"All That's Best of Dark and Bright"

by SithHappens

Summary

Sam Wilson knew you were a sucker for a tragic tale, and it didn't get much more tragic than Bucky Barnes, did it? So, you opened your home to an ex-assassin with PTSD and memory loss, because you'd be damned if you didn't try to help. Sometimes helping others helps you out, too. (started out as connected drabbles, sorta evolved into a full fic, so might seem a little disjointed at first)

Notes

This first set of tidbits were put on tumblr as drabbles, and the "reader" character has evolved from this a bit I think, but this is what I have done now and I don't know how to change it. So, here you go! Hope you enjoy! I think it gets better as it goes...
Chapter 1

If it had just been Captain America and Black Widow to show up at your place, or hell, even Sam in his Falcon get-up, you would have slammed the door in their faces. But Wilson had come to you as Sam, your old friend, Sam, the man you trusted, Sam, who thought more of you than you did yourself sometimes. And he was with people he trusted that could use your help. Damn that man for knowing you all too well, for knowing that you were a sucker for a tragic tale.

“James Buchanan Barnes,” Natasha informed when the scruffy-haired man with the metal arm was ushered quickly into your living room to sit on your couch.

“Bucky,” Steve corrected solemnly and you suddenly saw a war going on in the broody blue eyes of your new acquaintance. One war or a hundred or a thousand, all because of a word that was said more like a quiet plea than a nickname.

They’d barely finished telling you all they knew before you gave them your answer.

“Okay.”

—

He didn’t say a word to you those first few days. His eyes would just follow you, watching, calculating, as you showed him how to use the TV, the computer, the microwave. You pointed out the pantry for snacks and the linen closet for towels. When you made food, he’d sit at the table patiently and would eat with a practiced rigidity. Once finished, he’d immediately wash the plate and utensils and put them in your dish rack to dry.

You made up a room for him, but he was a ghost haunting your hallways at night for a while, even the warped old floorboards of your house too afraid to make a sound under the weight of him. Only the gliding of his shadow under your bedroom door gave an indication of his passing, and you were certain that was only a courtesy he gave you. If he had truly wanted to go unnoticed, you wouldn’t have seen even that.

His fourth night, your curiosity got the better of you, and you padded out of your room to investigate. You discovered him sitting on your couch in silence. When you rounded the armrest, you were surprised to find your cat sitting in his lap, purring contently. His fingers were buried in her fur as they both looked up at you.

“Is she bothering you?”

“No.” His voice was calm and even, but still it startled you enough to make you jump a bit.

As if trying to demonstrate, the cat got to her feet and stretched, making a round of his lap before butting her head against his metal arm, rubbing her cheek against its ridged surface. He glanced down at her as she curled into a ball of fluff in the crook of his elbow.

—

Shouting woke you late one night and you were on your feet and headed down the hallway on autopilot. From what Sam and the others said, you’d been expecting this to happen. Nightmares. There were always nightmares. You had seen so many of your friends go through this, had been a victim of them yourself so many times. It came with the territory.
You were barely in the door when something flashed through your line of sight, a searing heat etched its way across your right cheekbone, accompanied by a thud next to your ear. Bucky was sitting up in his bed, shirtless, with his prosthetic arm extended in your direction, eyes wide in near terror. Turning, you saw a throwing dagger embedded in the doorframe beside your face. Pressing your fingers to your cheek, wincing from the pain, you pulled them back to see blood. With an annoyed grunt, you pulled the knife from the wood. “Didn’t know you had this. Though I should’ve guessed.”

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, tossing his feet over the edge of the bed and staring at the floor.

You sighed heavily. “It’s alright. I’ve had worse things happen.”

His eyes shot up to you then, staring at you from between tendrils of sweaty hair. “I could’ve killed you.”

“And I should’ve knocked,” you replied, moving to sit at the edge of the mattress. His gaze followed you, silent and confused. “You were having a nightmare. Do you want to talk about it?”

He shook his head, finally looking away. You’d seen this before too, and it always broke your heart a little. But pushing would do no good, so you just reached out and balanced the flat of the dagger on his knee, pressing your palm to his shoulder for a fraction of a second. “Well, you know where to find me if you change your mind.”

You were almost to the door when he spoke again. “Why are you letting me stay here?”

"Because Sam asked,” you replied as though that was the most obvious thing in the world. “You’ve never had a friend you trusted enough to do what they ask?”

That war was in his eyes again, lost memories trying to fight their way to the surface. "I think so. I can’t…”

“You will,” was your soft response. A gentle reassurance. "You’ll remember.”

"Why you,” he asked, trying to push away troubling thoughts. You smiled, trying your damnedest to hold back your laugh as you left, offering back over your shoulder “I ask myself that all the time.”
Chapter Notes

Get an additional familiar character thrown in on this one. Sections sorta fluctuate in length for a bit, but I do believe they eventually get a decent length. Hope you'll bare with me!

Taking stock of the guests in your backyard would have given any sane person a headache. Two superhumans, one who had been frozen for over 70 years and another with a metal arm and memory loss, a man who wore mechanical wings regularly, a highly-trained assassin with auburn hair and a sharp tongue, and a Norse god. You just hoped you’d had enough lemonade and cookies made up.

The whole group had shown up at your place like an unexpected party, and you’d glowered at Sam for a while for not calling ahead. It was putting a cramp in your quiet corner of the world to have so many people, let alone super people, traipsing about the place like it was a public venue. But you supposed you couldn’t be too mad, because they were there under the auspice of friendship. Of helping. And despite whatever snide remark or sneering look you gave to people, you were all about helping.

Bucky and Thor sparred in the grass, the sound of metal clanging sporadically as arm met armor. It had been fortuitous that the God of Thunder had come along, though maybe Steve really did know his friend all too well, because Barnes silently refused to fight with his long lost compatriot, even in a friendly match in an isolated backyard. You went to those two first, Thor offering you a broad smile as he pushed Bucky away and pointed out your approach. Both stood, chests heaving a little from exertion, faces smeared with sweat and dirt.

“Thought you boys could use a breather,” you said, setting your tray on the grass and handing each an empty cup. "Brought you something to drink."

"Thank you,” Thor beamed as you poured watching the liquid sloshing with a bit of curiosity.

Bucky took half a glance at your right cheek and looked away with a nod. The scar there was only a few days old, still a little raw and gnarly, but nothing much to write home about. Still, he’d taken a step back in progress, as far interacting with you was concerned.

“This is very good,” Thor suddenly boomed, examining his empty cup. "What is it?"

"I take it you don’t have lemonade where you’re from,” you asked with a laugh.

He shook his head. "May I have some more?"

"Sure,” you smiled, pouring another before turning to Bucky who had finished his. "How about you?"

"No, thank you,” was his terse response. He held the cup out to you stiffly, and you made the conscious decision to brush your fingers over his as you took it from him, a gesture meant to ground him, soothe his nerves. Instead, his eyes flew to yours a split second before a long crack etched its way up the glass under the pressure of his hand.
“Barnes,” Thor asked in a cautious tone. “Do you wish to continue sparring?”

You could hear the relief in Bucky’s voice when he answered. “Yes.”

Without a second look, you picked up your tray to head to the patio table where the rest of your guests sat. You discarded the broken glass in the can beside the patio door on your way so there would be no questions about it. Sam, Nat, and Steve all looked up when you stepped to the table, obviously not too engrossed in their conversation. And Nat was the first one to grab a cookie as you poured the drinks.

“Steve, can I ask you something,” you said when you put his glass in front of him.

He nodded, sitting up a little straighter in his seat. ”Yes, ma’am."

"What was Bucky’s favorite food?"
There had been a basic routine at the house since Bucky had joined you. While you had never met anyone else in quite the same position as him, you figured it wouldn’t hurt to keep some semblance of structure for him. So, by the time the oven timer sounded, he was already in the kitchen grabbing plates and silver ware to set the table, a task you had laid on him at the beginning and he never balked at. He would always wait in there for you, though you assumed if you ever needed assistance, all you had to do was ask.

You brought the casserole dish to the dining room, musing to yourself momentarily how you were bordering on 50s housewife these days, without the nice dress or the apron. "Got some insider information that you might like this."

Bucky looked from you to the casserole dish with guarded curiosity as you sat, not saying a word. But when you took his plate and gave him a scoopful, his eyes widened a fraction and even through the curtain of his dark hair you could see something spark to life in them as the corners of his lips pitched upward. "Shepherd’s pie?"

"Yeah,” you replied gently, almost too afraid to breathe lest you startle him and chase away that hint of a smile that was threatening to crinkle the skin around his eyes.

"Rogers told you I liked this,” he stated rather than asked, and his gaze held yours longer than they had since the nightmare.

You nodded, smiling as you put the plate down before him. He lifted his fork with the same rigid motions as before, but he paused once he closed his mouth around the first bite. Paused so long in fact, you had time to get your own plateful, watching his jaw work in deliberate motions. He eventually swallowed, tip of his tongue sliding out over his bottom lip as he looked a bit lost in thought. And suddenly, he wasn’t the hardened, ice-cold assassin for a moment, just a regular guy sitting at your table.

“It’s delicious,” he smiled, an honest-to-goodness smile that softened his face and reminded you that he’d been a fairly young man when his world went to shit. If there had been any doubts in you over taking him in, over offering your help, they were driven away by that smile.

His movements were more natural now, savoring the food a bit instead of shoveling it into his face like he never knew when he’d eat again. When his plate was cleared, as usual, you asked if he wanted more. His face fell as he looked from the dish to his empty plate to your plate to your eyes, like he wasn’t sure what to do, almost begging you to take the decision away. “I…”

With a gentle smile, you reached out and scooped more onto his plate. “You can always eat as much as you want. Anything left over you can have for lunch or a snack later.”

He nodded, but was much more interested in the food on his plate, easing a little again as he ate. Still, he was quicker with his fork than you, and you finished by the time he’d polished off his second helping. Bucky licked his lips again before asking you “More?”

“If you want,” you laughed. You weren’t sure you’d ever had someone eat so much of your food at one sitting, and you had to admit it was sort of flattering.

“No,” he shook his head slightly. “Do you want more?”

“Oh,” you blinked. That was a first. “Uh, no. I’m good.”
Giving you a curt nod, he stood and reached for your dishes. He had to pause a moment to keep from stepping on the cat, who had apparently been curled up between his feet under the table. You must have had a confused look on your face, because he gave you a quick glance and said in a gruff voice “I’ll do the dishes more often.”

“Be my guest,” you replied, somewhat more amused by the tone of his voice than actually scared.

You reached down to pick up the uncooperative cat from the floor to allow Bucky to continue on his way. She meowed once in protest, but didn’t squirm as you tucked her under your arm to stand and grab the leftover food. You could help baby-talking the indifferent furry mass as you followed your housemate. “Isn’t that right, kitty-kitty? He can be our guest. Be our guest. Be our guest. Put our service to the test. Tie a napkin ’round your neck, Cherie, and we provide the rest…”

Continuing to hum the tune, you spun into the kitchen only to find Bucky standing at the sink, staring at you in near-horror. Apparently, he had heard your caterwauling and was none too impressed. “What are you doing?”

“Singing to the cat,” was your simple answer as you set her down so she could scamper off to who knows where. Your explanation did little to assuage Bucky’s look of concern as he still eyed you warily, running the hot water. “You know, Beauty and the Beast? Disney?”

“Disney,” he asked, taken aback. He scrubbed at a plate, pensive, until he looked back at you with brows furrowed. “Kid stuff?”

Ah, so he remembered Disney at least. But you couldn’t hold back your mock anger as you went about putting the food away. “Kid stuff? Kid stuff? That’s it! We’re having a marathon tonight!”

“Aren’t we both a bit old for cartoons,” he replied, and for a moment, you heard humor in his voice. He flashed you an almost jovial look with his hands moving under the faucet to rinse the forks.

“Okay, fight me,” you smirked, urged on by his demeanor. You took an obviously sloppy fight stance, fists balled loosely and held up on cocked wrists, something no one could find a true threat in.

He turned wide eyes to you, another light flickering there when he took you in. A memory… a good memory judging by the smile threatening his lips once more. “Are you… joking?”

“Of course, I’m joking,” you nodded, dropping the ruse and leaning against the counter beside him. “About the fighting though, not the movies.”

“Steve used to fight,” he murmured, far far away in his own head. He looked down at the draining water in the sink like it could give him some clarity. “God, I pulled him outta more scrapes than I can count. He was the scrappiest thing until… until…”

Something dark flashed across his face, agitation etching over his skin. His jaw clenched tight as his muscles tensed. Breath came in short growling bursts as you cautiously inched closer. Suddenly his metal fist banged down hard on the edge of the sink, denting it grotesquely, but not breaking it.

"Bucky," you soothed, pulled from your moment of observation. Your voice was even, calm, though your heart thundered in your chest. "Bucky, you’re safe. You’re here with me, in my kitchen. We just ate shepherd’s pie and you’re doing the dishes."

It was almost a dire miscalculation when you reached out to touch the cool metal of his prosthetic. Lightning fast, that fist gripped around you shoulder, fingers digging harshly into your skin. And it hurt, maybe not enough to break bones, but his hand was heavy and tight and it hurt. He was facing
you now, but he wasn’t behind his eyes.

"Bucky,” you tried again, gritting your teeth through the pain and trying not to struggle. Squirming around too would just make it worse, you knew from experience. Instead, you pressed your shoulder up into his palm, reaching out again to settle your hand in the middle of his violently heaving chest. “Bucky, you’re safe. You need to breathe. Listen to my voice. Breathe.”

You started to coach him, pressing your hand firmer against him when you said to exhale, easing your touch with an inhale, until he was starting to breathe normally and his grip loosened around your shoulder. When his arm fell to his side you stepped into him, hand pressed into his cheek to look up at him while his stubble itched at your palm. Searching his eyes, you found him there again, aware of things again.

“Hey, Buck,” you smiled gently. “You did it. You got through this one. You’re doing good.”

Bucky furrowed his brows at you, angry and confused, and for a moment you thought he was starting to slip back. But his metal fingers curled into the collar of your shirt, tugging it toward your aching shoulder. He paused at your involuntary flinch, swallowing hard before he found his voice, all gravel and disgust. “You call this good? I keep hurting you.”

“You don’t mean to,” you assured, rubbing the scruff along his jawline a little. “Besides, I’m a pretty tough cookie. It’ll bruise, but nothing’s broken.”

“And this,” he growled, hanging on to that anger, that self-loathing, as you felt the cool slide of his finger over your new scar. “They shouldn’t have left me here with you.”

You scoffed at this. “Why? Because I’m not some superhero?”

“Because I could kill you,” he ground out coldly, eyes boring into yours. There was no doubt in your mind that is was true, there never had been. But you surprised yourself with how steady your voice sounded when you replied “Do you want to kill me, Bucky?”

He blinked, confused. You guessed it wasn’t a question he’d ever been asked before. “No.”

“Good,” you nodded, tongue darting across your lips before you hooked a thumb toward the end of the kitchen. “Now go grab a big bowl in the far cabinet while I make some popcorn.”

His eyes darted over your face, brows knit, obviously jarred by the sudden change in conversation. An easy, reassuring smile spread across your lips, even as you wagged your finger at him in mock reproach. “I told you I wasn’t joking about that movie marathon. We are going to sit on that couch and watch cartoons like grown ass adults.”

He stared at you a heartbeat longer before finally moving to follow your instructions.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

There are random time jumps in the first few chapters, this one included. This is also where I started to define the "reader" characters background a bit better.

You were awake when the next nightmare came. Honestly, you were surprised he’d even fallen asleep so early, but then again you’d been curled up with a book under your bedside light and you didn’t stop to see what time it was when you heard him cry out almost loud enough to shake the house. You’d barely gotten your bookmark placed before you were tossing the novel aside and heading for the door and down the hallway.

Remembering the last time, you paused at the door to knock. “Bucky? It’s me. I’m gonna open the door slowly.”

A long pause and you heard his voice faintly. “Yeah.”

As promised, you took your time opening the door, deliberate and slow so as not to startle him. You found him sitting on a blanket on the hardwood floor, elbows rested on his up-bent knees while his hands hung in the space between. His chest heaved and his skin was slick with sweat, plastering strands of dark hair to the side of his face and making the web of scars stand out even more where metal met flesh. Face downturned and jaw slack, he still lifted his eyes to yours. It would have been menacing if you weren’t so concerned.

You glanced at the still-made bed and he must have noticed because he answered your unspoken question. “Too soft.”

Nodding, you sat down beside him on the floor, his gaze following your every movement. “Do you need more blankets?”

He shook his head slightly, but shied away when you twisted to reach a hand toward him. You stopped, tilting your palm up to show you meant no harm. Bucky looked at you a moment longer before turning his eyes away, a sign of acquiescence, of quiet submission, and it broke your heart a little. But you continued on with your little mission, smoothing hair out of his face, tucking it behind his ears. After an initial start at the first touch of your fingers, he seemed to calm under your gentle treatment. His eyes slid closed and the tension in his muscles eased.

“There. That’s better,” you declared with a soft triumphant smile. He looked over at you when your hand brushed familiarly over the back of his shoulder where skin and metallic surface touched. ”Now, do you wanna talk about your nightmare?”

Darkness passed over his face again as he turned his gaze back to the floor. ”No.”

“Okay,” you nodded. It seemed to surprise him when you nudged your shoulder against his prosthetic, his eyes lingering a moment on the already yellowing bruise there. ”But talking can help, you know?”

”Nothing can help me,” he sneered at the space between his bare feet.
You had heard those exact words before and the ache in your chest grew, eyes growing a little watery at the memory. Before you knew what you were doing, you gripped his upper arm tightly, though there was no chance it could have hurt him. When his guarded expression met yours, you couldn’t hide the small trace of desperation in your voice. "Please, Bucky. At least let me try."

He stared at you for the longest time. Even after you’d taken your hand from his arm. Even after you reached up to not-so-casually swipe at the tears that had threatened to form in your eyes. But you refused to look away from him. Finally, in a quiet voice, he said "Falling."

Your brow furrow with concern. "Falling?"

"The nightmare," he nodded, like there was only one nightmare that he ever had, or at least the only one that woke him up like this. "Falling and snow and… pain."

At the last word, his eyes slid over his left arm, slowly working the metal fingers into a fist before quickly releasing it. The motion let you know it wasn’t just a nightmare, but a memory. Steve had told you about the incident on the train and Bucky plummeting to an assumed death. You could only guess that’s what he was dreaming about, at least this time. Who knows what other horrors rattled around in his brain to surface during his unguarded sleep.

"Well, you’re safe now, Bucky," you soothed, reaching to card your fingers through his hair again. "I know that’s hard to remember when you’re dreaming, but you’re safe and you’re warm and you’re on solid ground."

He nodded, though he looked none too convinced. Knowing there wasn’t much more you could do that night, you gave those dark locks of his an affectionate tug before getting to your feet. "Try to get some more sleep, Buck? If you need anything at all, just knock on my door. Even if it’s just to talk, got it?"

His head ducked in a silent affirmative. After a lingering moment, you turned to give him his privacy. But as you opened the door, the cat plodded not-so-gracefully into the room, pausing at your feet to give you a loud meow before scampering on toward Bucky. You watched her press her head against his slack hands, petting herself, until a metal finger scratched that spot behind her ear she loved. She purred loudly when he gathered her up into the crook of his arm and twisted to lay back down on his side, not a single fuss or squirm given. He was just wrapping the blanket over the both of them as you pulled the door closed, not even trying to conceal the smile on your face.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A quiet moment before a first outing.

Chapter Notes

Another time jump, maybe a few days later

Bucky seemed reticent at first when you suggested him accompanying you into town for supplies. He didn’t have to say a word for you to pick it up and you knew exactly why. Town meant coming out of hiding, strangers, unfamiliar territory. It seemed like a recipe for disaster if you weren’t careful. But you knew near total isolation wasn’t going to help Bucky in the long run, and eventually he seemed to agree.

The morning you intended to go shopping, you found Bucky waiting for you in the living room. He was freshly shaved with his hair tied back from his face, leaning against the back of the couch as the cat rubbed her cheeks across the long sleeve of his flannel shirt covering his metal arm. The scene gave you a moment’s pause; he’d never looked so… comfortable before. And it wasn’t just the hand-me-down jeans and scuffed boots Sam and Steve had brought a couple weeks before, but the way his shoulders slacked and his face looked so soft with a little smile pulling at his lips as his fingers tugged the cat’s ear. It was serene, peaceful, and you hated that your step on a creaky floorboard squashed the quiet of the moment. But he didn’t jump, only looked up at you, and you had the sneaking suspicion he knew you were there watching him the whole time.

“Looks good,” you smiled as you moved to lean next to him, gesturing to your cheeks as the cat bounded out of your way. “What’s the occasion?”

He took a moment to run a hand thoughtfully over each of his bare cheeks, before answering. “I’m going with you today.”

“Oh,” you blinked, surprised. The two of you hadn’t discussed it since the day before, so you hadn’t been expecting that. “Are you sure? You don’t have to if you don’t feel up to it.”

“I have to try,” Bucky said with a slight tilt of his head.

“Yeah, okay,” you nodded, fluent enough in his unspoken language to know he was calling back to your last post-nightmare conversation. Without thinking, you rested your fingers across the back of his metal ones. “But if gets to be too much for you, say the word and I will drop everything and get you home, okay? No toughing it out, no pushing yourself. You’re allowed to be nervous and say you want to leave, alright?”

