Hunger Pangs

by Artemis_Day

Summary

Having a soulmate isn't as easy as it sounds, just ask Bucky Barnes. He may love Jane with all his heart, but that doesn't mean she's can't be an absolute pain in the ass. Luckily, he's been dealing with tiny reckless people for a lot longer than this.

Notes

Okay, here's something I've never done before: a continuation of someone else's fic, because this is a ship that needs more attention. I'm doing it as a platonic friendship/brother-sister thing in the Ms. Foster series, and now I'm giving it a shot as a romantic pairing here.

This story is a continuation of one of Ozhawk's soulmate shorts. I recommend you read that before you read this, as this story contains several references to the events of that fic. Also, you should totally read Ozhawk's soulmate shorts. They are hilarious and contain about a hundred crack ships you've probably never even thought of.

Also, this is probably going to be continued at some point in the future, but since it won't be anytime soon, I'm marking it as complete for now. Keep your eyes open for the possibility of more, though.

Hope you enjoy!
Inspired by The Crackship Armada Sails Again, AKA Soulmate Shorts Part 2 by ozhawk
There was a new routine around Avengers Tower, though most would find it hard to differentiate from the old one.

At the start of each new day, the tower's many residents and frequent visitors got out of bed or clocked in at the office, at or around the same time as they had the week before. Tony Stark still awoke in bed with Pepper Potts sprawled out over his chest and then proceeded to wake her up by getting out of bed without moving her. Steve Rogers still spent his mornings running ten laps around Central Park before heading to the diner for breakfast and a visit with his waitress friend. Clint Barton and Natasha Romanov still made intimate conversation over training sessions and mission briefings, and every afternoon, they called their third at home with the kids, letting her know how much they missed her and looked forward to having her in their arms again.

On the surface, it was business as usual for the Avengers, their friends, and the various personnel. The one big difference was something only a few bothered to stop and notice, but almost everyone had heard about in passing at least once.

For the past week, ever since one James Buchanan 'Bucky' Barnes was driven by his innate protective instincts to make sure a woman he'd never met before was taking care of herself, one could expect to hear them over the general noise of talking and training and science at least four or five times a day.

It started like this.

The door to Jane Foster's private lab would open. The motion itself was silent unless you were walking by to catch the distinctive whirring of the gate mechanism. Sometimes, heavy footsteps would accompany it, but again, one would be hard pressed to hear it over the swirl of activity around the tower.

What really got people's attention was the screaming.

"This is ridiculous, James! You can't just drag me away from my work every time you get a little peckish!"

"The hell I can't! I'm starving, and you know damn well this is just as much about you as it is about me."

"I already ate today!"

"You ate seven hours ago, and it was a peanut butter sandwich. You've barely gained back any of the weight you lost, and if you really think I'm going to let you go on week long science benders living off nothing but coffee fumes, you've got another thing coming."

"God, why are you always acting like this?"

"Acting like what?"

"Like you're my dad or something."

"I'm your soulmate, Jane. It's my job to protect you. Now, shut the hell up. We are going to get lunch and that's final."
"How are you even this hungry in the first place? You just ate a jumbo bucket of chicken wings an hour ago."

"What part of 'superhuman metabolism' do you not understand?"

On and on it would go as the voices made their way down the hall, into the elevator, through the lobby of the common floor and into the dining area. Whoever happened to be sitting down for a meal at the time was treated to the sight of the Winter Soldier carrying Dr. Jane Foster, either in his arms or over his shoulder depending on how difficult she was that day. He would march to the table at the far left corner next to the big window with the view of the Manhattan bay. This was their unofficially designated table. It provided ample privacy, whether they ate alone or Steve joined them. He was already there when they arrived with three plates of food in front of him.

"Trouble in paradise?" Steve asked, laughing when Bucky flipped him off and going back to his steak.

Releasing the squirming Jane, Bucky flopped into the seat next to hers. She sat with a huff and snatched up a menu, hiding her face behind it and mumbling to herself.

"Calling me an ass isn't going to change the fact that you need to eat, doll."

She dropped the menu, gaping at him with reddening cheeks. Bucky smirked.

"Enhanced senses," he said, motioning at his ears. "Another thing you keep forgetting."

"Yeah, just my luck I ended up with a super soldier for a soulmate."

"You seemed to like it just fine last night. And the night before that. And the night before that. And the day before that. And the-"

"Okay, fine, you've made your point."

"I love you, too."

He took her by the chin and pulled her into a kiss that, while chaste, had Steve coughing and looking away at a flock of pigeons that had taken up residence on the ledge. Though Jane was stiff at first, it wasn't long before she responded, kissing him back with fervor he had come to expect from his best girl. Most would be surprised to find what a vixen Jane Foster could be in the bedroom. At times, he would throw her on the bed (or other readily available surface), hold down her arms, and own her completely. Other times, she would come at him with fire blazing in those soft brown eyes. She'd walk him into the wall and she'd launch herself into his arms, her feet dangling a foot off the ground as she stuck her tongue down his throat. Bucky never knew just want to expect with Jane.

That didn't mean she couldn't be infuriating as hell when she wanted to be.

"You know, I was right in the middle of what could have been a major breakthrough," she said, looking passively down at her nails. "You may have potentially prevented mankind from taking its next big step towards expanding our knowledge of the greater universe all because you wanted a pizza."

"Actually, I think I'll go with the cheeseburger today," Bucky said, glancing over his own menu. "And quit whining already. You know what Bruce said. You need to get at least twenty five hundred calories a day to get your weight back up. Or do you want to start fainting all over the place again?"
"Well, if you promise to carry me," Jane said with a cheeky grin.

That was the kind of look that made Bucky want to drag her back to her apartment (more or less their apartment now that he spent most of his time there) and have his wicked way with her, but today, his better judgement and his stomach overruled his sex drive.

The waiter was coming their way, glancing around with hesitation like he was hoping someone else would come and do this for him. Bucky frowned. He'd been free from HYDRA for months now, and had helped save the world at least five times since, but people still got nervous around him. Not that he could really blame them.

"Oh, forget it. I'll just write it out here."

He felt the tablecloth shift and looked to see Jane whip a pen out of her pocket and start scribbling numbers into the cloth. Her speed was dizzying, and Bucky had to turn away before his head started to hurt. He'd barely made it through grade school math with a straight C average, and here his soulmate could fill an entire white board with equations in ten minutes flat. Her handwriting was tiny, too.

"Hello, good afternoon," the waiter said, nodding to the three of them in sequence. "If you already know what you want… er, I'm sorry, Dr. Foster, you can't write on the tablecloths."

Bucky eyed the man, adopting a cold look born from his time under HYDRA's thumb. Jane for her part was completely in the zone and unaware of the man trying to reprimand her, who now trembled in fear before her soulmate.

"But uh… we can always get another one. It's no trouble at all."

Bucky gave a dark smile and then politely requested all of Jane's favorite foods.

Exactly ten days after Jane and Bucky found each other, the door to Jane's apartment quite suddenly sprung open while she was lounging on the couch with a book.

"JAAAAANE!"

Darcy Lewis tackled her, practically knocking them both to the floor as she hugged the life out of her old boss. Gasping for air, Jane's hands found the mass of Darcy's brown curls, and she patted her head awkwardly.

"It's good to see you, too, Darcy," she said. "I've missed you."

"Can't be missing me much these days," Darcy said. "Lucky bitch, I heard you found your soulmate! That's not fair. I still don't have a damn clue where mine is."

"Oh no?" Jane asked, genuinely curious. She recalled Bucky telling her about Steve's not-so-secret crush on her former intern. Did this mean they weren't a match after all? They must have spoken to each other by now.

"Hey, don't worry about me and my problems," Darcy said. "We're here to celebrate you and your good fortune. You're finally getting laid!"

She raised her hand for a high five that Jane didn't meet.

"Why do you say that like I was a virgin before?"
Darcy blinked. "You mean you weren't?"

Rolling her eyes, Jane slid off the couch, forcing Darcy to let go and sit upright. Jane went for the fridge, grabbing a bottle of lemonade for herself and a Pepsi for Darcy.

"You remembered!" Darcy said, taking the can. "Here I thought after all this time apart, you would have forgotten to stock up for me."

"Technically, it's for James," Jane said. "He likes Pepsi, too."

"James, huh?" Darcy said thoughtfully. "That wouldn't be Stark's friend, James, would it?"

"You mean Colonel Rhodes? No, it's not him."

"Yeah, didn't think so. He doesn't seem like your type." Darcy jumped back into the couch with her head resting on a throw pillow. She always knew how to make herself comfortable wherever she went. "He is kind of hot, though. Know if he's single?"

"Aren't you the one working with Stark now? You should know better than I do."

Darcy shrugged. Finishing her soda, she crushed the can and threw it across the room where it bounced off the edge of the garbage can and flew under an easy chair. She clicked her tongue.

"Damn, usually I can make that shot. Well, anyway, you still need to spill all the dirty details to me."

"About what?"

"About everything! Who is he? What's he like? Is he hot? Is he another superhero? Is he a good fu-"

"How about one question at a time?" Jane shouted over her, though on the inside, she was cracking up. This was one of the many things she had missed about Darcy: that brutally honest edge to every conversation they had. No matter how aggressive she could be, she always made Jane feel like she could tell her anything, and Jane would never have to fear a phony response or sugarcoating. "Let's start at the beginning: James is-"

The bedroom door opened. In the commotion of Darcy's unexpected arrival, Jane must have missed the sound of the water turning off. Now Bucky walked briskly into the living room, whistling a tune as he made for the fridge. He was still a little wet from his shower. His long hair glistened and stuck to his bare back and shoulders. Drops of water slid down the defined lines of his chest and stomach. They pooled at the top of the bath towel, his only source of modesty. It was wrapped snugly around his hips, as low as possible while still leaving room for imagination.

Darcy's jaw hit the floor.

As Bucky rummaged through the fridge, bending so low that the towel began to slip, his whistle turned to a discontented hum.

"Hey, babe, didn't I have a drink getting cold in here or…"

He turned his head and saw Darcy first. She had yet to roll up her tongue or put her eyes back into her head. Whether it was how openly she stared at him or just her being there at all, Bucky faltered under her gaze. His metal hand went to the towel to keep it up while the flesh one rubbed the back of his neck.
"Oh… sorry. Didn't know we had company."

"She just came on her own," Jane said, feeling a little light headed herself as her soulmate moved around the living space, wet and tanned and nearly naked. She'd seen all of him already more times than she could count, but for as long as she lived, Jane didn't think she'd ever get over how glorious he was. It made her want to speak to God herself, to ask him how she ever got so lucky.

"I'll go get some pants on," Bucky said, walking backwards into the bedroom and shutting the door.

Jane found herself hoping he meant that literally, and would come back out with only his pants on.

"Jane," Darcy dragged her name out. "Was that your soulmate?"

"Well, if you can think of another reason why he'd be showering in my apartment."

Darcy got up off the couch and stood over her, looking more serious than Jane had ever seen her before.

"Okay, Jane, you know I'm your friend and I will always love you," she said, taking Jane's hand and patting it, "but right now, I totally 'effin hate you."

"I mean, my god, Jane, how did you ever manage to bag someone like that? He's the freaking Winter Soldier!"

"Yes, Darcy, I know," Jane said. She picked at what remained of her small salad, having eaten most of it fast before her mind started to wander. Not that hanging out with Darcy allowed for much by way of daydreaming.

"Christ, it's unreal. It's just unreal. You know, I read about him a long time ago on some wonky conspiracy website and I thought the whole thing was a bunch of BS. Who would have thought he'd turn out to be a real flesh and blood human and your soulmate?"

'Mostly flesh and blood,' Jane thought to herself. Heat pooled between her crossed legs as memories from last night returned to her, of all that he knew how to do with those cold metal fingers.

"Not only that, he's got the body of a freakin' Greek god and a face to match, and judging from the way you've been blushing ever since we started talking about this, he must be damn good in bed, too."

"Knock it off, Darcy."

"Hey, I'm not just making a joke here," Darcy said, stabbing a piece of lettuce with her fork. "I'm seriously wicked jealous. You've got your soulmate, and much as I tease you about your lack of experience, you've probably had more sex in the past week alone than I have in over a year."

"You mean you didn't sleep with Ian?" The question was strange on Jane's tongue. She'd never been one to poke her nose into other people's personal lives. "I could've sworn I heard you guys one night before we moved."

"That was just a porno I put on to try and get him in the mood," Darcy said. "Then he fell asleep halfway through it. That's why we broke up. He was sweet, but the poor guy was just too much of a virgin in the end."
Jane nodded. She remembered Darcy dumping Ian just a few days after that incident. All this time, she'd assumed Darcy just hadn't enjoyed their time together and wanted to resume the search for that one person the universe meant for her.

"So you really have no idea who your soulmate might be?"

"You try having a soulmark like this-" she raised the hem of her shirt up to her bra to let Jane read the two short words emblazoned in shorthand on her rib, "-and then tell me how easy it is to find the right guy. At least you had something specific to go on."

"He called me an idiot…"

"Yeah, and he was right. I swear, Jane, if I had known you'd start an impromptu hunger strike in the name of science the second I got transferred, I never would have taken the gig. I can't believe you were really doing that. You're lucky Tall, Dark, and Deadly has a protective streak a mile long when it comes to short, skinny people."

"Weren't we supposed to be talking about you?"

"I don't know, were we?"

"I just think you shouldn't give up hope." Jane eyed the side of Darcy's stomach that she had since re-covered with her shirt. "There are some clues to his identity in those words."

"Yeah, like what?"

"Well… he might be really old-fashioned if he's going to address you like that."

Darcy snorted. "Yeah, maybe it'll wind up being Steve Rogers or something."

Jane stopped short of sipping her soda and trying to find a discreet way to inject Steve into the conversation. Trust Darcy to be the efficient one and do it all on her own.

"Have you spoken to him yet?"

"Never even met him," Darcy said with a wave of her hand. "He's always off on missions whenever I have free time. Not like it would matter anyway. He's Captain America, for God's sake. You're the one who attracts the sexy super type, not me. Just look at Bucky and Thor."

"I never dated Thor, we're just friends."

"Oh please, don't look me in the eye and say you never noticed how Thor used to follow you around like a lost puppy dog. Sure, he never made a move, but I guarantee that if you said the word, he would have made you his queen in two seconds."

Much as Jane wanted to deny it and say that no, she'd never noticed such a thing from her good friend, the God of Thunder… he had looked awfully disappointed that time he kissed her hand and it didn't set her world on fire. She could've told him right away that it wouldn't work. She was born with her soulmark, and never once doubted that the man who spoke those words to her (rude as they were) would be her one and only. Now that she had him, she couldn't imagine sharing her bed, or indeed her life, with any other man. She had never known how fulfilling it could be to find one's soulmate. Now she looked forward to the day when people could address her as 'Mrs. Barnes'.

Compared to that, being Queen of Asgard just seemed paltry.
"It doesn't matter if Thor had a crush on me or not," Jane said. "I'm with James now, and I'm happy. I think you could be happy, too. You just can't give up hope."

Darcy shrugged. "At this point, I figure it'll come when it comes, if it comes at all. If not, I can always find a nice blank to settle down with or just become a crazy cat lady. My aunt Mildred was one of those, and she actually made it look pretty awesome."

Jane cracked a grin. Much as she was loathed to admit it (especially during what should have been a serious conversation), Darcy never failed to brighten the mood. And she was even funnier now that she wasn't in control of Jane's filing anymore.

"I still say your soulmark isn't as bad as you think it is." Jane grabbed the small pastry she'd bought for desert. According to the calorie counter Bruce gave her (she'd remembered to consult it for once), it would be just enough calorie intake until dinnertime. "I once knew a girl whose soulmark was 'Hi.'"

Darcy furrowed her brow. "Wait, you mean the word 'hi'?"

"Yes, the word 'hi.'"

"As in, 'Hi, nice to meet you,' or 'Hi, I'm your soulmate."

"That's right. Just 'Hi.' Nothing else."

A beat. Darcy's eyes widened.

"Oh my God, that must've been awful!"

"You don't know the half of it," Jane said. "It got to the point where any time someone said 'hi' to her, didn't matter who it was, she'd say the most bizarre thing that came to mind and hope for the best. She even became fluent in German just so she could spout off German phrases at people."

Darcy had just about doubled over laughing, a pretty extreme reaction in Jane's opinion. Was the story really that funny?

"So, did she ever find her man of few words?" Darcy asked once she'd calmed down.

"Last I heard, she was still looking, and I think she was starting on some basic Italian lessons, too."

Shaking her head, Darcy reached for the refilled soda their highly efficient waiter placed in front of her.

"Well, Jane, if your goal was to cheer me up, you certainly succeeded." She sat up straighter, leaning into Jane's space with prying eyes. "Now enough about me. I want to hear all about you and the Sexy Soldier. Don't leave out a single thing."

As Jane was busy trying not to let Darcy see her rolling her eyes, she almost missed the vibrating in her pocket. Pulling out her phone, she smiled at the picture of herself and Bucky on the call ID, the one Steve had taken three nights ago, when Bucky tricked her into turning her head so he could steal a kiss.

"Sorry, Darcy, I don't kiss and tell," Jane said, winking at her former intern. "And I have to take this."

She got up and walked out of the café, Darcy's angry voice following in her wake.
Bucky dodged Steve's fist and swept at him with a low kick, only to miss his mark and have to do a full backflip to avoid Steve landing on top of him. He threw a punch that knocked Steve's face in, but barely slowed him down. In return, he took a hit to the stomach, stumbled once, and then rushed back into the fray, undaunted.

"Is that the best you've got?" He punctuated the question with a feint, tricking Steve into blocking a right hook that never came and getting him with a left to his unguarded side.

Steve was knocked off his feet, the metal fist leaving a dirty imprint in the center of his shirt. He wheezed for all of a second before his accelerated healing kicked in and he was back on his feet, no worse for the wear.

"I'm just getting started," he said, "but you do know this is just training, right?"

Bucky shrugged and eyed the stands, currently unoccupied save for one person surrounded by notebooks and a laptop. Every now and then, she would stop and write something down or check for some new update on whatever data she was calculating that day, but for the most part, she watched the friendly battle and cheered her soulmate on. Hearing her call his name drove him harder.

