing with happiness while Clint’s eyes narrowed further. Settling back in her chair and spreading her knees so her boots knocked against the table legs only seemed to annoy him further.
“Well Clint,” she said slowly, adopting the most patronizing tone she could manage, “when you’re an adult you can do things like go home in between shifts, so you can shower, and sleep in a real bed, and, y’know, buy yourself Starbucks from the money you make at your job instead-.” Clint snorted, rolling his eyes, but Natasha just continued, “instead of spending all your money on new video game consoles, playing them all night, and getting zero sleep before your third twelve-hour shift in a row.”

“Hey!” Clint sounded affronted as he rubbed at his eyes, which were still looking more than a little bit bleary and not-all-there, “I got some sleep.”

“Really,” Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah!” Clint leaned back, coffee finished and crossed his arms. Natasha just looked at him, knowing full well that Clint had the same level of resistance to her as a three year old standing over a broken plate had to their mother. “Um,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “like, three hours?”

“Right,” Natasha finished the final sip of her latte, tossing her cup into the bin without looking, a move which had Clint offering his fist for a respectful bump. “I’m driving today.” She stood, the screech of the metal chair against cheap flooring almost covering Clint’s disheartened “Awwww”.

“C’mon Barton,” she called behind her as she headed for the locker room, “get changed. We’re on shift in ten.” The sound of his groan followed her out into the hall, but so did the squeal of his chair being pushed back, so she continued on her way to the women’s locker room.

Despite stopping to briefly chat with Maria, one of the few paramedics Natasha actually considered a friend besides Clint, she still beat her partner to the ambulance, and had already begun checking the ambulance over when Clint came strolling up, a Starbucks cup clutched firmly in his hand. Natasha stopped rummaging through the bandages, losing track of her mental inventory in her surprise.

“Where did you get-” she stopped, squinting at the cup, “wait, is that my cup?!” The spiky writing just peeking above Clint’s fingers seemed suspiciously similar to the one used by the barista to write ‘Nat’ on her cup that morning, a suspicion which was immediately confirmed by Clint’s guilty look. “Ew.” She wrinkled her nose at her friend as she turned back to the bandages, ignoring him as he clambered into the back with her, moving forward to deposit his coffee in the cab before joining her.

“What?” his voice was defensive, “I forgot my travel mug… would you really have me go without coffee?”

“You,” Natasha said somberly, turning and pointing a packaged syringe at her friend, “are a disgusting human being, and-” she continued as he just grinned back at her, “-that is definitely not the compliment you seem to think it is.” Shrugging, Clint continued to look unabashed as he rejoined her in the back of the ambulance. Experience meant they were able to efficiently restock the back of the ambulance with few words exchanged, after which they cleaned the space and began to straighten up the bay. They were almost done when the squawk of the radio at their chests brought them up short.

“Call to all available ambulances, we have a Code 3 at the University, Mary Fields building. Over.” After exchanging a look with Clint, Natasha thumbed the switch on the side of her radio, leaning her head towards her shoulder as she replied.

“Dispatch this is Ambulance 495, on our way. Over.”

“Ambulance 495 someone will meet you outside the building. A student fainted during class, regained consciousness briefly, and then fainted again. Over.”
“Copy that, over.” Natasha signed off as she climbed into the driver's seat of the cab, Clint still scrambling into the passenger’s seat as she started the engine, his indignant protest lost in the loud growl of the engine in the enclosed space. Pulling out of the bay, Natasha reached over and in one smooth movement grabbed Clint’s coffee cup and chucked it out of the window.

“Awww, coffee,” Clint stared mournfully into the rearview mirror as they pulled out onto the main road and Natasha switched on the sirens.

“Shut up Clint.” She glanced over while merging to see him in a full-on pout, arms crossed and lower lip stuck out exaggeratedly as he glared at her, and she couldn’t help but laugh as she pulled onto the highway. “We can stop at Starbucks and I’ll buy you something. But seriously. Trash cup? Gross.” Clint shrugged, grinning.

“Wouldn’t be the grossest thing I’ve ever drank out of.”

“Clint, I really don’t need to hear anymore details of your disgusting lifestyle.”

“Y’know what, that is like the tenth time today you have called me disgusting, and I want you to know that I really don’t appreciate your tone.”

“I don’t appreciate your face.” There was silence in the cab as Natasha exited the highway and Clint stared at her in judgement. She tried to contain her internal wince. Yeah, that definitely hadn’t been one of her snappiest replies.

“Anyways, you are clearly exaggerating. I’ve called you disgusting like, three times.”

“Regardless,” Clint said with a sniff, “it is hurtful and uncalled for.”

“Clint,” Natasha brought back the same patronizing tone she had mustered earlier, “you live like a 18-year-old frat boy. There are more pizza boxes in your apartment than plates.”

“Those are for pizza dog! I have nothing to do with that!”

“Right,” Natasha pulled up outside of the building, spotting the middle-aged woman standing outside of the doors and stopping in front of her, “and I suppose all the cheapest-you-can-find-beer is Lucky’s as well?” Clint’s reply was halted by Natasha throwing on the parking brake, and they grabbed their gear and hopped out, quickly confirming with the woman that she was the instructor who had called the ambulance before following her into the building.

“Aafiya ‘s awake now, but she fainted twice.”

“Is she responsive?” Clint’s voice was all business as they hurried down the hall towards the classroom. The teacher’s affirmative answer followed them into the room where they spotted a young woman lying on the floor, someone’s rolled up hoodie propping her head up as her worried classmates gathered around.

“Alright!” Natasha’s voice was authoritative, and several students hurried to step back even before she had to ask them to. Kneeling next to the girl, Natasha did a quick visual check. “Hey Aafiya, my name is Natasha, this is my partner Clint. Is it okay if I take your pulse?”

At the girl’s nod, Natasha placed two fingers against her wrist, easily finding the pulse point as she continued to take a visual assessment. Pupils looked good on first glance, skin pale and slightly clammy looking, but that was to be expected. Clint was now speaking softly to Aafiya, asking if this had happened before, if she had any conditions that might lead to fainting, when she had last eaten… Natasha half-listened to her responses while keeping a steady count of the heartbeat beneath her fingers. A little fast, but nothing outside of what you would expect from someone who had just fainted. She nodded to Clint, who
suggested to Aafiya that they try to get her sitting. With her permission, Clint and Natasha both placed a firm hand on her back, levering her up into a sitting position. Another student tentatively came up behind them as they were getting Aafiya settled leaning against a chair.

“Um,” the other student pushed her hair behind her ear, “I have some apple juice? I mean, my older sister-”

“That would be great, thanks,” Clint smiles at the student, who blushes as she hands over the bottle. Natasha barely refrains from rolling her eyes as she turns back to Aafiya. Ten minutes later, and both Natasha and Clint feel comfortable with their diagnosis. Aafiya is awake, alert, and her pulse rate had steadied out by the time Natasha checked it again.

“It was probably just stress, lack of sleep, not eating super well… you know, all those regular parts of a student's life,” Clint assured Aafiya and her friends, as well as the instructor, who were all still nervously hovering about. “Just sometimes it gets a bit much for the body, and, well…” he gestured around them. After multiple reassurances from Aafiya that her friends would walk her straight home, as well as promising that she would try to take better care of herself, they were headed back out to the ambulance.

“Students,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes as they climbed into the cab.

“Do you remember what you were like?”

“You never knew me as a student!” Natasha shot Clint a look as she settled into her seat.

“Yeah, but you were the scariest trainee I ever had,” Clint said with a laugh as he buckled himself in, “I was never quite certain if you were going to murder the patient or save them.”

“And I’ve changed so much?” Natasha asked with a raised brow. She’d been getting told by people her whole life how scary she was, but she was perfectly capable of being professional and reassuring thank you very much. With children. And animals. And hey, what was Clint there for if not for dealing with everyone else’s emotions so she could focus on, y’know, actually saving people’s lives.

“Nope. Same Nat I first started riding with,” Clint turned to her with a grin, “those first couple years were fun though, we had that whole student-mentor thing going on…..” Natasha barked out a laugh as she put the vehicle in gear and headed off of the campus.

“Right, right. You, my wise jedi. Me, the untested padawan. Eager to learn from your experience. Thirsty for knowledge.” Natasha gestured grandly, grinning when Clint laughed.

“Thirsty for something alright. Man, to be honest, I’m kind of surprised I remember anything from back then. Luckily I have grown wise in my old age and no longer attempt to keep up with you while drinking…” Natasha flicked a glance at him, “…most of the time.” he amended with a nod towards her. “Huh,” he said, turning his head to look out the window and propping his chin on his hand, “that seems like such a long time ago.”

“Seven years,” Natasha said, turning the wheel. It didn’t really seem real to her, that it had been so long since she had received her paramedic training, since she had that first, terrifying day of work where she had met Clint. Though they hadn’t stayed working at RedRoom Paramedic Services for very long, those first, brutal years were forever seared in her brain as the most stressful and difficult years of her career. Clint had been the one to talk her into leaving with him – she’d been determined to stick it out – but after one too many orders came down to cut corners, save the company money, and ultimately endanger patients, Natasha had had enough and she and Clint had moved to Shield Hospitals. Under Nick Fury, Natasha believed she had become a better paramedic, and she knew she
had been able to provide better patient care. Seven years later, it also hardly seemed real that Clint was the senior paramedic in their partnership, but then again, she still had trouble believing that he hadn’t somehow falsified his birth certificate and wasn’t secretly a teenage boy, so... it was all relative. Flicking on her indicator, Natasha pulled into the parking lot, causing Clint to bolt upright and turn to her with a grin.

She smiled back at him as she pulled into an empty spot outside the Starbucks. “I promised, didn’t I?”

The barista was pleasant but distracted, and Natasha just enjoyed breathing in the scent of freshly ground espresso as they waited for their lattes, the background noises of the coffee shop strangely soothing. She blamed it on the horrifying amount of time she had spent in them studying and pounding back coffee while a student. And okay, the amount of time she had spent in them since graduation as well. Clint was practically bouncing in happiness when he finally got his hands around his latte, some disgustingly sugary concoction that had at least three different syrups in it. Natasha wrapped her hands tighter around her own triple-shot latte as if that would prevent any sort of contamination through proximity.

They were just climbing back into the cab when the radio squaked again.

“Ambulance 495 are you still near the University? Over.” Clint picked up his radio this time as Natasha tucked her coffee away and buckled up, turning the ambulance on.

“Ambulance 495 here, we’re still near the University, over.”

“223 Kitt Avenue. Suspected heart attack, Omar Rezk. His daughter, Nannosa, called it in. Over.”

“Copy that dispatch we are on our way, over.” By the time Clint signed off with dispatch Natasha was already pulling the ambulance out of the parking lot.

“GPS Kitt Avenue,” she said, gesturing towards Clint, “I think I know where it is, but…” Clint grabbed the GPS off the dash, quickly entering the address given to them by dispatch. A dispassionate male British voice filled the cab, informing them that they had to take the next left, unless of course they would prefer to take a scenic tour of the river valley and let their patient die. Natasha glanced down at the GPS in annoyance, before looking back up at Clint, who shrugged.

“Tony,” he offered in explanation, and Natasha rolled her eyes in annoyance. Tony Stark was another one of the paramedics, a genius engineer who had decided he didn’t have enough excitement in his life so he was going to become a paramedic. Or something. To be honest, Natasha preferred not to talk to Tony to much. It really reduced the chances of her punching him in the face. Case in point: for the last couple of months Tony had been periodically reprogramming the standard ambulance GPS units with an AI he had created named JARVIS. Until today 495 had been spared Tony’s meddling, but it looked like his desire to show off and impose his creations upon everyone else had finally won out over his fear of Natasha smashing his face in.

Great.

The house at 223 Kitt Avenue was a small bungalow, old but well cared for, with a beautiful garden out front. As they pulled up, a young woman, dark black hair plaited away from her face, ran out of the house, gesturing for them to follow her while speaking a rapid stream of Arabic mixed with English. She led them into the living room, where a much older man was sitting, face ashen. Even as he clutched at his chest, however, he attempted to wave them off.

“I am fine,” he said, voice heavily accented and shaky, “Nannosa worries for nothing. I am fine.” He
turned to look at his daughter, speaking sharply in Arabic. The young woman snapped back at her father in the same language.

“If you don’t mind, since we’re here anyways, I’ll just have a look at you,” Natasha said, electing to ignore the unfamiliar language, voice firm even as her hands gently pressed him back to the couch as Clint pulled out the gear. Seeing Clint had it in hand, she stood back up to address Nannosa, who was hovering nervously beside Clint.

“When did his symptoms first start?” Nannosa startled, looking up at Natasha with wide eyes before visibly pulling herself together.

“He’s been complaining about his pains for a couple weeks but then an hour ago… he got much much worse.” As Natasha nodded she felt a tug on her hand, and looked down to see Omar looking up at her, voice trembling as he spoke.

“Not complaining. No pains.” Nannosa clicked her tongue against her teeth, bringing Natasha’s attention back up to her. She was shaking her head.

“He does not complain,” she explained, “but I see. He is hurting.” Natasha nodded as Clint stood back up.

“Alright sir, it seems like you’ve had a cardiac episode. I’d like to take you back to the hospital for further tests if that’s alright with you?” Clint asked, keeping eye contact with the old man.

“No,” Omar said nearly at the same time that his daughter said “yes”. The two glared at each other, and Natasha and Clint shared a glance before heading back out to the ambulance to grab the stretcher, leaving Nannosa to convince her father to go to the hospital. When they returned to the house it was to find both father and daughter wearing identical angry expressions, but with Omar willing to let them help him onto the stretcher, albeit begrudgingly.

“Alright,” Natasha said, climbing into the front seat while Clint finished securing the Rezks in the back, “everyone set?”

“I still do not think hospital necessary,” Omar grumbled and Natasha rolled her eyes as she turned over the engine to the sound of Nannosa ranting at her father in Arabic.

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“Hey,” Natasha says to Clint hours later, “what does this look like to you?” They’d just returned from their third call of the day, were entering hour eleven of their shift, and Natasha was officially more than ready to call it a day. If she even smells anymore coffee at this point, she’s going to vomit, and is so bored she might vomit anyways. As it is, she and Clint were obsessively going over their ambulance once again, making sure it was as spotless and well-stocked as humanly possible, resulting in her current position: one leg braced against the edge of the stretcher, the other propped up against the opposite side of the ambulance as she tried to get as close as possible to the mysterious stain on the ceiling. It was times like this that she really wished she was a couple of inches taller. Clint peered up from where he was standing in front of her, before offering up a shrug.

“I can’t even tell what colour that is,” he said with a raised brow, before turning back to his perusal of their supply cabinets, “do you think we need more number threes?,” he asked, holding up a handful of large gauze pads. Natasha gave the pads in his hands a considering look, then shrugged.

“Can never have too many,” Clint nodded decisively before shimmying under her spread legs, out into the bay, and Natasha returned her attention to the spot on the ceiling. She squinted at it, trying to
will herself to be a bit taller, before slumping in defeat.

“Whatever it is, it’s going to have to get cleaned off,” Clint points out, annoyingly reasonable as he clambered back into the back of the ambulance.

“It’s easier to clean if you know what it is, because then you know what to use to clean it with,” Natasha said, voice huffy before smiling down at Clint when he laughed at her, “besides,” she continued, looking back up, “I’m pretty sure it’s blood.”

“It does have that classic dried and disgusting blood look,” Clint agreed with a glance upwards, before handing her the spray bottle and cloth without being asked. Natasha frowned as she sprayed the spot and then started scrubbing, trying to think when they could have gotten blood sprayed on the ceiling… it had been a pretty sedate week after all, no one screaming and spraying blood everywhere. Clint snapped his fingers, and when Natasha looked down, he was pointing excitedly at her.

“That old lady, what was her name?!” Natasha lit up, remembering the very argumentative and aggressive elderly woman who they had picked up two days ago. Despite bleeding heavily from a rather large gash in her arm, the woman had spend the entire ride arguing with them that she was fine, getting blood everywhere in her attempts to stand up in her quest to ‘just go home and sleep it off, I’ll be right as rain in the morning dearie, just you wait!’ . She nodded, grinning down at Clint.

“Ms. Beal,” she said, and Clint grinned in response, repeating the name with a shake of his head before turning back to their supply cabinet, attempting to jam the extra pads he had grabbed into the drawer. One of Natasha’s favourite parts of her friendship with Clint was the fact that they often thought the same, their synchronicity serving them well in diagnosis, treatment, and transportation of patients. Plus they always seemed to know exactly when the other needed some more coffee, a very important characteristic in a partner.

A few more spritzes and swipes of the cloth and the spot had officially disappeared from the ceiling, allowing Natasha to finally hop down from her precarious position. Jumping out of the back of the ambulance, she turned back around to survey their workspace, watching with some amusement as Clint struggled to close the drawer now stuffed to bursting with gauze pads. With a grunt, he finally managed to push it shut, sighing with happiness as he swung down to stand next to her.

“Just watch,” Natasha said, “next call we’ll need a gauze pad and we won’t be able to get the drawer open,”

“Hey,” Clint said, affronted, “you said we needed more. In fact, I believe you said that you can never have too many.” Natasha shrugged and grinned.

“Maybe I was wrong.” Clint just snorted in reply, mumbling something under his breath that Natasha didn’t quite catch, but was sure was rude, and probably a comment on her inability to admit to the (very, very rare) occasion when she was wrong about something. Electing to ignore her friend, she turned back to her inspection of the ambulance, Clint joining her in scanning the inside of the large vehicle.

“I think it’s all good,” she said last, hesitant.

“Yeah,” Clint agreed with a sigh, “now what?” Natasha looked around the bay. Everything in here was also spotless and stocked. Clearly it had been a slow day for everyone, not just her and Clint.

“Guess we’ll just go hang out,” she glanced down at the men’s wristwatch that she wore on the inside of her left wrist, “only half an hour left anyways.”
“Oh thank god,” Clint said, his entire body slumping as he headed towards the waiting room ahead of her, “I am going to sleep for two days straight.”

“You can’t do that,” Natasha teased “If you do that who’s ass am I supposed to kick on Call of Duty? You said I’m not allowed to play on Live anymore.”

“You’re not,” Clint said as they headed down the hall, “you keep making twelve year old boys cry. Its cyber bullying.”

“They tell me to make me a sandwich, they deserve it,” Natasha said cheerfully as they pushed open the door to the room.

“Hey guys!” Clint called out to the room at large, choosing to ignore that remark, and the paramedics in the room looked up. Tony and Rhodey barely glanced up from their conversation, Tony half-heartedly waving a hand in their direction, while Rhodey offered a more polite ‘hello’ before turning back to what seemed to be a very intense discussion about whether or not they could make their ambulance go faster without killing themselves or their patients. Sharon was also in the room, and Natasha waved hello to her, trying to hide her frown when she saw Rumlow was also with her.

Brock Rumlow had been in the same class as Natasha, and she had hated him from the moment they met, when he looked her up and down before declaring that ‘this wasn’t nursing school darling, that’s in the other building’. He had hated her in return after she had smiled non-committedly at him, before proceeding to consistently outperform him in every aspect of their training. The only downside to her moving to Sheild, to be honest, was finding him working there. Natasha was unable to stop herself from frowning when she saw how tense Sharon was holding herself as Brock continued to talk at her, ignoring her and Clint’s entrance. Honestly, a nicer person couldn't have been paired with a worse person, and though Sharon did her best, she had confessed to Natasha once after a couple of glasses of wine at her apartment that she frequently fantasized about shoving the suction catheter up his nose (a pronouncement that had resulting in Natasha snorting into her wine in a rather undignified manner). Mouthing ‘give me a second’ at Sharon, she turned her attention back to Tony and Rhodey, marching up to their table and planting her hands on her hips.

“The fuck Stark,” she bit out, and Tony looked up, eyes wide with an expression of alarm that Natasha took no small measure of satisfaction in. She could hear Clint sigh behind her, but ignored him. “What the fuck did you do to my rig?” Tony blinked before breaking into a grin, while Rhodey gave his partner an incredulous look, scootching his chair away from his friend.

“Oh! That! Isn’t that cool? Did you use him? JARVIS is a fully functional AI you know, calculates traffic and weather factors in real time, tracks the other rigs within the system to create the optimal-”

“You messed with my rig,” she repeated, voice cold, and she could see Tony beginning to register that he might have mistepped.

“Um, yeah, but it needed to be integrated,” he glanced to Rhodey for help, who just shook his head, “I mean, it was part of, it was approved for everyone, for an upgrade…” he trailed off as Natasha narrowed her eyes at him. Leaning forward, she poked him in the chest.

“Don’t fuck with my rig,” she hissed, before turning around and heading over to Sharon. She bit back on a smile when she heard Rhodey beginning to scold Tony behind her, who was already indignantly denying any wrongdoing. Honestly, she wasn’t that annoyed (though being asked first would have been nice). She just really, really enjoyed fucking with Tony Stark.

Passing Clint, Natasha grabbed his arm, pulling him towards Sharon and Rumlow, and ignoring his put-upon sigh. It would be too cruel to leave Sharon on her own with Rumlow, especially since she
had to spend most of her shifts alone with him already.

“Hey,” Natasha greeted as she sat down, pulling an unwilling Clint down with her, “how’s it going?” Sharon shot her a grateful smile.

“Hey Natasha, Clint,” Sharon greeted them both, while Rumlow just shot them both an annoyed glare, accompanied by a grunt that might have been considered a greeting, “you guys been here long?”

“Almost twelve hours,” Clint replied, stretching and settling into his seat until Natasha was amazed he was still remaining sitting and hadn’t just slithered to the floor (or she would be, if she hadn’t seen him in a million ridiculous and seemingly impossible positions over the years).

“You?” Natasha asked, and Sharon gave her a smile that was more like a wince.


“Well are we still on for tomorrow night?” Sharon gave her a real smile at that.

“Of course!”

“Wait, what’s happening tomorrow night?” Clint shot up, instantly upset at the thought of being left out, “why am I not invited?” At least you didn’t have to worry about Clint not telling you if he felt left out, Natasha thought, rolling her eyes. Rumlow just continued to look at them like they were something unidentifiable but disgusting he’d found on the bottom of his shoe.

“Girls night out,” Sharon responded cheerfully. Clint’s mouth opened to reply and-

“No,” Natasha interjected before Clint had the chance to say anything, “you are not invited.” Clint pouted for a second but quickly perked up.

“Well hey, that’s fine, then I won’t have to leave my building at all.” Natasha rolled her eyes at him again.

“You just don’t like putting on clothes,” she pointed out, and Clint grinned at her.

“Ugh,” they all turned towards Rumlow, who stood up, nose wrinkled in disgust, “whatever. Carter, let’s go check the ambulance.” Sharon shot them an apologetic look and rolled her eyes as she stood and followed her partner from the room.

“So,” Clint stretched his legs out to rest on Rumlow’s recently vacated seat, “who’s all coming to girl’s night?”

“Sharon, Pepper, Maria, Peggy, Angie, and Tania.” Natasha replied, ticking the names off her fingers. Pepper and Maria worked with them as well, and Natasha counted them amongst her few friends, while Peggy was Sharon’s cousin and an FBI profiler (a fact that Clint was endlessly fascinated by) and Angie, her girlfriend, was a nurse at one of the city’s hospitals. Tania only vaguely knew other woman, being Natasha’s friend from childhood, and not having many opportunities to get to know the other paramedics over the last couple of years.

There was a fairly large cohort of paramedics operating out of their dispatch centre, however, the shifts were arranged in such a way that, though she had been there seven years, Natasha didn’t know most of them. Shifts were sometimes traded or shifted, but they generally stayed the same, and aside from people leaving or new hires, you would typically run into the same few paramedics over and
over again. Natasha, never comfortable making new friends, was thankful for this, as it had allowed her to slowly develop relationships with her coworkers without feeling the pressure of social expectations around the growth of friendships. Five years in, Maria, Sharon, and Rhodey had become good friends, while Tony and Pepper were the kind of people she wouldn’t hesitate to invite to a barbeque.

Well, maybe Tony, but that was mostly due to his and Clint’s tendency towards pyrotechnics whenever they got together.

“Y’all gonna get white girl wasted?” Clint asked, grinning at her with his head lolling over the back of his chair, and she reached over to smack his shoulder, “awww,” he whined, pouting as he rubbed at his arm.

“Nah, we’re gonna drink like soccer moms,” Natasha said with a grin, to which Clint returned:

“Two bottles of wine each and a handful of valium?” Natasha barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, exactly.”

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Natasha’s key sounded loud in the empty space of the stairwell. The building, an old brownstone home refurbished into four apartments, was in one of the older and poorer neighborhoods of the city, which was just the way Natasha liked it. Her childhood had left her with a strongly ingrained instinct towards frugality, alongside a deep distrust for wealth and the wealthy. The building was in relatively good shape despite its age, and Natasha was quite fond of how old it was, the squeak of the floorboards and the sputter of the tap when you first turned it on.

“Hey Tash,” a cheerful voice came from behind her, and Natasha turned away from her door to the door of the apartment across from hers to see her neighbor standing in her entryway. Darcy Lewis was a grad student who had moved into the apartment a couple years previous, and was also the only person in the world who got away with calling Natasha ‘Tash’.

“Hey Darcy,” Natasha returned with a tired smile, and Darcy’s brow immediately furrowed.

“Sorry,” she said, “you just getting off work?” Natasha nodded with a soft laugh.

“Yeah just finished up a twelve hour shift.”

“Shit,” Darcy replied, “I’ll leave you alone then. Just wanted to let you know that Jane and Thor wanted to invite you over to dinner sometime this week.”

“Not you?” Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“Meh,” Darcy replied with a shrug, and Natasha laughed in response.

“I’ll let you guys know,” she promised, “see you later Darce.”

“Later Tash!” Darcy responded cheerfully before disappearing back into her own apartment.

Stepping into her own apartment, Natasha flicked on the light switch by the entryway, bending to carefully set her shoes on the small shoe rack by the door. Though she would probably deny it if outright asked, another reason Natasha liked her building was her neighbors. With only four apartments in the building, they all knew each other quite well, creating a tiny community within the building. Darcy, Jane, and Thor were across the hall from her while Skye, her girlfriend Jemma, and
Bruce occupied the two upstairs apartments. Darcy was a graduate student who, as she had confessed to Natasha one beer-filled night on patio on the roof of the building, had made it her mission to seduce her internship supervisor and the supervisor’s boyfriend from the moment she met them. It had obviously worked out for her, since she was now living with them. Jane did something involving physics that made Natasha’s head spin, while Thor was the manager for the local MEC. Skye was much less open about her life story than Darcy, and Natasha heavily suspected it was because she’d had a less than pleasant time coming out as trans as a teenager. When Skye had told Natasha her eyes were wary and defiant in the guarded defense of someone who had spent her whole life being shit on for who she was. Natasha’s sedate response had seemed to put Skye at ease however, and though neither woman would ever be the most open of people, Natasha thought they were friends.

Skye’s girlfriend Jemma, on the other hand, was a British citizen in the states for her second PhD (bio-chem, which was slightly more comprehensible to Natasha than Jane’s physics, but was still far beyond her), and was very candid when talking about her life. Natasha had heard all about Jemma’s best friend, Fitz, who was studying with her, her childhood in England, and her professors, as well as having been forced to sit through the nauseatingly sweet story of how Jemma had met Skye more times than she cared to mention (it involved Skye almost getting arrested and Jemma being her white knight and Natasha had stopped smothering her groan every time it came up again). Bruce, the final resident of their building, was even more of a mystery than Skye. The man, whose apartment was located above Darcy, Jane, and Thor’s, was quiet and reclusive, but was very pleasant whenever he interacted with the other residents. Going by his tattoos, Natasha was pretty sure he was an ex-con, but that was about all she (or anyone else in the building, including the incredibly nosy Darcy) had been able to find out. He kept odd hours, and did who-knew-what for a living. All-in-all, it was a nice building to live in, and Natasha genuinely liked her neighbors. To be honest, the only reason any of them bothered locking their actual apartment doors was because the main door could be a bit dodgy in terms of actually locking. Another thing that their landlord had said he’d fix.

Two years ago.

Moving away from the door, Natasha entered the apartment proper. Her living room was directly off of the entryway, and she slid onto her couch with a grateful sigh, knowing she was going to have to get up and make herself dinner in a few moments, but reveling in the feeling of her body stretching and settling into the warm, soft fabric. The couch had been a great find in a thrift shop a couple of blocks away, and her and Clint had spent a very sweaty afternoon several years ago hauling it to her apartment. In fact, the only furniture in her apartment that she had bought new was her bed and mattress, a rare splurge. Other than that the apartment was filled with mismatched furniture found at various thrift shops and estate sales. Clint thought it was kind of creepy to buy stuff that had belonged to dead people, but Natasha kind of liked the idea of other people having lived their lives using the furniture and decorations now filling her apartment. Besides the couch, the living room had a steamer trunk doubling as her coffee table, a large flatscreen, various consoles tucked neatly beneath it, bookshelves, and, where they failed, books piled up in corners and on stools. Other than the piles of books, the apartment was faultlessly neat. Clint often commented on what he called her ‘stick-up-the-ass dedication to neatness’ when he visited, but she just told him that compared to his place, a garbage dump would look neat, and he knew better than to push her on the subject.

With a sigh, Natasha tucked her chin into her chest, looking in the direction of her kitchen. She was pretty sure that the only thing left in her fridge besides mustard and vodka was a half-eaten takeaway container of pho that she was certain was getting close to gaining sentience. She stretched, feeling the ache in her joints as she debated the relative merits of walking all the way to the grocery store over just calling in. She had decided to cut back on the takeaway when Sudarat at Ruan Siam had called her last week because she “hadn’t heard from Natasha in a while and wanted to make sure she was doing okay”. On the other hand, pad thai. Rolling her eyes at herself, Natasha raised her ass off the
couch just enough to slide her phone out from underneath her, dialing from memory.

“Hey Sudarat, it’s Natasha… good, how are you?”

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Natasha was woken by sunlight streaming bright and hot across her face, and fumbled for her phone on her side table, blearily blinking at it before groaning and rolling onto her back, flinging her arm across her face. 8:12. She’d slept for nearly ten hours. After a couple minutes of trying to talk herself into getting up, she finally rolled out of bed, stumbling into the bathroom, letting the freezing cold water wake her up with a jolt. One day the landlord would fix the hot water heater. Probably not today. Definitely not for the last four months. Shivering slightly, but already aware that today was going to be another hot day, she padded back into her bedroom, hair wrapped up in a towel as she pulled out her gym bag, debating between changing now or changing at the gym before finally settling on pulling on her gear now, tucking her pads back into the bag, along with her ipod, phone, and wallet. After a moment’s thought, she also grabbed a tank top and pair of short-shorts. Gathering her hair up into a hasty ponytail, she stopped in her kitchen, sighing at the black bananas sitting on her counter before sweeping them into the trash and grabbing an apple. She really, really need to go to the shop after the gym.

Locking her door after her, she bounced down the front steps of the building, wrinkling her nose at the feeling of her wet hair hitting the back of her neck, but aware that it would dry by the time she got to the gym. It already felt like it was thirty degrees. Definitely going to be a hot one. Again. She walked the block and a half to the nearest subway station, taking it only a couple stops before getting off. Her favourite gym, and the only one she had a full-time membership at, rather than a drop-in pass, was largely focused on a variety of martial arts, but also included boxing facilities and more sedate weight training equipment and treadmills. After a quick run on the treadmill to warm up, she headed to the sparring area, smiling when she saw Cataleya was already warming up. Though she and the tall Colombian woman never made any official plans to meet up and spar, they still managed to end up at the gym at the same time frequently. Natasha didn’t know exactly what Cataleya did; in fact she knew very little about the woman despite knowing her for five years. However, she did know that Cataleya was an amazing fighter, and a great sparring partner, and, to be honest, Natasha didn’t really need anything else from her.

Wrapping her hands and dropping her water bottle next to the matt, Natasha stepped up to Cataleya, who straightened up from her stretch. The two women exchanged quick greetings, before stepping back into a starting position. Cataleya clearly wasn’t in the mood to talk today, which was fine with Natasha. Her and Cataleya had discovered early on that they were both trained in a wide variety of fighting styles, and while they would occasionally pick a method and stick to it, they generally just went at each other with everything they had. Cataleya took a slow step to the left, and Natasha mirrored the movement, stepping to the right as they began to slowly circle each other. Natasha watched carefully for any twitch or tensing of the muscles that would give away Cataleya’s first move, while also considering her own first move. Finally, she took a quick step forward, pivoting into a kick, snapping her foot forward and smiling slightly when she felt the satisfying impact of Cataleya’s arm deflecting her kick, before they were off in earnest, and Natasha lost all clear thought to the instant, half-instinctual reactions of the fight.

By the time they finished, both women were out of breath and covered with a sheen of sweat. Stumbling towards the edge of the mat, Natasha picked up her water bottle, quickly draining nearly the entire bottle, throat tipped back as she let the cold liquid pour into her. Catching the eye of Cataleya, who was headed past Natasha towards the exit, she nodded a goodbye and smiled at the other woman. They would occasionally stick around to chat to each other through their cooldowns, and had even gone for post-workout smoothies together a couple times, but their relationship was...
largely limited to the mat, an arrangement that both women were more than satisfied with. She quickly ran through her cooldown on her own, finishing her first water bottle and a second before hopping into the shower once again, enjoying the luxury of the hot water and allowing herself to linger this time, letting the water pound down on her sore muscles before finally stepping out with a sigh. Dressing quickly she pulled back on her underwear, followed by the shorts and tank top she had grabbed earlier, foregoing a bra after a moment’s consideration. The shorts were plain grey sweats, but the tank was one of her favourites, a black racerback with ‘no one asked for your fucking sexist opinion’ in white block letters across the front.

What? It wasn’t like she wanted strangers talking to her anyways.

Exiting the shower stall, Natasha paused in front of the mirror in the changing room, glaring slightly at her reflection. Her eyes were surrounded by purple circles that she swore had appeared her first day as a paramedic and hadn’t left since, not helped by the traces of mascara smudged under them from the day before. Reaching up, she tugged at the end of her hair, straightening the curl her hair had already begun to dry into before releasing. The shorter haircut had been something Maria had talked her into a couple of months ago, and she still wasn’t sure how she felt about it. For the most part she had also been leaving her curls in their natural state, something else she wasn’t really used to. It was still quite long, long enough to easily pull into a ponytail, but was still much shorter than it had been since… well, probably since she had been in school. All in all, though it wasn’t much of a change in general it was still quite different from the long straight hair she had had since high school. Pressing it flat against her head by the part, she frowned at the black roots beginning to show before grabbing some mousse from her bag and scrunching it into her hair.

Leaning forward, Natasha checked her teeth before swinging her gym bag up onto her shoulder and heading back out into the early morning heat. A quick stop at a nearby cafe for a latte (triple shot, ignoring the judgemental eyebrow of the barista) and a muffin and she was back on the train headed back to her apartment, her day off stretching empty before her. It was only - she checked her phone - 11am, and she wasn’t supposed to meet the girls at the bar until 7, though she was pretty sure she was going to be able to talk Tania into coming over and having a couple of shots with her in advance of going to the bar. Natasha had always had trouble paying for the incredibly expensive drinks they served at the bars in the city when she had perfectly good, and perfectly cheap, vodka sitting at home.

The thought of the vodka in her fridge reminded her of lack of anything other than said vodka in her fridge, and, sighing, she resigned herself to going to the grocery store. Turning the corner to the brownstone, she slowed down before coming to a stop at the sight of Skye sitting on the front steps. The young woman was wearing a bikini top, shorts, sunglasses, and had her long black hair piled up in a bun on top of her head. She had a joint held between her lips as she typed away on her laptop, a cup full of lemonade, dripping condensation onto the steps next to her. She looked up from her laptop at the sound of Natasha’s footsteps, smiling when she saw the other woman approaching her.

“Hey Natasha,” she greeted, “how’s it going?”

“Good, just finished at the gym,” Natasha replied, “how’s your morning?” Skye shrugged.

“Alright, just catching up on some work,”

“Cheating spouse?” Natasha asked, raising a brow. Skye was a private investigator, and was always good for an entertaining story or two about her clients. Natasha also suspected that Skye did some hacking if not for her PI business, then just for fun, as both she and Jemma had heavily hinted at it before, but that wasn’t something she was ever going to ask the young woman about. People’s business was their own.
“Nah, this lady thinks her neighbor is poisoning her cat,” Natasha frowned at the thought of someone hurting an animal.

“Are they?”

“I don’t think so,” Skye looked up at Natasha, grinning, “but I’m spending a couple extra days checking. Just in case.”

“Rich?” Natasha asked, and Skye’s smile widened.

“Nailed it,” Natasha laughed and knocked her fist against the other woman’s. Distrust and dislike for the wealthy was something she and Skye had bonded over early on, and Natasha had been delighted to find out that Skye often dragged out investigations when they were for wealthy clients.

“Alright, I gotta go to the shop, you want anything?” Skye thought about it for a second.

“Chips? Um, just like wavy Lays or whatever?”

“You got it,” Natasha nodded and then headed up the steps past Skye.

Entering her apartment, Natasha threw her gym bag back into her room, pulling out her wallet and phone and tucking them into her pockets before picking up her grocery bags and her favourite pair of aviators, heading back out as quickly as she had arrived. Skye didn’t look up from her computer as Natasha passed by her, and she shook her head fondly as she hurried away from the building. The shop was only a block and a half away from her apartment, another factor that had attracted her to the building. She didn’t linger, easily moving around the aisles with a practiced familiarity, grabbing all of the staples - frozen pizza, pasta, coffee, fruit, and chips, because no matter how much she ragged on Clint for eating like a teenager living on his own for the first time, she knew she wasn’t really any better. Not that she would ever admit that to him. He would be unbearable. The self-checkout, possibly one of Natasha’s favourite modern inventions, gave her the perfect excuse to not have to talk to anyone else as she left the shop, heavy bags slung over her shoulder with ease.

Though she hadn’t been gone long, Skye was gone from the front steps by the time she got back from the shop so, after leaving her bags just inside her door, she grabbed the bag of chips and headed up the stairs. Knocking at the door, she only had to wait a moment before Jemma was opening the door with a grin.

“All right Natasha?” Natasha held up the bag of chips.

“Chips for Skye,” she replied with a smile, and Jemma reached out to take them from her.

“Aw, thanks! You’re such a sweetheart.” Natasha shrugged. “I was going out anyways.” She turned to head back down the stairs, but was stopped by Jemma calling after her, “You going to Darcy, Jane, and Thor’s thing later this week?” Natasha turned around on the stairs.

“Thing? It’s a thing now?” Jemma laughed.

“Well, you know Darcy.” Natasha nodded. That was honestly all the explanation needed.

“If I’m not on shift I’ll definitely be there.”

“Great!” Jemma waved goodbye, and Natasha continued her journey down the stairs.

Back in her apartment, she took her time putting away her groceries, before microwaving a bowl of popcorn and throwing herself down in front of her television. Turning on her xBox and grabbing her
“Hey Clint,” she said, seeing he was already online.

“Hey Nat,” he said, voice rough, and she smiled, eating popcorn while she waited for his current campaign to finish so she could join.

“How’s your day off going?” she asked around a mouthful of buttery popcorn.

“Well I just woke up so…” Natasha leaned over to check her phone, sitting on the coffee table, laughing.

“It’s almost one pm!”

“Your point being?” Clint asked, voice wry, pausing before continuing, “You’ve probably been out to the gym and wrote a novel and fucking repainted your entire house already, haven’t you?” and Natasha laughs again.

“I mean…” she says, smile in her voice, “oh!” she sits up as Clint’s current campaign finishes, and she joins his team. “Alright assholes,” she says to the group, “let’s do this.”

“Fuck yeah!” Clint replies, and they’re off.

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At quarter to six Natasha was disturbed by the buzz of her door, and, sighing, abandoned her glaring contest with her closet to answer the door, snagging her top off the bed on her way out of the room. She had said goodbye to Clint about two hours earlier, and had spent the time since idly checking her emails, sending Tania a text reading ‘6pm, vodka, mine’, eating one of the frozen pizzas she had bought that morning, and dicking around on Pinterest. She had lost track of the time somewhat, and was surprised to find it was already 5:30 and she was still in her shorts and tank top. Stripping to her underwear, she had gotten as far as her closet before realizing she had no idea what she wanted to wear that night. When the buzzer broke through the stillness of her apartment, she was deep in debate with herself over the relative merits of a dress or pants, and heels or boots. Pulling open the door she was unsurprised to find Tania leaning casually against the doorjamb, early as usual. Natasha greeted her friend, and Tania held up a bottle of juice as she walked past Natasha into the apartment.

“I bought mix,” Tania’s voice was husky, largely thanks to her pack-a-day habit that Natasha heavily disapproved of but no longer commented on. She headed into the kitchen while Natasha disappeared back into her room. She had resumed her former position, hands on hips and glaring into her closet when she heard Tania enter the room behind her, setting down the vodka, juice, and two glasses on top of Natasha’s dresser and pouring herself a cranberry vodka, and straight vodka for Natasha. Tania wrinkled her nose as Natasha raised her cup to her lips after clinking their glasses together.

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“I still don’t understand how you drink that straight,” she said, and Natasha shrugged.

“I’m just too-”

“-fucking hardcore for me, yeah yeah,” Tania finished, the old standby response making the women smile at each other. Tania looked as amazing as she always did, long white braids partially piled up on top of her head in a bun, the rest hanging down past her shoulders. She was wearing a sparkly silver oversized button-up shirt that emphasized how dark her skin was, and staggeringly high heels.

“You look amazing,” Natasha said, turning back to her own choices with a sigh, “but then you always look fucking gorgeous.”
“Oh fuck off,” Tania stood and walked over to where Natasha was standing, nudging her shoulder against Natasha’s. The two women looked into the closet in silence for a moment.

“It’s too hot for this shit,” Natasha finally declared before heading in and beginning to dig through her clothes. Tania laughed, heading back to sit on Natasha’s bed, picking her glass back up and taking a drink.

“So how was your day?” she pitched her voice to carry out of the closet into the bedroom, and Tania sighed in response.

“Okay I guess, work was whatever, DeAngelo is a fucking prick,” Tania worked at a strip club downtown, and Natasha was very familiar with her various rants about the club management and the stupid fees she had to pay to work. Her boss, a jackass named Antonio DeAngelo, was currently pissed off at Tania, which had resulted in her being given only day shifts, majorly increasing the volume and vitriol of Tania’s rants. “I stopped by The Box after work though, and one of my drawings sold, so that was nice!”

“Nice?” Natasha stuck her head out of the closet, “are you fucking kidding me? That’s awesome!” Tania shrugged and Natasha shook her head at her friend, moving back inside the closet. She had always been in awe of Tania’s artistic abilities, and though she herself had never been particularly artistic, a childhood of being dragged to museums and presented with drawings from Tania had gifted her with a healthy appreciation for art and good artists. And Tania was good, really good, no matter what she herself might have to say about the matter.

“Okay, how about this?” Natasha emerged from the closet dressed in tight fitting, high waisted black shorts, a loose white tee-shirt tucked sloppily into the shorts, and a large red button up shirt left open overtop, a pair of beat up black boots held in her hand. Tania hummed as she looked Natasha up and down.

“Jewlery?” she asked, and Natasha held up a finger as she headed over to the hooks by the closet that held a collection of necklaces, scarves, and other mismatched accessories. Setting down the boots, she grabbed a couple of long necklaces and pulled them over her head, flipping her loose curls out from under them before turning back to Tania, arms held out.

“Nice,” Tania pronounced with a nod of approval, and Natasha smiled at her friend, heading over to the mirror on her dresser and her collection of makeup, including a burgundy red lipstick that matched the colour of the button up shirt. Leaning over, she took another drink before beginning to carefully apply eyeshadow.

“How about Chrissy? How’re things going with her?” Natasha asked, and Tania responded with another sigh, louder than the first, forcing Natasha to bite down on a smile. Tania’s relationships were always, bar none, drama-fuelled angst fests that Tania absolutely revelled in, no matter how hard she denied it.

“Ugh. Whatever.” Natasha raised an eyebrow, meeting Tania’s eyes through the mirror.

“How about Chrissy? How’re things going with her?” Natasha asked, and Tania responded with another sigh, louder than the first, forcing Natasha to bite down on a smile. Tania’s relationships were always, bar none, drama-fuelled angst fests that Tania absolutely revelled in, no matter how hard she denied it.

“Whatever? I thought things were going good,” Natasha knew that didn’t really mean anything when it came to Tania’s girlfriends, but the script for this conversation had been written long ago, and it was with the comfortable ease of old friendship that she slipped into her role.

“They were... but then she started getting all weird and jealous about me hanging out with you.”

“With me?” Natasha turned around to meet Tania’s eyes again. It wouldn’t be the first time that one of Tania’s girlfriends picked her relationship with Natasha as a point of contention, and it probably
wouldn’t be the last, but that didn’t make it any less comprehensible to Natasha every time it happened. Her and Tania were sisters in every way except genetics. Jealousy over that was just so… pointless.

“Yeah,” Tania sighed, “and then it turned into this whole big thing with her accusing me of fucking guys at the club—” Natasha winced, “—never mind that I’ve told her over and over I’m a lesbian, no, having had sex with guys in the past apparently means that I could revert at any time!” Natasha laughed at the grumpy expression on Tania’s face, which turned into a pout when she turned back to her friend.

“I mean, fair enough,” Natasha replied, finishing her drink with a single large swallow before jumping over to Tania on the bed, bouncing down next to her so their shoulders touched, “you are a notorious slut.” Tania snorted, elbowing Natasha in the ribs.

“Look who is talking!”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that the majority of my sexual encounters were bought and paid for, thank you very much, unlike you, who just shoves her vagina at any nearby lesbian.” The friends mock-glared at each other for a long moment before both bursting into laughter. When their laughter finally faded, both women spent a moment staring at the ceiling in contemplative silence.

“I’m sorry,” Natasha finally said softly, and she felt Tania shrug.

“It happens.”

“Yeah, but it shouldn’t. It shouldn’t happen to you.” Natasha rolled her head to meet her friend’s eyes. “You deserve so much better.” Tania bit her lip, uncomfortable with the determination in Natasha’s declaration, though she eventually nodded her head in agreement, looking back up at the ceiling.

“We should probably go,” Natasha finally said, standing and walking to where her phone was on her dresser and checking the time, “yeah, we should definitely go.” Tania stood up, looking at the screen of Natasha’s phone.

“Yeah, we should,” she looked up, meeting Natasha’s eyes, “shots before we leave?”

“Shots before we leave.” Natasha grinned.

----------

The bar was pretty quiet when they arrived, given that it was a weeknight, but with enough people to give it a warm blanket of conversation above the music. She and Tania had ended up showing up a bit late, with the subway running behind schedule, and were immediately hailed upon their arrival by Peggy kneeling up on her chair and waving at them. Weaving their way through the tables, they joined Sharon, Pepper, Maria, Peggy, and Angie at the corner table. The usual noise of chairs being scraped back and greetings being exchanged filled the corner for a moment, before Tania and Natasha were finally seated with the other women, Sharon next to Natasha and Pepper on Tania’s other side.

“Glad you could make it,” Maria said from across the table, sarcasm heavy in her voice.

“Ah, fuck you Hill,” Natasha replied with a smile.

“Oh please,” Pepper rejoined, gesturing around at the other women, “everyone else here worked today and we all showed up on time.” Natasha rolled her eyes.
“Brag about it,” she replied, then felt a hand on her arm, and looked over to see Tania gesturing towards the bar.

“I’m going to get a drink,” the question was clear in her voice.

“Vodka,” Natasha replied, and Tania rolled her eyes but stood up. Natasha turned to Sharon.

“How was the rest of your shift yesterday?” Sharon rolled her eyes.

“Terrible. Brock had a fit about us not having enough gloves, then was convinced that, somehow, the sterile 4 x 4s had been contaminated, and made me throw them all out.” Natasha wrinkled her nose in sympathy.

“Any interesting calls at least?” Sharon shrugged, running a hand over her short hair as she thought back to the previous day.

“One kid who accidentally dropped a kettle full of boiling water on himself, which was not fun, let me tell you. And then a couple of false alarms, one maybe cardiac incident, and a couple of people with heat exhaustion.”

“Yes,” Angie interjected into the conversation, “this heat’s been horrible for that. We’ve been seeing loads of people with heat exhaustion, or whose pre-existings are being aggravated by the temperature.” The paramedics around the table nodded in agreement.