It took you a moment to realize that while he was nodding slightly, his eyes had dropped from your face to where your hand touched his. You could have kicked yourself. It hadn’t occurred to you before then that maybe he didn’t like being touched, least of all on his prosthetic, which he had every
right to be sensitive about.

“I’m sorry,” you offered, embarrassed. "I guess I shouldn’t just—"

"No," Bucky replied, grabbing your hand gently before you could completely pull away. He glanced quickly at your face before giving a huff of breath. "I don’t mind. You don’t treat it different than any other hand. It’s… comforting."

Not knowing what to say to the little confession, you entwined your fingers with his and when he looked up at your face, you smiled. "Let’s eat breakfast. We shouldn’t grocery shop on an empty stomach."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The drive into town proves surprisingly fun and the shopping trip goes well!

A lot of the roads on your way into town were rough gravel and winding. You knew them well and usually took great enjoyment taking curves maybe a little too fast, bouncing on your truck’s bench seat and spitting rocks behind you. But when Bucky reached up for the “oh shit bar” above the passenger side window after the second or third wild turn, you decided to take it down a couple notches.

“Music,” you asked, barely able to suppress your laughter at the way his eyebrows raised, nearly enough to disappear under the edge of his ballcap, when he nodded at you.

You flipped the radio on and started going through the tuner. Ugh, no to the country station. There was some classic rock that wasn’t too bad. Bucky pulled a face at the classical station. Talk. Talk. Commercial breaks. You were just tuning past a station with a faint horn playing when Bucky touched your hand to pause you. Daring only a quick glance from the road to his face, but it was enough to realize he wanted it back there. So you obliged and a smile crept over your lips when you recognized the song.

“What are the odds,” you mumbled as his hand fell from yours. Another quick glance and you saw the corners of his lips pitching upwards, pleasant recognition lighting up his eyes. You turned the volume up just as the lyrics began.

He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way

He had a boogie style that no one else could play

He was the top man at his craft

But then his number came up and he was gone with the draft

He’s in the army now, a-blowin’ reveille

He’s the boogie woogie bugle boy of Company B

Dancing a bit in your seat, you sang along as best you could despite it having been a while since you last heard the song. When you glanced at him again while making another turn, Bucky was staring at you with something akin to painful amusement. There was an almost teasing quality to his voice when he said “You are a terrible singer.”

“Hey,” you feigned offense, though you couldn’t hide your laughter. “At least I’m having a good time. Don’t be a jerk.”
The small chuckle that left him surprised you, making your smile grow wider. And to prove the point, you sang even louder than before as you turned onto the paved road that led directly into town. You were still shimmying a little in your seat when you pulled into the lot across the street from the market, though the song had changed to something jazzy you didn’t know.

When you both got out of the car, Bucky tugged his sleeves down firmly. If he hadn’t been scanning his surroundings like he was on a mission, face set dour, he probably would’ve looked self-conscious. You wrapped your fingers around the crook of his left elbow and offered him a smile. He looked down at you, the lines of his face softening just a bit, before giving you a nod.

The market wasn’t very busy that time of day, a few older people and mothers toting young children with them. To their credit, they did their best to hide their nosey glances when the two of you entered, though you were sure Bucky cut quite the imposing figure even if he was dressed like a cross between a farmboy and a hipster. It was the way he walked, took everything in, the set of his jaw. Without knowing a single iota of his past, anyone could tell there was a dangerous air about him. And there you were, caught up in the wide berth provided, giving him concerned glances and reassuring looks.

As expected, Bucky was quiet and decidedly out of his element. Hidden under the bill of his cap, you could see when his interest was piqued by something. Things like Coca-Cola and Hershey’s bars and ice cream sparked cautious recognition in his eyes, you supposed because he knew the products, yet they were just different enough now to give him pause. You immediately put these items into the cart.

In the fresh produce section, when his eyes widened a fraction of an inch in what could only have been awe, you stepped it up a notch, handing him a bag and telling him to find something he might like. You watched as he touched, sniffed, appraised, weighed a few different apples before they went into the bag. Then, you were delighted to see him get another bag, bananas this time. Another bag with oranges. One with peaches. He didn’t seem to know what to make of kiwi fruit and mango for a moment, but after smelling them, a few of each went into bags too. A few pints of berries were added for good measure as well as tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, broccoli, cabbage, potatoes…

He seemed to get a little more confident as the shopping continued. Soon, he was putting things in the cart you hadn’t asked him to or expected. You hadn’t known how closely he paid attention to your cooking until he started putting ingredients in your cart for shepherd’s pie, tandoori chicken, gumbo, chili and cornbread, meatloaf… all the dishes he’d gladly taken second helpings of over the last weeks. Each time, he’d pause to give you a questioning look, waiting until you nodded before dropping something in.

The biggest kicker came when Bucky suddenly left your side and turned down an aisle out of sight. You knew it was ridiculous to feel a sudden rush of worry. He wasn’t a child and not easily lost. Unless he wanted to be. Maybe that’s why you found yourself quick to follow him. But before you could get too far, he was already headed back to you, kitty litter and cat treats in hand. He paused at the cart again, but this time he surprised you by simply saying “We were out.”

“**We.** It always surprised you when he said we. Whether this time it was meant as you and him or him and the cat, it didn’t much matter. That phrasing meant he was making a connection and that was a very good step in the right direction. You couldn’t help the big grin that overtook your face, causing his eyes to narrow a bit in confusion.

“I think that’s everything,” you said, with a little shake of your head. “We should probably head to check out.”
He nodded and you both turned down the aisle he’d just been through. Passing by the shelves, he paused a moment to grab another bag of cat treats before depositing them in the cart and giving you the barest hint of a smile over his shoulder.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Treats after shopping, perhaps a spark ignites, day takes a bit of a downward turn, reader's past gets brought to light

Chapter Notes

alludes to suicide

The grocery bill ended up being a little hefty, but you had money set aside. Not to mention that at the end of every week you seemed to have more money in your bank account. A little snooping and a long talk with Sam revealed the reason behind this and you begrudgingly accepted that this money was going to keep showing up no matter how you demurred. You had initially wanted to complain about it to Bucky, you couldn’t really say why, other than you felt he’d dislike the idea of being “kept” even less than you. But that could’ve opened up a whole other can of worms in terms of his emotional state, so you kept quiet about it. Besides, at least it meant not really having to worry if your cart got filled to the brim with all sorts of goodies.

You were pulled from your thoughts on it when you saw Bucky about to lift all the bags from the cart at once. With a hand on his arm, you stopped him. "Here, let me take a few."

His brow furrowed under the ball cap. Obviously he was strong enough to carry it all easily, but you were still in the store with plenty of prying eyes. He seemed to catch on quickly and left a few of the lighter bags for you to carry. There was virtually no traffic, so it was quick work getting back to the truck and putting everything in the bed under the tonneau cover. You locked it out of habit before turning to Bucky.

"You did a really good job in there;" you informed him gently, absent-mindedly brushing some cat hair from his flannel shirt and smoothing out the fabric at his sleeve. For a moment, you thought about telling him how proud you were, but that seemed a bit condescending. Instead, another idea came to mind and you smiled up at him. "Okay, you’ve got a decision to make now."

Confusion passed over Bucky’s eyes and you could’ve sworn you saw the muscles in his neck stiffen for a split second. You gripped his elbow reassuringly. "I know, scary prospect, deciding for yourself. But here are your options. One, we go straight home, no ifs, ands, or buts. Or, two, since there’s nothing we bought that will really spoil, we can take a walk down to the cafe and get ourselves a treat. Up to you, I’m good either way."

“Cafe,” he nodded after only a moment’s deliberation.

“Okay.” you beamed and saw some of the tension ease in his shoulders. "It’s not too far. We’ll leave the truck here and walk."

You guided him across the parking lot and out onto the cobbled sidewalk. The town decided several
years ago that they wanted to make the place have an "historic feel." So you walked on uneven stone past antique storefronts on the main street, almost all the buildings a drab dark gray with white trim. The walk somehow seemed longer than you remembered, maybe because as you started down the street, Bucky seemed to fall back into that soldier-mode. Slight agitation, eyes scanning, and something about the way his fingers twitch make you wonder if he had a weapon concealed or if he was just missing the weight of one in his hands.

It worsened the further you got down the street and it started to worry you. You were about to say something, suggest cutting it short and getting home, when suddenly Bucky gripped your upper arm and roughly shuffled you in between two shops. You were too shocked to make a sound as he backed you firmly against a building, the full weight of his body pressed tight to yours like he would push you through the siding and bricks if he could. His face was turned from you, scanning the street with his jaw clenched so tight you could see the muscles twitching there. And you weren’t sure if it was the fear-triggered adrenaline or the pressure of his chest to yours, but you couldn’t fill your lungs enough and your heart was beating wild.

A few moments later, two people came running past the alley, jogging contentedly with their earbuds in place and neon colors to make them better visible to any traffic, completely oblivious to your presence. Bucky’s eyes followed them as they past, his brow furrowing before he looked down.

"The sound," he murmured, voice like gravel as he tried to control his breathing. "Boots on cobblestone… I remember…"

"Bucky," you managed to breathe out. When his face turned to yours, you told yourself it was the lack of air that made you lightheaded, made your knees wobble, not the intensity in those smokey eyes or the feel of his breath across your cheek. Your fingers twisted into the side of his shirt near his hip, tugging gently, as you rasped out “It’s all right. You’re safe. We’re safe.”

A pained expression flickered across his face before his tongue darted haphazardly over his lips. His eyes scanned your face, lingering a fraction of a second on the scar on your cheek, on the curve of your mouth, and that tightness in your chest could only have been the pressure of him still against you. A few more breaths were shared this way before he swallowed hard and his lips parted. "I’m sorry."

"Just a little scare is all," you huffed out a laugh as he was backing away from you. Your senses were reeling and your skin was flushed as you steadied yourself on your own two feet again without the weight of him to hold you up. Just the adrenaline, you told yourself. When you managed to look up at him, his face was almost unreadable or maybe you hadn’t gotten your bearings just yet. Still, you straightened yourself with a small, reassuring smile. "You okay? What did you remember?"

"The war," he answered, looking down at the ground beneath his feet. "Being chased by the enemy. Having to run, hide."

"And you were trying to protect me," you said, realization dawning on you. His only response was the slightest of nods. Forcing yourself to regain your composure, you sighed gently and tugged at the cuff of his sleeve. "Hey, you wanna just go home?"

"No," he replied, quick enough it surprised you. He looked up at you finally and you saw something like determination in his face. "I’m fine. Let’s keep going."

Bucky started to raise his left hand toward you, but blinked and pulled it away again. With an amused snort, you grabbed his hand, metal palm cool against your own, and entwined your fingers, urging him back toward the street and ignoring the jolt that skittered across your skin. You glanced down the sidewalk, the joggers having vanished around a corner somewhere, before looking back at
him. "You know, maybe you should think about taking up running."

"I do run," he informed as he fell in step beside you.

You raised an eyebrow at him. "When?"

"In the morning," he answered, like it was obvious. "While you're still asleep."

"Oh," you scrunched your face a little. You'd never heard him get up and leave, then again, that probably wasn't a hard feat for him. Pulling him off the sidewalk to cross the street, you added "Maybe I should start getting up and going with you."

Suddenly, that teasing tone was back in his voice when he said "You wouldn't be able to keep up."

Your mouth dropped open, amused and astonished. Not knowing what to say in response, because he was more than likely correct, you just scoffed and reached for the door to the cafe. You held it open for a patron who was leaving, he sniffled and unceremoniously wiped his nose on his coat sleeve before nodding a thanks your way. You cringed at Bucky who just gave a half shrug before following you inside.

The place was cozy and quiet even on it's busiest days, and that day was no exception. A few people were scattered near the back, on laptops with steaming mugs trying desperately to seem cosmopolitan in the middle of nowhere. You sidled up to some stools at the main counter, a feature leftover from when the place was a soda shop decades before. Though his face was stoic, you could tell Bucky was a little overwhelmed by everything that was available on the board, so you took the initiative to order for him just this once.

The barista made short work of the order and soon returned with a black coffee, an iced vanilla latte, and a chocolate chip scone. You broke the pastry in half as you watched Bucky first sniff then take a sip from his warm cup. A small smile crossed his lips, the one he had whenever he found something familiar and enjoyable that threatened to make dimples appear on his cheeks.

"Good," you asked and he nodded at you as he took another sip. "Wanna try mine?"

He sat his mug down and took your offered drink, bringing the straw to his mouth. You had to hide your laughter when he barely got a mouthful before he blinked rapidly. Pulling the cup away from him, he eyed the drink. "This tastes like someone spilled a little coffee in sweet milk."

Still, Bucky snuck another sip before putting it back down in front of you. To avoid laughing out loud, you quickly took a drink, though your shoulders still shook a little in amusement. He shot you a look as he reached for his half of the scone to take a bite and your chest compressed a little at the barest hint of playfulness there, too similar to the way it had in the alley not ten minutes before. But the lines of his face hardened suddenly when you were surprised by a familiar voice calling your name behind you.

"This day's been a bit more eventful than I planned," you sighed as you and Bucky turned to see the police chief making his way toward you, handcuffs jangling with each step. "Hey, Chief. How's it going?"

"Oh can't complain too much," he huffed, stopping to prop his hands on his belt like he was wont to do when he was trying to look official and imposing. "What's that on your cheek there?"

You brought your fingers up to your scar, chuckling lightly. "Wouldn't you know it, I cut myself shaving."
“Uh huh,” the chief nodded with a snort, then turned his eyes to Bucky. You followed the gaze to see Bucky looking up at the man coldly, his left hand tucked behind him out of sight. "What’s up with your friend here?"

"First time trying the coffee here,” you spat, something funny to diffuse the situation. It succeeded in bringing the chief’s eyes back to your. "So good it’s left him speechless."

"Clever,” the chief replied, looking none too amused.

He was going to push, you knew that. Just like you knew exactly what you could say to stop it. You didn’t want to drag up those bad memories, but it was the only thing you could do to make a getaway for Bucky’s sake. With a defeated sigh, you said solemnly “He served with my sister, okay?”

There it was. That look of sympathy you hated, sometimes felt you didn’t deserve, flashed across the chief’s face and you had to look away. At least Bucky’s eyes were only curious, you could live with curious. The chief brought his right hand down on your shoulder, an act of comfort that made you flinch. Then he offered the hand to Bucky, whose eyes widened almost imperceptibly. He looked at the hand a moment before slowly reaching out to take it.

“Thank you for serving your country, son,” the chief said, heartfelt, shaking hands firmly. Bucky seemed at a loss when the chief clapped the other hand around his shoulder. "Anyone puts on that uniform deserves more than a handshake and a cup of coffee, but it’s the least I can do for you today."

The chief gave you a nod before walking away, though you heard him tell the barista to put your order on his tab. Another sigh, this time of relief, and you turned back to your drink on the counter, raising it in thanks and salutation to the chief who responded in kind before picking up a newspaper and finding a spot near the back. For his part, Bucky said nothing then, just finished his coffee and scone, and you were grateful for however long his silence on the matter would last.

It lasted quite a while. Through the walk to the truck, the drive home, putting groceries away. He did calisthenics in the yard in the afternoon, came in and took a shower while you were reading on the couch. Even dinner came and went without a word. So long in fact, you might have let your guard down on the subject had you not seen his the wheels in his head turning all day. Adding things up. Once or twice, you almost just came right out and told him, end the almost torturous anticipation. But you couldn’t, and a part of you felt you deserved all the hell you put yourself through over it.

Finally, when you were drying the dishes and putting them away, Bucky came into the kitchen and said "Sam brought me here because of your sister."

You paused, putting your dish down so you wouldn’t drop it or break it. He just stood there, waiting patiently for you to answer. You swallowed back the bitterness in your mouth, the tears starting to form. "In a way, yes."

"She came back from war… different. Not quite like me, but close,” he continued. His voice sounded almost cautious as he stepped toward you.

“You’re very perceptive,” you tried to sound amused, but your voice was weak and your nose and eyes began to sting.

“She’s gone now, isn’t she?” It was less a question and more a need for confirmation, eyes intense as they scoured your face. "How?"
"Self-inflicted gunshot wound," you answered after clearing your throat. It was easier to say that way, cleaner, clinical, like you could divorce yourself from what happened. The reality had been far messier and it had haunted you for so long afterward. Still did, from time to time, like now, when you were forced by circumstance to talk about it.

His head tilted a little, though his eyes never wavered. "You think you failed her."

"Yes," you choked out, sniffing hard and wiping hatefully at the tears threatening to spill down your cheeks.

After a few moments, Bucky finally looked away from you, turning his attention to the half dried dish you left on the counter. "I’ll finish these."

"I can finish," you protested, happy to change subjects and try to push the past to the back of her mind.

Metal fingers stayed your arm, even as his right hand brushed over yours to tug the towel from your grip. Goosebumps rose across your skin. You told yourself it was the way he was looking at you, an expression that brooked no further argument. "Go get some rest."

Nodding, you relented. It had been a long day, physically and emotionally exhausting. You could only assume he’d seen that in your face. As you pulled your arm from him, his fingers tangled in yours a split second and it felt like he’d given them a gentle squeeze. But when you looked up, his attention was on the task at hand and not you.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

running with Bucky the next morning, reader let's herself get out of hand, fairly reader-centric, concerned!bucky

Sleep alluded you that night. You were sure you dosed, but nothing solid. No dreams, but you were thankful for that. It was a little after 5am when you decided staying in bed just wasn’t going to cut it anymore. Remembering what Bucky said about running the day before, you strapped on some tennis shoes and clothes you didn’t mind sweating in before heading for the kitchen to make some toast. He wasn’t there, but you weren’t surprised when you heard quiet steps on the linoleum floor a minute or so later, the noise only allowed to keep from startling you too severely, you guessed.

“Good morning,” you said, your voice sounding strangely loud in the quiet of the early morning. Finishing up with some butter on the toast, you turned around to hand Bucky a slice.

He looked at you a moment, then the offered food, as though it had never occurred to him to eat. But he took it from you as you bit into your own. “You look like hell.”

“Aw, Bucky,” you replied with a mock pout, pursing your lips, though it came out more vicious than you’d intended. “You certainly know how to make a girl feel good.”

An eyebrow raised a fraction of an inch as he bit into his toast, taking a third of it in one mouthful. He watched you as he chewed, waiting.

“I was hoping I could run with you this morning, if that’s okay,” you finally said. “But if you’d rather be alone, I understand.”

He seemed to be considering it, judging by the slight knit of his brow, the thoughtful way he bit and chewed. You waited patiently, running through your head all the other things you could do to pass the time. When he tilted his head to regard you, strands of his long hair catching at the corner of his eyelashes as he licked buttery crumbs from his lips and fingertips, you had to swallow around a suddenly dry throat.

“Stretch.”

The commanding tone of his voice made you blink with a start. “What?”

“You need to stretch,” he said firmly. Then the corners of his lips quirked up the slightest bit. “I’m not carrying you back if you pull something.”

“Deal,” you nodded, hurrying to finish your toast.

Once out in the misty gray pre-dawn world, you stretched the way your sister taught you. At least, what you could remember. The air had a bit of a chill to it, early autumn having arrived, and you were glad you put on long sleeves despite the thin material. Bucky stood waiting, arms crossed and throwing you an appraising look from time to time. And it wasn’t long before you signaled your readiness with a nod, quickly returned by your companion.
The pace started off easy, Bucky taking the outside as you headed down the road, gravel crunching under your feet. He kept pace with you despite you both knowing he could easily pull away. Not wanting to be the cause of his delay, you picked up your pace. It was nothing for Bucky to adjust, still unaffected. You increased again and he met you. You didn’t know what switch flipped in your head, but soon you were running full speed toward the edge of the woods near the road.

Those woods were your playground as a child, you’d run them with your sister like dryads, dodging trees and rocks and bushes, laughing because you were kids and the only darkness in the world then was in movies or under the bed. Maybe something nostalgic about them had called to you through the damp air, beckoning you with hazy memories of summer afternoons in the ruins of the old well house where it was cool and the two of you dropped stones and counted to figure out how deep the hole went. The sleepless, dreamy, broken part of your brain had a spark of hope that you might still find her there, that stepping past the tree line could magically transport you back to the day your hand slipped on a tree branch as the two of you climbed and she nearly dislocated her shoulder trying to save you from falling. And you wanted that, you wanted more than anything to go back to a place before your sister came back from war with dead eyes, anything to squash the memory of not being able to save her. So, you pushed your body to its limit, pumping your arms and legs for all they were worth until you could feel them screaming and still you pushed them harder, your world narrowed down to the path to those woods. Throwing yourself past any reasonable limit, you broke the tree line and kept going, but it brought you no peace.

Only Bucky’s voice right beside you, filtering through to your brain where crunching leaves and gasping breath and searing pain had not been able to reach. It was dark and grinding and almost angry, but still he was not winded. "Slow down."

"Stop… holding back," you managed to wheeze out through windblown lips. It wasn’t right to turn the tables on him, you knew that, but it was easier. Far, far easier to put your attention back on him when your tiny, impossible hope fluttered away like a ghost among the trees.

"You wanna blow your knees," he snapped hotly, more emotion than you’d ever heard from him before. You couldn’t see his face, but you could imagine his brow knotted together over fierce eyes. "Wanna snap a tendon? Is that it?"

"Yeah…," you rasped, trying to laugh without breath, without oxygen reaching your muscles. "Then… you can… put me down… like… a lame horse."

Bucky growled, low and dangerous. "If I pull ahead, will you stop?"