"Sorry, Stevie, can't pull punches today," he said. "I gotta look good for my girl, you know."

"Oh, all right," said Steve, re-taking his stance. "I'll try not to embarrass you too much."

The battle resumed with Steve aiming a kick at Bucky's neck and Bucky blocking his leg and using the momentum to hurl Steve into the far wall. Steve landed on his feet and caught Bucky's fist, holding on tight while he delivered a blow to Bucky's jaw. Bucky ripped his arm away and struck again at Steve's stomach. He spun around to stand behind his friend and get him in a chokehold.

"Give it up, punk," he said through grit teeth. "No shame in admitting defeat… by the way, Jane, did you eat the waffles I left for you this morning?"

Jane, who had stopped to type something and consult some of her notes, started. Bucky had gone from fully absorbed in the fight to addressing her like it was nothing.

"Oh…" she said, glancing around guiltily, "yeah, I ate them."

Bucky frowned. "You hesitated."

"No, I didn't."

"Jane, did you eat your breakfast, yes or no?"

"Yes, James, come on! I ate… almost all of it."

"How much is almost?"

"Shouldn't you be concentrating on Steve right now?"

"Don't change the subject, just answer the question."

"No, seriously, he's about to-"
Bucky didn't hear the rest. Steve's elbow, worked free from Bucky's metal arm while he was distracted, struck his nose with all the force in the super soldier's body. Bucky heard a crack and felt an explosion of pain before he blacked out. He awoke on his back, Jane and Steve kneeling over him. Concern mingled with humor as they helped him sit up. He saw the blood gushing from his nostrils, thankful that he'd worn a black shirt today. Though the pain had subsided, he still pressed the back of his hand to his nose to block the blood as he levied a glare at Steve. His oldest friend shrugged.

"Sorry, Buck, can't pull punches."

Bucky shook his head. "You're a damn punk."

"You're a jerk."

"You're a mess," said Jane as she matted Bucky's hair down and pressed a tissue to his nose. "Come on, I'd better take you to my room and clean you up."

Bucky brightened considerably as Jane led him out of the training room.

"I like the sound of that," he said in a low, husky voice. "I could use a good shower."

"We'll see," said Jane, though the shine in her eyes told him that was a distinct possibility. "Let's take care of that nose first. See you later, Steve."

"I'll kick your ass for real next time, punk."

Steve chuckled and grabbed a fresh towel out from the bin. "Yeah, you wish."

Their first real date took place two weeks after they met. It would have been sooner, except Jane wanted to review some new data over the weekend, and then Bucky had to assist on an important mission in Russia that took five days to complete and left him and Steve exhausted by the time they caught the quinjet home.

The latter incident had at least come with a few perks. The day he came home, Jane happily took time out of her busy science-ing schedule to lay in bed with him and massage the aches out of his shoulders. Her fingers were like magic, kneading away all the kinks and the tension. She had him laid out on his stomach, shirtless, completely under her spell.

"Damn, Jane, where did you learn this?" he had asked, groaning as she worked her way down to his sore back muscles.

"I took some nursing classes in college," she answered. "Thought it would make for a good back-up. My professor also worked as a massage therapist, and on the last day of the term, she taught us some stuff. Are you feeling better?"

He hummed, remaining immobile for a time until she lifted her hands off of him, and then he struck. Within seconds, she had gone from kneeling over him to on her back beneath him. Her squeal of delight, he silenced with a kiss, and for the rest of the day, he showed her just how better he was and how much he appreciated her efforts.

But a good relationship, even between two people fated to love each other, couldn't last on sex alone—even if it was amazing sex. They needed to find more common ground than just orgasms and one forcing the other to maintain a healthy diet.
That was how they ended up in Central Park, strolling through the zoo where the seals performed before a crowd of spectators. Flashes went off in all directions, leading Bucky to grab Jane's arm and quickly change directions to head towards the refreshment booth. Logically, there was nothing for him to be afraid of. He had worn a hoodie today, one a size too large and with a hood wide enough to hide his long hair. A pair of gloves kept anyone from suspecting that one of his arms might not be as fleshy as it should be. On top of all that, Jane was probably the most average looking person she had ever met in her life. Bucky could (and would) tell her that she was the prettiest girl around, but Jane had gotten lost in enough crowds over the years to know better. So long as nothing serious happened—no Nazis or terrorists or otherworldly monsters—they were invisible.

"Don't be so on edge, we're supposed to be having fun," she said. They had found an empty park bench where they could sit and enjoy their newly purchased pretzels.

"I am having fun," he said.

His eyes moved from one way to the next, and Jane knew that look. He was scouting for potential threats. He did the same thing at the party Stark threw for Pepper's birthday last week and scared off pretty much everyone who dared to walk within two feet of Jane. He really needed to deal with that paranoia somehow. Even so, when Jane took his hand in hers, his calloused skin gave her warmth and a sense that nothing could ever harm her. Bucky was good at that, making her feel like the most important person in the world.

"I don't think there are any bad guys here," she said.

"You can't let your guard down just because you think there isn't a threat."

"Well, you would know better than I do."

She let him wrap an arm around her waist and pull her into his lap. There were a couple of punkish looking guys standing around nearby with skateboards and rollerblades. None of them had looked their way yet, but experience told Jane that Bucky would not take kindly to some other guy watching her in anything less than a perfectly respectful way. Best to let them know she was taken before they got any ideas, he would say.

Normally, this kind of macho territorial behavior would get on Jane's last nerve. If Donald Blake had ever tried it, she would have teared him a new one and then dumped him right then and there. With Bucky, however, there was something nice about knowing that he cared so much for her. Even if it was silly and often unnecessary—just the fact that her soulmate was the Winter Soldier meant that all of the guys who used to leer at her in the street now stayed very far away—that overprotective streak of his somehow avoided the irritation anyone else would have inspired in Jane, and instead became…actually kind of hot.

That she got to rest her head on his very impressive chest and her hands on one of his equally impressive thighs also helped.

"You haven't finished your pretzel," Bucky rumbled after a few minutes of silence, during which those skater guys moved on without sparing them a glance.

Jane looked down at her pretzel, now cold with only two or three pieces at the ends nibbled off.

"I'm not that hungry," she said.

"Did you eat all your breakfast this morning? What about your lunch?"
"There you go doing the parent thing again," Jane giggled.

He scowled at her—he was still so damn scowl-y all the time.

"You know this isn't a joke," he said, and if possible, his arm around her got even tighter. "I was scared enough to find you unconscious before I knew you were mine. I hope you don't plan to put me through that again, Jane."

"Don't be silly, of course I ate breakfast," Jane said, and after a moment of deliberation, decided not to mention that said breakfast had been a piece of buttered toast and three sips of milk. Or that she might have maybe skipped lunch to run some new simulations she'd created. "I've always been able to work on small amounts of food."

"Just because you can do something like that doesn't mean you should."

He took the pretzel from her and broke off a piece. Crumbs fell from the edge onto Jane's pants, but before she could think of brushing them off, Bucky held the small piece of dough up to her mouth.

"Come on," he said, as if speaking to a small child. "Open up."

Jane looked at the pretzel, and then she looked at him. "Are you serious?"

"You're not giving me much of a choice here, doll."

He pushed the pretzel gently against her lips. Jane kept them closed, determined not to give in. He tried every which way he could to get her mouth open, and she thought maybe he'd give up and back down once he realized that she wasn't budging.

"Jane, if you don't eat this, I'm going to have to resort to drastic measures."

She knew exactly what he meant, and she wasn't falling for it. Not this time. Just because that particular tactic of his worked every other time he wanted something didn't mean it was going to work now, and it wouldn't. Nope, that wasn't happening. Bucky had overused it, and now Jane was immune to it. She let him turn her head back around just to prove it to him. There was no way in the seven layers of hell that she was falling for…

His clear blue eyes all wide and wobbling, piercing her soul like one of the knives he carried into battle. Jane's heart sped up, worse when he took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. He came in real close with those eyes, those goddamn puppy eyes...

"Jane," he said softly. "Do it for me?"

A short time later, Jane chewed on the last bit of the pretzel, refusing to see him again as he pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck.

"I knew you'd see things my way, baby."

"I should make you sleep back at your place tonight."

"You sure could. Now, how about we go and see those seals?"

They left the park shortly after getting drenched by a horde of barking seals that seemed to have it out for Bucky (or so he came to believe after the third time they got splashed in a row). The only good thing about getting soaked to the bone was Jane's translucent white t-shirt clinging to her body, showing off curves that were gradually filling out as she continued her new diet. Bucky
licked his lips. If they hadn't been in public and surrounded by small children and their parents, he didn't think he'd be able to control himself. That she stared at his body with the same kind of hunger just made it worse.

"You want to cut this short and head back?" he asked. He had his arm back around her. He had found that his favorite place for her to be was pressed up against him.

"Mmmm… maybe," she said with a coy look. "I could use some coffee first. Can we make a quick stop on the way?"

"As my lady commands."

She blushed. His 'ultra-chivalrous' side never failed to get to her.

Walking along the busy streets, blending in with tourists and business people and vagabonds stranger than they could ever hope to be, they found themselves lost in conversation about Bucky's time in the army. There were certain stories—the kind that kept him awake at night trembling—that he had yet to tell her about. He would when the time was right. He already trusted her enough to hold her hold his metal hand when they walked and trace the lines of his scars with her lips when they were alone. For now, he stuck to embarrassing himself with all the old tales that Steve would tell about him with great relish. Amazing it was, all that Bucky would do to get a laugh out of her.

"So you guys really sneaked into a bar run by HYDRA dressed as showgirls?"

Bucky sucked on his cheek. He was beginning to regret getting into that particular story. He should've started with the one about Dugan nearly driving a tank off a cliff because he found a spider crawling between the gears.

"Technically, I was the only one in the showgirl costume," he admitted, red in the face. "The guys said I had the cutest face out of everyone."

"Well, you do have a very cute face," Jane said.

"Excuse me?" Bucky was quite suddenly in front of her, stopping her in the middle of a busy Manhattan street. Some people who hadn't expected it had to swerve to avoid a collision, and shot glares over their shoulders that neither of the pair cared to acknowledge. "I am not 'cute', thank you very much. I am dead sexy."

Smiling, Jane walked into the circle of his arms and pressed her chin into his chest.

"Personally, I think one can easily be both cute and sexy."

"Then I'll leave that to you. Now let's move, because there's a guy here who I think wants to start a fight."

Said guy was clearly a business man of some kind. He had been talking on his cell phone, oblivious to the world, when he slammed right into Bucky's prosthesis and dropped his briefcase. Its contents spilled onto the street, at the mercy of an uncaring crowd eager to get where they needed to go. By the time he had his important papers together, half of them had shoe marks on them, and the look he was giving Bucky would probably be very scary to someone who wasn't a legendary assassin.

Ignoring the man's shouts and curses, Bucky led Jane back into the throngs of people, where they crossed at the intersection and turned on to a familiar block. The massive A of Avengers Tower
was in sight, the double doors leading to the main entrance barely a hundred feet away.

They didn't even need to go in to catch a familiar face. All they had to do was go to the local café for Jane's coffee and happen to walk past the outdoor seating where a golden haired man was reading the afternoon paper.

"You've gotta be bored here all by yourself, Stevie," Bucky said, leaning one hand on the table as the waitress arrived to refill Steve's cup. She smiled at Bucky and Jane before departing, and Bucky gestured after her as she moved on. "Maybe you could invite her to sit down sometime."

"Who, Beth?" Steve said with snort. "Nah, she's just a friend. And I like having time to myself. Helps me to think."

"Don't mind him, Steve, he's caught the love bug real bad and he thinks he's being helpful," said Jane.

"Yeah, don't I know it?"

"Still standing here, thanks," Bucky said loudly, and to his irritation, all he got was another laugh from Steve and a playful swat from Jane.

"By the way, why are you guys all wet?"

Bucky furrowed his brow, only to remember the reason him and Jane were turning in early. Though the high winds had mostly dried their skin and their hair, their clothes remained well and truly soaked. Another gust of wind hit, this one big and cold, so much so that even Bucky could feel it. He reached for Jane without a conscious thought, wrapping his larger body around her to protect her from freezing. He suspected that she would be out of commission for a few days with a cold if they didn't get back soon (assuming he could actually keep her in bed for longer than ten minutes).

'Oh well, at least I'd have a chance to nurse her back to health,' he thought.

"The seals at the zoo got a little too excited. James and I figured we'd head back and get into some clean clothes before we do anything else," Jane explained.

"Or we may just take these clothes off and stay in."

Jane nearly choke on her own spit. Then she swatted Bucky again a lot harder. Not that he could feel it.

"You're terrible, you know that?"

"We'll see how you feel tonight."

"Maybe we will and maybe we won't," she teased right back. She never had a problem matching him tit for tat. "For now, I'm getting my coffee."

"And a scone," Bucky called after her.

"Those things are expensive."

"We'll share one. Just get it."

As she went into the café, Bucky took a moment to enjoy the view of her backside and then sat at Steve's table.
"I'm telling you, buddy, things have been so great since Jane and I got together. I never knew I could feel this way about another person before, but now..." he shook his head, unable to come up with the right words to describe all the things Jane made him feel. It was a good thing he'd never in his life wanted to be a writer. He would have been terrible at it.

"Is that why you're still carrying her to dinner over your shoulder?" Steve quipped.

"I didn't say it was perfect," Bucky said, "but we're working through it. Yesterday, I even got her to eat all of her breakfast and her dinner."

"Really?"

"And I only had to use one of the tricks Darcy showed me."

The trick in question was the one where he had to pretend that the toaster oven or the microwave was broken and that Jane had better come and take a look at it. It was a fact that Jane hated to be bothered when she was working, but equally true was that nobody was allowed to try and fix her appliances but her. The stuff she hadn't built herself from scratch, she had put at least a few hours into the maintenance of. She would drop everything, albeit reluctantly, and go up to her apartment to assess the damage.

Invariably, the thing would be in perfect working order. He just pressed the wrong button or something like that. While she was here, they'd better test it out just to be sure. So in they would put some frozen mini-pizzas or whatever else was lying around and then, of course, Jane would have to take a bite to make sure they were cooked all the way through; maybe even two bites. If they were really good, she should just eat the whole thing. What the hell, right?

"She's a damn genius, that girl," Bucky said, not failing to note how Steve looked ready to return to his paper at the mention of Darcy. Punk didn't seem to realize that Bucky had already seen the pink in his cheeks. "You'd know it if you talked to her."

"I'm sure I'll get the chance," Steve said non-committedly. "I almost did that one time."

"Yeah, and you chickened out."

Bucky remembered quite well that day one month ago, when a presidential convention took a turn for the crazy as the taser wielding political science student got into a heated debate with two potential candidates over the importance of the Avengers and other costumed superheroes to maintaining the peace, culminating in Darcy threatening to get her taser back from the security office so she could 'zap their asses straight back to Washington.' Steve and Bucky had been there to witness the whole thing, off to the side and out of sight as someone called for security to escort Ms. Lewis out of the building. She had strolled out the door with a swagger while Steve stared after her like a little boy watching his first crush.

Thirty something days later, and Steve was no closer to finding out if the sassy lady would be the one to speak the words stamped on his left pectoral, or if they were in any way compatible at all.

"Honestly? I don't know if now is the right time for me to be thinking about a relationship," Steve said, "and if it does turn out that she's my soulmate, I know I'm not going to be able to keep her away."

"No, that would be difficult considering you live in the same building," Bucky said, nodding in agreement. "Not to mention she's stubborn as a mule. She'd probably start camping out in front of your door until you let her in or she figures out a way to break the lock."
Steve gave him a look. It was the kind he used to let everyone know it was time to stop messing around and be serious, a look reserved primarily for mission briefings when Stark was too busy making jokes to pay attention. Bucky found that it wasn't quite so effective on an average day.

"You do realize there's no guarantee that she is your soulmate, or that if she isn't, the real one could come along any time. It could be that woman right there walking her dog, or that one dumping a drink on her boyfriend's head, or even that little old lady there doing the crossword puzzle. Though for your sake, I hope it's not that last one."

Steve glanced at the tiny, shriveled up granny in a powder blue cardigan who held a pencil between bony fingers.

"She's probably younger than both of us," he said.

"Yeah, don't remind me. My point is that if you're so determined not to get attached, then you have to pretty much never speak to a single woman again, just to be sure."

"You know not everyone has a soulmark."

"Still risky."

Leaning back, Bucky propped his feet up on the last, unused chair and watched Jane through the window. She appeared to be staring up at the menu trying to make her choice, and he hoped she wouldn't forget about that scone.

"What makes you so against finding your soulmate anyway?" he asked.

"I'm not against it," Steve said, not looking up from the Lifestyle section. "I just don't think now is the time."

"Is it about Peggy?"

At the mention of her name, Steve froze, and Bucky was momentarily sorry he'd brought it up. He had gone with Steve only once to visit her, during a time when her head was mostly clear and she was still aware that Steve wasn't dead. He'd been afraid to approach her, wondering if seeing him alive and virtually unchanged would be as shocking for her as it was each time she 'reunited' with Steve. Bucky had considered her a friend in the old days, if not a terribly close one. He still lamented that he never got the chance to stand as Steve's best man and make an embarrassing speech about the punk at their reception.

"Peggy is… no, it's not because of her," Steve said, looking all the way down at his feet. "I know I wanted to be with her once, when we were both blanks. Now… she moved on and lived her life. I'm glad that she was happy. I'm just not sure what made anyone up there think I should suddenly have a soulmate of all things."

"I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to question it," Bucky said, shrugging. "If it happens, it happens. I didn't have a mark back then either, and look at me now."

He placed a hand over his right hip. Jane's tiny, messy scrawl had been printed there for the past thirty years. As far as he knew, he'd been defrosted one day, and had it been there, completely out of the blue. How HYDRA had reacted and what they intended to have him do about it was one of the things he still didn't remember about his time in their clutches. If he had it his way, he never would.