“And then you get all the idiots who are dehydrated because they’re out in the sun all day, yet somehow forget to drink any water.” Maria complained, Pepper nodding her agreement with her partner’s assessment, “Gente estúpida. You’d think people would understand that the more you sweat, the more water you need to drink, but nooooo.” The other women laughed, accustomed to Maria’s rants. The woman had one of the lowest tolerances for common stupidity that Natasha had ever met. There was a good reason she was paired with Pepper, whose level-headedness and legendary ability to manage people who were totally out of control made her the perfect buffer between Maria and patients. Natasha privately thought Pepper’s skill for dealing with bad behaviour stemmed from the fact that she had been dating Tony on-and-off again for as long as she’d known them, but then again, she had a very low tolerance for Tony’s messy personality herself. She did like the guy, when it came down to it, but could only handle him in low doses. She honestly had no idea how Pepper did it.

Tania finally returned to the table, setting a glass of vodka in front of Natasha and settling back into her own seat. Natasha smiled at her friend, briefly leaning her head against Tania’s shoulder.

“Thanks babe,” she said, before sitting back up.

“No problem babe,” Tania rejoined, winking back at her, before both women turned their attentions back to the table at large. Peggy was telling some story about her coworkers, who were, admittedly, an eclectic group.

The next couple of hours passed quickly, the group laughing and exchanging stories from their work and personal lives amongst themselves. Peggy and Angie were the first to beg off, as Angie had an early shift the next morning, but it wasn’t long before everyone else declared their need to call it a night. Natasha and Tania exchanged a look after the last of the other women had left the room, before grinning and grabbing their stuff. Tania nudged Natasha with her hip as they left the bar.

“Three Sisters?” Tania asked, and Natasha wrinkled her nose.

“Ew, no, the last time we went there that gross guy wouldn’t stop hitting on us and you ditched me
to fuck Lisa in the bathroom.”


“Cabaret Voltaire?” Natasha suggested, and Tania made a considering noise.

“I mean, they did ban me for life, but that was last year.”

“So the staff is probably completely different,” Natasha said reasonably, and her friend grinned at her.

“Yeah, okay, Cab Vol. Let’s give it a shot. If we can’t get in there, we can always go to Hive.”

“Ugggggh,” Natasha trailed after Tania as her friend took off at a brisk pace, a put-upon whine replacing her normal speaking voice as she complained, “if I wanted to hang out with a bunch of drunk teenagers and literally stick to the floor, I’d volunteer for extra shifts during rush and prom.” Tania just laughed at her friend’s complaints, waving her arm to dismiss them, conveniently, Natasha thought slightly grumpily, forgetting how much she herself hated Hive. Everyone hated Hive. Hive was awful.

They ended up at Hive.

Turns out, bouncers have a very long memory when it comes to women who cold-cocked the DJ. So, of course, they had to drink enough to forget that they were surrounded by a bunch of barely-legal-children. And then they had to keep drinking so that they would forget that their shoes were likely runed given the sheer amount of spilled booze and vomit on the floor. And then someone dumped their beer down Natasha’s back, and, well, it all got to be a bit of a blur after that.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is such a mess of “Canadian writer who lived in Scotland and uses British slang but is setting a story in the States”. Disaster.

The whole student-faints-in-class happened in one of my seminars. Students are terrible at taking care of themselves (says the girl who almost fainted in class several times).

Hive is a club in Edinburgh, and it’s gross. Don’t go there. Actually, all of the clubs are clubs in Edinburgh. Can’t say for sure if I’ve been to them or not though. #alcohol

If you’d like to be as cool as Natasha (and me) the tank top she is wearing is from here.

Easter eggs:

The building at the university is named after Mary Fields, a former slave, the first African-American woman employed as a mail carrier in the United States, the second woman to work for the Postal Service, and an all-around boss.

Kitt Avenue is named after the wonderful Eartha Kitt, of course.

Nannosa Rezk is named after Hend Rezk, the Egyptian Boxing champion from 2000 to 2010 and the first in Africa and the Arab World. She also trains self-defense for girls.
Cataleya, Natasha’s sparring partner, is a reference to Zoe Saldana’s character in Colombiana.

Tania is named after the character who takes up the mantle of the Black Widow in Secret Wars 2099 (not chosen because I’ve read it or anything, I was just looking into other Black Widows to have someone be Natasha’s childhood friend, and found Tania). If you’re wondering what her hair looks like but colour like. For her outfit, picture Zendaya at the 2015 BET Awards.

Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoy the story so far. I have the entire story outlined but for the first time am posting without a clear idea of when I'll be finished. I've got most of chapter 2 written though, so hopefully it won't be too long between updates! This was also supposed to be for the Natasha Romanoff Big Bang, but the deadline just wasn't going to work for me with my broken elbow and moving next month.

You can find me on tumblr at stevesbootyshorts.
Terrible Youth

Chapter Notes

*throws this at y'all*

As always, **slidingkinsey** is a champ. *blows kisses*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha was woken by loud pounding on her door. Groaning, she rolled over, yelping in surprise when she thumped down onto the floor. Blinking blearily around at her surroundings, she saw that she’d fallen asleep on her couch. Sitting up, she ran her hands through her hair which was a tangled and curly mess, pushing herself slowly to her feet and tugging at her shorts as she walked over to the door. Still wearing last nights clothes, including shoes. Awesome. Probably looked like a racoon too.

She opened the door to find Darcy grinning up at her, with Jane standing slightly behind her looking somewhat sheepish even as she too smiled at Natasha.

“Um…” Natasha blinked at her neighbors, rubbing at her eyes and running her tongue over her teeth. Ugh. Gross.

“Hey Tash!”

“Hello Natasha,” Jane added in a slightly more sedate tone.

“Rough night?” Darcy asked with a cheeky grin, and Natasha glared at her. “We are here,” Darcy continued on undeterred, pausing to grab Jane’s hand and pull her to stand next to her properly, “we are here to invite you to dinner!”

“Dinner…?” Natasha echoed slowly, still half-asleep as she leaned against the door jamb and scrubbed a hand over her eyes. She looked down at her watch, internally wincing when she saw that it was only nine.

“Yeah!” Darcy replied, brow raising, “I talked to you about it the other day? Anyways, we came to ask you first, since you’re the one with the weird schedule, so if you’re not free tonight, we could do it like, Friday night maybe? Or, oh!” She turned to Jane, gesturing excitedly, “we could do it Saturday! And, like, we could-”

“No, no, tonight works,” Natasha interrupted before Darcy could get too ahead of herself, “I don’t work until tomorrow morning.” She smiled crookedly, “last day off.” Darcy wrinkled her nose. She’d often told Natasha that she couldn’t even imagine working the shifts that she did, but Natasha didn’t think it was too bad. Three days on, two off, two on, three off was honestly better than a lot of people she knew who did shift work, even if the shifts were long and exhausting. And hey, at least she wasn’t on night shifts most of the time. That was when things got really weird. Darcy beamed at her.

“Awesome! We’ll see you tonight then, at…” she trailed off as she turned to her girlfriend, looking at her expectantly. Jane visibly startled.

“Oh! Um, six.” Natasha smiled at the scientist. Jane was brilliant, and really fun, but she could be
remarkably spacy, often getting distracted mid-conversation by ideas about her work. She had once stopped mid-sentence in a conversation with Natasha, grabbed the notepad Natasha kept by the phone, and spent two hours writing equations at Natasha’s kitchen counter while Natasha, amused, just finished her coffee and started reading a book. Natasha couldn’t imagine what she was like as a professor.

“Six,” Natasha nodded, “should I bring anything?”

“Oh no, that’s” Jane started, before Darcy interrupted.

“Wine! Thanks Tash!” She started dragging Jane up the stairs before she’d even finished speaking, and Natasha laughed as she watched them go, shaking her head as she closed the door behind them. Groaning she leaned against the closed door, running her hands over her face and blowing out a breath.

“Coffee,” she said to herself, “coffee, coffee, coffee…” she continued muttering to herself as she headed into the kitchen and turned on the very expensive espresso machine Clint had bought her for Christmas a couple years ago. Pulling her phone off the counter on her way to the fridge, she hit speed dial number one, tucking it between her ear and shoulder as she opened up the fridge to grab the milk.

“’lo?”

“Hey babe,” she said as she poured milk into the steaming jug, setting her favourite mug under the espresso sprout (a gift from Darcy, which read ‘FUCK YOU’ – her friends understood her, they really did), “you awake?”

“Mmmmmm,” Tania replied, sounding very sleepy, “kind of?”

“You sober?” Natasha flicked the switch, watching as the milk hissed and began to foam. She would feel bad for waking Tania, but, well, she knew that if her friend didn’t want to be awake and talking to Natasha, she wouldn’t have answered her phone.

“Um… definitely not.” Natasha smiled, leaning against the counter.

“Hope you don’t have to work today,” she teased, and Tania groaned.

“No, but I’m supposed to be going to Maggie’s tonight,” Natasha glanced at her calendar in surprise.

“Shit, it’s already Wednesday?” Probably the only bad part of her shift structure was that days of the week often ceased to have any meaning for her – she often found herself attempting to go to the shop late at night only to find out, to her profound annoyance, that it was a Sunday, and everything closed early (honestly, they were in a major city, it was 2015, enough of this ‘lord’s day’ bullshit, if she wanted to get a grapefruit at midnight, she should be able to get a grapefruit at midnight) (on a related note, she really needed to stop using that grapefruit-scented body wash after a late shift).

“Yeah, you coming?”

“Damn, I wish. I’m going to dinner at my neighbor’s. Say hi to everyone for me?”

“Yeah, for sure.” There was a moment of silence over the line, and Natasha poured the milk over the shot of espresso, absentmindedly shaking and twisting the stream of milk so the foam turned into a leaf. Her time as a barista had been brief, but learning to make the latte art had been one of her favourite parts, even if both Tania and Clint called her a pretentious hipster for it.
“Why are you having dinner with your neighbors?” Tania asked, “any occasion?” Natasha shook her head even though Tania couldn’t see her.

“Nah, just Darcy being Darcy. You know what she’s like,” Natasha said, settling onto one of the stools at her counter and taking her first, blissful sip of coffee. Darcy and Tania had got along like a house on fire from the moment Natasha had introduced them. Part of that was probably that Darcy was one of those people who was able to become friends with literally everyone she met, and part of it was that the two of them shared the same, caustic, take-no-shit attitude towards the world. Natasha was pretty sure their friendship had been cemented when they had had a very intense conversation about the pros and cons of various tasers.

Tania hummed in response. “Oh hey, I didn’t get the chance to tell you about this last night, but do you know what Brit did the other night? You are not going to believe this.” Natasha leaned her elbows on her counter, getting comfy as she listened to her friend’s work stories.

After a recounting of a confrontation with a coworker who was a notorious costume thief (‘like, who even wants to wear another girl’s g-string?’) Tania announced that she needed to go shower off the sweat and alcohol from last night. Hanging up, Natasha was left sitting, savouring the last slow sips of her latte, humming slightly to herself as she contemplated the day ahead of her.

Debating the relative merits of heading to the gym on very little sleep and as much of a hangover as she ever got, Natasha finally decided to just go for a run around the block instead. Looking down at herself, she grimaced. She reeked of booze and smoke, but there wasn’t much point showering now if she was just going to get all sweaty again so, sighing, she headed to her room, quickly changing into her running gear and heading out the door. Pausing just outside her door she put her earbuds in and clicked her ipod over to her favourite running playlist. With the steady beat of J Cole spitting bars filling her head she headed out of the door, nodding at Jemma and Skye who had taken up station on the front steps, but not pausing to chat before hitting the pavement. She quickly lost herself in the steady rhythm of air being pulled in and out of her chest, the steady rhythm of the rap beats pounding in time with her feet against the pavement, the strain in her muscles, the flick of her ponytail against the back of her neck, the heat of the sun against her face.

It was to the sound of Lamar proclaiming his love for himself that she finally slowed to a walk a block away from her building, though she was still breathing hard when she turned into her gate, pulling out her earbuds when she saw that Jemma and Skye were still on the steps. While it wasn’t uncommon to find Skye sitting out on the front porch soaking up the sun, it was much less common to find Jemma with her, both because (Natasha suspected) the pale British girl wasn’t actually that fond of the sun (or her inevitable sunburns) and because, as Skye had wryly remarked several times, it was very difficult to tear her away from her lab long enough to just hang out. Natasha had been there the first time Skye and Darcy and Thor had bonded over oblivious scientist girlfriends. It was cute.

“Hey Skye, Jemma,” she gasped out, bending over and putting her hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

“Hey Natasha,” Skye’s voice was amused. The younger woman had once told Natasha that you literally could not pay her enough to workout, and that sure, jogging kept you healthy, but god, at what cost? (at Natasha’s subsequent blank look, Skye had rolled her eyes and shoved her Parks and Rec DVDs at Natasha).

“Mmmmm,” Natasha sat down on the bit of cement in front of their steps and began stretching, “how’s it going?” The other women shrugged.

“Quite well,” Jemma answered, “and how are you? We heard you get in quite late last night.”
Natasha wrinkled her nose.

“Sorry, I was that loud?” Skye laughed.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I didn’t hear a thing. Jemma only heard you because she was up late doing god-knows-what.” Jemma rolled her eyes.

“The microbes need to be fed every couple of hours or else our findings will be irrelevant due to inconsistent data!” Skye leaned forward over her open laptop.

“It’s like having a newborn,” she stage whispered, and Natasha laughed while Jemma frowned at Skye.

“A newborn would be noisy, microbes aren’t noisy,” she informed her girlfriend seriously, and both Natasha and Skye laughed this time.

“You guys going to Darcy’s tonight?” Natasha asked, leaning forward to touch her toes, and both women nodded.

“Yeah, did Darcy tell you to bring wine?” Natasha leaned back, finished stretching and now just enjoying the feeling of the hot sun drying the sweat on her skin.

“Of course,” she replied, tipping her chin back and closing her eyes against the glare, “you guys too?”

“Of course,” Jemma replied, a laugh in her voice.

“Mmm,” Natasha replied, and Jemma laughed.

“The both of you! It’s like you’re photosynthetic!” Natasha leaned her head forward to see Jemma looking down at her girlfriend, a fond smile on her face.

“I am secretly a plant,” Skye said, voice dead serious, and Natasha snorted, groaning as she forced herself to stand back up.

“So are you going to the liquor store today or?” Jemma nodded, looking up at her.

“Yeah, probably this afternoon.” Skye ignored them, having returned her attention to her laptop and was busy typing away, “You want us to pick you up a bottle while we’re there?” Natasha nodded.

“Yeah, that would be perfect, thanks.”

“You got it,” Jemma nodded definitively and Natasha smiled at her before heading inside the cool shade of her building. Stripping, she abandoned her clothes on the floor of her bedroom, the cool water of the shower a blessing on her sun-and-run heated skin. She stayed in until she was shivering, washing and conditioning her hair and using her favourite sugar-lime body scrub until all traces of smoke were gone.

Brushing her hair up into a sloppy bun, she pulled on the same shorts she had worn the previous day, as well as a white crop-top with the bisexual flag on it. Grabbing a pair of big hoops, she finished off the look with a silver body chain that was visible both above the collar of and below the hem of her top. Leaning over her dresser, she began putting on her makeup, loving the ritual of it. Though she went bare-faced more often than not, she always found the ritual of applying makeup soothing when she choose to do it, and since she hadn’t yet decided what to do with her day, she had the time to spare.
Smearing some lipstick on, she gave her reflection in the mirror a small smirk before checking her phone. Eleven. Wandering out into her living room, she looked around, picking up a couple of game and DVD cases before throwing them back down. Picking up her book from the coffee table, she flopped down on the couch and tried to read, but found her attention wandering. Despite the run, she felt restless and itchy in her skin. After several minutes of reading the same page over and over again and not absorbing a single word, she finally threw her book back down, snatching her wallet, keys, and sunglasses off the kitchen counter before heading to her front door and grabbing her pair of white adidas sneakers. Checking that her phone was in her pocket, she headed out the door, not sure where she was going but needing to do something with the energy stretching her skin out. The steps were unoccupied as she quickly stepped out onto the sidewalk, heading off in a random direction.

A couple blocks later, it occurred to her to head over to Clint’s and see what he was up to. She didn’t bother to call or text first – it wasn’t like he would mind her just showing up, he was home most of the time anyways. Even if he wasn’t, well, it wasn’t like he actually lived far from her. She did spare a moment to wonder if Kate would be home. She hoped she would be, since Natasha hadn’t seen the younger woman in a while, and would like the chance to ask her how her summer was going, and how her job as a camp counsellor was treating her.

Kate Bishop was Clint’s half-sister, who had moved in with Clint a couple years after Natasha had met him, just after they had made the move from RedRoom to Shield. She was only twelve when she’d moved in with her older brother, and Natasha had spent a lot of time stopping Clint from completely freaking out those first couple of years. Clint had been convinced he was somehow going to irrevocably fuck up his little sister, and despite Natasha’s (admittedly, less-than-helpful) reassurances that hey, he couldn’t fuck her up more than their father already had, Clint had spent those first couple years pretty much constantly on edge. Five years later, and Kate was seventeen, one of the most capable and put-together teenagers Natasha had ever met, and had a great relationship with her older brother, though she did spend a lot of time mocking him. Which Natasha always encouraged.

Clint and Kate lived in an apartment building a couple of blocks away from Natasha’s building. It had been built in a similar time period to Natasha’s, though it was in much better shape than her’s. Clint actually owned the entire building, through a series of events that was never super clear to Natasha but somehow probably maybe involved the mob. Whatever. Clint had only been in the hospital for a little bit, that was six years ago, and nothing bad had happened since, so Natasha had decided not to worry about it too much. Kate had come to live with him a year later. The week before she was to move in, Clint had gotten very, very drunk at Natasha’s and confessed the entire sordid story of his childhood. Natasha had often thought since that it would have been a great opening to tell Clint about her own childhood but… she still hadn’t given him anything other than vague hints, and despite Tania’s lectures about the importance of opening oneself up to other people, that probably wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

Clint’s mother had died in a car accident when he was quite young, leaving him and his older brother Barney in the custody their abusive alcoholic father. One too many black eyes and broken bones had seen the brothers out on the streets by the time Clint was ten, where he’d become a very accomplished thief, a skill that he still utilized on occasion to annoy the shit out of Natasha. They’d survived like that for couple years before Clint’s brother ditched him in a flophouse hundreds of miles from their former home with only five dollars and two broken ribs. After that, it had just been Clint on his own, but through sheer stubborn determination he’d survived, gotten his GED, and became a paramedic. He had never specified what he’d done to make it through his teenage years, but he had hinted at a past similar enough to Natasha’s that she’d found herself swallowing with a dry click of the throat, but still not confessing to her friend.

Clint hadn’t thought of his father in years by the time he and Natasha came to know each other
however, so it had come as a bit of a nasty shock when he’d gotten a call out of the blue from a social worker to inform him that his father had been shot in an altercation at a bar, and that his half-sister was going to go into the system unless Clint was willing to take custody of her, as the only living, locatable, and unincarcerated, member of her family. That had also been the same day that Clint had found out where Barney had ended up – doing 30 years at Ohio State for stabbing his drug dealer and girlfriend to death. All in all, not a very pleasant surprise, though Kate herself had turned out to be a gift, helping keep Clint in line while Clint provided her with the most stable and supportive home environment she’d ever experienced.

Natasha arrived at the building just as Noor was exiting, and ran to catch the door as it began to shut behind the young woman. She smiled and greeted the other woman before heading into the coolness of the stairwell. Clint’s building, much like hers, was made up of a very friendly community of people, though there were quite a few more of them in Clint’s building than in her own. Through a combination of time and Clint’s fondness for building-wide rooftop barbeques, Natasha knew everyone in his building by sight if not by name. She sighed when she saw that the out-of-order sign was still hanging off the rickety old elevator, and headed up the stairs instead. Even when the elevator was working it was notoriously unreliable, and, after getting stuck in there with old Ms. Wake for several hours, she tended to choose to take the stairs most of the time regardless of whether or not it was running (even if Ms. Wake’s stories of fighting in WWII were endlessly entertaining). After her run this morning, and all the dancing last night though, she wouldn’t have minded taking the elevator.

She arrived on the seventh floor to see Clint’s door propped open with a brick, so she headed inside, tapping on the door as she passed and calling out a greeting. When no one responded she wandered around the apartment, unsurprised to find it unoccupied. She was just debating between heading home and trying to find Clint in the building when she heard the jangle of dog tags and returned to the living room to catch Kate and Lucky just as they were heading into the kitchen.

“Oh hey Natasha!” Kate greeted, unphased to find her brother’s friend wandering through their apartment. She raised the sunglasses off her face as she spoke. She was wearing a big-brimmed sunhat, a purple bikini, and Natasha guessed what she was going to say before she said it. “Clint and I are just up on the roof tanning, I just came down to grab more water for Lucky.”

“Alright,” Natasha watched as Kate filled up a large bottle of water from the top, before trailing behind her as she headed out of the apartment and back up the stairs, Lucky panting at their feet as he followed close beside Natasha. She blinked in the bright glare of the sunlight as they emerged onto the roof, quickly pushing her sunglasses back down onto her face.

“Clint!” Kate called out as she headed across the roof to the loose grouping of lawn chairs and loungers, “Natasha is here!” A blonde head popped up over the top of one of the chairs, and Natasha smiled at her friend as she drew close, flopping down on the chair next to Clint as Kate settled back onto the lounger with a towel draped across it, throwing the water bottle at Clint before getting comfy, laying down on her stomach and opening up a magazine.

“Hey Natasha,” Clint greeted, unphased at almost getting smashed in the face with a water bottle. He leaned over to empty it into the dog dish sitting next to his chair, and Lucky came over to eagerly and messily take a drink, “how’s it going?” Natasha shrugged as she sank into her chair, briefly debating before pulling off her shirt and tucking it behind her neck. Clint mock-gasped at the sight of her bare breasts before settling back onto the lounger with a towel draped across it, throwing the water bottle at Clint before getting comfy, laying down on her stomach and opening up a magazine.

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“Hungover?” Clint asked after several long minutes of silence, broken only by the music playing from the speakers set up in the shade at the edge of the roof. Natasha rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses, turning her head towards Clint and tipping them down to give him a look. He laughed. “Well if you’re not hungover, maybe you’d like a beer?” He reached into the cooler beside him that Natasha hadn’t noticed earlier, passing her a Corona which she took with a smile. Kate put up her hand without looking up at them.

“Beer me,” she said, flipping through the pages of her magazine.

“You are underage young lady,” Clint replied, but still passed her a beer. Natasha smiled as she took a sip of the ice-cold beer, sighing at the feel of the cold glass in her hand.

“Trying to get less pasty, white boy?” Natasha asked her friend, who tilted his head at her. She gestured towards his barely-there shorts with her beer, and Clint laughed.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Not all of us are blessed with your skin tone, Natasha.” She laughed.

“I hope you’re wearing sunscreen, I’d hate to see you turn into a lobster again.” Clint’s summer burns were as legendary as they were funny (to Natasha and Kate) and painful (to Clint). Clint pouted at her, but it was Kate that replied.

“He is. He made me help him put it onto his back,” she grimaced as she looked up from her magazine, “he’s really not very flexible.”

“I’m flexible!” Clint huffed, “I’m so flexible! I can bend my body into all sorts of positions!”

“Ew,” Kate wrinkled her nose, holding a hand out as she sat up, “don’t tell me more.” Clint narrowed his eyes at his sister, who gave him a shit-eating grin before taking a drink of her beer.

“How’s things going for you Kate?” Natasha asked, now that the younger woman was no longer occupied with her magazine.

“Good,” Kate nodded, adjusting the brim of her hat and tucking some escaped strands of her long black hair back under it, “it is too damn hot this summer.”

“How’s camp?” The camp that Kate worked at was just outside of the city, an outdoor camp focused on giving inner-city kids the chance to interact with nature, and ran two-weeks on, one-week off. Natasha was happy she’d managed to come by on a week when Kate was in town.

“Good!” Kate smiled, “the last batch of kids were the youngest of the summer, and they were fun, but I’m happy the next group is going to be a bit older.”

“No one shoot anyone else?” Kate laughed.

“Not yet, but there’s still plenty of summer left.” Kate made a face. In addition to being a cabin leader and doing general supervision, Kate taught all the archery for the camp. She’d joined the archery club in middle school with encouragement from Clint and Natasha (Natasha had sat down Clint one day and told him that he either needed to figure out some way for Kate to work out her anger towards her parents and the world in a productive way or prepare himself for being called into the principal's office once a week for the rest of Kate’s time in school). It had proved the perfect activity for her, and she was now nationally ranked and being courted by several universities for their archery teams (Clint was so proud, it was adorable).

“How many did it end up being last summer again?” Clint asked, and Kate wrinkled her nose.
“Six, but I maintain that that was entirely Lindsay’s fault. She wasn’t fucking watching the kids when she was supposed to be.” Lindsay, Kate’s partner for the last two summers, was also probably Kate’s least-favourite person in the world.

“Sureeee,” Clint said with a smirk, then yelped when Kate flicked her bottlecap at him with deadly precision, hitting him right between the eyes.

“Okay, come on.” Natasha said, sitting up and gesturing, “what stories do you have from this summer then?” Both her and Kate ignored Clint’s sulk as they turned towards each other, Kate thinking.

“Oh! Okay so like, about a week into camp I get a call from this mother right? And they specifically asked to talk to me, because their son is in my group.” Natasha nods. “The kids had just called home for the first time the other night, and I guess their son had told them about his bunkmate who had gotten cookies from home.”

“Parents send their kids cookies when they’re away for two weeks?” Clint asks incredulously, and Kate nods.

“You wouldn’t believe the stuff some parents send. Or the amount of times they call.” Clint huffs and Kate waves her hands.

“Anyways, so this mother calls, and she is pissetted Off.”

“About the cookies?”

“About the cookies. Apparently she was furious because now this other kid’s mother looked like a better mother than she did. And I was like, well, you could always send cookies? And she was like well, it’s too late for that now!” Kate paused to take a drink of her beer, “So I ask her what exactly she wants me to do, right? And she tells me…” Kate paused dramatically, leaning back and spreading her arms, “she tells me to intercept any other parcels from other parents so she doesn’t look bad.”

“You cannot be serious,” Natasha says flatly.

“Oh no,” Kate shakes her head, “this woman was very very serious. She was upset that she had looked bad in front of her son and insisted I make sure it didn’t happen again.”

“So what did you do?”

“I told her I would absolutely make sure it wouldn’t happen again, and then just kept giving the kids whatever they got in the mail.” Natasha and Clint laughed. “Oh but wait,” Kate holds up a hand, “there’s more. When she showed up to pick up her son on the last day she was fucking furious. She actually flipped out at me in front of everyone and told me it was my fault if her son didn’t love her anymore.”

“Holy shit,” Clint laughed, “that’s insane!”

“Right?? So I told her that if her son didn’t love her anymore it was probably because she was causing a scene, not because other people’s parents sent packages.”

“You’re going to get fired,” Natasha laughed.

“Nah,” Kate grinned, “my boss loves me. Also apparently this woman has pulled this on other counselors in the past so no big deal.”
“Jesus,” Clint shook his head, “I do not envy you having to deal with soccer moms all the time.” Kate shrugged.

“It’s mostly the kids and they’re fun so whatever.” Natasha nodded her agreement. The three lapsed into silence for a minute, before Clint suddenly straightened.

“Hey did I tell either of you about the date I went on last week?” Natasha and Kate exchanged a glance, both women shaking their heads in the negative. Clint grinned.

“Okay, you’ll like this one. I met this guy on OkCupid and everything seemed really great, right? So we decided to meet, he picks me up in his car, but then the restaurant he choose was closed. So he asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him Hooters and Bowling.” Natasha snorted and Kate gave her brother a disbelieving look. Clint rolled his eyes before continuing. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Anyways, we’re driving there, and he’s a total shitshow of a driver, and this is me saying this.” Kate grimaced and Natasha smirked. There was a reason she ended up driving most shifts, and Kate no longer allowed him to drive the purple VW bug that had been her sixteenth birthday present (because Clint spoiled her rotten).

“All of a sudden his brakes give out, and we smash into the back of the truck in front of us. We’re just sitting there, and I’m just like, processing what the fuck just happened and he starts freaking out. Like, muttering ‘oh shit oh shit this is bad’. So I asked him what was wrong, if he didn’t have insurance of what, and he turns to me with this like wild-eyed look and goes ‘no, I have a warrant out for my arrest’.” Kate’s mouth dropped open.

“No way.” She breaths, and Clint nods.

“Yeah. Then he fucking gets out of the car and starts running, shouting back ‘I’m really sorry I just can’t go back to jail’.”


“Then the guy who we hit peaces the fuck out, leaving me stranded, just chilling and waiting for the cops to show up.”

“Oh my god,”’ Kate said, bursting out into laughter, “only you Clint, only you.” Natasha starts laughing as well.

“This might actually top Super Racist Tattooed Chick for your worst date ever,” Natasha pointed out, and Clint scowled at her.

“You said you’d never bring that up again,” he grumbled, leaning over and flicking her ear hard. Natasha yelped, jumping up.

“Okay, I’ve got another one. So there was this kid the other day…”
Several hours later Natasha pulled her shirt on, said her goodbyes, and headed out, leaving the siblings arguing over what they wanted to order in for dinner. The sun was still hot and high overhead as she walked home, though it was now nearing evening and dinnertime. She’d managed to lose track of the time while at Clint’s, and so headed directly to the door of Darcy, Jane, and Thor’s apartment when she entered the building, which was propped open letting the sounds of music and laughter spill out into the stairwell. Wandering in she first spotted Thor and Jemma, who were standing just inside the kitchen, surveying the contents of the refrigerator. Thor looked up as Natasha entered the room, grinning when he caught sight of his neighbor.

“Natasha!” The man greeted in his typically loud and booming voice, “Welcome to our home!” He gestured grandly, and Natasha couldn’t help but smile back. The man’s enthusiasm and friendly nature made it impossible not to like him. Though he was a large, muscled white man that absolutely screamed ‘bro’ in the way he dressed and carried himself, Thor was one of the biggest softies Natasha had ever met, kind, generous, and completely besotted with his two partners.

“Hey Thor, Jemma,” she greeted, “hope I’m not late?”

“Not at all! Jemma and Skye have just arrived. Can I get you a drink?”

“I gave Darcy the wine from you already,” Jemma interjected, and Natasha nodded her thanks.

“Beer?” She directed at Thor, and the man passed her one from the fridge, prompting Jemma, who had apparently been wavering before, to finally settle on beer as well. Thor led the way further into the apartment. In the living room, they found the rest of the building’s residents – Darcy, Jane, and Bruce were holding glasses of wine while Skye was perched on the window ledge with a joint and beer in hand. The neighbors exchanged greetings, and Natasha settled against the wall next to the bookcase. After a moment, Thor joined her, and Natasha smiled up at the much taller man.

“So where have you been, big guy?” Natasha asked. She hadn’t seen him in a while, though she wasn’t sure why. Since he often propped open the door to their flat when he was home, enjoying the company of his neighbors, Natasha was used to seeing him quite frequently, even on her schedule.

“Ah, did Jane and Darcy not tell you?” Natasha shook her head in the negative, “I was with some work colleagues on a kayaking trip in the mountains. Darcy dropped us off at the riverhead and we took a week to navigate down the river and the rapids. We just returned yesterday.” Natasha raised her eyebrows.

“Sounds intense,” she commented, and Thor grinned.

“It was quite an adventure! My new kayak performed admirably however, as did my new tent.” Natasha grinned.

“Well thats good then,” she said. Thor’s love of the outdoors was only matched by his dedication to giving his customers the best advice possible. Natasha had been rock climbing with him a couple of times, and had to admit that he knew his shit. Thor had mentioned before his father’s disappointment that his eldest son, his pride and joy and the heir to his business empire, had decided to give that all up to become a “mere” manager at a outdoor supply company. Natasha couldn’t help but think that anyone who couldn’t see how perfectly matched Thor was to his job was an idiot. Besides, Thor’s younger brother was a far better match for the future Thor’s father had laid out for him, and actually enjoyed the tricks and machinations of running a large corporation.

Before their conversation could continue, Darcy bounded up to them. Natasha smiled down at the younger woman. By the way she was swaying, Natasha guessed that she had started drinking far earlier in the day than the rest of the group. Thor excused himself to check on the food, leaving
Natasha and Darcy alone together. Darcy leaned heavily on the spot on the wall left vacant by Thor’s departure, and Natasha couldn’t help but laugh at her young friend.

“Can’t hold your wine eh?” She teased, and Darcy grinned up at her.

“I was working on my dissertation,” she offered as explanation, “and I left the bottle out on the table.”

“Oh,” Natasha nodded, “and let me guess, one glass turned into two…”

“Turned into three, turned into the bottle,” Darcy finished, “I’ll probably have to rewrite everything I did today tomorrow. I’m sure it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Or you may have made some incredible breakthrough,” Natasha countered, “you never know.”

Darcy laughed. Her dissertation, which involved something about astrophysics had been her sole occupation for the last couple of years, though she had a habit of getting distracted by other projects. As Natasha understood it, Darcy had been studying political science when she had ended up Jane’s intern to earn her last couple of science credits, and had ended up switching majors because of her work with Jane. Before Darcy could offer a quip in return, Thor returned to the living room, announcing that dinner was ready, and the group migrated en masse back to the kitchen, filling up their plates before returning again to the living room, settling in and beginning to eat. Thor was an excellent, and adventurous, cook, and the curry he had made for the group was delicious, if so spicy it made the weaker members of the group cry (Natasha cheerfully ate her way through two helpings, mocking Jemma who was sniffing on the couch next to her).

The rest of the evening was filled with pleasant conversation, the neighbors all enjoying each others company. Natasha ended up having a spirited discussion by the window with Skye and Darcy about the best way to counteract gentrification, though out of habit she kept an eye on the rest of the room. As usual, Bruce kept much to himself, though Thor managed to draw him into a long conversation that lasted most of the evening, while Jane and Jemma ended up in the couch exchanging stories about their colleagues at the university. Unlike the previous evening, Natasha ended up being one of the first to say goodnight, heading across the hallway to her own apartment and bemoaning the fact that she was going to have to get up early the next morning for work.

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“I don’t think that’s even humanly possible,” Natasha’s head lolled back so she could look up at Maria, sitting up next to her. Natasha, Clint, Rhodey, and Maria were currently sitting on (or in Natasha’s case, half-lying on) the small patch of grass just behind the ambulance bay, enjoying the sunshine as they waited for a call to come in. The ambulances and bay had been cleaned, stocked, and cleaned again, leaving the three crews on shift with nothing left to do. Pepper and Tony had disappeared off somewhere shortly thereafter (to be frank, Natasha really didn’t want to know), leaving Maria and Rhodey to join Natasha and Clint on the lawn.

“No, no,” Maria shook her head, insistent, “I swear to dios mío, there was bone sticking out of his leg, blood everywhere, and he was still standing up!”

“Seriously,” Clint said, raising a skeptical eyebrow, “that just doesn’t seem possible. How can someone be drunk enough to walk on a leg that is that fucking broken, and still be alive?” Maria shook her head, raising her eyebrows.

“Frat boys,” she said in explanation, and the other paramedics laughed.

“What I want to know is why anyone would think it was a good idea to jump from the roof of a
house into a swimming pool,” Natasha commented, and the group shook their heads.

“And not even a fucking in-ground pool!” Maria exclaimed, “it was one of those shallow above-ground ones?”

“A kiddie pool?” Clint asked incredulously, and Maria laughed.

“No, he really would have died then. No, one of those bigger ones, you know? An above-ground pool.” Clint nodded.

“Oh!” Rhodey snapped his fingers, “speaking of frat boys, did I ever tell you guys about the call Tony and I took last year to Phi Sigma whatever the fuck?” Natasha shook her head, as did Clint and Maria.

“Okay,” he said, leaning forward, “so this was in September, y’know, when all the rush week nonsense was going on, right? So we’re getting the normal number of calls for alcohol poisoning, people hurting themselves while drunk or trying to do stupid initiation activities, whatever.”

“Right,” Clint said, gesturing for Rhodey to continue.

“So when we get this call, we assume it’s going to be just like the rest. But when we arrive—” Rhodey was interrupted by a loud squawk, and the group groaned.

“Call to all available ambulances, we have a Code 1 at the corner of 5th and Bhanot Street. Over.” The group groaned again, Natasha sitting up from her reclined position.

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Clint asked, and the paramedics exchanged looks before Clint, Rhodey, and Maria put their hands into the middle of their group. Natasha watched as the three threw, groaning and smacking Clint on the back of the head when Rhodey and Maria threw scissors and Clint threw paper. Scrambling up, she brushed the grass from her uniform pants, grabbing her radio.

“Dispatch this is ambulance 495 on our way, over.” She glared down at Clint, who offered her a sheepish smile as he too climbed to his feet. Sighing, she waved goodbye to Maria and Rhodey, their good-natured taunting following them as they headed into the shadowy interior of the bay.

“Copy that ambulance 495. Young adult male stuck in tree. Fire department also hailed, but will be an additional twenty minutes.”

“Copy that dispatch, over.” Clint replied, then grinned at Natasha as they both climbed into the cab of their ambulance.

“Stuck in a tree,” he repeated with no small measure of glee, “do you think he was trying to rescue a cat? Maybe a kite?” Natasha rolled her eyes as she started the engine and pulled back out into the sunlight. Bhanot Street was near enough to her own neighborhood that she actually knew where she was going, and didn’t have to use Tony’s stupid obnoxious GPS, but that didn’t make Natasha any more excited to be taking this call. Code ones were generally the dullest calls, which could be nice on a day filled with stressful Code threes and fours, but in general were just boring pains in the asses, usually involving standing around while the police or fire department resolved everything, and then heading back without having done a single bit of work. Besides, Natasha thought as she made the left-hand turn onto Bhanot, she really wanted to hear Rhodey’s story.

The right hand side of Bhanot Street was largely taken up by a park, flanked on either side by apartment buildings. Luckily, it was pretty obvious where the call originated from, as even from half a block away Natasha could spot the young man hanging from a tree next to the road. Pulling up next to the curb, Natasha took in the elderly woman anxiously clutching a small cat and a iphone in
her hands, and groaned, barely restraining herself from smashing her face into the steering wheel. Clint, of course, laughed in delight.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, “it was actually a cat in a tree.” He turned to his partner, grinning, “Natasha. Nat. It was actually a cat in a tree.” Natasha gave him a dead-eyed stare in return.

“How is this my life,” she asked flatly as she turned and climbed from the cab, walking around the front of the rig to join Clint on the sidewalk, where he had already begun talking to the elderly woman. Leaving Clint to reassure the old woman and get her version of events, Natasha stepped into the park, looking up at the young man who was hanging from the tree. Though dispatch had said adult male, the man in the tree looked far too slight to be an adult. As she got closer, Natasha could see that he was dangling from his left leg, his large black combat boot firmly wedged in a vee in the branches of the tree, leaving him to hang upside-down and immobile. She sighed as she walked around to face him. They were definitely going to have to wait for the fire department. Raising her eyes, she made eye contact with the man, who grinned at her sheepishly.

“Hi,” he said, his voice far deeper than his size would suggest, and Natasha reevaluated her estimate of his age. He was definitely tiny, skinny and no taller than 5’1”, and very pale, though his face was currently quite red from hanging upside down. He was wearing a pair of pastel floral shorts, cuffed above his knee, and a tank that was currently only covering the very top of his torso, revealing the tattoos that covered his skinny (too skinny, Natasha frowned) chest. His arms and legs were similarly decorated, and he wore small black plugs in both ears. His eyes were very big and very blue, and longish blond hair flopped down from the top of his head while the sides were cut short. He had hearing aids wrapped around his ears and, Natasha noticed as Clint joined her, he was holding a pair of chunky black glasses in his hand while a medicalert bracelet glinted in the sunlight on his wrist. She nods towards it.

“Anything we need to know about?” The man glanced over at his wrist.

“Uh, asthma, diabetes, heart murmur, scoliosis, angina, and high blood pressure.” At Clint and Natasha’s matching raised eyebrows, he smiled. “And I’m colour blind, though I’m not sure that matters right now. Steve Rogers.”

“Natasha. And this is Clint.” Natasha paused, glancing again at his hearing aids, “Can you hear us okay?” She asked, signing as she spoke. She knew Clint sometimes had trouble hearing even with his aids in, and it couldn’t help that he was hanging upside down with all the blood rushing to his head. Steve raised an eyebrow, but answered in the affirmative. “Are you feeling okay Steve? Dizzy?” Rogers shook his head and Natasha raised an eyebrow doubtfully, “How long have you been hanging here?” The young man shrugged as best as he could while hanging upside down.

“Not too long,” he said cheerfully, “Mrs. Pavlichenko called 911 pretty quick.”

“She said you were helping her to get her cat out of the tree?” Clint interjected, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice, and Natasha shot a quick glare at her partner, turning back to Rogers as he let out an embarrassed laugh.

“Um, yeah, it’s pretty stupid, I know. I kind of, um, slipped? But hey,” he continued cheerfully, “at least I got the cat down!”

“Right,” Natasha responded dryly, “well the fire department is on its way to get you down,” she told him, “but I need you to tell me right away if you start to feel like you might faint, have any trouble breathing, or feel like something might be going on with your heart.”

“What will you do if I do start having trouble?” Rogers asked, voice curious even as his mouth
curled into a little smirk. Natasha narrowed her eyes at him.

“Stand here and be very concerned,” she replied with a smirk of her own, and Rogers laughed.

“I’ll grab the intake forms while we wait,” Clint said, heading back to the ambulance, leaving Natasha alone with the young man hanging before her.

“So, Steve,” she said, feeling slightly awkward, “you end up in trees often?” There was a reason Clint usually handled most of the interaction with adults, though Natasha had to admit she was intrigued by the tiny hanging man, who grinned in response to her question.

“Nah,” he said easily, “only when I’m trying to meet cute paramedics.” And then he fucking winked. Natasha was so startled she couldn’t help the laugh that burst out of her. He wasn’t the first, and certainly wouldn’t be the last, patient to try flirting with her, but Natasha couldn’t help but be slightly charmed by his attempt, considering the position he was in.

“Hate to break this to you, but hanging upside down in a tree? Not your best look,” she snarked back at him, causing Rogers to grin at her in return.

“Damn, and I was sure I had it in the bag this time.” Their conversation was interrupted by the return of Clint, who raised an eyebrow at Natasha before handing her the clipboard and saying something about doing ‘crowd control’. Natasha looked dubiously at the bored housewife and two small children who were standing on the sidewalk staring at Rogers, but Clint was gone before she could say anything.

“Alright Steve Rogers,” Natasha said, turning back to Rogers and clicking her pen, “middle name?”

“Grant.”

“Date of birth?”

“July 4th, 1985.” That would make him thirty which, holy shit, he did not look. They continued going through the form, Rogers giving her the details of his address, doctor, and medical insurance before they got to the list of pre-existing conditions, where Steve again rattled off a list so long it made Natasha raise her head and an eyebrow. He shrugged, smiling.

“Yeah, it’s a lot.” He acknowledged. Natasha couldn’t help but huff. Yeah, it was a lot. She’d met seniors with fewer ailments than Steve Rogers seemed to posses. In addition to the asthma, diabetes, heart murmur, scoliosis, angina, high blood pressure, and colour blindness Steve had mentioned earlier, and the hearing aids and glasses Natasha had noted, Steve was anemic, allergic to amoxicillin, pentobarbital, and strawberries, and was taking insulin, iron supplements, blood pressure medication, antidepressants, and antianxiety medication.

“I cannot even imagine what your medicine cabinet looks like,” she commented without thinking, and then shifted uncomfortably, aware that that was an inappropriate comment, but Steve just laughed (Steve? It was Steve now?), and Natasha smiled up at him as she tucked the clipboard under her arm.

“So I guess now we wait,” Steve commented, and Natasha hummed her agreement, looking down at her watch.

“Fire department should be here soon though,” she looked back up at him, seeing that his face hadn’t really changed colour since they’d arrived, but was still worryingly red compared to the rest of his body “You still feeling okay?” she asked, “Not getting dizzy?” Steve made a face in response.
“Nah,” he said, and Natasha narrowed her eyes, not entirely sure she believed him, but willing to let it go for now.

“So what do you do?” she asked somewhat awkwardly, well aware that she was trying to make small talk with a guy stuck in a tree. Her job, honestly.

“I’m a barista,” Steve, on the other hand, was apparently completely unphased by his predicament. “I mean, I’m really an art-eest,” he drew out the word as pretentiously as possible, “but yeah most of the time I’m just making lattes.”

“Oh? Would I have seen any of your stuff?”

“What, my lattes?” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“No, smartass, your art.”

“Not unless you go to Arsenal,” Steve replied with a self-deprecating twist of the lips, naming a small midtown gallery, and Natasha frowned.

“I haven’t been there in a couple of months, so if it’s recent I wouldn’t have seen it” she said apologetically, and Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise. “My friend, Tania, she’s an artist, so I end up going to a lot of the small galleries,” Natasha explained, and it was Steve’s turn to furrow his brows.

“Tania… Tania… Tania Saris?”

“You know her?” Natasha asked, surprised. Steve shook his head.

“No, but I remember her name. I saw some of her stuff last year at Site 7, she’s really good.” Natasha nodded.

“Yeah, she is,” she replied, because that was never in question, “How long is your stuff going to be at Arsenal for?” Steve opened his mouth to reply, then stopped, shaking his head and looking briefly disoriented. Natasha stepped forward, frowning in concern, though Steve spoke before she could ask.

“So I lied,” Steve admitted, “I might be feeling a bit dizzy.” Before Natasha could start to worry too much (the fuck was she supposed to do when the guy was stuck in a tree??) she heard the sounds of sirens and sighed with relief as the fire truck finally pulled onto the street. Stepping aside, she stood next to Clint as they watched the firefighters maneuver Steve out of the tree, a process which didn’t actually end up taking that long, though one of the branches was sacrificed in the process, and, quick as they had arrived they were gone, leaving Clint and Natasha with Steve, sitting on the backend of the ambulance and letting him get his bearings back.

“Will I have to go to the hospital?” He asked, sipping from the bottle of water Clint had handed to him while Natasha checked his blood pressure again.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Natasha replied, noting that his blood pressure was returning to a normal level.

“We just want to make sure you’re not about to pass out before we release you into the wild,” Clint added, and Steve rolled his eyes at him.

“I’m fine,” he said, an assertion that both paramedics ignored, “Really, I am, I can just…” and before Natasha or Clint could stop him Steve pushed himself to his feet, where he proceeded to sway
dangerously before they both grabbed an arm and dragged him back into a sitting position. “Okay,” he replied, voice a bit fainter, “maybe I can sit for another couple of minutes.”

“Damn straight,” Natasha grumbled, earning a smile from the smaller man. Now that he was upright and wearing his glasses, he was even cuter (and damnit had Natasha ever been trying very hard not to think of him as cute). His tank top had turned out to say ‘I hope your day is as nice as my butt’ on it, which had earned a laugh from both Clint and Natasha. She watched him sip his water again, and he smiled when he caught her looking. She flushed and looked away, and found herself both relieved and disappointed when it was finally decided that he was okay to released.

As they drove off, she couldn’t help but watch in the rearview as he headed down the street, hands shoved in the pockets of his shorts, so it caught her slightly off-guard when Clint suddenly leaned over and poked her in the ribs. He waggled his eyebrows at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“Shut up,” she said.

“But-”

“Shut. Up.”

Chapter End Notes

Natasha fuckin finally meets Steve, holy shit.

Maggie’s is a sex workers action project in Toronto. I don’t know much about them but they seem to be a pretty solid organization

Arden Cho as Kate Bishop

Hi Lindsey! Congrats, I named a shitty camp counselor after you.

Clint’s dates are shamelessly ripped off of stories shared in this [reddit thread](#).

Steve’s outfit: [shorts](#) [shirt](#)

Some punkass skinny Steve fanarts for reference slash general enjoyment: [one](#) [two](#) [three](#) [four](#)

Easter Eggs:

Noor (from Clint’s building) is named after Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan, an Indian princess also known as as Nora Baker, a British spy during WWII, and a total badass.

Ms. Wake is named after Nancy Wake, a super badass spy and guerrilla operative during WWII. She once killed a German guard with a single karate chop to the neck.

Bhanot Street is named after Neerja Bhanot, a flight attendant from India who saved 360 people during a hijacking.