"Yes," you answered, feeling yourself fast approaching the point when your body would just plain give out. With a snort, he pressed forward into your field of vision just as white was threatening to overtake the edge of your sight. He left your side easily and soon he was far enough ahead you could see all of him, loose hair blown back from his face as small branches broke against his arms and chest. There was a wake of kicked up leaves and twigs behind his feet. You couldn’t deny how powerful and feral he looked weaving through the trees until he was out of sight.

You slowed yourself in increments, knowing a dead stop would’ve left you a flailing mess or possibly caused more physical damage. It was difficult, but eventually you were at a muted jog. The sound of the creek pulled you toward it and you followed gladly. Stumbling through the underbrush, you remembered the way. Remembered giggling excitedly as you and your sister set out in search of frogs and turtles, got into scuffles with farm boys, and were chewed out by your mother for dirtying your school clothes. You remembered the way, but time had passed and even a wood you once thought enchanted can change.

There was new growth around the edge of the creek and as you picked your way through on wobbly
legs like a new born foal, your foot caught on a lifted root you hadn’t seen. It sent you tumbling forward, unable to catch yourself. You landed face first into the bank, barely enough time to turn your head to avoid a broken nose. Thankfully, the river was down and the creek along with it, so only ice cold mud seeped through the front of your clothes and smeared across your face and neck, with little chance of drowning. With a groan, you began to pull yourself up, but your muscles protested. Honestly, the cool wetness felt good to them and you resigned yourself to laying there a moment, catching your breath and letting the thunder of your heart subside.

Tears began to flow then, unbidden, but you didn’t care at the moment. Just let them flow and mix with the dirty watery muck you were in. It had been so long since you cried for her, and this was as good a place as any. So long since you let yourself wallow in your own self-pity, and in the mud where you’d made pies with her seemed appropriate. You couldn’t help yourself and you definitely couldn’t help your sister, how could Sam think you’d be able to help an ex-assassin with memory loss and 70 years to make up? Bucky didn’t seem the type to go down that road, but neither had your sister until the very end. Bitterness welled in the back of your throat as you thought about all the things you could have, should have, said and done. But you couldn’t change the past, now could you? All you could do was take what you learned and put it to good use. All you could do was try. Try and fight like hell. Just like you asked of Bucky.

You were surprised by your own amused snort when you heard a rustling in the woods. Speak of the Devil and he shall appear. How you knew it was Bucky from the sound of his breath or the pounding of his feet on the soft earth, you couldn’t say, but still you knew. You worked your elbows underneath your chest, head turning just in time to see him splashing through the creek toward you. He said your name, voice deep and twinged with concern, and it made your chest ache. You never should have worried him like this.

"Are you hurt," he asked as he hit knelt beside you, gripping your shoulder and helping you roll over. You sat up as his right hand reached to smear mud from your cheek and neck.

"Just my pride," you chortled, not wanting to dwell on the feel of his warm fingers on your skin. He didn’t seem amused, but wrapped an arm around your lower back to help hold you up while you got your feet under yourself, letting you use him as leverage and giving you a nudge when you faltered.

You still had a hand on him when you said, apropos of your place and company, "My sister and I stormed the beaches at Normandy here."

Bucky went still against you, so still you had to look up at his face. His lips were pulled thin as he eyed you and you figured you should explain yourself before he thought you’d gone crazy.

"Boys said girls couldn’t be soldiers," you informed wistfully. "We showed them. Kids play war all the time. I’m sure they did when you were little too. They play war and sometimes never learn the true cost of it until it’s too late."

Clarity danced through his eyes then, like he suddenly understood you even though you weren’t sure you understood yourself half the time. He hiked you closer to his side, seeming to know you’d be useless walking on your own, and in a hard voice said "Let’s get back."

The walk home was long and quiet, though once you were out of the woods Bucky let you go to move on your own. He stayed close though, prepared to catch you if you stumbled, you were sure. The sun had risen by then, but cloud cover kept the sky gray and the smell of rain was in the air though none had fallen yet. Once at the house you both deposited your shoes on the porch before going in, trying to avoid tracking mud everywhere.

You went straight for the shower, plopping your clothes in the hamper to wash later. Your legs were
still jello, but you managed to step into the tub and run the water hot enough to steam the place. It felt good on your muscles, working out the kinks and cramps as you washed yourself. There had been a time when you might’ve cried in the shower, after thinking so much about your sister. But you didn’t this time. You’d left your mini-breakdown on the bank of the creek in those woods and there it could stay.

It was ten or fifteen minutes until you felt clean enough to get out. Stepping into the hall wrapped only in a towel, you found Bucky standing there waiting. "Get dressed. I made breakfast."

And like that, he turned away and left you there, movements rigid. Apparently he was none too pleased with you. Still, he had offered you food and in a roundabout way requested your company. You couldn’t deny him. So, you dressed quickly in some comfy clothes as the rain began to pour outside. When you got to the table, he was already there, two plates of bacon and eggs laid out. You sat and started to eat, but you could see the regimented way he cut into his food, the twitch of the muscles in his neck and shoulders.

"I’m sorry I ruined your run," you finally said after finishing a mouthful of eggs when the tension had become too much.

He swallowed, giving you a hard glance. "What you did out there was stupid."

"I know," you nodded meekly.

"You could have seriously hurt yourself," he continued and you were somewhat startled by the sudden anger in his voice though the volume never rose. "And that crack about putting you down like a lame horse…"

He shook his head a little and you took the opportunity to try soothing him. "I’m sorry, Bucky. It was just a bad joke. I never -"

"You were just laying there," he interrupted, jamming flesh and metal fingers alike through his loose hair and propping his elbows on the table, staring through his unfinished plate of food. The very edge of his voice was raw and you were taken aback by the sound of it. "I left you behind and come back to see you face down in the mud, not knowing what happened to you."

"Bucky, I’m sorry," you tried again, leaning toward him and resting your hand on the table near his elbow. He looked up at you, only his eyes giving away any emotion. "I just… It's hard to explain what was going through my head, but remembering my sister and what happened hurts sometimes. I had to let off some steam. I broke down a little. It happens, it’s human. But I’m supposed to be taking care of you and I’m sorry if I worried you."

He looked away, giving the slightest of nods as he picked up his fork. You thought the conversation over, until he threw in gently "You scared the shit out of me, kid."

"I’m sorry," you repeated, though you couldn’t help the smirk that quirked your lips. "Won’t happen again… old man."

He paused with the fork in his mouth, eyes widening just a bit as he moved the food into his cheek to speak. Pointing the tines of his fork at you, he huffed, "You’re not funny."

"I’m a little funny," you countered with a raised eyebrow. You lifted your chin, crunching into a slice of bacon with a smug look when you saw the corners of his lips twitch and the skin around his eyes had the barest hint of a crinkle.

"You’re a little shit is what you are;" he grumbled, turning back to his food. But the tension had
eased from his muscles, just as it had from the room.

The two of you finished your plates in peace, though you bristled a little when Bucky insisted on clearing the table and doing the dishes. The withering look he gave you put a stop to any argument before you’d begun. Besides, you were quite exhausted, physically and emotionally, and your bed was calling your name. Bucky only responded with a nod when you excused yourself to try sleeping again. The last thing you remember hearing after your head hit the pillow was the sound of Bucky getting in the shower.
reader wakes up that afternoon, a discussion over weapons, the subject of Steve is broached

When you woke up that afternoon, the first thing you saw was a glass of water and a bottle of ibuprofen on your nightstand. It hadn’t been there when you fell asleep and you were momentarily confused. Trying to sit up, the scream in your muscles reminded you of the morning run and you groaned a little at your own stupidity. Bucky must have left the pain killers for you, anticipating how much you would be hurting. You took the medicine and laid back for a little while longer. A quick mental checklist turned up no dreams that you could remember, which was fine by you. You were probably just too exhausted to start with for your mind to worry about dreaming.

Maybe 20 minutes later, you felt just strong enough to try standing. It probably wasn’t the best idea, but you weren’t one to stay cooped up in bed all day, no matter how much your feet and legs protested when you put your weight on them. You slowly hobbled your way out into the hall where you found Bucky’s door slightly open, heard him inside. That was unusual. Normally, it was closed whether he was in there or not. Something about it felt like… an invitation.

“Bucky,” you asked curiously, rapping your knuckles on the door which caused it to open wider.

The scene before you had your heart leaping into your throat. Bucky sat cross-legged on the floor, several weapons laid out on towels before him. The gun in his hand was partially disassembled and it took you a moment to realize he was in the process of cleaning it. That calmed your nerves a bit. He paused to look up at you, unsurprised at your presence, before moving his gaze to the floor opposite him, then back to his task at hand. It seemed to say, come sit, and you listened.

Your unsteady legs carried you to the spot, though trying to sit down was excruciating and you ended up just falling on your butt with a soft thump. The slightest twitch of Bucky’s nose signaled his amusement, leaving you wondering exactly when it was you’d learned to read his face so well. He didn’t speak, just went about cleaning the gun, meticulous, efficient. You supposed there was no sense in having weapons if you didn’t keep them in proper working order. Yet the sight of him doing this felt almost intimate. His work was cool and mechanical, but there was a vulnerableness to him letting you watch something he usually kept hidden.

“Did you…” you began, unsure of how to ask your question. "Are these the weapons you’ve used?"

"No,” he replied, reassembling the gun in his hand and laying it on the towel before picking up the next one. But he seemed to be mulling something over in his head, another response, and you stayed quiet. After a few beats, he spoke again. "Guns and knives, rocket launchers, garrotes; they’re tools. I’m the weapon."

"Were,” you countered automatically. He looked up at you then, blue eyes scouring your face in question. With a muted chuckle, you explained. "You were the weapon. Now, you’re Bucky again. Maybe not exactly like before, but you’re human and your own.”
He didn’t respond, eyes turning back to the gun in his hand as he worked. When that one was nearly
finished, you finally said, "Can I help?"

“Have you ever cleaned a gun or sharpened a knife before,” he asked, and the teasing tinge to his
voice was not lost on you.

“I’ve sharpened kitchen and hunting knives before,” you offered with a small smile. "But I suppose
it’s not the same.“

Bucky set down the pieces he was working on before twisting to reach behind him. He came back
to center with a whetstone in hand and placed it on a section of towel in front of you. Then he
picked up a knife from his collection, the knife, the one that had scarred your face after his first
nightmare with you. With his fingers careful on the blade, he presented it to you handle first.

"You can have this one,” he said as you took it from him. Then added, much quieter, "I don’t want
it any more.“

You flushed a little at that, but said nothing. Soon, the measured sound of steel on stone joined
Bucky’s cleaning. The cat padded in while you worked, found a square of sunlight on the floor to
doze in since the rain had stopped. She added her content purring to the mix. The repetitive motion
let your mind wander just a bit, and you decided it was time to broach a subject you’d been thinking
about for a while.

"I think,” you paused to give a final drag of the blade. "You should talk to Steve.“

Bucky stilled. Pain flashed across his face, you could see it even from the down turned angle. You
had avoided bringing it up as much as possible, and maybe while he had so many deadly objects in
front of him wasn’t the best time, but it needed to be said. Steve had come by a few times since
Bucky took up residence with you, always with one or two or three others, under the auspice of
checking on his friend. A part of you knew a little of what Steve was feeling when Bucky silently
refused his help, avoided eye contact, wouldn’t interact with him. You’d lived that with your sister
and could empathize.

"I tried to kill him,” Bucky ground out, and you saw his hand twitch, something remembered.

“And you ended up saving him,” you soothed. You knew it was difficult, but a little push could be
helpful, just not too much.

“He was my mission.” He looked up at you finally, eyes a little frantic though his jaw was set firm.

A thought occurred to you then, the way Bucky was speaking, the particular way he avoided Steve.
"Are you worried part of you -that part of you- might still see him that way?“

The look on his face was the only answer you needed. The pain there, the lost expression, even if it
was only in his eyes, kicked you square in the gut.

"Steve is your friend,” you said gently. "More than that. He’s your family, your brother. He’s
something that ties you back to the man you used to be. It’s big and it’s scary, but trust me when I
say he needs you to let him help you, just as much as you need his help. I know, I’ve been there.“

Blinking, he regarded you a moment, clarity etching his face again. He knew your meaning, though
there was still a little doubt there. You decided it was safe to press on.

"What if I call him,” you asked, trying to sound more enthusiastic than desperate. "Invite him over
this weekend. Just him. We’ll have dinner and watch a movie or something. Something boring.
"Yes," he cut you off, lowering his eyes to the partially assembled gun in his hand. He let out a gruff sigh. "I’ll try. For him. For you. I’ll try."

You watched him a few moments more as he worked, trying to catalog the fullness in your chest, the wateriness of your eyes. Ignoring the screaming protest of your aching muscles, you moved to your knees. He didn’t look at you until you reached across to him and slid your hand over his cheek. You marked the beginnings of returning scruffiness even as his eyes found yours.

"I’m proud of you, Bucky," you told him honestly. "It might sound condescending or it might not mean a thing to you. But you’ve been wading through shit up to your eyeballs for over 70 years and you’re still trying. It’s amazing and I’m proud of you."

Cool, metal fingers slid over the back of your hand. Maybe you imagined the feeling of him pressing your skin closer to his, the slight itch of stubble across your palm. But those fingers curled around yours and pulled your hand away. The blue in his eyes was soft this time as they traced your features. You had to sniffle and clear your throat before you could speak again.

"I’m gonna make lunch," you informed him, sliding your hand from his. "You hungry?"

"A little," he nodded, going back to the work at hand. "This could take a while though."

"I’ll bring you a sandwich," you smiled. It took a moment for you to gain your footing, Bucky’s well-made bed providing support. "But when you’re done, you get to wash the gun oil out of the towels."

"Sure thing, kid," he replied and you saw the ghost of a smile on his lips.

You couldn’t help the grin that overtook your face as you worked your way to the door, legs feeling a bit stronger now. "Well, don’t break a hip while doing it, old man."

"Old man," he mused. "You’re the one who needs a walker."

Turning to look at him, you saw a hint of mischief in his eyes. You stuck your tongue out at him and for the first time, just for an instant, you saw his dimples.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but this chapter is a little different and proved a tad daunting. It's very long and from Bucky's perspective. I'd really appreciate if you'd let me know how I did with him. Thanks for sticking with me through the wait.

He ran alone the next day. Even if you had been awake so early, he would not have let you join him. He'd watched you move around the night before, your face and posture giving away your pain at every step. You were paying for your recklessness with little complaint. He respected that. Still, he would have said no if you asked to come along, because you needed time to recover. And because... because now he could say "no."

The darkness of early morning concealed him well, made him more comfortable. And the woods had proven equally as inviting when you'd led him there. Though now he kept his own pace, eating up the distance between the tree line and creek in a quarter time it had taken the day before. There he paused a moment to survey the muddy bank he'd helped you from. When he had found you there yesterday, a sight had flashed through his head, both foreign and familiar. A lost memory.

Shelling, loud and terrible, shaking the ground and filling the air with smoke and screams muted by the ringing in his ears. Bodies tossed and strewn broken across his field of vision. The smell, the taste of dirt and blood and death. Then you moved. The present had returned to sharp focus for him. You'd pushed yourself and you'd fallen, but you were not dead. And he hadn't realized his heart was racing until it started to slow.

Leaving the edge of the creek, he continued through the woods, picking his way through branches and brush. A nearly straight line, taking mental notes of significant landmarks, and soon he was past another tree line, out of the woods and stopping at the paved road that led into town. A short cut, filed away for possible use later. There was a flash of headlights far down the road, heading in his direction, and he moved back into the cover of the trees. His stamina could have carried him much farther, but he decided to go back. Decided... it was still a strangely new concept.

When he got to the house, you were still asleep, your gentle snore audible to him through your bedroom door. He made himself eggs. Real eggs. He couldn't help wondering just how bad powdered eggs had been if he could still make the automatic comparison in his mind with no firm memory of them. And toast with butter. Such a simple pleasure you'd reintroduced to him. He ate, washed, dried, and put away the dishes. You still hadn't stirred in your room.

Physical training in the yard. Push-ups, sit-ups, sprints, shadow combat. Whether the imaginary opponents were wholly fictional or partly remembered, he could not say. Punch, pivot, twist, kick, duck, slice; he kept moving because movements were better than thinking sometimes. Pushing the senses could clear his mind. And push he did until he could feel a dull ache in his muscles and he had to wipe sweat from his brow before it dripped into his eyes. The grass was long and itchy on his skin as he laid back on the ground. You had not mown it in a week or more. He could probably do that for you. But you would smile at him, and he didn’t deserve that smile.
Inside, showered, and the cat was waiting for him outside the bathroom door. She meowed and paced back and forth in front of him, expectant. After shower was time for treats. But he glanced down the hall to your door. Still closed, still asleep. He looked back down at the cat, who sat at his feet purring, and patted his thigh. She stretched up, digging her claws into the fabric of his pants. He stooped slightly and she pulled herself up the length of him swiftly until she was perched on his shoulder. The small weight of her was warm against his neck as he moved to the living room.

The armchair afforded the best view of the hallway and he sat there. The cat jumped to the coffee table, a flash of white with spots of yellow, and sat to stare at him a moment with patient green eyes. He remembered cats. He liked cats, sleek, agile, elusive. Cats pounced on rats and sauntered over dumpsters in back alleys like they were royalty. And Stevie snuck a saucer of milk for the kittens near the stoop one spring and his Ma was none too pleased with the loss of milk or the addition of cats. He blinked when your cat mewed at him from the table. Sharp reality replaced the hazy images.

She paced again, folding in on herself as she turned so her tail brushed across her whiskers. He opened the bag of treats and she sat gracefully. A few morsels in each palm and fisted his hands around them. When he pointed at her, she raised the corresponding paw and batted his finger and she got a treat. Other hand, other paw, treat. It was simple, easy training. No. Playing. He felt himself start to smile. Playful, cute, sweet, the cat flopped onto her side and grabbed at his dangling fingers, catching them in her paws and pulling them in to brush her cheeks against.

You still hadn’t stirred. His eyes narrowed at the clock. It was hours past the time you were normally up and about. He suddenly registered the worry that had been eating at his gut all morning. Leaving the cat behind, he went to your door and listened. Your snoring had stopped, replaced by ragged breaths punctuated by a sudden, dry, rattling cough that almost startled him. Familiar… troubling.

He called your name and heard the concern in his own voice, knocking his knuckles against the wood of the door. “Are you alright in there?”

There was the sound of movement, bedsprings shifting under your weight, then a faint “Bucky?”

Bucky. Yes, that was his name. It was another thing he forgot sometimes when he was in his own head for too long. But Bucky heard the weakness of your voice, the hoarse whimper, and his hand fell to the doorknob to enter. The sight of you made something in his chest clench tight and not let go.

You were wrapped up in a heavy blanket, though you still shivered. When you raised your head from your pillow, he could see a flush to your cheeks, your eyelids trying to stay open and barely making it. Still, you smirked at him weakly. “Sorry, Buck. Not feeling too well today.”

He was by your side in a few quick strides, something itching at the back of his brain, something familiar, telling him what to do but not why he knew it, a strange muscle memory carrying him. You turned your face from him to cough hard into your balled up fist and he could see the redness grow across your cheeks. When you looked up at him again, he reached out and brushed aside the hair that was sticking to your face. And you didn’t flinch when he rested his palm on your forehead.

“Jeez, you’re burnin’ hot, kid,” he grumbled, hand moving down to your cheek and under your chin on instinct.

“Not so bad yourself, old man,” you chuckled airily before giving a soft sniffle.

Bucky grunted his annoyance at you. It was not the time for jokes when you were feverish and
looked like death warmed over. He allowed his fingertips to linger across the scar on your cheek a few seconds more before he crouched down next to your bed. Mulling over his next thought carefully, he finally spoke “Should I take you to a doctor?”

“No, Bucky. I'm fine,” you replied with a small shake of your head. His eyes narrowed when you flinched in pain at your own movement. You most certainly weren't fine. Still, you smiled at him, though it was pained and slightly miserable. It almost unnerved him. “It’s just the flu.”

“The flu.” He rolled it around on his tongue a moment. Seventy years and they hadn’t gotten rid of the flu? Then a memory struck him. Not an old, laggy one washing up from the depths of his mind, but a crisp new one. He stood and gingerly, awkwardly, touched your covered shoulder. When you looked up at him curiously, he assured you “I’ll be right back.”

If you had discovered the weapons Bucky had hidden about your house in the first days he arrived, you had never said anything to him. That offered him a sort of comfort. But when he was securing a knife on the underside of a shelf in your bathroom closet, out of sight, he remembered taking stock of the contents. He went there now and looked at the two bottles marked “Cold + Flu,” one blue and one orange. Both had a fever reducer, pain reliever, and a decongestant, but the blue one mentioned it could cause drowsiness. Sleep. Yes, you needed rest. Rest helped with the flu.

He read the instructions as he walked back to your room. Nothing too difficult. Two tablespoons every six hours in a little marked dosing cup. He saw you grimace when you noticed what was in his hand. You made the most defeated expression, lower lip sliding out into a pout as you huffed. Bucky paused at the sight, halfway to your bedside, and blinked in surprise. The look on your face was childish, innocent… sweet. Clearing his throat and shaking the thought away, he moved to sit on the edge of your mattress as he uncapped the bottle.

“Could’ve at least brought the daytime stuff,” you muttered, sounding thoroughly disgusted. “I have things to do around the house today.”

“You need rest,” he stated firmly, pouring the thick blue liquid and holding it out to you.