"Look, the truth is, I don't know if I'll ever be able to have a relationship," Steve said. He had
folded the paper and put it off to the side with his coffee mug. He had the serious face on again. "I shouldn't have to tell you how many enemies we have."

"Stark makes it work with his girl," Bucky said. "So do Barton and Romanov. They even have a third who's a civilian. And, of course, there's me and Jane. If we can do it, anyone can."

Steve was running out of excuses, and they both knew it. What Bucky really wanted to know was whatever happened to give the little punk such cold feet around women. While Steve was never exactly a ladies' man (even after they all started throwing themselves at him), he had at least been brave enough to talk to them, and he certainly hadn't been shy about his feelings for Peggy.

"Are you saying you never get scared?" Steve asked. "I don't mean to bring you down or anything, but if it were me, I'd be pretty nervous about what could happen if the wrong person found out about her."

"That's never going to happen," Bucky said, a bit more roughly than he intended. "Come on, Stevie, we live in a nigh-impenetrable tower filled with Avengers and former SHIELD agents. You and I are both capable of taking on entire armies by ourselves. I have an arm that can break through anything. If there's a way Jane could be safer, I'd love to hear it."

"I know all of that," Steve said, "but I can't help thinking that whoever my soulmate turns out to be, they'd be far better off staying away from me and my troubles."

"Well, that's because you've become a major buzzkill since the forties," Bucky said. His remark and the easy way he slid down in his seat masked unwelcome thoughts of waking up one morning to find Jane gone from their bed, missing from the lab, nowhere to be found. His metal hand clenched into a fist. "Trust me, Steve, there's nothing to worry about. Jane may be a bit reckless at times… boy, is she ever… but it doesn't matter, because there's nothing in this world or any other that I can't protect her from."

He checked the window, and she was coming out of the store with a bag in one hand and a tray with two cups in the other. It appeared she'd remembered to get whipped cream on his, or he hoped that she did. He'd forgotten to tell her. There was a man leaving the café right behind her, but it wasn't clear to Bucky that he was actually following her until they were outside and she whirled around.

"Look, I already told you, I have a boyfriend, and he's my soulmate, okay? Please quit bothering me."

"Sorry, hon, I'm just struck by your beauty. Bet if you gave me a chance, I could make you forget all about that so-called soulmate of yours."

"Yeah, I don't think so. He's right over there by the way, so I suggest you leave before you get hurt."

"How about you give me a kiss first? See how you like it."

They were a good twenty feet away surrounded by a noisy crowd and New York traffic, but those enhanced senses of his allowed him to hear the whole thing. Bucky pursed his lips.

"Observe," he said, getting up and walking briskly to the scene.

In the end, that man didn't get a kiss.

What he got was eternal bragging rights for taking a punch from the Winter Soldier and surviving.
In the dim orange light of the line of scented candles, Bucky reached for another strawberry. He had already taken so many from the bowl that was at one point full to bursting. He bit the end of the succulent fruit, letting the sweet juices roll around on his tongue, before placing the top half in Jane's waiting mouth. She chewed slowly and moaned in ecstasy, a sound that went straight to Bucky's groin. As if he wasn't hard enough already.

"So good," Jane said, as his fingers ran across the length of her naked chest and stomach. He knew all the right places to touch her to make her putty in his hands. "James… it's so good."

"There's more where that came from, baby."

He lowered his lips onto hers, his tongue meeting hers as the delicious taste of strawberry mingled between them. He thought he heard her moan his name again and it nearly drove him over the edge. She was the only one who ever called him by his real name, and he loved it. Loved the way it sounded when she screamed it at the height of her pleasure. He was going to hear it again, just as soon as he gave her what she needed.

He reached for another strawberry, fumbling a bit as the bowl appeared to have gone out of range. Furrowing his brow, he stretched further, pulling away from Jane in the process. Where was that thing? He hadn't knocked it over in the excitement, had he?

Bucky turned to look, mumbling an apology to Jane that she wouldn't hear. Nobody would hear it. As soon as he turned his head, the warmth of the candlelight disappeared and bright, unfeeling florescent light took their place.

There were machines everywhere, and men in lab coats standing in a line, watching him. Like the thing he was to them.

Bucky's mouth fell open, a cold fear twisting around his heart. He tried to move his arms, but the flesh one was tied down, and the metal one was offline. His breathing became erratic. There were more people in the room, people he recognized in the deepest, darkest part of his psyche where he tried to never venture.

"Don't worry, Asset," said the sickly warm voice of a man long dead. A man who sat in front of him now, smiling down at him like a puppetmaster. Bucky's body refused to obey him, though on the inside, he screamed and cursed and willed himself to move so he could grab that bastard who used him all those years and choke the life out of him. "Don't worry… we'll take good care of your pretty little soulmate. We've known for a long time what to do with her."

He heard the machines turn on, sounds that haunted him. He tried to scream but the mouth guard was suddenly in place. The cold was growing, seeping into his skin, clouding his thoughts.

"It's good to have you back, Asset."

'This can't be happening. It can't be. It can't…'

"Wipe him."

'NOOOOOOO!'
the faintest hints of sunlight creeping over the horizon. Her bedside clock read six fifteen in the morning. For the longest time, he stared at it. It was twenty after by the time he felt calm enough to look away, but it felt more like a year had past.

'A dream,' he told himself, repeated it like a broken record. 'Just a dream. Nothing but a stupid dream. Stay calm. Everything is fine. They don't have you, and Jane is-

Gone.

Her side of the bed, ruffled with creases in the shape of her body, was empty and cold. Only a trace of her scent lingered. A cursory glance at the closet and the wide open door would have told him that she had gotten up early as she was prone to doing and left to start her work without thinking to wake him.

Would have if Bucky even bothered to look at all, instead of bolting down the hall like all the forces of Hell were on his tail. He cared not that he'd left without shutting her door, or that he was barefoot and shirtless and people were diving into broom closets and corners to avoid him running them down.

He made it to Jane's lab in record time. The doors opened for him automatically (Stark's AI had learn its lesson after the first time), and the first thing he saw was Jane in front of her desk. She looked healthy and whole, if a little disheveled, and she was standing before a whiteboard half covered in some new equation. She was mumbling to herself, words he could have made out were his ears not ringing. At the sound of the door sliding shut, she jumped.

"James!" She sounded happy to see him; her smile was brighter than the sun. "I didn't expect you for at least another hour."

He stared at her, air coming to him in quick bursts. She was still talking, not really seeing him.

"I'm sorry for not waking you, but I've been stuck on something for a while now, and when I woke up, the answer just came to me right out of the blue, and I had to get down here fast to write it all down, so if you want to… James, are you all right?"

She had walked around the table to him, stopping halfway as she finally noticed his sweaty, half-dressed, distressed state of being. Her eyes swept over his form, lacking the eager lust that usually came with it. Instead there was concern, and maybe a little fear. It made his heart ache in his chest.

Without thinking, he closed the distance between them, gathering her in his arms as she tried and failed to question him, to find out what was going on. He hoped that the heat of his body would counteract the chill of his arm, but he still felt a shiver run through her. He didn't care. He couldn't let her go. Not now.

He held her as tightly as he could without hurting her. He always had to be careful with her. He was so much stronger than an average man, and even with her slow but sure weight gain, she was a damn tiny woman. She looked like she could be placed over someone's knee and snapped in half like a twig. Hadn't he said something like that to Steve on the very first day?

"Looks like a breath of wind could blow her away?"

Yes, it was true. It was painfully true. That was why he hadn't let go yet. He was on high alert, searching every nook and cranny of the spacious lab, poised to kill anyone who might be lurking around. It was a ridiculous thought that a HYDRA mook could even get into the tower without being seen, but rationality was not something he was capable of at the moment. Right now,
everything was dangerous. Any one of the tools and instruments littering her work table could have been rigged with some kind of explosive device. There could be a HYDRA mole making note of where they were this time of day, so that it would be all the easier for them when they decided to take her.

"What's wrong with you?" Jane asked.

Her small fists were balled and she pushed at him, but his grip was iron. He watched with fascination as she tried to get away. From this angle, he could feel every inch of her body against his. She was soft, warm, and more alive than anything he had known in seventy years. His deep seated fears and the stress of the nightmare broke in an instant, and something new came to take their place; something hot and raw and undeniable.

Bucky lifted her into the air, his mouth coming down to crush her lips before she could make a sound. He kissed her hard, fast, and with enough passion that she would know he meant business. Had she been on her feet, he would have pressed himself against her and she would have felt just how badly he needed her. She returned his kiss, her hands flat against his chest, exploring hard muscles and traveling down to his abs. She moaned in his mouth, almost like she had in the dream—No, stop, don't think about that—and he answered with a growl as he walked them to the nearest wall and pushed her up against it.

What followed involved a lot of hair being pulled (mostly his), clothes being shredded (mostly hers), and little gasps and moans that rose over the hum of machinery (both of them equally). Some rational part of his mind thought he should at least take this over to the table, but that was quickly smothered under the force of pure need, telling him there was no time for that.

If Jane minded, she gave no indication. Quite the opposite, in fact. Her entire top half was naked at that point, goosebumps rising from the chill in the air. Bucky lowered his head to her chest, catching one pert nipple between his teeth and sucking. Jane's fingers dug into his skin as she writhed and bit back a scream. She told him once that she liked a little pain with her pleasure, but she'd never known anyone who she trusted enough to give it to her. That he would have that honor went without saying. If one couldn't trust their own soulmate, who could they trust? He felt honored that she gave him so much freedom. Even knowing the horrors he had committed, she still had faith that he would never hurt her.

He had moved on to her other breast when her hands went for the button of his pants. She worked it open and then fumbled for the zipper. Her efforts were hindered by his body blocking her view. She groaned in frustration, and Bucky let go of her just long enough to pull his pants down around his knees. He kicked them off near what remained of Jane's plaid shirt and started working on her pants. Thankfully, she hadn't taken the time to get dressed before coming down here. Her pajama bottoms were quick and easy to remove, as were her panties. One tear of the flimsy fabric and they were gone, and now there was nothing left to keep them apart.

It occurred to him one more time to take this somewhere else. Let them drop to the floor or carry her over to the office chair and continue there. Just as he thought he might listen, as the frenzy that had overtaken him started to clear, her hand found his hair again, running through the soft locks he had never gotten around to cutting. She mewed so sweetly, so full of need that matched, if not overshadowed, his own. As soon as he heard it, he was gone again, his base instincts taking control. They demanded that he not waste time. He was going to take her and he was going to do it now.

His hands wrapped around her buttocks to pull her up against the wall, high enough that his erection was situated between her legs. Sandwiched between the wall and his powerful body, Jane
was completely under his control. He took one of her legs—God, her legs were perfect—and brought it up around his waist, while she obligingly lifted the other one. The action pulled them closer, and he could feel how slick she was already. He wouldn't keep her waiting any longer.

She gasped as she felt him push inside of her. He didn't need to worry about protection. Both of them were clean, and there was this wonderful new invention in the future called birth control. It was a good thing, too, because he didn't think he'd have been able to stop to put a condom on. He could barely keep up a steady pace. Every time he moved, it was fast and hard. On a better day, they would take their time building up the heat between them until they were both ready to go over the edge. He would always make sure she went first, and this would be no different. He was no longer capable of coherent thought as he pounded into her, but he heard her screams increase at least twice.

"Oh God. James- Oh!"

Whenever she said his name like that, it just made him want her more. His pace became even more erratic. Later on, he would be ashamed to admit that this had been more about him than had been about her. Every time he felt her tighten around him, it was a reminder that she was there. She was here with him, and she was his. All his. They didn't have her, and they never would.

"Fuck. Jane!"

However long it lasted, the point came where he could no longer take it. He made her scream for him one more time, and then he bared his teeth and let out a growl as he came. His head fell into the crock of her neck where he bit into her smooth skin, giving her one last shock of pleasure before his legs gave out and the two of them collapsed to the floor in a heap of sweaty, panting bodies.

Bucky held her long after it was over, when he had slipped out of her and had one arm thrown over her cooling body. She clutched at him. He was as always surprised to find how much strength his girl had when she needed it. There would be a lot of red nail marks on his back for the rest of the day.

Minutes passed in silence. Bucky had already caught his breath and shifted positions, sitting up with Jane in his lap. His chin rested on top of her head.

"'m sorry," he said under his breath.

He felt her start to shake, feared for a second that she was crying until he got a look at her face and saw pure exuberance.

"What was that?" she said. "You just gave me the most incredible sex of my life, and you're apologizing for it?"

Bucky blinked. He kept watching her, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It never did. Instead, she ran a hand along his unshaven face and then kissed every spot she had touched. He shuddered. Her soft lips drew heat that pooled at the pit of his stomach. He felt himself stir. That was one benefit of this whole super soldier thing: extremely short refractory periods.

Jane let out a hum, and Bucky realized that he had her in his lap and she could surely feel that.

"Don't be embarrassed," she said, drawing circles over the damp skin of his chest. "It's not the first time we've gone for another round."

"This is different," Bucky mumbled.
He closed his eyes and willed himself to think of the least sexy thing he had ever seen in his life. The best he could come up with while his mind was still rebooting was the time he accidentally walked in on his grandmother in her girdle, but it did the job. Now he just had to get Jane off of him and back into some clothes, and they could talk like adults as they should have been doing all along. He started to shift her weight off his legs-

-and then threw his head back and groaned as Jane made it clear that she had other ideas. She ground her backside into him, the soulmark on the small of her back brushing his for an instant. They hadn't talked about bonding yet, both agreeing that they wanted a more stable situation before thinking that far ahead. Technically, they still lived half a building apart and with their busy work schedules, it was a miracle they got time together like this at all.

If she kept that up, he was liable to forget all of that and just take her like a wild animal.

"Dammit, Jane," he grunted. "I just got it down."

It was with some difficulty that Jane managed to turn herself around to face him. She had some pieces of hair stuck to her forehead and her eyes were wide and inquisitive. They always broke through Bucky's carefully built up defenses without a shred of effort.

"What's wrong, James?" she asked him again. "That was amazing, but I feel like you didn't rush down here just for this."

"Yeah, you're right," Bucky said, heaving a long, deep sigh. "I didn't come here for this at all, it just… happened. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

He sounded like a scared little kid and he knew it, but if there was one thing that terrified him more than the thought of an enemy hurting Jane, it was himself hurting Jane. A fear she didn't seem to share as his question only made her giggle.

"Well, it might be a day or two before I can walk straight," she said, only for her face to fall as she caught sight of his expression. Then she leaned back, wrapping thin arms around his waist as his muscled ones snaked over hers. She rested over his heart, her breath on his skin cool and soothing. "You can tell me anything, you know."

He nodded. Yes, he did know.

"It's the stupidest thing," he said, his face half in her hair. "I was talking to Steve the other day, while you were in the café. He started telling me all about how… scared he would be to find his soulmate, because she could wind up in danger, and I… I guess it got to me more than I wanted to admit."

He paused, waiting to see if she would have anything to say. If she did, she wasn't letting it on.

"Then last night, I had this… this dream and… god, this is so stupid."

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"But it is. It's ridiculous," he said, and now he was the one who was shaking. "I try so hard not to think about what they did to me, and now I have to wonder what would happen if they ever got me back… or found out about you… I never had a soulmark for the longest time, and then one day, I was taken off ice and there it was, clear as day. Like it had always been there. I don't remember what they were going to do about it, but I don't think they were ever able to match up the handwriting."
"And they never will," Jane said with finality. "Even if they did, they'd have a hell of a time getting to me. Between you and Thor and the rest of the Avengers, this is probably the safest place in the world for me."

"I know," he said, kissing the top of her head. "I didn't used to be worried about this, but now that it's in my head, I don't know how to get it out."

If he had to suffer another nightmare like that one, he was going to want to lock Jane up in her apartment and never let anyone in. That wasn't bound to do much more than piss her off, but he couldn't help it. He'd known an hour after they met that he couldn't live without her. That was just how it was for soulmates. It was how his parents had been, how Steve's parents had been, and according to Jane, how her parents had been. From now on, it was how they would be. There was no fighting it even if he wanted to.

"If it makes you feel better," she said softly, "I could rethink your offer to show me how to use a gun."

Bucky's lips quirked up. "Yeah, but then you'd want to return the favor by teaching me algebra or something."

"My field is in physics. That's what I would teach you."

"Jane, please, you're giving me a headache."

"You think it hurts now? Just wait until we get into the really advanced stuff."

He whined and went back to her neck, leaving behind another hickey directly parallel to the first one. Something about the little marks he left on her skin satisfied a primal side to him that he hadn't known he had. Jane sighed happily, pulling her body more fully into his so that she rubbed up against his arousal. What a cheeky little thing, she was. She wasn't going to get much science-ing done today.

"If they ever found out about you," he said, trailing kisses down her stomach to her core, "if they ever hurt you… it would be bad."

"Nothing is going to happen to me," she gasped as he nipped a sensitive spot in her inner thigh. "You don't have to be afraid."

"Thanks for the reassurance," he said, and as he moved up her legs from one to the other, he hid from her sight as his eyes darkened, "but I meant it would be bad for them."

They made it to Jane's room eventually, after a second romp in her office chair and a quick detour to the shower stall in her lab's private bathroom. It was late in the afternoon by the time he was well and truly spent. He'd need a few hours rest to get his strength back, and she'd probably need the whole night.

Indeed, as soon as they finished the final time, Jane's head dropped into his shoulder and she was snoring within seconds. That was fine by him. He didn't often get her in such a deep sleep as this, where he could just hold her and watch the peaceful rise and fall of her chest. He reckoned it would be morning before she woke up again, then maybe he could persuade her into a quickie before she got back to into 'work mode' and forgot that he and everything else not science related existed.

He ran a hand through her hair as she snuggled into him. He stared up at the ceiling, tired, but not quite ready to sleep, wondering not for the first time how he could've gotten so lucky after
everything he had done (no, everything they made him do). He never understood what made soulmates so great back when he was a blank. Sure, his parents were happy. He never had to worry that his mother would throw his father out on his ass because he was making eyes at some girl selling cigarettes on the street. On the other hand, he had to make sure to stay far away from their bedroom when the door was closed. Otherwise, he risked being traumatized again like when he was seven. It seemed to him that soulmates weren't really worth all that trouble. Better to just date a lot of pretty girls and never settle down until he was old and it didn't matter anymore.