Mrs. Pavlichenko is named after Lyudmila Pavlichenko, a Russian-Ukrainian sniper during WWII who is credited as the most successful female sniper in history.
Songs that Natasha listened to this chapter:

Fire Squad - J. Cole
i - Kendrick Lamar
The weeks following Natasha’s meeting with Steve Rogers were filled with small disasters. First, the incredible summer heat began causing brownouts and blackouts across the city, increasing pressure on emergency services and putting the entire staff of Shield on edge. Then Clint had a brief and extremely turbulent affair with a woman that ended in him somehow getting both a new car and a broken nose. Natasha’s favourite coffee shop near her flat had a small fire, and shut down. Tania’s landlord raised the rent again, finally pushing it beyond Tania’s budget. Two weeks later and she was evicted, leaving her to crash with Natasha until she could find a new place. Finally, Bruce’s pet snake escaped into the ductwork of the building, resulting in a very tense two days for the building’s residents before she was found, curled up in the sunlit front window of Jane, Thor, and Darcy’s living room. The young man who had been stuck in the tree soon faded from Natasha’s mind, joining the long list of patients she had encountered and forgotten over the years.

Of course, just when she had forgotten about him, she met him again.

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“Natasha!” Tania’s shout was just audible over the water of her shower, and Natasha stepped out of the spray, sticking her head out from behind the curtain to reply.

“What?”

“I…………. are……fucking………. anywhere!”

“What?” Tania’s face appeared around the corner of the bathroom.

“I said, where are your fucking baking sheets? I can’t find them anywhere.”

“I don’t know!” Natasha frowned, thinking for a second. “Do I own baking sheets?” Tania raised an eyebrow at her friend.

“I honestly have no idea how you survive sometimes,” she snarked and Natasha laughed as she stepped back under the cool water.

“It’s not my fault no one ever taught me how to cook!” She raised her voice to be heard over the sound of the water.

“Hey, I tried!” Tania called back at her, and Natasha waved a hand over the top of the shower curtain, and heard the sound of her friend laughing as she left the bathroom. She finished rinsing her hair, then shut off the water. Grabbing her towel, she dried off quickly before wrapping the towel around her hair and walking back into her room. Heading into her closet, she grabbed a pair of underwear, jean shorts, a crochet bikini-style top, socks, and a pair of American flag-patterned litas. Pulling on everything but the boots, she quickly did her makeup. After a moment's thought she
grabbed her fringed purse from the hook, throwing her wallet, sunglasses, phone, and ‘fuck off’ sweater into it before heading out into the kitchen, carrying the shoes in one hand. She couldn’t help but laugh when she saw the state it was in.

“It’s like the Sixth Sense in here,” she said, hands on hips as Tania looked up from where she was poking around in one of the bottom cupboards, legs sprawled across the tile floor and still in her pyjamas.

“If I knew you didn’t have any cooking supplies, I wouldn’t have put all of mine in storage,” Tania grumbled as she stood and began closing all the cupboard doors in the kitchen. Natasha raised an eyebrow at her friend as she went to set her shoes and purse by the door.

“You’ve known me how long, and yet somehow expected me to have cooking supplies?” Tania shook her head.

“Well, it’s your loss. I can’t make cinnamon rolls without a baking sheet.” Natasha pouted as she walked past Tania to the espresso machine.

“But Taniaaaaa,” she whined at her friend as she began to pull out her latte-making supplies, “I want a cinnamon roll!!”. Her friend just laughed at her and they fell into silence as Natasha quickly made two lattes, handing one to Tania as she rounded the counter and sat at one of the stools. Tania remained standing, flipping through the paper that had been lying open on the counter in front of her.

“You’re up early,” Natasha commented as she sipped at her coffee. Tania nodded.

“Yeah, I’ve got an early showing of an apartment to get to.”

“Any luck?” Natasha asked, seeing that her friend had the page open to the rentals page. Tania shook her head.

“Not yet, I’m looking at a couple more places today though, besides the one this morning.” Natasha hummed.

“Hey, I asked Clint the other day if there were any places in his building.”

“Yeah?” Tania looked up, “are there any free?” Natasha shook her head.

“Not right now, but he said he’d let me know if that changed. It’s coming up on the end of the month so there’s a chance that a tenant might not renew their lease.” Tania nodded.

“Well that would be awesome if they did. I’d be so close to you!”

“It’d be alright I guess,” Natasha shrugged.

“Rude!” Tania said, and Natasha smiled.

“You working today?” she asked, and Tania nodded.

“Yeah, so I won’t be here when you get home. I’ll probably leave you some dinner in the fridge though, so you can eat that instead of getting takeout again.” She shot a judgemental look at Natasha, which Natasha ignored, finishing her latte. Tania shook her head, before glancing over at the stove clock. “Hey, don’t you usually leave by now?” Natasha looked over at the clock and groaned.

“Yeah, guess I’ll grab breakfast on the way there,” she sighed, standing and heading towards the door. She laced up her shoes, grabbed her purse, and waved goodbye to Tania, who shouted ‘say hi
to Clint from me!’ as Natasha headed out the door. Running down the street, she savoured the crisp texture of the early morning air. The city was still largely asleep, so both her walk to the subway station and the ride to work were quiet, the men and women wearing business attire on the subway more concerned with their phones than Natasha. Despite this, she did catch a couple of raised eyebrows being thrown in her direction. She technically didn’t have to leave her house this early, but she far preferred to leave early, and miss the morning rush, than sleep in and have to deal with the press of humanity right after waking up. Besides, it meant that when she exited the stop a block away from the ambulance dispatch centre, she had plenty of time to stop at a cafe and grab breakfast, texting Clint on her way in to see if he wanted to meet her.

She was eating her breakfast sandwich, watching the increasingly busy sidewalk outside the cafe window when Clint stumbled in, wearing his usual off-work uniform of purple tee-shirt and grey sweats. He didn’t even glance around for her, instead going straight to the counter and ordering his coffee. Natasha watched with amusement as he stood by the counter, swaying slightly. He grabbed his coffee as soon as it was set down in front of him, immediately downing a large gulp. His eyes closed, and Natasha bit her lip at the blissful expression that washed across her friend’s face, before he opened his eyes and finally looked around for her. Catching her eye, he picked his way across the room, settling into the chair across from her.

“Did you just come from drinking that coffee?” Natasha asked, laughter lacing her words, “Because like, you’re one of my best friends, but that’s still more information than I wanted to know about you.”

“What?” Clint replies, clearly still not yet awake as he took another large swig of his coffee. “God,” he said, sinking further into his plush chair, “this is so much better than the coffee from The Beast. Wait. What? Did you just ask me if I came from drinking coffee?” Natasha couldn’t help but burst out laughing at the offended expression on Clint’s face.

“Sorry, it’s just that the last time I saw a guy with that expression, his dick was in my mouth.”

“Woah,” Clint said, holding up a hand, “speaking of TMI.” Natasha snorted, kicking at him under the table.

“As if.” Natasha replied, sipping at her own latte.

“I thought you said you were cutting back on the lattes,” Clint remarked, and Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, before looking down at her latte.

“Did I? I don’t remember that.” Clint nodded.

“Oh yeah,” he said, putting on a falsetto as he continued, “I’m gonna cut back on coffee Clint, for real this time!” Natasha swatted at him.

“I do not sound like that!” She exclaimed, indignant, before pausing, “...okay, maybe I did say that, but I was clearly just delirious from lack of caffeine.” Clint rolled his eyes. Natasha’s frequent declarations to cut back on her one real bad habit was a long-standing joke between the two friends. The longest she’d ever gone was two days, while Clint, who would occasionally vow to quit in solidarity, had only lasted twelve hours.

“So,” Natasha began after a moment of silence, “how are things with what’s-her-name?”

“Cherry,” Clint replies, scratching the back of his head, “or maybe Darlene?” And that honestly said more than enough for Natasha on the fate of that relationship, but Clint kept going. “And, uh, I’m not exactly sure where she is? She might have left the country.” Natasha gave her friend an
incredulous look, though honestly, she didn’t know why she was surprised. Clint’s life was like a surreal postmodern play where nothing made sense and everything was plagued by a vague sense of symbolism.

“But hey,” Clint said, brightening, “at least I’ve got the car still!”

“Right,” Natasha nodded, “for all the driving you don’t do.” Clint frowned at his friend, and Natasha hid her smile behind her latte. She had to admit the car, a 1970s Dodge Challenger in cherry red, was a pretty sweet car, and she was actually pretty excited that Clint had gotten it (even if he was being just as vague about the circumstances in which he acquired it as he was when talking about how he ended up owning his own building). After all, any car that Clint owned was inevitably one that she would end up driving far, far more than he would (the last car he’d owned, about four years previous, he’d totalled by somehow managing to roll it while on an empty road, in the middle of a dry, sunny day).

“Anyways,” she said, checking her watch, “we should get going.” Clint threw his head back with a moan but dragged himself to his feet, gathering their trash and disposing it on their way out. They didn’t speak on the short walk to the dispatch centre, too focused on navigating the now packed sidewalk. Entering the centre they both headed straight to their respective locker rooms, Natasha quickly changing into her uniform and, as always, beating Clint out into the bay. If she wasn’t well acquainted with how lethargically he moved in all non-emergent situations, she would wonder how on earth it always took him so long to change.

Their first call of the day came a couple hours later, when they were both sat up in the cab of the ambulance, feet propped up on the dash as they each played games on their phones. Clint slammed his knee into the door in his haste to get his legs down and be the first to answer the call, wincing as he replied to dispatch. Natasha folded back into her seat at a more sedate pace.

“Dispatch this is ambulance 495 on our way, over.”

“Copy that ambulance 495. You’re headed to Vera Peters High School, if you go around the back you can just drive onto the football field. One of the players, seventeen year old male, has a bone protruding from his shin.” Natasha shared a wince with Clint as she turned over the engine, driving them out of the bay.

“You know where the school is?” Clint asked, and Natasha nodded as she turned onto the main road, flicking on the sirens as she sped up. She could see him look at her out of the corner of her eye, and chanced a quick look at him before returning her eyes to the road.

“What?” she asked when another minute went by without Clint saying anything.

“Sorry, just… did you go to school there?” Despite her best efforts, Natasha couldn’t help the way her shoulders tensed, and Clint immediately reacted to the outward sign of her discomfort. “No, no, never mind, I was just wondering, it’s not important.” They sat in silence for an awkward moment before Natasha hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Yeah,” she said slowly, “I went there for a couple years before I dropped out of high school.” Clint looked at her in surprise.

“You dropped out too?” Natasha nodded, and she could see Clint’s grin in her peripheral vision. “Cool, GED buddies.” Natasha couldn’t help but smile at the delight in his voice, and felt some of the tension leave her. See, that wasn’t so bad, she’d told Clint a detail of her childhood and no one had started screaming or crying or anything. Tania would be so proud of her.
“Football practice,” Clint commented, gracefully changing the subject, and Natasha felt a wave of affection for her friend, “another sign that school’s starting up again soon.” Natasha wrinkled her nose as she turned a corner.

“Don’t remind me,” she said, and Clint raised an eyebrow at her.

“I thought you liked it when school went back in?” he asked. “Gets the youths off the streets and whatnot.” Natasha laughed.

“Yeah, no, I definitely like that, I just don’t like that first month or two where all the frosh make terrible drunken decisions and we have to work extra evening and night shifts.” Clint groaned.

“Fucccck rush week,” he said with feeling, a sentiment that Natasha heartily agreed with. Before anything else could be said however, they arrived at the school, Natasha following dispatch’s instructions and driving right onto the football field, heading towards the group of players who opened up as they approached, leaving only the few adults present standing and kneeling around the kid lying on the ground. Throwing the rig into park, Natasha and Clint scrambled from the cab, before heading around the back to grab the stretcher, knowing for certain that they’d need it for this call, stacking their kits on top of it. Hurrying over with the stretcher, they set it down, Natasha kneeling in the grass next to the kid while Clint began firing off rapid fire questions at the adults standing nervously around. The boy’s face was pale with pain. Glancing down at his leg where the white of the bone was standing out in stark contrast to his dark skin she winced in sympathy.

“Hey there,” she greeted, “my name is Natasha, what’s your name?”

“Antoine,” the boy hissed out through gritted teeth, “everyone calls me Trip though.”

“Well Trip,” Natasha continued in the same soothing tone, “that’s a pretty bad break you’ve got there. I’m going to need to bandage around the bone to stop the blood flow, and then we’re going to immobilize your leg with a long board. That sound good to you?” Trip nodded sharply.

“Okay,” Natasha said, heading down to the boy’s leg where she was joined by Clint. Together, they quickly bandaged around the bone. “You still doing okay Trip?” Natasha asked, looking up at him when he didn’t respond. Happily he was still conscious. “I’m going to need you to respond verbally okay Trip? I know it hurts really bad, and we can get you some painkillers as soon as we’ve got you in the ambulance, but for right now I need you to talk to me, okay?” Trip nodded before breathily responding in the affirmative and Natasha turned back to the leg. Clint had grabbed the long board and straps.

“We’re gonna move your leg now Trip,” Clint called up, “this is probably going to hurt but after this your leg will be secured and we’ll be ready to move you. Let us know the instant we do something that makes the pain a lot worse, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Trip replied, audibly gritting his teeth as Clint and Natasha quickly but carefully slid the long board under his leg, securing it above and below the fracture.

“Alright, that’s the worst done,” Natasha said, “do you think you can sit up?” Clint moved behind him, ready to catch him if he got faint as Trip slowly pushed himself into a sitting position.

“Awesome,” Natasha encouraged, “now we’re going to move the stretcher right behind you, and Clint and I will help you sit on it, and then we’ll move your legs over for you, okay?” With Trip’s consent, they set to work, quickly getting him situated on the stretcher. They moved Trip into the back of the ambulance, where Clint stayed, along with one of the coaches, while Natasha moved forward into the cab.
“Alright Trip,” Clint said cheerfully, “now we get to dope you up!” Natasha smiled at Trip’s weak responding ‘yay’ as she started the engines and headed back towards the hospital, radioing them to let them know they were on their way. It wasn’t long before they arrived at the hospital, pulling up at the Emergency doors. Natasha put the rig in park then headed round the back of the ambulance, opening the doors to let the coach hop out before she and Clint removed the stretcher, wheeling it through the emergency room doors which parted before them with a soft hiss. They quickly completed the handoff, and watched as a nurse wheeled Trip away, the coach trailing behind them.

“Ugh,” Clint stretched as they headed back towards the Emergency doors, “I hate compound fractures.” Natasha shot him an amused group.

“You know you’re a paramedic right? That’s your job?” Clint shuddered.

“Bones belong on the inside of the body,” he said firmly, and Natasha laughed. Before she could respond, however, she heard someone calling out behind her.

“Natasha! Clint!” They both turned to see Angie striding down the hall towards them, her cheerful smile lighting up her face. Angie was wearing the typical nurse garb of scrubs and sensible sneakers. As she got closer Natasha could see that the scrubs were decorated with little dancing Snoopies and Woodstocks.

“Hey Angie!” Clint greeted. “What are you doing down here?” Angie worked up in pediatrics, and as far as Natasha knew, didn’t do any shifts in the ER.

“Oh, I was just down in the cafeteria,” Angie replied, holding up a soda, “I’m headed back up to PED now. You guys just headed back out?” Clint nodded, rocking back on his heels.

“Yeah, just dropped off a kid with a compound fracture in his tibia.” Angie made a sympathetic face.

“Hey Barton!” Natasha looked over her shoulder to see one of the ER nurses waving Clint over, pointing at his clipboard, “What the fuck does this say?” Clint laughed, heading over to interpret his scrawl for the admitting nurse.

“Anyways,” Angie said, watching him go, “I’m glad I caught you, Natasha. Me and Peggy have been meaning to invite you over for coffee one of these days. Clint too, if he wants.”

“I don’t know if you want to do that,” Natasha warned, “you know how Clint gets about Peggy’s job.” Angie laughed.

“He is a bit obsessed isn’t he?” Natasha shook her head.

“I think you’re forgetting about how bad last time was,” she warned, “but we’d love to. We’re off work tomorrow? Or if you wanted some other time, I think—” Angie shook her head.

“No, tomorrow works great actually, I’m off and as long as Peggy’s team doesn’t get a callout she’ll be around! If you wanted to come over around one?” Natasha nodded.

“Sounds good. I can’t speak for Clint, but he’ll probably be in as well.”

“Okay awesome!” Angie grinned at her, “anyways, I have to get going, but I hope the rest of your guys’ shift goes well!”

“You too,” Natasha called out after Angie’s retreating back. Clint came up behind her just as Angie turned the corner towards the elevator banks.
“What were you guys talking about?” He asked as they both resumed their walk back to their rig.

“What were you guys talking about?” He asked as they both resumed their walk back to their rig.

“Coffee with her and Peggy tomorrow. You in?”

“What were you guys talking about?” He asked as they both resumed their walk back to their rig.

“Are you kidding me? Of course I’m in!” Natasha shot him a look.

“You can’t terrorize Peggy about her job the entire time,” she said as they both climbed back into the ambulance.

“Me?” Clint asked, faux-offended, and Natasha laughed at him.

“Honestly, after the last time they had us over and you spent the entire time asking about serial killers, I’m amazed they even still want to talk to you,” she teased as they drove back around to the dispatch centre.

“Me?” Clint asked, faux-offended, and Natasha laughed at him.

“I am a delight at dinner parties,” Clint said, voice haughty as they parked and began the process of restocking and cleaning the ambulance.

There were no further calls that afternoon, and evening saw both Natasha and Clint slumped over a table in the break room, half-drunk cups of coffee on the table in front of them. Natasha didn’t know why she kept drinking coffee from The Beast, it was horrific and disgusting. And yet, she still kept doing it whenever she needed caffeine but didn’t feel like going out to a cafe. She was pretty sure that Clint was actually asleep, and she herself was in an almost half-asleep doze when she heard the sound of footsteps entering the room. Rolling her head over she saw Sharon walk into the room. The other woman snorted in amusement when she caught sight of Clint and Natasha. Natasha slowly pushed herself up as Sharon headed over to The Beast. Seeing that Natasha was actually awake, Sharon smiled over at her.

“The coffee is disgusting,” Natasha warned as Sharon poured herself a mug, voice raspy with disuse.

“When isn’t it?” Sharon replied. Despite her brave words, Sharon took one sip of the coffee, made a face, and dumped it down the sink.

“You starting work soon?” Sharon was still in her civvies: tight black pants, white tee-shirt, and big silver hoodie. She made a face at Natasha’s question, setting her mug down in the sink and coming over to sit at their table, pushing Clint out of the way and yup, he was definitely asleep.

“No I’m off today, I’m just…” she trailed off, and Natasha raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to go on, “I wanted to come in when I knew Brock wouldn’t be in.” Natasha raised the other eyebrow.

“Not that I blame you, but why?” Sharon sighed.

“If Fury won’t approve a transfer… I think I might quit.” Sharon abruptly sat up completely.

“Shit.” Natasha sat back in her seat, “Again? Think it’ll do any good this time?” Sharon shrugged.

“No I’m off today, I’m just…” she trailed off, and Natasha raised an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to go on, “I wanted to come in when I knew Brock wouldn’t be in.” Natasha raised the other eyebrow.

“I’m going to see Fury.”

“Shit.” Natasha sat back in her seat, “Again? Think it’ll do any good this time?” Sharon shrugged.

“It’s not like he’s done anything that he can be fired for, and it’s not like anyone wants to trade.” Natasha hummed in sympathy. Sharon had had a couple of meetings with Fury since getting paired with Brock, but hadn’t been able to get a new partner. Sharon visibly hesitated before speaking again.

“If Fury won’t approve a transfer… I think I might quit.” Natasha abruptly sat up completely.

“Seriously?” Sharon nodded, her mouth twisting.
“Fuck,” Natasha breathed, and when Sharon tensed, quickly continued, “I’ll just really miss you if you leave. But, I mean, Brock is a nightmare. You shouldn’t have to deal with that every day.” Sharon sighed, running a hand over her short hair.

“The thing is, I really don’t want to leave Shield, they run such a good system and I love everyone else, but Brock… I’m just not sure how much longer I can stand to keep working with him.” Natasha nodded, meeting Sharon’s eyes.

“Hey, no matter what, we’ve got your back yeah? All of us,” and she nodded over at Clint and the rest of the room as if to indicate all the paramedics who weren’t there. Sharon let out a breath, smiling.

“Thanks Natasha. That… helps.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “I should go before Fury leaves for the day,” she stood, “but seriously, thanks.”

“Let me know how it goes?” Natasha asked as Sharon began to head out, and the other woman nodded before waving and exiting the room. Natasha slowly rotated her own mug. It would really suck to lose Sharon, she was a solid paramedic and a great friend, but she meant what she’d said. Leaving RedRoom had made such a difference in Natasha’s life, she hated to think that her friend was living in a similarly toxic work environment. She smiled. Besides, if she herself was paired with Brock, she didn’t think she couldn’t have lasted nearly as long. She probably would have been fired for assault – since there was no way she would be able to work with Brock every day without punching him in the face. The sudden squawk of the radio pulled her out of her thoughts, and Clint jerked upright with a snort, looking around dazedly.

“Call to all available ambulances, we have a Code 3 at the stadium. Over.” Natasha scrambled to grab her radio, but before she could there was the sound of static.

“Hey dispatch, this is Tony Stark, we’ve got it covered.” Tony drawled over the radio, and Natasha glared down at it. There was a couple of seconds of static-filled silence, before another voice came over the radio.

“Over.” Natasha could hear the fond annoyance in Rhodey’s voice as he attempted to keep some pretence of sticking to protocol. Natasha rolled her eyes at Clint, who grinned back at her.

“You know you love him,” he teased, and Natasha snorted. “What time is it?” Clint asked, looking around. Natasha turned her watch face towards herself, groaning and thunking her head down on the table when she read it.

“Six,” she mumbled, voice muffled against the top of the table, and Clint echoed her earlier groan.

“Fuck,” he said with feeling, and Natasha couldn’t help but agree. “We’re going to die here,” he announced, melodramatically throwing himself back in his chair, and Natasha raised her head enough to watch him slide down until he was barely in his seat. Natasha made herself stand up, stretching before dropping to the ground to do some push-ups.

“Seriously?” Clint wined from his seat, and Natasha grinned at the floor.

“C’mon Clint, it’s not like we’ve got anything better to do.” Clint grumbled, but apparently agreed as he too stood before dropping to the floor. While they couldn’t properly work out on shift, Natasha had gotten annoyed with the fact that she didn’t have the energy for the gym on the days when she worked, so her and Clint and Maria had come up with a set of exercises that they could do easily during quiet moments while at work. Most of the other paramedics had also picked it up, save for Tony, who was of the opinion that exercise was the literal worst, and possibly an invention of Satan.
“If we haven’t got a call by the time we finish, we can have dinner,” Natasha said without pausing her steady up and down movement, and she didn’t even have to see him to know that Clint brightened up at the possibility of imminent food.

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Despite the slow day, things picked up in the evening, with calls out to bars and street brawls. There was some sort of sports game on that night, and everyone was getting at each other’s throats. However, whoever had done the scheduling hadn’t accounted for the extra calls, and so Natasha and Clint ended up staying on long after their shift ended to help Rhodey and Tony with the stupid volume of calls. By eleven, Natasha was grumpy and tired and just wanted to go home.

“I don’t get it” she complained. Her and Clint were slumped in the rig, parked in front of a Starbucks as they drank their coffees. Clint hummed vaguely.

“Who the fuck cares this much about sports?” She continued, unperturbed by her partner's lack of response. Clint hummed again, blinking slowly down at his coffee.

“Seriously, it’s fucking ridiculous,” she grumbled into her latte, and Clint finally looked up at her, smiling slowly as her rant registered.

“Aw, you just don’t like having to deal with drunk people.”

“They are grown ass adults,” Natasha said, “the fuck are they doing fighting over sportsball.” Clint laughed.

“Aw, they-” but whatever he was going to say was interrupted by the sound of the radio. Clint groaned, putting his head down on the dash as Natasha smiled slightly and answered the call.

“Dispatch this is ambulance 495, on our way.” Since Clint and Natasha hadn’t bothered to go back to the dispatch centre after their last call, they were only a couple blocks away from the club which dispatch directed them to, arriving minutes after receiving the call. When they arrived, the front of the building was already lit up with the flashing lights of the police cars parked in front. Pulling up behind one of the cop cars, Natasha and Clint grabbed their bags before exiting the ambulance, walking over to one of the police officers standing on the sidewalk.

“Hey, where do you want us?” Clint asked. Natasha shifted next to him, uncomfortable. God, she hated cops. Clint did too, she knew, but he was better at pushing it aside then Natasha. She looked around, seeing another ambulance pull up and Tony and Rhodey climb out, heading towards them. She nodded towards them in greeting before turning back to Clint and the police officer. The cop was giving them an assessing look, but eventually pointed them to two people sitting on the curb just down from a cop car.

“Those two are under arrest, but need medical attention. You’ll need a police escort if you need to leave with them,” Clint acknowledged the direction, before they both headed down the sidewalk. She could hear Tony and Rhodey being similarly directed by the police officer. Natasha crouched down as she reached the two people sitting on the edge of the sidewalk, hands cuffed behind their backs, setting her bag down before looking up at them.

One of the two was a black man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties, with short hair and a neatly trimmed goatee. He was wearing a black tee-shirt, black pants, and bright white shoes, which were splattered with drops of blood. She paused at that, before looking over at the other man. She blinked in surprise. Sitting on the sidewalk in front of her, a wry grin twisting his lips and face absolutely covered in blood, was Steve Rogers.
“Hi again,” he rasped, then doubled over coughing.

“Woah there,” his friend said, concern obvious in his voice, “Steve. Stevie.”

“I’m okay Sam,” Steve got out, sitting back up. Natasha pulled her eyes away from the disconcerting sight of his blood-covered face to scan down the rest of his body. His grey tank was splattered with blood, as were his beige pants and white shoes, but the only source of blood seemed to be the head wound.

“Where are you injured?” She asked.

“Head,” Steve said, confirming her suspicions.

“No where else?” She asked, just to be sure, and Steve began to shake his head in the negative before stopping, wincing.

“Someone smashed him over the head with a beer bottle,” his friend interjected, and Steve shot a glare at him but Clint had already drawn the friend’s attention away from Steve and Natasha as he began his examination. Natasha returned her own attention to her patient, opening her kit and pulling out a pair of latex gloves and a flashlight. She flicked it in front of Steve’s eyes, checking his tracking and pupil reactions.

“Having difficulty tracking, pupil dilation appears slightly mismatched.” Natasha noted aloud before carefully tilting Steve’s head forward to probe at the wound on the back of his head.

“Can you hear me okay?”

“Yeah,” Steve replied, “I can hear you.”

“You having any issues with your pre-existing conditions right now?” Steve winced as she touched the wound.

“Fuck. No, no I’m fine.”

“Dizzy?”

“No.” Steve’s friend’s leg shot out to nudge him, and Natasha glanced over at him along with Steve. Clearly he was paying more attention to her and Steve’s conversation than she thought. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he smiled in apology.

“Sorry. Just, punk isn’t always honest with doctors, are you Steve?” Steve’s glare increased, before he looked back at Natasha, a guilty look passing across his face.

“Okay, maybe a bit of dizziness.” Natasha hummed in response, unimpressed, letting go of Steve’s head and grabbing a bandage out of her kit. She did not appreciate it when patients lied to her.

“Well, maybe a bit of dizziness.” Natasha hummed in response, unimpressed, letting go of Steve’s head and grabbing a bandage out of her kit. She did not appreciate it when patients lied to her.

“The wound isn’t too bad, you probably won’t need stitches,” she told him as she carefully wrapped the back of his head. “Have you had any loss of consciousness?”

“No,” Steve replied, even as his friend replied “Yes.” Natasha sat back on her heels, officially annoyed.

“Steven Rogers, unless you want to end up in a fucking body bag you will accurately and truthfully report your symptoms to me, without prompting from your friend, are we clear?”

“Oh, I like her,” the friend said with a laugh. Natasha ignored the other man, and Clint’s snort,
watching Steve’s face. He looked angry, then guilty, then resigned.

“We’re clear,” he replied, and Natasha narrowed her eyes at him.

“How long was the loss of consciousness?” She asked, stripping off her gloves. Steve glanced over at his friend.

“Less than a minute, I think. I started counting as soon as I noticed he was out but,” he shrugged, “I don’t know if he was unconscious before I noticed or not.” Natasha nodded.

“Okay, we’re going to have to take you back to the hospital for some additional tests,” she said. She looked over at Clint.

“Sam here is doing pretty good, I’ve bandaged up his knuckles, but he does have a gash on his arm which is going to need stitches.” Natasha nodded.

“Alright, off to the hospital for both of you then,” Natasha and Clint closed up their kits before helping their patients to their feet. Sam was standing fine under his own power, but after a moment of swaying, and glare from Natasha, Steve leaned on Natasha. She headed over to the ambulance with Sam and Steve while Clint went back over to the same cop that they had spoken to when they had arrived. Natasha put her kit away, before helping Sam and then Steve into the back of the ambulance. Getting them both sitting on the stretcher. She was happy that Sam only needed a steadying hand as he climbed in with hands still cuffed, since she was certain she wouldn’t have been able to get him into the back of the ambulance if he had needed as much support as Steve. Luckily, Steve barely weighed anything, and even with Natasha having to support most of his weight, she was able to maneuver him up into the ambulance.

Having gotten everyone ready to go, she looked back over to Clint, who was still speaking to the police officer. Judging from his stance and gestures, he seemed to be arguing with the cop, and Natasha’s brow furrowed. Steve and Sam caught the direction she was looking, and Steve snorted.

“Officer Ward here is going to be accompanying Sam and Steve to the hospital,” he said at Natasha’s questioning look, his voice carefully neutral. Natasha nodded, and made to get out of the back. Clint waved at her.

“I’ll drive,” he said. Natasha frowned at him, but he didn’t look at her. Not willing to argue with him
in front of an audience, she just scooted further down the seat, allowing Officer Ward to climb into the back. Clint shut the doors behind him and then walked around to the front of the vehicle, starting the engine and setting off. They rode for several minutes in uncomfortable silence, Natasha continuing to clean the blood from Steve’s face.

“So you guys were out to watch the game tonight?” she finally asked. Ward gave her a sharp look, but she ignored him, instead focusing on Steve, and Sam, who laughed. She gave him a questioning look, and he shook his head.

“Sorry, no, I was out to watch the game tonight, I had to bodily drag this guy out of the house.” Natasha turned her attention to Steve.

“Not a sports fan?” He shook his head with a laugh.

“Not really, and I had a painting I really wanted to finish, but apparently Sam was tired of me being antisocial, and here we are. Should have just stayed at home.” He added with a wry smile. “I would still be ‘starving myself of human contact’,” he made air quotes while shooting a smile over at his friend, “but at least I wouldn’t be on the way to the hospital!”

“So you admit to having a role in starting the fight?” Officer Ward suddenly interjected, and Natasha couldn’t help her small flinch away from him. Sam shot him a sharp glance, while Steve openly glared at him.

“No. Neither of us admit to anything like that.” Both men shared a glance, and then fell silent, as did Natasha. She focused instead on finishing wiping the blood from Steve’s face and neck. Looking forward, she caught Clint’s eyes in the the rearview mirror, and he grimaced. Thankfully, they arrived at the hospital shortly afterwards, and the uncomfortable silence that filled the back of the rig was interrupted by the bustle of getting Sam and Steve into the hospital. Soon Sam was getting his arm stitched up while Clint and Ward talked to the admitting, leaving Natasha standing with Steve until a nurse could come and take over for her. She shifted, uncomfortable, causing Steve to grin up at her, obviously sensing her discomfort.

“So if the stuck up the tree look didn’t do it for you, how’s the bloody head wound doing?” Natasha couldn’t help her laugh, relaxing slightly as she glanced down at the slight man, who was smiling up at her. In the bleak fluorescents of the hospital, the remaining smears of blood across his face and neck appeared even more gruesome, as was the bruising across the left side of his collar and shoulder. She nodded towards him.

“Another wound from your fight?” He glanced down towards his chest in surprise, before snorting and looking back up.

“Nah,” he said, but didn’t expand further, and Natasha didn’t press.

“So, you start bar fights often?” At that, Steve laughed.

“I don’t try to,” he said with a wry smile, and Natasha grinned down at him. “How about you?”

“Oh, I don’t start bar fights often either,” Natasha said, and Steve shook his head, smiling.

“No, do you spend a lot of time stitching up people after bar fights?”

“More time than I’d like to.”

“But your patients aren’t usually as cute as me, right?” Steve’s head lolled back against the wall, and Natasha bit her lip at the exaggeratedly moony look on his face.
“I think your head wound is affecting you more than I thought at first,” she teased, and Steve crossed his eyes at her.

“You wound me,” he said, clasping a hand to his chest, and the flash of his medicalert bracelet jogged Natasha’s memory.

“Hey, where are your glasses?” she asked, concerned. Steve blinked at the sudden change of topic, reaching his hand towards his face on reflex, before stopping the motion in mid-air.

“Oh no,” he said, shaking his head, “no, I’m wearing contacts.” He smiled up at her lazily. “No worries sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart?” Natasha smirked, “Please tell me that’s the head injury speaking.” Steve winked at her, and Natasha laughed. Seeing Ward heading over, accompanied by a nurse, Natasha pushed herself off the wall.

“Looks like this is where I leave you,” she said, once again finding herself reluctant to leave his company. He gave her a tired smile in return.

“See you around, Natasha,” he said, and she pointed down at him.

“Better not,” she warned before heading down the hallway, briefly meeting Ward’s eyes as she walked past him. The cold look in his eyes was disconcerting, but not surprising. She couldn’t help but glance over her shoulder and saw Steve glaring up at him as Ward said something to him, a sneer twisting his face.

Clint was waiting for her by the exit, and she joined him as they headed out of the hospital. The drive back to dispatch was made in silence. As they drove in, Natasha was surprised to see Coulson standing in the ambulance bay. The unassuming man also looked surprised to see them, looking down at his watch as she parked and her and Clint climbed out of the rig.

“What are you still doing here?” He asked with a frown as they rounded the back, “You were off hours ago.” Natasha didn’t interact with Phil Coulson much, as he was in charge of the dispatch centre during the evening shift, Fury’s second-in-command, but from what little she knew of him, he was a good man and a good supervisor.

“It was really busy, so we stayed to help Tony and Rhodey,” Natasha explained as they opened up the back of their ambulance. Coulson continued to frown at her.

“Well Sitwell and Mack started an hour ago,” he said, “so go the fuck home.” Natasha blinked at his choice of words.

“I think you need to stop spending so much time around the big boss,” Clint said with an insolent grin, “you’re starting to sound like him.” Coulson narrowed his eyes at Clint.

“Watch it Barton,” he said, before pointing at both of them. “Go home,” he ordered again before leaving the bay. Natasha glanced at Clint, who rolled his eyes at her. They both turned to look at the back of the ambulance, sighing at the blood smears and general disarray.

“Clean tonight, restock next shift?” Clint proposed and Natasha nodded in relief.

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Natasha woke the next morning to the sound of her phone buzzing on her bedside table. Scrambling a hand out from underneath the covers, she smacked around on the tabletop before her searching
fingers finally closed around her phone. Blearily peering at it, she was just able to make out the name flashing across her screen. Groaning, she swiped to answer.

“’lo?”

“Good morning sunshine!” Clint’s voice was disgustingly awake and chipper, especially since Natasha knew he was no better at getting up than she was, which meant he had probably been awake for a while.

“The fuck Barton,” she mumbled, not particularly caring that her words were barely intelligible.

“Do you want to go to the pound with me?” He asked, ignoring her grumpiness.

“It is too early for this Clint,” she mumbled, and there was a pause across the line. “What?”

“Um, were you seriously still asleep? It’s past eleven.” Cracking her eyes back open, she observed the sunlight sliding into her room through her curtains. Huh.

“Fuck,” she said, sitting up and rubbing at her eyes. “Okay. What?”

“Pound,” Clint repeated, voice annoyingly patient. “Do you want to go with me?” Natasha sat, blinking for a moment, trying to gather herself.

“Um, we’re supposed to go to Angie and Peggy’s at one.”

“Oh fuck,” it was Clint's turn to be surprised, “I forgot about that. Okay, what about afterwards?”

“Yeah, okay, pound. Wait, why are we going to the pound.”

“Oh, no reason…” Clint sounded evasive, the false casualness of his words obvious even across the phone.

“Clint…”

“There was an ad on the TV, Natasha, all these dogs-”

“Kate is going to kill you,” Natasha interrupted without any heat in her words. They both knew that Kate loved Lucky to bits, and any temporary annoyance over a new pet would be just that: temporary.

“Yeah I know,” Clint replied cheerfully, “I’ll see you at one.” And without further ceremony, he hung up on her. Natasha sighed, letting herself flop back into bed for a moment longer before forcing herself to stand, stretching. She shook out her shoulders, thinking about the day ahead of her. Less than two hours before she had to be at Angie and Peggy’s…. she shook her head. Whatever else she wanted to get done today would probably have to wait, but she could manage a run before she had to head out.

Leaving her room in her running gear, she ran into Tania, who teased her about sleeping in. She asked Natasha to wait for a moment as Tania grabbed her own running gear, and the two women were quickly out of the door. They both had their own headphones, and ran through the sunshine in silence, their pace fairly evenly matched. Though Tania was significantly taller than Natasha, Natasha was faster, so their strides evened out pretty well. Probably the best of anyone Natasha had ever run with, to be honest. Their silent path took them on a winding circle through the city, dodging strollers, dogs, and children playing.
Arriving back home, Natasha called first shower, hopping into the cold water with a sigh of relief. It was really too hot out to be running so close to noon, but she hadn’t wanted to put the run off until the evening and risk ending up with no time to do it. Stepping out of the shower, Natasha left her hair down, pulling on a loose seafoam green romper, cut low in the front, and a couple of long necklaces. After a moment’s consideration, she also grabbed a pair of black sandals and her brown leather purse, internally bemoaning the rompers’ lack of pockets. Whoever decided women’s clothing shouldn’t have pockets should be drawn and quartered, she decided as she headed into the kitchen. After glancing at her phone, she changed her path towards the front door, seeing that it was swiftly approaching one. Her stomach grumbled as she did so, and she made a face down at it. Hopefully Angie would have food. She usually did, anyways.

Calling out her goodbyes to Tania, she headed back out into the sunshine, sliding on a pair of aviators as she jumped down the steps and headed towards the subway. It wasn’t far to Angie and Peggy’s, but it was farther to walk than she had time to, or really wanted to in this heat. Besides, the subway at this time of day was largely unoccupied, and she was able to sit down, absentmindedly scrolling through her phone as the train rattled through the tunnel towards it’s destination. Too quickly she was back out in the hot sun, headed to the house Peggy and Angie had bought a couple years ago. It was small but well loved, though the yard always suffered due to Peggy and Angie’s combined strange hours. Natasha bit her lip against a smile as she let herself into the front yard and saw that all the grass was indeed dead, though there were several patches of weeds that were flourishing despite the dry summer.

A knock on the door produced the muffled sound of Angie shouting ‘got it’ before the diminutive brunette appeared at the door, smiling and ushering Natasha inside. Toeing off her sandals and leaving her purse by the door, Natasha followed Angie through the house to the shadowy backyard. The rear of the house was faring much better than the front, being protected from the worst of the sun by several large trees, and thus actually had some green remaining in the grass that edged the large stone patio. Natasha knew far more than she wanted to about the patio, since Peggy and a couple of her coworkers had built it the previous summer with help from Clint. Clint had just done it because he wanted to talk to more FBI agents, Natasha was sure, but he had also made sure to tell her every fucking detail about the process of building the stupid thing, to the point where Natasha felt a vague annoyance just seeing it.

Peggy was already sitting outside, a large pitcher of iced coffee sitting on the table, along with, Natasha was relieved to see, a plate of assorted tarts and cookies, and another of finger sandwiches. Angie always did love playing hostess. Greeting Peggy, Natasha sank into one of the comfy patio chairs, making sure to get one within arm's reach of the snacks.

“Glad to see you didn’t get a call,” she commented to Peggy as the other woman poured Natasha a drink, handing it to her across the table. Peggy groaned.

“Right? God, I needed a day off.”

“Lots of murders lately?” Natasha asked with a wry smile, and Peggy rolled her eyes at her.

“Last night was the first night I got to sleep in my own bed in two weeks.” Natasha winced in sympathy.

“Shit, that’s brutal. All one case, or?” Peggy shook her head.

“No, two in a row, and we don’t usually get assigned them back-to-back like that, but we’d been specifically requested for the second case, and, well,” Peggy waved her hand around in the air in front of her, “you know how it goes.” Natasha nodded, but was stopped from replying by the sound of the doorbell echoing back to them from the front of the house. Peggy made a move to get up, but
Angie hopped up before she had the chance. Natasha sipped her coffee and grabbed a couple of sandwich triangles, sitting in comfortable silence with Peggy for a moment while the sounds of Angie greeting Clint trailed through the house to them.

“So any exciting developments at work?” Natasha asked as the voices drew closer, “Besides the shitty long hours of course.” Peggy rolled her eyes.

“Well, we just got a new member on the team. Do you remember Elle? You probably would have met her at Sharon’s birthday party last year.”

“Um, Elle. Brown hair? In a bob?” Peggy nodded, pulling her long, wavy black hair over her shoulder.

“That’s the one. Well, she left, for a bunch of reasons but it was all probably for the best, and her replacement just started.”

“They working out okay? I know you guys are a tight team—that must have a big impact, any changes in who is on the team.” The voices of Angie and Clint hadn’t gotten any louder, though Natasha could still hear them faintly from inside the house, and she thought vaguely that they must have been waylaid on their way to the backyard.

“Yeah, she’s really competent and insightful, I like her. But, y’know, it’s always an adjustment.” Natasha nodded, grabbing a couple more sandwiches. Peggy looked over at her and smiled, nudging the plate closer to Natasha’s side of the table. Natasha crossed her eyes at the other woman, but grabbed another triangle, and Peggy laughed. She watched Natasha eat for a moment, before frowning.

“How are things at Shield? Sharon’s told me about some… issues she’s been having.” Natasha made a face.

“Yeah, well, you’ve met Rumlow.” Peggy nodded.

“And it was a good thing I wasn’t armed at the time.” She said, and Natasha bit out a surprised laugh.

“Did Sharon tell you about everything… about?”

“That she’s thinking about quitting? Yeah.” Peggy nodded, “I wish there was something else we could do. Rumlow is a fucking shit, but everything else about the job is great.” Natasha hummed her agreement.

“Do you know how her talk with Fury went? She said she’d let me know but I haven’t heard from her.” Peggy shook her head.

“Yeah, she called me last night, he gave her the same line he gave her last time.”

“That he can’t do anything about it unless Brock does something that he can be fired for?” Peggy nodded.

“Yeah, apparently he gave her a bunch of legal stuff to look at. It sounded like he really wants to help her out and get rid of Brock though, so she’s agreed to hang on for a bit longer while they both try and think of a solution that doesn’t involve Sharon leaving and Brock staying.”

“I’m glad. I mean, not that I want Sharon to stay if she’s unhappy, but-“
“You want to keep working with Sharon.” Natasha laughed.

“Basically.” Peggy nodded.

“She’s a good kid,” she said, sounding satisfied, and Natasha smiled at her. She didn’t know much about Sharon and Peggy’s family but she did know that the two cousins had grown up close, more like sisters than anything, even living in the same house at various times. The sounds of Angie and Clint began to draw closer again, and without speaking about it, Natasha and Peggy both fell silent on the subject of Sharon, looking up as the other two entered the backyard. Clint greeted Natasha and Peggy, and both he and Angie put down the plates of food they were holding, Natasha ignoring the smirk Peggy shot her as she reached for some of the new selection. Peggy could bite her, to be honest. Pigs in a blanket were delicious.

As predicted, Clint spent quite a bit of time asking Peggy about her work, questions which she fielded with good humour, while Natasha and Angie also talked shop about the proposed renovations to the hospital. From there, the conversation moved on from work to gossip about their mutual friends, discussion of the upcoming municipal election, and the book club that Angie and Clint wanted to start (they had been talking about it for so long with absolutely no effort to actually start it that Natasha would be shocked if it ever actually materialized). It was nearing four when Natasha and Clint said their goodbyes and headed out from Peggy and Angie’s house.

The subway trip to the pound was short, as it was just a couple blocks down from Clint’s building. Given the proximity, Natasha was kind of surprised that Clint didn’t have even more mutts running around his apartment than he already did. The bell over the door jangled cheerfully as they stepped inside the shadowy interior of the pound. Before Natasha’s eyes had the chance to adjust, a cheerful female voice was calling out a greeting.

“Hey Clint! Welcome back.” Natasha turned to her friend, raising an eyebrow at him. He had the grace to look slightly shamefaced, though he still grinned at her before greeting the staff member that had called out to him. She led them into the back, where a chorus of barks, screeches, and yowls greeted them. Clint was immediately kneeling in front of a cage, greeting the large black dog inside with enthusiasm which the dog eagerly returned. Natasha watched him for a moment, before wandering away down the aisles of cages, glancing aimlessly inside. At the end of the aisle, she paused in front of a cage that held a small black cat. Unlike most of the animals, who came to the front and made greeting noises at her when she walked past, the cat stared haughtily at her from the back corner of the cage.

“Black cats are less likely to be adopted,” the staff member – Ellen? Eileen? – suddenly appeared at Natasha’s shoulder. “People are superstitious. They think they are bad luck.” She looked behind Natasha, towards Clint, who was calling out a question about the dog whose cage he was now in front of. “Excuse me,” she said, walking off. Natasha stared at the cat, who stared back.

“Now who would think that you’re bad luck?” She muttered, turning when Clint called her name.

“Meet Arrow,” he said, pointing down at the large black dog now sitting at his feet, looking up at Clint with an expression of absolute adoration.

“Arrow,” Natasha said dubiously.

“Arrow,” Clint repeated, grinning down at the dog.

Chapter End Notes
UPDATE: the next chapter is done but my poor beta is very sick right now so in the meantime I'm working on Chapter 5 and if you could send positive thoughts their way, that would be much appreciated!!

Just as a heads-up, I just moved to a new city, so while I job-hunt and work on getting myself settled, writing is probably going to fall to the wayside, so there might be a bit of a longer wait for the next chapter. I'll try to get it done as soon as I can, but... stress, y'know?

So going forward, instead of including a bunch of links to outfits, etc mentioned in each chapter, I’ve made a [pinterest board](https://www.pinterest.com) that you can go to to see all reference pics, outfits, and inspiration for this fic.

I wanted to include Trip because I hated the way his character was killed off in AoS so then I gave him a really bad broken leg?? I’m so sorry Trip!! You deserved better from the AoS writers, and you deserved better from me.

Easter Eggs:

[Vera Peters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vera_Peters) was a Member of the Order of Canada. She brought Hodgkins down from a death sentence to a treatable disease and created the lumpectomy method of dealing with breast cancer all while being shunned by the international medical community.

Ride Avenue is named after [Sally Ride](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sally_Ride), the first woman in space.
Bloody and Raw

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains several patients dying. Semi-graphic descriptions of death and injury. Allusions to murder and abuse.

Oh my god it's finally here!!! Chapter four!!! slidingkinsey has promised not to almost get pneumonia again, so it shouldn't be a such a long wait for the next chapter. Though I've also told Mel I'll write her a steve/bucky hockey au for her birthday... and I've started writing self-published erotica for kindle... and I've just started a new job...
*silently panics* no this is fine everything is fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took two weeks of Natasha catching herself changing her route to ensure she casually passed by the animal shelter before she finally went back inside, finding the black cat still where she had left it, staring suspiciously at her from the back of the cage.

“Hey there,” she said. The cat blinked back at her, not moving. The two stared at each other for several long minutes, before Natasha abruptly turned and left. What was she even doing there? She didn’t want a goddamn cat! She could barely take care of herself, she didn’t want a small creature relying on her. She didn’t have the time, the energy, or the capacity to deal with having a pet, for fuck’s sake.

Despite everything she told herself, after that initial visit, she still found herself coming back there every day before work, or after her run, or hanging out with Clint and Kate. Finally, three weeks after she had visited the shelter with Clint, and with very little real thought put into the action, she finally called over the man working that day, and asked how to begin the adoption procedure. Adopting a pet, it turned out, was far more difficult than she had thought. She was slightly embarrassed to admit that she had assumed, with all the animals needing homes, she’d just be able to pick one out, grab it, and go. Instead, she was standing at the counter in the front of the shelter filling out an adoption application questionnaire. She squinted down at the page. There were questions about her family’s situation, lifestyle, and expectations, as well as questions about the specific needs of cats, including diet, housing, enrichment and socialization, training and veterinary care.

Enrichment and socialization? Shit, she was really not prepared for this.

After filling out to the questionnaire to the best of her ability (and feeling pretty confident that no one would ever give her an animal ever) the man informed her that the next step was an interview with an adoption counselor. Feeling more and more surreal about the whole thing, Natasha followed him down the hallway into an office, where she was reintroduced to Eileen, who turned out to be the same staff member that had been there the day Clint got Arrow. As Natasha sat in the chair across from her she commented that the adoption processes had seemed much easier when Clint did it. Eileen laughed.