“We’re having company this weekend.” Your voice was hoarse and whiny as you moved to a sitting position and took the medicine from him. “I’ve gotta get this place together.”

“You’re not getting out of bed,” he countered-- an order, a warning.

But you just glared at him and scoffed. “You’re not the boss of me, Bucky Barnes.”

“Like hell I’m not,” he said hotly. And maybe his exasperation carried him a little too far, because the next thing he knew he was blurtling out words he somehow knew his mouth had shaped before. “Shivering under your covers looking like you’re gonna keel over any minute. You’re sick, feverish, coughing up a lung. Now shut up and take the god damned medicine, Stevie!”

Bucky flinched even as your eyes widened at him. That was what it all had been, what had felt so familiar. He’d had this argument with Stevie one time, hadn’t he? Maybe more? Same sort of smartass remarks, not wanting to take it easy when he was sick, always something to prove. But you weren’t Stevie. Hell, Stevie wasn’t even Stevie any more.

The look you gave him was gentle, apologetic, as you downed the medicine in one gulp. He couldn’t help the smile tugging at his lips at the grimace you made before handing the cup back with your tongue sticking out. “Gah, tastes like shit.”
He snorted in amusement before setting the medicine on your nightstand and standing up to leave again. You needed fluids. Water. There was a jug in your icebox you kept cold. It could get the taste out of your mouth. He pulled it out and set it on the counter. You needed something in your stomach, settle the medicine and help it work better. A glance in the pantry revealed oatmeal. That could stick to your ribs and help your sore throat. The instructions were easy and he put the ingredients on the stove to cook. As he was returning the canister, he saw brown sugar on the shelf. He remembered your drink in the cafe, the one that almost rotted his teeth out. You liked things sweet. Too sweet. Like the drink and the way you smiled at him, even when you thought he wasn't looking. He tightened his jaw and grabbed the package, dropping a few clumps in as the oatmeal cooked.

The cat had joined you in the bed by the time Bucky returned. You were still upright, though you had pulled your cover up to tuck under your chin, and she was curled up on your lap, purring loud enough for him to hear from the door. Both of you looked up at him when he approached, pleasant surprise lighting your face. It was another reaction of yours he was having trouble getting used to.

“Thank you, Bucky,” you sniffled and panted a bit after taking a long drink of water. You looked curiously into the bowl he offered before taking it. “Well, aren’t you sweet?”

“No,” he ground out with a shake of his head. But he found himself starting to smile back nonetheless. “But the oatmeal is. Figured you’d like it with brown sugar.”

The delighted little laugh you gave him, despite how miserable you must have been feeling, was devastating to him, making that clenching in his chest tighten half a turn when you ended it with a somewhat pained groan. He ignored it, opting instead to pet the cat, who had stretched up on its toes across your thighs to greet him with a meow and a paw to smack at his palm. She pressed her cheeks against his fingers and head-butted his hand as best she could. Out of the corner of his eye, through strands of his hair that had fallen like a curtain between the two of you, Bucky caught you smiling at him again, spoon poised in your mouth. But when he turned his face toward yours, you were already looking back down at the bowl.

“The chores you wanted done today,” Bucky asked gruffly as he stood straight. “I’ll do them. What are they?”

You swallowed your spoonful of oatmeal, grimacing in pain as you shook your head. “Aw, Bucky, you don’t.”

“What are they,” he repeated, interrupting with an exasperated glare.

“Dusting, sweeping, cut the grass,” you sighed with a shrug. “But, really, they can wait. You don’t have to do them.”

Bucky regarded you a moment, the flush of your cheeks, the red around your nose, the exhaustion in your eyes. “I know.”

He left before you could argue with him any longer. Because he knew you would keep arguing if given half a chance. Stubborn… bull headed… complete disregard for personal well-being… maybe he was cursed. Bucky huffed to himself as he opened the hall closet. That’s where you kept all the cleaning supplies. He’d observed your routine before. There was little else to do when he grew tired of staring at a TV or computer screen or the pages of a book, trying to catch up on decades of information. Train or observe. A body could only train so much before it needed time to recuperate, and he had discovered that you were not entirely unpleasant to observe.
Dusting was a delicate operation, there were books and movies and weathered knickknacks to lift and wipe under and set back. He mimicked the care you took with these things, unsure of their exact value to you, but if you treated them as precious and fragile then he would as well. Sweeping the floors was time-consuming, if only because he was thorough, leaving no corner untouched and moving most of the furniture easily. There seemed no point in doing the job if it wasn't done right.

It was the mowing that caused the worst problem, and not because the task was difficult. There was a mindless precision to it, back and forth and back again, enough to get lost in. There was a cool breeze across his face. The smell of grass. The engine drowned out the world. And the thoughts came rolling in. Dozens killed. And those were just the names in the files... the targets. How many more people had tried to stop him, people just doing their job to protect, who didn't get to go home and be domestic? How many kids without parents? Overgrown yards? Knickknacks collecting dust in abandoned homes? The flash of an unsuspecting face through a sniper scope. Overturned car with a wheel free spinning as the snow underneath turned red. He had been at war once, but they made him a monster. There was blood on his hands, so much it soaked through to his very bones. And jumping into a river to save Captain America-- to save Stevie -- was not enough to wash him clean.

The aluminum handle of the lawn mower crumpled in his grip, metal and flesh alike. With a low growl, he bent the rods back into place as best he could. It wasn't perfect, but enough for him to finish the yard in a dark mood despite the sun on his face. Once done, he went stalking through the back door of the house, intent on taking another shower to rinse off the grass clippings that had stuck to him. But he stopped when he saw you on the couch, head sticking out from a mound of heavy blankets with the television on.

"I told you to stay in bed," he said, harsh, aggressive, as he approached you from behind.

When you twisted around to offer him a sheepish expression on your flushed face, some of the anger eased from his shoulders. You lifted a steaming mug into his field of vision, saying in a raspy and feeble voice "Tea."

Bucky resisted the sudden urge to roll his eyes as he turned from you to continue what he was doing. Hair up and out of the way, quick rinse under the shower head, special care in drying his left arm, from dull web of scars to the tips of metal fingers. Didn't want to have to worry about rust. He snorted at his own train of thought. "Lounge wear" Wilson had called the clothes Bucky picked out, dark cotton pants and shirt, somehow a magnet for little white and yellow cat hairs.

You were still in the living room when he was finished. Moving to the front of the couch, he found you cradling your mug of tea in your hands just under your face, shivering despite the steam and blanket. Bucky pressed his right hand to your forehead again and frowned. "Chills now, too?"

A simple nod was your only response for a moment as you took a sip of your tea. He took the opportunity to sink onto the couch to your right, folding his left leg under himself so he could face you better. Another heavy shiver rattled your frame, eliciting a sound of cold discomfort from you. Bucky reached out to tuck your cover tighter around you and decided in that moment that if your fever hadn't broken by the next day, he was taking you to a doctor whether you liked it or not. He didn't care if his presence raised questions he didn't want to answer.

"I like your hair bun," you said with a scratchy voice, drawing him from his thoughts. His eyes widened a little at your small smile. "Long hair can be comforting to hide behind, but I do like seeing that handsome face of yours."

You thought he was handsome? Fingers having absently reached up to touch his gathered hair, Bucky dropped his hand. "Finish your tea so you can go back to bed. You need rest."
There was something like quiet laughter in your eyes, but you didn't put voice to it as you turned your attention to the show on the television, taking another gentle slurp from your mug. Bucky watched your face a moment longer before following your gaze. It was a painting show, a man with a large amount of puffed out hair standing at an easel and canvas encouraging viewers to create their own worlds in a calm, even voice. The techniques seemed familiar, the colors, creating depth on a flat surface. It wasn't high art, but simple and sturdy, and Bucky seemed to know it.

From the corner of his eye, he saw your head start to droop forward, mug tilting in your hands. Before he could say anything, you caught yourself with a shiver, taking another sip. It pulled Bucky's attention from the show, watching you begin to drift off only to catch yourself with a start to pull from your tea again. He should have been summarily ushering you back to bed from the very beginning, but something about it kept him enthralled until finally you tipped toward him, blanket bunching and cushioning your head's impact with the metal of his left arm, handle of the now empty tea mug hanging loose in your fingers.

Bucky pulled the mug from your hand to set on the coffee table before using the remote to shut off the television. None of his movements seemed to wake you, only caused you to shiver and fold in tighter against him. Weighing his options a moment, Bucky determined the best way to avoid any further fuss and argument from you was to simply take you to bed himself. It was no difficult task to twist and get his arms hooked beneath your neck and knees, and he had strength enough and more to lift you from the couch and carry you to your room. Though he did pause in the hall when you shivered violently in his arms, head lolling into the crook of his neck to press your feverish and clammy forehead against his skin there.

Once in your room, he propped a knee on the mattress and gently lowered your legs first. But as he leaned to lay your head back against the pile of pillows, you twisted into him, shouldering him in the chest while an arm that had worked free of your blanket cocoon wrapped around his ribs. Bucky froze with a sharp inhale and heard, felt you sleepily murmur something about "warm" against his collarbone. Your fingers curled achingly frail into the fabric at his back and you turned your face into his shirt, the shuddering of your frame subsiding. He slowly laid himself out on the bed, barely breathing, not wanting to wake you. The combined body heat could help sweat out your flu, Bucky reasoned. And he told himself as soon as you rolled away from him, he would make an escape.

---

"Wipe him."

_Terror flooded cold in his veins, but he could not disobey. Heart raced. Faces in lab coats blurred through his vision in an agonizingly slow tilt, filled with horrific anticipation. Mouth full of hard plastic. Smell of electricity like lightning in the air. The excruciating pain of being unmade..._

He sat straight up with a furious cry, the nightmare, the memory lingering on his senses, not quite knowing where he was in that first instant. There was movement beside him. _Bedsprings?_ He started to twist, to instinctively swing his heavy left arm out to neutralize whatever might oppose him. But a voice, thick with worry- _with sleep?_ - rocketed through the rush of blood in his ears, through the wild beating of his heart.

"Bucky, it's okay. You're here with me. You're safe."

The world returned to him finally. Even though he still fought to regain control of his breathing, he recognized your room, your bed, you kneeling, straddling his left leg with a soft, concerned expression and your fingers reaching to cup his face. Bucky let out a ragged sob as the adrenaline began to ebb from his muscles.
"The machine," he tried to explain. But how could he? It was meant to make him forget, but his body always remembered the pain of getting ripped away. His voice was gravel in his throat when he looked at you. "I don't want to lose myself again."

"Oh, Bucky," you breathed softly and he saw understanding light across your face. Sympathy flashed there for a moment, still more than he deserved for the things he'd done, then you leaned forward to hug him. There was a beat for his mind to register the gesture, to accept it, but his arms snaked around you, hauling you against his chest as he buried his nose into the crook of your neck, sagging into you. It was selfish and vicious and terrible how much he wanted your warm comfort in that moment.

There was a twisting in Bucky's gut when you pulled away after a minute, resting a hand on his chest to turn and cough hoarsely into your arm. How had he forgot how sick you were? He reached up to press his right palm to your forehead yet again, but he couldn't resist the urge to brush the hair from your face or the small smile of relief that tugged at his lips.

"I think your fever broke," Bucky informed. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Headache, throat still hurts," you shrugged feebly, leaning back to sit on his thigh for support. "What about you?"

"I'm fine," he nodded curtly after licking his lips, mouth having gone dry with the sudden realization of how very close you were to him, how his hands had found their way to your waist like they belonged there, like back in the alley just two days before when he thought the two of you were being chased and his original thought to protect you melted into just how soft your body was pressed against his, softer than anything he could pull from his cratered memory.

He nudged you a little, urging you gently from his lap and onto the bed. A quick glance at your bedside clock told him it was early evening. "You should probably take another dose of medicine. I'll fix you a can of soup for dinner."

"Hey, Buck," you said quietly as he went to stand. Out of reflex, he turned his face towards you and that aching clench of his chest returned yet again when your fingertips slid soft as sin over the skin of his cheek. The gratitude in your eyes tore at him and he almost begged you not to speak, but the corners of your lips quirked up and all he could do was stare. "Thanks for taking care of me today. And the chores and... Just, thanks. But are you sure you're okay?"

Slow and measured, the metal fingers of Bucky's left hand reached up to cover yours at his face, applying the smallest amount of pressure, wanting the feel of your skin on his to last just a split second longer, before he pulled your hand away to place back on the bed. Bucky straightened and with a duck of his head, retreated toward the kitchen.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Steve's coming over for dinner and a movie. It's a pretty strange day.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is ridiculously long! I mean... ridiculous! 7500+ words ridiculous. Part of why it took so long to get up. Hopefully you'll stick with it and the rest of the fic

By the time you woke up Saturday morning, you felt right as rain again. Of course, this was due in no small part to Bucky absolutely hounding you in his brooding, sometimes angry way to take it easy. There had even been a few times when he'd forced you to sit on the couch and handed you a mug of tea. Bucky did not know how you took your tea and the first time you had nearly choked on all the sugary sludge in the bottom. He had frowned at your reaction, despite you trying to explain it to him gently. The next time he sat you down, he brought the steaming mug with the bottle of honey on the side and watched you fix it up yourself. The third time, your tea was already perfect when he handed it to you.

Despite feeling so much better, the situation had gotten you on a bit of a tea kick, especially with the mornings getting chillier, so you put the kettle on when you got to the kitchen before going off to find Bucky. When you discovered him sitting at the table, you had to hold in your laughter. He was hunched over a bowl of cereal loaded down with berries and the cat was lounging across his shoulders as though he were a sunny window ledge and not a person trying to eat. She pulled some of his hair between her paws, chomping on it a bit before batting it away.

"Good morning," you chuckled as you sat next to him.

"Morning." He looked up at you after finishing his spoonful, the cat undeterred by the shifting of his neck and shoulders. "You sound better. Cough gone?"

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks," you replied. Trying to keep a straight face, you nodded toward the cat. "I like that you're trying out new accessories. This one really brings out the color of your eyes.”

Bucky blinked at you a moment in confusion. When he followed your line of sight, the cat pawed his cheek gently. A long suffering look was shot your way, though you caught the corner of his mouth twitch up as he clucked his tongue a few times and set the cat to purring loudly. It struck you just how gentle and adorable this little interaction was, another of those moments that the hard lines of his face were just a little softer, his eyes just a little brighter. You knew full well that you were staring, how could anyone blame you? But when he flashed you a sly little smirk, gone in a split second, you told yourself it was just the thought of breakfast that fluttered through your stomach.

"So," you teased gently, propping your chin in your palm as you watched him go back to eating. "Today's the big day. You excited?”
The way his face fell, you could have kicked yourself. Such wonderful progress dashed. The stiff edge was back to his features, chewing almost maliciously at his mouthful of food. Still, his voice was surprisingly neutral when he looked up at you. "Not exactly the word I'd use."

"Are you sure you want to go through with it?" You reached out to press your fingers to the cool metal of his forearm in a reassuring gesture. "There's still plenty of time to cancel."

"I can do this," he stated firmly, though it sounded more like a mantra to keep himself going as his fingers curled closed.

His determination brought a smile to your face. "I have no doubt you can and will do this, Bucky Barnes. But if at any point it's too much for you, just say the word and I will step in and end it. I will physically pick Steve up and throw him out on his ass if I have to."

"Was a time that would've been a lot easier," he huffed out in a laughing tone, eyes a little far away. "He might've fought ya, but..."

Bucky let out an almost pained sigh as his focus returned to the bowl in front of him. "Wouldn't be so easy now."

"Hey," you said gently, dropping a hand over his and giving it a little squeeze. "This has gotta be harder on you than I could ever imagine, but I'll be here with you, okay? It may not mean a lot or anything at all, but--"

"It means something," he retorted quietly before shoving another spoonful of cereal in his mouth, avoiding eye contact.

You weren't sure how to respond to that. Thankfully, you were saved by the screeching whistle of the tea kettle on the stove. Glancing back at his face to find him intent on his food, you stood to leave. The cat gave you an expectant meow as you began to move away. You turned back to scratch behind her ears and leaned down to give her an over dramatic smack of your lips to the yellow patch of fur at the crown of her head. When Bucky tilted his head to look up at you sideways, you could see the agitation and worry there, its own unspoken cry for comfort. You reached to cup his opposite cheek and on pure impulse leaned in to press a lightning quick kiss into his hair. His back stiffened, eyes a little wide, even as you gave him a reassuring smile before rushing off to the kitchen to stop the kettle shrieking. A moment later, the cat came bounding in after you to help with the tea.

Bucky went about his usual routine that day. A few times you snuck glimpses of him training in the yard through the kitchen window, so fast and agile and ferocious, while you nervously checked and rechecked that you had everything ready to prepare dinner. Steve had been over a few times before, but never to sit down for a meal. And he was coming alone, much to Sam's annoyance, and not just because Wilson was a fan of your cooking. You understood your friend's concern, but he understood your reasoning too. So, it would just be the three for dinner. You and two super soldiers from World War 2. It really was an absurd science fiction novel just waiting to happen.

When you called Steve earlier that week to invite him over, he had seemed too much in shock by the prospect to offer you an idea of what he might want to eat. You asked Bucky for suggestions and he'd gone quiet a few moments, that thoughtful look on his face you had been seeing a little more often recently, like something had bobbed up to the surface of his mind and he was trying his best to reel it in despite it fighting. When he finally began to answer, it sounded more like a question. "Sunday dinner?"
"Okay," you had smiled, giving him a nod of encouragement, wanting him to keep going with his thought process. "Like a big family meal?"

He nodded in return, voice becoming more certain as he continued. "Whole chicken, potatoes, carrots, stuffing, rolls... and Brussels sprouts."

"Sounds good," you had beamed at him. It was fascinating and wonderful when he had those moments, when you could tell he was gaining back a little piece of himself. And as always, you were more than happy to make something extra special for him.

So, now you were in your kitchen, making up a nice old-fashioned meal like little Suzy Homemaker, humming to yourself because it helped calm the nervousness buzzing around your head. Bucky had stayed outside longer than normal, probably to work off his own nervous energy, and by the time he was showered and dressed the chicken and root vegetables were already in the oven. He came back through the kitchen at one point, stopping to peek over your shoulder as you cooked off bacon for the Brussels sprouts dish you were making.

"Need help," he asked, voice a little tense.

You turned to speak, but the sight of him stopped you. Bucky was standing there in a pair of black slacks and a light gray dress shirt, just a fraction too small so the fabric was pulled taut across his chest and shoulders, sleeve cuffs rolled neat and tight just below his elbows, with his hair clean and brushed and ridiculously soft looking. You hadn’t even known he owned dress clothes, let alone something so… stylish. His confused frown had you blinking to regain your senses.

"No, thanks. Everything’s almost done," you shook your head. Bucky’s frown subsided, but he still had a questioning expression. With a soft sigh, you offered him a grin. “You look nice, Bucky. Real sharp.”

His eyes widened ever so slightly, glancing down at himself before looking back up to you. “Company’s comin over. You’re cookin up somethin special. Least I could do is look presentable.”

“Company’s comin over. You’re cookin up somethin special. Least I could do is look presentable.”

“You look nice, Bucky. Real sharp.”

His eyes widened ever so slightly, glancing down at himself before looking back up to you. “Company’s comin over. You’re cookin up somethin special. Least I could do is look presentable.”

“Thanks, kid,” was his low response, gaze falling from yours quickly as he started for the living room. "Let me know if you need help."

On instinct, you reached out to gently touch him as he brushed past you. When your fingers slid up the bare skin of his forearm, Bucky stopped abruptly and his spine shot straight. He looked from where you were touching him to your face, something like pain flashing through his eyes.

"Bucky, are you okay," you asked, concerned with his sudden change in mood. It certainly wasn't an uncommon occurrence, but it always worried you. It was a sick beating in your heart like you had done something wrong.

"He’ll be here soon," Bucky replied, minute twitches in his muscles giving away his nervousness. He
tilted his head to look around you. "Bacon's burning."

You were momentarily confused, but spun in time to see the edges of the bacon just starting to turn black. "Shit!"

There was a soft chuckle before Bucky left you to salvage what you could. Luckily, it wasn't too bad and soon all that was left was to wait for the chicken to finish resting after being pulled out of the oven. You joined Bucky in the living room, sitting on the opposite end of the couch with one of your old books while he was on the laptop. Not two pages in, you heard a car pulling into your driveway.

Bucky was on his feet in an instant, laptop discarded on the coffee table. You went to the window, but it really only could have been Steve. As soon as his car door swung open, you turned back around with an encouraging smile. Bucky was standing just behind the end of the couch, tense with his jaw working, attention turned to the floor. A knock sounded at the door and the barest of flinches around his eyes pulled at your heart.

"Just a minute," you called out, moving over to Bucky. You dipped your head to make eye contact with him, offering him a mischievous grin and a raised eyebrow. "Like I said before, one word and we'll see how far that big bald eagle can fly."

It was a split second before understanding etched his face. He sighed at your antics, some of the tension dropping from his shoulders. "Just let him in. It's not polite to keep a guest waiting."

You shot Bucky a grin as you went to answer the door. Steve had a grocery bag tucked in the elbow of one arm and a polite smile on his face that did little to mask the disquiet in his eyes. "Hi. Hope I'm not too early."

"Nope, right on time," you replied, pushing open the screen door and waving him in.

"I brought some beer and wine to have with dinner." Steve motioned at the armload he carried. "I wasn’t much help in meal ideas, figured the drinks could be on me."