Now, he had Jane, and she was reckless, crazy, obsessed with her work, and her survival instincts were so low they made Steve look cautious. At the same time, she was passionate, beautiful, frighteningly intelligent, and the only woman he could ever want. It was overwhelming, how much had changed in such a short amount of time, but Bucky didn't question it.

He loved Jane Foster with all that he had, even when he carried her into the living room through the kitchen and caught a glimpse of the table, where the breakfast he had arranged to be delivered every morning sat untouched and cold.

Again.

This was the third day in a row.

Bucky found himself going back to the very first day, praying to the lord for strength and wondering how he'd ever gotten saddled with a soulmate who, somewhere down the line, apparently forgot how to eat. That early morning inspiration she'd had was probably something along the lines of 'If I sneak out of here while he's still asleep, I can get to my lab without having to deal with pesky things like keeping myself fed so I don't wither away and die.'

Good God, what was he going to do with her?

He had a sinking suspicion that she was finally catching on to all the tricks. She had put off checking the microwave when he came to her about it last night, and earlier, when he'd been about to suggest a trip to the local delicatessen, she had silenced him on the first word with her tongue around his half hard length.

What was he going to do when the only options he had left were carrying her to the common floor on his shoulder or literally holding her down and shoving food down her throat?

...unless there was something else he could do.

It wasn't uncommon, now that he was back to his old self, for Bucky to have sudden, vivid bursts of memory at completely random moments. It wasn't uncommon, but it wasn't typically helpful either—especially if it happened in the middle of a fight, and then that son of a bitch, Crossbones, got a hit on him while he was distracted. Every now and then, however, such instances would afford him a burst of inspiration, and as the scene played out in his mind, like a moving picture on a screen, Bucky knew this was going to be one of those times.

He went back to the year 1931. He was fourteen years old, a man in some ways and a child in so many others even as he convinced himself that he was all man.

He'd been an arrogant child, as he would now freely admit. It used to be that Steve was the only one keeping him grounded. Protecting him from harm and making sure he didn't get beat up after school (again) was how Bucky filled his 'good deed' quota each day, and the stupid kid never seemed to learn his lesson.
The day was like any other since the market crash two years back. He went to school; he made deliveries on his bike for pennies; he dragged Stevie out of another fight if necessary. Business as usual for the most part. The change came when his bike suddenly developed a flat as he was riding along the riverside. Losing control, he pitched over the edge, lucky to avoid the side of the dock as he plunged into freezing cold water. Somewhere in between coming up for air and a helpful sailor pulling him out of the water, one of his old, worn out shoes had fallen off of his foot and sunk down into the depths below. Its partner joined as Bucky, in a fit of rage, pulled the ratty thing off of his foot and threw it as hard as he could. He walked home that day soaking wet in just his socks, grouses on how long it had been since he had a new pair that actually fit him right.

Going home, his mother confronted him first. She appraised her eldest, shook her head at his filthy clothes and shoeless state, then sent him to his room for his father to deal with later.

And when he did, boy did he let Bucky have it.

That he hadn't screamed was the worst part; Bucky would've been lucky if that was all his father did.

He heard Bucky's angered complaints about not having good tires on his bike anymore, let alone shoes that tied properly without the laces snapping. It used to be he got a new pair every year, whether he needed them or not. Now that money was tight, he was lucky to be given enough to buy a gumball at the candy store.

His tirade came to a swift end as his father stood over him— the old man was so tall that he towered over his son until Bucky was well into his teenage years. He always knew how to use that to his advantage. He was an imposing man. He had fought in the Great War and came back without a scratch on him. Much as young Bucky felt like a man at the tender age of fourteen, when his father looked at him like that, he might as well have been that six year old who broke Great Aunt Margret's priceless vase.

"Well, James, I didn't realize that my boy was growing into such a prince."

Prince was what his father used to say when Bucky was being a brat. It was a signal to Bucky that he'd royally screwed up and now he was going to pay the price. At the time, he hadn't heard it since he was ten. He must have gotten soft in the interim. Thought himself immune to punishment.

He wasn't, of course. His father made that fact abundantly clear the next day, when Mr. Collins knocked on their door during breakfast. Mr. Collins was the local shoemaker, and Mr. Barnes' best friend from his old army days. He was a slight man, prematurely gray with great big calloused hands that seemed disproportionate to the rest of him. His face was well-worn, and he smiled often. He did even as Bucky was ordered to come to the door and stand at attention.

"Good news, son, you're gonna get a brand spankin' new pair of shoes," said Mr. Barnes in cheerful tones that increased Bucky's anxiety rather than easing it. And then his father dropped the bomb. "You'll get them right after you finish makin' them."

For the next week and a half, all of Bucky's free time (what little there was) was spent at Mr. Collins' shop, cutting and stitching together pieces of leather over rubbery soles. Any time he made a mistake, his work was thrown aside and he had to start again. It seemed an impossible task, one that had Bucky ready to scream with frustration at the end of each day, as he walked home in the floppy saddle shoes Mr. Collins had loaned him. His father was always waiting for him in the living room, newspaper folded under his arm, scrutinizing the boy without a hint of sympathy.

"Takes a lot of work to make 'em, doesn't it?" He would say. "Lots of time, lots of effort, lots of
money. And if you do it wrong, that's money wasted. Not really in a place to waste money, are we, son?"

Though the day did come when Bucky walked home from Mr. Collins's store for the last time, in the shoes he made with his own aching and burning hands, it would be many years before he stopped hating his father for putting him through all that. He would be gearing up to go to war himself, finally understanding the value of all the things he once took for granted. Now that he was a man of twenty nine (or ninety eight if one got technical about it), he looked back with a fresh perspective, and knew that it was the best lesson his father ever taught him. It was a lesson he would gladly teach his own children one day.

If he had to teach his soulmate first, he thought while smiling down at Jane's sleeping form, then so be it.

It was noon the next day when they started up again.

"James, come on! I have a lot of work to do, and you can't just throw me over your shoulder like a caveman any time you want!"

"Really? Because it looks like that's exactly what I'm doing. Minus the caveman part."

"You wish! Just let me down. I can walk there myself."

"We tried that once, Jane. You can't be trusted. Now pipe down, and let's go eat."

"I'm not even hungry!"

"Too bad!"

Several people jumped out of the way as Bucky entered the dining room and deposited Jane at their usual table. It was just them today, as Steve was away on a business matter and Darcy was busy with Tony and Bruce. That was fine by him, he liked his alone time with Jane.

"I'll tell you what," he said a little later just because starting into his sandwich, "If you stay here right now and eat, I promise not to drag you down here against your will ever again."

He saw her brown eyes narrow, brimming with unexpressed suspicion and doubt. In response Bucky gave her the most innocent smile he could manage while clamping down hard on the need to laugh. He thought about giving her the eyes again—puppy dog eyes, she called them—but that might be overdoing it.

"You swear?"

He held up one hand. He couldn't believe how easy that was.

"I solemnly swear."

They enjoyed a light meal (light for him being very loosely defined) and some pleasant conversation. Jane heard some more stories about his time in the war, and in return, he learned all about Asgard and all the wonders the other realm had to offer. When the main course arrived, she ate everything on her plate and even seemed to stop and savor the taste. That was a first. Normally, Jane had a very practical mindset when it came to food. It was for staying alive and nothing else; something to partake in only when absolutely necessary. Things like flavor and texture were non-
issues. Probably how she stayed so skinny all her life, even before the month long science binges.

He waited for her to finish and politely decline desert in favor of fresh coffee to ask her.

"So, Jane, do you think you could finish up a little early today?"

Jane blinked at him, and then frowned.

"Why?" she asked slowly.

"I have a surprise for you," Bucky said.

"And you can't give it to me some other day?"

"Nope!"

He escorted her upstairs to grab her coat and her wallet, and then they were on the street hailing a cab. They had an easy time of it. Yellow cars were always driving by Avengers Tower, hoping to get one of Earth's Mightiest Heroes in their car, because surely a superhero sworn to protect the people would be a very generous tipper.

One fifteen minute drive later they were standing in front of a white, stocky building smashed between two gray ones. It was smaller than its neighbors; a mere two stories where every other building on the street had at least twenty. Short and squat, it would stick out like a sore thumb for that reason alone, but it also happened to be much cleaner and more modern looking than the rest. The name was stamped on the window in flowery script that Jane couldn't make out through the glare of the sun. It appeared to be something French, which wasn't going to be much help to her. She'd taken Spanish in high school.

"Where are we?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Bucky stuck his nose up and took a long whiff of the air.

"You smell that?" He grinned wide, and somewhere in Jane's traitorous mind she couldn't help but notice how white and straight his teeth were, or that he had neglected to shave this morning and the stubble on his cheeks made her want to run her lips along his jawline.

'Snap out of it, Jane. This isn't the time for that. You're in public.'

She inhaled deeply the smell of cooking meat that wafted through the open door of the white building. It was pretty good, she had to admit. It smelled like the chicken dinners her mother used to cook every Friday night. Her stomach whined even though they had lunch just under an hour ago.

"You couldn't wait to take me out to a restaurant?"

"This isn't a restaurant," he said.

Jane furrowed her brow. "Then what is this?"

"You'll see."

He took her by the hand and led her up the stairs into the building. It was warm inside, and decorated in soft whites and purples. Watercolor paintings adorned the walls on all sides, and a large potted plant sat on a round end table in the far corner with flowers spilling out the top and dangling to the floor. Serene piano music filtered through speakers nailed to the ceiling. The whole
setup created a very quaint atmosphere that seemed out of place in a hustle and bustle city like New York. This was the kind of place Jane expected to find in a tiny suburban town tucked away from the world, mostly frequented by little old grannies that drank tea and knitted sweaters.

It was a different story in the main room, which, despite what Bucky had said, was set up to look just like the waiting area of a very swanky restaurant. It was furnished with bright red couches positioned around a small coffee table. A stack of magazines was scattered in the center, along with a coffee cup someone had left behind on a coaster. Further in was a large kitchen area, where at least ten people stood around a long, rectangular tabletop. They all wore aprons and chatted amiably.

As soon as Jane saw them, she understood everything.

"Oh no," she said under her breath.

"Oh yes," Bucky said in her ear.

"You didn't."

"I did."

"Are you out of your mind?" She came very close to screaming, catching herself at the last second so it came out as a hiss instead. "You cannot seriously expect me to go in there."

"I sure do," Bucky answered cheerfully. "I'm going in with you, aren't I?"

"But this is ridiculous. I can't cook! I can't do anything more complicated than frozen waffles!"

"And my last experience as a chef involved reheating canned beans over a campfire while trying not to get shot. What's your point?"

"My point is that this is a terrible idea, James. I don't know what the hell you were thinking!"

He raised an eyebrow all the way up, and that was bad news for Jane. Whether he knew it or not (and he probably did) that was one of the sexiest faces he knew how to make. Her toes curled involuntarily.

"What I was thinking was that you need to learn to take care of yourself and that means eating three square meals a day like a normal person. You're a big girl, Jane; you can't rely on me or Darcy forever."

"So how is forcing me into a cooking class going to help?"

"Simple. You learn the same way I did. You don't really know the value of something until you have to make it yourself. I made a pair of shoes. We're going to make dinner tonight. That's how you learn."

"But I can't-"

"Wait, let me guess. You can't even boil water, right?" Bucky shook his head. That girl of his could be a real brick wall sometimes. "That's just a lousy excuse for lazy people who can't be bothered to try, so they just parrot that stupid line like it's so hard to put some water in a pot, stick it on a stove top, and turn a knob. Aren't you creating a portal to another dimension? If you can do that, you can do this."
"It's not another dimension, it's another world co-existing with ours- don't change the subject." At this point, they had raised their voices enough that the gathered crowd had fallen into a hush and twelve pairs of eyes now rested on them. "I've been making an effort to remember mealtimes, and Bruce said I'm back to my normal weight, didn't he?"

"Yes, and I was happy to hear it," said Bucky, "but Jane, do people on diets go back to eating junk food as soon as they reach their target weight?"

"Statistically speaking?"

"No. No, they don't. And neither will you. Now enough talking, we're holding up the class." He took her by the arm and pulled her along until she got the hint and started walking on her own. Her movements were sluggish, and so he beamed down at her. "Come on, baby, this is going to be fun, you'll see. A perfect soulmate bonding activity."

"We already have soulmate bonding activities," Jane grumbled.

"Yeah, but this one's different. You need to wear clothes for this one."

The last part he whispered, so close they were to the other students that they were bound to hear it otherwise. Jane still turned bright red and still gave him a poke in his side, right over the words etched into his skin in her handwriting. Maybe it was her imagination, but they felt warm to the touch, relaxing even. They felt right. Someday, she knew, she'd see them again when they took the next big step in their relationship. Until then, Jane accepted an apron from the class instructor and helped Bucky loop his own around his waist. She tied the knot behind him, standing on tip-toes to reach his ear.

"I guess I am a little hungry," she said, and she could feel him grinning.

"That's my girl."
Avenger’s Tower had two gymnasiums. The first was on the second floor and open to the general public. Getting a membership there meant a chance to catch a glimpse of Ironman or Captain America as they strolled around the building. For anyone lucky enough to get in, a strict set of rules had to be followed. First and foremost: no cameras allowed, and all phones had to be left in the locker rooms until their owners were ready to leave. They only needed one incident of Bruce getting ambushed by twenty fans with flashbulb cameras for that to become necessary.

Lucky for him and for all of the tower’s official residents, the second gymnasium existed. Like every floor above the twentieth, only those who lived in the tower could access it. It was much bigger and better equipped than the public one, meant to accommodate superhumans and god-aliens. It was primarily frequented by two types of people.

The first type was the Avengers, or the former SHIELD agents, or anyone whose job in some way involved saving people.

The second comprised mainly of female staff members who liked to watch said Avengers and former SHIELD agents left weights or spar with each other or otherwise flex and sweat.

On this day, Jane Foster found herself surrounded by dumbbells and medicine balls, firmly placed in the latter category. She did what she could to hide it, and in keeping with the illusion, she had spent the last few minutes with a pair of five pound weights. They were lighter than she expected, likely the result of all that time spent lugging her homemade equipment around. After the first few reps, Jane’s arms began to sting. Three more and they were on fire.

Through sheer force of will, Jane made it to twenty and dropped them. She fell back against the wall to catch her breath. A woman in a tight tank top with toned arms walked by, carrying a pair of fifteen pound weights like they were nothing but air. Jane, unaccustomed this kind of jealousy, glared after her.

“Let me guess,” said a friendly voice from above, “you’ve been skipping a few gym days, right?”

If someone had to catch Jane in what was quickly becoming her most embarrassing moment, she was glad it was Sam Wilson. They had only been acquainted for as long as Jane had been with Bucky, but in that time, Jane had learned exactly what kind of person he was. He was the guy you wanted in your corner if you committed murder. He wouldn’t ask questions, he’d just grab a shovel. If Jane asked him to keep quiet about her colossal failure at exercising, she had no doubt that he would.

“I may have missed one or two,” she said. “Just over the past couple of… years…”

She looked down, only seeing his hands as he picked up the weights.
“Well, your first problem is that you’re not lifting them right. You need to bring your arms all the way down, like this.”

He demonstrated, and as happily taken as Jane was, she couldn’t help but admire Sam’s well developed arms.

“You were also going too fast. Put it together, and you’re more likely to pull a muscle than build any strength.”

“I’m not sure I didn’t already.” Jane rubbed her aching wrists. “Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime,” Sam said. “So, what brings you here?”

For a split second, Jane glanced to the left. She prayed that Sam hadn’t seen it as she put up a front of nonchalance.

“Why does anyone go to the gym? Self-improvement, getting healthy-“

“Watching your soulmate do chin-ups one handed?”

Jane fell immediately into awkward silence, staring with her mouth open for all the flies in the world to enjoy. Sam, meanwhile, grinned in a way that would’ve made Jane want to punch out anyone else. Her eyes shifted back to Bucky. He’d been in the gym for longer than Jane had and, aside from a quick practice bout with Steve, he seemed content to work out alone. He was hanging off a metal bar, using his flesh arm to lift himself. Through the clanging of weights being dropped and machines working on overdrive, Jane could just hear him counting.

“One eighty six… one eighty seven… one eighty eight…”

Jane licked her lips, an action she regretted as she realized Sam was still watching her. Not that he wouldn’t know already what kind of thoughts were running through her head as she watched Bucky work that incredible body of his.

“Uh… I guess you could call that a bonus,” she said.

“Uh huh. Bonus. Right.”

Jane would’ve told him where to stick it, but on the other hand, there was Bucky. She watched him finish two hundred reps and jump down. He uncapped his canteen to take a drink. He had barely broken a sweat, but his hair was wonderfully disheveled and his chest heaved with exertion.

“You could go ask him for help,” Sam suggested.

“I would, but I don’t want him to know I’m here.”

“I’m thinking he already does.”

“What makes you say that?”

Sam nodded at the bar Bucky had abandoned. “He usually only does one hundred of those.”

**

Bucky tucked his left hand into the pocket of his apron. He winced at the inevitable grinding and shifting of plates. It didn’t matter how carefully he moved, that arm of his was never silent. Not that he had cause for concern. Almost everyone here was either a regular or not paying attention to
him. Last time, the instructor had risen a bit of a fuss about Bucky’s staunch refusal to remove his gloves for the baking portion of the lesson. Jane had seamlessly brought an end to the issue, taking the teacher aside to explain her boyfriend’s sensitivity about his ‘skin condition’, and promising to do all the kneading of the dough herself.

With that squared away, Jane faced her next most arduous task: actually cooking something.