“Yes, well, Clint is one of our frequent fliers, so to speak,” she explained, “seeing as this is your first time adopting, we want to make sure you understand what adoption will mean, and that both you and the cat will be happy together.” Natasha nodded her understanding. The interview itself turned out to be much less painful than the questionnaire.
“We’ve noticed you visiting the cat of course,” Eileen commented as the interview drew to a close, “I’m quite confident you’ll be a good match together. If you’d like, we can finalize the adoption now.” Natasha’s eyebrows raised in surprise, but she still nodded her assent. Eileen escorted her back to the front room, where she paid less fees than she would have guessed, and then the man was back, handing her a carrier containing the cat. Minutes later, she found herself standing on the steps of the building, taking deep breaths. She had honestly thought, for one reason or another, someone at some point in the proceedings would declare her unfit for cat-parenthood, and that would be that. She glanced down at the carrier. She wasn’t sure how to deal with the revelation that she was apparently, in the eyes of the human society at least, fit to care for another creature.

Two hours later, Natasha found herself struggling through her front door, carrier and large bags full of supplies from the pet store clutched precariously in her hands. She finally managed to make her way through the door, dropping all the bags with a relieved sigh. The cat had seemed fine through their shopping spree, but had yowled the entire time they’d been on the subway. Now that they were inside, it had now fallen silent again. Locking her door behind her, she moved into the living room, sitting down on the couch and setting the carrier down on the table before her, peering uncertainly through the cage at the animal that was regarding her with just as much uncertainty and wariness.

“Now what?” Natasha muttered, immediately twisting her mouth in a scowl. Great, five seconds into cat-ownership and she was already becoming one of those people who talks to their pets like they can understand them. Turning from the cat, she looked around the apartment critically, eyes picking out perilously stacked books and shiny objects that might attract a curious and destructive cat. There wasn’t much. After the chaos that Tania had brought with her, her apartment seemed very empty. Her friend had moved out a week previous, after finally finding a place a couple blocks away, and to be honest Natasha had been missing the company. She refused to entertain the thought that that might have been why she had abruptly ended up with a cat, however. Nope. Definitely not the reason.

Sighing, she returned her attention to the cat that was still staring at her. Reaching forward, she hesitantly unlatched the door of the cage. The cat blinked up at her, but didn’t move. Natasha was suddenly struck by a wave of uncertainty. What had she been thinking? She had no idea how to look after an animal… cats were supposed to just look after themselves weren’t they? What if she had to… her mind drew a blank. She didn’t even know what she might have to do.

Forcing herself to take deep breaths and calm down, she stood, determinately heading back to the door, grabbing the bags of supplies abandoned at the door and heading into the kitchen. After everything that she had survived in her life, getting a cat was certainly not going to be the end of her. Picking an empty corner of the room, she quickly set up the bed and food and water bowls, filling both, before standing uncertainly with the litter box, looking around the room. She didn’t particularly want to have that in the kitchen, but she wasn’t sure where else to put it… wandering around the room for a moment, she finally set the litter box on the floor of the doorless closet next to the emergency exit at the back of the kitchen. She had to shove around some boxes before she was able to set the bag of food on a shelf in the same space, hoping that it was high enough up to keep the cat out of the extra food. She set the toys she had bought on the top of the island, uncertain as to what to do with them right now. Hearing a soft nose behind her, she turned, slightly started to find that the cat had finally ventured out of its carrier, and was now peering around the corner at her.

“Hey there,” she said softly, and the cat meowed up at her, cautiously coming further into the room, looking over at the food and water dishes with interest. Deciding to give the cat space to adjust to its new home, Natasha grabbed her laptop off of the kitchen counter and headed back into the living room, settling in to do some serious googling. She might have just jumped into this whole thing without thinking it through, but she wasn’t going to remain ignorant if she could help it. She hadn’t been sitting for long before she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Keeping her eyes on the
screen, she tracked the cat as it moved across the room, sniffing and poking at the furniture and piles of books before it reached her. Winding around her legs, it finally settled on top of her feet, and Natasha couldn’t help the smile that stretched across her face.

The next morning when she and Clint met for breakfast before work, Natasha was annoyed to find herself fidgeting anxiously, worried about leaving the cat alone in her apartment for the day. When Clint finally pried the reason for her nervousness from her, he predictably began to tease her.

“I can’t believe you decided to become a mom just like that.” He said with a laugh, while Natasha rolled her eyes.

“I’m not a mom,” she said, practicing selective amnesia about the thoughts she herself had had yesterday about being a cat-mom. Clint shot her a knowing look, but didn’t push the subject, instead taking a big bite out of his breakfast sandwich. Natasha wrinkled her nose as yolk ran down her friend’s chin.

“I’m more of a dog person myself,” he garbled through a full mouth, “but I do know a couple things about cats.”

“Swallow, Jesus, Clint. You’re disgusting.” She said, biting the inside of her cheek to stop from smiling at the baleful look he shot her.

“Is it a boy or girl cat?” He asked once he’d swallowed. Natasha shrugged, and Clint raised an eyebrow at her.

“What, they didn’t tell you? How about a name?” Natasha shook her head.

“No, they told me, but I mean, it’s a cat,” Natasha sighed, “I don’t think my cat cares about gender.” Clint laughed at her, but gestured for her to continue. “They said I could rename it if I wanted, see what stuck.”

“What was it’s name?”

“Midnight,” Clint paused.

“Is… is it a black cat?” Natasha made a face, nodding, and Clint laughed.

“Creative,” he said, and the conversation moved on to tips for cat ownership. Some of Clint’s advice was good, though she was pretty sure that everything he said about catnip was completely incorrect. However, her worrying turned out to be for naught, as she arrived home to find the cat curled up asleep on the couch, with nothing in the apartment appearing out of place or destroyed. Despite this, Natasha continued to worry about pretty much everything. After a full week passed with no major disasters, however, Natasha started to relax. Soon, her and the cat had settled into a comfortable companionship, where they both largely ignored each other except for sometimes when the cat would curl up in Natasha’s lap, or Natasha would entice it out to play with treats and toys. She also finally settled on a name for it.

Liho.

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Their day had not been going well. A call to a domestic incident had ended with Clint and Natasha frantically trying to save a woman that they both knew was dead as soon as they saw her lying on the living room floor in a pool of blood. After bringing her body back to the hospital to be declared dead by a doctor, Natasha locked herself in the bathroom so she could have her panic attack in peace. The
soothing sounds of Clint rambling on about nothing barely reached her where she sat, curled up on the cold tile with her head resting against the door until she felt like she could breath again. Clint hadn’t said anything, he wouldn’t, and he knew her too well to think she was going to offer any explanation. By this point in their partnership she was certain he had mapped what calls provoked adverse reactions from her, and had drawn his own conclusions anyway. She didn’t mind, really. This way she didn’t have to talk about it, and his assumptions were probably close enough to the truth. Close enough, anyway, that it didn’t feel like a lie when she met his eyes and told him she was fine.

She was fine, really. She had been feeling shaky but okay to keep working when, a couple hours later, they received a call of a man having difficulty breathing. Arriving at the house, Natasha and Clint performed a quick assessment before loading the man into the ambulance. Their attempts to assess what had happened and provide treatment were not aided by his crying wife, who kept shouting at them and getting in their way. Natasha understood that people had different, and often adverse, reactions to stress, but having someone scream ‘you’re killing him!’ while trying to save a life was both draining and desperately unhelpful. Halfway to the hospital, the patient stopped breathing altogether, and despite Clint’s best efforts, he wasn’t able to reestablish airflow before they reached the hospital. The two paramedics were still shaking off the sight of the hysterical wife desperately trying to cling to her husband’s limp hand while the ER nurses attempted to remove her when they were called out to a house fire, only to be forced back by the firefighters. Fifteen minutes later, an exhausted-looking firefighter approached them to let them know that the coroner had been called, and they wouldn’t be needed. Nodding tightly, and trying not to retch at the smell of smoke that had buried itself in their lungs, Natasha and Clint climbed back into the rig. They drove in silence, Natasha unconsciously biting at her lips as she fought her body’s exhausted urge to just curl up and cry.

Sometimes Natasha really hated her job.

By the time the day narrowed down to the final hours of her shift, she was beyond ready to just go home and hug Liho and sleep forever. The universe apparently decided to ignore her desperate wishes, however, as a final call came in just before the end of their shift, sending Natasha and Clint running out of the staff room and into the bay. Climbing into their rig, the two settled into a tense silence as Natasha drove them to the Code 4. Both were thinking about the call, a toddler who had fallen out of a third story window, and bracing themselves for what they might find when they got to the scene. Dispatch had reported that the child was still alive according to the distraught father who had made the call, but both of them knew that a parent might not be willing to accept reality in such a situation. Natasha knew from experience that both how patients fell and how they landed made a great deal of difference in the injuries sustained from falling, and the survival rate. She also knew that below 4 to 5 stories, chances of survival were much higher, a statistic she kept running through her head as she let the GPS guide her to the apartment building.

Even the GPS seemed drained of it’s usual dry snark as it gave its final few directions to the address given to them by dispatch. They turned out to be unnecessary anyways as, when they turned into the parking lot, it became immediately obvious which building was the correct one. A large group of people were crowded in a loose crescent at the corner of one of the buildings that made up the square, the majority of whom looked up and backed away at the sound of the sirens. Pulling up as close as they could get given the parked vehicles filling the lot, Natasha threw the ambulance into park. Grabbing her kit, Natasha quickly climbed into the back, grabbing the pediatric spinal board before sprinting after Clint across the lawn, following the gap in the crowd that had formed to let Clint through. Her eyes were instantly drawn to the tiny body crumpled on the ground, blocking out the man kneeling over it and Clint, who was talking to him urgently as he knelt and began his assessment. Almost without her permission, Natasha’s eyes flicked to the open window three stories above them, curtains blowing out of the open square in a terribly picturesque fashion, and she had to
force her face to remain in a neutral expression.

Swallowing roughly, Natasha joined Clint on the ground, listening carefully to the man’s answers to the paramedic’s questions. In his panic, he was switching back and forth between English and what she thought might be Tagalog, making it difficult for her to follow what he was saying. Several times, she was forced to firmly restate her questions, trying to keep her voice calm as she guided the man through their assessment questions. She was relieved to see that the child’s chest was falling and rising with breath, even though the child remained unconscious. She helped Clint move the tiny figure onto the spinal board while the father watched on, his breath catching roughly as the child remained limp and unmoving. Strapping down the child with efficient movements, she and Clint carried him into the ambulance, the father following behind, his face streaked with tears.

In the ambulance, the man kept out of Clint’s way, crooning soft words in his native language to his child. Natasha could feel her exhaustion with the day sinking into her bones as she drove, and she prayed to the gods that the child would be alright. Just this one thing, at the end of this day, just let this child be okay. Her cautious exploration of Hinduism in the last couple of years had yet to produce any strong convictions in her as to the power of the gods, but she needed this child to be okay, and so as she sped them through the city, she prayed.

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The emergency room nurses along with the attending had hustled the child and father away as soon as they had burst through the doors of the emergency room, over half an hour ago, but Natasha still lingered. When she had announced her intention to stay, Clint had just nodded his understanding, offering to return the ambulance to the bay on his own, leaving her to pace a tight, nervous line in a corner of the waiting room. She was off now, and could technically go home whenever she wanted. She also knew that if things didn’t go well with the child, it would just make her feel all the worse for it, but she just… she really need something to go well that day, and, fair or not, she was pinning that need on the toddler. So she paced and she prayed and she waited.

Finally, she spotted the father entering the waiting room from the hospital proper, face drawn with exhaustion as he headed towards the public phone. Spotting her, he changed direction, stopping in front of her and offering her a tired smile. The sight of that smile made something deep inside Natasha instantly unclench, and she found herself drawing a deep, steadying breath before the man even spoke.

“Thank you,” he said, voice almost painfully sincere as he looked up at her, and the relief that Natasha felt was enough to someone alleviate her customary discomfort at being thanked for doing her job. “Thank you,” he repeated, “for saving Bayani. Thank you for helping my son.” Natasha offered him a tired smile of her own, shrugging awkwardly. She tamped down on her urge to offer one of her usual brush-off responses.

“I’m happy he’s okay,” she said instead. The man nodded.

“I have to call my partner. Please excuse me.” Natasha watched as the man walked away, the nervous energy that had been sustaining her collapsing in a rush as she sank down in one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs. Scrubbing her hands over her eyes, she allowed her head to fall back and eyes to slip closed while she sat and just breathed for a moment. She didn’t think she had fallen asleep, but she was drifting in her exhaustion when she heard someone next to her break out into a loud coughing fit, startling her into opening her eyes and sitting up. Turning, she was surprised to find herself meeting familiar blue eyes with her own brown ones.

“Steve?” She said, voice betraying her surprise. He gave her a smile, before breaking out into the same ugly, dry, hacking cough as before, though this one was much more subdued. Sitting up
properly, her hand hovered nervously above his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” She asked as his coughing subsided, and he sat back with a groan. Her eyes flicked up and down his body, slouched in the seat, taking in the outfit he was wearing, which consisted of a jean romper and a pair of black motorcycle boots. She was pretty sure that romper was meant for women or, considering Steve’s small statue, maybe teenage girls. She was also pretty sure she shouldn’t find it hot.

Fuck.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he gave her another smile, this one more tired looking than his first one, “had a bad asthma attack earlier so they’ve got me just hanging around until they’ve got the results for the x rays they took.” He wrinkled his nose, “They want to make sure there aren’t any infections or complications that helped cause the attack. Of course, you probably already know this…” His eyes flicked over her face, and he hesitated before speaking again. “Are… are you okay?” Natasha was nodding before he even finished the question, and he raised a skeptical eyebrow at her. “Are you sure? You looked pretty out of it sitting here. Are you working?”

“No, I just got off.” She sighed. She really should get moving but no matter how uncomfortable the chair she was in was, she wasn’t yet ready to face the prospect of having to make her way to the dispatch centre and then home. Besides, Steve was smiling at her again.

“Would you like a coffee?” She asked impulsively, and cursed herself when Steve looked startled. He quickly recovered however, and gave his assent, so she dragged herself out of her chair to the vending machine. Returning with two cups in hand, she handed one off to Steve before sitting and taking a sip of her own. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. Gods, the vending machine coffee was worse than coffee from The Beast, if that was even possible. She took another sip. Steve for his part hummed contentedly as he wrapped his hands around the warm cup.

“So, asthma attack?” She asked, to instant regret. What the fuck was wrong with her? She wasn’t on shift and Steve wasn’t her patient, why was she acting like he was? Steve for his part seemed to take her extremely personal question in stride, however, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. She couldn’t help but notice that he looked even cuter not covered in blood or hanging upside down. Though she supposed neither of those were particularly good looks for anyone, no matter how hard Steve had tried to power past them with his flirting.

“Apparently charcoal dust isn’t very good for your lungs,” Steve said in answer to her implied question, voice dry. Natasha gave him a judgemental look, and he rolled his eyes again, adjusting his grip on his cup. Glancing down at his hands again, she saw that his nail beds were black, and he was currently smudging black dust all over the white coffee cup.

“Maybe the guy with severe asthma shouldn’t be working with charcoal, hm?” Natasha commended.

“True Art cannot be stopped by such mortal concerns,” Steve said, voice lofty, and Natasha snorted out a laugh. He grinned at her, before finally taking a sip of his own coffee.

She almost spit out her her own mouthful of coffee at the look of disgust on Steve’s face.

“What the fuck?” he said once he had swallowed, looking down at his cup like it had personally offended him. She couldn’t help the laughter that burst out of her, even if Steve glared at her for it. “This is disgusting,” he said stiffly.

“Yup,” she agreed cheerfully, and he narrowed his eyes at her, before glancing back at his cup. After a long pause he shrugged and took another drink, and she laughed again. As he drank she examined his face. The smudges of charcoal on his skin wasn’t limited to his hands and she noted the way it was smudged adorably across his nose, staining his blond hair in spots, and swiped across his
forehead. Blinking, she realized he had caught her staring, slyly smiling at her from under his
ridiculously long lashes, and she fought the urge to bite her lip.

“So what are you working on with charcoal that you absolutely cannot use any other, less deadly,
medium for?” She asked, feeling a flash of annoyance at the way his eyes shone with mirth at her
attempt to draw the focus off herself. She couldn’t help but smile at how well it worked, however,
with Steve quickly launching into an extended explanation of his current project, which involved
nudes of injured veterans. His descriptions of the emotion that he was trying to convey through the
use of charcoal quickly segued into a rant about the treatment of injured veterans, homelessness, and
failing social support systems.

As Natasha watched him wave his arms around, eyes alive with the force of his anger, she couldn’t
help but be slightly amazed at how much caring was packed into such a small man. She had no
doubt that the anger he was showing now was connected with the anger that had gotten him into a
bar fight previously. He pulled out his phone to show her some of the completed pieces from the
series, and as Natasha leaned into him, she was amazed to find that despite the violence she knew
him capable of, and the anger she knew he harbored towards the world, she wasn’t wary of him at
all. Their shoulders pressed together, and he was back to talking about textures and the specific
impact of different mediums, but Natasha was only half-listening, too focused on her own realization
that she wasn’t afraid of this man, despite everything. She knew, with a dead certainty that she had
experienced in so few parts of her life, that men were always capable of violence, always capable of
hurting her. And yet she felt like Steve Rogers probably wouldn’t physically harm her, and would
probably do everything possible to protect her from any such threat. The force of that realization left
her reeling, the unfamiliar feeling of safety shaking her, and she quickly pulled away, excusing
herself and ignoring the slight hurt and confusion she could read in his eyes at her abrupt departure.

“I’ll see you around Steve,” she said quickly before any more ridiculous thoughts could cross her
mind, the hurt look in his eyes replaced with his usual flirtatious one as he smiled up at her.

“See you later Natasha,” he called after her retreating back, and she stomped down on the urge to
look back as she hurried out the doors.

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The heat of the height of summer was finally waning. There was now a cool bite in the air long into
the morning, and evenings required a jacket to prevent chill. It was still early in the evening as
Natasha made her way slowly up the sidewalk, however, and the warmth of the day lingered still.
The long colourful skirt she was wearing passed cooly over her legs as she moved, the bright reds of
the floral pattern matching the red in the red-and-white striped long-sleeved crop-top she was
wearing. Her outfit was completed with a pair of strappy flats, a small purse, and round sunglasses,
her hair straightened and tucked behind her ears. She slowed her strides further as her eyes flicked
over the numbers of the townhouses she was passing, finally stopping and checking the number
against the address she had saved on her phone, before heading up the steps and ringing the bell. She
listened it echo through the house, shifting from foot to foot as she waited. Tania had texted Natasha
the day before, asking her to come over for dinner when she was free next. Natasha had been
working the day Tania had moved out, which hadn’t been a big deal since Tania had just moved
with the help of some girls from work, but it did mean that Natasha had neither seen Tania’s new
place, nor met her new roommates/landlords.

Tania was sharing the townhouse with a married couple, a woman who worked for the military and
her husband, who was a psychology professor at the University. Tania had been gushing to Natasha
about her new home, and looking up at the townhouse, Natasha could see why. It was in far better
repair than Tania’s old place, despite costing less, and as Tania answered the door and gestured her
inside, Natasha saw that the inside matched the outside. The space was light and airy, with high ceilings, and was tastefully furnished, with gorgeous artwork lining the walls. Natasha thought she might have even spotted a piece or two of Tania’s artwork hanging over the stairs leading away from the entryway, though she was a bit too far away to be sure. Giving her friend a hug, Natasha smiled up at her. With the move and Tania finally getting more hours at work, she hadn’t had the chance to see her friend in person for longer than she liked, though they still talked nearly every day. Her friend had changed her hair since she’d seen her, and the long thin braids that hung from her head now faded from black to a rich purple before ending off at a light violet at the tips. Pulling back, Natasha took in the dress her friend was wearing, an adorable white strapless dress with an almost watercolour-esque pattern of lips on it, accompanied by gold bangles on both arms. She looked amazing, and Natasha told her as much. Tania laughed, returning the compliment as Natasha bent to remove her shoes.

Tania had told Natasha that her new landlords had been looking to rent out their spare room because the wife was overseas a lot, and the husband hated how empty the house was in her absence. Looking around her, Natasha could see how the open spaces of the townhouse could easily become cold and empty when unoccupied, but at the same time were quickly filled with Tania’s bright voice as she led Natasha further into the home. In the kitchen they were met by the couple in question: a short yet very intimidating Chinese woman who introduced herself as Melinda, and a tall black man with closely cropped hair, who was introduced as Andrew. Natasha accepted the offer of a glass of wine from Melinda while Andrew, who was busy over the stove, assured them that dinner would be ready soon. She settled against the island, where Tania was already leaning herself.

“It’s very nice to finally meet you Natasha,” Melinda said, leaning against the wall opposite Tania and Natasha with her own glass of wine in hand, “Tania has told us so much about you. It sounds like you girls have been friends for a very long time?” Natasha nods.

“Yeah, I think we met when we were what, ten? Eleven?” Tania nodded.

“Sometime around then, yeah. Haven’t been able to separate us since.”

“Though our teachers always tried,” Natasha added, and Tania laughed.

“Yeah, we were always little shit disturbers. Not very conducive to a productive learning environment, or so we were told.” The two women grinned at each other, Melinda smiling slightly at their exchange.

“And now you’re a paramedic?” She asked Natasha, who nodded.

“Yeah, for about… seven years now.” Melinda hums in response.

“That must be quite exciting,” Andrew comments from his post by the stove. Natasha shrugs.

“It is and it isn’t. It’s more like long periods of incredible boredom interspersed with short periods of super stressful and intense activity.”

“Sounds like war,” Melinda says with a twist of the lips, and Natasha gives her a small smile.

“I guess. We have a lot of time between calls most of the time, and only some of the calls are really intense, lots are false alarms or pre-scheduled transports or just non-life-threatening injuries. Like, the shift that I had the other day, we only had one call that was an actual life-and-death emergency. But other days we have tons.” Melinda nods. “It’s definitely the kind of job where every day brings its own, brand new challenges.”
“So what made you decide to become a paramedic?” Natasha tilts her head.

“Um, I’ve always been very calm in emergency situations, I guess, and I liked biology and stuff in school, but I don’t have the, um, temperament to be a nurse or a doctor.” Natasha bit her lip, she always hated answering that question. “It seems a bit cliche to say, but I just wanted to help people.” Melinda nodded, apparently satisfied with Natasha’s response, and Natasha paused, before asking, “And you’re in the military?” Melinda nodded again.

“Yeah. Can’t really talk about it though.” She smiled, and somehow that didn’t make her any less terrifying. Natasha wasn’t sure what it was about the petite woman that screamed ‘dangerous’, but it was there, in the way she held herself and the careful way she spoke. Nonetheless, Natasha smiled back at her, grateful that the woman had allowed her the subject change. “It’s classified,” Melinda continued, and Natasha’s smile turned uncertain. Was that a joke?

“She’s a bit of a legend around campus actually,” Andrew interjected, to Natasha’s relief, and she turned towards him. “She shows up so rarely that it’s a bit of a thrill for the students and staff whenever she does.” Melinda laughed.

“That’s just because you refuse to tell them anything about your personal life,” she said, smiling at her husband over the top of her glass. He smiled back at her, before announcing that dinner was ready. There were several moments of shuffling chaos as the group moved food and wine and themselves over to the table, settling in and spending several moments just chewing silently, enjoying the food.

“This is really good,” Natasha said, pointing her fork down at the roast on her plate.

“Thank you Natasha, I try,” Andrew said with a laugh. The conversation picked up after that, now that everyone was no longer focused on the food. They managed to cover a variety of small-talk staples, including work, family, and life in the city. Natasha found herself becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the assessing looks Andrew gave her at the answers to her questions, acutely aware that he was a psychologist. She was pretty sure he wasn’t actually, like, psychoanalyzing her or anything, he seemed far too professional and nice for that, but she couldn’t help the niggling voice at the back of her head that told her not to give too much away. As the evening progressed, she found herself giving shorter and shorter answers. Happily, Tania easily picked up the conversational slack, and several hours later Natasha bid the three goodnight, leaving with no small sense of relief even if she had enjoyed meeting the couple and was endlessly pleased Tania was happy in her new living arrangement. She walked home, savoring the cool evening air against her skin, thinking of nothing in particular.

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The next morning dawned wet and grey and Natasha was grumpy before she had even left the house. Shuffling out of bed, she slowly made herself a latte, before standing in front of her living room window, staring out at the rain that was pouring down from the sky. Making faces at the rolling echoes of thunder as she sipped at her coffee, she briefly debated leaving the house early as was her habit, before dismissing that idea in favour of staying out of the rain as long as humanly possible. She lazed around the living room instead, watching a cooking show (just because she didn’t cook didn’t mean she couldn’t appreciate people who could), Liho lying in her lap, and texting back and forth with Clint, though that conversation mostly just consisted of raincloud emojis and crying faces. Finally, she had to accept the fact that she was going to have to leave the warm, dry interior of her flat and brave the disgusting outside. After a fruitless search for her rain jacket, Natasha finally had to concede defeat, knowing that it was definitely far too windy for an umbrella to be anything other than an annoyance. Pulling on a pair of black leggings, her ‘fuck off’ sweatshirt, and a jean jacket,
Natasha threw her hair up in a clumsy bun, shoved her shoes in a pair of white and gold wedge sneakers, and, after pouring another latte into her travel mug, finally braved the weather.

Though she half-ran to the subway and then to the dispatch centre, she was still well on her way to being soaked through by the time she stumbled through the entryway of the building. After catching her breath, Natasha made her way through security and headed further into the building. After checking the time on her phone and finding she still had some time left before the start of her shift, she turned into the staff room rather than the locker room. She was happy to see Pepper, Maria, and Clint all huddled around a table, and all looking just as miserable as she felt. Throwing herself down in the chair between Maria and Clint, she allowed herself to slump down in the seat.

“I hate the rain,” she mumbled with a frown as she took a sip from her mug. Clint made a sympathetic face at her, his grey sweatpants turned nearly black from the water, his jacket not faring any better.

“If we get one more call because some pinche idiota has hydroplaned and sprained a wrist, I’m going to lose my fucking mind.” Maria grumbled, while Pepper solemnly nodded her agreement.

“Ugh,” Natasha wrinkled her nose, “it’s been busy this morning then?” Maria shook her head.

“So busy. It’s ridiculous. And there was only two of us on.”

“You guys and…?”

“Sharon and Brock. They’re out on a last call right now, but should be back soon.”

“Hopefully,” Natasha said, looking down at her watch, “they’re off in two minutes.” She stood with a groan. “Which means we should probably get ready.” She kicked at Clint’s chair, and he grunted at her, but stood as well, following her down the hall towards the locker rooms, squelching slightly as he went. Changing took Natasha longer than usual, as she had to peel her wet clothes off, grumbling to herself about stupid fuckin’ rain as she quickly dried her hair before throwing it back up. She didn’t know where her rain coat had gone, but she had a sneaking suspicious that Clint had taken it last time he was at hers (of course, he wasn’t wearing it today, because Clint).

Heading back into the hallway, she almost ran into Clint, who was exiting the men’s locker rooms. Together, they headed down the hallway, but were pulled up short at the staff room by the sound of raised voices. Peering into the room, they saw that Sharon and Brock had indeed finally returned from their call. Sharon was standing to the side, arms crossed over her chest and looking exhausted while Brock and Maria yelled at each other. Pepper had a hand on Maria’s arm, but that didn’t seem to be doing much to dissuade the shorter woman as she viciously stabbed a finger towards Brock. Rumlow for his part was smirking as he looked down at Maria.

“If you can’t take some constructive criticism, maybe you shouldn’t do this job,” he said, voice mocking.

“Vete a la verga culero,” Maria bit out, voice shaking with her anger, “I will fucking ruin you, you piece of shit, no me jodas.” Turning and shaking off Pepper’s arm, Maria stalked out of the room, Natasha and Clint quickly stepping to the side out of her way. Pepper quickly followed her, rolling her eyes at Natasha as she walked past. Sharon was standing to the side, arms crossed over her chest and looking exhausted while Brock and Maria yelled at each other. Pepper had a hand on Maria’s arm, but that didn’t seem to be doing much to dissuade the shorter woman as she viciously stabbed a finger towards Brock. Rumlow for his part was smirking as he looked down at Maria.

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“What?” He said with another smirk, his eyes challenging, and Natasha rolled hers in return, grabbing Clint and leaving without dignifying Brock with a response. In the bay, she spotted Maria
and Pepper talking quietly by their ambulance, but after sharing a glance with Clint, decided to leave them alone for now. Either Pepper or Maria would probably tell them what had happened once they had calmed down some. In the meantime, she and Clint headed over to their own ambulance to begin the daily ritual of checks and restocking. The previous day had been quite slow, so the ambulance was very clean and stocked, and they were quickly left with nothing to do, finding themselves idly leaning against the back of the rig and waiting for a call to come in.

They didn’t have to wait long.

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Natasha was already soaked from their last call when they pulled up behind the police and fire trucks on the side of the highway, but they hadn’t had time to go back to the dispatch centre and dry off before they were off to another accident. The last she’d heard Pepper and Maria were on the other side of town dealing with a messy shooting at a gas station, leaving Clint and Natasha running from accident to accident. Their shift had been pretty much steady after that first quiet period, and Natasha was getting anxious to restock the back of the rig. She didn’t have time to linger on that thought, however, as both she and Clint slid out of the front of the ambulance, kits in hand as they ran through the downpour to the two crumpled cars sitting side by side in the grassy ditch.

Through the rain and glow of flashing lights, Natasha saw there was another ambulance already at the scene of the accident. Two paramedics wearing the uniform of RedRoom were helping two patients into the back, and Natasha frowned at them briefly before turning her attention to navigating the wet grass. A brief conference with the firefighters standing nearby informed them that they were going to have to wait until they had removed the door from the second car to get at their patient. She and Clint stood to the side to wait, water dripping down the back of her uniform raincoat and off the end of her nose. Her hair quickly became plastered to her face as she stood shivering, stepping from foot to foot in a vain attempt to warm up against the chill of the rain.

“The other ambulance is RedRoom,” she said to Clint, nudging his shoulder, and he looked down at her briefly before his eyes cut to the other ambulance, which was prepping for departure.

“I noticed,” he said, voice low, “must be pretty busy tonight if they’re calling multiple companies to the same accident.” Natasha nodded. Normally, one company would service each individual call, to avoid unnecessary overlap and conflicts, whether of personnel or methods, but the day had been far busier than the schedule had accounted for, and Natasha wasn’t really surprised to find other companies being called out to the same scene. She just wished it hadn’t been a RedRoom ambulance – seeing the familiar logo always made her feel tense and edgy. However, the ambulance quickly disappeared into the rain, and Natasha returned to complaining about the rain to Clint.

“How are you still complaining about this?” He finally said, fond and exasperated in equal measures. “It’s been raining all day!” Natasha narrowed her eyes at her friend.

“I will be complaining about the rain until the day I die. After I die too. My ghost will be chilling above my grave, complaining about the fucking rain.” Clint laughed at her, but before he could comment they were finally called forward by the firefighters. Working together, they quickly performed an assessment on the elderly man sitting in the car. It was soon apparent that he was having an acute stress reaction to the accident, his voice weak and words garbled, and, with a glance at each other, Clint and Natasha agreed to treat him as an unreliable patient.

Performing a visual check, Natasha found no external injuries other than a few minor cuts and bruises. Stepping back to confer with Clint and the cop that had taken statements from the occupants of the other vehicle, Natasha and Clint briskly agreed that there was a good chance of a neck or spinal injury, given the velocity of the crash and the man’s age. They both ran to grab the spine
board from the rig, putting the cop in charge of making sure the old man didn’t move while they were gone. Once the man was completely immobilized on the board, Clint and Natasha settled him into the back of the rig, Natasha climbing through to the front to start the ambulance, switching on the sirens as she turned onto the highway. In the back, Clint began to assess the patient, speaking loudly so that Natasha would know what he was doing.

“Respiration adequate,” Clint called out, “Sp02 is… shit, Sp02 is 82 percent on room air. Administering oxygen via nonbreather mask at 15 lpm.” Natasha slowed down to take a corner, nodding along at Clint’s actions. She didn’t think she’d ever been so acutely aware of rain in her life after the number of crashes she’d seen that day. Since the elderly man was relatively stable, she felt okay about driving a bit more slowly than she would normally. She knew Clint would tell her if he thought they needed to hurry up.

“Initiating intravenous infusion of saline. Systolic blood pressure is… 80 mmHg.” Clint paused, and Natasha flicked her eyes to the rearview mirror.

“Is it rising?” She asked Clint, who was carefully examining the monitor. After a long, tense moment he finally shook his head.

“Only went up to 83 mmHg. Applying a vasopressor agent at 5 mcg per kg per minute.”

“You using dopamine?”

“Yeah,” Clint replied, leaning across the patient to pull some out of the drawers before quickly setting up the titration. He watched the monitor, announcing when it finally reached 10 mcg/kg/minute.

“How’re we doing?” Clint asked, and Natasha glanced down at the GPS, who replied for her.

“Approximately 12 more minutes until we reach the hospital, factoring in slower speeds due to inclimate weather,” it announced dryly.

“Alright then,” Clint said, “checking blood glucose level. Aaaaaand we’re at 53 mg per dL.” He glanced down at the patient uncertainly, before meeting Natasha’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Not sure if he’s symptomatic for hypoglycemia.” Natasha hummed. The stress of the accident and the rain would make it difficult to detect symptoms like clamminess and anxiety.

“You said 53?”

“Yeah. Oh, 52 now.”

“Okay then I’d do a half dose of 50 percent Dextrose and then reassess.” The sounds of Clint rummaging around in the drawers filtered up to her.

“Aright, administering 12.5 grams of 50 percent Dextrose.” Several minutes passed in silence, before Clint spoke again.

“Blood glucose now at 51. Administering second half dose of Dextrose.” Natasha pulled up to the emergency entrance of the hospital just as Clint finished speaking, and they were both quickly drawn into the carefully controlled chaos of transferring the patient over to the hospital’s care. Stepping back outside ten minutes later, Natasha couldn’t help the grin that broke over her face as she saw that the rain had finally stopped. It was still grey and overcast, and it might start raining again, but for the time being, the air was filled with the sound of water dripping off vehicles and buildings, rather than the steady roar of the rain falling. Clint laughed as he pulled up next to her, and he teased her gently as they climbed back into the rig.
“Aren’t you happy? Now you won’t run the risk of melting!”

“Whatever,” she said, still smiling. “Let’s go change into dry uniforms, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Clint said, his voice just as relieved as hers at the thought of finally being dry, no matter what he claimed about his imperviousness to being wet.

“And I wasn’t going to melt,” she said, voice haughty, while Clint laughed.

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With the end of the storm came a significant decrease in calls, and they were finally able to restock and wipe down the back of their rig, which unfortunately involved cleaning out a lot of mud. Natasha scowled down at the metal floor as she viciously scrubbed the brush back and forth over the dirt that had managed to find its way into every nook and cranny of the back of the rig. She and Clint had pulled the stretcher and all of the cabinets out of the vehicle, leaving Natasha to clean the floors and walls while Clint cleaned everything they had pulled out. The radio was on, and Natasha found herself humming along through her annoyance, finally smiling when Clint burst out into song. Natasha resisted for a minute before joining in, and the two friends finished cleaning that way, singing along to whatever came on the radio. They had just started to pull the cabinets back into the back of the rig when Maria and Pepper wandered up to them, leaning against the open doors of the ambulance.

“I just want to go home and sleep for a hundred years,” Pepper announced, “and then maybe a hundred more.” Maria groaned, rubbing her face.

“I swear to dios, I was about ready to call up my mamá and tell her and Matías to start gathering up the animals in pairs of two.” Maria’s mother and younger brother, who lived on the farm she had grown up on just outside the city, were frequent features in her stories, though none of the paramedics aside from Pepper had ever actually met them. Pepper, when asked, would just say that ‘you can see where she gets it from, my god’, and no one knew if she was talking about Maria’s temper, her tendency to cuss like a sailor, or her ability to get shit done with absolutely zero fuss. Natasha had also once overheard a phone call between an irate Ms. Hill and Maria, in which her mother called her by her full name - Maria Fernanda Antonella Hill - a piece of knowledge that Natasha treasured. And, of course, immediately shared with Clint so that he could call Maria by her full name and piss her off to no end.

“I was pretty sure this one was about ready to up and quit and move to the desert,” Clint said, jerking his thumb at Natasha as they maneuvered a cabinet back into the rig. Natasha rolled her eyes at him, but didn’t deny it.

“Ugh. Don’t even. I’m just so done with today,” Maria groaned, and Natasha abruptly remembered her earlier blow-up with Brock.

“So what happened with Rumlow earlier?” Clint asked, apparently having the same thought.

“That cabron is so full of shit,” Maria bit out.

“He was just being Brock,” Pepper added, as if no further explanation was necessary which, honestly, it wasn’t really. Brock was being Brock was being an absolute piece of shit.

“He’s always so full of himself, has the fucking nerve to tell me how to do my job, as if I haven’t been doing this long before him, as if I’m not far above him.” Maria and Pepper were, in fact, the senior paramedics at SHIELD, and had won multiple awards for their work and for their creation of
new and better techniques for providing excellent patient care and for saving lives. The fact that Brock had the gall to tell Maria how to do her job was… well, it wasn’t unexpected, but it was incredibly arrogant.

“Anyways, we’re off now,” Pepper said before Maria could launch into a complete rant about all the ways that she hated Brock Rumlow (that he was making Sharon miserable always featured heavily), “we just wanted to stop and say bye.” She looked down at her watch. “Tony and Rhodey are starting now I think.” Waving their friends off, Natasha and Clint continued pulling the last of their supplies back up into the ambulance. They hadn’t yet seen Rhodey and Tony, and had just finished putting the ambulance back together when their radios squaked.

“Call to all available ambulances, we have a Code 3 at Radić Avenue and Cannon Street.”

“Dispatch this is ambulance 495, on our way.”

“Copy that 495. Three patients, one with severe injuries, two others with minor. Police are on scene.” Natasha wrinkled her nose at that last piece of information as she climbed back into the front of their rig, settling into her seat with a sigh. Turning over the engine and flicking on the sirens, she pulled out of the bay, turning left.

“You need the GPS?” Clint asked, slumping into his seat, but Natasha shook her head. “Nah, I’ve got it.” She glanced over at her partner, before returning her eyes to the road. “Coffee after this?”

“Yes,” Clint sighed fervently. Natasha privately agreed. This was turning out to be a very long day.

It wasn’t long before they arrived at their destination, and as they pulled up behind the police car, Natasha’s eyes scanned the scene in front of them. A young woman, hijab dishevelled and face streaked with tears, was talking to a police officer while another officer talked to several calmer-looking people near her. An additional cop was standing glaring down at two cuffed men sitting on the curb, while another stood, shifting nervously, above a small body crumpled on the ground.

“I’ll check the two with minor injuries then join you with the other guy,” Clint said as he grabbed his kit, and Natasha nodded her agreement as she grabbed hers, both paramedics quickly exiting the vehicle and hurrying across the sidewalk. Natasha ignored Clint as he headed over to the cop and two men by the curb, her vision narrowing to the figure lying prone on the ground. Though they were facing away from her and she couldn’t yet see any injuries, she could see the way that they were curled up on themselves in pain, and quickly darted around the cop. Drawing in a sharp breath of surprise, she found herself once again facing Steve Roger’s bloody face. Dropping to her knees, she breathed out a sigh of relief when he cracked his eyes open, peering up at her through swollen eyes and bloody lashes.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” he mumbled, trying for a grin but failing with an obvious wince.

“Jesus.” Natasha muttered, casting her eyes over him. His face was swollen and bloody, and the knees of his skinny jeans had been torn out, the fabric and skin beneath covered with blood. From the way he was curled in on himself, and was holding his arms, she suspected he’d sustained injuries to his torso, but couldn’t do a visual check thanks to the large, loosely draped black sweater.

“I know,” Steve said weakly, “I look great. Please, just try to restrain yourself.” Natasha couldn’t
help her smile, though it quickly disappeared when Steve shifted and groaned.

“Can you hear me? Can you tell me where you’re hurt?” Natasha asked, casting her eyes once more over his body.

“Face,” Steve said, breathing shallowly, and Natasha barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes despite the worry that was filling her.

“Besides the lacerations and contusions on your face and knees,” she clarified, “do you have any further injuries? Your ribs? Your arms? Are you dizzy? Nauseous?” Steve tried to move, to do what Natasha didn’t know, but quickly stilled with a muffled moan of pain.

“Um. Ribs. Broken probably.” He winced again. “Definitely. I mean,” he smiled weakly, “I’d know.” Natasha frowned at the implication that he was familiar with what broken ribs felt like, but Steve wasn’t done. “Arm might be broken too.”

“Fuck,” Natasha breathed out, quickly unzipping her kit and pulling on a pair of gloves, before pulling out bandages and beginning to wrap his knees. Though his face was covered in blood, nothing seemed to currently be bleeding, so she focused on wrapping the sluggishly bleeding cuts on his knees.

“How’s your head?” She asked, noticing he’d never answered her if he was dizzy or nauseous.

“Head’s fine,” he said, wincing on a smile when she shot him a suspicious look. “I swear I ain’t tryin’ to hide anything from you. Only reason I’m not sitting up right now is because my ribs hurt so much when I tried, it just didn’t really seem worth the pain. Though… if I’d know you were coming, I might have made a bit more of an effort, cleaned myself up a bit.” Then he winked at her.

For fuck’s sake.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” came a voice from behind them, and they both turned to see Clint standing above them, a shocked look on his face. “That you Rogers?” Steve attempted another weak smile.

“Heya,” he said, “sorry, I can’t remember your name?” Natasha ignored Clint and Steve reintroducing each other in favour of turning and catching the eye of the cop that had been guarding Steve.

“We’re going to have to take him to the hospital for an x-ray,” she told her, and the cop nodded.

“Hold on a second,” the cop said, before walking over to the other two cops who had been talking to the people that Natasha assumed were witnesses. She watched them confer for a moment, before her attention was drawn back to Steve, who was still talking to Clint.

“-thing?” He said, and Clint raised his eyebrows, snorting incredulously.

“Yeah, no buddy, sorry. They’re fine. Just a couple of scrapes and bruises. I’m sure you tried your best though, Jesus.”

“How ‘bout the girl?” He said, trying to raise his head and turn around, only to be stopped by Natasha’s hand on his shoulder and her glaring at him.

“No,” she said, and he lay back with a sigh. Before he could begin to argue with her (and he was about to, she could see it in his eyes), the cop returned, the young woman in the hijab following, face now wiped free of tears, but eyes still red and swollen. Both women looked down at Steve.
“You’re not under arrest,” the cop said, “Mahjabeen has something she wanted to say to you though, before we let the paramedics take you away.” The cop looked over at the young woman – Mahjabeen – who looked down at Steve.

“Um, are you okay? Those guys… they were like, stomping on you.” she asked. Steve frowned, and nodded.

“Yeah I’m fine. Are you?” She waved a hand.

“I’m fine,” she said, voice strong, “you didn’t have to do that.” She paused, before adding on, almost as an afterthought, “Thanks.” Steve gave her the wry smile that Natasha was beginning to recognize and Mahjabeen returned it before walking away alongside the cop.

“Alright,” Clint said, clapping his hands together, “not under arrest today. Yay!” Natasha rolled her eyes at her partner before getting back to work. Together, the two of them got Steve up and standing, albeit slightly unsteadily, on his own.

“Um, can you? My glasses?” Steve was squinting at the ground around them, and Natasha startled, quickly glancing around as well.

“Here,” Clint said, bending over and picking the frames off the ground near his feet, wincing when he got a look at them. “Um, sorry,” he said, handing them to Steve, who also winced as he got a look at the cracked surface of the left lens, and the strange angle one of the arms was bent into. Still, he gamely slid them on, and Natasha bit her lip at the way they sat on his face, crooked and broken and weirdly adorable. Steve shot her a look that showed he could tell what she was thinking, and she quickly averted her eyes. Together, she and Clint led Steve over to the back doors of the ambulance, opening them up and helping him up onto the stretcher. Natasha turned to head into the driver's seat, but was blocked by Clint, a huge, shit-eating grin stretching across his face.

“I'll drive!” he announced, apparently impervious to the glare she was shooting him. She opened her mouth to argue, but was stopped by Clint pressing a finger against her lips. Her eyes narrowed, and Clint quickly pulled his finger back, correctly reading her intention to bite it in her eyes. The threat of violence apparently wasn’t enough to stop him, however, as he swung into the driver's seat with a wink and a smirk.

“Motherfucker,” Natasha muttered, turning back to Steve, who’s eyes were sparkling with amusement, even if he couldn’t quite manage the matching smile.

“What are you looking at?” She said as she took the seat across from him and Clint started the engine.

“Nothing,” Steve said, tone cheeky. Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, but didn’t say anything else. Steve was sitting upright on the stretcher, though he was still slightly hunched into himself, and was cradling his right arm close to his body.

“You’ll get an xray of your arm at the hospital, and they’ll clean and bandage your face and knees properly.” She said instead. Steve nodded. Natasha was beginning to get the distinct impression that this whole thing was very much routine for Steve at this point. With that thought, she couldn’t stop herself from asking him the question that had been on her mind since she realized the crumpled form on the ground was Steve.

“What happened?” She asked, and Steve shifted.

“Those guys pulled that girl… Mahjabeen… they pulled her hijab off her head. She was just walking
down the street and they just ripped it off and started yelling all this horrible stuff to her. She’s a kid! And they were being so cruel to her,” Natasha already had a feeling where this was going, but asked anyways.

“So, you then…?” Steve flicked his eyes to the side, then up at the ceiling.

“Um… I may have stepped in between them, and said some… things.”

“Some things.” Natasha repeated flatly.

“Some things,” Steve repeated, tone defiant, before sagging slightly, “that they then took exception to. Forcefully. With their fists. And boots.” Natasha couldn’t help but wince slightly in sympathy, before shifting uncomfortably, not sure what to say.

“Well I’m happy that they got arrested and not you,” she finally settled on, and Steve snorted before wincing.

“Yeah, makes a nice change of pace.”

“You have a lot of run-ins with the cops?” She asked, already pretty sure she knew what the answer was going to be.

“I don’t try to,” he said, a clear echo of what he’d told her earlier that month, and Natasha couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’ve got a problem, Rogers,” she said, the words that were supposed to sound sarcastic coming out surprisingly fond. “You should be more careful.” And shit, that came out sounding concerned. What the fuck. Steve was looking at her with a smile in his eyes and Natasha was having trouble meeting his gaze.

“So, showing any art right now?” she said, abruptly. “I didn’t make it Arsenal before your show ended.” Steve looked at her like he knew what she was doing, allowing her the subject change, and she would be annoyed at him for being patronizing except for the gleam in his eye.

“M’not showing anything right now,” he said, glancing down at his arm and making an annoyed face, “maybe not for a while now. I’m still working on the series of veterans.” He moaned, letting his eyes slip shut. “God I hope my boss is cool with me just doing cash for the next little bit.”

“Can’t make coffee with a broken arm?” Natasha asked, and Steve snorted.

“Not exactly.” Natasha frowned

“Would you have to leave your job?” Steve shook his head.

“Nah. My boss, the owner, is one of my oldest friends. He’ll give me shit for it but it’ll be fine.” He said with a laugh. Natasha nodded, opening her mouth to reply but was startled by Clint poking his head into the back.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said with a grin, “but we’re at the hospital.” Natasha looked around, startled to find themselves parked in front of the emergency room doors. Feeling red creeping across her cheeks but determined to ignore it, she stood up, looking down at Steve as Clint joined them in the back.

“Guess this is me then,” Steve smiled up at her best he was able, before letting them help him down and steer him through the doors. Before she could hand him off to the admitting, Steve turned and
winked at her. “Looking forward to seeing you again,” he said. She managed to keep her blush under control as she glared down at the tiny man.

“Again, Rogers, better fucking not.” Natasha warned before heading back out. Back in the rig and in her rightful place in the driver’s seat, she braced herself to be subjected to Clint’s merciless teasing. To her surprise, he managed to restrain herself until they were settled back in the dispatch centre, Starbucks in hand and lounging in the staff room.

“So,” Clint said, taking a sip of his coffee, “We’ve run into Steve Rogers a couple times now.” Natasha hummed noncommittally. “He seems to really enjoy flirting with you.” Natasha narrowed her eyes at her friend. “You seem to really enjoy him flirting with you,” Clint continued, undeterred, voice far too serious for the teasing she had been expecting from him. Natasha stood, abruptly, her chair making a terrible noise as it slid across the floor.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” she announced, leaving the room before Clint had the chance to say anything. By the time she returned, Tony and Rhodey had joined Clint. She carefully avoided Clint’s eyes as she sat back at the table, but he didn’t bring up the subject of Steve Rogers again.