"Thanks. Very thoughtful," was your chuckled response as you took the offered wares. "You can just put your jacket on one of the hooks if you like."

Steve gave a gracious nod before peeling his outer layer off. You almost let out an exasperated laugh when you realized he was also dressed nicely, with khakis and a navy blue shirt, sleeves rolled up just as smartly as Bucky's. But you found yourself holding your breath when Steve turned around and the two men were face to face.

"Hey, Buck," Steve held his hand out with a somewhat nervous half-smile.

Bucky hesitated a moment, looking torn. That warring in his eyes again. You were about to step in when he finally squared his shoulders and took the offered hand with a single, firm shake. "Steve."

Everything in the room seemed to relax a bit, not the least of which were Steve's tense demeanor and your heartbeat. With a relieved smile, you dug through the bag in your hand to pull out two beers.

"Must have been a memo about dressing up for dinner," you joked, handing a bottle to each of them as you approached. "Gotta say, it never crossed my desk."

Steve cracked open his bottle with a shrug. "I was always told if you're invited for a nice dinner, you
always bring something to share and you should at least look presentable."

With a surprised blink, you glanced over at Bucky. He gave you a quick, knowing look as he took a drink. You sighed in amused defeat. "I suppose I better go change."

"Doesn't really apply to you," Steve countered in a jovial tone. It made you smile to see him acting a little lighter around you. Certainly, he'd always been polite, probably because you had become caretaker to the last connection to his life before all the chaos. But it was nice that he was starting to become friendly with you. "It's your house, you wear what you want."

"Oh no," you chuckled, wagging your finger at him sarcastically. "I'm not sitting down to eat with two sharp-dressed men while I'm looking like a slob in yoga pants and an old t-shirt."

"You look fine like you are," Bucky stated as though it were a cold hard fact before bringing the bottle to his lips again.

The strange little compliment surprised you. For a brief moment, you wondered if it was him asking you not to leave him alone with Steve, but there were no worsened signs of agitation or apprehension in him. A peek at Steve revealed him tilting his head in the barest hint of curiosity. At least you hadn't been the only one to find the quiet remark a bit unusual.

"Well, thank you, Bucky," you smiled appreciatively. "But I'll only be a minute. You wanna set the table?"

With a nod, he silently turned and left for the kitchen. You met your guest's questioning look with your hands turned up in a dramatic shrug. "Why don't you make yourself at home, Steve? I'll be right back and we can eat."

"Sure," he nodded a little awkwardly as you headed for your room, depositing the bag on the dining room table.

There wasn't much in the way of dress clothes in your closet, and what you did have was mostly for going out, despite not having been out in quite some time. Settling for just a pair of nice jeans and a blouse, you reconvened with your dinner party. The place settings were on the table already, Bucky standing at the kitchen counter as you past, and once you hit the living room you saw Steve sitting on the edge of the loveseat, beer bottle dangling from his fingers casually. He gave you a somewhat sheepish smirk when he saw you and stood when you gestured for him to follow.

You joined Bucky in the kitchen to discover he had already carved the chicken and placed it neatly on the platter you had set out. There was no doubting his knife skills, but the less deadly application for them was much more pleasant, especially considering how clean the bones were picked. "Looks great, Buck. Thanks!"

"You're welcome," he replied, corner of his lips quirking upward as you leaned your hip against the counter beside him. He picked up his beer bottle for another swig, eyes giving you a quick once over.

"Need any help carrying stuff to the table," Steve asked from the kitchen entryway.

Admittedly, his voice startled you. You hadn't realized just how intently you were watching Bucky's face as he drank, the long curve of his neck when his head tilted back. Shaking the thought away, you smiled over your shoulder. "You're a guest, Steve. You go pick a place to sit."
"I don't mind helping out," he countered, taking a few steps toward you and Bucky. "Least I can do is carry a bowl or plate."

"Go sit," Bucky said and his voice was a subdued command. But he gave Steve a small, reassuring nod. "We got this, Rogers."

You looked over just in time to see Steve give a pleased snort of amusement and a little nod. Not paying attention, you went to pick up the ceramic dish of root vegetables with your bare hands. It was still too hot and you immediately dropped it the few inches back to the counter with a surprised and pained yelp before it could burn your skin. Bucky's face snapped back to yours in concern, body suddenly rigid and alert.

"It was hot, is all," you explained with great chagrin.

It seemed to soothe him some, but his eyes zipped from you to Steve, down at himself and to the hot dish, finally resting on you again, all at dizzying speed. Then, he raised his left hand, wiggling his metal fingers just slightly, and in a deadpan voice said "Forget you didn't have one of these, kid?"

Your mouth fell open in shock even as he picked up the dish in said hand. Your eyes shot to Steve for a second who seemed equally aghast. But Bucky looked almost agitated when your gaze returned to him, like he was disappointed. You suddenly realized he may have been hoping for a better reaction to his attempt at levity and a warm ache settled in your chest.

"Well, we can't all be so handy, old man," you huffed a laugh at him, hoping your delayed response didn't cause him any embarrassment. You were rewarded with that lightning flash mischievous smirk of his before it vanished in the blink of an eye. He was back to a sobered expression when he handed you the platter and one of the cooler bowls, gathering everything else in his arms to carry.

Steve had a curious smile on his face when you turned toward him, and you grimaced in dismay. "No offense about the old man comment."

"None taken," he shook his head and raised a hand as if to wave the idea away, but his smile grew as he moved to allow you and Bucky to pass on your way to the dining room. You and Bucky ended up in your usual seats, your housemate at the head of the table, with Steve across from you. Rogers gave an appraising look at the spread and took a deep breath through his nose. "Everything looks and smells delicious. Been a while since I've had a home-cooked meal like this."

"Well, Bucky suggested the menu," you replied as the three of you passed around the dishes for everyone to fill their plates. "Family dinner with all the fixin's. Like Sunday supper on Saturday night."

"It seemed kinda... familiar," Bucky added, eyes a bit distant. They focused again, gaze darting to Steve, then away in an instant, a thoughtful squint to them.

"Yeah," Steve chuckled softly, lifting his chin with a slight nod. "Yeah, it does."

Bucky nodded in kind, though a pained look ghosted over his face for a split second before he shoved a forkful of stuffing into his mouth. The room was quiet for a while as everyone began to eat, a bit of awkwardness in the air as though none of you knew quite how to make small talk with the others. You decided you would be the first to cave under the silence, but when you took a breath to speak your throat suddenly tickled. With just enough time to bring your napkin up to cover your
mouth, you turned your head away from the table to cough a few times.

"Sorry, fellas," you said after seeing the concerned looks from both men. Steve's was curious, but Bucky's was a hard set mouth and soft eyes. "Getting over the flu. The cough is always the last thing to go."

There was a bit of unease to Steve's expression, but he still smiled. "Yeah, I remember that. You gonna be alright?"

"Oh yeah," you nodded in assurance. "Bucky actually took great care of me. Nursed me back to health."

Steve opened his mouth to speak, but Bucky made a flippant interjection after swallowing his mouthful of food. "She's almost as bad a patient as you."

Both your attention and Steve's immediately snapped to the man between the two of you. There was a question in Steve’s eyes, a hope, but it faded as he watched his friend. Bucky had stilled, a startled expression on his face as he glanced between both of you. His tongue darted out to lick his lips as his brow furrowed in thought. Resting his forearms on the table, he turned his face down to his plate so that his hair half concealed him.

"I..." Despite his curtain of hair, you could still see him flinch a bit as he began to speak, like it physically hurt to drag the air from his lungs to form words. You wanted to reach out to him, but didn't dare interrupt as he continued. "Sometimes I remember you. As a kid. Sick all the time and scrawny, getting your ass handed to ya at least once a week. Jesus, you were ten pounds of ornery in a five pound bag and didn't weigh a hundred soaking wet. You couldn't... wouldn't take care of yourself..."

He raised his head, hand reaching up to brush the hair back from his face in one easy swipe as he took a deep, steadying breath. After a slow exhale, he huffed with a weak smile and looked at Steve. "Guess I don't have to worry about that anymore."

"No, I suppose you don't, Buck," Steve replied quietly, shaking his head a little. The sadness that colored his eyes was heartbreaking. He glanced your way, then down at his own plate as if searching for a distraction. Clearing his throat, he asked, "You think you could pass me the -"

Before Steve was half way through with his request, Bucky was reaching out. He grabbed the bowl of Brussels sprouts from in front of you and set it down next to Steve's arm, like a peace offering. Steve's eyes widened.

"They were your favorite," Bucky said with a tiny shrug, voice rough around the edges. He was poised to put another forkful of food in his mouth, but he paused and gave an almost amused shake of his head. "Only guy I ever knew wanted Brussels sprouts with just about every meal."

"What can I say," Steve replied, chuckling under his breath. And if you had thought you'd ever seen Steve smile before, you were sorely mistaken, because his face lit up so bright you found yourself blinking while he took a large scoop from the bowl. "Just thought they tasted good."

"Boiled Brussels sprouts don't taste good." Bucky’s lip curled up in mild disgust as he finished chewing. You couldn’t help your own grin at the small gesture, but then he picked up one of the Brussels sprouts on his fork, contemplating it severely for a moment, before his expression softened and his eyes slid over to regard you. "These are delicious, though. These could grow on me."
“It’s all very delicious,” Steve smiled over at you with an appreciative nod. But something told you he wasn’t only talking about the food when he added, “Thank you.”

The rest of dinner was less tense. Bucky was still quiet, but he had eased some. When all three of you had eaten your fill, despite your protests, both men insisted on helping clear the table. However, you put your foot down at them washing dishes, partly because you wanted the pots and pans to soak and partly because you didn’t want to explain the Bucky-fist sized dent in the edge of the sink. Instead, you ordered them off to the living room with a devious little smile.

"I've got a treat for us, but it's a surprise," you answered their questioning looks. Steve shrugged casually and turned for the living room, but Bucky lingered. With a lighthearted huff, you started nudging him backwards gently with your fingers on his chest. "Go on, scoot! Outta my kitchen!"

Bucky shuffled a half step back, taken off guard. Then one of his brows arched up, silent laughter glinting in his eyes as an impish smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, as though it amused him, you being a little forceful. He pressed forward a bit, and, spurred on by his unusual playfulness, you flattened your palms on his chest to push with a grinning scoff. Obviously he was strong enough to stop you if he really wanted, but he let you back him up a few more inches before he relented and stepped away, throwing you a smile as he rounded the corner to follow Steve.

Once he was out of sight, you gleefully went about gathering up everything you needed from the fridge, including the nice frosty glasses you’d stuffed in the freezer that morning. It was only a few minutes until you had the three glasses filled. And damned if you didn’t feel a little like you stepped back in time when you placed them on a serving tray and carried them into the living room, only to have both men politely stand up when they noticed you enter.

“Oh, sit back down, gentleman,” you scolded with a smile. They complied as you came around the corner of the armchair where Steve sat.

Steve’s eyebrows shot up in pleasant surprise when you set the tray down on the coffee table, doing your best not to slosh the foam on top. “Chocolate egg creams?”

“Yes, sir,” you snickered proudly, handing a glass over to him. “Thought you Brooklyn boys might enjoy something a little old-fashioned.”

Handing another to Bucky, you saw that spark of recognition in his eyes. His smile widened as he looked up at you and despite the chill of the glass you felt his warm fingers brush against yours as he took the drink. The third you picked up and brought with you while you moved to sit at Bucky’s left on the couch, but you had barely settled when you saw Steve pull the glass from his lips, a third of the drink already gone, to reveal a thick line of milk foam caught across his upper lip with a grin plastered on his face.

“Oh my god, Steve,” you cried out, voice nearly a squeal at the absurd sight of him. Something about the thoroughly confused look on his face set you to laughing uncontrollably. On impulse, you turned to bury your face in the closest available object to try and hamper the sound you were making. Said object just so happened to be Bucky’s shoulder, though the soft fabric stretched across metal did little to muffle the noise. A moment later, you felt Bucky move and heard a sputtering, followed by Steve’s laughter. But when you heard a third gentle chuckle join the cacophony of sound, you sat bolt upright on the couch.

Steve’s mustache was gone, but he was almost doubled over, one hand propped on a knee and the
other clutching his empty glass to his chest over his heart, smiling so wide his eyes were nearly closed. Bucky had a few wet spots on the front of his shirt having dripped from his chin that he was wiping at with his arm. And his entire upper lip and part of his nose were coated in foam. He was still chuckling, the act making his nose scrunch up and the skin around his eyes crinkle. You started laughing again, this time more subdued, when he looked over at you, licking the foam from his upper lip like a little kid.

“You better hurry up and drink that,” Bucky nodded toward your glass as he swiped his right hand across the remaining mess on his face.

“C’mon, Buck,” Steve chided as he set his glass back on the tray. “People can savor their drinks if they want.”

“Not that old argument again, Stevie,” Bucky waved him off jovially, barely looking over. You saw Steve still at the nickname, but did your best not to react because Bucky seemed to be on a roll and you didn’t want to jar him out of it. He leaned toward you, almost conspiratorially. “You gotta drink ‘em fast otherwise they go flat. Then you might as well just be drinkin’ chocolate milk. No straws, though, right?”

He looked to Steve for confirmation and Rogers obliged with a knowing shake of his head. “No straws. Takes away half the fun.”

Bucky turned back to you and gave a curt nod. “Ya see? Now, get to drinkin’!”

You rolled your eyes at him, but brought the glass to your lips and started gulping down the drink quickly. Pausing to take a breath, you saw the cat jump onto the back of Steve’s seat with a loud meow. She had been scarce since breakfast, probably sensing something was going on in the house, but now she wanted to join the party. Steve leaned back to take a look at her and she tentatively took a step onto his shoulder before hopping down into his lap.

“Hey there,” he smiled, brushing a hand down her back as she sniffed one of his shirt buttons.

“Behind the ears,” Bucky informed as he put his empty glass on the coffee table and gestured casually at the side of his head. Steve scratched where instructed and it set the cat to purring loudly, rubbing her cheeks against his shirt. She stretched up onto his chest to start kneading her paws there while he continued to pet her. But being a somewhat fickle thing, she soon hopped away right onto the coffee table.

“Potato, no,” you said, loud and stern, when she tried to stick her whole face down into Bucky’s glass.

This brought the attention of both men to you, though you still had to reach out and move the glass away from the misbehaving cat. Bucky was giving you an uncertain look even as the cat climbed into his lap. "Potato?"

"Yeah," you nodded, confused at his questioning tone as you stood to gather the glasses. Then a thought struck you, and you gave an embarrassed groan. "Bucky, have you not known her name this whole time?"

He shook his head with a little shrug, raising his left hand so the cat could pet herself as she pleased against his fingers. "Just called her Cat."
As if on cue, she stretched up to rub her cheek against Bucky's before jumping onto his shoulder to stretch behind his neck much like you had seen this morning. Bucky smiled and clucked his tongue at the purring mass before reaching up to tug at her ears. A glance at Steve showed him trying hard to suppress a laugh, but you could still hear it when he asked "So, why Potato?"

"Well..." you began, standing up to start gathering the empty glasses. "First, she can be dumber than a sack of potatoes sometimes. You have no idea how many times I've had to pull her off of door jambs and bookcases because she got up and couldn't get down."

You caught Bucky shaking his head in amused disagreement when Steve looked over at him. But you rolled your eyes and continued. "Second, she sorta looks like a mound of mashed potatoes when she's all balled up. But mostly, it's because I found her as a feral kitten in my grandma's old potato bin outside. I was out doing chores and I heard her crying in there. She was old enough to be on her own, without momma cat, but she was acting kinda helpless, so I took her in."

“Oh, so you make it a habit of taking in strays,” Bucky joked quietly as the cat jumped over to the arm of Steve’s chair for further investigation of his drumming fingers. If he noticed the sudden shock on Steve’s face, he didn’t react to it.

“You could say that. And so far, I’m one for two in domesticating them. But I ain’t done with you yet, Bucky Barnes,” you teased with a wink and you saw that flash of a smirk before you left for the kitchen with the dishes.

The boys were still preoccupied with the cat when you returned. Bucky had brought out the bag of treats and the two of them were tossing them in her direction for her to catch. No wonder she had been getting a little heftier recently. Chuckling to yourself, you headed over to the entertainment center to turn on the TV.

“Sticking around for a movie, Steve,” you asked, turning back to the pair. It had been discussed during your phone call to invite him over, but you figured you would give him an out, just in case there was some superhero business to attend to, or he was just uncomfortable staying longer. Though, with as much he seemed to be enjoying himself, you were sure you already knew the answer.

“If it’s alright with you,” he replied, stealing a glance at Bucky, who had gotten Potato to sit up on her haunches to beg for a treat. Bucky obliged, looking over to Steve, then you with a nod. "Movie sounds good."

“Okay, what do we wanna watch,” you smiled. “There’s Netflix or I’ve got a lot of DVDs.”

“Lady’s choice,” was Steve’s genial answer. And Bucky just shrugged, as per usual.

With a laughing sigh, you skimmed through your shelves of movies, trying to pick something that might go over well. You passed up any dramas, too boring and would probably be a mood killer. Shoot-em-up actions and horror-thrillers probably weren’t a good idea for the evening either, considering your present company. But some of your comedies wouldn’t make much sense to the pair of them. Then your eyes lighted on one in particular and that devious smile returned.

“Hey, Steve,” you looked over your shoulder at him. “Have you seen The Princess Bride, yet?”

“Can’t say I have,” he shook his head, handing a treat over to the cat.
Pulling it from the shelf, you turned to see Bucky tilting his head to look up at you with a brow raised in anticipation. You swallowed the lump in your throat, but continued to smile. "It's sort of a modern classic, I guess. A little humor, a little adventure, some fencing, fantasy stuff. Been a while since I've seen it. What do ya say?"

You were met with nods of approval and you happily set everything up to watch the movie. Grabbing the remote, you settled in beside Bucky once more to press play. Their reactions were of equal interest to you as the movie itself, so you kept an eye on them as things happened.

Bucky snorted gently in amusement at Grandpa's line. "When I was your age, television was called books."

"Look at the size of that guy," Steve muttered at the sight of Fezzik. You grinned when he added, "Kinda reminds me of someone I know."

At the first close-up of The Man in Black, Bucky shot you a look. Obviously he'd figured out it was Westley in disguise. Both men seemed completely enthralled with the swordfight between Inigo and Westley. You could imagine them as boys watching the likes of Errol Flynn swashbuckling at the cinema, faces lit up by the light of the screen. There was even some snickering at the hand-to-hand combat.

"All right. Where is the poison?" Westley began the battle of wits with Vizzini, but Bucky called out "In his nose!"

This caused Steve to sputter out a short laugh that made Bucky smile triumphantly. And both gave a bit of a somber nod at "Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something."

Everything seemed to be going very well. Maybe they didn't get the nostalgic feeling that came with the movie for people of your generation, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Content in your great choice of films, you excused yourself to the bathroom and told them to keep watching. By the time you returned, they had gotten to the part where Buttercup wakes up from her dream with the old woman yelling at her for leaving Westley. You were a little confused at Bucky's sudden unease as you sat down next to him, until a few scenes later when you saw Count Rugen heading down into the Pit of Despair and rolling Westley to "The Machine" and you remembered Bucky waking up in your bed screaming just a few days before.

"Oh shit!" How had you forgotten this scene? Your eyes widened at Bucky, whose face had darkened though his gaze turned to lock with yours momentarily from the corners of his eyes, muscles tensed to twitching. Steve gave you a confused look at your outburst just as you were reaching for the remote. "Okay. I'm gonna change--"

Almost quicker than you could register, Bucky's left hand shot forward, sleeve making a hideous tearing sound at the shoulder seam, metal fingers gouging into the wood surface of the coffee table around the remote to block you. How he managed to not crush it in his grasp, you didn't know. He stayed in that position a moment, body coiled like an animal about to pounce, chest rising and falling with ragged breath as the movie continued to play and Westley jerked and spasmed in pain.

"Buck," Steve spoke in a low question, having moved to the edge of his seat. Bucky's face whipped violently in his direction. You couldn't see his expression, but something there brought a look of pained sympathy to Steve's face.

You moved to sit on the coffee table next to him, heart thundering in your chest while you tried to soothe him. "Bucky, it's okay. I'm sorry. We'll turn it off..."
"I can do this," he ground out through gritted teeth as his face turned back to the table beneath him. They were the same words he'd said that morning about meeting with Steve, the same determination. He was not far away in his mind like he sometimes got, at least not in that instant. Bucky was trying. He was trying so hard.

"I have no doubt you can and will do this, Bucky Barnes," you echoed your response from much earlier in the day. "But it gets worse in the movie. The next scene is so much worse."

"There's a happy ending, right," he asked, his voice dark and quiet. Something in it stunned you to silence, but when you didn't answer, Bucky finally looked up at your face. "Isn't there a happy ending?"

"Yeah, Bucky," you smiled gently. Instinctively, you reached out to cover the back of his metal hand with your palm. "Of course there's a happy ending."

The strained vibration of his muscles eased a bit as he nodded, slowly leaning back into his seat. Metal fingers curled around the remote to drag it with him. A sense of control was something he needed, and what better object to hang onto. He grimaced a little when his eyes focused on Steve, and he looked away quickly. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Steve replied with a solemn shake of his head. "Are you sure you wanna--"

"Yes," Bucky bit out, finally settling back on the couch, though his spine was still rigid.