To Bucky’s credit, he’d been right about how easy it was to make water boil. Learning to work the stove wasn’t much different from mastering the toaster oven once she figured out what the knobs were for. Putting dry noodles in the water and making them soft had been a snap, and Jane thought she might be getting the hang of this. Then it was time for the sauce, which they had to make themselves. As if the average stay-at-home moms of America weren’t out buying the brand name stuff like everyone else. Raising this point to Bucky got her nowhere. He smiled and stuck a mixing spoon in her hand, leaving her to stir in the olive oil. To her dying day, Jane would never admit that it was her fault for getting the teaspoons and tablespoons mixed up. That instructor should have done a physical demonstration explaining which was which. The end result was some kind of putrid red gunk that tasted like pure vinegar, and Jane was surprised when they were welcomed back with open arms two weeks later.

But Jane was nothing if not determined. Once she started something, willingly or otherwise, she had to finish it. Quitting was never an option. A fact Bucky knew too well, seeing as the big jerk never seemed to worry that she would make an excuse and bail out at the last second. He stood back, arms crossed, chatting with another student while Jane beat the eggs. She kept whisking until they looked more or less like the yellowy soup mix the instructor described, and she was proud to note that only five or six drops had splashed on her.

“You know, most people who want to make cookies go to the store and buy cookie dough,” she said, grabbing an unused bag of sugar from the counter.

“And those people are a bunch of lazy bastards,” said Bucky. “Not us.”

Jane opened the bag and measured out a heaping spoonful. The recipe as she’d memorized it called for two more after this before it came time to start mixing. Then the batter was poured onto a baking pan and went in the oven. Easy enough.

“Teaspoons, Jane.”

Jane paused with the spoon over the bowl. “What?”

“That’s a tablespoon,” he said. “Recipe calls for teaspoons.”

Jane’s eyes flicked from him, to the spoon, and back to him. Then they narrowed.

“You are not getting any tonight.”

“You said that the last two times.”

“This time, I mean it.”

“Okay, doll.”

Jane tossed the tablespoon in the sink and retrieved a teaspoon- ‘teaspoons are smaller, stop forgetting that’. She poured the completed batter into the pan and put it in the oven while Bucky set the timer.
Two hours later, they returned home with a bag full of lopsided and slightly bland, but otherwise passable sugar cookies. Jane put them away in the pantry and turned the coffee maker on. Bucky had retreated to the living room and was resting on the couch with a book in hand. Jane set her mug on the end table and sat down in her easy chair. She wasn’t in the mood for work, so she grabbed a book of her own. The only one within reach was a well-worn mystery novel she had first thumbed through in college. Jane read the first chapter, then the second one. She took periodic looks at Bucky. He flipped through his book without a care, one arm under his head, feet propped up on the armrest. Hair fell over his eyes in the most enticing way, and if he read something interesting or provocative, his lips would pucker.

Jane made it halfway through chapter three before she snapped.

“Dammit,” she cursed. She threw aside her book and then his as she straddled him. “I swear you’re doing this on purpose.”

“Doing what?” he asked innocently, and it no longer mattered if he really was that insidious or if Jane was just paranoid. She wanted to kiss the life out of him, so that’s what she did.

**

Today was a perfect day for going outside and watching the stars.

Not that Jane could see any stars what with the thick grey storm clouds and the rain pouring down. Any average layman without advanced computer programs and access to major satellite feeds would be shit out of luck if they wanted to do some star-gazing. Those people would never be as dedicated to studying spacetime as Jane Foster was, so she didn’t mourn their loss.

“Okay, everything looks good…” Jane shook the hair out of her face for the tenth time as she began final diagnostics on her equipment. The waterproof tarp shook in the wind, but held firm, protecting her life’s work from an untimely demise by rainfall. Jane zipped her coat all the way up to her neck and threw the hood up. One computer started to glitch, and she set about fixing the problem as the door to the roof flew open.

“Jane!” Darcy called out. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“My radar picked up an anomaly in the stratosphere, and it’s not like the last few. It’s much bigger. I need to get everything up and running so I can measure it.”

“You sure it’s not just Thor coming to visit?”

“If it was, why isn’t he here right now? It started over an hour ago.”

“I don’t know, maybe he found a new human girlfriend or he’s vacationing in Tahiti, but you can’t be out here when it’s pouring rain like this. You’ll get sick.”

“Wow, Darcy, didn’t realize you were my mom.” Jane typed in a few command codes and ran a scan for bugs. “I’ll be done in a minute and then I can come back inside.”

“That’s not all that encouraging,” Darcy shouted back over the howling wind. “A minute for you can be over an hour.”

“Just let me finish this one thing.” She pumped her fist in the air as her tests came up clean. Not much more to do now. Just a little coding here and then maybe rewire a few things just to be safe…
“Jane, the rain is picking up!” Darcy was screaming now to be heard.

“Then why don’t you go inside, you’re so worried.” Jane pulled the tarp over one side of her makeshift base and secured it with rope. “I’ll be fine. I never get sick.”

**

“Ah-ah-ah-CHOO!”

Jane just missed the tissue, raining snot and spit down on her new bed sheets. She blew her nose and threw the wadded tissue into the pile. Her carefully constructed used tissue pyramid was unceremoniously destroyed by Bucky’s arm sweeping them into a garbage can. He dropped a fresh, pre-opened box at Jane’s side. She pulled out the first one to wipe the excess mucus off her bright red Rudolph nose.

She moaned pitifully at the lump in her throat, giving Bucky time to stick a thermometer under her tongue. Experience told her that spitting it out would only make him put it in again, so Jane leveled at him the strongest death glare she could muster and listened for the beep.

“Hundred and one,” Bucky said, shaking his head. “So what was that thing you said about never getting sick?”

“Shut up,” Jane muttered.

“Something about being immune to bad weather? Impervious to rain?”

“I hate you.”

“Hey, you think you can walk on hot lava without shoes on? You’re even more impressive than I thought, doll.”

“Why don’t you go do something useful with your time?” Jane snapped.

“Useful like what?”

“Get me more tissues.” She blew her nose again. “Or go do shirtless chin-ups.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be bringing your temperature down?”

For once, Jane could not stand to look at his face. She threw the covers over her head and burrowed under her pillow.

“Arrogant ass,” she said through her teeth.

“Not really,” he said. She hated his stupid super hearing. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me. Get some rest, okay?”

Jane mumbled through the pillow, an answer he seemed to accept.

“And Jane? Don’t try and get out of bed and go back to work. You have television, internet, and plenty to read, so take it easy until you’re better.”

“Scientists don’t take anything easy,” Jane said just as another powerful sneeze took hold and rattled her brain even further.

“Uh-huh,” said Bucky. “Rest.”
He left the door wide open. From Jane’s bed, the view of the kitchen skewed to one side. Everything from the oven on was hidden behind the wall. Bucky disappeared around the corner. Jane had less than a second to watch him in that tight pair of pants he’d chosen to wear, but she made the most of it. She heard cabinets and drawers opened and closed; the clattering of pots and pans rubbing against each other. Bucky turned on the faucet, let it run until he had however much water he needed. A sliver of him came into view as he grabbed something else off the stove. Whatever he was up to in there, he had better not break even one of her appliances. Super soldier or no, she would knock his lights out.

Jane picked up one of her books from the nightstand and threw it aside without opening it. A wordless grunt of frustration passed her lips as she folded her arms and curled up under the covers. She couldn’t stay that way for long, not when she felt like someone had stuffed a rock up each nostril. She watched the clock as ten minutes went by. It felt more like ten hours. Bucky had not reappeared with more tissues. He was saying something to himself that Jane couldn’t make out as he pulled something out of the fridge and then ripped open a cardboard box.

He sounded pretty busy in there. So busy, in fact, that if she carefully eased herself out the side of the bed-

“I said don’t get up, Jane.”

Jane stopped. She stared incredulously at the open doorway. What the hell was that? She’d barely even moved!

Luckily, a distraction did come in the form of her phone ringing right at the opportune moment. Though a glance at the call ID made Jane wonder if she could call this stroke of luck ‘good’.

“Hey there, Jane,” Darcy sang as power drills roared and electricity surged in the background. “How’s the patient today? Feeling better? A little wiser perhaps?”

“Darcy, if you were in front of me right now, I’d sneeze on you.”

“Funnier! This whole mess has been good for something. For real, though, how are you? Is Sexy Thighs taking good care of you?”

Jane glared into the kitchen, but she still couldn’t see him. In his absence, she’d just destroy the toaster oven with her mind.

“If by taking care of me, you mean acting like a drill sergeant.”

A burst of laughter.

“Me? A drill sergeant?” Bucky shouted to her. “Doll, if you think I’m a drill sergeant, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Jane stuck her tongue out in his general direction. He wouldn’t see it, but she had golf balls in her nose and now Thor appeared to be inside her skull trying to beat his way out with Mjolnir. She could not even bring herself to care.

“And did you just him what I think you called him?”

“What? Sexy thighs? It’s only the truth, Jane. You should know that better than anyone.”

She could practically feel the massive grin on Darcy’s face.
“Darcy, I’m going to give you the same advice that you’ve been giving me since the day we met: get laid.”


“I’m fine,” Jane said through her teeth. “Just fine. I think James is making me something to eat.”

“Wait, he cooks, too? Goddammit, Jane. You hit the jackpot.”

She wouldn’t argue with that. Her current feelings towards Bucky and his definitely drill sergeant ways notwithstanding, that was how she felt every morning, when she woke up to one of Bucky’s sweet kisses. At least once, he’d attempted breakfast in bed, only to accidentally break the tray and send a perfectly good plate of pancakes flying out the window. He had sulked in the living room while Jane gave him a shoulder rub and made some waffles.

She wondered what the people who still feared the Winter Soldier would think if they knew what a big softie Bucky Barnes really was.

“So what’s his specialty? Like pasta and cereal or actual cooking with spices and stuff?”

“We’ve only had two classes, Darcy,” said Jane. “I don’t know what he’s doing in there.”

“Chicken soup probably. Classic cure-all for the common cold.”

“I guess so,” Jane said. “I always hated chicken soup. It only tastes good when I’m sick.”

“There you go! You’re sick, you can’t breathe through your nose, chicken soup to the rescue.”

She made a good point, but it didn’t make the prospect of a bowl full of soggy chicken pieces and carrots any more appetizing. Falling back into her mountain of pillows, Jane groaned.

“I hope he puts noodles in it.”

**

“Dammit, forgot to buy noodles.”

Bucky checked the recipe one more time, squinting to read where a stray drop of water had blotted out some of the words. He was pretty sure it said ‘carrots’, which he had already chopped and poured into the pot. Next step was adding the chicken pieces, followed by another round of stirring, and after that, he just had to let it cook. This was even easier than reheating beans during the war. He didn’t have to dodge any bullets and he had a working stove top.

And Jane thought learning to cook would be hard.

Bucky pulled the chicken pieces out of the fridge. They were pre-cooked as per the instructions, cut into bite sized cubes and not breaded. Bucky poured them into the pot, adjusted the knobs and sat back. All he had to do now was let it cook.

“Stay in bed, Jane.”

Let it cook and listen for all of Jane’s attempts at a daring escape.

“I was just trying to get comfortable, Sarge,” she snapped at him.
“You know, nobody actually calls Sergeants that in the army.”

“My mistake, Sir.”

Bucky grinned. “Sir? I like that. Keep to your barracks now, private.”

She mumbled some very rude names that Darcy would no doubt be repeating to him later. Had she forgotten they were still on the phone or did she just not remember that he heard everything she was doing in there?

He couldn’t hear Darcy nearly as well, but bits and pieces came through as he listened over the static. Something about leather and thighs. Knowing that girl, she was probably off objectifying him again.

**

“So since Drill Sergeant Sweet Ass is giving you a hard time, I’m guessing you’re not being a model patient right now.”

She spoke in a light, teasing tone of voice because she knew that Jane wasn’t there to blast her for it and had neither the strength nor the freedom to go and kick her butt. It was official: being sick sucked.

“I hate this, Darcy. I hate just sitting around doing nothing. I haven’t taken a sick day in two years.”

“Yeah, I guess your immune system was running on fumes from keeping you alive all that time. Just look at it this way. You learned a valuable lesson about knowing your limits, you’ll come out of this physically and mentally stronger, and the ‘get well soon’ sex is bound to be spectacular.”

“You can’t possibly believe that I’m in any mood to have sex.”

“When you have a man like that warming your bed, I sure as shit do.”

“Is there anything else perverted that you want to say about my boyfriend?”

“I want to lick his abs, I daydream about his lips, I’m pretty sure he could bench press me, half the time I come over it’s because I’m hoping to catch him out of the shower again…”

A moment passed.

“Are you done?”

“Hold on, I’m thinking. Umm… oh yeah, I overhead him and Romanov talking in Russian once, and his Russian voice can melt panties. Like for real.”

Darcy went quiet again. Jane could hear tapping and tinny voices behind her.

“Okay, I’m done,” she said.

Jane sighed, long and loud. On Darcy’s end, the noise in the background abruptly cut out.

“Sorry, I’m on break. Forgot to pause my movie,” she said. “Anyway, did I go too far with that?”

“What makes you think that?”
“Unless I heard wrong, you just did that thing you always do when you’re annoyed with me. That ‘blowing out air like a bull’ thing.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, you do. Trust me on this. It’s my job to notice these things.”

“I thought it was your job to keep Tony and Bruce’s glasses full.”

“Ouch, Foster. I wonder who fills your glass now that I’m not around.”

“James does, obviously. Sometimes, he even wears an apron. Sometimes, he wears nothing but the apron.”

“…I hate you.”

“I know.”

**

When it was just about time to turn the heat off, Bucky pulled a spoon out of the drawer and took a small sip. It was burning hot even after blowing on it twenty times. If he could feel that, it would probably kill Jane before it made her better. At least the taste was mostly right. He had depressingly vague memories of his early childhood, or anything from before he was eleven or twelve. One thing he did remember was curling up in a cocoon of heavy blankets, desperate to escape the cold ravaging his body. His mother brought him a piping hot bowl of her famous chicken soup, and he’d be back on his feet in no time. That stuff was like magic. It could even get Steve through a fever.

This attempt of his wasn’t magic. It was barely real medicine, but it was overly salty with a distinct poultry taste, and that was enough for him. It was only ever good when he was sick anyway.

“Five minutes, Jane,” he called out. “Don’t get out of bed.”

She was still on the phone with Darcy, and seemed to be pointedly ignoring him. He pulled a bowl out of the cupboard. They were rarely used, so he rinsed it out before ladling the soup in. He had just enough to fill one bowl thanks to a little mishap with the chicken bouillon earlier. He maneuvered around the puddle spreading under the kitchen table, offhandedly noting that he should mop that up when he was done with Jane.

“I’m coming in.”

Bucky nudged the door with his foot, perfectly balanced with the heavy bowl in one hand and a tray in the other. He placed the tray on Jane’s lap after first coaxing her to sit up. Steam rose from the bowl and wafted in her direction. She took a big whiff, her face impassive.

“Smells good,” she said dully. She still had the phone in her hand. “Darcy, I’ll call you back.”

She hung up and tossed it aside. Bucky handed her a spoon and she slurped up a bite of cubed chicken. Her face scrunched up.

“Hot. Really hot.” She blew on the bowl while Bucky squeezed her free hand apologetically. “Tastes fine. About as good as chicken soup can taste.”
“You’re telling me,” Bucky said. He sat at the end of the bed, watching her eat. “How are you feeling?”

“Same as ten minutes ago,” she said. “My head still hates me, as do my sinuses, my throat, my bones, my skin…”

“That’s too bad,” Bucky said, shaking his head. “I guess I’ll have to love you enough to make up for it.”

She stared at him, slowly lowering the spoon. “That was the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard. Now my ears hurt, too.”

Bucky snorted. “Sorry about that. Any way I can make it up to you?”

“Shirtless chin-ups.”

“Finish your soup first.” He leaned in to kiss the crown of her head. “I need to go clean up the kitchen. Call me if you need anything.”

Jane grumbled through a mouth full of chicken and carrots and no noodles, a dribble of broth leaking out of her mouth to her chin. He figured there was an agreement somewhere in there and dreamt of something like, ‘I will be a good girl and not try to get up and work while I’m hocking up buckets of mucus, and I will do everything you say until I am better’. No man was ever harmed by wishful thinking.

Ten minutes later, he had most of the chicken stain out of the floor. After endless scrubbing only the faintest hint of yellow remained, and even that was easy to cover up just by moving the table a couple of inches to the left. Bucky gave the kitchen a final once over. The pot was in the dishwasher with all the other utensils. The unused ingredients were back in the cupboard. He could give himself a pat on the back both for successfully remaking his mother’s soup and for keeping the place as neat and orderly as possible. Winifred Barnes would’ve been so proud of her boy.

His cell phone rang on the coffee table. Bucky snatched it up and flopped on the couch.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hey, studmuffin. What’re you wearing?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. Just what he needed. “Three layers of bloody animal pelts and a clown mask. Didn’t I tell you to stop asking me that?”

“Yeah, but it’s just so much fun hearing your answers,” Darcy said. “So what’s going on with Jane? How is she?”

“As compared to the last time you spoke to her? Not much different.”

“Still pronouncing ‘n’s like ‘d’s, huh? That’s why cold bugs suck.”

“Yes, I do remember what colds were like,” said Bucky. “What I don’t remember was being so determined not to stay in bed. When I was a kid, I’d do everything I could to avoid getting up.”

“Amazing how soulmates can be so similar in some ways, yet so completely different in others, huh?”
Bucky ran a hand over his face. He moved the phone away from his ear to listen for Jane. She hadn’t moved except to scrap her spoon around the bowl for extra dregs of soup.

“So does the incorrigible Ms. Lewis have any advice on how I can stop Jane from making herself sicker?”

He could close his eyes and envision the look on Darcy's face. He wondered if she’d ever know how much of an open book she could be. He hoped not. It might make it difficult to get what he wanted out of her when he needed it.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Barnes.” She moved something around and sat down. The yelling behind her fell silent and she mumbled something about remembering to pause before making phone calls. “For someone in your position, there is only one logical choice here.”

“And that is?”

“Spank her.”

Bucky took the phone away from his ear, checking for cracks in the speaker that had to be there. Otherwise, it would mean that Darcy really did say that.

“Come again?”

“You know, spank her. With your hand. On her ass. Spank her.”