Chapter End Notes

As always, you can find the pictures for outfits etc in this chapter over on the [pinterest board](https://www.pinterest.com).

We’re getting more into Natasha’s past and her specific issues. Fair warning, it’s going to get rougher here on out for both her and Steve.

s/o to [this tumblr post](https://www.tumblr.com) for the idea about how Melinda is seen on campus

I read an article on what EMTs should do with a spinal injury, but this is all still probably super medically inaccurate.

Sarah, if you’re reading this, I’m not making fun of you for your cat’s name. Really. I’m not (okay I am but like, only a little bit).

Easter Eggs:

Radić Avenue is named after Lepa Svetozara Radić (1925–1943), a partisan executed at the age of 17 for shooting at German soldiers during WW2. As her captors tied the noose around her neck, they offered her a way out of the gallows by revealing her comrades and leaders identities. She responded that she was not a traitor to her people and they would reveal themselves when they avenged her death. She was the youngest winner of the Order of the People’s Hero of Yugoslavia, awarded in 1951.

Cannon street is named for Annie Jump Cannon, an American astronomer who was co-creator of one of the first scientific classification systems of stars, based on temperature.
Natasha managed to maintain her cool demeanor towards Clint for a whole day before she admitted to herself that she was being ridiculous. Her and Steve were flirting, she enjoyed it, it was fine. Clint hadn’t done anything wrong by commenting on it. Happily, Clint was too good a friend to be pissy about her attitude towards him, accepting the apology coffee she bought him and the lack of an actual verbal apology with good grace. Now that she had admitted it to herself though, she started to give some consideration to if she’d ever see Steve again. After all, it wasn’t like she’d known he existed before that summer – he might never get picked up by her ambulance again (which, honestly, she would prefer to be the case; that guy needed to learn to take better care of himself). After a week of fretting and anxiously wondering if every call involving young men was him, she decided to shake it off and stop worrying about it. What would happen would happen.

Of course, that was easier said than done, but that was what Tania was for.

“Okay, you have to tell me more than ‘tiny guy who gets beat up a lot’,” Tania said as she rummaged through Natasha’s closet. Natasha had called Tania the day before, telling her that she needed to go out and get out of her head for a bit, and that afternoon Tania had shown up with a bottle of vodka and plans to find a club with cheap booze and good music. The two women were currently wreaking havoc on Natasha’s room trying to pick what to wear. Of course, Tania had come over already looking amazing in a short red dress with loose, draped sleeves, but that didn’t stop her from picking through Natasha’s wardrobe and seeing if there was something of her friend’s that she wanted to wear instead. Natasha herself had already settled on a skin-tight strapless black dress, paired with neon yellow stilettos, and was now sitting on the floor, sorting through a handful of earrings as she looked for her favourite gold triangle studs. She sighed as she looked up at her friend, half wishing she had never mentioned Steve, and half really happy for the excuse to talk about him with her best friend.

“Steve Rogers.”

“What?”
“That’s his name. Steve Rogers.” Tania nodded her head.

“White boy? That sounds like a white boy name.” Natasha laughed.

“Yeah, he’s a pasty little thing. Blond hair, blue eyes, the whole nine.”

“Wow,” Tania raised an eyebrow at her friend, “no offense, but he doesn’t really seem like your type. I mean, I can’t even remember the last time you dated a guy, much less a white guy.” Natasha shrugged.

“I know, but he’s just… he’s different.”

“Excuse me,” Tania said, turning to her friend, hand on hip, “did I just have a stroke? Did the woman who has repeatedly ranted to me about how all men are the same just say ‘he’s different’?” Natasha laughed, leaning over to shove at her friend’s leg.

“Shut up! He is!” Tania shook her head but turned back to her perusal of Natasha’s closet.

“Okay, so tell me more. How is he different. No wait,” she held up a hand before Natasha had the chance to speak, “tell me more about what he looks like first.”

“He’s adorable,” Natasha could feel herself start to smile without her permission. “He’s like, maybe 5’1”.”


“Yeah, tiny and skinny! Like, a strong breeze would push him over.”

“And that’s cute?” Tania asked, sounding more than a little bit dubious. “That’s attractive to you?” Natasha shrugged.

“I guess so? He’s got a ton of tattoos too, and wears the fucking weirdest clothing, but somehow he pulls it off.”

“Like what?”

“Like… okay, when I ran into him at the ER, he was wearing a fucking jean romper.”


“Yeah, but I mean, like, he’s cute to look at, but his personality is just…”

“Just…” Tania prompted, and Natasha shrugged again.

“I don’t know. Like, he flirts with me every time he sees me even if he’s covered in blood. He’s passionate. He’s an artist… actually, he recognized your name when I mentioned you.”

“Wait, seriously?” Natasha nodded.

“Yeah, he said he’d seen some of your stuff at Site 7, I think, when you were doing that show with all the floral nudes?” Tania nodded, looking thoughtful.

“That was a while ago. What did you say his name was?”

“Steve Rogers. Steven Grant Rogers.” Tania hummed as she thought, before shaking her head.
“I can’t think of anything off the top of my head, but maybe…” she shook her head again, “Anyways, you were saying?”

“Yeah, so he’s an artist but he works as a barista for his like, day job. He seems to get the shit kicked out of him a lot, and probably has a really long arrest record, but not for like… he gets arrested for being a really good guy.” Tania raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Okay, I gotta ask, what the hell kind of calls have you been meeting this guy on?”

“Well the first time it was because he got stuck in a tree rescuing an old lady’s cat,” Tania snorted, and Natasha gave her a look to say ‘I know, right?’, before continuing, ticking off on her fingers. “The second time he got into a bar fight because some drunk asshole called his friend the n-word, the third time I just ran into him in the waiting room when he’d had an asthma attack, and the fourth time he got his ass handed to him by some skinheads for defending a Muslim girl they’d been harassing.” Tania raised an eyebrow.

“Wow, sounds like someone has a serious case of white knight syndrome.”

“Right?! Which like, normally I would find annoying but he’s just so tiny himself, and so like, determined to do the right thing that somehow… it’s really endearing instead.”

“He sounds scrappy,” Tania smiled down at her friend, “I like him.” She finally abandoned Natasha’s closet, joining Natasha on the floor. Natasha made a triumphant noise as she finally found the earrings she’d been looking for, dumping the rest back in their dish and quickly changing them out with her usual small hoops. She looked over at Tania, who was sipping at her drink.

“Couldn’t find anything to your taste?” Tania shook her head, wrinkling her nose.

“Nah. I’m bored with all my clothes but like, I’m bored with all yours too.” Natasha laughed.

“Well I’m sorry my sartorial selection is lacking, your highness.” Tania shoved at her shoulder, laughing.

After another hour of slowly getting ready, and steady drinking, the two friends finally decided it was time to head out. They locked up, and Natasha shoved her wallet, phone, and keys in Tania’s purse rather than taking her own. Slightly unsteady on their heels thanks to the vodka, they made their way to the subway.

“I can’t believe we’re going to The Citrus Club,” Natasha grumbled as they took their seats. Tania laughed.

“I don’t know what you have against The Citrus Club,” she said, “the music is good, the drinks aren’t too expensive, and there’s lots of room to dance.” Natasha wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah, but you have to pay cover.” Tania laughed again. Natasha’s dislike of paying cover was always a point of contention whenever the two friends tried to pick a place to go to. She only won the argument about half the time, and this was not one of those times. However, it turned out to be a moot point when they arrived at the club, only to be informed that they were already at capacity.

“Ha!” Natasha crowed, “Now we go to my choice!” Tania rolled her eyes as she followed behind her friend. The Liquid Room, Natasha’s pick for the night, was only a couple blocks away from The Citrus Club, so the two walked over. Inside, the crowd surged in time to the music and Natasha could feel the base line drumming at the back of her skull, singing electric through her veins.

“Get drinks then dance?” She shouted in Tania’s ear, and her friend nodded her agreement. They
made their way to the bar, Tania taking advantage of her height to push through the crowd while Natasha followed closely behind her. Getting the bartender’s attention was a bit more challenging, but they still managed to be back on the dance floor, drinks held carefully in hand, quite quickly. After that, the two friends lost themselves in the thudding beat and flashing lights, jumping and spinning and occasionally grinding against each other. Tania ducked out a couple times for a smoke, but Natasha just kept dancing, loving the way the music and alcohol combined to fuzz out her brain, flowing with the movement of the people around her.

It was nearing closing time, and the crowd had depleted significantly when the loud sound of angry voices caught Natasha’s attention. There were still enough people that she couldn’t immediately see the source of the disagreement, but had thinned out enough that, within a few seconds the press of sweaty bodies around them shifted enough for her and Tania to get a glimpse at the people who were the source of the argument.

Natasha sighed.

Honestly, she didn’t even know why she was surprised anymore.

A few feet from them was Steve Rogers, Sam next to him and a group of tall, dark haired white men opposite them. With the shift in the crowd, she could also now hear what was being said.

“I said, watch where you’re going, you little faggot!” Natasha frowned and started to walk over, Tania following closely behind. As she drew closer, she blinked in actual surprise. The man at the fore of the group of men was Rumlow, and she had a moment to inanely wonder if he and Steve knew each other before taking in the way the group of men were arranged. While Sam and the other men were actively glaring at each other, Steve was looking off to the side, away from Rumlow and his friends, hand on Sam’s bicep as if to hold him back (as if he could, if Sam actually wanted to move). Steve was wearing a similar outfit to the last time she had seen him at a club; a dark purple tank overlaid with a loosely knit white sweater, grey jeans, and gold sneakers, while Sam was dressed in a white t-shirt and grey sweats. Natasha’s frown deepened as she pulled up next to them, Brock’s eyes widening in surprise as he saw her, before he was sneering at her too.

“What do you want, Romanov?”

“Nice to see you too, Brock,” Natasha said back, a fake smile plastered on her face as she crossed her arms over her chest. Rumlow’s eyes flicked up and down her body and Natasha was suddenly aware of how tiny her dress was, her fake smile dropping into a scowl. Steve had startled at the sound of her voice, turning to look over at her, eyes wide. She met his eyes, giving him a real smile, but before she could do anything else, Brock was speaking again.

“Figures you’d know this little faggot, Natasha. Nasty little pervert was checking out me out. Disgusting.” He spat on the floor, and Natasha’s eyes widened in shock. Brock had always been an asshole but this kind of aggression was out of character, even for him. Still, his sneer remained firmly in place as he surveyed their group. Natasha could feel Tania standing, tense, at her back, and then Sam spoke.

“Listen man, we’re just trying to dance. We don’t want any trouble.” Sam’s words were calm and reasonable, but his eyes still flashed in anger, flicking between Steve and Brock. Rumlow seemed to hesitate at the out Sam was giving him, eyes travelling over to Natasha before he made a small, aborted movement with his shoulders, as if he was going to turn to look at his friends but stopped himself. His friends were exchanging glances behind his back, expectation clear on their faces. The uncertainty in his eyes didn’t last however, hardening back into anger as he squared his shoulders, scowling at Sam.
“Oh look, your little butt-buddy is defending you now,” Brock spat out, looking between Sam and Steve. Overtop of the anger, his eyes were glazed with alcohol or something else, and Natasha had a moment to wonder what was going on with him. His friends laughed, one of them joining in, turning to Sam.

“Hey, does it make you feel better about being a stupid fuck when you fuck him? Or are you the one who takes it up the ass?” He and the others laughed at his own comment, Brock joining in a beat behind.

“Think whatever makes you happy,” Sam replied with a roll of his eyes. He uncrossed his arms and looked down at Steve. “C’mon man, let’s get out of here. It’s not worth it.” Steve nodded but before he could move Brock spoke again.

“Oh look at that, the ghetto trash wants to leave before the fairy gets his ass beat. What’s the matter, you scared?” The men jeered. Sam frowned, though he was still tugging back on Steve’s arm. Before he could react however, Steve jerked free from his grip and darted out in front of him.

“Apologize to Sam right now.” This was the first time Natasha had ever seen Steve at the beginning of a fight rather than the end of one, and it was a strange contrast. Instead of being beaten and bloody, Steve was standing, his tiny stature rendered irrelevant by the way he carried himself, all clenched fists and righteous fury. It almost made up for the fact that Brock was several feet taller than him, and that Steve’s right arm was in a cast.

“Apologize?” Brock’s laugh was incredulous. Natasha looked between the two men, feeling a rising sense of disbelief that Steve was demanding Brock apologize when he’d seemed willing to walk away from the disagreement only moments before. “I’m not going to fucking apologize to either of you.”

“You’re a fucking piece of shit,” Steve spat, and Brock’s face twisted in anger. She could see the way he was squaring himself up, as were his buddies at his back, and without thinking, she quickly moved to put herself between him and Steve, hands raised.

“Wa-,” was all she got out before the fist that was meant for Steve hit her square in the face. Bending over and holding her cheek she took a deep gasp of air as her lungs suddenly clenched.

Not now not now not now not now -

“What the fuck Romanov?” Brock’s voice was shocked and she looked up at him. Whatever regret was on his face was quickly once again replaced with anger, however, as he continued, “What the fuck are you doing?” Natasha straightened, the anger that suddenly surged through her, driving out the panic.

“Fuck you Brock, just leave it!”

“Yeah?” Brock said, and then pulled his arm back again. This time, however, Natasha was ready, and easily blocked the blow. Her training was burning through the haze of alcohol, though her movements were still slower and clumsier than they would be normally. She managed to smash her fist into his face, with the full force of her body behind it.

“Fuck!” Brock roared, blood gushing from his nose, spraying onto his shirt and Natasha. She had a brief moment of vicious triumph before she just felt nauseous looking at the blood. She stood numbly by while Brock cursed and delicately prodded at his nose in front of her, barely registering his friends shifting uncomfortably behind him. She vaguely felt a pair of large hands suddenly grip her shoulder as a swarm of bouncers suddenly descended upon them, hustling out of the club and out into the street.
Great, she thought to herself distantly as she joined Steve, Sam, and Tania on the sidewalk, another club we’re banned from.

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“I’m sorry,” Steve spoke, pulling her attention away from where she’d been staring blankly out of the window. The diner that the four of them had stumbled into after being thrown out of the club was empty save one other patron sitting at the counter. It was nearing 3 in the morning, and the streets were almost completely deserted, the night winding down as the city fell asleep. She had barely registered the walk over, or sitting down, letting Tania guide her movements. She blinked slowly, looking around the table. Sam and Steve were sat across from her, Steve gently cupping a mug of coffee with his long, thin fingers, while Sam was cheerfully eating a massive burger with fries. There was a cup of coffee in front of her as well, though she didn’t remember ordering one. She assumed Tania, with her own mug and plate of fries, had ordered it for Natasha. Reaching out, she slowly turned the handle of the mug towards herself, but didn’t raise it to take a drink.

“Natasha?” Steve spoke again. She raised her eyes to meet his, but he was looking down at his lap, playing with the edge of his cast. She looked over at Sam, but he was eating his fries, looking at Tania as the two of them made small talk.

“Sorry, what?” She asked, clenching and unclenching her hand and wincing at the feel of bruises forming over her knuckles. Steve looked up, meeting her eyes.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into a fight.” Natasha frowned.

“You didn’t drag me into anything,” she said, speaking slowly, “I stepped in.” Steve shook his head.

“But you didn’t have to,” he insisted, and Natasha finally caught Sam’s eyes. He just shrugged, and she looked back to Steve.

“I know that. You don’t think I know that?” she said, totally lost. “I wanted to.” Steve shrugged again.

“It doesn’t… you didn’t need to get hurt. Not for me.” Natasha’s frown deepend.

“What are you… Steve, did you not want me to help? I mean, did I overstep?” Steve shrugged, looking suddenly embarrassed and uncomfortable. Natasha felt herself go cold, the distance that had existed between her and the situation suddenly narrowing as she parsed Steve’s reaction. Her eyes flicked to Sam and Tania before bending close to Steve, raising her hand so her fist was resting next to her mouth, blocking her mouth from the eyes of everyone except for Steve. He leaned in across the table top as well, and she lowered her voice as she asked, “Steve… were you looking to get hurt?” He jerked upright at that, shaking his head.

“No, no, I wasn’t looking to get hurt.” Natasha cut her eyes to Tania and Sam who were now rather pointedly ignoring them, their cheerful small talk about life in the city rising in volume to help drown out Steve and Natasha’s own conversation. Tania’s eyes were still flicking to Natasha every once in awhile though, and she knew her friend was still worried about her in the fallout of the fight.

“So why are you so bothered that I protected you? Is it because I’m a woman?” Natasha kept her voice lowered as her brow furrowed. She didn’t think Steve was like that but…

“No! No, of course not.”

“Then what is it?” Natasha asked, exasperation finally leeching into her voice as she struggled to keep the full weight of her dissociation from overwhelming her. She was sure that the impact of the
violence of this night was going to overtake her, probably when she was alone at home, but for now she pushed it firmly away to concentrate on this conversation with Steve. He didn’t reply, and Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, her mind replaying the way he was standing in the club, the way he didn’t react until Brock insulted Sam. He hadn’t done anything, she realized, until it was Sam being attacked instead of himself.

Before she could say something though, Tania nudged her, and she turned to her friend, who was offering her some fries off her plate with a smile on her face. Natasha cut her eyes back to Steve, who was looking both relieved and nervous, and decided that this wasn’t the time and place. She grabbed some fries, and started paying attention to what Tania and Sam were talking about. Steve gave her a small, grateful smile which she returned before they both turned their full attention to their two friends.

“-and then he throws the painting at the guy!” Tania laughed, and Natasha frowned slightly in confusion even as she smiled slightly to see her friend laughing so openly. Seeing that Steve and Natasha were now paying attention to their conversation, Sam shifted his body slightly so he was facing more towards the centre of the table. “I was just telling Tania about one of the vets in my support group… Steve taught an art class down at the VA the other week and two of the older guys got into a fight about the relative artistic merits of Duchamp.”

“Duchamp…” Natasha frowned.

“Urinal,” Tania helpfully supplied.

“Ah, right.” Natasha nodded. “So you work at the VA?” she asked, realizing she didn’t really know anything about Sam other than the fact that he liked sports and Steve. And wasn’t half as inclined to start shit as his smaller friend.

“Yeah, that’s actually where I met Steve, he was-” Sam started to smile then jerked, breaking off and looking over at Steve, who was frowning and shaking his head. Natasha and Tania looked between the two men in confusion, before Sam turned back to them, smile back in place, if looking slightly strained, “Anyways, sorry, yes, I work at the VA. I did a couple tours and when I got back I started working with other vets. I did my bachelors in social work before I shipped off, and when I got back it seemed like a good fit.” Sam shrugged, before looking at Tania with a slight frown. “Sorry, I know Natasha is a paramedic but I just realized I didn’t ask you what you do. Are you a paramedic like Natasha?” Tania hesitated, and Natasha reached her hand under the table to brush her fingers across her friend’s thigh.

“I work at Déjà Vu.” There was a pause while Sam and Steve frowned, trying to place the name, before Steve’s eyes suddenly widened in recognition, snapping his fingers. Natasha felt Tania tense slightly next to her. Natasha hid her own tension, knowing that Steve’s reaction to this would decide for her whether or not she wanted to pursue… whatever this was that was developing between the two of them.

“Yeah, Déjà Vu!” Steve said, turning to his friend, “You remember Bobbi?” Sam frowned, thinking.

“Bobbi who used to date Trish?” Steve nodded.

“Yeah, she works at Déjà Vu.” He turned back to Tania, “Do you know her? Bobbi Morse?” Tania smiled, wide and genuine.

“Yes! I love Bobbi, she’s awesome.” Steve was nodding happily.

“She really is.” Steve agreed, before frowning slightly. “You do art too right?” He asked, eyes
flicking between her and Natasha, “I just, Natasha and I were talking—”

know?” Steve nodded his head.

“It always sounds like you’re being a total dick too,” Steve said, “when you meet people and are like
‘oh yes I’m an art-eest’,” Steve waved his arms about dramatically, and the table laughed. Steve and
Tania fell into a conversation about the art scene in the city, but it wasn’t long before Sam, looking
down at his watch, stood, dragging the group’s attention to him.

“Sorry to break this up,” he said with a smile, “but there’s a night bus going by in ten and then
there’s not another for half an hour, so we should probably get going.” He looked over at Steve, who
nodded. The group made their way up to the counter to pay their bills, Tania paying for Natasha’s
untouched coffee with a roll of her eyes. They parted on the sidewalk outside of the diner, Tania and
Natasha running to catch one bus while Steve and Sam waited for another. The trip home took
longer without the subway, but it wasn’t long before Natasha was saying a quiet goodbye to her
friend, getting off the bus and stumbling home, feet now aching in her towering heels.

Unlocking her front door, she kicked off her shoes and settled onto her couch with a long sigh. She
shifted, feeling the zipper on the back of her dress dig into her spine uncomfortably. Standing back
up, she undid the zipper, pulling her dress off, leaving her in her underwear on the couch. She pulled
the blanket off the back of the couch, wrapping herself in it as she let herself list to the side, curling
up in a ball as her mind ran over the events of the night, feeling the aftereffects of the violence
beginning to well up again as she began to shake slightly. She needed to sort things out for herself if
this was something that was happening, and she was pretty sure it was. So she burrowed into her
couch, settling in to think.

Steve Rogers. God, she hadn’t let this happen for such a long time, and she still wasn’t sure how
Steve had managed to get so firmly under her skin (that was a lie, it was his smile, the way he cared
about his friends, the way he looked when he talked about his art). She liked him, despite herself. He
was so different from the men in her past, kind and caring, small but fierce, stubborn and funny. Plus
it really didn’t help that he was, gods help her, incredibly hot. How someone that short and skinny
could be so goddamn hot Natasha didn’t know, but somehow Steve pulled it off (and okay, so she
might have a thing for tiny, twinky guys, so what?). She let herself think about kissing Steve, feeling
a flash of heat in the pit of her stomach. Okay, so, she was attracted to Steve. But could she do
anything about that attraction? Was that something she could manage?

It had been such a long time since a man had touched her, with or without her permission. Could she
let herself have that with Steve? Could she handle having that with Steve, even? She thought about
it. She had touched him, initiated contact with him several times. He wasn’t very threatening,
physically, and she felt like she’d be willing to touch and be touched by him. Even tonight, in the
aftermath of the violence between her and Brock, she hadn’t retreated from Steve like she normally
would from any male presence save Clint. On the other hand, her brain supplied, he had a tendency
to find himself in violent situations. No matter what she might tell herself about other people initiating
that violence, the scene she had witnessed tonight made it clear that Steve did everything but initiate
fights, willing to escalate situations and completely unwilling to back down for anything. He might
not throw the first punch, but he’d throw the second, and until then he’d use his words as weapons,
making situations worse rather than diffusing them.

On the other hand, she thought, rolling onto her back and blinking up at the ceiling, that didn’t
mean he would be violent outside of situations where someone initiated that violence. From what
she’d seen of him and understood of his personality, he would never back down from injustices and
would defend those he cared about, but it wasn’t like he was going around getting into fights for
petty reasons. Not that she really thought there was a good reason to be starting violent conflicts with other people. She sighed heavily into the darkness of her apartment. She heard the soft sound of Liho’s footsteps approaching, and managed not to flinch when the cat leapt up onto her stomach, curling up in a ball on top of her. She reached out a hand, slowly stroking its fur. She was wary of the violence. She didn’t know if she could be around someone who attracted fights like moth to flame. Still, she felt a slow warmth spreading through her at the thought of Steve.

She felt safe with him, she did, despite everything. She really believed that he wouldn’t hurt her, not after everything that she’d seen of his willingness to defend other people that he saw as needing his help. But she had thought that she was safe with people before who had proven her wrong… and she was scared, so goddamn scared, that that would happen again with Steve. Her fear was fighting a battle with her knowledge of who Steve was, and she wasn’t sure which was going to win. If Tania was here she would probably say something about how Natasha couldn’t live in her past trauma forever, that she had to make the choice to trust people or not to trust people.

Natasha just wasn’t sure if she could. Still, she supposed that was why she had spent so long learning so many different martial arts, why she worked out all the time, why she carried a switchblade in her purse. She didn’t think Steve would hurt her, but if he did… well, she had the tools to defend herself now.

She wasn’t the scared little girl she had been.

Decision reached, she pulled out her phone and texted Angie.

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“I don’t know how I feel about this,” Angie fidgeted where she sat across from Natasha at the cafe. Natasha raised an eyebrow at the other woman as she took a slow sip of her latte.

“If you weren’t going to do it, you wouldn’t have even come to meet me,” Natasha pointed out. Angie shifted again, nervous uncertainty written across her face.

“It’s a violation of patient confidentiality,” She hedged. Natasha made a face.

“I know, and I know it’s asking a lot. But you know me. You know I’m not going to go all stalker-serial-killer on this guy. I just want to know where he works so I can like, casually check up on him without it getting weird.” Angie let out a slightly forced, short laugh.

“Right!” She said, voice high, “Wouldn’t want it to get weird.” Natasha gave her friend a look, slightly thrown by the other woman’s reaction. Angie shook her head, seeming to pull herself together.

“Okay, yeah, you’re right, I trust you Natasha. Besides, if you decide to serial-kill Steve, Peggy will definitely kill you.” Natasha smiled tightly at the mention of violence, though she knew Angie was joking.

“So you’ll give me the info.” Angie paused, then nodded.

“Yeah, but I didn’t have to go into the hospital records to get it.” Natasha frowned in confusion, and Angie drew in a deep breath. “I wasn’t sure when you described him but when you texted me his name that’s when I knew for sure… Steve is Peggy’s ex.” Natasha’s mouth opened in shock.

“What?” Angie made a face.

“Yeah, I know.” She fidgeted slightly in her seat again. “They dated in high school, but they stayed
really good friends after they broke up. It’s actually kind of random that you two have never met at any of the parties we’ve had at our place.”

“That’s crazy. What… what even are the chances?” Natasha stuttered out, and Angie laughed.

“Yeah, I kind of freaked out when I figured it out. But hey, at least I can tell you that Steve’s a really good guy… though he doesn’t really seem like your type.” Angie shot Natasha a look that she ignored.

“I can’t believe Peggy and Steve dated… I can’t believe Peggy dated a man.” Angie shrugged.

“She always says something along the lines of him being the single exception to her dedicated lesbianism.” Natasha snorted.

“She would. So you’ll give me his info?”

“Well I don’t really know what info you’re expecting me to give you. I can tell you that he works at The Bean Tree down on 7th?” Natasha smiled at her.

“Thanks Angie, that’s all I wanted,” she said, voice sincere.

“No problem,” the nurse smiled at her, before leaning forward, gripping her own coffee tightly.

“Now, spill. How did you meet Steve?”

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The coffee shop was located on the corner of a relatively busy street, cars rumbling by and people rushing to and from on the sidewalk. There was a large patio on the one side, metal tables and chairs. Natasha stood outside, examining the large sign and the hand-painted tree that sprawled up from the door, branching and blooming across the entire facade. She wondered if Steve painted it, though… no, probably not. Taking a deep breath of the crisp late afternoon air, she pushed through the door, chime echoing somewhere in the depths of the shop. The interior was eclectic yet cozy, mismatched chairs and old couches contrasting with the shiny chrome espresso machine sitting on the counter and the neatly lettered chalkboard sign above the counter. The walls inside were painted with the same style as the tree outside, interwoven branches and leaves, flowers on the tables and the beams of sunlight pouring through the large windows stopping it from making the space dark. A familiar blonde head popped out from behind the counter as she walked further into the shop.

“Hi, welcome to The Bean- hey!” Steve said, recognizing her once he got a good look at her, a more genuine smile immediately replacing the stilted customer-smile.

“Hey,” Natasha replied with a smile as Steve leaned against the counter. There were a couple of customers already in the shop, tucked away at the tables and in armchairs. They seemed content to ignore the conversation taking place at the counter.

“So,” Steve said, familiar flirty grin firmly in place, “you stalking me at my place of work now?” Natasha felt her cheeks heat up, and thanked her dark skin for the fact that Steve hopefully wouldn’t be able to tell. She managed to keep her voice when she replied though.

“Yeah, well I figured it was about time I came and saw you on your job instead of on your way to the emergency room,” Steve laughed.

“Angie told me you asked about me,” he said with a cheeky grin, and Natasha groaned.

“For fucks sake,” she grumbled, leaning on the counter, “okay so now you know what a total creep I

“Oh my god, are you asking me out? Is that what’s happening here? Someone pinch me,” he said, raising his voice and turning to the cafe, arms held wide, “I’m dreaming!”

“Shut up!” Natasha leaned over the counter to punch gently at his shoulder. “I take it back, I’m never talking to you again.” Steve laughed, walking over to the espresso machine.

“Skim, 2%, or whole? Or we’ve also got rice, almond, hemp-” he began ticking the milk off on his fingers, but Natasha interrupted.

“2% is fine, Jesus.” Steve shrugged.

“We kinda do a lot of specialized stuff,” he said by way of explanation, “for people with food allergies, or, like, most of the food we have is either kosher, halal, or vegan.” He poured the milk before turning towards the back.

“Dum Dum!” he hollered, and Natasha raised an eyebrow as he turned back to her with a sheepish smile, holding up his casted arm in explanation, which she saw was now covered in paint splatters and what looked like charcoal dust.

“Can’t make coffee with a broken arm,” he said, and Natasha wrinkled her nose.

“That cannot be sanitary,” she said, and he looked down at the cast, laughing.

“Oh don’t worry,” he said, “I sprayed it with hairspray to set it.”

“You sprayed it with hairspray,” Natasha repeated faintly. Before she could comment further, however, a large mustached man came out of the back.

“Jesus Rogers, for a guy with such shitty lungs you sure are fucking loud.”

“Customer, Dugan,” Steve chided cheerfully as the man drew level with them. The other man’s eyes flicked to Natasha, looking her over briefly, and Natasha crossed her arms over her chest. She was wearing a loose red shirt under a small, fitted white jacket, blue jeans and thigh-high leather boots, orange scarf stuffed into her cream purse. She definitely hadn’t spent ages picking out her outfit while thinking about the fact that she would be intentionally seeing Steve for the first time.

Definitely not.

Steve nodded towards her, “This is Natasha and she wants a large latte with an extra shot. Natasha, this is Dum Dum Dugan, my boss.” Dugan turned to Steve, a surprised expression on his face.

“Natasha?” He asked, “The Natasha?” A blush shot up Roger’s face so fast it was amazing he didn’t pass out. Natasha felt a delighted smile grow on her face. She could see straight through him though, and couldn’t help but feel slightly relieved. This, at least, assuaged her lingering fears that the flirting was just a meaningless front for Steve.

“Anyways,” he said loudly, and Natasha had to bite down on a snicker, “Dugan and his girlfriend...
“Sure do,” Dugan said, clapping a hand heavily on Steve’s shoulder, who crumpled slightly under the pressure, “hired this little pipsqueak four years ago and I’ve regretted it every minute since then.”

“Hey!” Steve glared up at his boss, and Natasha laughed.

“Nah,” Dugan said with a fond smile, ruffling Steve’s hair, which just made him glare harder, “Steve here’s a good kid.”

“I’m a year older than you!” Steve said.

“A good kid,” Dugan repeated, ruffling his hair one more time for good measure. Steve shoved him away, and Dugan went, laughing, to make Natasha’s coffee.

“Ignore him,” Steve said, “He’s an idiot.” Natasha reached over the counter, running her hand through Steve’s mussed hair without thinking. She almost froze when she realized what she was doing, but forced herself to keep moving through it, not withdrawing her hand until Steve’s hair was back in order. When she pulled back Steve was looking at her with a slightly stunned look, blush settling prettily onto his cheekbones and Natasha was absolutely loving how clearly his pale skin gave him away. The thought shot through her mind of what he would look like flushed from other activities, and she had to fight down her own blush, clearing her throat uncomfortably.

“Anyways,” she said, then winced at how loud her voice was, “you never answered me about when you get off work?” Steve started.

“Oh, right!” he said, “Um, I get off in-”

“Now,” Dugan interrupted, depositing two cups on the counter between them. “You’re off now.” Steve looked at him, obviously startled, but Dugan just winked at him exaggeratedly, pushing him out from behind the counter.

“Bye Rogers!” He said loudly before turning to Natasha and pointing at one of the cups. “That one’s yours,” he said. Steve scowled and threw his apron at the other man, before turning to Natasha.

“I just need to grab my coat, I’ll be right back.” He headed off into the back, leaving Natasha standing awkwardly with her coffee while Dugan grinned at her from the other side of the counter. She shifted uncomfortably, but he just kept smiling at her. Steve thankfully reappeared, a large coat pulled over the sweater that was already swamping him, his skinny legs sticking out underneath the hem encased in jeans while a pair of giant Doc Martens covered his feet. He grabbed the second cup off of the counter, shot a final glare at Dugan, and then gestured towards the door.

“Shall we?” He asked, sounding slightly hesitant, and Natasha opened the door, holding it open for Steve who followed her outside, immediately shivering at the chill in the air. She glanced back up at the front of the cafe as she let the door swing shut.

“Did you paint that?” She asked, just in case. To her surprise, Steve nodded.

“Yeah,” he said looking up at the branches of the tree, “Inside too.”

“Really?” She looked back up, noting the way the branches twined around themselves and the irregularities of the building front, “It’s amazing,” she said, meaning it too. It really was gorgeous.

“Thanks,” Steve said, rubbing at the back of his neck, “I was… I was going through some stuff when Dugan first hired me, and when he got me to paint the front and inside… well, it got me back
“I usually walk to work unless it’s really cold,” he said, glancing up at her, “I hope that’s okay with you?” She nodded.

“Works for me, it’s such a nice day.” It really was, despite the chill in the air that announced that they were finally entering autumn. The sun was shining brightly, and the crowds bustled around them as they slowly walked down the street.

“So you really don’t think it’s creepy that I showed up at your work?” Natasha blurted out, surprising both Steve and herself. He smiled up at her, the heels on her boots making him seem even shorter than normal.

“Nah, I think it’s cute.” He smiled, and Natasha couldn’t help but return it. “Besides,” he added, “you got me off work early, which is great, because the customers were being extra awful today.” Natasha stopped abruptly, looking down at her coffee cup in horror.

“Oh my god I forgot to pay,” she said, but Steve just laughed, nudging her to keep walking.

“Don’t worry about it. This one’s on Dugan for being a meddling bastard.” Natasha laughed.

“Fair,” she said, “He seems like a good boss?” Steve nodded.

“Good guy, good boss, good friend… his girlfriend, Amaani, is really great too. She’s my real boss, Dugan just plays at it.” There was a pause in the conversation as they ducked around a large group of teenagers hanging out in front of a convenience store.

“So, uh,” she looked over at him. He looked tense and uncomfortable, mouth twisted up, and Natasha felt her stomach sink. His eyes flicked to her, then down to her hands. “Um, is your hand okay? From punching Brock I mean?” Natasha startled, surprised by the question.

“Oh yeah, it’s fine.” She said quickly. He still looked awkward as he nodded, tight and fast.

“Good, good, that’s… good.” Natasha quickly cast about for a subject change before either of them could get more uncomfortable.

“So, you said you had terrible customers today?” Natasha asked, and Steve nodded, eyes widening.

“Oh yeah,” he said, “one old guy spent ten minutes lecturing me on how bad styrofoam was for the environment before he finally stopped long enough for me to tell him all our to-go cups are biodegradable. Then he demanded to know why we didn’t have non-disposable mugs to stay, and when I pointed at the big rack of ceramic mugs, he stomped out in a huff.” Natasha laughed, but Steve held up his hands.

“Just wait,” he said with a smile, “then I had this woman come in who wanted oat milk. When I said we didn’t have it, but we did have almond, rice, soy, and hemp, she got all huffy with me! Demanded to know why we don’t have more non-dairy milk options!”

“Seriously?” Natasha asked, “I didn’t even know there was such a thing as oat milk.” Steve nodded solemnly.

“There is, and apparently it is both unfair and absolutely appalling that we don’t carry it.” Natasha shook her head.
“It really is unacceptable,” she said, “I should write a letter.”

“You really should,” Steve said, then smiled. “So how about you, how’s your day? I’m guessing you didn’t work?” Natasha shook her head, telling him about her morning at the gym with Cataleya, which segued into a story about her, Kate, and Clint spending the entire day yesterday going to what felt like a hundred pet stores looking for the “perfect” birthday present for Clint’s dogs, before her and Kate eventually declared Clint insane and ditched him to go for dinner. Steve then jumped in with a story about a customer who had made him remake her drink five times because she fundamentally misunderstood what a latte was. By the time they arrived at Steve’s building, Natasha’s stomach hurt from laughing at Steve’s stories about customers and Steve wouldn’t stop smiling up at her. She didn’t really want to say goodbye, but she did anyways. Steve hesitated as he was unlocking his front door, turning back to her.

“I’m doing a gallery opening this weekend, the series I was telling you about?” He fidgeted, clearly nervous. “It’s just a small thing, but would you like to come? Um, I have to be there early, so I would be able to like, actually go with you, but-”

“Yeah, I’d love to,” Natasha replied with a smile, and Steve smiled back at her. She hesitated, then asked: “I didn’t think you’d be finishing it this soon? Because of y’know, being broken,” she nodded to his arm and he laughed.

“Yeah, well, being ambidextrous has its advantages, as soon as I gave up trying to keep the cast clean anyways.” Natasha shook her head at him. He half-turned towards the door again before startling, pulling out a phone.

“Here,” he said, handing it to Natasha, “Put in your number and I’ll text you the details.” Natasha quickly typed in her number before handing it back.

“Awesome,” Steve grinned at her, “Talk to you later Natasha. Thanks for walking me home. You sure you don’t want to come up for a bit?” But Natasha shook her head, apologetic.

“No, sorry, I really do need to get going, I told my neighbor I’d help her set up some shelves since her girlfriend is absolutely useless at that sort of thing.” Steve nodded.

“Alright, well I’ll see you later!” They both waved, slightly awkwardly, and Natasha waited until he was inside before turning away, a small smile on her lips.

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Natasha shifted from foot to foot, gripping her glass of wine tightly as she felt the condensation run from the flute over her fingers. Looking around the room, she thought once again that Steve had severely understated how big the gallery show was. At least he’d given her an accurate assessment of how posh the event would be and her outfit – blue cocktail dress, gold heels, statement necklace, and small purse, red coat left with the girl at the coat check – matched those of the other guests. She hadn’t seen Steve yet, but wasn’t surprised, given how many people were crowded into the gallery’s floor, milling around and staring up at the pieces on the walls. Natasha hadn’t actually been where she was now (hiding in the corner and trying to spot Steve) for very long. She had spent a long time after she first arrived wandering around, staring up at the art hanging on the walls, and it had taken her quite a while to cycle through all the portraits, some more than once.

Steve had told her about his series on veterans, but what he hadn’t mentioned was how numerous, and how big, the pieces would be. The canvases ranged in size from a massive painting of a one-armed man that took up most of the rear wall, to a number of smaller charcoal drawings. The random size of the canvases and the materials used, as well as the jagged strokes and abrupt shift in colour
tones on the paintings all added up to create a disconcerting feeling of disconnect, sadness and anger and despair clearly on display on the faces of many of Steve’s subjects. She had recognized Sam in one of the larger paintings, naked and hunched over himself in an old wooden chair, head in his hands, pain palpable even frozen in time as he was.

She was currently standing near the huge, wall-spanning painting, idly wondering how Steve had even managed to work on the giant painting. She couldn’t help the involuntary smile that twitched across her lips at the image conjured by her mind of Steve balancing precariously on a ladder. She took a sip of her wine to cover the fact that she was smiling to herself in a corner, darting glances to the people near her, none of whom were paying her any attention. She abruptly jumped and turned around however when someone suddenly spoke from just behind her.

“It’s good eh?” Sam stood next to her, dressed smartly in a black button-up and jacket, looking up at the painting.

“It’s amazing,” she said, following his gaze back to the painting. And it was. She’d circled the room several times, returning to this one again and again. Though it was certainly the biggest piece of art in the room, that wasn’t what kept drawing her in. It was the raw pain, worse than any other others, held in every brush stroke and the curve of the man’s jaw. He was turned away from the viewer, hunched in on himself, hair covering his eyes, but every muscle in his body still screamed his pain and unhappiness, alone in a dim and deserted room. “It’s the best one here, I think.” She saw Sam nod his agreement out of the corner of her eye.

“I think so too,” he confessed.

“Who is he?” She asked, curious, “the man in the painting? Just… this painting seems to hold so much more emotion than any other others. It makes me think he’s someone Steve knows well.” Sam visibly hesitated before replying.

“Has… has Steve mentioned James to you? Bucky?” Natasha frowned, shaking her head.

“Is that him?” Sam nodded slowly.

“Yeah. And yes, Steve knew them but… look, it’s not my place to tell you. I know that’s cryptic but… it’s Steve’s story to tell.” Natasha nodded, curiosity piqued, but understanding that Sam wasn’t going to tell her anything else. Given that he’d used past tense when talking about the painting’s subject, she was guessing the story there was a painful one, and could understand why Sam wouldn’t want to share that with her without Steve’s permission.

“So I saw your painting,” she said, changing the subject away from the portrait they were standing in front of. Sam laughed, rubbing a hand over the nape of his neck.

“Yeah?” He asked, grin crooked, “what’d you think?”

“It was really good,” she replied sincerely, “very… raw. Honest.” Sam nodded.

“Yeah, Steve had been bugging me to pose for him for a long time and then… Steve can explain this better than I can, but, part of what Steve wanted to convey with this series is that scars aren’t always visible.” He nodded towards the painting in front of them, “The marks of violence can be very visible but it’s just as easy to carry your wounds without anyone ever knowing you’re bleeding out in front of them.” Natasha nodded, very familiar with that particular kind of slow death. Sam hesitated before continuing.

“I wasn’t sure if I wanted to show anyone those wounds, y’know? I could acknowledge they were
there, I could talk about them in group, work on healing them but… there’s a lot of exposure, a lot of, like you said, honesty that goes into paintings like this, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for that.”

“What made you decide to pose then?” Sam shrugged.

“It was kind of the perfect storm. I’d lost… overseas, my… partner, he died.” Sam cleared his throat.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Natasha interjected, suddenly worried that she’d overstepped the boundaries of this new friendship. Sam shook his head, laughing slightly.

“No, no, it’s fine really. It’s been seven years. It just throws me, sometimes, how much I still miss him.” Sam took a sip of his wine before continuing. “It was the anniversary of his death, which I’m normally fine with, but I got the invite in the mail for his sister’s wedding that morning and it was just… that he wasn’t going to be there to see her get married, it just really threw me, and, well, I ended up at Steve’s, kinda freaking out and when he answered the door covered in paint, I just kinda threw all caution into the wind.” He laughed, shaking some of the seriousness of the moment, “It took forever for him to actually sit down and do the initial sketch though, he just kept mother-henning all over me.” Natasha smiled at that.

“That sounds like Steve alright,” she said.

“Did I just hear my name?” Natasha jumped again, turning to find Steve looking between her and Sam.

“Just telling Natasha all about the night you had all those jello shots and then decided that skinny dipping in-”

“Oh!” Steve said loudly, clapping his hands together as Sam broke down into laughter.

“I’m going to get more wine,” he said as his laughter subsided, holding up his empty glass and clapping Steve on the shoulder before wandering away.

“You came,” Steve said, turning to Natasha with a smile.

“I said I would, didn’t I?” Natasha replied. Steve didn’t reply, just smiled wider. “I thought it was going to be smaller though… you made it sound like it was just going to be this tiny little affair!” Steve shrugged, sheepish.

“I mean, it was going to be? … about seven months ago before an agent saw my work and made it bigger.”

“It’s amazing Steve,” she said. And it was. She’d been shocked when he had texted her and told her the show was going to be at Catalyst, but even then she hadn’t realized what a big deal it was going to be. Though Catalyst was probably the biggest, and most important in terms of professional exposure, gallery in the city, she had thought it would still be a fairly small show, given how much Steve had downplayed the entire thing. Turned out he was just being an overly modest little shit, and the evening was the kind of thing that could launch an artist’s career.

“Yeah,” he replied softly, “it really is.” He looked around the room, and Natasha took the opportunity to blatantly stare at him. She was guessing Sam had had a hand in his outfit for the evening, since he looked much less like a trashy art hipster who got dressed in the dark and more like… well, a model. A tiny punk model that Natasha wanted to strip naked. He was wearing a plain black suit, but one that was so well fitted to him it transformed the entire outfit. He even had a pocket square. True to his nature, it had what appeared to be a print of tiny plastic dinosaurs on it, but still. *Pocket square.*
“So,” he said, turning back to her and grinning when he caught her staring, “what do you think of the show?” Though his tone was casual, Natasha could see his nerves in the way he shifted from foot to foot, so she took her time before replying.

“I think… I mean, first of all Steve, I think it’s really, really good,” he smiled shyly as she continued, “I think it’s very raw and honest and… chaotic? It makes me feel uncomfortable, but in a good way. Like, it’s too much, the colours and contrasts, the different canvas sizes and materials, it’s all too much variety, not enough coherence, but that creates the coherence, y’know? Like, the chaos is the coherence. The connection is the disconnect…” she trailed off, shaking her head. “Sorry, I don’t think that made any sense.” Steve was already shaking his head before she even finished her apology though.

“No, no, that’s totally… that’s exactly what I was going for, I’m so happy to hear you say that.”

“I mean, it’s not like my opinion matters,” she laughed, and Steve frowned up at her.

“It does to me,” he said seriously. And that. Well, Natasha wasn’t too certain what to say to that. Luckily, before she needed to stay anything a very tall and very pregnant brunette woman came bustling up to them, trailed by a slightly overwhelmed looking, heavily tattooed latino man.

“Steve!” She said loudly, “This is so fucking amazing, holy shit.”

“Thanks Becca,” he said, smiling up at her. She looked over at Natasha, and Steve turned towards her.

“Natasha, this is my friend Becca and her boyfriend Yadriel. Becca, Yadriel, this is Natasha.”

“Nice to meet you Natasha,” Becca said, looking her up at down before turning to Steve, punching him in the shoulder and not pulling it at all either, judging by the way Steve flinched.

“Where have you been hiding her? She’s super hot,” she said, not lowering her voice at all, and Natasha almost choked on the sip of wine she was taking. Steve turned bright red but other than that didn’t react.

“Well it was nice to see you too Rebecca. Bye now.” He said. Becca laughed.

“Yeah, yeah, I see how it is. I come all the way over here on my massive, swollen ankles only to be rudely dismissed,” She winked at Natasha before turning back to Steve, “You’re lucky you’re cute,” she said before reaching up and tweaking his nose. He squawked indignantly, but she just ignored him, turning and walking away. He turned back to Natasha, a resigned look on his face.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’ve known her since she was little.”

“She seems… nice,” Natasha offered uncertainly.

“She’s loud and rude.” He said flatly, and Natasha couldn’t help her laugh. He gave her a wry smile. “Sorry, all my friends are terrible.” She laughed again as sam rejoined them, pausing as he looked between the two of them.

“Sorry, should I leave you two to flirt some more and come back later or…?” He asked, pointing over his shoulder with his wine glass, and Steve groaned.

“See what I mean?” He said. Natasha smiled at him, Sam grinning as he settled in next to them. The
conversation quickly turned back to the show and off whatever was happening between Steve and Natasha, which she was very grateful for.

She didn’t ask about the painting of the one-armed man. She wanted to, was curious about what could have Sam stumbling over his words like that. She looked up at the painting. What kind of man could inspire Steve to create a wall-sized painting of him? What had happened to cause the flash of pain she saw on Steve’s face whenever he looked up at the large painting? Natasha shook her head at herself. She knew this wasn’t the time or place. Her resolve lasted through several more glasses of wine, through standing next to Steve as he talked to critics and customers, through her and Sam teaming up to tease Steve about his future as a world-famous artist, through Steve furiously blushing, through his shy invite to come back to his place as the gallery was locked up behind them. It lasted all the way up until she was standing alone in Steve’s living room, waiting for him to come back from the kitchen with another bottle of wine, and found herself staring up at a photo of the man and Steve on Steve’s mantle. Steve was dressed in a suit, the other man in a military uniform, and both were beaming at the camera, arms wrapped around each other. The man, she noticed, still had both arms.

“Oh,” she heard Steve say behind her as he walked into the room, and she turned away from the photo.

“Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to snoop.” Steve shook his head.

“No, no, I mean, it’s right there.”