You had moved back to the cushion beside him just as Prince Humperdinck was heading down into the Pit of Despair. Bucky's whole body flinched at the machine being thrown to its highest setting and the agonizing sound the tore out of Westley was so much like Bucky's from nights before that you reached out to tuck your hand around his elbow for comfort. His eyes fell to where you touched him before moving to meet your gaze. Those hard lines were back on his face again, jaw tight and brow knit, pain and exhaustion in his eyes, and it hurt knowing you'd managed to chase away all that soft playfulness from not 20 minutes before.

The three of you weathered the rest of the movie in silence, Steve slipping worried glances in Bucky's direction from time to time and you doing your best to avoid eye contact. Though Bucky did relax some as the film progressed, especially after the visit to Miracle Max. By no means was he back to where he was before you'd put the DVD in, but by the time the credits rolled, he was breathing regularly again and had released his death grip on the remote. In fact, he handed it back to you, wrapping his cool metallic fingers around yours for a split second as you grabbed it from him before letting you go.

"I should probably be heading back," Steve finally broke the silence, stretching a little as he stood. "It's getting late and it's a long drive."

Bucky stood as well, seeming a little uncertain, but he was the one to offer his hand. "I... I'll see you later, Steve."

Steve gave a reassuring smile and a firm handshake. "You bet, Buck."

You grabbed Steve's coat for him even as Bucky headed in the opposite direction. It had gotten dark outside, so you flipped on the porch light as you followed your guest out into the cool night air. He was already down the steps when you worked up the courage to speak.

"So much for a fun, relaxing movie," you tested the waters as you leaned against the bannister, unsure of how Steve would react to you after the incident with Bucky. He turned toward you with a
dismissive shrug, but there wasn't any harsh judgment to his look. "Well, at least now I know why Barton says 'Have fun storming the castle' before just about every mission."

"I'm sorry I ruined the mood," you chuckled feebly. "I seriously screwed the pooch on that one."

"You couldn't have known that would happen," Steve waved you off, though there was a lot of sympathy in his voice.

"I should have thought of it. Should have remembered that scene," you shook your head with anexasperated groan. "God, things were going so well tonight."

"They were," he smiled fondly. "Saw some of my old friend tonight. I know he'll never be the exact same, no one can be after everything. But he seems to be doing so much better. You gotta be doin something right."

"Bucky's the one doing the real work. I'm just offering support," you countered, taking a moment to rub a hand over your bare arms to warm them a little.

Steve regarded you a moment before speaking again. "Sam told me about your sister."

"Yeah," you snorted, hoping the flinch you felt had just been internal. "I suppose that doesn't really inspire much confidence in me."

"You're wrong on that one," he replied. When you blinked up at him in mild shock, he propped his hands on his hips and gave a frustrated huff. "I should be the one helping Bucky. He's my friend, my responsibility. But the others just don't trust him yet. And... honestly, I wouldn't know the first thing about how to help. So, I'm glad he's got someone like you. Someone who treats him like a human being instead of a... a monster. Someone who gives a damn about what happens to him."

"I live to help," you shrugged with a smirk, for some reason a little uncomfortable with the small praise. "And that boy could use all the help he can get."

Steve chuckled under his breath, nodding. "Thanks for dinner. It really was delicious."

"Any time," you smiled. "Good night, Steve. Have a safe trip back."

"Night," he waved before turning to head toward his car.

You stood on the porch as he got in and drove away. It was an old family quirk to wait until someone got to the end of the driveway, keep an eye on them until they left your acreage and got back to the outside world. After a final wave, you headed back in. Bucky had already cloistered himself in his bedroom.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of dinner with Steve

Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long. Hope you enjoy it. Let me know what you think? <3

It was late when you heard a knock at your bedroom door. Kicking yourself over causing Bucky distress had kept you awake even longer than usual and you had tried to silence that nagging, anxious voice in your head for the last few hours by reading under your bedside lamp. The knocking startled you a bit, but after giving yourself a derisive snort, you put your bookmark between your current pages. "Come on in."

The door opened slowly, just wide enough for Bucky to step through, Potato pattering in between his feet. He only wore sleep pants, low lamplight glowing off his bare left arm as he closed the door quietly behind him. You hadn't seen him since walking Steve outside. Hadn't had a chance to check on him and apologize for what happened with the movie. When he turned to face you, he looked haggard, pensive, such a drastic change from earlier in the evening. You had the sudden urge to hop to your feet and wrap your arms around him in a hug, but you resisted, remembering there was a good chance you contributed to his current unease.

"Trouble sleeping," you finally asked after a few moments of quiet.

His lips pulled thin as he nodded, raking the hair back from one side of his face. Fingers still tangled at the nape of his neck, Bucky leveled you with a nervous, questioning look through his lashes, like he wanted to ask something, ask for something, but didn't know how. The last straw was his tongue darting out across his lips, dragging his lower one between his teeth to worry absently as he looked away. The silence and that almost needy, childlike look about him were too much. You pulled the covers back from your bed to your right and tilted your head in casual invitation when his eyes returned to you.

Bucky stood straight, hand falling back to his side. Face turning from you slightly, his brow furrowed and he seemed uncertain. You could see him thinking it over and for a split second you saw self-loathing color his features, a sight and feeling you knew all too well. It made you wonder if his courage to seek comfort carried him as far as your bedroom door only to falter now. There was a bit of desperation to the next look he flashed you from out of the corner of his eye and it made your chest constrict painfully. But you gave him a reassuring smile, tilting your head again as you patted the mattress beside you. Yes, it was okay to be there. It was okay to ask for help. And you wanted to help so much.

The softness was back in his face a moment. The one that reminded you that despite having been on this earth for almost a century, he wasn't honestly much older than you in the scheme of things. He took a breath, parting his lips as if to speak, but no sound came out. Instead, he gave a curt nod and
slowly made his way over to the other side of the bed. There was another split-second hesitation, grey eyes meeting yours before he slid himself onto the mattress. As he settled cross-legged beside you, you noted that the red star on his arm looked different. It was marked up, scuffed, like maybe he had tried to scrape it off since the last time you saw it.

With a soft meow, Potato followed Bucky onto the bed. She landed in front of him gracefully, but paused only for a small brush against his hand before making her way to the foot of the bed where she often liked to sleep. The small distraction of her movement seemed to ease the tension in his shoulders just a touch. And you hadn't even known you were tongue-tied watching him until you found yourself finally able to speak again.

"Bit of a wild day, huh," you said quietly, repositioning yourself to face him.

His eyes were still fixed on the crumpled sheets in front of his knees, but he breathed out a gravelly "Yeah."

Encouraged by the addition of his voice, you plodded on with a small smile. "Steve said he had a good time. Seemed to like my cooking, too."

"Everything you make is delicious," Bucky replied. It was another statement of fact from him, as though no one could dispute it, just like his earlier comment on you looking nice even in clothes you lounged around the house in. A little more agitation seemed to drain from him as he spoke and your smile widened.

"Even the chocolate egg creams," you asked in a playful, hopeful voice and leaned toward him a little expectantly.

Bucky gave a languid blink as his gaze shifted in your direction, head tilting enough for you to see the corners of his mouth curl up ever so slightly. There was almost a tinge of laughter to his voice when he answered. "Especially the egg creams."

"Good," you beamed, relieved at his approval. Out of habit, you reached over with the tips of your fingers to tuck a few wayward strands of hair back behind his ear. "I've never even had one before, let alone made one, so I was worried you boys wouldn't like them."

"They were good," he assured with a slight nod. Turning his head a little more, his cheekbone brushed into the palm of your hand just as you were about to pull it away. The fleeting way his gaze flickered up to yours let you know it hadn't been an accident.

You let your touch linger a moment, rasping a thumb across his stubbly cheek as your fingers curled against his jawline, answering that unspoken need for contact in his eyes. When you finally lowered your hand to rest on his knee, you huffed a little sigh through your smile. "You were awesome today, Bucky. You did it, just like you said you could. Steve even said he saw some of his old friend back. And it seemed like you were having such a great time."

"I was," he replied, but his face darkened, pain and anger etching his features as he turned from you again. "Until..."

"I know," you nodded, cringing. Your eyes and hand both fell back to your own lap, fidgeting with the hem of your shorts as shame twisted in your gut. "It's all my fault. You were doing so well and I ruined it. I just had to pick that movie. My sister and I watched it so many times as kids. Maybe, seeing you and Steve together, I just wanted some nostalgia of my own."

"You and your sister watched it together," he asked, a quiet, thoughtful sound.
"Yeah." You breathed out a bleak chuckle, running your hands down your face. "Guess I remembered all the good parts and forgot all the scary, bad ones. I'm sure there's a lesson in that somewhere. God, I'm horrible. Such a fucking idiot."

There was a heated edge to his voice when he countered, "I'm the one who nearly put my hand through the coffee table."

"The coffee table?" Your eyes shot to his face finally as you groaned out in annoyance, shaking your head. "Aw Bucky! The coffee table? Your shirt? The sink? None of that stuff matters!"

"It matters to me," he snapped back. The intense look he turned your way had you like a deer in headlights, even as he reached for you with his left hand. "This?"

You didn't flinch away, knowing exactly what Bucky had zeroed in on despite the scar being nearly invisible now. In fact, if you were being honest with yourself, a part of you wanted to feel a cool touch against your skin that had grown too warm under his scrutiny. But he stopped just inches from it, brow furrowing as grey eyes fell from yours to the metal fingers curling away from you. "This was meant for nothing but destruction."

He dropped the hand, palm up, to his knee. Lips turned down to a grimace, that hatred rolling off him in waves, his fist clenched and unclenched multiple times, fingers rolling in fine articulation. The sections of his arm slid together one second and apart the next, a robotic flexing with a near inaudible pistoning sound. And Bucky watched it like a gruesome thing, like a train wreck you know is horrible but you can't tear your eyes from.

"You've never asked me about it," he eventually spoke again, and you were so damned thankful. A moment longer and you might have lost your nerve and put a stop to his self-imposed punishment yourself.

Instead, you gave your most nonchalant shrug. "It's never made a difference to me."

"It's been months." He looked up at you, one eyebrow cocked though the rest of his features seemed indifferent. " Aren't you curious?"

"Of course, I'm curious," you said, snorting a bit at the absurdity of that question.

"Well, ask then," was his hard, bitter response before you could add anything else. "Now's your chance."

"Bucky, it's been a rough day for you," you tried to soothe. "And I really don't think--"

But he interrupted you with an order that brooked no refusal, expression a grim determination.

"Ask."

Breathing out a heavy sigh, you let your eyes roam his face a bit. You could see he was dead set on it. Maybe playing along could help him feel better, especially since he seemed so willing to talk. And you did have questions you had wondered about. Propping your elbows on your knees, you held your palms out to him. "May I?"

Confusion tinted Bucky's expression, as though it never occurred to him that you might want to touch him. He contemplated your hands a moment before ducking his head in a nod, lifting his arm out to you. Tentatively, you hooked your left thumb with his, the heels of your palms fitting sleek metal and warm flesh together flush as you gripped him. When he gave no indication of pulling away, you leaned in for a closer inspection. You could feel his attention fixed on you, but you did your best to ignore it.
"How does it work," you asked, fingers of your right hand gliding delicate and slow down the backs of his shiny digits starting at the tips and working their way over each joint. You'd held his hand before, but had never taken the time to examine the intricate plating. "I mean, how do you feel things?"

"Hard to describe," he replied as you moved to his wrist, studying the shape of the metal there. His voice had lost some of its edge, mulling over each word to use. "There's pressure. I can tell when things are hot or cold. I can detect surface variables. But it's not the same as... feeling."

"Sounds very sci-fi," you smirked despite yourself, thumb tracing a section of his forearm. There was a look of interest on his face when your eyes flickered up to him. "Sci-fi?"

"Science fiction," you explained and watched as Bucky's eyes became a little distant, that pull of recognition evident on his face. The memory, or memories, must have been good, because the corner of his lips tugged upward and he gave a half-hearted little laugh. "I liked science fiction."

"Really?" You never would have pegged him for a sci-fi fan. Returning your attention to the metal beneath your fingers, you hid your grin. "I'm rather fond of it, myself."

Several silent moments passed as you continued to explore the lines of his arm. He let you bend his elbow, taking great care in manipulating the joint. The way it made the sections in his upper arm expand and contract was absolutely fascinating. You brushed over the flecked and pitted red star near his shoulder. No need to ask about that, though you shared a furtive glance with him. It didn't take a rocket scientist to understand the concept of him wanting rid of such a branding.

"Not as heavy as I thought it'd be," you remarked, pausing to raise his arm up a bit when you felt you'd lingered too long at the attempted removal. Leaning to one side, you looked over the sections that disappeared into his back. "Is it heavier than the right? Does it feel lopsided?"

Bucky took a moment to respond as your right hand followed just inside the curve of skin. "I... I think it might have. In the beginning. It's just how it is now."

"That makes sense," you nodded. Lifting again, you draped his forearm across your right shoulder to continue your inspection. This time, you gingerly traced your fingers along the edge of webbed scar tissue at his chest, an inch at a time as though one wrong move, one errant breath could break something, despite how ridiculously strong and sturdy you knew he was. "Does it hurt?"

When you looked up at him, he was staring at your face so intently it threatened to unnerve you. But his eyes fell to where you touched him, the thin line where metal met tough, thick skin. Tongue darting out across his lips, Bucky's voice was hushed and almost unsure when he answered. "It did. For a long while. I sorta remember injections, IVs. They musta had me so pumped fulla shit I couldn't feel mucha anything, judgin by how sick I was when I broke loose. But it hasn't hurt in a long time, I don't think. Except... when it's cold. When I'm cold. Like an ache deep in my bones."

There were no words you could muster when his gaze found yours again. Even the air in your lungs seemed hard to come by through the lump in your throat. The way he spoke, despite how quiet, you could almost hear that young sergeant crying out in torment and fear, thousands of miles and decades away. And all that pain in his eyes as they held yours... It was enough to break your heart. You had to look away as you blinked back the tears trying to form, that familiar sting in your nose making you sniff gently. Turning your attention to where your fingers rested against the plating at his chest was a small relief, but enough.

"I guess we'll-" Your voice gave an unceremonious crack when you started to speak. Clearing your
throat, you hazarded a glance up at him. Some of that anguish had dissipated from his eyes with the slightest tilting of his head, making way for something close to curious concern. You offered him a self-deprecating smirk as you continued. “Guess we’ll just have to make sure you keep nice and warm from now on.”

A smile ghosted over Bucky’s face, unsure, but he gave a small nod in acceptance. Content with your inspection of the scars, and not wanting to cause any more distress at this point, you gave him a few sympathetic pats to his chest. As you moved to pull his arm from your shoulder, you let your fingers brush down his ribs in a gesture meant to soothe frazzled nerves. But his demeanor suddenly changed. Spine shooting straight, he jerked away from you with a sharp inhale, making your heart sink with worry.

"Are you okay," you asked, frantic, pulling your hand from his skin with a gasp, afraid that you had hurt him somehow.

"I'm fine," he replied and shook his head, eyes a little wide as he turned his face away from you.

It was your turn to be confused a moment. Trying to make sense of the reaction, there was only one conclusion. You cracked into a knowing grin. In a tone of mock accusation, you asked "Bucky, are you... ticklish?"

He shot you a look, all that sadness gone from his eyes. It was replaced with amused reproach, as though the very idea was ludicrous. You had to bite into your lower lip to hold back the chuckle that threatened to bubble up inside you. He shook his head at you again, this time a real smile flashed across his lips, huffing a small exasperated laugh at your antics. It made your smile grow wider to feel some of the tension melt from his muscles, to see that light back in his eyes from earlier in the evening. It made you feel like maybe you could really help him, if given the chance.

Repositioning yourself again, you let your knee knock into his on the bed and gently pulled his left hand down into your lap once more. Your fingertips played over the insides of his palms a moment as you wondered at their details, pondering at everything he had told you. "So, you really think this is only meant for destruction?"

You could almost feel his disdainful frown before you ever turned to look at him. Desperate to keep the mood light, you rolled your eyes with a playful shrug. "Okay, sure. It was designed for nothing but that. However, I can think of a few good, positive things it could be used for."

A long quiet moment stretched while you let that sink in. Let Bucky try to wrap his head around the concept. Palm to palm, your fingers splayed against his in an attempt to measure them, he finally asked in a quiet, unassuming voice. "Like what?"

"Well," you began, tilting your head as you considered it. The index finger of your right hand skimmed a nail through the grooves inside his knuckle. "We already know you can pick up hot things to keep others from burning themselves."

His shoulder shook against you a little, a silent laugh, probably remembering your stupidity from that afternoon. Encouraged by this, you decided to press on. "And you're obviously really strong. I bet you can crush a thousand cans for recycling before you ever got tired."

"Crushing cans," Bucky muttered sarcastically, though the tone of his voice let you know he was at least somewhat entertained.

“Hey, recycling is very important for the environment,” you informed with a haughty expression as you glanced over at him. He wasn’t looking at first, his interest seemingly focused on the way your
hand slid over the cool surface of his own. Though when he did turn his attention back to you, corner of his mouth quirked up, you swallowed down the tiny skip in your chest. “If you need something more substantial, you’ve basically got a built-in jaws of life. If there were a really bad car wreck, you could pry off a door, or, hell, probably rip a small car in half to rescue someone.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed, lost focus. Another memory perhaps, less than pleasant, but it began to subside when your thumb pressed down the inside of his wrist. Scrabbling to pull him back, you shouldered him gently with a smile. “Or, some poor stranded motorist with a flat and no jack, you would be their hero holding up the car while they changed the tire. You probably wouldn’t even break a sweat.”

“A glorified carjack now, huh” he snorted wryly, but it seemed you had succeeded in your effort.

“Everyday hero,” you countered as your fingers folded between his. As if on instinct, his hand curled closed around yours, though the quirk of his eyebrow let you know he was unconvinced. Giving a wicked smile, you squeezed a little tighter. "Just imagine it! Bucky Barnes, the bane of stuck jar lids. The master of helping friends move house. The savior of hot dogs that have fallen directly into the campfire. The best damned cat petter the world has ever seen!"

It surprised you when Bucky laughed. A short burst, gone much too soon, but a real one that lingered on his voice as he shook his head yet again. The grin was firmly planted though, even if just for the moment, those dimples infectious. "You're ridiculous, you know that?"

"Of course I do," you answered proudly and pressing your ear into his shoulder with your own chuckle. Watching your thumb run over the plating where you held his hand, you brought your right up to tuck around his forearm so you could hug the metal appendage to you. When he didn't shy away, you let out a lighthearted sigh. "Honesty, Bucky, at the end of the day, it's really just an arm. It's unique and super powerful, and you obtained it under the absolute shittiest circumstances known to mankind, but it's an arm. And just like so many other things in this world, whether it's good or bad depends on what you do with it. How you choose to use it. Especially now that you've got so many more choices."

His hand flexed tighter in yours, but he didn't say anything. You really didn't expect him to. Instead, you just held onto him, letting him know you were there. The cat's purring filled the otherwise silent minutes that passed, even as he rested some of his weight against you. It was cozy in a way, your body heat having warmed the metal in your grasp. Comforting. You hadn't even realized you were starting to doze until a yawn overtook you unexpectedly.

"I should go," Bucky murmured just as you leaned away to glance up at him, his expression looking all the world like he had begun to zone out himself.

"Stay here," you replied, though it sounded almost more like an order than a suggestion in your tired voice. "Warmer than the floor, firmer than your bed, plenty of room for the both of us."

He looked unsure despite the obvious heaviness of his eyelids as he slowly untangled his fingers from yours. An inner turmoil furrowed his brow and his voice was tight when he said "What if I..."

"Survived the last one, didn't we," you answered, knowing he meant another nightmare, like the one that startled you awake with his cries of fear and pain. Unfolding your legs from under you, you gave him a sleepy half-smile. "It's up to you, but I cross my heart I won't bite. Unless you snore, then there could be a problem."

"I don't think I snore," he responded, shaking his head thoughtfully while you scooted to lay back. Turning to look down at you, he added "I've heard you snore, though."
You shushed him with a finger pressed to pursed lips. "I'm calling lights out, Barnes. Stayin' or goin'?"

Bucky hesitated. His eyes moved from you to the cat to the blanket at his feet before he began to twist away. And you'd be lying if you said your heart didn't stutter sickly when you thought he was going to leave. But he only moved to free the covers from beneath him, slipping his legs under them as he settled back on the mattress. Silly feeling of relief spreading through your chest, you rolled on to your side and reached for the lamp switch.

As you pulled the cover up to tuck against your chin in the darkness, you heard Bucky's voice behind you, exhausted and barely above a whisper. "G'night, kid."

"Night, old man," you smiled, snuggling down into your pillows.

---

It was still dark when you half-woke in the middle of the night. Your eyes were still too heavy to open, but you could tell. Vaguely, you realized it was the sensation of weight draping across your waist, being gently pulled a short distance, something unusually firm tucked beneath your pillow that disturbed you. The dull spark of confusion in your sleep-addled mind was smothered by the steady rise and fall against your back, the warm breath puffing against the nape of your neck. You barely recognized the contented sound you made as you drifted off again.

---

The smell of coffee filled his nose, dragging him from the depths of sleep. He flooded his lungs with it again, something peaceful and familiar about it, as he pried his eyes open slowly. The view of your bedroom ceiling was bright with sunlight that managed to spill around the drapes, midmorning if he had to guess. His metal arm crooked out beside him on the mattress and he shifted in that direction. There was a tepid dampness near the crook of his shoulder that he wiped at in confusion. There were a few hairs pinched between the plates of his upper arm. But there was no you. He felt his heart sink.