“You’re telling me to threaten to hit Jane if she tries to get out of bed.”

“What? No! That would be terrible. I’m telling you to reward her for staying in bed by spanking her.”

Bucky examined the phone one more time. He had to be missing something.

Of course, that Jane might enjoy being spanked was in no way news to him. His spur of the moment bluff the day they met came to mind. He’d meant it then as nothing more than a joke. An empty threat to make her stay put until Bruce gave her the okay to leave. He hadn’t expected her to respond so… enthusiastically.

Not that he was complaining, but this was something he’d only ever intended to talk about with Jane. Alone. Without a crazy person in his ear.

“You cannot be serious,” he said.

“You can’t be serious if you think I don’t know Jane is into that. I was stuck with her in the desert for four months. I saw her using all her down time to watch Secretary on her phone.”

“What the hell does that mean?!”

“It means that James Spader is sexy and everyone knows it. Especially Jane. You need to get in there and tell her to stay in that bed if she ever wants to get to bend over the desk and read the letter out loud.”

“Lewis, are you drunk?”

“Find your inner James Spader, dude!”

“I’m hanging up now.”
Bucky ended the call and tossed his phone aside. He heard the empty bowl make contact with Jane’s night table, before she moved around on the mattress to get comfortable. She was snoring in seconds, and Bucky thought that sounded like a good idea, getting some shut eye…

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The sky was dark when Jane awoke. She dug her head out of the pillow, a wave of dizziness overcoming her. It was gone as quick as it came, but it remained an unfriendly reminder of why she was in bed at ten in the evening when she should have been working.

At least the headache was gone. Jane sighed with relief as she registered the lack of pain. Thor must’ve taken a short cut out through her ears. A real medical miracle, those cold pills were. She tried to inhale through her nose but the blockage had not lessened. The failed attempt sent her into a coughing fit. Her chest hurt when it finally stopped. Jane threw off the blankets and sat up. She muttered curses to herself, her toes scraping the carpet. Outside the crack in the window was the typical chorus of cars and people on the busy Manhattan streets. No sound came from her apartment, so that grating racket was all she could hear. Jane crossed over to seal the window shut, plunging her bedroom back into blissful silence. Thank the lord for reinforced glass and window panes.

She felt a sneeze coming on and ran to grab a mostly clean tissue off her bed. She wiped her nose clean and dried her mouth with her shirt. No reason to have good manners when she was sick and there was no one around.

Jane’s head snapped up. She replayed the events of the last minute and a half. She had gotten up, closed a window, and sneezed. She had walked all over this room to do all of that. She had made no effort to muffle her steps or pace out her movements, and she had yet to hear a single peep from Bucky.

Not wanting to press her luck, Jane approached the bedroom door carefully on tiptoes. She did what she could to soften her breathing as she poked her head out to look. It was dark in the living room. The curtains had been drawn shut. A tiny sliver of light stretched over the couch, but it was just enough to make out the heavy mass laid out upon it. Jane scrunches up her eyes, as if that would help her get a better look. Bucky was sound asleep from the look of it, his head tucked under his arm and his face expressionless. The light on him was steady, and just missed his eyes by a fraction of an inch. Jane stepped back, tearing her gaze away from her soulmate. It took a lot more effort than it should have, but it was just so rare to see Bucky sleeping. He didn’t need much, and he was always awake before her, so she couldn’t even watch him in the morning.

It was too dark to get a proper look at him, but Jane could still make out the lines of his face and his plump, slightly parted lips. He was so beautiful like this. What she wouldn’t give to go over there and kiss him awake for once.

But right beyond Bucky’s sleeping form, just outside of the light, was the front door. If her math was right (and it always was) she could make it there in exactly twelve steps. Twelve measly steps and she’d be home free. She could get to her lab, check her data, and maybe tweak a few programs. Her new prototype bridge was coming along, and she had some emails from the head engineers to answer before the week’s end. She could get all of that done in just about an hour, and be back in bed before Bucky ever knew she was gone.

She just had to make it twelve steps.

Jane grabbed her bathrobe and her slippers. She stuffed the pockets full of tissues and grabbed her notebook off the floor. She took the first step into the living room. The floors were new and
didn’t creak, so she wasted no time in taking the next few steps. She was halfway there, and Bucky hadn’t moved an inch. Three steps to go and not a peep out of him. He was usually such a light sleeper, too. He must’ve been especially tired today.

The door was in reach. One more step and she’d be there. Home free at last. Jane pressed a tissue to her nose to catch a trail of running mucus, wrapped her fingers around the knob and—dangled helplessly in the air as Bucky carried her back the way she came. A cheery tune was on his lips as he set her down on the bed.

“You know, I’m not even mad this time,” he said. “I can’t believe you actually thought you could beat me at stealth. Especially since every time you breathe in it sounds like someone turned on the garbage disposal.”

“You are never getting laid again,” Jane croaked as he fluffed her pillows and stuck them under her head. “Never ever.”

“Come on, Jane, you can go one night without work,” Bucky said.

“I know, I just don’t want to,” she countered.

“Well, now you’re being childish.”

“I am not!” Jane rolled over and away from him, crossing her arms over her chest. Until her nose began to itch and a tissue was proffered before she could ask for one.

“No, you just want to work yourself to death, is that right?” he asked, a hint of edge to his voice that didn’t escape Jane’s notice.

“I hate sitting around and doing nothing.” She said. She shoved her head into the mattress, obscuring her face and the hint of shame she felt at the admittance. “I can’t help it. I feel restless and useless and every second that goes by where I can’t get up and move I get more and more disappointed in myself. This is why I hate being sick. Stupid cold. Stupid storm.”

Jane’s words devolved into meaningless mumbles. She kept her face in the bedsheets as she struggled with the burning in her eyes. The last thing she ever wanted was for Bucky to see her like this, in such a miserable state. Not this soon in their relationship. While he was plagued by nightmares of HYDRA and the horrors they’d committed, she wanted to always be there with a smile and a shoulder to lean on. To break down in front of him, over something as stupid as missing work for one day, was out of the question. She dried her tears and steeled herself.

The colors shifted in the corner of her eye, making her look up. Bucky had settled down in bed, his shirt disposed of in the corner by the TV. He stretched, his muscles bunching as he relaxed inches away from Jane’s face.

“I thought you wanted to keep my temperature down,” she said.

“I do,” he said. “That’s why my pants are still on.”

Jane scoffed. “You think you’re all that.”

“To be fair, all that stuff you say during sex is very good for my self-esteem.”

“You know, I could’ve been exaggerating all those times to not hurt your feelings.”
“Okay, but were you?”

Jane had no answer that wouldn’t make him unbearably smug, so she kept her mouth shut. Not that silence was a better option. Bucky grinned triumphantly as he pulled Jane into his arms and rested her head on his chest. Jane snuggled closer. His body was warm, but her fever had long since broken, and it was a little chilly in here with the air conditioner on.

“If you want to cuddle, that’s fine,” she said, “but I warn you: I might sneeze on you.”

Bucky shrugged. “Do what you got to do.”

“Is this just so I don’t get up again?”

“No, it’s because I love you and I love being in bed with you and holding you.”

“You know what I’d love?”

“If it involves going to the lab, the answer is no. If it involves shirtless chin-ups, then maybe tomorrow.”

Jane pouted. Bucky kissed it away.

He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. Jane hadn’t sat down to watch anything since the last episode of Warehouse 13, so she didn’t have many suggestions. He settled on a random station playing a black and white romance film. Jane didn’t recognize it, or any of the people in it, but it cast a somber air over Bucky as the man and woman on screen embraced.

“My mother loved this movie,” he said. “My father took her to see it on their anniversary.”

He raked his fingers through Jane’s hair, gently grazing her scalp. She shut her eyes and let it soothe her, nesting into the crook of his neck and letting her lips touch his throat. She did it again. She wanted to do more, but her head was still foggy.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a pain in the ass today,” she said later on.

“You haven’t been a pain all day,” he said.

Jane nudged him, making him chuckle under his breath.

“I promise not to get up again until I’m better.”

“You’d better not,” Bucky said, “or you’ll be in very big trouble.”

“Am I going to get that spanking you promised?”

“Don’t talk back to me, missy.”

“Yes, sir.”

There it was again. She called him ‘sir’. And just like the first time, he didn’t hate it. Coming from her, it was kind of nice…

The movie was coming to an end, so they sat through the last few minutes and then Jane picked up the remote. She switched through a few more channels, finding nothing but action movies and cheap adult cartoons until she reached the syfy channel. The creepy music box tune she’d know anywhere played. She settled back in Bucky’s arms, as he turned his questioning gaze on her.
“What’s this?” he asked.

She was about to laugh at his joke, because who in the world didn’t know the Twilight Zone? Then she remembered who she was talking to.

“It’s an old show from the fifties and sixties,” she explained. “I used to watch it with my dad. You’ll like it.”

They ran two episodes. The first was a lesser known one about two people alone at the end of the world. The second was Jane’s favorite, cliché as that was. Watching William Shatner contend with the monster on the wing of the plane was always a ride. Jane had been enthralled as a child, and even now that she was older and the teddy bear-like creature no longer kept her awake at night, nothing had changed. She held her breath as Shatner pulled back the curtain to reveal the monster’s face. Bucky frowned at the screen.

“That thing supposed to be a gremlin?”

“I think so. How’d you know that?”

“Falsworth liked to tell scary stories over beer,” Bucky said with a crooked smile. “He had a buddy back in the RAF who was some kind of writer. Liked to talk about gremlins and crazy shit like that. I swear I heard so many of Squadron Leader Dahl’s stories that I could write a book.”

Jane listened half to Bucky and half to the TV. Shatner was trying to convince the pilot of what he saw out there, but he wasn’t having much luck.

“Wait a minute.” She turned to Bucky. “Dahl? Not like Roald Dahl, right?”

Bucky thought for a moment. “Yeah, I think that was his name.”

“You knew Roald Dahl?”

“No, Falsworth knew him,” Bucky said. “Why? Who is he?”

Jane shook her head. That little lesson in literary history was best saved for a time when she wasn’t sick. She made a note to go to the library in the next couple of days and lost herself again in the battle between man and evil teddy bear monster. It was almost over and she was getting sleepy again.

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At some point, Bucky must’ve closed his eyes. He watched the end of Jane’s show, and then turned off the TV so she could rest. She was out cold before the credits even rolled, her face buried in the crook of his neck. For Bucky, it was pure bliss. He never wanted this moment to end. This was why he made sure to always be awake before her. Those first few minutes each morning were his favorite part of the day. He could watch her sleep without worrying about some new mission to complete or world domination plan to foil. In seventy years, he had never known such peace.

It made waking up to find her gone all the more depressing. It hadn’t happened since that morning several weeks ago, after his nightmare. Though he gave all indications of being over it, he still got up twenty minutes earlier from then on and kept his gun in the nightstand drawer where she wouldn’t see it. Two more were under the bed. He’d wanted to put another one under the mattress, but that felt like overkill. He hid some knives there instead. Only after taking those precautions did he feel safe to fall asleep. He told himself that if she got up before him, he wouldn’t freak out.
He wouldn’t immediately go for the drawer or the mattress unless there were clear signs of danger. If she was just making a bathroom run, he would be calm and patient.

Light streamed out from under the door and he could hear the water running. Jane was singing to herself, something he didn’t know that she might’ve been making up on the spot. Her voice wasn’t the best, but she could carry a tune. She stopped short as the water kept running. Something cold dropped in the pit of Bucky’s stomach. He threw his legs over the side of the bed and froze.

Blood.

There was blood on the ground.

Not a lot of it, just a few droplets coagulating on the carpet. A few more had dried, staining the fibers. Most frightening of all was how far they went. A long line of droplets led around the corner. Bucky followed the trail, his heart sinking when they stopped in front of the bathroom. He wanted to run and break it down, or go back and get his gun. He couldn’t make himself move in either direction, even as water pumped out of the faucet and ran under the door. It spread fast, soaking the carpet. He hadn’t heard a peep from Jane. She was still in there. Alone. Without him.

He made it to the door. The knob had a bloody handprint on it. Bile surged to his throat as he tried to touch it. He pushed the door instead, it wasn’t even fully shut. It swung open, revealing an overflowing sink, walls painted with more blood than he’d ever seen before and-

Bucky’s eyes opened. He almost sat up, but Jane whined in her sleep and held him. She was partially atop him, a trail of drool pooling on his chest. Her hair was messily spread about, some of it stuck under her chin to catch the drool.

The night had worn on and left the sky a light blue color. Jane hadn’t left this bed once since falling asleep. Bucky peered at the spotless carpet and listened for the sound of running water. Gradually, the moment passed, and the alarm bells ringing in his head grew quiet. He sat back and closed his eyes. He pushed himself down to press his chest against Jane’s and feel her heartbeat. He own stopped racing and fell in line with hers. It took him out of high alert and out of consciousness, but though he didn’t dream again, his sleep was fitful.
THREE WEEKS AGO

Steve stared out the window of the restaurant, as crowds of carefree faces walked by. Not a single one was familiar to him. He checked his phone; another fifteen minutes gone. He played with his napkin, folding and refolding it in his lap. He placed his cutlery like they were dining in a five star restaurant, rather than a grill with peanut shells all over the floor. Keeping his hands busy helped him avoid looking at his watch for the hundredth time.

He didn't know what he was so antsy about. It wasn't the first time Bucky had been late meeting them. Sam wasn't concerned, but he never was. He was too busy watching football on the overhead screen. He pumped his fist when his team scored another touchdown, and a bunch of guys at the bar cheered slammed their tankards on the table. Steve was a baseball guy, so he couldn't relate. Now that the Dodgers weren't in Brooklyn, he didn't even have that anymore. No way in hell he'd ever root for those rat bastard Yankees. Maybe he should become a Mets fan.

"You guys ready to order?" asked the waitress, a perky blonde who had been making eyes at them both since they walked in.

"Not yet," said Sam flatly. "Still waiting for one more."

She frowned and reluctantly moved to the next table. Sam knocked back the rest of his drink and shot a glare at Steve.

"He'll get here when he gets here. Meanwhile, I'm starving." His stomach whined in agreement. "Let's just order already!"

"He has to be here soon," Steve said, though if he was being honest, he was pretty damn famished himself.

"So? You know what he likes. What's up with you today?"

Steve shook his head. "I have a weird feeling. I don't know why."

"Oh, so you're psychic now, Punk?"

Sam jumped, but Steve didn't. Bucky slid into the booth and reached over him to get a menu. Sam had to press his face into the wall so not to get a mouthful of Bucky's shirt, and even though this meant they could finally place their orders, he didn't look any happier.

"Where have you been?" Steve asked. "I know you're a lazy ass, but this is a new record."

"Hey, I got an idea. Bite me." Bucky grinned. "And I'll have you know, there's a very good reason why I'm late."

"Do tell," Sam said, turning back to watch the football game.

"I will," said Bucky. His eyes flicked for a moment at something behind Steve, but when he turned to look, nothing was there. "So Steve, remember how I was asking you about that doctor? Dr. Foster?"

"Why was he asking about Dr. Foster?" Sam asked.
"Bucky was worried about her eating habits, believe it or not," Steve explained.

Bucky shrugged. "I'd just been seeing her around and I didn't realize at first that she lived in the tower. I got curious and asked Steve. He didn't know anything, so I went to go talk to her myself."

"Still got that thing about people smaller than you," Sam remarked. At Bucky's pointed look, he said: "You think Steve never talks about the forties?"

Bucky pursed his lips. "If I do, it's a damn good thing. Because when I got to Dr. Foster's lab, I found her unconscious."

"She wasn't hurt, was she?" asked Steve.

"Nah, not even," Bucky snorted. "She'd just been going without proper food for a week and a half so she could work more. I don't get these scientists. They're all nuts."

"At least you don't have to hang out with Tony and Bruce," Sam muttered.

"I got the A.I. to let me in and I brought her to the medical center. Bruce was looking her over, and when he woke up her..." Bucky paused and adopted a sheepish look. "Well, I guess I shouldn't have been hovering over her like I was. She freaked out and nailed Bruce right in the nose."

Sam stifled a laugh with his hand, his shoulders shaking. "Jesus. Poor guy."

"Eh, he was fine. He's got good control," said Bucky. "The crazy part is what happened after he went to clean up. I wanted Foster to lay back down, but she's a stubborn little thing. Kept fighting me on it. I tried to reason with her, but you know what she said to me?"

He looked over Steve's shoulder again. He wasn't even trying to hide it.

"Okay, I'll bite," Sam grumbled, as did his stomach. "What'd she say?"

That was when a woman who definitely wasn't their waitress and definitely was Dr. Jane Foster circled around the table and planted herself in Bucky's lap.

"Hey guys," she said, beaming almost as brightly as Bucky.

"Steve, Sam, I'd like you to meet my soulmate," he said as he kissed the side of her head.

"Nice to meet you," Jane said.

"Pleasure's all mine," said Steve. He was glad Jane had spoken first because he was still processing this unexpected (though not unwelcome) development. The pure joy in Bucky's eyes as he looked at her, his gentle touch on her smaller frame. If anyone still denied that he was fully rehabilitated, they should be here right now to see this.

"I guess we'll be seeing a lot of you from now on, Jane," he said, but he might as well have said nothing for how intently they gazed at each other.

"Yeah, Steve," she said dreamily, "I think you will."

**

Jane hated washing dishes. It was her least favorite household chore. In fact, if she were to make a list of all the things she hated, washing dishes would fall somewhere in the top ten. Maybe top five if it was one of those days where she had a week's worth of old dishes in the sink and some of them
were beyond saving.

Such days were rarer now that Bucky was in her life. He'd deep clean the place in an hour all by himself if it wasn't up to his ultra psycho military grade standards. It took a week of coming home to find her furniture re-rearranged and her clothes shrinkwrapped, but Jane did get the point and now she made sure to vacuum and clean the windows at least twice a week.

And today, she was doing the dishes. Bucky had better appreciate it.

Her smartphone buzzed while she was wiping her hands. The clean plates had been set out to dry and the silverware returned to the drawer. Jane unlocked it to answer the call which, since she still hadn't set up an address book, could've been from anyone.