“Sorry,” she apologized again anyways, “I just… that’s him, isn’t it? The man from the painting?” Steve nodded, looking uncomfortable and Natasha shifted nervously. “You don’t-” she started at the same time as Steve said,

“Sorry, it’s just-” They both stopped, and Steve wrinkled his nose at her, sitting and pouring them both glasses of wine, “It’s not a very happy story,” he said as she sat next to him. “I don’t want to dump all my issues on you on our first date.”

“Oh is that what this was?” Natasha teased, and she was relieved when Steve smiled back at her.

“Well I’m certainly not counting you walking me home from work,” he said, and Natasha laughed.

“Seriously though, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to but… I mean, I want to know more about you, and he is obviously very important to you.” Steve hesitated, before nodding.

“Okay, but seriously, if this is too heavy or too much, please just stop me anytime.” Natasha nodded.

“Same goes for you,” she said.

“Okay. Okay.” Steve drew in a deep breath. “I knew Bucky from the time we were kids. They were my best friend, helped pull me out of fights – yes, that is a lifelong habit,” he added when he saw Natasha smile slightly, “When we graduated from high school… actually, it was just after me and Peggy broke up, we started dating. It was… it was great. I was so worried that it was going to ruin our relationship but they just told me to stop being stupid.”

“Sorry,” Natasha held up her hands, not wanting to interrupt, but needing to clarify, “you keep saying ‘they’…” she trailed off, but Steve was already nodding.

“Yeah, Buck was non-binary. Um, that means they weren’t male or female.” He explained. Natasha nodded. There was that past tense again, and unlike when Sam used it, this time she knew. She suddenly wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear this, but figured that listening was the least she could do if
Steve was willing to share this with her. And she really did want to know more about him, about his life.

“They enlisted not too long after high school,” Steve continued, looking down at his glass, “we were just two stupid, poor kids from the inner city, y’know? I wanted… I wanted to be a teacher, so I started college and Buck went off to war.” Steve cleared his throat, looking back at Natasha. “We got married when they got back from their first tour,” he said, and Natasha started, looking back up at the photo on the mantle. Steve followed her gaze, smiling slightly. “Yeah, that’s from our wedding. I proposed to them in the airport when they got back.” Steve let out a quiet laugh as he remembered. “They yelled at me for spending money on a ring instead of school, and when I asked if that meant they wouldn’t marry me, they told me not to be ridiculous, of course they would marry me, that someone had to keep my dumb ass out of trouble.” Natasha laughed.

“They sound very sensible,” she said, and Steve smiled at her.

“Yeah, you would have liked each other.” Natasha felt her smile slip at the reminder that the story wasn’t over yet, and it wasn’t going to end well. Steve must have had the same realization as he returned to staring into his glass, playing with the stem. He took a deep breath, then continued.

“Anyways, they did a couple more tours, mostly domestic, and I graduated and started teaching. And then Buck got deployed overseas again.” He paused for a long moment. “It was a rocket, in the middle of a firefight with insurgents. Buck was trying to evacuate a school when it hit the building. Dugan pulled them out of the building.” Steve took another deep breath. Natasha wanted to tell him again that he didn’t have to continue if he didn’t want to, but she didn’t want to interrupt him. “There was… Bucky never told me the full story; I got most of it from Dugan and the rest of their unit. It was really bad though apparently. Bodies everywhere, kids, and Buck… Buck’s arm was gone. They barely made it out alive.” Steve paused to take a drink of wine, and Natasha mirrored the action.

“When they got back, they were different. I mean, I’ve spoken to Sam enough, about PTSD and all that, about how there’s no point in blaming myself, that there wasn’t anything I could have done, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling like I should have, y’know?” Steve looked up at her. “I should have saved them.” His mouth twitched.

“Steve. What happened?” Natasha asked softly, reaching out and putting a hand on his shoulder. Steve’s eyes flicked away from hers, focusing on some point across the room, but his free hand came up to cover hers.

“Six months after they got back, while I was out getting groceries, they killed themselves.” Natasha sucked in a sharp breath. She had been expecting it, but somehow it was still like a shock out of left field. It might have been seeing the pain clear on Steve’s face, but it felt like being blindsided. She was no good at this, didn’t know what to say. If there was anything to say. After a moment though, Steve shook his head, turning back to her.

“It was five years ago,” he said. “It still hurts but… you deal with the pain. It’s part of me, but it’s not all of me. Buck made their choice and no matter how much I love them, I couldn’t have saved them.” Natasha twisted her hand to grab Steve’s, squeezing it. He gave her a small smile.

“I’m really sorry Steve,” she said, and he shrugged.

“No, it’s okay. I still miss them, I’ll always miss them, but I’ve also spent a lot of time learning to move on.” He paused, then laughed. “Some first date, eh?” Natasha huffed out a small laugh in response. “I know it’s a lot,” he said more seriously, “but I figure best you know what baggage I’ve
got going on before we… whatever. Do more dates. If you want more dates that is. I mean, I do, obviously, but I don’t.” Natasha stopped Steve’s nervous babbling with a wave of her hand.

“Don’t… we’ve all got our own pasts,” she said seriously, “thank you for sharing yours with me.” She felt a brief twinge at not returning the favour, but stubbornly ignored it. She would have to, she knew, tell Steve at least some things about her past, but not right now. Learning about Bucky had been enough heaviness for one night, she decided. With that in mind, she spoke.

“Now,” she said, raising her glass in front of her, “how about we drink some more wine and talk about something more fun, like that jello shot story Sam mentioned earlier.” Steve groaned, both of them settling gratefully into the subject change.

“No,” he said as he took a drink, “I am absolutely never telling you that story. Ever.”

Two glasses of wine later, he told her the story.

When she said goodnight several hours later, they had both settled back into steadily flirting with each other, teasing and exchanging stories with ease. Perhaps even easier than before, Natasha thought to herself, as it quickly became clear just how heavily Bucky featured in Steve’s more outrageous stories (he claimed that they had been the sensible one in their relationship, but Natasha was quite certain that they were much more of an enabler than Steve let on). She also learned that Becca was Bucky’s younger sister, causing her to wonder how similar in personality the two siblings had been. From Steve’s stories, she gathered very, which cemented her suspicion that they were just as much of a troublemaker as Steve himself. Natasha was surprised but pleased to find that she was reluctant to leave, but finally gave in when both of them were yawning every other sentence. She pulled on her coat, and was about to pull on her shoes when Steve stopped her. She looked down at him curiously.

“I’d really like to kiss you,” he said seriously, “And if you put on your heels I won’t be able to reach.” Natasha laughed. Taking that as permission, she leaned down, pressing her lips against his. The kiss was soft and warm, his lips slightly chapped against her own. This close he smelt like paint and coffee, and his hand pressed lightly against her hip. She pulled away slightly but he chased up after her for a second kiss which she happily allowed him, smiling slightly against his lips. When he pulled away she smiled fully down at him, and he gave her a happy grin in return.

“Goodnight Steve,” she said.

“Goodnight Natasha. I’ll text you soon, okay?” She nodded and finally pulled on her shoes, departing with a final wave. Walking towards the subway with her hands tucked into the warm pockets of her coat, she enjoyed the feeling of the warmth growing in her stomach, the smile tugging at her lips that she was helpless to stop, and didn’t think about anything else at all.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t hate me. Poor Steve. This started out so much less sad, but stories will do what they want.

Accidentally made Becca preggers again. Whoops. Also, yes, I gave her the same boyfriend as in *I've Never Felt Young*. I loved him and wanted him to be in this story too, fight me.
All barista stories Steve shares in this fic will be 100% real and have happened to me. People are idiots. And weird. And demanding assholes. I had a customer once order a latte, take a sip, and then tell me she didn’t like espresso, why did I make her latte with espresso???

It’s up to you really, whether or not Riley and Sam were involved romantically or not. I left it ambiguous because I think it was more complicated than Sam can really explain to a relative stranger. But he did love him.

Up next: Natasha’s super upsetting past!!!

As always you can find outfits, art reference, and other assorted images on the Pinterest board for this fic. You can also find me on tumblr.
Natasha arrived at work to the sounds of shouting coming from Fury’s office. Changing into her uniform, she wandered into the staff room. Maria, Pepper, Tony, Sharon, and Rhodey were all there, sitting in total silence, not even pretending that they weren’t trying to hear what was being said. Pulling out a chair, Natasha dropped into the seat opposite Rhody, setting her cup down on the table as she leaned towards him.

“What’s happening?” she whispered. The entire table shushed her without even looking at her. Natasha bit down on her smile as she sat back, hands raised in surrender. Now that she was sitting in the silence of the staff room however, she could also catch some of what was being said.

“...irresponsible, unprofessional, disgraceful... to think…” She was pretty sure that was Fury.

“...fault... that bitch...” And the second speaker sounded like it could be... Rumlow?

“...not to mention... punching... “

“...asking for it! I don’t see why…”

“...fired!” They all jumped as the sound of a door slamming suddenly echoed loudly through the building, and they all quickly pretended to be busy on their phones as the sound of stomping feet approached the break room. Rumlow appeared in the doorway, pausing to glare into the room.

“Fuck all of you,” he spat angrily, and Natasha bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from smiling. “I didn’t fucking deserve this.”

“Actually, you kind of did,” Maria said with a smirk. Rumlow’s eyes flicked over to where Natasha was sitting, and she straightened in her seat under his gaze. There was something in his eyes—not just anger but something else, something she couldn’t quite identify. He opened his mouth, but paused, shutting it. Shaking his head, he kept walking. They all jumped slightly at the sound of the front door slamming open. They all sat in silence for a long moment before Sharon suddenly jumped up.

“YES!” she shouted, pumping her fist towards the ceiling. Everyone burst into startled laughter as she grinned widely, throwing up her arms. “I’m free!!”

“Congratulations,” Maria said, voice teasing. Sharon pointed at Natasha.
“I never thought I would be so happy for you getting punched in the face,” she said, and Natasha startled.

“Fury found out about that?” she asked, surprised “That’s why he got fired?” Sharon shook her head.

“I don’t know if that’s actually the reason, but c’mon, you reported him right after it happened, if they didn’t fire him for that…”

“Yeah but it’s been weeks since then,” Natasha said, confused. “You’d think they’d have fired him before now if that was the reason.” Sharon frowned in thought, and Rhodey cleared his throat. They all turned to him.

“I might have heard a rumour that he failed his drug test.”

“Seriously?” Pepper said, genuine surprise in her voice.

“I did not see that coming,” Tony added.

“Why wouldn’t they fire him for punching you though?” Maria interjected. “Surely punching a co-worker would be enough grounds for dismissal, even if it happened outside of work hours.” Natasha shrugged. She honestly hadn’t thought about it too much. Shield, for all the ways in which it was ages better than RedRoom, still had its faults, and she wouldn’t be surprised to find out someone in charge had decided that one driver getting punched wasn’t worth losing a paramedic who was, yeah, a complete asshole and nightmare to work with, but also very good at his job. Not Fury though. She was pretty sure Fury would have dropped Rumlow’s ass the second Sharon said something bad about him if he had been able to.

They heard the front door open again, and all tensed slightly, relaxing when Clint turned the corner, looking back over his shoulder with a slightly puzzled look on his face. Turning around, he startled at the sight of all of his fellow drivers assembled in the break room.

“Is there a reason Rumlow’s kicking his car’s tires and swearing like crazy in the parking lot?” He asked, dumping his coat onto a chair and beginning to unwind his scarf.

“He got fired,” Sharon said, voice incredibly chipper to match the giant grin she was still sporting. Clint raised his eyebrows.

“No shit?” he said. “Damn, that’s great Sharon. Congratulations.” She just smiled some more, bouncing on the toes of her feet. Fury appeared behind Clint suddenly, looking around at the room of cheerful paramedics before rolling his eyes.

“Inappropriate,” he commented dryly, before pointing at Sharon. “C’mon Carter, let’s pick out your new partner.” Sharon flashed them all a double thumbs up, accompanied by another large smile as she followed their boss out of the room.

“So Rumlow’s finally gone,” Clint said with a low whistle.

“’Bout fucking time,” Rhodey said, shaking his head.

“Amen,” Maria said, “Sharon deserves so much better than him.”

“Yeah, you’d think so,” Pepper said, nudging her, and Natasha watched with curiosity as a blush crept up Maria’s cheeks. They were interrupted by the squawk of a radio. Rhodey and Tony took it, hauling themselves out of their seats with a groan.
“See y’all later,” Tony said with a sloppy salute, walking out of the room. Natasha rolled her eyes at him. Clint disappeared to get changed, and Maria and Pepper were now whispering furiously at each other. Natasha ignored them in favour of sipping on her coffee as she waited for Clint to reappear, smiling slightly into her drink. She still didn’t really understand everything that had been going on with Rumlow, that night or any other, and the fact that he’d failed his drug test… but she also didn’t really care, too busy being incredibly happy for her friend. She had faith that Fury would be careful to hire someone that would be a good match for Sharon this time. Despite how gruff their boss could be at times, he was a genuinely good guy who wanted the best for his employees.

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The air became more and more frosty. Ice was now lacing the window when she got up in the morning. Liho walked around the apartment, meowing loud complaints at the cold tile against it’s paws in the morning. Several weeks later, the first snowfall of the year finally blanketed the city and Natasha, with no small degree of annoyance, pulled all of her heavy winter coats out of the back of her closet and resigned herself to running indoors until the spring. Despite her general irritation at the dropping temperatures, Natasha had to admit that there was something about watching the snow fall from inside her apartment, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, that created a cozy feeling of home. Liho, proving that it was perfectly suited to being Natasha’s cat, also wasn’t happy about the snow, spending a lot of time curled up in Natasha’s lap or hiding under her sheets.

Clint, on the other hand, loved the snow, as did his stupid dogs. Natasha had arrived at his place on her day off only to be shepherded up to the roof of his building where she now stood, the two dogs running excitedly through the snow around her. She was wrapped up in a blue winter coat, faux fur hat, and oversized scarf, quiver and bow thrown over her shoulder as she rocked back and forth on her toes. Her face was buried into the scarf, peering out over the top of the fabric at where Clint and Kate were setting up across the roof.

“I really don’t think this is safe,” she said again, not actually particularly concerned. Clint and Kate continued to ignore her half-hearted protestations. The home-made targets Clint was setting up on one side of the roof were pretty large, and Natasha was totally confident in Kate’s shooting skills… but still. She didn’t really want to have to administer first aid to a poor passerby that got shot by a stray arrow. She just didn’t.

“Okay!” Clint called out, the two siblings trudging through the snow covering the roof to where Natasha was standing, shivering.

“Why are we doing this again?” Natasha asked, putting the quiver and bow into Kate’s outstretched hands.

“I want to make sure I can shoot in any temperature,” Kate said, shouldering the quiver and running her hands over the bow.

“Will the bow be okay?” Natasha asked, eyeing it. “Like, it won’t snap or anything?”

“Nah,” Kate said, twinging the string, “this guy is made for use in temperatures down to forty below.”


“I mean, I personally probably wouldn’t, but…” she trailed off with a wide grin, and Natasha rolled her eyes at the obvious attempt to unnerve her. With a laugh, Kate turned and headed towards the far
side of the roof, opposite the targets, leaving her brother standing next to Natasha, hands shoved in his pockets. The dogs tried to follow her, but Clint called them back. Waking over the the door, he ushered them into the stairwell, shutting the door on their whines.

“Won’t they wander all over the building?” Natasha asked as he returned to his spot next to her. Clint shrugged with a lopsided smile.

“All of the tenants know them if they do. No one’ll mind.” Natasha raised an eyebrow at her friend.

“I still can’t decide if you’re an awesome or a terrible landlord.”


“So,” he said after a moment of watching Kate in silence, “what’s new with you?” Natasha gave him an incredulous look.

“We see each other almost every day,” she pointed out. “If we spent any more time together we would be common law married.” Clint laughed.

“I like that. You’re my work wife.”

“Excuse you,” Natasha said, “we both know that you’re my work wife.” Clint pretend to think about it for a moment, before nodding solemnly.

“True,” He said. Kate swore, and they both looked over to see her dropping an arrow into the snow at her feet. They watched her struggle for a moment in silence, before she finally managed to notch the arrow, letting it fly to land dead-centre in the target. Her smile was visible from across the roof as she walked across it to inspect her aim.

“Seriously though,” Clint said, looking uncomfortable when Natasha glanced at him, “I know you don’t like to talk about… things, sometimes, but I mean, you’ve mentioned spending time with Steve a couple times, and…” He trailed off with a shrug.

“Yeah,” Natasha said after a moment’s silence, “sure, we’re… hanging out, I guess.”

“Hanging out,” Clint echoes, hastily continuing when Natasha turned to glare at him, “so, how’s that going?” Natasha paused for a moment, thinking. She had been surprised at how quickly and easily her and Steve slid into… well, she wouldn’t call it dating, though she knew everyone else would. Steve was taking her utter refusal to term what they were doing anything other than ‘hanging out’ in good humour though, so everyone else could get fucked. They texted or called each other nearly every day, and were seeing each other at least a couple times every week, though it was sometimes difficult given the long shifts Natasha worked. On the other hand, Steve kept really weird hours, which definitely made it easier.

“It’s going good,” she said, honestly. “It’s going really good.” There was a pause, before Clint spoke again.

“Feel free to tell me to shut up or whatever, but y’know, I’ve known you for a long time Natasha, and despite all my teasing it’s still… surprising, I guess, that you’d want to… hang out, with someone like Steve.” She raised an eyebrow at her friend.

“Someone like Steve?” she repeated.

“A guy,” Clint replied, “I mean, to be totally honest here I kinda thought you were a lesbian.”
“No,” Natasha said, shaking her head as she turned away, “no, not a lesbian. Just a wary bisexual.” Clint let out a surprised bark of laughter before lapsing into silence.

“I like him,” she said after a moment, and Clint nodded, accepting that. They watched Kate fire off a couple more arrows before Natasha again broke the silence.

“So how about you? You dating at all?” Clint squinted at her.

“Just because we talked about you ‘hanging out’ doesn’t mean we have to talk about me.” Natasha shrugged, smiling.

“We don’t have to. I just want to. C’mon,” she said, nudging her shoulder against his, “tell me about your life as a full-time queer trainwreck.” Clint rolled his eyes at her.

“There’s nothing to tell. I’ve been really busy lately between work and Kate, so I haven’t had the time to go on any disastrous dates.”

“Busy with Kate? Is there something wrong with Kate?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Clint replied hastily, throwing up his hands. “We’ve just been working on her college applications and studying for the SATs.”

“No shit,” Natasha said, and Clint grinned.

“First member of the family to graduate high school.”

“That’s awesome,” Natasha breathed, turning to look at Kate, standing across the roof with a look of fierce concentration on her face.

“Yeah,” Clint said, voice filled with pride, “yeah it is.” They lapsed into silence for another moment, before Clint spoke again.

“Hey!” he said, voice excited as he turned to Natasha, “did you hear about Sharon?”

“Did I hear what about Sharon?” Natasha asked.

“Well for one I’m pretty sure she and Maria hooked up or are hooking up-”

“What!” Natasha shouted.

“But she got a new partner.” Clint continued, ignoring her.

“Okay,” Natasha said, holding up her hands, “slow down, go back to that first point. You think she’s got a thing with Maria? Why?” Clint shrugged.

“Just the way they’ve been acting around each other. I haven’t figured out yet if it was a one time thing or ongoing.” He brightened. “Hey, I should just ask Peggy!”

“You will do no such thing,” Natasha said, pointing at him. He fake-pouted at her. “New partner?” she asked, and Clint smiled.

“Yeah, I forgot my pants there the other day and met him when I stopped by to grab them. He’s this huge guy, like, over six feet tall and built like a brick shithouse, super hot…” Clint trailed off, looking dreamy, and Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.
“Maybe you should be dating,” she said, and Clint rolled his eyes at her.

“Anyways, he’s super cool, and him and Sharon seem to be getting along great, judging by the two thumbs up she gave me behind his back.” Natasha laughed.

“That’s amazing, I can’t wait to meet him. I’m so happy they found someone better than Rumlow.”

“I mean, low bar,” Clint said, and Natasha inclined her head in acknowledgement. The sound of crunching snow drew their attention back to where Kate was now trudging back towards them across the roof.

“My fingers are cold,” she announced as she drew closer. “It’s fucking up my aim. I need to take a break.”

“So much for your plan to be a super secret Russian assassin,” Clint said as they turned and headed inside. Kate sighed.

“I’ll just have to be a super secret Caribbean assassin instead.”

“There a lot of call for those?” Natasha asked for a smile as they headed down the stairs. Kate turned to grin up at her.

“Well if there isn’t I’ll just lie on a beach instead! Win/win!” Natasha laughed, and the three of them stomped inside Clint’s apartment, shedding boots and coats.

“So Clint said you’re applying for schools?”

“Yeah, just started! The application process to some of these places is ridiculous, honestly.”

“Any idea what you want to study?” Natasha asked as Kate and Clint settled at the counter. Natasha turned her back to them, grabbing the ingredients for hot chocolate out of the cupboard. She held them up, receiving matching nods of confirmation from the siblings, and grabbed a pot to heat the milk. Kate shrugged.

“I’m not sure yet. I’ve gotten a couple of scholarship offers already for archery, so I’ll definitely keep doing that, but I’m not sure what I want to study.”

“Well you can always just take a shit ton of different classes your first year and decide then,” Natasha said, and Kate nodded.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. A couple of the scouts said I could probably go to the Olympics in the next couple of years too, so there’s that as well.” Natasha grinned over at her, and at the proud look on Clint’s face as he smiled at his sister.

“That’s so awesome Kate. You’re gonna do awesome no matter what.”

“I know,” Kate said with an exaggerated hair flip, and Clint and Natasha rolled their eyes at her.

“So, any schools in particular you really want to go to or…?” Kate hesitated, glancing at Clint as Natasha set down mugs of hot chocolate on the counter, bag of marshmallows next to it. Clint immediately dumped a small mountain on top of his before taking a sip.

“Well… my girlfriend is going to Stanford… and they have a pretty good archery program.”

“You’re not chasing a girl to school,” Clint said with no inflection, and Kate scowled at him.
“I’m not chasing her. I’m just saying, she’s going to Stanford, they’re one of the schools that have offered me a scholarship, and it’s a fucking great school.” Clint hummed into his hot chocolate, narrowing his eyes, but refraining from further comment. Natasha glanced between them. Clearly this was an ongoing argument, and not one she really wanted to get in the middle of.

“So,” she said, turning back to Kate, “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend. Why don’t you tell me about her?” Kate sat up, face brightening as she began to talk about her girlfriend, America. Natasha leaned against the counter with her own mug cradled in her hands as she and Clint listened to the teenager explain, with much waving of her arms, how badass America was.

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Three weeks after her talk with Clint, Natasha headed over to Steve’s after a rough shift at work, letting the calm of his presence wash over her as they made dinner together and washed up. Steve had asked her what was wrong once over the course of dinner, but didn’t press when she brushed him off, which she appreciated. Any day that involved a panic attack was not something she particularly wanted to talk about, at least not in the middle of eating. She was currently curled up on his couch, half watching the cooking show that was playing on the television, half watching Steve as he worked on his latest knitting project.

She had laughed at him, long and hard, the first time he had pulled out his knitting while they were out getting coffee, teasing him about being an incurable hipster while he got all huffy with her. It was adorable though, and she had carefully bit her tongue when he’d told her about the knitting club he belonged to that was half made up of old grannies with nothing better to do and half of university students seeking stress relief. She loved to watch him knit, the graceful way his slim fingers manipulated the yarn, much smoother now that the cast had been removed. He’d also gifted two hats and a scarf to her, and Natasha was beginning to suspect that if she kept dat--seeing him for any length of time, she’d end up with a full kit of knitted winter wear.

She took a sip of her tea, watching with a smile as Steve frowned down at the piece of paper balanced on one knee, glasses slipping down his nose as he leaned forward to read it. She could just hear him muttering under his breath over the sounds of the woman on the television telling her to grease her baking pan. The fire sent flickering lights and shadows across his face, casting his cheekbones into sharp relief, and she allowed her eyes to wander over him, the oversized Hanukkah sweater he was wearing, the tight black leggings. She had already agreed to spend the holiday with him at the Barnes’ household, which she was feeling slightly hesitant about, but mostly excited. She wasn’t sure if two months into… whatever, was early to meet the family or not, but she’d already said yes, so it was happening, whatever she felt about it. At the very least, she already knew Becca, and while the other woman had raised an eyebrow or two at the way both Natasha and Steve avoided the word ‘dating’, she’d still taken it with good humour, so Natasha could only hope that the rest of the family would be the same.

Natasha had run into the other woman a couple times since the art gallery, mostly when she was leaving Steve’s apartment. Becca had apparently adopted Steve after his brother’s death, and still dropped by once a week or so with armfuls of tupperware. Natasha was just glad that someone else was looking out for Steve - it hadn’t taken long at all for her to realize that when he got caught up in his art, everything else faded to a distant second, including eating. Between Natasha, Sam, and Becca though, he’d put on a little bit of weight lately, something Natasha was very happy to see.

There was a sudden loud noise from the television as it switched to commercial, and Natasha jumped, twisting around and bracing to move. Steve looked up, startled by Natasha’s movement.

“Everything okay?” He asked.
“Yeah, fine,” Natasha said, still looking at the television. She could sense Steve’s eyes on her for a couple more moments before the sound of the needles clacking together once again filled the room. She kept staring over at the television, unseeing. She was going to have to tell him, she realized. It had been weeks, and he had taken her weirdness about labelling their relationship, about doing too much couple-y stuff, about physical closeness, with no complaint and utter patience. She wasn’t obligated to tell him, she knew, would prefer not to really, but… she also did want to, wanted to open up to him, wanted to return the trust he had given her. The fact that she knew he wouldn’t ever pressure her to tell him anything made her want to tell him. Her eyes flicked to the picture of Steve and Bucky on the mantle below the television, and her mind was made up. Turning to face him, she cleared her throat. Looking up, Steve saw the look on her face and immediately set his knitting down on the coffee table, turning to look at her fully.

“So I went on this call today,” she started, stopping and running her hand through her hair. “Shit,” she muttered, and Steve reached forward, resting a hand lightly on her knee.

“Hey,” he said, “it’s okay, you don’t have to-”

“No,” she interrupted, “no, I do, I want to, I need to talk to you about this, it’s just…” she let out a heavy breath, looking across the room. “It’s hard,” she admitted. “It’s not something I talk about often, or with many people.” She looked back at him. “But I trust you, more than I’ve trusted someone new in a long time, and I want to tell you this.” He nodded his head, solemn in the face of her seriousness.

“You went on a call?” he prompted when she still didn’t say anything. Taking a deep, shaky breath, Natasha nodded. She could do this. More importantly, she wanted to do this.

“It was to a domestic incident, though we didn’t know that at the time. The kid had been the one to call. I guess she was too afraid to ask for the police or something because all she told dispatch was that her mom was hurt. So dispatch sent us.” Natasha paused, taking another couple of deep breaths, centreing herself before continuing.

“When we got to the door the kid let us in, we went into the kitchen. He was beating her over the head with a frying pan, just smashing it into her over and over again. If it was cast iron she would have already been dead, but she still had her arms up, trying to protect herself.” Natasha felt herself beginning to dissociate, everything taking an unreal sheen, and she reached out blindly, Steve’s hand slipping into hers and gripping with a strength that always surprised her, grounding her back in the present.

“It wasn’t… when he caught sight of us he started yelling and screaming at us, then he started swinging at Clint when he went to separate him from his wife. He managed to get in a couple of hits in before the police could get him out of there. And I just stood there, in the doorway. I wanted to move, I wanted to help but…” Natasha trailed off, staring into the shadows over Steve’s shoulder for a long moment before meeting his eyes again.

“I had… a less than pleasant childhood. Other than the last eight years, I spent most of my life around men who were… cruel.” Steve squeezed her hand again, and she offered him a crooked smile. His eyes, so full of concern, and anger that she knew wasn’t directed at her, let her continue, taking a deep breath as she disclosed something she had only told a handful of other people.

“I don’t really remember my parents. They immigrated to the States before I was born, and were killed in a car crash when I was a kid. I didn’t have any family back in India, at least not that the government could find, so I went into foster care. Bounced around for a few years then, when I was six, I ended up with the Romanovas. When I was eight, they officially adopted me.” She smiled crookedly as she remembered.
“They adored me, or at least what I represented. Their perfect minority child, someone they could brag about to all their friends. But, I mean, of course I couldn’t just be a minority. Playing the perfect white saviours for their friends only went so far. I needed to actually succeed at something. So they pushed me with school, and they started me doing ballet. I was the perfect student, perfect daughter, perfect trophy for them to show off at the country club.” She laughed, bitter and brittle.

“Just one big happy family. Or at least to the outside. After all, it’s not like the country club set want to see bruises on a kid’s face, no, they’ll ignore that all day long, buy whatever weak excuses I came up with without question.” She paused, chewing her lip as she debated if she really wanted to tell him this next part. Glancing up and seeing the intense concentration and concern in her eyes, she let her eyes slip shut, and continued.

“He never told me not to tell anyone, he didn’t have to. It started when I was thirteen and just like when they hit me I never told anyone.” Steve sucked in a breath at what she was talking around, but didn’t say anything, and she didn’t look at him as she continued, “The first time I ran away I was fourteen. The police picked me up after a week. I still have the scars on my back from that. The second time I was sixteen and I made sure they would never find me again.” She smiled, suddenly, looking up at him.

“That’s when I met Tania. She was screaming at a cop for harassing a homeless man sleeping on the curb. Fifteen years old, five foot eleven, skinny as a rail, and fucking furious. She was amazing. We hustled together, after that, had each others backs. When she went to prison…” Natasha shook her head. “It wasn’t good. I ended up hooking up with this guy who… well, I was in the hospital a lot those couple of years. I was with him almost the whole time she was in lockup.” She looked up at Steve.

“But that’s never going to happen to me again. I got off the streets, away from him, Tania got out of prison and helped me study for my GED, do my application to become a paramedic, and I learned how to defend myself. No one is ever going to touch me without my permission again,” she said fiercely. “Never.” She paused, looking at Steve for his reaction, but his expression hadn’t really changed since she had started to speak, still filled with concern and anger and sadness. Taking a deep breath, she thought for a moment before speaking again.

“You’re the first man in a long time that I’ve wanted to be around, to be involved with romantically, but I’m not really sure how to navigate that. I’m not going to be okay with saying we’re dating or calling you my boyfriend. I’m not comfortable with a lot of stuff around male-female relationships because of what has happened to me in the past, and it seems only fair to warn you that if you want someone who can give you… everything normal, I’m not the person for you.”

“Hey,” Steve said, softly, gently, speaking for the first time “what ever gave you the idea I wanted everything normal?” Natasha bit out a surprised laugh, sniffing as she smiled down at the man sitting next to her on the couch.

“Too much?” she asked, and Steve shrugged.

“Nah,” he said, overly casual. “I mean, I did tell you how my partner killed themselves on our first date, so really, this is pretty lowkey for us.” Natasha laughed again, letting her head drop forward to knock against Steve’s shoulder, leaning against him.

“I’m so fucked up,” she mumbled into his sweater. “You have no idea Steve, I’m so fucked up.”

“Well we haven’t even begun to plumb the depths of the various ways I’m super fucked up either,” he said calmly. “So let’s just be fucked up together.”
Two weeks later, it was the last night of Hanukkah, and Natasha was officially freaking out. Her room looked like a tornado had hit it, with clothes strewn everywhere, and Tania was not answering her phone (she was probably at work, Natasha knew she was probably at work, Natasha wanted to know why the fuck she wasn’t answering her phone anyways). She couldn’t call Clint, he was absolutely useless, and she may have broken out a bottle of wine to make herself feel better. She took a large drink from the sizable glass she had poured as she observed the room. She probably should have anticipated this, gotten together with Tania earlier in the week to pick out an outfit, but she just hadn’t thought of it, and here she was, three hours away from when she was supposed to meet Steve at the Barnes’ house, and no idea what to wear.

She was basically going to be meeting his family.

Fuck.

Spinning, Natasha quickly strode from of her room and out of the front door, crossing the entryway and knocking on the door opposite her own.

“Natasha!” Thor greeted her with a large smile, “wh-”

“Is Darcy home?” She asked, interrupting him. He looked between her face and the glass of wine still clenched in her hand, smile dimming slightly as he took in her expression.

“Darcy!” He called over his shoulder, the brunette quickly bouncing into view from the living room.

“What’s up? Oh hey Tash,” she said, spotting the other woman standing in the doorway, “wh-”

“I need help,” Natasha said. Darcy’s eyes widened.

“Um, okay? With?”

“I don’t know what to wear tonight.” Darcy laughed.

“Oh my god you had me worried there for a moment.” She took in Natasha’s unamused look, and bit her lip, trying to smile less. “That’s fine, let’s go see what we’re working with.” She followed Natasha back across the hallway, Thor trailing along. Which was fine, the more opinions the better. Well, except for Jane’s. Natasha didn’t know if the other woman was home as well, but considering the number of times Natasha had seen her wearing shirts that were both inside out and backwards she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be much help. Darcy was by far the most stylish of their triumvirate, though Thor also had been known to clean up well on occasion, and had that whole lumberjack aesthetic going for him the rest of the time. Leading them into her apartment, she headed directly into her room, Darcy taking in the mess with wide eyes while Thor immediately bent down to coo at Liho, who was sitting on top of a pile of jackets, unconcerned about her owner’s freakout.

“So what are we looking at here?” Darcy asked, picking a red dress off the floor. “Is this for a first date or?” Natasha shook her head, abruptly realizing how long it had been since she had actually hung out with her neighbors. Resolving to do something with them soon, she set that aside for the time being.

“No, I’ve been… hanging out with this guy for a couple months now, but we’re going to his family’s for Hanukkah tonight and I’m kind of freaking out.” Darcy raised an eyebrow at her, but didn’t otherwise comment on the information she’d been given, which Natasha appreciated.

“Alright so are we feeling dress or pants tonight?” Natasha sat down on her bed heavily, taking
another gulp of wine.

“I don’t knowww,” she whined. Darcy laughed at her, while Thor looked up from where he had been making friends with Liho with a frown.

“You should wear a dress,” he said. Natasha looked over at him. He shrugged. “You look good in a dress.” Natasha looked back at Darcy, who nodded solemnly.

“It’s true,” she said, picking up another scrap of fabric off the floor and examining it.

“A dress just seems so formal,” Natasha said with a frown, thinking over the dresses she owned, “plus I only have either cocktail dresses or club dresses… I don’t really have anything to wear to meet the family.”

“That’s a good point,” Darcy said, raising an eyebrow as she looked at the length of the dress she was now holding. “How about a skirt/shirt combo?” Natasha thought for a moment, then nodded.

“That could work.”

“Still fancy, but good for family,” Thor added, now sitting on the floor with Liho curled up in his lap, purring as the large man stroked her.

“Alright,” Natasha said, pouring the rest of the wine down her throat and standing. “Let’s do this,” she said, joining Darcy in digging through the pile of clothes.

After a few minutes Natasha went and got two glasses of wine for her friends, though she decided to cut herself off. She modelled three outfits for Darcy and Thor before finally settling on a black and white striped shirt with a red skirt, big yellow scarf and black tights. They stayed to hang out with Natasha while she drew her hair up into a bun, taking her time in doing her makeup as she chatted with her neighbors about their respective jobs and schoolwork. The topic changed to holiday plans, Darcy telling her that they were heading over to Norway for Christmas, where Jane and Darcy would meet Thor’s family for the first time. Natasha could see that the younger woman was nervous, but Thor seemed very excited, grinning as he talked about his mother, father, and younger brother. When it was time for Natasha to head out, she said goodbye to them with a smile.

She shoved on a pair of boots and large winter coat before heading out. She was taller than Steve anyways, but was still happy that he didn’t mind her wearing heels. Some men got weird about girls wearing heels that made them taller than them, but Steve had confessed to her that he just thought her heels were hot, blushing while he did so. God, he was cute.

The subway ride to the Barnes’ was longer than Natasha was used to, and also involved two buses, since the family lived out in the suburbs of the city. She checked the address on her phone three times on the way over, texting Steve when she thought she was close and getting a reply telling her he’d meet her at the bus stop. She was getting more and more nervous as she drew closer, but tried to ignore it. Tonight was going to go fine.

It was.

True to his word, Steve was waiting for her at the bus stop, smiling at her as she climbed out of the vehicle. Her boots crunched against the snow as she alighted next to him. Bending down, they exchanged a quick kiss, Steve’s cold nose brushing against her cheek. Steve interwove his gloved hand with hers as he pulled her off down the street. He was wearing a massive winter coat, unbuttoned, under which Natasha could see he was wearing yet another Hanukkah sweater. He had shown her his entire, very impressive, collection a couple weeks before when she’d asked about
them, admitting that half of them had been Bucky’s, before. The one he was wearing right now was probably Bucky’s, judging by the size, and featured a large dreidel and the phrase “you spin me right round, baby”. It made Natasha smile as they crunched their way down the street.

Steve had converted to Judaism before marrying Bucky. He’d told her the first time he’d had to beg off from plans because he was going to shul, but it hadn’t come up much since then. He admitted he’d fallen out of the habit of attending regularly after Bucky’s death, when the mother henning of all the Jewish grannies from the synagogue had become too much. She had told him in turn about her own struggles to connect with the religion of her parents, to reclaim the culture that had been stripped from her as a child. He’d accompanied her as she nervously went down to a shop and bought her first package of bindis, as well as several small statues for her home shrine. She’d set it up in her living room, clearing a space for the statues of the gods and an incense stand for performing puja.

“You doing okay?” Steve asked, pulling her from her thoughts. He looked up at her, squeezing her hand. Natasha nodded, smiling down at him.

“I had to go and buy another bottle of wine to bring tonight,” she confessed. “I may have drank the first one while I was getting ready.”

“Nervous?” He asked. Natasha shrugged.

“A bit,” she said with a smile. “You’re lucky, the only family of mine there is to meet is Tania, and you’ve already met her.” Steve laughed.

“Well the Barnes are good people, promise,” he said. “It’ll be fine.” Despite Steve’s words, and the fact that Becca was very open in her fondness for Natasha, she was still worried. The Barnes might be Steve’s family, and they might want only the best for him, but he had still been married to their child. She was worried that, despite what Steve said, what they might have said to Steve on the matter, they would still resent Steve bringing someone new to a family holiday celebration when their own child could never again join them.

Steve nodded towards the house they were approaching. “We’re here.” Natasha looked up at the little two story house, picturesque in the snow, with white fairy lights strung across the windows and a silver menorah visible in the front window. She took a deep breath, and then let Steve lead her up the walkway, trying the door then ringing the doorbell when it was locked. Barking sounded immediately from inside the house, along with a woman’s voice shouting. The door opened quickly to reveal a harried looking older woman, holding back a large german shepherd.

“Sorry,” she said, holding the dog back as Steve and Natasha stepped inside. “Sorry. Lupo! Sit!” The dog immediately sat, tongue lolling as it looked up at them. The woman straightened, offering her hand towards Natasha. “Sorry, I’m Winnie, you must be Natasha.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Natasha said, taking her hand and shaking it. The woman’s grip was as firm as her smile was warm.

“Steve,” she said, turning to give him a hug in greeting, “it’s good to see you. Did you get the matzo ball soup I sent with George? He said he gave it to you, but I’m not sure I trust him not to have just eaten it…” she trailed off, smiling at Steve, who laughed.

“He gave it to me Winnie, thank you, it was delicious.” Steve said, smiling at her, “The door was locked?” He asked, gesturing over his shoulder. Winnie rolled her eyes.

“Lupo’s apparently learned to open the door,” Steve raised an eyebrow, and Natasha glanced at the dog, who was panting happily up at them.
“Well that’s exciting.”

“That’s one word for it,” Winnie said, shaking her head. “I can’t prove it either, but I’m pretty sure Kimberley taught him how to do it.” Steve laughed again.

“This is for you,” Natasha said, holding out the bottle of wine, which Winnie took with a smile and thank you.

“Here, let me take your coats,” she said, holding out her arms. “Everyone else is in the living room,” she said as she headed back into the house with their coats, and Steve nodded, leading Natasha towards the front of the house and the sounds of people talking and a child laughing. Entering the room, Natasha was immediately struck by how cozy it was, from the strings of lights to the fire burning in the grate. The room’s occupants looked up as they entered, calling out greetings. Steve returned them with a smile before gesturing to Natasha.

“Everyone, this is Natasha. Natasha, this is George,” he pointed towards an older man, who smiled and waved slightly, “Aunt Ida,” the elderly woman next to him smiled as well, “and you remember Yadriel,” the man sitting next to Becca on the couch nodded in greeting, “and the new baby is Scott.” He gestured towards the tiny bundle lying on Yadriel’s lap. He looked around the room.

“Where’s Kimberley?” Natasha felt a thud as something ran into her from behind, twisting to see a little girl staring up at her. “There she is!” Steve said, and the little girl screamed in delight, running over to Steve. Steve picked her up, swinging her into his arms with no small effort.

“Hey, there’s my favourite niece!” The little girl began rapidly talking at Steve, who smiled at her as he listened carefully, nodding along.

“How are you doing Natasha?” Becca asked, gesturing to the space next to her on the couch. After one last glance at Steve and the little girl, she took a seat next to Becca.

“I’m good,” she said, smiling at the other woman. “Congratulations on the baby! I’m impressed you still came tonight, you only just left the hospital right?” Becca glanced down at the infant in her boyfriend’s lap with a smile.

“Yeah, just got back from the hospital two days ago.”

“Are you kidding? There’s no way Becca would ever miss Hanukkah,” George interjected, “even if she had to come here while still in labour.”

“Dad! I wouldn’t have come here still in labour,” Becca said with a laugh, looking back at Natasha. “I would have made you all come to the hospital.” Natasha laughed as Winnie returned to the room, Lupo trailing behind her.

“George! You haven’t gotten our guest anything to drink!” She chided her husband before turning to Natasha. “Natasha, can I get you something to drink? We’ve got wine, beer, or I can mix up a drink... “ Natasha hesitated, and Winnie continued, “gin and tonic, vodka cran, um-”

“Vodka cranberry sounds lovely,” Natasha said, and Winnie nodded, looking at Steve.

“Wine for me,” he said with a smile, finally setting down Kimberley and joining Natasha on the couch. Kimberley curled up on the floor at his feet, Lupo padding over to lie down next to her.

“So Natasha,” George said, “Steve tells us you’re a paramedic?” Natasha nodded.

“Yeah, that’s how I met him actually.” George nodded, grinning.
“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me,” he said, and Steve rolled his eyes. “And how long have you been in the city?” he asked.

“About thirteen years,” she said. George nodded.

“And how long have you been in the city?” he asked.

“About thirteen years,” she said. George nodded.

“Any family here?” Natasha hesitated before responding. This is why she hated doing the whole ‘meet the family’ thing, she thought to herself, she didn’t want to-

“Oh no wait, dad, you have to hear the full story of how she met Steve,” Becca interrupted, saving her from replying. She glanced over at the other woman gratefully, and she winked at Natasha. “Believe me, it’s a good one,” she said, and everyone looked expectantly at Natasha. She smiled reassuringly at her before cheerfully picking up the thread, continuing the story all the way to the fight at the club that had finally led to them interacting outside of the confines of her job. She supposed that if the Barnes had known Steve since he was a kid, they would be well aware of his predilection for getting into fights, a theory born out by the indulgent smiles on their faces as they listened. The narration was only interrupted by the return of Winnie with her and Steve’s drinks. The conversation flowed easily from then on, to Natasha’s surprise and delight, staying strong through dinner. She found out that though Becca was loud and chatty, Yadriel rarely spoke, and that Aunt Ida had been one of the top rated surgeons in the country when she was younger, and also had a very dirty sense of humour. She also learned that George, like Bucky, had been in the military, while Winnie was a nurse. That was actually how Bucky and Steve had met, Natasha learned, when Winnie and Steve’s mother ended up working together and arranging a playdate for their then-young children.

Steve had told Natasha about his parents a couple of weeks before. About his father, dead before Steve was even born. About his mother, who was a rock in his life up until her death when he was twenty years old (at least, Steve had said with a wry smile, she had gotten to see him and Bucky married, that had made her so happy). After his mother’s death Steve had no family left other than the Barnes… he thought he might have some cousins in Ireland, but he didn’t know them and they didn’t know him.

Bucky themself was a ghost at the table the entire evening, though not necessarily an unpleasant one. They were casually mentioned in stories, fond smiles always gracing the lips of the people talking about them. She had heard enough about them from Steve at this point that she almost felt that she knew them, feeling a strange affection whenever someone said something good about them. Natasha had noticed a portrait of them in their military uniform, as well as the same photo from their and Steve’s wedding that Steve had on his mantle in the Barnes’ living room. She knew that Steve had their purple heart framed in his bedroom, but it was clear that their family also held the memory of their child close.

Her worries about George and Winnie resenting their son-in-law bringing his new girlfriend to Hanukkah were proved completely groundless over the course of the evening as they welcomed her just as warmly as Becca had. They also showed an incredible amount of tact, not pressing her on subjects such as her family or childhood, and Natasha wondered if Steve had told them not to ask too much about her past. Whatever reasons for it, she was grateful, as it put her more at ease than she normally ever felt around strangers. She also found herself more and more thankful that the Barnes had been there for Steve after their child’s death. It would have been easy for them to alienate Bucky’s husband in the wake of their suicide, but it was clear that they had just woven him tighter into their family.

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Steve opened the front door of his apartment, letting Natasha squeeze in past him. They danced around each other in the entryway for a moment, shedding coats and scarves and toques as they tried not to get in each other’s way.

“So,” Steve said as he headed further into the apartment, “did you have fun tonight?” Natasha nodded, pulling off her shoes.

“Yeah, I did. You were right, your family is lovely and very welcoming.” Steve nodded, grinning back at her as he settled onto the couch.

“Told you so,” he said.

“Yeah yeah, you’re always right about everything,” she said, sinking onto the couch next to him.

“Damn right,” he said. She grinned at him, looking adorable with his smug smile, in his dorky sweater. She leaned closer to him on the couch, stopping just before her lips would touch his.

“Happy Hanukkah,” she said before closing the distance between them. She felt Steve’s smile against her lips disappear as she deepened the kiss, running her tongue over his lower lip before licking into his mouth. He raised his hands, twining them in her hair and she wrapped her hands around his waist. He kissed her with such affection it was almost overwhelming, nipping at her lip and smiling into her mouth when she inhaled sharply. They kissed for several more long minutes before Steve shifted, pulling back and swinging a leg over hers, settling into her lap with a smile. Natasha smiled back at him, biting her lip before leaning in to continue kissing him.

She loved how small he was, how comfortable he was with his size, a fact that he clearly embraced, what with how many times he had crawled into her lap while they were making out over the last couple of months. Wrapping her arms around his waist she pulled him close, feeling his hard dick press into her stomach as he settled in close to her. She’d also felt that many times over the past month, though they hadn’t yet progressed beyond kissing. She lost track of time, losing herself in the taste of Steve on her tongue, the feel of him pressed against her lips, his warm weight in her lap. Steve was the one to halt their increasingly heavy makeout session, humming as he pulled back, breathing heavily as he leaned his forehead against Natasha’s, eyes closed.

“Oh okay,” he said, moving to pull back and slide off of Natasha’s lap, only to be stopped by her hands on his waist.

“Wait,” she said, “you don’t have to… I mean, if you want we can…”

“Only if you want,” Steve said, looking into her eyes with concern. Natasha bit her lip, looking away from the intensity of his gaze, bracing herself for the conversation they were about to have. There were a whole host of reasons that she didn’t date men normally, and what she was about to have to say to him was definitely one of them.

“I mean, I don’t really do… I don’t really do penetrative sex?” She hated how nervous her voice sounded, but Steve just grinned at her.

“Well that’s fine. I mean, assuming you mean penis in vagina.” Natasha nodded, and Steve leaned in to press his lips against hers, smiling again when he pulled back.

“Fingers too,” she added, but Steve just kept smiling at her.

“That is so not a problem,” he said. “Can I ask how you’d feel about fucking me? I don’t actually own any strap-ons at the moment, but—” Natasha cut him off with a kiss, the hot flash from want that she’d felt at his words sinking into her groin, making her feel too hot and tight in her skin.
“Believe me,” she said, “I am so down for that.” Steve grinned at her.

“Not tonight obviously,” he said, “but good to know for future reference.” He paused. “So what would you be interested in doing tonight?” Natasha thought for a moment, surprising herself with what came out of her mouth.

“Well I don’t know about you, but I would really like to suck your dick,” Steve let out a delighted laugh at her bluntness, but it was the truth. She really did.