How you had gotten up without waking him, he couldn't figure out. Normally, the slightest change of environment, the barest movement, the tiniest sound would have him up and alert, prepared for an attack. Then again, normally he didn't really sleep. He had that night though, a deep sleep after an hour or two of fitfulness as he battled that selfish need for consolation in himself, surrendering to it finally as he pulled you against him in the night.

It was his own fault for feeding it by knocking on your door. The evening with Steve had drained him, despite how much fun he had found himself having, an undeserved enjoyment, and the incident over the movie had tipped him over the edge. He tried to deal with it himself, but it proved too much for him. And you were always so generous with your comfort, with your smile. Still, it had chaffed him, not knowing how to ask. You knew though, you almost always seemed to know. It made him wonder if he had become an open book, so easily read.

Sitting up in the bed, he thought about how you treated him the night before. You were trying your damnedest to help him. Even when he snapped at you bitterly about his arm, you met him with so much tenderness his chest clenched at the memory. Your fingers delicately exploring every metal plated inch, face alight as though it were something to marvel at instead of cringe from. The questions you asked weren't what he expected either, full of such genuine interest and concern for him. It had been so easy to answer, to open his mouth and just talk when you were leaned in close, no world outside of the space between you. You'd given him that sweet, soothing smile of yours, comforted him, joked with him, made him laugh until he nearly felt like himself again, whoever that was supposed to be.
And when your fingers had slipped down his ribs, the jolt of sensation that shot over his skin startled him. It was one thing to have the light pressure of your touch across the unfeeling surface of his left arm, intimate yet distant, but feeling you on his bare skin was something else entirely. If he thought your hand on his cheeks or your lips muffled by his hair had been bad, he had to reset the bar now. Remembering that, or the curve of your waist beneath his arm, or the kittenish sound you made when you settled back against him in the darkness... He was suddenly almost glad you'd gotten out of bed before him.

It hadn't been long though, judging from the warmth still trapped in the sheets beside him. Getting to his feet, he made his way out of the bedroom. Silence was second nature to him and he slipped down the hallway without making a sound. You, however, he could hear clearly now, bare feet padding across the linoleum in the kitchen as you hummed to yourself. He didn't know if it was a song he hadn't heard or just an absent noise you made, but it was airy and pleasant. The sound of it, mixed with the strengthening smell of the coffee as he approached, was familiar, nostalgic, felt almost serenely dreamlike.

The feeling intensified as he stepped into the kitchen doorway. Sunlight was beaming through the window above the sink, highlighting little flecks of dust wafting on the air, a few cats hairs floating here and there. You were standing at the counter, facing away from him, hard at work on something, seemingly oblivious to his presence as you continued humming. And Potato, ridiculously named as she was, was sitting picturesque on top of the little table near where he stood with her green eyes flashing his way. For a moment, he wondered if he wasn't still sleeping after all. It all seemed too unreal somehow, like any second he would open his eyes and find himself on a cold table with needles in his veins and straps holding him down. He felt his heart rate start to quicken in sudden dread.

But then the cat meowed loudly, stretching up onto her toes lazily and alerting you to his presence. Turning to look back at him, your laughing smirk helped calm the wild beating in his chest. "Mornin', Bucky. So much for your pre-dawn run, huh?"

"Yeah," he bit out, moving over to the side table to pet the cat, to reassure himself. She purred under his touch and rubbed her cheek along his arm as he watched you pull a mug from the cabinet.

You made your way to the coffeemaker you'd dug out of storage a few days before and pulled the full, steaming carafe for a long pour. There was a warm twisting in Bucky's gut as you approached him. He finally noticed how mussed your hair still was, the lingering puffiness under your eyes, erratic lines indenting your right cheek, skin so paled with sleep it made your lips standout. A gorgeous woman bringing him a cup of coffee in the morning? If it was a dream, he hoped like hell he stayed asleep forever.

"You must have been exhausted from yesterday," you smiled sympathetically as you handed the mug over to him. "Never would have guessed I'd be up before you. Granted, it's only been about 10 minutes, but still."

"Little surprised myself," he admitted, bringing the cup to his lips. He had never seen you make coffee before, but it was good. Jesus, everything you made in that kitchen was good. He lifted the mug in a casual salute. "Delicious. Thanks."

Your smile widened and you bounced a little on the balls of your feet as if you were excited. He hid a forming smile behind another gulp of coffee as you spoke. "So, since it's a little late in the morning, I decided to make us a quiche."

"Quiche," he repeated thoughtfully. You hadn't made that for him before either, which explained your eager attitude. Bucky had learned pretty early on that the idea of introducing or reintroducing
him to something, whatever the case may be, delighted you to no end. At first, he thought it would wane as you realized just how daunting of a task it could be to try filling in almost a hundred years worth of information. Though some things seemed to interest you more than others, you really hadn't faltered yet. But nothing got you more enthusiastic than food. Something about it was almost... charming.

"Aside from mimosas, quiche is by far my favorite brunch food," you explained. "It's basically a custard pie with savory filling."

When you reached up absently to scratch at your right cheek, nails catching on the fading sleep lines, he raised an eyebrow in a silent question while pulling another mouthful from his cup. You caught the gesture, a sheepish expression easing across your face. "I woke up with my face planted in your left shoulder. Guess I got a little cuddly last night."

Bucky couldn't bring himself to correct you. You may have rolled over at some point, but he instigated the closeness. But he didn't want to upset you or admit how ashamed he felt for it. Instead, he nodded in understanding, tilting his head toward his shoulder as he picked those few strands of hair away. "Probably yours then. And I think you drooled on me."

It was a swift kick to his solar plexus, threatening to drive all the air from his lungs when the skin at your cheek bones darkened. He'd seen you flushed with fever before, but not anything quite like this, especially from something he'd done. You suddenly seemed painfully self-conscious, smoothing a hand through your hair with a nervous smile. "God, that's gross. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Bucky tried to soothe. He had to mentally squash the thought that wondered if your face felt as scorching hot as it looked, wondered just how far down your skin that flush reached. He shook his head to clear it a little. "There's no harm done. At least you didn't snore."

That brought a grin back to your face, even through your pink cheeks, and his chest puffed up a little despite himself as you moved back to the counter to continue working on your quiche. He drained his coffee mug and brought it to the sink, glancing out the window to the backyard. "Missed my run. Should probably start calisthenics soon."

"Actually," you chimed in. Bucky looked over to find you chopping a mushroom carefully. "I was going to ask you. Since we both got up late, did you maybe just wanna make it a lounge around the house kinda day? Yesterday was pretty stressful, so I figured I could put something sci-fi on for us and we could veg out on the couch with some snacks. I think you'd like a Star Trek marathon."

"Trying to make me fat and lazy like your cat over there," he found himself teasing, licking at his dry lips and trying hard not to question how easily that tone of voice came when talking to you anymore. Especially when the reward was your face lighting up like it was now and that little laugh of yours that was too damned sweet in his ears.

"I don't hear her complaining," you chuckled, turning back to your cutting board.

Bucky considered his coffee mug in the sink a moment before deciding to pick it up again. Crossing behind you, he poured himself another cupful and turned to lean back against the counter, watching you work. After a few moments and a few more sips, he sat his coffee on the counter to move in beside you. "Why don't you let me finish that for ya? Figure two sets of hands could get us to that marathon sooner."

The grateful, ecstatic smile you flashed him tightened Bucky's chest a little. It seemed easy enough to ignore as you relinquished your position at the cutting board, handing the knife over carefully with the slightest brush of your fingers over his. You were probably just relieved to have help, chopping
vegetables was tedious work. But then he saw that flush kick up on your cheeks again just as you were turning to gather more ingredients. And Bucky wondered what he'd ever done to earn a sight like that.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Bucky makes some decisions, some consequential, some trivial, but for a guy who hasn't had a choice in a while, everything seems important.

Chapter Notes

Well, this is a great big, long-winded, basically fluff chapter. No real drama in here, no sirree. And honestly, it's probably not that great. But hopefully you'll find something you enjoy about it. Sorry for the delay!

A few days after your little get-together, Steve called you to thank you for dinner again. Maybe it was some politeness holdover from his upbringing, but you were also fairly sure he wanted to check up on how Bucky was doing. You glossed over the finer details – no need to divulge the late night conversation, sharing a bed, the day spent just enjoying each other's company lounging on the couch —but let him know that Bucky seemed to be doing alright. When the subject of your conversation walked through the living room from training, a little grimy from sweat and dirt and more distracting than you cared to admit, he gave you a questioning look. You casually used Steve’s name in your next response and saw a contemplative expression cross Bucky’s face. A moment later, much to your astonishment, he held out his hand in a silent request for the phone.

“Uh, hang on a sec, Steve,” you said, feeling a smile tug on your lips when Bucky answered the confusion on your face with a nod of certainty. “Bucky wants to talk to you.”

You wondered briefly just how shocked Steve must look on the other end as you gave over your cell. When Bucky brought the phone to his ear, you made your way to the kitchen. Ostensibly, you meant to give him some privacy and start getting things together for lunch. Yet, you found yourself eavesdropping a bit just the same. It wasn’t very stimulating conversation on Bucky’s end. There were a number of affirmatives and one or two negatives. You peeked around the corner to see him nodding or shaking his head respectively and you couldn’t deny the fondness you felt over it.

“Yeah,” he was turned away from you, but you could hear consideration in his voice. Then his shoulders squared and he sounded more determined. “Yeah. Let’s do that… I’ll talk to you then… Bye.”

Before he could turn around, you ducked back into the kitchen and busied yourself in the pantry. Bucky walked in a few moments later, holding your cell phone out to you when you looked up at him. There was a hint of amusement on his face. “You’re terrible at spying, kid.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” you acted innocent, taking the phone to slide back into your pocket. He raised an eyebrow, unconvincing, but entertained, with a knowing smirk. Rolling your eyes, you gave a sheepish smile. “Okay, fine. But you can’t fault me for being curious. What did you two geezers talk about?”
“He asked if I might wanna come visit him this weekend,” he replied, tongue darting out over his lips as he went over to the fridge. "Told him I would."

"Oh," was your immediate response, struck a little dumb by the information. Why it surprised you, you couldn't really say. Obviously, Bucky wasn't supposed to stay cooped up in your house all the time. You were just meant to be a way station for him anyways, until Steve could convince the rest of his team that Bucky was safe and adjusted. It was a natural next step in the progress. It really shouldn't have caused you any concern. But it did. And Bucky's thinly veiled attempt at casualness over the matter didn't help at all, the minute agitation in his features giving him away.

"Is that okay," he asked in a hesitant voice, pulling you from your thoughts as he grabbed the water jug. There was concern and confusion in his face when he turned back to you.

"Of course, Bucky," you smiled. Moving to the cabinet to grab a glass, you shook your head vigorously. "I'm not your jailor. You can do whatever you want. And going out to see Steve is a good thing. He's good support for you. Plus, I'm sure he's super excited to..."

You realized you were starting to babble when you saw the curious tilt to Bucky's head. But there was a small smile on his face and his voice was gentle when he asked "You worried about me?"

"That obvious, huh," you sighed as you set the glass down on the side table next to the water. For some reason, Bucky seemed to be standing a little taller when you looked up at him and didn't appear quite as tightly wound as before. "I mean it when I say this is a good thing. I just... I want to make sure you're doing it because you're ready to and you want to, not because you think you're supposed to. Does that make sense?"

He nodded thoughtfully, brow furrowed as he turned his attention to pouring himself a drink. Bringing the glass up to his lips, he paused a moment to look at you again. "I'm ready to give it a shot. I want to try."

"Then that's good enough for me," you beamed up at him before grabbing the water to put back in the fridge. And it really was true. It was just your own ridiculous worry that had caused that flop in your stomach, maybe a remnant left over from painful past experiences, that's all. Now, there was only the jackhammer beating of pride in your chest as you glanced over at him. Bucky really was something else.

"Was wonderin," he began as he took his empty glass to the sink. When you turned to give him a quizzical look, he seemed to become a little uneasy, uncertain. "That dress shirt I wore Saturday... it was my only one."

"I see," you replied, remembering the way the seam at the shoulder had been torn to shreds. You also remembered how Bucky talked about looking presentable, almost like it was important, a way to help him feel a little more... normal. And if it was important to him, it was important to you. Offering up a reassuring smirk, you grabbed for the fridge door again. "I'll get lunch together while you hit the showers, old man. Then we will go out and pick you up somethin' real snazzy to wear for your date. Impress the hell out of 'em."

"You ain't cute, kid" he shook his head with a snort, but there was relief in his voice and a playfulness in his eyes.

"Oh, please," you teased back, waving him off as you dug out sandwich fixings. "I'm freakin'
adorable and you know it."

Hazarding another glance Bucky's way as he headed for the bathroom, you caught a glimpse of that smile of his again. The one he'd been pulling more often recently, not constantly, but not quite so rare, like he was finally letting himself be a little happy. You were glad to have the fridge to turn back to quickly, because it was entirely too unfair and unreasonable just how hot your skin grew whenever you saw that smile flashed at you.

---

The closest clothing store was several miles down the highway, which meant a bit of a drive. Bucky didn't really mind though. You weren't taking the curves in the road as recklessly as before and the scenery outside his window was rather pleasant. There were rolling fields and horses and cattle and sheep, a far cry from the dodgy brick and metal memories of his childhood or his snowy, battle scarred nightmares. It was like one of those pastoral paintings in some fancy museum come to life. It was beautiful.

Still, his gaze kept moving across the bench seat to you. Thumbs drumming idly on the steering wheel, you hummed along with the radio. Something you referred to as "classic rock," loud and catchy and fun. He could see why you liked it so much. Your attention was dutifully on the road for the most part, though you did turn a smile on him from time to time. And that was beautiful too, more than he would allow himself to look at for too long.

There were quite a few cars in the parking lot when you finally arrived at the long row of storefronts, and Bucky's heart started to pound a little harder. More people meant a higher possibility of a threat, more cars were obstructions in his line of sight. As he got out of the truck, tugging his long, flannel sleeves lower, he scanned the surroundings. Everything seemed sufficiently mundane at first glance, but he was still nervous. You must have noticed it, because when you came around to stand beside him, you shouldered his left arm gently. Looking over at you, he found a reassuring expression on your face as you twined your fingers with his metal ones. His heart didn't slow down, but some of his tension eased on the walk to the store.

Once inside he felt a little less anxious. The few people around were intent on their own shopping, so no one turned an eye as you tugged him through the winding paths between racks and tables. Soon, he found himself in an area marked “Menswear” on the signage, standing next to a somewhat unsettling faceless mannequin done up in a tennis shirt and khakis like it was about to go for a stroll in the park. There was a display set up with crisply folded button-up shirts in more shades than Bucky was certain he'd ever seen before, despite his fractured memory. Pastel pink, lavender, sky blue, mint green, and crimson set among the neutral black, white, and grays.

“Here we go, dress shirts,” you said with a flourish as he reached out to run his fingertips over the fabric of the nearest shirt, a disgustingly bright blue one that threatened to hurt his eyes. There was mischief in your voice when you added, “Well, what do you think? Is purple your color? How about this salmon one? We could see if they have an electric green one in the back.”

Sparing a glance at your smirking face, he found himself chuckling under his breath. “Maybe something a bit more… traditional.”

“Yeah, okay,” you nodded with that sweet little laugh of yours as you continued perusing the selection. “Do you know what size you wear?”

How long had it been since he had known the answer to that? Seventy years ago he could've rattled
off that and any number of trivial things about himself, but even if he could recall that particular piece of information, his body had changed since then. Bucky had worn whatever was handed to him by the scientists, then whatever things that looked to fit that he’d stolen from unattended dryers in laundromats or donation bins outside of thrift stores, then whatever Steve and Sam brought to him which were mostly the right size. In all that, he’d never really stopped to check a tag.

"I don't really know anymore," he finally admitted, hearing the strain in his voice as he realized you had been waiting patiently for an answer.

You nodded thoughtfully, before giving a little shrug and smiling. "We'll grab a few different sizes and you can try them on. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good," he nodded, relieved at how easily you seemed to accept these strange confessions of his, as you piled a bunch of shirts in his arms in varying grays, whites, and muted blues.

After you found a clerk to let him into a fitting room, Bucky took great care in changing, acutely aware of how easily he could rip the fabric on the metal segments of his arm or just from sheer strength. A few were small enough he wouldn't even think about forcing a button on them. A few were much too big, and he could have laughed at himself, feeling a bit like Goldilocks. It was a slate gray one that finally fit, much like his recently destroyed shirt except not quite as tight across the chest. You'd said he looked handsome in that one. Hell, you said he looked handsome more than just then. There may even have been a time, ages ago, when he might've agreed with you, but all he saw in the mirror now were metal and scars and eyes that looked almost as old and tired as his body should be.

"Well," he asked when he stepped out of the small room and presented himself to you. Bucky wondered at the twinge of awkwardness he felt in doing that. There were vague memories floating around in his head of being on display, circled as if by wolves with their teeth bared in cruel triumph, and there was only acceptance of it. Maybe it was the unabashed delight on your face or the way your eyes actually saw him as you walked straight to him that made him aware of his own skin.

"It looks great, Buck," you smiled, moving in close to him. "How does it feel though? Is it comfortable? Is there enough room at the neck? Can you move?"

Suddenly, your hands were on him, achingly delicate, worrying at the fabric, hooking a finger in the collar for a little tug. He let you inspect him for a moment, despite the stuttering in his chest, distracted by the gentle determination of your pursed lips and the clean smell of your hair. And his mind wandered to thoughts it had no right to, like just how soft your mouth might be against his. Jaw clenching tight, Bucky shook his head before biting out a little rougher than he meant to "Would you quit fussin’ over me?"

"I am not fussing over you," you scoffed and your hands left him abruptly to anchor fists at your hips like you were insulted, though there was amusement in your features.

Barely able to tear his eyes from the twitching at the corners of your lips, desperate to hold back a smile, he knew if you blushed then, like you’d been wont to do recently, he could’ve been a goner. And damned if he didn’t want to press his luck in that instant as he teased back with a straight face “You are fussier’n a mother hen and you know it.”

“You are fussier’n a mother hen and you know it.”

“I am not fussing over you,” you scoffed and your hands left him abruptly to anchor fists at your hips like you were insulted, though there was amusement in your features.

Suddenly, your hands were on him, achingly delicate, worrying at the fabric, hooking a finger in the collar for a little tug. He let you inspect him for a moment, despite the stuttering in his chest, distracted by the gentle determination of your pursed lips and the clean smell of your hair. And his mind wandered to thoughts it had no right to, like just how soft your mouth might be against his. Jaw clenching tight, Bucky shook his head before biting out a little rougher than he meant to “Would you quit fussin’ over me?”

“I am not fussing over you,” you scoffed and your hands left him abruptly to anchor fists at your hips like you were insulted, though there was amusement in your features.

Barely able to tear his eyes from the twitching at the corners of your lips, desperate to hold back a smile, he knew if you blushed then, like you’d been wont to do recently, he could’ve been a goner. And damned if he didn’t want to press his luck in that instant as he teased back with a straight face “You are fussier’n a mother hen and you know it.”

You didn’t blush and a part of him was thankful for that, who knows what he might’ve done.

Instead, you rolled your eyes, dropping your shoulders in defeat even as you smirked at him. “Okay, fine. I was fussing. But, seriously, you think that’s the size you need?”
“I think so,” he answered, rolling his shoulders a bit and flexing his left arm just to make sure. There was no tearing or uncomfortable strain with his movements, so he nodded with finality. “It’ll work.”

“Good,” you replied, though something about you seemed a little flustered as you gave him another quick once over. “Maybe we should pick up a couple in that size while we’re here? Just in case?”

“Good idea,” he nodded again before returning to the changing room.

Once back in his worn-out flannel, Bucky deposited the unwanted shirts at the little desk outside the door with a similar pile and joined you back at the display table. You glanced at the gray shirt clutched in his hands before speaking. “You gonna double up on gray or spice things up a bit? White’s a bit see-through, but there are a bunch of other dark colors.”

Walking around the table, he considered his options. Even this seemingly trivial decision seemed somewhat important, so he took his time thinking on it. If his delay bothered you in the slightest, you didn’t show it, just stood aside and let him look, an encouraging smile on your face. He didn’t have anything against the more colorful shades, he had clothes in varying colors, greens and reds and browns, but even the dark ones just didn’t set right until he came across a deep blue-gray shirt. There was something almost familiar about it, though he couldn’t place it. Sifting through the small stack, he found a size that matched the gray one.

“Nice,” you beamed at him from across the table when he lifted it up to show you. “It’s a good color. Two shirts down. Anything else you might like?”

“Nah,” he shook his head a little. There were other clothes he recalled wearing before, waistcoats, suspenders, probably out of style these days. No need for a suit. Unlikely to be any weddings to attend in the near future and he hoped to god no funerals. “A couple good shirts and a decent pair of slacks is all a man really needs… well, maybe a tie.”

“I see,” you nodded in understanding, though there was laughter in your voice when you hooked your thumb off to your left. “Saw a tie rack back that way.”

Following your gesture, he made his way between the tiered tables and shelves to the display in question. There were almost as many different ties as there were shirts, a myriad of colors and patterns. Maybe that’s why you had sounded so amused at him. It had taken so long to pick a shirt, now he had another decision to make. He examined each one closely, feeling the slippery silks and satins between his rough fingers. Then the air shifted, his heart hammering in his chest as his blood ran cold. There was the clattering of hangers behind him even as he spun on his heel, apprehensive, ready for an attack. It came as an insistent tug on his left shirt sleeve from below his immediate line of sight. Looking down, he was shocked to see a little girl, maybe four or five years old, mop of dark hair on her head and hazel eyes big and round like saucers staring up at him from chubby cherub cheeks, unafraid.