"Hello?"

"Janie!"

The booming voice on the other end hit Jane like a gust of wind. A familiar wind dating all the way back to her childhood. "Hi, Aunt Judy. How are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good." There was noise in the background like a mix between cheering and a blender. The latter disappeared, and now Jane could clearly hear Uncle Frank shouting at the TV. "Heard you've been doing well at that new job of yours, huh? Living in the big city now."

"Yeah, it's been great," Jane said. Her eyes flitted around a kitchen that fed into a high-ceilinged living room with glass walls, stereo sound, and enough space that even with all her portable equipment set up, there would never be clutter. "Really different, though…"

Aunt Judy hummed, while somewhere behind her, Uncle Frank started yelling again, this time with added curse words and what sounded like a bottle crashing to the floor. "Frank, clean that up! That had better not stain the carpet… sorry about that, Janie. I was just calling to let you know that we're having Grandma's birthday party a week from Saturday."

"I thought her birthday wasn't until next month," Jane said, pulling a dry dish from the rack to store it in the cabinet.

"Well, there's a funny story about that," said Aunt Judy. "Remember how last month we were cleaning up her old house to sell it? Your uncle Jeremy took home a few keepsakes, including your grandma's birth certificate. Turns out, she was born in March, not April."

"You're telling me she's been celebrating her birthday on the wrong day for over ninety years," Jane said.

"I was just as surprised as you, believe me. Anyway, you know how precise she can be about these things. Since her birthday is really March 15th, that's when we're going to celebrate from now on."

Jane tapped her nail on the second dry plate, going over in her head her plans for the next two weeks. Other than a conference on the 18th and a 'girls night' with Darcy the day after, she was pretty sure she had nothing going on that might interfere. Not that driving out to New Jersey on such short notice was going to be any fun, but this was her grandmother. For all her faults, Jane loved the old woman. Even if she didn't, she'd never hear the end of it if she skipped out on yet another family gathering.

"Okay, I guess I'll see you guys next Saturday," she said.
"Wonderful!" Aunt Judy exclaimed. "It's been far too long anyway. You're probably a skeleton by now, all that work you do."

"No, I'm not," Jane said through her teeth. Why did everyone always think that? "And if it's okay with you, I might bring a guest."

"You have a new boyfriend?"

Jane smiled in spite of herself. "He's a little more than that. He's my soulmate."

There was a split second of silence, and then a screech like microphone feedback. Jane nearly dropped the phone. Holding it a foot away from her face, she could still hear Aunt Judy's shrieks of 'Oh my god you found your soulmate!' and 'Frank, did you hear that? Janie found her soulmate!' clear as day.

"Oh, honey! This is the best news I've heard all week." Her voice cracked like she was holding back tears. For a while, Jane had wondered if she should wait to tell her favorite aunt in person, but now she was glad she hadn't. "I can't wait to hear all about him. I'm sure he's wonderful."

"He is," Jane said. The front door opened and Bucky stepped inside. He had a towel over his shoulder and his skin glowed with a sheen of sweat under tight gym clothes. He gulped down what remained of a large water bottle and tossed it with expert precision into the garbage can.

"Hell of a workout," he muttered, going straight to the bathroom and shedding his shirt along the way.

"He really is," Jane said, dazedly watching him.

She finished the call with Aunt Judy, after promising one more time to be at her house on the 15th at six sharp, to bring a nice gift and, of course, to bring Bucky. He was out of the shower by then, resting on the bed and flipping through channels. He wore loose fitting pajama pants and an old t-shirt. Even though it was two in the afternoon, he looked ready to go to sleep. It was his day off as long as no alien menace or mad scientist showed up, and he was going to spend it right.

Jane crawled into bed with him. His arm came around her, pulling her face into the crook of his neck. Jane kissed the spot where his neck met his shoulder, her tongue briefly darting out to taste him.

"Keep that up, and you're not gonna like what happens," he rumbled.

Jane nipped at his Adam's apple, palming the growing bulge in his pants. "I sincerely doubt that."

He rolled on top of her, grinding into her as she struggled to get her shirt over her head. Her breasts exposed, Bucky took one in his mouth, his tongue swirling around the sensitive nub. Jane was blinded by her shirt over her face. The damn thing was stuck and she couldn't sit up unless Bucky moved off her. He did only to get undressed. He was naked in the time it took Jane to finally remove her shirt, and then he helpfully tore her pants off, underwear and all. He dipped his fingers between wet, silky folds. Jane whimpered, her ability to think sucked away from her.

"We have… to talk… about something. It's important..." she gasped.

"It can wait," Bucky said. He had her in his lap as he slid inside her, a very convincing argument.

It was over fast, just a spur of the moment quickie. Jane fell onto the mattress, panting and shaking with the aftershook of her orgasm. Beside her, Bucky moved strands of hair clinging to her face.
He noticeably did not sweat or pant or look any worse for the wear despite the flurry of activity. Damn super soldiers.

"Told you," she said with a smile. "I absolutely loved that."

"Of course you did," Bucky said.

"Don't get cocky, Mister. We really do have to talk."

Bucky moaned like a kid forced to eat vegetables. He let go and Jane sat up on her elbows.

"My aunt called," she said. "My grandma's birthday is coming up, and we're having a big party for her."

The smile left Bucky's face as he seemed to understand where she was going with this. "You want me to go with you."

"Only if you want to," Jane said. "If you don't, I understand. I know meeting so many new people at once can be overwhelming, and my family can be kind of overbearing at times."

"That sounds familiar." Bucky chuckled. He kissed along the shell of her ear, making her shiver. "But if it's what you want, I'm happy to go."

"I want you to be comfortable," Jane said.

Bucky paused in his actions. She could still feel his lips on her. He breathed deeply, in and out. Without any conscious effort, Jane matched his pace, inhaling more than her lungs could take in and wheezing when she let it out. He moved his mouth away from her, setting his chin on top of her head. Jane could hear somewhere that a faucet was leaking. It was either in the bathroom or the kitchen and timing each drop almost kept her from blurting out something to counteract the silence.

"You really don't have to..." She put all the sincerity she could in her words without overdoing it. The last thing she wanted was to unintentionally guilt him into it. She'd dealt with relationships and friendships like that in the past; she knew what an awful thing it could be.

"I want to," he said. Jane could detect no hints of uncertainty in his tone. No breaks or wavering. If she didn't know he had the best poker face in the world, she would be completely reassured by now. "I really do, Jane. I want to meet your family. I'm guessing you already told them about me."

"Not much," said Jane. "Just that you exist. I wasn't sure what else to say before I talked to you."

"That's sweet of you, doll," Bucky said. "Course, if I'm going to meet them, it'll come out who I am eventually."

"We'll take it one step at a time." Jane kissed him. They both enjoyed the taste of each other long enough that Bucky started to get hard again. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"There's only one thing I'm more sure of right now," he said, pressing his length into her. "It's time to stop talking."

**

The drive from Manhattan to Newark wasn't a long one. Just under an hour not accounting for roadblocks or traffic. Jane took the shortest possible route her GPS offered, shaving exactly two minutes off the total travel time by cutting across Times Square. Hopefully, no collisions or idiots
trying to merge from the on-ramp would slow them down. Years of her grandma's trademark '5:01' death glare as she tapped her watch in Jane's face had taught her to fear tardiness in all its forms.

It had also taught her to never give in to road rage, tempting as it might be. Nothing spelled 'late' like spending an hour yelling at your insurance provider over a fender bender on the freeway.

"Come on…" she honked the horn as nobody moved even after the light had been green for five seconds. "Move! Dammit, who's in that car? A bunch of old ladies?"

"Not sure," Bucky stuck his head out the window to get a better look. They were only two cars down, so he wouldn't have too much trouble. "Okay, I can't see their face, but they are definitely on the phone."

Jane groaned, smacking her head on the steering wheel. "Just my luck. It had to be today, didn't it?"

"Come on, it'll be okay," said Bucky. "We'll be out of this before you know it."

"Can't you just shoot the driver?"

He chuckled. "I'd love to, but I left all my guns at home. Plus, I don't think first degree murder is going to get us to your aunt's place any faster."

She ground her head into the steering wheel until Bucky's large hand caressed her cheek, coaxing her out of her funk. "How 'bout you tell me more about your family while we wait?"

Jane sat up and checked in the rearview mirror that her hair was in place (unkemptness was another thing her grandmother's expectations taught her to fear). "There's not much to tell. The party is for my grandma, Jean. It's my Aunt Judy and Uncle Frank's place. Uncle Jeremy will be there and unless my cousins are still in their moody teenager phases, they'll be there, too."

"Hang on a second," Bucky said. "Is Aunt Judy your grandmother's daughter?"

"Biologically, yes," Jane said. She had to keep her eyes on the road, but she glanced at him from time to time. "What about it?"

"So your grandma is Jean, and her kids are John, Judy, and Jeremy. Your mom was Johanna, you're Jane."

"And you're James." Jane smiled at him. "Glad you figured it out."

He shook his head. "What the hell are we going to name our kids?"

Jane thought for a second. "If it's a girl, Jennifer or Jessica. If it's a boy, Joshua or Jacob."

"That settles it. I'm naming our kids."

"Don't be mean," Jane teased. "I think Jacob is a good name."

He pursed his lips. "It's okay. I'm still naming them."

She wished she could kiss the smirk off his face. Curse her running engine and the cars ahead of her choosing now of all times to move and the fact that she had to go celebrate her grandmother's birthday and be around her family all day.

He watched out the window as the trees flew by. Now that the traffic had cleared, they could speed along at a respectable pace, the Newark skyline slowly coming into view over a steep hill. They
drove through the city, passing buildings that would've looked huge to someone who didn't live in the heart of Manhattan. Aunt Judy and Uncle Frank's house was just outside city limits. It would be a while before they got there. At least another twenty minutes.

"You okay?" Jane asked. He hadn't spoken in some time and his face was severe.

"I'm just as okay as the last eight times you asked," he said.

Jane scowled. "I have not asked that many times."

"You sure?"

She ignored the humor in his voice. If she answered his challenge, he'd list each and every instance of her asking that question, from early morning to right now. Even though there was no way he could've committed all that to memory.

"You'll be fine," she said. They slowed for another red light, and she took the opportunity to close her hand over his. "My family is going to love you."

"I know," he said, almost convincingly. "I just keep thinking about when I met Erik. He sure doesn't love me."

That was not an untrue statement, she was sorry to say. Bucky and Erik were the two most important men in her life. There was nothing Jane wanted more than for them to get along, but they hadn't gotten off to a great start.

**

TWO WEEKS AGO

Bucky had been in a bad mood. Looking back on it later, he wouldn't remember why he was so pissed off, only that it had something to do with a botched training session and Sam Wilson being the stupidest smug asshole to ever be a stupid smug asshole. One of these days, Bucky was going to snap those stupid bird wings in half. Right down the middle. It would be glorious.

Going back to Jane's place, his acute hearing picked up more than one voice within her walls. It was male and unfamiliar, but there was no malice in his tone nor fear in Jane's. Probably just one of her co-workers then. Bucky stopped short of going in. Standing in front of the door, he could now hear them perfectly.

"...I'm glad you're settling in here, Jane. I know this is a big change from Puente Antiguo."

"It is different for sure, and I can't say I enjoy all the light pollution, but for now, the pros outweigh the cons."

The man hummed and there was some movement before he spoke again. "Darcy is enjoying herself."

Jane snorted. "Enjoying herself? She blew her first paycheck in one hour buying new clothes and iPhone accessories. Also, she's--"

"Jane, before you go on, there's something I wanted to talk to you about." He sounded more like a concerned parent all of a sudden. Bucky pressed his ear to the door. "I know this tower is home to a lot of people who have…somewhat shady pasts."
"That's one way to say superheroes."

"I've had the pleasure of meeting most of them by now. I think this is probably one of the safest places in the world, but at the same time, some of these guys might not be as trustworthy as others, and I want you to be careful who you get friendly with."

Silence. Followed by more movement. Footsteps made by small, feminine bare feet. "No offense Erik, but I haven't met anyone yet who fits that description."

"Well, for example, there's someone here who used to be an assassin for HYDRA. They say he was brainwashed and he had no control over his actions, but I think you should err on the safe side and not get too close to him."

The footsteps stopped. Jane might've gone still, or maybe Bucky was just projecting because he himself had gone very very still.

"I'm only saying this because I care about you, Jane. You're the closest thing I have to a daughter. I'm not asking you to scream and run whenever he walks by, but maybe-"

Bucky didn't let him finish that sentence. He was tired, his shoulder hurt, Sam was a stupid smug asshole, and this son of a bitch was shit-talking him in front of his own soulmate! If he wasn't Jane's dear old friend and father figure, God help him. As it was, Bucky strode into the room like he owned it, grabbed Jane, and dipped her, kissing her thoroughly before she had a chance to react.

He kept going until they both needed to breathe, but he kept her in his arms and relished the horror on Erik Selvig's puce colored face. "There you are, Jane, my beautiful soulmate. I missed you all day today. If I had it my way, we'd spend every waking moment in bed, and boy would I make you scream… oh, do we have company?"

He pretended to be shocked by Erik's presence, then hopped over the coffee table to shake his hand. He made sure to use the metal one.

**

"Yeah, that could've gone better," said Jane. It had taken an hour for Erik to stop hyperventilating. "I mean, I was about to tell him when you came in… actually, maybe it's for the best that you did what you did. I was going to really rip into him for talking about you like that."

Bucky shrugged. "He wasn't all wrong."

"Yes he was," said Jane, leaving no room for argument.

They got off at the next exit. This part of Jersey was mostly houses with a few stores mixed in. They passed a crowded supermarket with a logo he recognized from Manhattan. This store was huge, though, with a parking lot twice its size. With so much space to stretch out in, it was a wonder they weren't even bigger. Across the street were more houses, most of them smaller and older than the identical homes on the street they turned into. All that differentiated the rows of off-white dwellings were the numbers on the mailbox and the few that had been re-painted.

"So this is a suburb," Bucky said quietly.

"Pretty much," said Jane. "What do you think?"

"I was expecting smaller."
They pulled up in front of the house two doors from Aunt Judy's. With all the cars clogging up the driveway, it was the best Jane could manage. She hoped the old couple in the window wouldn't mind. She waved at them and they both gave her the stink eye before shutting the blinds.

"Okay," Jane said. She pulled the bag containing Grandma Jean's gift out of the backseat. Bucky took the tin of their most recent batch of cookies. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, lowering his gaze. "Just... do you think maybe we could not talk about me in there?"

Jane frowned. "Like who you are, or-"

"Yeah, that," Bucky said, still not looking at her. "Look, I'm not trying to talk bad about your family. I don't know them, and I want to be able to trust them, but this is your grandma's day so-"

"James, relax." Jane touched the fleshy glove that covered his robotic fingers. It was a new creation courtesy of Tony Stark for the everyday needs of the metal-armed amputee. No one would ever know something was off unless they touched it. "I told you, I want you to be comfortable. If you don't want to tell them yet, we won't. Not until you're ready."

Bucky swallowed. He pulled Jane into his arms, burying his face in her hair. "I am the luckiest bastard on earth to have a girl like you, you know that?"

"You only tell me ten times a day."

Bucky made a mental note to start telling her twelve times.

**

"Janie, my baby! You made it!"

A petite woman with dyed blonde hair and tannish skin launched herself at Jane from across the room. They'd only just gotten through the door when she attacked. If it had been anyone else, Bucky would've had them off Jane and headfirst into the nearest wall before they could blink. He stayed those protective instincts as the woman released Jane and rounded on him.

"And this must be your boyfriend," the woman said, wearing the biggest grin Bucky had ever seen. Now that he could appraise her properly, her resemblance to Jane was pretty uncanny. She was maybe an inch shorter, with gray roots come in and bright brown eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses. Another thirty years, and this would be Jane. He'd think they were mother and daughter if he didn't know better.

"Aunt Judy, this is James," Jane said, taking his hand. "We met last month."

"Is that all?" she asked. "You two already seem so close! It's like you've been together forever."

"I guess it's just a soulmate thing," Jane said.

"Must be wonderful," Aunt Judy sighed. "I never had a mark myself, but I wouldn't trade your uncle for anything. Right, Frank?"

A man in the living room with his eyes glued to a football game answered: "Sure, honey, in a minute."

Aunt Judy marched over and snatched away the pillow he'd been resting his head on. "Francis,
He rubbed the back of his head and scowled at his wife, but she just tugged him up by the scruff of his neck. He was almost as tall as Bucky with a layer of thickness around his waist. His brown hair was cut close to the scalp, his eyes warm but hard with age. He hugged Jane and kissed the top of her head. Then he turned to Bucky and stuck out a hand.

"Good to meet you, son," he said. Bucky noted his posture: spine straight, shoulders back. A veteran maybe? Jane hadn't said anything. "I hope you're taking care of my niece. She means the world to us."

"Yes, sir," Bucky said. "Of course, sir."

He met the rest of Jane's family as Aunt Judy called them all to attention. Frank's brother Will, waved from the couch and then went back to cursing out the referee. Next to him was Abigail, his wife, who smiled at them but was even more into the game than her husband. Their son, Will Jr., typed something into his phone and didn't look up even after his name was called three times.

A toilet flushed and another man bounded into the room shouting Jane's name. He was short, but stocky, with light blond hair and massive arms. He engulfed Jane in a bear hug, spinning her around a few times. She laughed happily and needed a minute to regain her balance after he let go. Then Bucky was officially introduced to Uncle Jeremy.

With Jane's grandmother resting before dinner, Bucky settled for integrating himself into the family unit. He watched the game with Jane's uncles and tried to be enthusiastic despite not caring for football. He struck up a conversation with Will Jr, who nodded a lot and gave one-word answers to everything. He helped Aunt Judy in the kitchen, getting things down from the high shelves and setting the table.

Things went smoothly for the first hour or so, and Bucky could almost say he was enjoying himself. Nobody had asked him any questions beyond 'where are you from' and 'what team do you root for?' The only awkward encounter so far was when Uncle Jeremy decided it was time for Bucky to 'officially join the Foster family' by engaging him in an arm wrestling match.