“Sounds good to me,” he said, and she flashed him with another smile as she slid off the couch, hearing his breath catch in his throat as she knelt, spreading his legs. She glanced up in concern to find him looking down at her, wide-eyed.

“Should we make sure you have your inhaler within arm’s reach before we get started?” She said, half joking, half not. Steve rolled his eyes even as he laughed.

“Got it,” he said, pulling one out of his pocket, setting it next to him on the couch, and Natasha smiled up at him before returning her attention to his pants. She undid the zipper of his jeans, tugging as he lifted his hips from the couch, pulling down both the pants and the briefs beneath them. His cock sprung free, standing up from between his thighs, pink and adorable, not that she’d be calling it that out loud anytime soon. Leaning forward, she wrapped her hand around the base and licked at the head. Glancing up at Steve she saw he was leaning back against the couch, eyes closed and apparently concentrating on regulating his breathing, which made her smile.

Returning her attention to the warm flesh held in her fingers, she gave the head a few more licks before lightly sucking on the head, humming happily as Steve gasped. Sense memory had been fully replaced by fondness towards the man she was with as she removed her hand and sucked him down to the root, amusement streaking through her at the loud moan her actions tore from Steve’s throat. He clearly hadn’t been expecting that, one hand landing on the edge of the couch next to his knee, knuckles white with how hard he was gripping the fabric. She glanced from his hand back up to his face, finding him with his head still tipped back, other hand buried in the longer hair on the top of his head. She bobbed up and down quickly a couple times before slowing down, eventually pulling back and licking around the head of his cock before sucking it back down. She was loving the noises he was making, the way he was shaking under her, the power that she had over him and the affection that she had for this man almost overwhelming.

“Fuck, Natasha,” he muttered, and she smiled around his cock. “I’m not gonna last much longer,” he warned, and she waved him off, continuing to suck until she felt the splash of hot come against her tongue and he moaned loudly above her. Pulling back she wiped spit and come from her lips, looking up at Steve and grinning in satisfaction when she saw how dazed he looked.

“I didn’t… I wasn’t wearing a condom,” he said, and Natasha shrugged.

“I’m clean,” she offered, “I can give you the paperwork if you’d like.” She’d gotten tested the previous week when she’d realized that she was more and more reluctant to stop her nights with Steve at kissing.

“I guess?” Steve said, sounding uncertain. “I’m clean too. I mean, it’s been a couple years, I don’t know if I know where the paperwork is, but I haven’t slept with anyone since then… but I can get tested again if you’d like?” Natasha nodded, finally rising from between Steve’s legs to sprawl next to him on the couch, tucking close to him.

“That’d be good,” she said. They sat for several minutes as Steve caught his breath and Natasha just enjoyed his company.
“Okay,” Steve finally said, breaking the silence, “my turn.” He pushed himself up, kicking off his pants and briefs completely. He turned to look at her. “I mean, if you want, I’d love to return the favour.” Natasha thought about it for a moment, exaggerating the thoughtfulness in her features as she hummed.

“I suppose I could allow it,” she said, and Steve grinned at her.

“How kind of you,” he said. Standing, Natasha pulled down her tights and underwear while she was up, glancing down at Steve who was looking up at her with undisguised desire that warmed her to her core.

“Here okay?” She asked. Steve glanced around the living room, then shrugged.

“Bed would probably be more comfortable,” he said, standing and heading down the hallway, Natasha following. “You going to stay here tonight?”

“Yeah I think I will.” Though this was the first time they had moved beyond kissing, Natasha had stayed over at Steve’s before, enough times that she had her own toothbrush in his bathroom. She made a mental note to set an alarm though, as she’d have to leave early in the morning to go home and feed Liho before work. Entering his bedroom, Steve turned on only the bedside light, pulling back the sheets on the bed, gesturing grandly to the bed as Natasha approached him. She laughed, climbing onto the bed, laying back against the pillows and watching through half-lidded eyes as Steve stripped off his shirt.

Though she hadn’t seen him completely nude before tonight, she had seen him without his shirt before, as he tended to sleep in just sweatpants, and she took in the familiar sight of the tattoos that covered his torso, as well as the ones on his hips and thighs. Looking at his tattoos it was obvious he was an artist, and he had confessed to her that he had designed most of them himself (she was kind of debating asking him to design her one, to be honest). Little silver bars pierced his nipples, shining in the low light, and she smiled at the sight. He hadn’t seen her topless yet so he didn’t know that matching bars decorated her breasts. She was looking forward to surprising him with that.

He settled between her legs, his own hanging off the end of the bed as he stretched out. He ran his hands up and down the outside of her thighs, making her shiver. He met her eyes before bending down to press a kiss to the inside of her thigh, slowly working his way higher, thumbs catching at the edge of her skirt, slowly pulling it up as he kissed his way up her thighs. She felt a sudden flash of self-consciousness at the scars that she knew lay in his path. Though they were faded with age, and she didn’t think about them most of the time, she knew they were still visible. Steve didn’t pause however, kissing over them and arriving at his goal soon after. She felt his face nestled between her thighs, though the only thing she could see below her skirt which was now bunched up around her waist was the shock of his blonde hair between her legs.

“Tell me right away if there is something you don’t like or want me to stop doing,” he said, raising his head, and she nodded, meeting his eyes. He lowered his head again. The first swipe of his tongue against her was a shock, making her gasp even as he immediately repeated the movement, using his fingers to spread her labia so he could lick at her clit. He swirled his tongue around it, causing her to groan even as she needed more.

“More pressure,” she said, surprising herself with how wrecked her voice already sounded. Steve immediately obeyed, pressing his tongue down harder and moving a thumb so it could rub at her clit as his tongue licked around it. She drew in a sharp breath, closing her eyes as her head dropped back. She could feel his lips curl against her even as he continued in his ministrations.

She could feel the slow hot heat begin to build in the pit of her stomach as Steve continued to lick,
circling his thumb slowly, teasing, though he continued to put just the right amount of pressure on her sensitive skin. She gasped as he moved his thumb to suck at her clit, shoulders rising off the mattress as she arched at the sudden surge of sensation radiating out from her groin. He hummed in satisfaction, and she twitched as the vibrations resonated against her, sending shockwaves up her spine. She was vaguely aware of the small gasps and breathy noises she was making as he returned his thumb to its previous position, pressing down with more pressure now and moving it in tighter and faster circles. He kept licking as she felt the pressure begin to rise within her before suddenly cresting as she let out a low noise of pleasure and orgasmed. He continued to lick her through the aftershocks, though he removed the pressure of his thumb, until she finally pushed him away, oversensitive.

Sitting back on his heels, Steve looked at her with a smugly satisfied smile, chin gleaming in the low light as he wiped it with the back of his hand. She smiled up at him, still feeling slightly dazed as she patted the bed next to her. Steve crawled over, curling up next to her, wrapping a skinny leg around her waist as he nuzzled in close, uncaring of the sweat covering her skin. They lay together as Natasha’s breathing and heart rate slowly returned to normal. Finally, Natasha shifted, becoming aware of the uncomfortable way her skirt was bunched up around her waist. Steve let go of her as she stood, stripping off her skirt and pulling off her bra without taking off her shirt. She climbed back into the bed, and Steve pulled the blankets up to cover them both.

“Good?” He asked, and Natasha laughed.

“Very,” she said, twisting to press a kiss to his lips, tasting the faint tang of herself.

“Good,” Steve repeated, sounding satisfied as he curled around her again, tucking his face into her neck. Natasha fell asleep like that, a faint smile still gracing her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Chanukah!!!!

Holy shit this chapter took a lifetime, I am so sorry about that.

Check out the outfits etc from this chapter here...

and find me on tumblr here.
“So Melinda’s still out of town?” Natasha asked from where she was sitting on the couch, looking towards the kitchen where she could see Andrew fussing about with the tea pot. When it became clear that Andrew was too distracted to reply, Tania spoke.

“Yeah, until Thursday,” Tania said. Natasha nodded, not that Tania could see her from where she was sitting on the floor between Natasha’s legs.

“Can you pass me the hydrator?” she asked. Tania passed back the small pot, the outside smeared with the sweet-smelling cream. Natasha met her friend’s eyes in the makeup mirror sitting in the coffee table in front of them, smiling at her before turning her attention back to Tania’s hair. Rubbing the hydrator into the strands from the tip to the root, she quickly brushed it. Spinning the small section of hair into a two strand twist, Natasha picked up a piece of the synthetic red hair sitting on the couch next to her in a pile. The first time Natasha and Tania had spent the day doing Tania’s hair together had been a very long time ago, but Natasha still remembered how badly she’d fucked up the few braids she’d done, and how amazed she’d been at how quickly Tania had done the rest. Now, after years of practice, she was proud to say she was almost as fast as her friend, though it still took the two of them most of an afternoon to do Tania’s entire head.

She had nearly finished braiding the synthetic hair into Tania’s natural hair when the clink of cutlery made her raise her head to see Andrew setting a tray containing a pot of tea, two cups with saucers, a sugar pot, and a tiny milk jug on the coffee table in front of them. Natasha bit down on a smile as her and Tania both thanked him. He gave them a soft smile in return before picking up his own cup and book and settling into the armchair by the window. After spending more time at the May-Garner household in the last couple of months, Natasha now understood that their reasons for seeking out a roommate were neither a lie nor an exaggeration. She had only seen Melinda two or three times since the dinner when she had first met the couple, whereas Andrew was there most times she was over, unless he had class or some faculty event to attend. She was sure he had friends (or at least that’s what Tania, laughing at Natasha’s question, had told her) but as far as Natasha could tell, Dr. Andrew Garner spent most of his time reading at home, with a cup of tea at his elbow as his only consistent companion.

Natasha had honestly been a bit worried that it would be uncomfortable hanging out with Tania at someone else’s house. That first dinner not been enough to settle her anxiety. Even if they were technically Tania’s roommates, the fact that they owned the house and were also her landlords, not to mention being far more respectable adult-adults than she suspected Tania or herself would ever manage, gave it an air of formality that Natasha wasn’t particularly fond of. After a couple days spent at the house while Andrew was home however, Natasha quickly became used to the quiet man’s presence, though she still didn’t particularly enjoy talking to him. It always felt like he heard so much more than she said, that he could see all the secrets lying under her skin. It was unnerving and she didn’t like it, though she tried not to hold it against him. It probably wasn’t his fault, or even exclusive to her, just a natural side-effect of being a shrink.
The two women continued to work in relative silence, only really speaking to ask each other to pass the pot of hydrator back and forth. The only noise from Andrew’s corner of the room was the rustling of pages as he slowly flipped through his book. After an hour of peaceful silence however, the doctor finally stood, stretching and groaning.

“I can’t put it off any longer,” he announced gravely, and the two woman looked up at him, Tania smiling.

“Grading?” she asked, and Andrew groaned again.

“First years,” he said, with an exaggerated shudder, and both Natasha and Tania laughed. He gave them a lazy salute.

“I’ll see you ladies on the other side,” he said. “You staying for dinner Natasha?” Natasha shrugged, then nodded when Tania shoved at her knee.

“I think I will be yes, thank you.” Andrew nodded with a smile.

“Excellent, I was thinking of making lasagna, I think we’ve got the ingredients…” He trailed off as he headed upstairs to his office. Tania let out a moan as he left, making Natasha let out a startled laugh.

“Oh my god, what?”

“His lasagna is so fucking good Natasha, holy shit.” Natasha laughed again.

“Seriously, that good?”

“You have no idea,” Tania replied feverently. “There’s just… so much cheese, and spinach, and really garlicky tomato sauce…” she trailed off, a dreamy look on her face. Natasha laughed again, tugging on one of the finished braids, making Tania yelp and turn to shoot a glare at her.

“Anyways, I’m happy you could come over today and stay for dinner,” Tania said, turning back to face forward and separating out another section of her hair. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages.” Natasha felt a flash of guilt as she looked down at the back of her friend’s head. Between Steve and picking up some extra shifts at work, she hadn’t seen Tania nearly as much in the last couple of months as she usually did. They’d spent Christmas together, the same way they always did, binging shitty horror movies and eating takeaway and cuddling close to the only family either of them had but… aside from that, it had been weeks since they’d spent any time together.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and the guilt she was feeling must have been obvious in her voice because Tania looked up sharply, meeting Natasha’s eyes in the mirror.

“Shut up,” she said, and Natasha raised an eyebrow at her. “No, shut up, I didn’t mean it like that, it’s just nice to see you is all.” Natasha bit the inside of her cheek before responding.

“Yeah, but I haven’t been around very much, and-”

“And I’m happy for you, you asshole.” Tania said, smacking Natasha’s calf. Natasha couldn’t help but smile. “Seriously,” Tania continued, “I am, and I don’t want you feeling bad for not spending time with me or any stupid shit like that. I do have other friends you know.”

“Really?!?” Tania smacked Natasha again without turning around, and Natasha laughed.

“One or two,” Tania said, a wry twist to her lips. “Anyways, it doesn’t matter if I don’t see you for
two weeks or two years, nothing is ever going to change between us. You’re my family.”

“I know,” Natasha said seriously, meeting Tania’s eyes in the mirror again. And she did know. Anyone else and this conversation would have her squirming in her seat, trying to escape, but her and Tania had been through too much together for too long for there to be anything but honesty between the two of them.

“And I am happy for you, really.”

“I know.”

“I just… I worry about you.”

“I know,” Natasha said again, voice slightly more exasperated this time.

“And I know you can take care of yourself—” Natasha hummed. “—and I already gave Steve the shovel speech—”

“What?” Natasha half-shouted. “When?” Tania twisted to grin up at her unrepentantly.

“When you guys met me and Sam for dinner a couple weeks ago and you went to pee.”

“Oh my god,” Natasha said, staring down at her best friend in horror. “He didn’t say anything. Oh my god. What did you say to him.”

“Oh you know, the usual,” Tania said, waving a hand about. “He hurts you, I have a lot of dodgy friends who would be happy to help me get rid of a body, that sort of thing.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I kinda thought Sam would have given you the same speech then, did he?” Natasha shook her head.

“No,” she said, voice coming out more venomous than she thought it was going to. “Maybe because he knows Steve can take care of his own fucking self.”

“Oh babe,” Tania said, voice softening in a way that put Natasha’s teeth on edge, “I know you can take care of yourself. But what kind of best friend would I be if I didn’t give the shovel speech to people that you’re… hanging out… with.” Like she could with Clint, Natasha could hear the heavy scare quotes Tania was putting around the phrase ‘hanging out’. She rolled her eyes, sitting back with a huff.

“Sorry,” she said, waving a hand, “it’s just… y’know.”

“I do know,” Tania said, tilting her head as she looked up at her. “Besides, maybe Sam is just waiting for the best moment to threaten you with death et cetera if you hurt Steve.” Natasha laughed.

“Well I’ll look forward to that conversation then.”

“I’ll let him know.” Tania said with a smirk. Natasha shook her head.

“I can’t believe you and Sam are hanging out, what do you even talk about?”

“Secret black people stuff,” Tania said, turning back around with a satisfied smile. Natasha rolled her eyes again, picking back up the strand of hair she’d been braiding before.

“Right, so, sports?”
“Sports,” Tania confirmed with a laugh. They worked in silence for a few minutes before Tania spoke again. “He’s a nice guy, fun to hang around with, and he doesn’t try to hit on me.”

“Hey, you don’t have to explain yourself to me,” Natasha said. “I was just kidding, I like that Steve’s friends and my friends get along.” Tania snorted.

“Steve’s friend you mean.” Natasha kicked her leg.

“Steve has more than one friend,” she said with a laugh.

“Right, there’s Peggy too.” Natasha made a face but didn’t really have anything to say in Steve’s defense. He kept a small friend circle, good people, people Natasha liked but… there weren’t many of them. She did wonder, if there had been more before Bucky’s death, but she hadn’t asked, and wasn’t sure she was ever going to. Some things weren’t worth the pain of poking at.

“So things are going well between you two then?” Tania said, overly casual, and Natasha narrowed her eyes at her.

“Yes,” she said slowly, cautiously. Tania shrugged.

“Sorry it’s not- it’s not that I think-” she broke off, sighing in frustration. “It’s not that I think you are incapable of having a relationship,” she finally said.

“Thanks,” Natasha replied dryly. Tania rolled her eyes at her.

“You know what I mean,” she said, “but you do have a bit of a habit to self-destruct your own happiness.” Natasha made a face, but couldn’t really deny it. “Plus Steve is the first guy you’ve dated since… well,” Tania continued, “and I know I’m probably being nosy and over protective but I just want to check in with you.” Natasha sighed and dropped the braid she had just finished. Untangling herself from Tania, she sank to the floor next to her friend.

“Tea?” She asked, reaching for the pot and preparing two cups without waiting for Tania’s response. Cup in hand, she leaned back against the couch, sitting in silence for a moment while she tried to organize her thoughts. Tania drank her tea quietly while she waited, well used to Natasha’s idiosyncrasies.

“I told Steve about my childhood,” she finally began, speaking slowly. She heard Tania make a startled noise next to her, but continued on. “I told him about meeting you, about… everything, really. Not in detail,” she added, meeting Tania’s eyes, “but the basics, yeah, he knows everything.” She dropped her eyes back to her cup of tea. “And I told you what he told me about Bucky, about the suicide.” Tania hummed, and Natasha paused.

“I trust him,” she said, “more than I’ve trusted anyone in a long time. And that doesn’t- I mean, it’s not, I don’t want to run. I know I usually run, I do know that about myself.” Tania nodded. “But I don’t want to this time.” Natasha frowned. “It’s scary, the scariest, but I think it might be worth it?” She turned to Tania, who nodded again.

“I think it is,” she said softly. “I think Steve is.” Natasha smiled uncertainly.

“Really? You think so?” Tania nodded.

“I do. He’s not… you’re right. He’s not like anyone else,” Tania laughed. “To be honest, he’s kind of perfect for you.” Natasha smiled, fiddling with her cup.

“It’s… we fit, I don’t know if I can explain it, but it’s good.”
“Yeah it is,” Tania said, leaning her shoulder into Natasha’s. “It’s really good babe. I’m happy for you.”

“I’m happy for me too,” Natasha said, so quiet she wasn’t sure if Tania heard her or not. They sat in silence for a minute.

“Now we just need to find you a woman and we’ll be all set,” Natasha finally said, breaking the solemnity of the moment. Tania laughed.

“I don’t need a girlfriend to be complete,” she said, bumping against Natasha’s shoulder. Natasha hummed thoughtfully.

“What about that barista? The cute one with all the piercings and the purple hair?”

“Oh my god.”

“Ooooh, or what’s her name from the club. Bobbi?”

“Oh my god Natasha, do not try to play matchmaker with me. You’re so bad at it.” Natasha narrowed her eyes at Tania.

“I am not terrible at it!” she protested. “What about Jessica?”

“Straight.”

“Anna.”

“Cheated on me.”

“Kaylee.”

“Republican.”

“Liv! You dated Liv for months!”

“Yeah, and then I found out that she was married.”

“Shit,” Natasha said, sitting back against the couch. “Maybe I am bad at this.” Tania raised an eyebrow at her incredulously.

“I cannot believe you are just figuring this out.”

“I should ask Clint if he knows anyone. Ooooh, or Steve.”

“One, Clint is a fucking disaster at finding dates for himself, so I cannot even imagine what nightmare scenarios would arise from having him try to set me up. Two, didn’t we just establish that Steve has no friends?”

“How about Peggy or Angie? They know lots of lesbians.” Tania made a face.

“Yeah, I’ve kinda exhausted that circle.” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“So basically the real problem here is that you’re a huge slut.” Tania laughed.

“Basically.”

“Hmmmm,” Natasha hummed. Tania pointed a finger at her threateningly.
“Seriously Natasha, don’t you dare. I swear, if I go to meet you for drinks and find myself on a blind date one more time, I’m never talking to you again.”

“Alright, alright,” Natasha held up a hand in surrender before placing her empty tea cup back on the table and resuming her earlier position behind Tania, picking up a braid. They quickly settled back into the silence of the familiar routine, almost finished now.

“What about Ilana Forst? The social worker from St Jude’s?”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

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“Seriously Natasha, it’s colder than a witch’s tit out there.” Steve’s nose was bright red and his glasses were completely fogged over. His eyes were serious as he looked up at Natasha from the bundle of wool wrapped around his head and neck. He was wheezing slightly, asthma reacting with the cold winter air, and Natasha smiled down at him, reaching out to brush off some of the snow that dusted him.

“Really,” she said, “and how cold are witches’ tits?”

“Real cold,” Steve said, maintaining his serious expression, although she could tell he was struggling not to smile.

“C’mon,” she said, gesturing towards the rest of her apartment, “take off your coat, stay for a while.”

“Just for a while though,” Steve replied, stomping the snow off his boots as he removed his scarf, hat, and coat, hanging it next to hers. He walked past her into the kitchen, pulling out the kettle with an easy familiarity that made something squirm in her stomach. “I’ve got to work in a couple hours.”

“Well so do I,” she said, coming to stand next to him, leaning against the counter as they both waited for the kettle to boil. Steve wrinkled his nose.

“I thought you were off today?”

“Extra shifts.” Steve made a face of exaggerated disgust, making Natasha smile down at him despite herself.

“I so don’t envy you having to drive all over the city in this stupid weather. All slippery and snowy and cold and wet.”

“You can’t even drive,” Natasha said with a laugh. “How would you know what it’s like to drive in the winter?”

“Exactly,” Steve pointed at her, “exactly, I don’t drive because it’s terrible.”

“Or because you’re a stuck up city boy who thinks public transit is the be-all to end-all.” Steve stuck his nose up in the air.

“It’s better for the environment,” he said stiffly, and Natasha laughed at him again, shoving at his shoulder as he lost his stuck-up expression and instead grinned up at her. Natasha felt her stomach swoop again, and reached across Steve to the cupboard to distract herself.

“What kind of tea did you want?” she asked. Tania had raised a very judgemental eyebrow, though thankfully hadn’t commented, the last time she’d been at Natasha’s apartment and had discovered
how much tea her friend had accumulated since she’d started seeing Steve. Like it was Natasha’s fault that, despite working at a coffee shop, Steve rarely drank coffee, and much prefered a cup of tea. Steve hummed thoughtfully, looking up into the cupboard.

“Chai?” he finally said with a laugh in his voice. “I could use the spice to warm up.”

“Chai it is,” Natasha replied, pulling down the tin and a mug, and grabbing a second mug for her coffee. She’d only had… two cups so far today, that wasn’t so bad, she could have another one now, and a couple at work and… shit her resolution to drink less coffee really wasn’t going well. Steve smirked at her as he watched her pour herself a cup, though he knew better than to comment.

“So Sam’s agreed to write me a reference letter for that volunteer position,” he said as the kettle finally began to emit an annoyingly high pitched whistle. He reached over and shut off the stove, pouring his tea and following Natasha out to the living room.

“Was there ever any doubt that he would?” Natasha asked. Steve laughed as they both sat down, careful of the hot drinks in their hands.

“You’d be surprised,” he said, blowing on his tea, “When I asked him, he said something about recklessness… being prone to fights… being a bad role model–”

“Oh yeah that doesn’t sound like you at all,” Natasha said dryly. Steve laughed again.

“He was just taking the piss though. He wrote it in the end.”

“So when do you think you’ll hear back from them? The reference letter was the last bit of paperwork you needed right?” Steve had been trying to apply for a volunteer position with the local LGBTQ+ youth outreach centre, but had been having difficulty given his criminal record. Steve shrugged.

“Soon, I hope. I mean, I was a teacher, I can’t help but feel like that should count for something.”

“I mean, at the very least it shows that you have supervised children before,” Natasha said.

“And no one even died!” Steve threw up his free hand, “I mean c’mon, what more could they possibly want?” Natasha laughed. She understood why organizations like the outreach centre had to perform background checks, and were wary of hiring people with criminal records, but Steve was so perfect for the position. It was frustrating that they wouldn’t just accept his application.

“Hey, you taught middle school right?” Natasha asked, something suddenly occurring to her. Steve made a face.

“Yeah, I wanted to do elementary school but there weren’t any jobs.”

“Were any of your students taller than you?” Steve’s eyes widened, and then he barked out a laugh, shoving at her shoulder.

“Fuck you!”

“Were they? Oh my god were they all taller than you? Did they have to get things down from shelves for you?”

“Oh my god I am not that short!”

“Did you blackboard only have notes up to like, the middle of it, with this giant blank space above
“it? Did you get the school to lower the bulletin boards for you?”

“I am not that short!”

“Aw Steve, don’t be mad. It’s adorable. You must have been the tiniest teacher.”

“You’re not even that much taller than me!”

“So small. So little.”

“Oh my god,” Steve said, putting his mug down so he could slump back in the couch, crossing his arms and pouting at Natasha. “Maybe I should just start wearing heels all the time like you do,” he said grumpily. Natasha grinned, leaning down and pressing a kiss to his stupid little mouth.

“I mean, you know I’m not going to object to that,” she said, leaning back and taking a drink of her coffee. Steve rolled his eyes, but couldn’t hide the pleased little smile curling his lips as he took a sip of his own drink. They settled into easy conversation, Steve getting up once to refill his tea when he went to take a sip and realized that it had gone cold while they were talking. Natasha was slowly breaking him of his habit of microwaving his forgotten tea by making various horrified faces at him whenever he did it, which made him laugh, but was also working.

“Shit,” Natasha said eventually, looking down at her watch. “I’ve got to go to work,” she said with regret. Despite her teasing, Steve had been right. Driving in this weather was terrible, and she was not looking forward to her shift. She wished she could just spend the day here, curled up on the couch with Steve, with Liho eyeing them suspiciously from the armchair across the room. (Despite Steve’s best efforts, the cat still hadn’t quite warmed up to him.) But they both had to work, so she grabbed all her work stuff and the two of them walked over to the subway together, crunching through the snow. Steve was right, it was cold, and the melt a couple days earlier had left patches of ice everywhere, which were now being obscured by the swirling snow. They both almost fell a couple of times, and ended up clinging to each other the rest of the way, laughing and trying to stay upright. They managed to reach the subway without any major mishap however, saying a quick goodbye as they rushed off to work.

Natasha arrived at the station at the same time as Mack, the much taller man holding the door open for her as she ducked inside, sighing in relief as the warmth of the building washed over her. The two of them split off at the locker rooms, where Natasha found Sharon already half way through changing into her uniform for her shift. She frowned over at the other woman.

“We’re working the same shift?” Natasha asked. Sharon nodded, holding up her shirt and examining it.

“Yeah,” she said, apparently deciding the shirt would do as she started to pull it on. “Fury called me and Mack in. He thinks it’s going to be a busy night, with the snow and all.” Natasha nodded.

“Yeah, it was fucking awful walking to the subway. I almost fell like five times.” Sharon laughed, looking over at her.

“You only almost fell? Well then you’re more graceful than me, I fell between my fucking front door and my car, which is a distance of like five feet.” Natasha laughed.

“You okay?” Sharon rolled her eyes, waving a hand at her friend.

“Yeah, maybe a bit bruised, dignity took a bigger hit than my ass. On the bright side, I’m pretty sure the only person who saw was—” she stopped talking abruptly, cheeks turning bright red as her eyes cut over to Natasha.
“Was?” Natasha prompted, fighting not to smile.

“Um, my neighbor.” Sharon said, and Natasha bit her lip.

“Right, your neighbor. Uh-huh.” Sharon narrowed her eyes, but didn’t say anything else, and the two women continued getting dressed in silence, before heading over to the waiting room. They heard Clint before they saw him, exchanging smiles over the exaggerated moaning emerging from the other room. They turned the corner to see Clint slumped in a chair, face pressed against the dirty table top and arms flung out in front of him. Mack was sitting in another chair at the table, looking down at the other man with an expression of clear amusement.

“You okay Clint?” Sharon asked as they joined the men at the table. Clint responded with another long moan, and Natasha laughed, kicking at his chair.

“Don’t be such a wimp,” she said, and he rolled his head so he could glare at her.

“You are just as disgusted by this weather as I am,” he said. “Don’t you dare pretend otherwise.”

“I don’t know,” Natasha said, unable to help her smile. “I’m feeling better about it now...” Clint narrowed his eyes at her, and her smile got bigger.

“I’m glad my suffering amuses you,” he said, and Natasha tilted her head.

“Aw, you know your pain always gives me comfort,” she said, laughing when Clint gave her a pained look before turning his face back into the tabletop.

“Leave me here to die,” he said, muffled.

“C’mon,” she said, standing and kicking at his chair leg again, “let’s go get the rig ready.” Clint groaned again, but dutifully stood and followed after her.

Setting up didn’t take long, the two of them quickly making sure that everything was where they had left it two days earlier. Soon enough, the ambulance was stocked and ready to go. After that, they settled into the familiar boring wait, though this time with the company of Sharon and Mack. The four of them sat on the back of their ambulances, trading jabs and stories. Natasha had almost died laughing when she’d realized that the new partner Sharon had, the one that Clint had described as “6’4” of pure sex”, was in fact that same Mack that had been working at Shield almost as long as they had. He’d wanted to trade off the night shift for a while apparently, and since trading no longer meant that his old partner, Jasper, would then be forced to work with Rumlow, he’d gladly agreed to work with Sharon when Fury had asked. Clint wasn’t entirely clear on why he hadn’t recognized him the first time he’d seen him during the day, but Natasha was willing to chalk it up to Clint’s general inattentiveness, and the fact that he’d been distracted by how huge Mack’s biceps were.

Regardless, they had rarely ever seen him other than in passing before, and were learning that he was a funny, warm-hearted guy, and a great paramedic to boot. Plus, Sharon really liked him, and liked working with him, which was really the most important thing as far as both Natasha and Clint were concerned. Though Clint also really, really enjoyed the bonus of getting to look at him every day (his chest Natasha, he hissed, nudging her in the ribs, look at his chest). He also turned out to be good friends with Skye, something that Natasha had discovered when she told a story about what she, Skye, and Jemma had been up to the previous night. She still wasn’t very clear on how they knew each other, since Mack was being very evasive on that subject, but it was a strange coincidence.

Leaning against the back wall of the bay, the four paramedics talked about the previous day’s calls. They were in the middle of Sharon’s familiar and fairly involved rant about a particularly obnoxious
and arrogant ER doctor that she had been forced to deal with more than usual that week when the radio squaked.

“Here we go,” Natasha said with a sigh as Mack and Sharon waved goodbye and dashed over to their rig. A second call followed closely behind, and Natasha spared a wistful thought to her cozy apartment with Steve and Liho as she swung up into the rig.

It was going to be a long night for everyone.

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Fury’s predictions about the weather were as dead-on as always. Though there was the usual smattering of false alarms, broken bones, heart attacks and the like, there were also numerous incidents directly related to the weather, from falls to car accidents. The large number of calls had them rushing from calls to the hospital to the dispatch centre to restock in a rush, with barely a moment to spare. It only got worse as the night went on, calls coming in faster and faster as the weather worsened, road slick with black ice, visibility compromised by the darkness of the night, and the snow that blew fast and thick across their windshields. They ran into Tony and Rhodey at the dispatch centre and were told that they had been called in, along with Maria and Pepper. Natasha was glad for the help, even if they didn’t really notice it, still jumping from one call to the next without pause.

Natasha and Clint had just finished restocking the bandages when the radio on her shoulder squawked to life, requesting an ambulance to a location on the edge of the city limits. The two partners exchanged an exhausted look, but climbed back into the front of the rig. The drive out to the call, a farm on the very border of the city, took twice as long as usual, Natasha forced to drive slowly as white snow swirled around them. She was relieved to see that they were nearly the only ones still out on the road however.

“Less cars,” Clint commented as they made the final turn towards the call. They hadn’t been talking much. Clint was always very good at knowing when to shut up and let her concentrate on her driving, basically the only time he ever did know when to stop talking.

“Maybe it’ll finally slow down,” she said. Clint nodded. There were always going to be those few, special people who would insist on driving no matter the weather condition or the inane reason for taking to the road, but at this point most sensible people were firmly tucked into their homes for the night.

The farmhouse finally came into view through the storm, their tires sliding slightly on the gravel as Natasha brought the ambulance to a stop in front of the door.

“Single male, thirty years old, cut his arm,” Clint recited as they ran up to the door. “Called 911 himself from the kitchen, front door should be unlocked,” he said as Natasha tried the knob, and sure enough it swung open easily, admitting them into the eerily silent house. Not good, Natasha thought to herself as they looked through the first two doorways.

“Shit,” she heard Clint swear, and turned to follow him into the kitchen, swearing herself when she saw the unconscious man lying on the floor, wad of bloody towels on his arm not doing much now that he wasn’t awake to put pressure on it. Sliding slightly in the blood, Natasha knelt, moving to stem the flow of blood while Clint checked his vitals.

“Pulse is thready,” Clint said as Natasha pressed bandages to the cut. “I’m going to get the stretcher.” He ran from the room as Natasha began to wrap the arm, assessing the man’s condition. His skin was pale and slightly cool, his rapid breathing loud in the silence under the howling of the storm outside.
Clint returned quickly, spreading more snow across the kitchen as he set the stretcher down on the tiles.

“Looks like he’s lost about a litre and a half,” Natasha said as they moved him onto the stretcher. Clint nodded.

“Class two hemorrhage,” he said as they moved out to the rig. Natasha shook her head, blinking as snow blew into her eyes.

“Class three,” she said. The man had already lost about 30% of his blood volume, and was already beginning to soak through the bandages she had tied around his arm. If he lost much more he was almost certainly going to die. Meeting Clint’s eyes across the length of the stretcher, Natasha could see the same knowledge reflected in his eyes, and knew that he had been trying to be optimistic with his diagnosis. They secured the stretcher quickly, and Natasha slid back into the front seat, ignoring the blood she was smearing across the seat. She turned them around, gravel flying around them as they sped back up the road.

“No wallet,” Clint shouted, and Natasha bit her lip, keeping her eyes on the road. The storm had worsened when they had been inside the farmhouse, and visibility was now so low she could barely make out anything farther than a couple of meters in front of them.

“How much o-neg we got?” she shouted back, hearing Clint curse in response. She knew already, of course, what the answer was. Not enough.

“Fuck,” she said, slowing slightly as they reached the highway, speeding back up once she made the turn onto the smoothly paved road. She could go faster now they were no longer on gravel, but she still couldn’t see worth shit, and she found herself sending a prayer to all the gods she could think of that no one else would be out there, or a couple of seconds in front of them.

“How much blood do we have left?” She called back to Clint, flicking her eyes towards the rear view mirror, where he gave her a tired smile and a bloody thumbs-up.

“One bag,” he said, and she felt a thrill shoot through her stomach, a smile crossing her face as she turned her eyes back to the road and the black shape in the darkness

small pale faces reflecting her headlights

grabbing and pulling the steering wheel and oh gods please turn please please please

skidding

Clint was shouting what was he saying what was
the wheels were sliding

turn it back

don’t overcorrect

why were they still sliding

oh gods why wouldn’t it stop sliding it needed to stop sliding

she had to

why wouldn’t it

The guardrail slammed into the side of the ambulance and the weight of the vehicle sent it tipping over the edge, rolling down the steep incline, the world flipping over and over again and she couldn’t hear Clint anymore and there was a sudden sharp pain radiating through her entire body and someone was screaming, who was screaming? and then

Chapter End Notes

Oh my goooood look who is actually still alive and writing I'm so sorry. But hey, I've got a new job now and it's going well so hopefully my shit will be more together soon and I'll be finishing this up right quick!!!

As always, see the pinterest board for outfits and general inspiration.
Natasha awoke gradually, the familiar antiseptic hospital smell registering before anything else. Next was the dull thrum of pain, muffled beneath a leaden fog that weighed down her limbs and turned her thoughts slow and stuttering. Her mouth was dry, tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth with a tackiness she could taste. She felt her lips part. Cool air brushed down her throat like a balm. After a moment, she began the struggle to open her eyes. It took a minute, but eventually she managed to part her eyelashes, sticky and reticent as they were. The white room swam before her, shapes blurry and indistinct as she blinked again and again, fighting to bring everything into focus.

The shape of the end of the bed, the thin hospital sheets covering her, the whiteboard with its notes from the nurses slowly sharpened in front of her. As her vision finally resolved itself so did her hearing, sound returning in a rush of noise, and she registered the sound of people rushing to and fro in the hallway outside her room and, much closer, a steady beep beep beep chiming in time with her heart beats. She lay like that for a long moment before deciding to turn her head. Her thoughts were still unclear, slow and difficult.

Why was she in the hospital?

What had happened?

Turning her head turned out to be more difficult than she’d originally thought, but turned out not to matter, as her movements obviously didn’t go unnoticed. Tania’s worried face appeared in her line of vision almost as soon as she twitched, blocking out the room.

“Natasha? Oh my god Natasha?” Wow, Tania’s eyes were really red. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Don’t try to speak.” Tania said, turning and disappearing from Natasha’s line of sight. She reappeared almost immediately though, cup with a straw in hand, and Natasha was suddenly, painfully reminded of how thirsty she was, how dry her mouth was. “Here,” Tania said, reaching behind Natasha. The bed jerked before beginning to rise beneath her, pushing her into a sitting position. Once she was upright Tania finally guided the straw into Natasha’s mouth and she swallowed gratefully, the rush of water the sweetest thing she’d ever tasted. When the cup was empty Tania took it away. This time when Natasha tried to speak, actual words emerged.

“Wh- what happened?” He voice was raspy and quiet, but audible, and Tania bit her lip as she looked at her friend.

“I- I think, I mean the doctor’s can tell you more but... You were in a car accident Natasha, do you remember that?” An echo of screeching metal and loud screams rang in Natasha’s ears, and she
nodded, a movement she immediately regretted as a wave of nausea rose up and choked her. She took in a couple of deep breaths through her nose before meeting Tania’s worried gaze once again.

“Clint?” She asked, and Tania looked relieved.

“He’s fine,” she said quickly, and Natasha felt tension she wasn’t even aware of release, sinking back into the pillows. “I mean, he’s not in great shape, but he’s totally alive and will walk again and all that,” Tania continued and Natasha pursed her lips at her friend, since she was pretty sure rolling her eyes would cause her to actually vomit.

“What happened?” Natasha asked again, and Tania nodded, clearly willing to tell Natasha more now that they’d established that everyone was okay.

“I don’t know how much you remember of the specifics, but it was snowing really bad and you were on your way back from a call. There was a minivan in the road, they’d just slid on the ice and had stopped when you came up behind them– they’re totally fine,” Tania rushed to add as Natasha’s eyes widened, “Mom, Dad, and three kids, all fine because you reacted fast and swerved around them, but with the ice and snow… you couldn’t stop the ambulance, it flipped over the guardrail.” Natasha sat with that, more memories returning the longer she was awake, though the crash itself was still a confused mess, images and sounds jumbled together.

“There was a guy,” she said, abruptly remembering, “the call we were on, there was a guy.” Tania shrugged helplessly.

“I don’t know babe, I’m sorry.” Natasha shifted, and a sharp pain shot through her, causing her to still and hiss through her teeth.

“Shit!” Tania swore, “Don’t move! Shit, I should call the doctor…” she trailed off, disappearing from Natasha’s sightline once again, presumably to press the nurse call button. She reappeared, picking up Natasha’s hand from the blanket, squeezing it as they waited. It wasn’t long before Dr. Danvers strode into the room, smiling widely when she saw Natasha’s eyes were open. Natasha smiled weakly in return. Carol had started working at the hospital a couple months earlier, fresh out of the military, and though Natasha didn’t know her very well yet, she had seen her working enough to know she was a good doctor.

“Good to see you awake Natasha,” Carol said, stopping at the foot of the bed.

“Glad to be awake,” Natasha replied, voice still rasping. Carol frowned, gaze flicking to Tania then back.

“Did you have anything to drink?”

“I had a cup of water.”

“Okay, have another one once we’re done talking if you can, okay?” Natasha nodded, then winced. Carol’s eyes narrowed.

“So how are you feeling?”

“Tired. Foggy.” Carol nodded. “What happened?” Natasha was starting to get sick of asking that question. Carol’s eyes flicked to Tania again, and Natasha shook her head. “Not– I know there was an accident, what happened to me?” Carol glanced at Tania.

“Would you like your friend to leave the room while we discuss the specifics of your–”
“No,” Natasha interrupted, “Tania can stay for everything.” Carol nodded, then met Natasha’s eyes, face serious, and Natasha felt a sudden jolt of nerves.

“First off all, I want to say that I’m confident that you’ll suffer no significant lasting reductions in mobility as a result of the accident.”

“Okay,” Natasha said slowly. Carol smiled crookedly at her.

“Its an extensive list of injuries, so I just wanted to give you that reassurance before I started rattling them off. It was a bad crash.” Natasha frowned.

“I’m not a civvie.” Carol paused, eyes assessing Natasha, before nodding.

“Okay. Stop me if it gets to be too much.” She waited for Natasha to nod before continuing.

“You’ve suffered multiple minor facial lacerations, most of which will probably not scar, but there is one large one across your cheek—” Carol drew a line across her own face, “—that may scar.” Natasha had been aware of the strange stretch and pull at her skin when she was speaking, but now reached up her fingers to feel the edge of a large bandage on her face. Carol clicked her tongue at her. “No touching,” she said, pointing with her pen, and Natasha dropped her hand.

“We had to perform emergency surgery for a laceration of your right lung – a rib penetrated the lung, but the surgery was a success and we’re confident that you’ll have no problems with that going forward.” She paused to glance up at Natasha, who was beginning to feel very disconnected and unreal about the whole thing, a feeling not being helped by the drugs being slowly introduced into her bloodstream through her IV, but she nodded for Carol to keep talking. Carol glanced back down at her clipboard.

“When the vehicle flipped over the guardrail, the front engine block crumpled backwards, trapping your feet between the dash and the floor of the ambulance. As a result of this, you suffered a bimalleolar fracture on your right leg, and multiple metatarsal fractures to your left foot.” Carol looked back up at Natasha, who was looking down at her legs with a sort of distant horror. “You’ll be able to use a walking cast on your left foot, but you won’t be able to put any weight on your right one for at least six weeks, so you’ll be using crutches I’m afraid. On the bright side, no broken arms, so you won’t be stuck in a bed or a wheelchair.” Natasha closed her eyes.

“Anything else?” She asked, voice distant to her own ears.

“There’s superficial bruising and cuts on your arms, torso, all over your body really, but no, that’s the worst of it.” Carol’s voice sounded far off, but Natasha blinked her eyes open enough to see her share another look with Tania before heading out of the room. With no people in the room to hold her attention, Natasha could feel herself sliding back into the blackness of drugged sleep. There was something else she’d wanted to talk to Carol about, but…

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The next time Natasha woke up, there was sunlight streaming through her curtains, and two booted feet propped up against the end of her bed. She followed the path of purple skinny jean-clad legs to find Kate peering at her over the top of a gossip magazine.

“Hey,” Natasha rasped out, and Kate grinned at her, dropping the magazine to her lap, feet hitting the floor with a thud.

“Hey sleeping beauty, look who’s awake.” Natasha tried to sit up but quickly fell back, gasping in pain as Kate scrambled to grab the remote for the bed. The whirr of the machinery filled the room as
Natasha slowly rose up.

“Better?” Kate asked, and Natasha nodded. Kate offered her a cup, which Natasha took gratefully, capturing the straw with her lips.

“Tania?” She asked after drinking half the water. She felt disoriented and confused as she looked around the room. She hated it.

“I made her and Steve take a break to get lunch in the caffetteria.”

“Steve?” She asked, and Kate’s face softened. Natasha looked away.

“Yeah he’s been here as much as he can.”

“How- how long has-?”

“Two days since the crash. You’ve been in and out since then. This morning you had a conversation with Dr. Danvers. Do you-”

“Yeah,” Natasha interrupted, still looking anywhere but Kate, not able to stand seeing that look, that soft pity on her face, “yeah, I remember.” She heard Kate move, watched as her feet landed back on the end of Natasha’s bed. She looked down at her hands, cataloguing the cuts and bruises that littered her skin.

“Clint?” She asked, and heard Kate sigh.

“He’s fine. His face kinda looks like raw hamburger which is pretty nasty, but the doctors say he’ll make a full recovery or whatever, so.” Kate nodded decisively as Natasha looked up at her.

“He was in the back,” she said slowly, “he wasn’t secured by anything, he would have…”

“Flown around a lot?” Kate finished for her. “Yeah, there was a lot of talk about how lucky he was to be alive, blah blah blah. Here,” she said, reaching into the bag beside her feet and pulling out a small square of paper, unfolding it and squinting down at the page. “I stole his chart, I figured you’d want to hear all the medical mumbo jumbo.” Natasha tried to frown at the young woman, but Kate ignored her, and besides, Natasha’s heart wasn’t really in it anyways. She might have been alarmed at the flippant way Kate spoke about the fact that her brother very easily could have died if she didn’t know the other woman so well… and wasn’t so well acquainted herself with using flippancy to disguise real distress.

“Okay, so, we’ve got multiple lacerations and bruises to his face… whiplash… concussion, which has been fun, let me tell you. Enough weird shit comes out of Clint’s mouth to begin with, the last couple days have been a fucking adventure.” Kate grinned up at her and Natasha laughed wincing as pain radiated up from her abdomen. Kate paused, watching as Natasha grabbed the morphine dispenser button on the bed and gave it a couple more clicks. “Um, and the worst one, which was that the broken rod of the IV pole-thing went through his left shoulder.” Natasha hissed through her teeth in sympathy, and Kate looked up quickly.

“He’s gonna be totally fine though! Like, I wasn’t lying about that. The doctors are all, ‘we’re confident that Mr. Barton will make a full recovery’.” Natasha smiled at the deep masculine voice Kate had put on, hands on hips as she mimicked Clint’s doctor. There was still one thing she wanted to know however, and she hesitated, not sure if she wanted to put this on Kate.

“Do you know what happened to the patient we were transporting?” Natasha finally asked. She was pretty sure she knew the answer anyways, now that her mind was clearer and she could remember
the state John Doe had been in. Her suspicion was confirmed by the look on Kate’s face before the younger woman even opened her mouth.

“Yeah,” Kate said, looking uncomfortable, “he died. I’m sorry Natasha.” Natasha shook her head.

“No, no, don’t worry, I thought… but I just wanted to make sure.” Kate nodded, still looking vaguely uncomfortable, and Natasha searched for a way to change the topic to anything else. She shifted, sucking in a breath as it only caused her more pain. Jesus, she hoped the fucking morphine kicked in soon. Happily, that was the moment that Kate took the initiative to change the subject, and as a side effect, distract Natasha from the pain. The teenager leaned forward with a conspiratorial look on her face.

“So Steve has been here an awful lot.” Natasha’s face was kind of numb but she had a sinking suspicion that she was blushing.

“Yeah, well…” she trailed off, not sure what she was going to say, which only caused Kate’s grin to grow.

“He’s very cute you know, very-” she cut herself off abruptly, looking up, and Natasha turned her head to see Tania and Steve walking through the door. Steve lit up at the sight of her awake, rushing over to the bed then hovering nervously, hands fluttering just above the sheets as he nearly vibrated on his toes.

“Hey! You’re awake!” He said, and Natasha felt herself grin. He was so fucking cute. So tiny, she just wanted to pick him up and put him in her pocket and- oh hey, there was the morphine.

“Yeah, I am,” she rasped, and Steve’s expression turned fond.

“Hey,” he repeated, leaning down to press a careful kiss to the side of her face.

“Hey,” she said back.

“I’m so happy you’re awake.” Natasha was vaguely aware of Kate and Tania exchanging looks behind Steve’s back, and of Tania jerking her head towards the hallway. Natasha was drugged enough not to care about how rude she was being however, and watched her friends leave without comment, though she did exchange a smile with Tania just as the other woman left the room. Steve meanwhile had dragged the other chair in the room right up to the bed, and had picked up her hand at some point. She could feel the pressure of his hand squeezing her as more of a vague tingling pressure than a real sensation, but it was nice anyways.

“So this is a bit of a change eh?” Steve said with a smile that only faltered a little bit around the edges, “You in the hospital, me not…”

“I’m really high,” Natasha said abruptly, cutting him off, and Steve laughed. It was true though, and it had apparently all hit her at once.

“Yeah? They giving you the good stuff?”

“The best stuff,” Natasha said, looking at Steve intently.

“Good,” he said with a fond smile.

“You’re really cute,” she said, echoing her earlier thought, and Steve bit his lip.

“Thanks,” he said, fighting a smile.
“No, like, you’re really cute. The cutest. I just want to tuck you in my purse and carry you around with me everywhere.” Steve laughed.

“High as fuck and still giving me shit about my height,” he said with a grin, and Natasha shook her head.

“Nooooo,” she said, drawing out the word as she struggled to remember what they were talking about. Whatever. It probably wasn’t important. Not as important as making Steve understand how adorable he was.