"Oh no, sir," Bucky said, sliding away from him. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Come on, boy," said Jeremy. He got down on his knees with his sleeve rolled up and his elbow on the coffee table. "I don't bite! Get on over here. Hope you're left handed."

"I am definitely not left-handed," Bucky hid said arm behind his back. The creak of the metal was right against his ear. "Not at all. So we shouldn't do this."

"Don't tell me you're scared of little old me."

"I am scared, yes," Bucky nodded. "I'm terrified. You're very intimidating."

He vaulted over the couch, knocking a lamp off the table with the toe of his boot. It would have shattered and spread broken glass all over the floor, but Bucky caught it half an inch from the ground and replaced it on the side table. Frank, Will, and Abigail gawked at him, but Jeremy was too busy shaking his head and bemoaning that Jane picked 'a total wimp' for a boyfriend to notice.

He spent some time in the bathroom before deciding to go look for Jane. He found her in the kitchen, her back to him as she chatted with Aunt Judy. Her hair was up for some reason, and maybe a little shorter at the ends unless his eyes were playing tricks on him. Also, was she taller all of a sudden?
"Hey, doll," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. 

She tensed up, then turned to look at him with hazel green eyes. "Excuse me?"

Bucky snatched his hand away. "I'm sorry. I thought you were-"

"James!" the real Jane appeared at his side, so silently it was as if she was the trained assassin. "There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"James has just met your cousin," said Aunt Judy. She placed her hands on the Jane lookalike's shoulders. "This is Sammy, Jeremy's oldest daughter. Sammy, this is Jane's boyfriend, James."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, shaking his hand as Uncle Frank had.

Now that Jane was there to compare, several more differences became apparent. Sammy had a longer nose and a wider mouth. Her body curved at the hip in a way Jane's did not, giving her a pear shape as opposed to Jane's petite build. She dressed in more form fitting clothes, skinny jeans and a halter top. No plaid for her he'd wager. That aside, the resemblance was uncanny.

"I know what you're thinking," Aunt Judy sang in his ear. "And if you think these two are like twins now, you should've seen them when they were kids. We used to call them Patty and Cathy."

"I see," Bucky said, as Jane and Sammy side-eyed each other.

"But I suppose Patty Duke would be a bit before your time."

"Uh huh…"

"Sammy, James happens to be Jane's soulmate. You're doing a paper on soulmates, right? Maybe they can help you out."

That must've been the best thing Samantha Foster had heard all day. Her entire demeanor changed so fast, it was like someone had frozen time and replaced her with an alien duplicate.

"Seriously?" She grabbed Bucky's arm (the right one, fortunately) and then Jane's. "We're going to have a long talk."

"Uh, Sammy-" It was no use. With shocking strength, Sammy pulled them to the nearest empty couch and situated them with herself in the middle. She withdrew a pen and a notepad from somewhere in her pockets. The first few pages were total chaos of scribbles, lines crossed out, half-formed ideas, and doodles of flowers.

"I'm doing my Ph.D thesis on interactions between newly discovered soulmates as opposed to those who have been together for more than twenty years," she explained, all but bouncing in her seat at the prospect of new guinea pigs. "You wouldn't believe some of the stories I've heard. One guy met his soulmate when she was catering at, get this, his wedding."

"Wow," Jane said politely.

"That must've been awkward," Bucky said. "What happened to them?"

"Fortunately, the bride and the caterer were both bi and open-minded. This sort of thing would usually end in total disaster, but the three of them seemed really happy when I interviewed them."

Sammy tapped her pen on the top of the page. "Enough chit-chat. I have some questions for you lovely people."
For the next forty-five minutes, Sammy grilled them on every aspect of their relationship. What their words were; how they met; had they bonded; did they plan on bonding within the next year; the next five years; what were their opinions on couples who bonded the very first time they had sex; what were their opinions on those who didn't wait for their soulmate and started a romance with someone else; how did they feel about the psychological and sociological impact of soulmates in modern Western society…

By the time Jane's grandmother hobbled out of her bedroom supported by a cane and both of Jane's uncles, Bucky was about ready to bolt. Samantha had filled five back to back pages with messy scribbles of literally every word out of their mouths. Her handwriting was awful, but her speed was inhuman. Her resemblance to Jane was even stronger than ever.

"Happy birthday, Grandma!" Jane and Sammy said in unison.

Grandma Jean, the guest of honor herself, was exactly what Bucky expected her to be. Tiny, wizened, white haired. The only surprises were her shocking blue eyes that matched none of her children and the scowl on her face as she jerked her arm out from Frank's grip.

"Knock it off," she rasped at him. She had the voice of a pack a day smoker, but that might've just come with age. 'Babying me... I'm not dead yet. Go do some jumping jacks. You're getting fat. Judy won't put up with you if you're fat.'

"Love you, too, Ma," Frank muttered.

He went to watch the end of the game as Jeremy stayed one step behind his mother, just out of sight. She stopped at the couch where Bucky, Jane, and Sammy sat. She studied her granddaughters for a moment, their happy smiles in place even as their grandmother glared at them.

"You have that degree yet?" she asked Sammy.

"Still working on it, Grandma."

"You'd better!" Grandma Jean turned to Jane. "They name something after you yet?"

"Not yet, Grandma."

"Get on that!" said Grandma Jean. Her eyes fell upon Bucky. She stared a hole through his head. Barring a moment of apparent shock, her expression was unreadable.

'She recognizes you,' said a voice in the back of Bucky's head.

But that couldn't be, he reasoned with himself. She would've been around back then, sure, but that was seventy years ago. No way she'd remember some guy she might've seen on the news once or twice standing behind a much more conspicuous Captain America. Not to mention how different he looked now.

"Who is this?" she demanded. She leaned in as far as her brittle bones would allow, but even that half inch of scrutiny had Bucky backing up a hair.

"Grandma, this is James. He's my soulmate," Jane said. "We just met and-"

"He needs a haircut," Grandma Jean shouted. She pointed a gnarled finger in Bucky's face. "Get a haircut and shave! You look like a gangbanger."
In the kitchen, Judy spat out the wine she'd been drinking. Jeremy fell on his ass laughing while Sammy tried her best to stifle her giggles. Even Frank and Will Jr. cracked smiles, though neither bothered looking away from their respective screens.

"Uh..." Bucky looked to Jane for help, but she was speechless. "I..."

"You're gonna date my granddaughter, you're gonna look respectable. Like a proper soldier." She looked him up at down very slowly, taking in every detail of his body from head to toe. "At least the rest of you is right. Next time you come over, leave your shirt at home. Your pants, too."

"Grandma!" Sammy shouted between guffaws. "You can't talk to people like that! It's rude."

"What was that?" Grandma Jean brought a hand up to her ear as she hobbled into to the kitchen. "Can't hear you. Aid's on the fritz. Talk louder next time."

"She doesn't have a hearing aid," Jane whispered to Bucky.

The party moved to the dining room as Aunt Judy announced that dinner was ready. Bucky was seated between Jane and Uncle Jeremy. The latter still hadn't given up on his arm wrestling plan, and Bucky carefully deflected him with questions about the weather and compliments to Aunt Judy for her wonderful cooking skills.

"Maybe you could teach me and Jane a thing or two," he said. "We've been taking cooking lessons."

"That's wonderful!" Judy squealed, clapping her hands together. "Cosmopolitan just ran an article on the ten best activities for soulmates and cooking was number four."

"I wonder what number one was," said Will Jr. He'd put his phone away for once, but he still had little to say as he ate. His father swatted him on the head with a napkin for that comment, and not another word passed his lips all the way to dessert.

Jane, meanwhile, had Sammy on her other side and judging from their conversation, it was clear the interrogation was far from over.

"So when you think back to your past relationships and crushes, do you see a pattern in terms of appearance or personality that might've indicated early on what kind of soulmate you'd have? Studies have shown that one in six women experience a sort of precognition when it comes to their soulmates and are drawn to men with similar attributes."

But what really got to Bucky was Grandma Jean. At no point, from the moment they sat down to when Uncle Frank carried out the birthday cake and they all started singing, did she look away from him. She was still as a statue, eating like a bird and ignoring anyone who tried to talk to her. The worst part was that Bucky's earlier fears appeared to have come true. Nothing about her look was searching. There was no confusion, only knowing. She knew exactly who she was looking at. The only question was how?

Bucky had wracked his brains, going as far back as his mostly repaired memory would allow, but nothing came to him. He'd never had a friend or a girlfriend or even a casual acquaintance named Jean. He would've written her off as just another viewer of the old newsreels and interviews, but there was something much too familiar about her gaze like she knew every inch of him intimately. And then there was the way she smiled when he took a deep breath and his chest puffed out.

"You look like you bench five hundred," she said, reaching out to squeeze his right arm. "I bet it's even more. You got the arms for it. Why don't you roll up your sleeves and flex?"
"Mother, please," Aunt Judy said. "Don't embarrass Jane's boyfriend."

"I'm trying to help her," Grandma Jean snapped. "Get a man like that, you gotta know what to do with him. Make sure he's doing her right."

"I'm so sorry," Aunt Judy hissed to Bucky from across the table. "She's old. She has no filter."

"Sit down, girl! I can't hear you when you whisper like that." Grandma Jean took a sip of wine and smacked her lips. "Hits the spot… anyway, how's your tonguework?"

"I think it's time to adjourn to the living room for some coffee," said Uncle Frank. He took his plate to the sink and left the kitchen as fast as possible. The rest of the family followed suit until only Jane, Bucky, Aunt Judy, and Grandma Jean remained.

"Fuh, bunch of babies," Grandma Jean muttered. "You'd think none of them ever had sex in their lives."

"Mother, you can't just ask people questions like that."

"I'm ninety-three goddamn years old, Judith," Grandma Jean said. "You think I give a damn about being polite?"

Jane motioned at Bucky to follow her. They left while Aunt Judy had Grandma Jean distracted, and they skipped coffee in the living room to find some peace and quiet in the guest room.

"I guess I should've warned you about how my grandma can be," she said, dropping down on the bed. "Normally, she's not that… blunt."

"Age'll do that," Bucky said, grinning. "I mean, I'm close to a hundred, and I'm very open about wanting you naked all the time, aren't I?"

"Stop it," Jane said, squeaking as Bucky's lips found her throat. "Knock it off! My entire family is in the next room!"

"The walls are thick," Bucky said, his hand creeping up her thigh. "Just lock the door and we're golden."

"After we get home," Jane said firmly, pushing Bucky's hands away. He pouted but acquiesced and moved to the edge of the bed.

"I think she knows who I am," he said, shaking his head. "I guess I should've expected it, her being as old as she is."

"I doubt she'll say anything," Jane said reassuringly. "Something else will catch her attention, and she'll rant about that for a few hours. By the time she's done, she'll have forgotten all about you."

"Maybe," Bucky said. He could still hear everyone talking outside. They were laughing. Someone had just told the funniest joke. "I have this weird feeling, though. Like maybe I did meet her once."

"I don't think so," Jane said. "Until she moved in with Aunt Judy and Uncle Frank, Grandma never left her hometown in Pennsylvania. I know she was a big Captain America fan back in the day. She had this autographed picture of Steve she got from his fan club. I think she sent you guys some letters, too."

Bucky's stomach dropped all the way to his feet as soon as Jane said the word 'letters'. Something
long since dormant floated up to the forefront of his mind, and he stammered out his next words.

"Jane, what was your grandma's maiden name?"

She blinked. "Norton. Jean Norton. Why?"

'Ooh my god…'

**

1944

"Hey, Barnes! That Jean Norton woman sent you another letter!"

Bucky, who'd been happily minding his own business polishing his sniper rifle, had an open and unfolded letter shoved into his face by a stupidly grinning Dugan. Dugan was going to get a spider under his pillow just as soon as Bucky found something big and hairy enough to scar him for life, but that was a job for another day.

"Don't you know it's rude to open someone else's mail, asshole?" Bucky snatched it out of his hands.

"Can't help it, pal. Not when you have so many admirers." Jones and Jacques snickered in the background like the fuckheads they were. "Especially this one. Read the first few paragraphs. Some good stuff in there."

Against his better judgment, Bucky did look at the letter and fuck that fucking fucker Dugan and his perfect memory. Bastard immediately started reciting it.

"Sergeant Barnes, my heart goes aflutter when I think of you! My dripping womanhood aches for your rough, manly touch. I throb with need every night as I think of what it would be like to be yours. To be claimed by you in the most intimate of ways. To have your big strong hands on my naked, quivering body. To feel your tongue race across my bosom, down to the apex of my pleasure center—"

He dissolved into a hysterical mess, as did Jones and Jacques. If anyone else was around to hear this, all of them would be dead right now, and no one would mourn them. At least Bucky wouldn't.

Tossing the letter aside, he decided some fresh air was in order before they shipped off on their next mission tomorrow. If luck was on his side, this would be the last he ever heard from that particular fan.

**

"James, what's wrong?" Jane asked, prodding his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Uh… I…"

The clack of a cane stopped, and when the door creaked open, Grandma Jean was there. She gave Bucky the same look, the same smile as before. She winked at him.

"Tongue," she said, and then she stepped into her room and shut the door.

**

Bucky insisted on driving home. Jane was tired and he needed more practice behind the wheel
anyway. City life wasn't conducive to learning a stick shift, and unless it had two wheels and handlebars, he wasn't used to traveling any way other than on foot or by plane. After many goodbyes, a clap on the shoulder from Jeremy, six hugs and kisses on the cheeks from Judy, and one more whispered 'tongue' from Grandma Jean, they were on their way and would be home before midnight.

Jane had her head against the window, her eyes lidded. Once or twice, Bucky thought she'd fallen asleep, only for her to change positions or turn the dial on the radio.

"You still haven't told me what my grandma meant by that," she said.

"What makes you think she meant anything at all?" he asked quickly. "You said it yourself. She's old and she's blunt. That's all it is. Nothing else."

"If you say so," Jane said. She adjusted her seat backward, curling up under his jacket.

"As long as she doesn't say anything about me to your family, I'm okay," he said.

Jane bit her lip. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you."

**

TWENTY MINUTES AGO

"Thanks so much you guys for being so nice to James," Jane said to her gathered family while Bucky was in the bathroom. "He was really nervous about coming here today."

"We understand," said Jeremy. "You have any idea how I felt when I first met your aunt Ellen's family? And we weren't even soulmates."

"This is different," Jane muttered. The only sound for the next few seconds were the explosions from whatever game Will Jr. was playing. "James has had… kind of a difficult life. It's hard to explain."

"Well, all those superheroes have had hard lives, dear," said Aunt Judy solemnly. "It's why they're so good at what they do."

Jane's mouth fell open. She scanned every single face in the room from Sammy to Frank to Abigail to Jeremy. Not a single one showed any surprise by what Aunt Judy just said. "Wait.. what do you- How did you know?"

"Technically, we didn't," said Frank, jamming a thumb over his shoulder. "Not until Will Jr. told us."

Jane stared at him, but he just rolled his eyes and kept playing. "There are new Winter Soldier pics on the Avengers fan forums every day, Cuz. You'd have to be an idiot not to recognize him."

"I can't believe I didn't see it before," said Uncle Frank. "The way he moves is clearly military."

"I am so damn relieved I didn't arm wrestle him," Uncle Jeremy shuddered.

"Don't worry, sweetie, we already figured out that he wants to be incognito for a while," said Aunt Judy. "We won't say anything until he's ready to tell us."

"Th-thanks guys," Jane said, as she made a mental note to badger Tony about tighter restrictions
The bridge was just ahead and the twinkling lights of the city beckoned to Jane for once. Normally, she hated them. They blotted out the stars and turned the sky into an empty blob of smog and occasional airplanes. Tonight, it relaxed her. It reminded her where home was.

**

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"So I've been thinking," she said.

"About?"

Jane hesitated for a second. "You ever think about your family? I mean… what happened to them?"

It was a question that had been on her mind for a while now, but she'd refrained from asking out of fear of insulting him or dredging up uncomfortable memories. He paled a shade and Jane was ready to launch into an apology.

"I've looked into it," he said stiffly. "Parents are gone, of course. Mom went in the seventies of cancer, but my dad stuck around until about ten years ago. He was a tough old bastard, so I'm not surprised he lived so long."

"Like father, like son," Jane said, earning a near smile from him.

"My sister, Becca, she's the only one left." His hands tightened on the wheel. "She's eighty-five. Lives in a nursing home. They say she doesn't know what day it is most of the time."

Jane held his hand, rubbing his knuckles in that way that never failed to soothe him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "It happens. Should've happened to me a long time ago…"

"Do you wish it had?" Jane asked.

They stopped at a red light, and Bucky took the opportunity to reach over and kiss her sweetly. "Not anymore."

He licked her lips and Jane moaned with need. She should've let him have his way with her back at the house. Now she'd be spending the next half hour with her legs crossed. The light changed, and they had to pull away. The car behind them started honking and Bucky flipped them off before speeding down the road.

**

Morning dawned, shining a light on Jane's bed and the two naked bodies curled up together. They'd thrown the covers off in the middle of the night when Jane woke him up for a 'midnight snack'. She sighed happily against his chest, her lips brushing his warm skin as she slept on. Bucky had been awake for some time, and while his leg was about to fall asleep, he had no desire to move Jane off. He drew circles in her back, creeping lower until his fingers kneaded her ass. She wriggled and moaned. She'd be awake soon if he kept going.

His phone dinged, and he lazily picked it up to read the message.
'hey sexii thing! when u done nailing jane lets all do lunch! Xoxo -D'

Someone needed to talk to that girl about her sign offs. And her grammar. And her people skills. She was going to wind up just like Jane's grandmother someday. Another text came in, this one with much improved spelling and grammar.

'Bucky- Sam and I were going to the bar for dinner tonight. Wanted to invite you and Jane to come too. Let me know if you're not too busy. ;)'

'Dumb punk,' Bucky thought. Whoever taught him about emojis was getting a bullet in their leg. So probably Sam.

Jane sighed as he found a sensitive spot on her inner thigh. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Bucky said, his lips brushing hers. "Just thinking about what a great family we have."

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