“Like, I want to bundle you up in a billion blankets. You’re too skinny you know.”

“Uh-huh,” Steve nodded, biting his lip again.

“And like, to be honest it’s a bit offensive? How cute you are? With the hair and the tattoos and just…” Natasha tried to wave her hand at him but was surprised to find that it was being held in Steve’s own hand. She blinked down at their joined fingers. When had that happened?

“When did what happen?” Steve asked, sounding confused, and Natasha realized she must have said that last part out loud.

“You’re so little,” she said instead, and ignored the way Steve rolled his eyes. “I just really want to like, tie you to the bed and fuck you into the mattress.” She pulled her hand from his to raise both her hands front of her face, “I have this dildo, you’ll really like it.” She spread her hands to what she thought was about eight inches apart, though she couldn’t be sure. There was four of her hands and she wasn’t quite certain where the real ones were. “It vibrates,” she said, and Steve let out a choked noise. Natasha finally looked away her spread hands just in time to watch a brilliant red flush rush across Steve’s cheeks. “What?” She asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Steve said, voice strangled. “Nothing at all.” Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, but shrugged, leaning her head back against the pillow and watched the way the ceiling spun. Steve picked up her hand again, and that felt nice, the warmth of his palm pressed against hers as her began telling her about what Clint had said when he’d ducked in to say hello to him earlier.

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“Oh my god I do not need to be in a fucking wheelchair.”

“Standard operating procedure Natasha,” Angie said, far too cheerfully in Natasha’s opinion as she wheeled the other woman towards the hospital entrance. Natasha grumbled, but settled back down into her seat. As the automatic doors slid open in front of them, she caught sight of Sam and Steve waiting for her next to a very clean and new-looking car.

“Did you steal that?” She asked as Angie halted the wheelchair in front of the two men.

“Ignore her,” Angie said happily as Sam opened his mouth, “she’s just grumpy.”

“I’m not grumpy,” Natasha said, painfully aware of how petulant she probably seemed with her arms crossed, glaring. Steve’s grin was brilliant as he smiled at her.

“Sure you’re not,” he said good-naturedly. Sam moved forward to take her arm, and Angie grabbed the other one. The two of them leveraged Natasha out of the chair, helping her into the front seat of the car. It smelt like new car, Natasha noticed as she buckled herself in, Steve sliding into the backseat as Sam settled himself behind the wheel. Angie waved goodbye, huge grin on her face as they pulled out from the hospital.
“Is this your car Sam?” Natasha asked, reaching out to tap the air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.

“Nah just rented it for the day,” he said, glancing over briefly to smile at her.

“Oh my god you guys didn’t have to do that,” she said, turning as Steve’s head popped up between them. He smiled at her.

“Of course we did! Or well, I was going to, but then I can’t drive, so Sam did it.”


“So I was thinking we’d stop at your apartment and get anything big you need, and Liho,” Steve wrinkled his nose up a bit as he said the cat’s name, “and then head back to my place.” Natasha sucked on her teeth, not willing to rehash this with Steve again, at least not in front of Sam. He’d brought up the idea of her staying with him while she recovered from her injuries a couple days after she’d woken up, and she’d immediately told him no. But then he’d brought it up again, and again, and again…

Natasha had known Steve was stubborn before, but it was a whole other experience to have that stubbornness turned onto her. Her complete annoyance and frustration with him was only tempered by the fact that she knew he was doing it out of… well, you know. Whatever.

As Tania had pointed out, annoyingly reasonable, she was going to need help while she healed from her injuries. Still, Natasha couldn’t stop herself from being annoyed about the whole thing, and had accepted Steve’s help with possibly the least amount of grace anyone had ever accepted another person’s aid with. Luckily he’d been taking her general grumpiness with good cheer, telling her that Bucky had always been pissy when they were sick too.

Her throwing a pillow at him and screaming ‘I’m not fucking pissy!’ probably hadn’t helped her stance any.

And she’d pulled out two stitches.

“Alright,” Sam said, pulling up in front of Natasha’s place. He and Steve piled out of the car while Natasha opened her door and spun to face outside. Sam appeared in front of her, holding out a pair of crutches, an obnoxious grin on his face. Natasha rolled her eyes at him, but let him help her out of the car. He handed over the crutches once she was safe on the sidewalk. The walk was clear, making it easier for her to maneuver up the cement path. She made her way to the stairs, Steve nervously hovering at her elbow in a way that made her both roll her eyes and smile. Sam strode ahead of them, unlocking the front door and holding it open as Natasha struggled up the stairs, then doing the same for the door of her apartment.

“Liho,” Natasha called out, hearing a loud meow as the small black cat came running, twining around her feet and staring up at her plaintively. “Hey baby,” she cooed down at the cat, and Sam laughed. Natasha felt a blush rise on her cheeks, but didn’t look up. She didn’t usually let people see this side of herself, how openly affectionate she was with her cat, but she hadn’t seen Liho since the accident, and she’d missed the little terror. Liho turned away from her and looked over at Steve, hissing at him, and Steve huffed in indignation. Natasha couldn’t help but laugh.

“The cat comes with me, you know that right?” Steve got a slightly pained look on his face, but nodded. Natasha bit her lip, moving forward into the apartment, navigating down the hallway and sitting down on her bed once she reached the bedroom. She let herself flop backwards as Steve wandered in. Gods she was happy to be home, even if it was just temporary. Sam poked his head in
after Steve, and she rolled her head to look at him.

“Do you have a carry case for the cat?” He asked.

“Aw fuck, no, I don’t.” She said. “I borrowed one from the shelter to get her home and then I haven’t had to use one since.” Sam nodded.

“That’s okay. I’ll go get one from the pet shop?” Natasha nodded.

“Thank you Sam, that would be great. You’re great.”

“I know,” Sam said, nodding solemnly before turning and leaving.

“Wow, you’re never that nice to me,” Steve said once he was gone. Natasha snorted.

“Please, I’m super nice.” Steve laughed, then looked around the room.

“So, do you have a bag or something?” He asked, and Natasha hummed in affirmation.

“Under the bed,” she said, and Steve knelt on the floor, pausing then looking up at her.

“Care to move your legs?” He asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Eh,” Natasha said, but did move her legs so Steve could pull out the suitcase that was tucked under the bed. The shoebox that had been lying next to it got pulled out at the same time, and Natasha tried not to look too guilty as she kicked it back under the bed with her casted foot. Steve gave her a look but didn’t say anything, just opening the suitcase and asking what she wanted packed. Natasha had to say, laying on the bed and ordering Steve what to pack was pretty nice. Liho wandered into the room, jumping up to lie on Natasha’s stomach and she smiled as she petted the warm ball of fur.

“So you decided on what you’re gonna do with all this time you’ve got off?” He asked as he pulled out the shirts she directed him towards. She shrugged.

“Read,” she said, “probably binge watch Netflix, whatever.”

“You won’t be able to go on your runs,” Steve said, teasing, “what will you do without them?” Natasha grinned at him.

“Oh, you know, I’ll probably just stick to like, chin-ups, crunches, whatever. Maybe lift some weights, bench press you…”

“Oh, a joke about my size,” Steve said dryly, “how original.” Natasha grinned, watching as Steve shoved a final pair of shorts in her bag.

“Okay, anything else?” Steve asked, hands on his hip as he looked around. Natasha hesitated, then gathered up her nerve.

“Yeah, actually. Grab that shoebox.” Steve pointed under the bed, raising an eyebrow. Natasha nodded, and he reached under where she was sitting to pull out the box. “Open it,” she said. Steve gave her a look, but did as she said, lifting the lid of the box.

“Wow,” Steve said after a moment of silence.

“Good wow?” Natasha asked, nervous despite herself. Steve raised his head and grinned at her, and Natasha couldn’t help but smile back.
“Definitely good wow,” he said before looking back down into the box. “Oh hey,” he said, reaching in and pulling out a large black dildo, toggling the switch on the bottom and smiling as it started vibrating. He glanced over at Natasha with a sly look, “I think I’ve heard about this one before.”

“Fuck off,” Natasha laughed, and Steve looked straight at her as he reached over and dropped it into the bag. The smile dropped off her face, and she bit her lip.

“You should grab the green one too,” she said, “and the harness.” Steve complied with a growing smile.

“I’m back,” Sam called from out in the apartment, and Steve flailed to close the suitcase and shove the box back under Natasha’s bed. Natasha laughed watching him scramble across the floor, Liho running from the room. When Sam’s head came around the door, Steve was perched on top of the suitcase, blushing bright red. Sam raised an eyebrow.

“Y’know what,” he said, “I don’t want to know. I’m going to get the cat in the box and then we’ll head out.”

“Sounds good,” Steve said, voice slightly high-pitched, and Natasha started laughing again. Sam disappeared, shaking his head as he went. Natasha levered herself off the bed, getting her crutches under her arms and heading into the living room. Steve followed behind her, pulling the suitcase. They stopped to watch Sam trying to lure Liho out from under the couch, leaning against the wall by the entryway.

Natasha jumped at the sound of a knock on the door. She wasn’t given the chance to open it however, as it immediately swung open, Darcy’s head popping around the door frame, followed by Jane’s as they pushed into the apartment.

“Tash!” Darcy exclaimed, pulling Natasha away from the wall and into a hug.

“Hey Darcy,” she said, patting awkwardly at the other woman’s back.

“I’m so happy to see you, you have no idea,” the younger woman gushed. “We were so freaked out when Tania called and said you’d been in an accident!” Natasha shifted, uncomfortable.

“Thanks for feeding Liho. Tania said you’d been doing it,” she said instead of responding.

“No problem,” Jane replied with a smile, “We were happy to help.”

“Are you going somewhere?” Darcy asked curiously, looking at the suitcase then at Sam, who was now just lying on the floor, staring at Liho, who was staring back without blinking. She gasped dramatically. “Are you moving out?? Are you leaving us forever?!” Natasha laughed.

“I’m just going to stay with Steve while my legs heal.” Darcy put her hand over her heart dramatically, clutching at her metaphorical pearls.

“Oh my goodness Tash don’t scare me like that. I don’t know what I’d do without you as my neighbor.”

“Mmmm, literally nothing different?” Natasha said, and Darcy smacked her arm.

“Shut your mouth,” Darcy said, ignoring the way Natasha winced as she hit one of her bruises.

“HAH!” Everyone turned at the sound of Sam shouting in triumph, hoisting aloft a carry case with a very pissed-off looking Liho staring out at them.
“Congratulations,” Steve said flatly, “you conquered the tiny cat.”

“Says the guy who’s afraid of it.” Sam replied with a smirk, and Steve stuck his tongue out at him.

“Okay we’ve gotta go,” Natasha said, turning to Darcy and Jane and ignoring Steve and Sam as they continued to snipe at each other. “Say goodbye to everyone for me? I’ll be back in a couple weeks.”

“Of course,” Jane said, pulling Natasha into another awkward hug. “We’ll see you when you get back. Rest up, and heal quickly.”

“I’ll do my best,” Natasha said with a smile, nodding her farewell and heading back out to the car.

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Natasha found herself settling into living with Steve with an ease that made her uncomfortable. Even Liho adjusted to their new living space with minimal fuss, only adding to Natasha’s internal conflict. She knew that she was being ridiculous, being upset about being comfortable. But knowing that didn’t stop her from worrying that the speed with which she settled into domesticity with Steve was a sign of bad things to come. After all, the last couple of times she had allowed herself to believe that the person she was living with was safe had ended… poorly, for her. So she struggled against the feeling of comfort and home that Steve provided her, snapping back to tense wariness anytime she caught herself getting too complacent.

Despite all of her stupid internal worrying, it was very physically comfortable to live with Steve. His narrow townhouse was three floors, but the main rooms Natasha used, the bathroom, living room, kitchen, and master bedroom, were all on the first floor, making it much easier for her to navigate around the space by herself. She had struggled down to the basement a couple times to do laundry, stubbornly ignoring Steve’s loud protests, but hadn’t bothered to venture up to the second floor, which housed a spare bedroom, Steve’s studio, and a second bathroom. Well, she’d been up there once, to watch Steve work, which had been… interesting. Steve had been very aware of her at first, shifting uncomfortably and glancing over at her a lot, but he’d eventually settled into the work. At that point, it was as if she had ceased to exist, his concentration total as he painted, biting his lip as he looked back and forth between the photos he’d taken of his model and his painting. He’d been beautiful, as he worked, and Natasha had found herself feeling a swell of emotion she didn’t want to name as she watched him.

She hadn’t been upstairs since.

She’d been spending much of her time in the living room, propped up in the couch in front of the television. She’d watched so much daytime television that after a week she solemnly told Steve she could feel her brain literally physically melting away. After that he’d started bringing her books from the library, which she devoured, plowing through her goodreads ‘to-read’ list with a single-minded dedication. Though she did keep watching a couple of the terrible reality shows. Steve had almost given himself an asthma attack with how hard he laughed when he’d caught her watching one, and no amount of her bringing up the fact that he knitted saved her from his teasing.

Natasha was in what was quickly becoming her usual spot on the couch when Steve came home from the coffeeshop, smelling deliciously of ground espresso and the rain that was tapping lightly against the windows. Shaking out his umbrella, he removed his coat and boots, wandering into the living room to press a kiss against the side of Natasha’s head over the back of the couch before heading towards the kitchen. Natasha watched him go, struck all over again how painfully domestic they had become, and how quickly they had fallen into this pattern. Steve had become far more casually physically affectionate in the last week and a half since she’d moved in and while Natasha certainly wasn’t objecting… she did feel like she ought to be.
It just all seemed far too *nice*. And if there was one thing that life had taught Natasha, it was that nothing nice ever lasted.

In fact, it lasted exactly two more days.

Natasha was sitting at the kitchen table, watching Steve wash dishes. He’d made dinner that night, and Natasha wasn’t certain she’d be letting him do that again anytime soon. Steve had pointed out that since she basically lived off of takeout, she probably wasn’t in any position to judge anyone else’s cooking. She’d told him that she could when it was as bad as his, and he’d gotten very huffy, claiming that it had been much worse before he met Sam. All that did was make her feel bad for Sam, and she’d told him so, watching with amusement as he stalked off to the sink, grumbling about ungrateful house guests. After having a soapy cloth brandished at her multiple times, Natasha had now learned better than to try and help clean up. Instead, she satisfied herself to sipping on her beer and watching Steve’s ass as he swayed in time to the music coming from his phone on the counter.

Then he dropped a plate.

The ceramic dish shattered against the tile, shards spreading out across the room. At first, that was all Natasha noticed, the broken pieces skittering across the floor as everyone in the room froze. It took a moment for her to look up and realize that Steve hadn’t unfrozen even after the initial surprise had worn off. Instead he was standing frozen, staring down at the pieces of broken plate with a strange look on his face. He didn’t react when Natasha said his name, or when she struggled to her feet and carefully picked her way across the room to him. In fact, he only reacted when she reached out to carefully place a hand against his arm, and then it was to violently flinch away from her touch. She withdrew her fingers instantly, holding her hand in the air uncertainly as she stared at him. She’d never seen Steve like this before, he looked *terrified*.

“Steve?” She said his name again, softer than the first time, and he finally turned his head to look at her, eyes wide with fear, and Natasha had a sudden sinking realization. *He looks like me*, she thought. *He looks like I do when I have a flashback.*

“Steve?” She said again. He moved, shaking himself as if to throw off whatever had taken over his mind, reaching up to run a shaking hand through his hair.

“Wow, sorry,” he said, voice shaking on an obviously fake laugh. “Guess that startled me. I should grab the broom.” He abruptly moved to leave the room and Natasha let him, staring after him. She could let it go, she should let it go, Steve obviously wanted her to let it go but…

“Steve,” she said again as he came back into the room and began sweeping, refusing to look up at her. “Steve,” she repeated again, more forcefully and his eyes flicked to her briefly before turning stubbornly back to the floor.

“What?” He mumbled, and Natasha shook her head.

“Go to the living room.”

“What?” This time he really looked up at her, and Natasha pointed towards the living room.

“Put down the broom and go to the living room.” She said and Steve hesitated, clearly thinking about arguing, but finally did as she said. Natasha followed behind him, moving far more slowly on her crutches.

“What?” he said again once they were both sitting, refusing to look at her.

“What? What the fuck was that Steve?” He flinched, and she thought again about backing down,
before gritting her teeth.

“Nothing,” he said finally, and Natasha narrowed her eyes.

“That wasn't nothing. That was definitely something.” Steve still wasn’t looking at her, and Natasha took a deep breath, channelling every single conversation she’d ever had with Tania about opening up to people and healthy relationships, and spoke.

“You looked the same way I look whenever something reminds me of my father… or my ex.” Steve looked up at that, surprise clear on his features. She hadn’t brought up any of her former abusers since the very oblique conversation they’d had about her past, and it was obvious that Steve hadn’t expected her to mention it now. “What was that Steve?” She repeated, making her voice a bit softer. What had he not told her? She tried to push down the hurt she felt, focusing on his face, on the fear and hesitation that flashed across it.

“It was… I…” Steve started, then trailed off, clenching and unclenching his fists against his thighs.

“Did someone hurt you Steve?” Natasha asked, and she couldn’t help the way her voice broke on the words, and Steve finally met her eyes.

“Yes,” he said simply, and Natasha sucked in a surprised, shaky breath.

“Who?” She asked simply, and Steve closed his eyes.

“My foster parents,” he said, and Natasha frowned.

“My foster parents? But-”

“My mum was really sick.” Steve began, and Natasha stopped talking immediately. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes before continuing. “My entire life really, but it got really bad when I was fourteen. My dad died overseas before I was born, so it was just me and my mum. She didn’t have any family in the States, and her family in Ireland had disowned her when she got pregnant with me because she wasn’t married to my dad. So when she had to go into the hospital, there was no one to take care of me.” Natasha had been holding herself still since Steve had began talking, but now she reached across the space between them, grabbing his hand and squeezing it tight. He opened his eyes to give her a shaky smile.

“Okay?” He asked, and she nodded, keeping her expression carefully blank. Steve had been there to hear her, she could be here to hear him. “I went into foster care,” he continued, “it wasn’t so bad at first, I was in a group home with a bunch of other boys. It was wild and no one was really taking care of me but at the time I was too worried about my mum to focus on anything else. And I figured, it wasn’t like I was going to end up in a family right? Who is gonna want to take in a fourteen year old boy? But then my social worker told me she had exciting news, that she’d found a family to place me with. She said it would give me stability, would help me cope with my mum being so sick.”

“It didn’t.” he continued, taking a deep breath. “The couple that she placed me with… well, they had a lot of opinion on how children should and shouldn’t behave. Lots of stuff about being tidy and clean and above all quiet. It was… I dropped a plate after dinner once, it just slipped out of my hands while I was washing the dishes, and it broke. They locked me in an old army trunk for three days. When they let me out, they told me I was being ungrateful, that I was lucky they were so kind, that my mum was going to die and then no one would ever love me again.” Natasha could barely feel her fingers for how hard Steve was gripping her hand, but she kept holding on. Steve had started crying sometime in the last couple of minutes, sobs breaking out between words.
“It was only three months and then my mum was well enough to come home, for me to join her. It was only three months, it shouldn’t have… I shouldn’t’” Natasha was moving before she could think about what she was doing, and then Steve was clinging to her side, face pressed into her shoulder as he cried.

“It does matter, three months matters, it doesn’t matter how long it lasted,” Natasha said, holding Steve tight. “That was horrible Steve, and you never deserved it.” Natasha’s voice broke on that last word, and she was startled to find that she was crying as well.

“I never told anyone.” Steve said, voice muffled against her shirt, “because I couldn’t help but think they were right. That my mum would die and I was going to be alone. And then she did die and then Bucky died, and then I- I almost…” Natasha let out a choked noise and she pulled Steve even closer so that the small man was half in her lap, ignoring the way pain shot up from her stomach at the movement.

“You’re not alone though Steve, you’ve got Sam and you’ve got Peggy and you’ve got me.” Steve shook her head against her shoulder and then suddenly it seemed very easy to say. “You do Steve, you do have me. I love you. You deserve love and I love you and you’re not alone.” Natasha was almost surprised Steve could even tell what she was saying--she was now crying so hard--but he gasped, sobbing and clutching at her back, arms impossibly tight around her.

“I love you too,” he said, crying. “I love you too.”

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Several days later saw Natasha and Steve spending Steve’s day off lying together on the bed, the beam of sunlight coming through the window and settling warmly on their bodies providing a convincing argument against ever getting up. They had gotten up briefly, as evidenced by the crumb covered plates and empty coffee mugs stacked on the bedside table. They hadn’t remained upright for long though, eating and then soon ending up lying back down beside each other, a pillow between Natasha’s casted feet allowing her to lie on her side while Steve ran his finger up and down the scars on her back. She was finding it surprisingly soothing, his gentle touches across the most visible reminder of the most painful time of her life.

They hadn’t really spoken about what had happened the other night. They had both kept crying until they were exhausted and had no more tears left, and then had just stumbled off to bed. Something had shifted between them since then though. Natasha felt lighter, and Steve seemed to feel the same, like they had both let go of a weight they had been carrying.

Or perhaps they were now sharing the burden of carrying it.

Whatever it was the silence that stretched between them in the morning light was comfortable, Natasha was half-way to drifting back to sleep when she felt Steve’s lips press against the top of her spine, moving slowly downwards. She hummed, twisting to look back at him. He was biting his lip, half shy even with the obvious heat in his gaze as he pulled away from her to meet her eyes.

“Hey,” she said, smirking at the expression on his face.

“Hey,” he said back, voice hoarse, and her smirk grew.

“You kissin’ with intent back there?”

“Maybe,” he said, a small smile quirking his lips. Natasha rolled fully over onto her back.

“Well did you maybe have a plan?”
“Just lie back and let me do all the work,” Steve said, a cheeky grin on his face and Natasha couldn’t help but laugh as she settled back into the pillows, trying to ignore the way her legs lay awkwardly within their casts and the way the blue of her stitches stood out against her brown skin.

“Alright then,” she said, gesturing down at her body. “Get to work.” Steve made a face at her, but moved up to straddle her stomach, leaning down and kissing her. She responded happily, threading her fingers into his hair and tugging lightly. His fingers ran lightly up and down her arms, skating over her bruises and cuts with feather-light touches. She lifted her own hands to grip Steve’s hips, rubbing her thumbs over the sharp jut of his hipbones. He stopped kissing her, leaning back until his lips were barely brushing hers.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she smiled against his lips, feeling his fingers move off her arms, trailing down between her breasts, brushing across her stomach and dipping into the patch of hair between her legs. She arched up as the pads of his fingers stroked gently across her clit, more teasing touch than pressure. Natasha growled slightly, and Steve laughed softly.

“So,” he said, “I was thinking I could eat you out until you come, then you can put on that nice strapon I’ve heard so much about and I’ll ride you until we both come again.” Natasha bit her lip to stop herself from grinning, instead shrugging and putting on an air of nonchalance.

“I mean, that sounds okay I guess.”

“You’ll suffer through it though?” Steve asked, laughter in his voice. Natasha shrugged.

“I’ll just have to grin and bear it I suppose.” Steve smirked, leaning down to press a light kiss to her mouth before sliding down her body. She nudged his sides with her knees, and he bent her legs slightly, getting her to rest her legs against his shoulders as he settled between her thighs. Natasha lay her head back against the pillows, closing her eyes. Even though she had been expecting it, she was still somehow startled by the cool press of Steve’s fingers spreading her out beneath him, the hot wet touch of his tongue against her, sliding across her clit. Natasha sucked in a breath, smiling as Steve stopped teasing and pressed down. He’d taken her instructions from the first time they’d done this to heart, barely requiring any encouragement now to press down hard on her clit with his tongue, occasionally reaching up to press his thumb against her as well.

Natasha gulped in large breaths as shocks of pleasure began to ripple up her body. She could feel Steve smile against her as she gasped, probably smug about the affect he was having on her, the little shit. Still, she couldn’t hold back the noises of pleasure that came from her throat, glancing down occasionally only to keep catching glimpses of Steve staring up at her from between her legs, face wet with her slick. The heat in his eyes was almost enough to make her come on the spot. When he pressed his thumb hard against her clit and ran his tongue over it at the same time, she did come, breathing in a sharp gasp, back arching off the bed.

“Ow,” she moaned, and Steve shot up.

“What? Did I do something? Are you okay?”

“No,” she moaned, grabbing her side, “no it’s fine I just came so hard it hurt my ribs.” Steve snorted, obviously fighting a smile. Natasha glared at him for a moment before laughing, reaching up and pulling him down to her. “C’mere,” she murmured, pulling his head to her own, licking into his mouth. They allowed themselves to get distracted by kissing for long minutes, before Steve finally pulled away with a groan.
“Okay, okay,” he said, sliding off the bed and half-running across the room to where Natasha’s suitcase lay on the floor, kneeling down and beginning to dig through it. It was only a minute before he gave a cry of triumph, hoisting the black dildo above his head and Natasha couldn’t help but laugh as he half-danced back across the room, harness held in his other hand. He clambered back on top of her, pausing just as he settled into position straddling her stomach, careful of her still-healing stitches. He stared down at her for a moment, smile curving his lips, before suddenly frowning.

“Fuck, lube,” he said, and Natasha raised an eyebrow at him.

“Are you actually about to tell me that you don’t have any lube?” Steve dropped the dildo and harness on the bed, shaking his head and muttering ‘no’ under his breath as he leaned over and yanked over the top drawer on his bedside table. He let out another triumphant cry as he pulled out a tube of lube, the delighted expression on his face making her laugh again.

“Found the lube,” he said, a goofy grin on his face, and Natasha couldn’t help but pull him down to kiss her again.

“Yeah you did,” she said.

“You wanna?” He asked, holding out the tube.

“Nah,” Natasha replied with a slow grin, trying to raise her arms to put them behind her head but wincing in pain when the movement pulled at her various injuries. Instead, she put her hands back on Steve’s hips. “I thought you said you were going to do all the work.” Steve grinned, slow and delighted.

“You’re right,” he said, “I did say that.” He set down the lube next to the other supplies, hooking his thumb under the elastic of his underwear and shimmering it down his hips, throwing it over his shoulder, making Natasha laugh again. He picked the lube back up, uncapping it and squeezing some out onto his fingers. He bit his lips as he reached behind himself. He made a small grunting noise, and Natasha wished she had a better view of what he was doing to himself. Still, being able to see his face was just as good, Natasha loving the play of expressions across his face as he twisted and scissored his fingers into his own body. Besides, this way she got to watch as his dick bobbed adorably in front of him, jutting out from his body and tapping against his stomach as he jerked.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said, surprising herself and Steve too, judging by the noise he made, startled and pleased. He kept making soft noises and Natasha felt herself getting more and more turned on. “Gods yeah, do that, just like that, get yourself ready for me,” she said, feeling a little bit awkward but loving the way Steve reacted, moving his hand faster and faster. “I can’t wait until I’m all healed up, I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t be able to walk properly.”

“Fuck,” Steve said with a gasp, “okay, okay, okay.” He pulled his hand away, wiping it on his own thigh before grabbing the harness off the bed. It took a bit of work to pull it over her casts, both of them laughing through their impatience. Finally they got it on, and the dildo attached. Steve grabbed the bottle of lube again, slicking up the thick rubber cock – Natasha’s cock, and fuck, she loved the idea of it going into Steve. She may or may not have bought this one specifically after Steve had first mentioned her fucking him. She’d been at the shop with Tania looking at vibrators and had seen it, and immediately all she could think of was how hot it would look sliding inside Steve.

She didn’t think she was going to be disappointed.

Steve shuffled forward on the bed, positioning himself over where the dildo was sticking straight up from her crotch. He grabbed ahold of the base, tilting it back, thighs shaking under Natasha’s hands as he slowly lowered himself back down, mouth falling open as the large dildo slowly began to slide
inside of him. He huffed out a little noise when he finally reached the base, Natasha mimicking him as his weight pressed the base down against her swollen clit. Steve remained there for long moments, adjusting to the sensation of the large dildo filling him up. Natasha couldn’t look away from his face, tilted back and eyes half closed as he took slow, shaking breaths. Not that she was doing much better, not having fully recovered from her earlier orgasm and now dealing with renewed pressure on her clit.

When Steve began to move, it was without warning, his legs shaking as he lifted himself up an inch before carefully easing himself back down. He kept moving with the same aching slowness, rolling his hips up and down.

“Is this okay?” He asked, voice already breathy.

“Yeah, yeah, totally okay,” Natasha said, running her hands up and down his sides. She couldn’t reach as far as she could normally, not with her injuries, but she was still able to run her fingers across his ribs. She took in the way he was biting his lip, moving carefully and slowly. She hesitated, then spoke.

“Do you… you can go faster if you want.” Steve paused, a surprised look flashing across his face.

“Are you sure?” He asked. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” she reassured. Steve gave her a doubting look. “Okay you might,” she amended, “but I’ll tell you the second you do.”

“Promise?” Steve asked, biting his lip again.

“Promise.” Natasha said with a smile. Steve hesitated for a moment, then raised himself back up. He slammed back down with an abruptness that had both of them crying out. He leaned forward, bracing himself on Natasha’s shoulders.

“Is this okay?” He said, “Does it hurt?”

“Oh my god, yes! Just move.” Natasha said with a laugh, and he used the better leverage to lift almost wholly off the dick this time, slamming down with just as much force as before. Natasha watched, enthralled, as Steve moved, his small frame graceful in its movements as he kept up his fast and hard pace. It was almost too much for her, the hard bursts of pressure against her clit making her twitch and shiver beneath him. It didn’t tip her over that edge though, and it was obvious that Steve liked it fast and hard, a thought that was making Natasha almost painfully turned on. It was also making her curse her broken bones again. Gods, she couldn’t wait until she was healed, she was going to fucking wreck him.

Steve’s breaths were now hitching out of his throat, soft noises being forced from his mouth with every thrust. Natasha wasn’t doing much better, her hands shaking where they had risen to grip Steve’s sides. His dick was tapping against his stomach with every thrust, but when Natasha reached towards it, Steve batted her hand away.

“No,” he said between gasping breaths, “no, I can, I can come like- like this, ah, fuck.”

“Fuck,” Natasha said watching as his face screwed up and he began moving even faster. “Fuck Steve, come on, come for me.” Natasha was close too, she could tell, the pressure from Steve’s jerky quick bounces up and down driving her closer and closer towards her second orgasm. Just when she thought she was about to tip over the edge again though, Steve stopped, and Natasha let out a noise that was closer to a growl than she would admit, Steve laughing as he lifted himself entirely off her
“What. Why are you—” Natasha trailed off as Steve quickly detached the dildo from the harness, fiddling with the base. A soft buzzing noise suddenly filled the room, and Natasha watched as the rubber toy began to move. She could feel the slow smile creep across her face and didn’t stop it, her laugh turning into a gasp as Steve fit the base back into the harness and the vibrations were suddenly rolling across her clit. He didn’t waste anymore time, quickly climbing back on top of her and shoving back down onto the cock. With the added vibrations, it only took two thrusts of Steve’s weight coming down on her before her head snapped back. She let out a long, low moan, the orgasm shuddering through her. She felt Steve’s movements falter for a moment, and then he was speeding up, moving in short, jerky movements. Loud noises were now spilling from his mouth which he made no attempt to muffle.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted, slamming himself down again and again until he abruptly stilled. She watched through slitted eyes as he shivered and came, come splattering across her stomach as his dick jerked in the air. Steve tilted forward, almost collapsing down onto Natasha, but catching himself at the last minute. Instead, he rolled to the side, and they both lay there, panting out shallow breaths, covered in sweat and, in Natasha’s case, Steve’s come. She reached down with two fingers, drawing them through the splatters on her stomach and making a face. Steve laughed, and she looked over to see him looking up at her, eyes half-open and drowsy.

“I’ll clean it up in a minute.” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“You’re going to fall asleep in like five seconds and leave me with all the cleanup you mean.” Steve shrugged, a small smile on his lips as he let his eyes fall closed, the beam of sunlight still obligingly falling across the bed and warming the entire room. “Hey,” Natasha said, poking at him with the fingers that she’d smeared through his come, “you said you’d do all the work.” Steve mumbled something incoherent and didn’t move. Natasha sighed heavily, smiling despite herself. She was pretty sure he was faking but still. She pulled herself out of the bed. In the bathroom she washed herself off before grabbing a washcloth and heading back to the bedroom, pausing in the doorway. Steve was sprawled out across the bed, definitely actually asleep now, the bright sunlight catching in his blonde hair and making it glow. She leaned against the doorway, smiling, and let herself just feel the warmth filling her.

Chapter End Notes

I should not make promises I can't keep. I can't believe this took so long. But hey, one chapter left, and it really will be done soon.

Pinterest for fashion and general inspo

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Natasha wasn’t sure what had happened to the winter, the cold weather melting into spring then summer almost entirely without her noticing. She did return to her own place in the early spring, all the snow gone from the ground by the time her and Liho returned home. Steve had been sad to see her go, she could tell, though his feelings on Liho had been much less complicated. His exact words, she thought, had been something along the lines of “get that small fuzzy nightmare out of my house before it literally kills me”. Still, she had returned to her own place with a sense of sadness she hadn’t expected, and had admitted to Steve that she did miss living with him, though they both agreed that they weren’t quite there yet.

She had returned to work around the same time. Whatever worries she had that her accident would leave her with a fear of driving was erased her first day back. Sure, the first couple of calls they’d taken she’d been tense and stiff behind the wheel, with Clint giving her looks out of the corner of his eye that were much less subtle than he thought they were. Then, around midday they’d received a call for a Code 4 and it wasn’t until they had handed the patient off to the surgeons at the hospital that Natasha really registered the way she’d just sped through the city. After a brief bit of hyperventilation in her favourite supply closet, she’d returned to driving with the same attitude that she’d always had, and Clint relaxed significantly when he realized that she was no longer quite as tense.

One afternoon in early June found Natasha and Clint sitting in the sunshine outside of the dispatch centre, Sharon and Mack lounging on the grass with them. Natasha was idly listening while Mack teased Sharon on her recently revealed relationship with Maria (no one had even had the grace to act surprised when the two woman had announced the relationship to their coworkers, which had resulted in Maria rolling her eyes and Sharon stalking off in a huff). Natasha’s phone chimed on the grass next to her, and she flipped it over to see she had an email notification from Clint. Frowning over at him, she clicked it open, reading quickly before looking up, directing an incredulous look at her friend.

“What? We didn’t!” she said, interrupting Mack. Clint had been discharged from the hospital about a week after Natasha, so she wasn’t sure why she had just received an invite for a ‘We Didn’t Die!’ rooftop BBQ at Clint’s that weekend. Clint grinned knowingly, gesturing around them.

“Sounds good man,” Mack said, and Natasha and Sharon nodded. Clint grinned at them all.
“Invite anyone else you want yeah?” he said. “I’ve invited the whole building, we’re just gonna hang out on the roof all day and eat burgers and drink a fucking ton of beer.” Natasha smiled, very familiar with Clint’s rooftop parties, but Mack frowned slightly.

“That sounds a bit dangerous,” he said slowly, and Clint waved a hand at him.

“ Barely anyone’s ever fallen off,” he said.

Mack didn’t look very reassured.

“He’s joking right?” he asked, looking at Sharon. She shrugged, and he turned to Natasha, raising his eyebrows.

“Right?” Natasha raised her eyebrows right back at him, mimicking Sharon’s shrug. There was a moment of silence before Clint laughed, leaning over to shove at Mack’s shoulder. Mack didn’t move at all, and Clint took a moment to pout briefly before grinning at the other man.

“Of course I’m joking buddy, no one’s ever fallen off the roof.”

Not surprisingly, Mack did not look very reassured.

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okay so I feel like when you say BBQ that means smtg other than BBQ

like what?

like, you’re secretly inviting me to an orgy

if I was inviting you to an orgy you’d know abt it

srly tho is that what u think of clint?

does he seem like the kind of guy who just hosts orgys?

i mean....

he doesn’t not seem like the kind of guy to host an orgy

the last time we went over to his place we all ended up naked

we were just enjoying the sun omg

clint was lounging naked in a kiddie pool WHEN WE GOT THERE

.......and?

jfc

zero sense of propriety, the whole lot of you

I mean you seemed pretty stoked to join in

it’s a bit weird being the only clothed one at a party okay??

on a rooftop full of drunk naked ppl
I WAS NOT DRUNK

you and clint tried to play chicken with thor and darcy IN A KIDDIE POOL

I still can’t believe no one died

I keep telling you, no one has ever died at one of Clint’s parties

u and mack, y won’t u believe it?

idk might be the fact u can’t say it w a straight face

.....

i don’t know what you’re talking abt

uh huh sure u don’t

so r u free?

I’m always down for an orgy

funny

Natasha tossed her phone on the couch cushions next to her, smiling to herself. She was a bit nervous, finally introducing Steve to the rest of her friends, but honestly, he’d already met most of them. So she was trying to very firmly tell herself this wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t really working but hey, she could keep saying it anyways. Tania had rolled her eyes when Natasha had brought it up, which helped. She could always count on her to tell her when she was being ridiculous.

“What are you smiling at?” Skye asked from her perch on the arm of the couch, stretching her feet forward to nudge at Natasha’s phone.

“Nothing,” Natasha said. Skye rolled her eyes, taking a drag on the joint pinched between her fingers before passing it over to Natasha. She ignored the look Skye was giving her as she inhaled, concentrating on the plume of smoke coming from between her own lips.

“I’m excited to meet your boy,” Skye said, “he is coming Saturday right?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Cool.” Skye nodded, taking back the joint.

“Mack’ll be there too,” Natasha said casually, watching Skye carefully out of the corner of her eye. The other woman just hummed back at her in reply.

“You know, I’ve been getting to know him more the last couple of months, he’s a great guy,” Natasha said, stretching out. Skye didn’t react at all.

“How did you meet again?” Skye smiled, shaking her head.

“You’re cute,” she finally said, and Natasha scrunched up her nose.

“Come on! Not even a hint?”

“Nope,” Skye said, popping the ‘p’.
“One day,” Natasha said, shaking her head, “one day I’m going to figure it out.”

“Sure you are,” Skye said with a grin. Natasha narrowed her eyes at the other woman, pointing a threatening finger at her before dropping it with a smile.

Yeah, this was all gonna be fine.

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The rooftop was packed with people, to the point where it was probably a hazard. Not that anyone who was there was worried about that, too busy drinking and laughing in the sunshine. At least half of the residents of Clint’s building had crammed themselves onto the rooftop, along with most of his friends. Well, his and Natasha’s friends and she didn’t think she’d ever taken the time to realize just how completely those two groups overlapped until Clint had been telling her who he had invited. Most of the paramedics were there, all the ones who were off work for the day anyways. Tony, Rhodey, Maria, and Pepper were all working, though they had promised to drop by later, if they could.

Natasha and Steve had walked over together. Natasha wearing a pair of high waisted jean shorts, a pastel pink shirt proclaiming ‘DUMP HIM’ in bold black letters, and a pair of mint green wedges. Steve, in typical Steve fashion, was wearing a pair of women’s short jean overalls overtop of a white shirt, white adias on his feet. When she’d teased him for it, he’d given her the same lecture he always did about not assigning gender to clothing. To be honest, that lecture was the only reason she ever mentioned it to him. She loved seeing him all worked up, even if it was almost too easy to do.

The smell of burning charcoal and searing meat drifted across the roof. Clint had been manning the BBQ, but had been replaced by Nick and Sam after he had, in typical Clint fashion, gotten distracted and burnt the first batch of burgers. Of course, he still ate them, wandering from guest to guest and offering them burnt burgers, cheerfully eating them after every single other person refused. Well, Darcy had had one, but Darcy was kind of like the female version of Clint, so that made sense. The second BBQ of veggies and veggie dogs was being run by Angie, who had been cheerfully smacking every person who teased her about being a vegetarian with her spatula. Peggy and a couple members of her team at the FBI stood next to them, a tall skinny white guy and a very attractive black man.

Like, very attractive.

“You’re staring,” Steve said, nudging her side.

“Am not,” she said, not bothering to look away. “Besides, so are you.”

“Yup,” Steve said, both of them continuing to look across the rooftop as they took a drink of their respective beers.

“You guys are so weird,” a sudden voice proclaimed, and they both turned to see Kate looking at them, one eyebrow raised judgmentally.

“You’re so weird,” Natasha said.

“Oh burn,” Kate said flatly, before grinning at Natasha, who smiled back at her.

“You getting excited for school?” Natasha asked, and Kate smiled widely.
“Yeah! I think Clint’s going to lose it though, he’s already getting a bit clingy.”

“He’s going to cry so much,” Natasha said, and Kate made a face.

“I knooooow, it’s going to be terrible.”

“Oh yes, it must be sooo hard, going to one of the best schools in the country on a full scholarship. Woe is you.”

“You know what Natasha?” Kate said, pointing a finger at her. Natasha waited for a moment, grinning when she realized that Kate didn’t have anything to follow that up with.

“He said something about you driving down?” she asked.

“Yeah, me and America are probably gonna drive there.” Natasha raised an eyebrow at that.

“Wow really going for the full American college experience aren’t you.” Kate laughed.

“You know it!” She said. “I just really need to- oh my god Clint!” Kate interrupted herself, Natasha and Clint both turning to follow her gaze to see Clint looking over at her with a guilty expression, from where he was doing a handstand on the edge of the roof.

“Get down from there right now!” Kate shouted, shoving through the people to get to her brother.

“Yeah I’m really starting not to believe you when you say no one has ever died at one of these things,” Steve commented, staring after her.

“I definitely don’t believe it,” a voice said from behind them, and they turned to see Mack staring over both of their heads, an incredulous look on his face. “Who does a handstand on the edge of a roof?” he asked, looking down at Natasha and Steve.

“Clint,” Natasha said, before pausing for a second. “Actually, that also seems like something you’d do Steve.” Steve opened his mouth, presumably to deny the accusation, but was interrupted by Mack speaking.

“White people,” Mack said, “are fucking crazy.” Steve sputtered indignantly as Natasha and Mack both laughed.

“I would not do that!” Steve said, voice outraged.

“Because you can’t do a handstand?” Natasha asked, and Steve gasped at his chest dramatically.

“Betrayed by my own girlfriend,” he said, voice wounded, and Natasha felt a thrill shoot up her spine at the word. They’d had a conversation a few weeks previously in which Natasha had announced that she felt ready to refer to them as dating, as boyfriend and girlfriend. Natasha had pretended like it wasn’t a big deal while Steve pretended that he wasn’t crying a little bit. It’d been great.

Mack, oblivious to the effect Steve’s words had on Natasha, continued to tease the much shorter man. Steve, hands on his hips, was giving back as good as he got, and Natasha let the sounds of their teasing conversation wash over her. She tuned back in just in time to hear Mack start teasing Steve about his height, and grinned at the way Steve threw up his hands in exasperation.

“Everytime!” he said, “Every goddamn time!” Natasha laughed, and Steve crossed his arms.

“Really, it’s a mark of how uncreative every single one of you are,” he said. “You can’t think of a
“Single other thing to tease me about other than my height.”

“Oh I’m sure I could think of a couple,” Natasha said, grinning and winking at him. Steve squinted up at her. From across the roof, the sound of Kate yelling at Clint drifted over to them.

“She is scary,” Mack commented, looking over their heads again. “Do you know who she is?”

“Clint’s sister… did he not introduce you around when you got here?” Mack raised an eyebrow at Natasha and she shook her head.

“Right, stupid question. Well I’m Natasha,” Natasha pointed at her own chest, “and this is Steve.” Mack rolled his eyes, holding out his hand in an exaggerated motion.

“Nice to meet you Steve,” he said. Steve grinned as he took his hand, shaking it firmly.

“Nice to meet you too, Mack was it?”

“That’s right,” Mack said, nodding solemnly as a short blonde man with curly hair appeared at his elbow.

“Babe they… they have um, the… like hot dogs but…” The man said, speaking with a British accent.

“Veggie dogs?” Mack asked, grinning down at him.

“Yes!” The other man said excitedly, holding up two veggie dogs. Mack took one with a smile before turning back to Natasha and Steve.

“Natasha, Steve, my boyfriend Leo.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, waving his hand.

“You too,” Steve said.

“Leo’s studying for his PhD,” Mack said, voice proud. “Mechanical engineering.”

“Yeah,” Leo said with a smile. “But also some… bio-chem, because Jemma doesn’t… won’t stop telling me about it.”

“Wait,” Natasha said slowly raising a hand, “Jemma Simmons?”

“Yes,” Leo replied, raising an eyebrow.

“...any chance your last name is Fitz?” Leo nodded, looking even more uncertain. Natasha turned to Mack. “So this is how you know Skye? Your boyfriend and her girlfriend work together?” Mack slowly began to grin, figuring out why Natasha was so excited.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said, and Natasha shouted in victory, pumping her fist. Mack laughed while Leo smiled bemusedly.

“Shit Skye is gonna be so pissed at me for letting that slip, she was really enjoying making you wonder.” Natasha shook her head, grinning.

“You know, I figured it was either gonna be something epic or something totally mundane.”

“Well I hope you’re not disappointed,” Mack said, and Natasha shook her head, grinning,
“Not at all.” They stayed in that corner of the roof for a while, chatting with Mack and Leo as the hot afternoon sun slowly made its way across the sky, until Natasha glanced at Steve and noticed that he was beginning to look a bit pink. Mack laughed at them both when she began fussing after him to put on more sunscreen, though the effect was slightly ruined when he immediately turned to his own boyfriend and told him that he should really put on some sunscreen as well. Steve, of course, hadn’t brought any with him.

Waving a goodbye to Mack and Leo, Natasha led Steve across the roof to the stairwell, and the two made their way down the stairs to Clint’s. The door was unlocked in a typical Clint display of blind trust, something that made Natasha roll her eyes and Steve frown worryingly. The noise of the party was muffled in the apartment, distant but still comforting. The relative silence of the apartment echoed strangely in their ears after the chaos of the party, both of them staying silent in an unspoken agreement to preserve the fragile peace woven into the air. The consistent mess of Clint’s apartment was comforting and familiar as they began searching for the sunscreen, beginning in the bathroom before widening their search to the rest of the apartment.

Natasha paused in the living room to just enjoy the sunlight streaming through the windows, igniting the floating motes of dust. She caught Steve smiling at her, and had to bite her lip not to smile back at him, pretending she hadn’t seen him looking. She saw him shake his head out of the corner of her eye, but he returned to their search without saying anything. It took some digging, but eventually Natasha found a bottle of sunscreen under the couch. She stood up after pulling it out from the dust and lost dog toys. Brushing the dust from her knees, she struck a pose.

“Hey there gorgeous,” she said, putting on the huskiest voice she could manage, “need someone to put sunscreen on your back?”

“Oh gosh,” Steve said with a grin, splaying his hand out on his chest, “That is just so kind of you to offer.” Natasha poured out far too much sunscreen into the palm of her hand, and then looked up at Steve with a large grin.

“No,” he said, already beginning to laugh, “oh no, no-” She lunged, and Steve screeched as he tried to dodge her. He wasn’t fast enough however, and she caught him around the middle, smacking the palm of her hand into his shoulder.

“Oh god,” Steve groaned as she smeared it down his arm, reaching up to grope at his face, getting it all over his chin. “That’s so slimy,” he said, voice turning into a whine, “fuck why is it so slimy.” Natasha laughed as she let go of his waist and Steve turned around. She began rubbing it in properly, trying and failing to stop laughing as Steve pouted up at her.

“Stop it,” she said, and Steve just stuck out his lower lip even further. “You big baby,” she said, voice fond. She swiped a finger through the sunscreen that she hadn’t yet rubbed in, painting it down his nose.

“There,” she said as he yelped, “now you’re a real white guy.”

“Fuck off,” Steve laughed, rubbing at his nose. Natasha paused as she finished rubbing in the last of the rest of the sunscreen, smiling at the way Steve crossed his eyes to try and see if there was still sunscreen on his nose. Without thinking, she leaned forward to press a light kiss to the very tip of his nose. Steve blinked up at her in surprise, then smiled. They leaned forward at the same time, sharing a gentle kiss, winding their fingers together. They stayed in each other’s space even after the kiss had ended, close enough that Natasha could feel ghosting of Steve’s breath.

“We should get back to the party,” Steve said, voice quiet.
“In a minute,” Natasha said, not opening her eyes. His palm was warm against hers, a stray breeze from an open window stirring the hairs around her face. Sweat ran down between her shoulder blades where the sunlight pressed down against her skin.

She breathed, and breathed again.

Chapter End Notes

And it's done!

After eight months, this is officially the longest I've spent writing a single work, and the longest thing I've ever written.

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Finally, as always, you can find the outfits from this chapter on the pinterest board and can find me on tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!