Her little fingers grabbed hold of his left hand, staring at herself in the metal in wonder. She giggled excitedly and something clawed at the back of Bucky’s mind. Little girls giggling on their way back home from the corner store. The littlest was holding his hand on the walk, her palm forever sticky against his. Wanna piece of my candy, Bucky? He looked down at her, shaking his head. Nah, Beks, that’s yours. Her lip stuck out in a pout. How come you didn’t get any with the money momma gave you? He patted his breast pocket and felt the change there. Savin up for art supplies. This pleased her greatly, he knew it would, and she bounced a little. You and Stevie gonna make us more pretty pictures? He smiled as he swung their arms playfully. Only the prettiest pictures for my pretty
“Hey, sweetheart.” The sound of your voice, gentle and kind, pulled Bucky from his hazy childhood memory of his sisters. He’d had sisters… Blinking to clear his mind, he saw you just kneeling down beside him, leveling yourself to the girl’s height as best you could. You glanced up at him, face awash with questioning concern. Checking on him. He gave a quick nod to let you know he was alright. Turning your attention back to the girl, you said warmly. “I bet someone’s missin’ you. Do you know where your mom or dad is?”

“She’s over there with my baby brother,” she answered, tilting her head toward the changing rooms just on the other side of the racks. She was still holding Bucky’s hand and looked up at him gleefully. “Why’s your hand so shiny?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly snapped it shut. That inquisitive, fearless little face had something in him wanting to answer, he just wasn’t sure how or even if he should. Turning his eyes to you for help, he saw your understanding smile, which grew when you looked at the girl again.

“Well, you see,” you began, as friendly as you please, not a hint of condescension. He felt himself start to smile a little as well. You seemed so good with her, so effortless, like it was a natural thing to you. “He had an accident. Hurt his arm real bad. So, they had to replace it with this one.”

“Oooooh,” she replied in an almost solemn tone at the simple explanation. Then she brightened right back up, like she’d thought of something clever. “Momma says kisses help boo-boos feel better.”

Bucky felt his heart skipped a beat when you bit back your laughter, face ecstatic even as you shot a mischievous look up at him before you replied. “You know, I’ve heard that before myself. Why don’t you give it a try and see if it works?”

The little girl gripped his hand tighter and pulled it to her for a loud, wet sounding smack of a kiss on the back metal plates. Then she looked up at him expectantly and for a split second, he wasn’t sure what to do or how to respond. But when he flexed his fingers a little, her eyes widened in surprise. So, he closed his hand into a loose fist before opening it again and her face lit up in a toothy grin. He saw you, hand covering your mouth, face just as bright and happy. Clearing his throat, he spoke as gentle as possible. “All better.”

Another peal of giggles was cut short by a frantic, female voice from over by the dressing rooms. “Maddy? Maddy, where are you?”

“Right here,” the little girl called out, dropping Bucky’s hand finally as she stepped around the tie display to wave.

You stood then, grabbing his hand yourself and smiling at him as you used the hem of your shirt to dry where the little girl had kissed. The woman behind the voice came into view, no doubt in Bucky’s mind the girl’s mother, both looked so much alike. She bent to scoop the girl up in her arms, her voice relieved. “Maddy, what have I told you about wandering off? I was so worried!”

“It’s okay, Momma,” the girl, Maddy, said back, wrapping her arms around her mother’s neck. “I was just talkin to the man with the shiny hand and the nice lady.”

“Shiny hand,” the mother began, confused, then suddenly seemed to notice Bucky standing there, you right beside him. Her look of embarrassment worsened when she saw his left hand, which he quickly tucked behind his leg nervously. “I am so sorry! I hope she didn’t…”
“She was fine,” he assured, right hand clenching around the shirts he still held, feeling uneasy. But he managed a half smile. “She’s a doll. Really.”

“She can be,” the mother smiled, though another concerned look crossed her face as her eyes turned to you.

Bucky followed her gaze to find you sticking your tongue out, scrunching your nose up, making a variety of silly faces at the very small boy whose head was peeking out from behind the woman’s leg. The toddler had a grin plastered on his face, looking bashful as he kept burying himself in his mother’s jeans only to look over at you again. Bucky nearly burst out laughing when you realized you were being watched, but he caught it in time so it was only a snort. God, two cute little kids around and damned if you didn’t manage to be the most adorable thing in that instant.

“Sorry,” you said, sheepish, that blush blooming on your cheeks now, and he could almost feel the warmth of it in his chest. “I just… like kids.”

“Well, maybe you’ll have some of your own one day,” the woman said politely, eyes flickering over to Bucky for a second as she grabbed the boy’s hand to make a retreat.

Somewhat taken aback by the small gesture, Bucky looked over to see if you’d caught it. But you were too busy waving at the kids who each had an arm flapping wildly in farewell. The girl was smiling at him over her mom’s shoulder. After a moment’s hesitation, unsure if he should or not, he finally gave in and lifted his left hand a bit and wiggled his metal fingers. He saw her smile grow impossibly wider before the three rounded the corner out of sight.

“You definitely made that little girl’s day. Maybe even her whole week,” you teased beside him,Shoulder his arm gently as you laced your fingers with his, the pressure reassuring to him. You tapped your thumb against the metal there. “Told you it isn’t all that bad.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky replied gruffly. He was far from convinced he had anything more than a weapon attached to his left shoulder. Even kids can get distracted by shiny things they shouldn’t play with. The girl had been cute though, innocent little face reminding him… Sisters? File that away. Ask Steve later.

But you, your cheerful, easy way with her, the way your face lit up. It had to have been your presence beside him that kept him from seeming so scary, kept the little girl from running off screaming. At the very least, he knew it had kept him at an even keel. Running his tongue over dry lips, he finally said “You ever have kids, you’ll make a good mom.”

You snorted in amusement, shaking your head as you rolled your eyes at him. Taking the shirts from him, you asked “Did you pick a tie before you managed to make a spectacle of yourself?”

Noting the change in subject, and not too upset about it, Bucky turned back to the display rack. One quick look and he pulled out a solid black silk tie. “Black goes with everything, right?”

“That’s what they say,” you smiled, sliding the tie out from between his fingers in a smooth motion. “Now if that’s everything, let’s get out of here. I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

He gave a nod, his own smile fond as he let you tug him toward the registers.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Reader share drinks and memories over Scotch. TRIGGER WARNING: Discussion of the sister's suicide.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. This one is a bit of a rollercoaster, emotionally speaking. Sitting at 8231 words (I gotta stop making such long chapters only to have short ones in between!) I put a lot of my Bucky headcanon stuff in here, which made me really worried about how it will come across, so please let me know if you like it! If you absolutely hate it, at least try to be gentle in telling me heh. TRIGGER WARNING: There is a non-graphic discussion of the sister's suicide near the end.

Walking through the front door, cat carrier in hand, you were surprised to find Bucky sitting on the couch. He had been gone on one of his weekly visits with Steve and you hadn’t expected him home for another few hours. Yet there he was in his worn out t-shirt and jeans, perched on the edge of the cushion, studying something in his hand. It had taken all of two visits to decide he didn’t need to dress up every time he went to hang out with his friend. Certainly, he was pretty damned good-looking in those button-ups he’d picked out, but you had to admit that sometimes the sight of him looking so comfortable warmed your heart a bit. Whatever he was holding, he tucked into his palm before twisting to offer you a tight half smile over the back of the couch by way of greeting.

“Didn’t expect you back so early. Date get cut short,” you teased, hip-checking the door closed behind you as you moved into the living room.

“Steve got called out for somethin’,” he replied, barest hint of gruffness in his voice. A mission, you surmised. You knew he didn’t mind you giving him shit about going out. Hell, over the last couple weeks, a bit of teasing now and then had become a shared past time. You could only guess it was some sort of worry for Steve.

“Wondered where she’d got to,” Bucky spoke again after clearing his throat. He tipped his head toward the carrier in your hand.

“Just a vet visit,” you smiled as you set her down on the coffee table to sit at his right. “Figured I’d schedule it for when you were out. Didn’t want to bore you with sitting in a waiting room for a long time.”

He shifted some to look through the grate as Potato let out a pitiful mew. There was worry etched on his face and it made your smile grow wider. “She alright?”

“She’s fine,” you assured and reached to open the door. “It was just her yearly check-up and shots. Perfectly healthy. Well… she’s put on a couple pounds. I blame you, by the way.”
Bucky shot you a look from the corner of his eyes, devious smirk pulling languidly at the corners of his lips. You snorted at him in mock annoyance even as the cat poked her head out of the carrier. She stepped onto the table slow, timid, her nose working the air. Green eyes flashed from you to Bucky with a little merr. Then, she shot off the table with enough force to send the carrier back almost a foot and bolted down the hallway. Almost as quick, Bucky was turning in his seat to watch her scamper off. The surprised question on his face had you sucking in your lips to keep from laughing.

“She does that after every vet visit. Might be a house cat now, but there’s always gonna be something a little feral in her. And few wild things like to be caged up against their will,” you informed. Of course, of all people, Bucky Barnes could understand something like that. It was written in his features when his eyes seemed distant before finding yours again. You gave him a comforting smile. “We’ll see her again in a few hours when she’s done sulking.”

As you closed up the carrier to tuck under the coffee table for the time being, you caught sight of a box on the floor next to Bucky’s feet. It wasn’t very big, bit more than shoebox sized maybe, but had flaps that were partially opened. When you quirked a curious eyebrow at him, Bucky seemed to grow slightly tense again. There was a flash of something like pain in his eyes when they went from you to the box to his cupped left hand where he’d palmed whatever it was he’d been looking at when you came in. Seeing how uncomfortable he was, you were prepared to leave it well enough alone. But after considering his metal hand a moment, he huffed a sigh.

“Steve,” he began, though he paused to drag his tongue slowly over his lips. “Steve managed to scrounge up some old photos. Let me bring ’em here to look at, see if they jogged any memories, but…”

"Have you looked through them yet,” you asked, folding your knee up onto the couch to face him better.

Bucky shook his head with tight lips and lifted his left hand a bit. "Just this one."

"Do you wanna show me,” you offered quietly. When he looked at you with his brows knitted in confused surprise, you gave a small shrug. "You don’t have to. Just thought I’d ask."

He looked at his metal fingers again, features somewhat grave. Slowly, he uncupped his hand and brought it closer for you to see. It was weathered, yellowed and tattered a bit at the edges, gray-scale. It was a photo of Bucky in an Army uniform, hat tipped to one side of his head. He was fresh-faced, clean shaven, looking off somewhere beyond the camera.

"Wow,” you breathed, heart fluttering a little despite itself. "You look so…”

"Young and dumb,” Bucky filled in his own description with a snort.

You shot him a disapproving look, but you saw his shoulders relaxing somewhat as you both continued to study the picture. "Do you remember this one?"

"I don’t know,” he shook his head again, bowing over the photo as if looking harder and closer could give him the answer he wanted. His fingers moved to comb through his hair, gripping it a bit harshly near the ends.

“Thinking you might wanna cut it,” you asked as you watched him closely.

He leaned down to put the photo in the box at his feet, his only response a quiet “I’m not that guy anymore.”
“Well, you’re not that other guy either,” you informed in as casual a voice you could. He glanced over at you when you continued lightly “You’ve gotta be a new Bucky. Bucky 2.0… Or 3.0. I’m not sure how the number system would work in this case.”

There was the barest hint of a smile on his lips as you reached up to tuck some of those wayward strands of hair behind his ear, giving the locks an affectionate tug. Turmoil over old pictures was something you were intimately familiar with. Maybe it wasn’t quite the same case as his, your pain from the memory and his from the lack thereof, but you felt a kinship in it. Thinking about that fact a moment gave you an idea.

“You’re a little nervous about going through them, aren’t you,” you said gently, more a statement than a question. The distress in his eyes when he looked at you was all the confirmation you needed. Taking a deep breath, you rested your hand on the back of his forearm, though whether it was to soothe him or yourself, you couldn’t quite say. "What if… what if I brought out some of mine?"

His brow furrowed again, head tilted in piqued interest. "I haven’t seen any pictures out around the house.”

“There’s a reason for that,” you chuckled a little, though even you could hear the bitterness in it. “You’re not the only one a little put off by old photos. But misery loves company, so what d’ya say?"

Pulling his gaze from where you touched him, Bucky searched your face for a long moment, uncertain. Then, with the barest of nods, he said "Yeah, alright.”

“Alright,” you repeated with a small smile, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze. You grabbed the cat carrier as you stood. No sense leaving it behind when you were going that way as it was. "I have to pull them from storage. Be back in a minute.”

You’d be lying if you said you didn’t know precisely where that actual shoebox of pictures was collecting dust. Even despite hiding it in the furthest reaches of your makeshift storage room, the one that used to be a bedroom, her room. It used to bother you, being back there, but you supposed having kept it cluttered with odds and ends for long enough had made it easier. Hardly caused an issue at all anymore, except a twinge of sadness once in a while. You felt it now, but you’d be damned if you let Bucky suffer alone if you could help it.

After depositing the kitty carrier and picking up the photos, you made a stop in the kitchen pantry for a dust rag. The often untouched liquor shelf caught your attention. Bucky didn’t have a problem with the beer and wine Steve brought over for dinner a few weeks prior. And you knew you could certainly use a little bit of liquid courage. So, you grabbed the practically full bottle of decent scotch and two tumblers from the pantry before returning to the living room.

Bucky raised an eyebrow when he saw the bottle, but didn’t look put off in the slightest. In fact, he was already grabbing one of the glasses from your fingers as you spoke. "Misery might love company, but it still has a soft spot for booze.”

“Scotch,” he questioned lightly, spinning the bottle by its neck to read the label after you set it down.

“Well, I’ve got vodka if it’s too much for ya, old man,” you teased while plopping back down on the couch beside him.

Eyeing you with a bit of amusement, Bucky pulled the cork on the bottle. As he poured you both a few fingers of the amber liquid, you took the time to wipe the thick dust from the box you’d brought out. Luckily, it all stuck to the little microfiber cloth instead of billowing into the air. A mouth and
nose full of dust would not have paired well with the glass of scotch Bucky was handing you. You took it gratefully and quickly pulled a gentle sip, letting the warm sting of it coat your mouth before swallowing it down.

“I’ve got an idea,” you finally said, watching Bucky bring his own glass to his lips. "How about we swap boxes? I'll show you pictures from your box, you show me pics from mine. That way if one of us has an issue with a photo, the other can just tuck it back in the box. How does that sound?“

Bucky gulped down his mouthful of scotch and gave his glass an approving look, tipping it up to you in a silent thanks. Then, he sat his drink on the table before reaching down to lift his box onto his lap. Fingertips brushed over cardboard as he gave it a considering look, but his eyes found yours again, tense edges softening, and he held the parcel out for you to take from him. You tried to blame those first few sips of scotch, but you knew it was something about this bit of trust Bucky showed you that made you a little delirious.

Handing over your photos, you slipped off your shoes so you could sit crossed-legged to face him. Another swallow of scotch was in order for both of you, but Bucky especially as he eyed the box balanced on your thighs with mild apprehension. After giving the fire in your belly a second to settle, you offered him an encouraging smile. "Do you want to pull the first picture?"

There was a minor twitch in his jaw, determination in his gray eyes. "You first."

"Okay," you nodded slightly. If that’s what he wanted, you would oblige. Opening the box in your lap, you saw the photo on top was the uniform pic you’d both looked at already and you brushed it aside carefully. The one beneath it was equally as tattered, grainy black and white. Two boys sitting on a stoop, each with an arm thrown about the other’s shoulders. It took you a moment to realize the bigger boy was Bucky, baby fat still hanging on at his cheeks, and the other, frail slip of a child, was Steve Rogers. You gnawed at the insides of your cheeks to keep from giggling as you presented the picture to him.

Bucky blinked a little, and though you knew he had impeccable eyesight, he still tucked his knee up onto the cushion beneath him to lean in for a closer look, curious bent to his brow. The corners of his lips quirked upward a fraction of an inch as his eyes scoured the photo. "That’s… That’s me and Steve."

"I thought so," you grinned at him. "Do you remember anything about this one?"

"I think… that mighta been my parents’ place,” he began, voice questioning. He heaved a breath through his nose. "I’m not sure."

"Hey, that’s okay," you consoled when you saw frustration start to line his forehead. Quickly, you tucked the photo back in the box. "We’ll put it away for the moment. Now, your turn."

You took another gulp of your scotch as Bucky unlidded the box to rummage through the pictures. He stopped suddenly, eyes going a little wide, and his slick smirk made you wonder what embarrassing horror he might have found. The photo he finally held up to you had you covering your eyes with your free hand at the very first glance. "Oh my god! Really? That one?"

Peeking through your fingers, you saw Bucky with an eyebrow raised at you despite trying to hide his smile behind a drink. With a laughing sigh, you went ahead and explained yourself. "That’s a sixteen year old me doing my best chimpanzee impression at the zoo’s primate house. I should’ve burned that! In fact…“

But when you went to snatch it from him, Bucky already had it far out of your reach. He shook his
head even as he tilted his chin toward you defiantly. "Nah, I don’t think so. Your turn.”

The clinking of bottle on tumbler, the slosh of liquid, the deep rumbling drag of the heavy-bottomed glasses across the wooden table, and Bucky’s intermittent chuckles were music to your ears as the night continued on. Of course, most of his amusement was at your expense, but that was alright. You were warm and fuzzy, and you could admit that it wasn’t only the alcohol that had you swimmy in your own head. Something told you Bucky was nowhere near as far along as you, probably that supersoldier metabolism of his, but he still seemed to relax and his smile was a little easier. Even the progression of mostly unremembered photos didn’t look to bother him so much as time went on.

Third drinks poured and you were several rounds into this little game when you saw the brilliant spark of recognition light up his eyes. The picture seemed innocuous enough, a young Bucky with a black eye and a shit eating grin. Holding it up for him to see, you noticed words scrawled on the back.

“Photographic evidence that Bucky gets in fights too. SR.”

As you read the message aloud, Bucky’s face began to mirror the picture, grin wide and toothy and arrogant. It softened his face, made him look so young, so happy. When the fingers of his right hand gently plucked the photo from your grasp, they brushed over your skin. You had to swallow down the skip in your heartbeat before you spoke again. "I take it you remember this one."

"Yeah," he answered, voice a little distant as he nodded slowly and pulled the picture in for a closer look. His tongue slid over his lips to drag the bottom one in between his teeth, a huff of laughter shaking his shoulders. All you could do for a moment was stare dumbly at him when his eyes turned back up to you. "Jesus… me and Stevie were goin to see a movie and there was this gal standin around by herself, a real looker. So, I cozy on up to her, all gallant, spoutin off poetry, when outta nowhere her boyfriend shows up. Clocks me good, can’t really blame the guy. But, shit, Stevie was laughin so hard I thought he was gonna have an asthma attack."

"Holy crap," you chuckled through the hand over your mouth. "You were reciting poetry as a pick-up line to a random girl?"

"Women love poetry," he shrugged, confident, giving the photo back to you. He looked thoughtful as he sipped his scotch, trying to recall something, though there was still a smile on his face. "Did… Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."

You looked up from putting the picture away, rolling your eyes, slow grin spreading over your face. "Seriously? Young Bucky Barnes strutting around quoting Shakespeare? Lord have mercy!"

“How do you know I strutted,” he asked in mock affront. Your raised eyebrow was a silent challenge for him to deny it, but he dropped the charade with a contemplative smirk. "I think I knew more than just that. But nothin charmed the ladies like the Bard."

Bucky’s eyes slide to yours, mischievous and daring right back for you to say otherwise. You just shook your head and laughed, gesturing to the box in his lap. "Alright, Romeo, pick another pic."

With a self-satisfied look, he went about complying with your playful order. It took him a few seconds of looking before pulling out a glossy color photo of a couple smiling, washed out with too much light. You knew it from countless viewing, and despite the history, it managed to pull a little smile from you. Maybe you could blame the alcohol, or, like your sister’s bedroom, things were getting easier to deal with over time. Or perhaps having someone to really share them with made all the difference. Your brain was just fuzzy enough to let you not worry too much about it in any case.
“That’s my mom and dad… and me,” you told him and smiled wider when you saw his confused
look, as there were only two people visible in the picture. Reaching out, you tapped your finger over
your mother’s stomach. "I’m right there."

Bucky seemed to get the idea, nodding slightly as you continued. "According to my mom, that was
one of the last pics where they’re happy together. They got divorced when I was really little, I
hardly remember him at all. It’s okay though. Sometimes, people just don’t mesh. And we got
along fine without him.”

“And your mom,” Bucky asked, the mirth gone from his voice as he tucked the picture back in the
box.

“Bad car accident about 8 years ago,” you replied before taking another drink. You made it a point
to keep your voice fairly casual, already upset that you’d brought down the good mood.
"Technically, she was alive when they pulled her out of the car, but she flatlined at the hospital."

"I’m sorry,” he offered, seeming as equally apologetic for bringing up the subject as for the situation
itself.

You gave a slightly dismissive shake of your head, wanting to get back to better thoughts. "It is
what it is. Let’s move along, shall we?"

A few more round of pictures passed. Yours were mostly distant relatives from old family get-
togethers or old high school friends you hadn’t seen in ages. Bucky’s were mainly him and Steve,
vaguely remembered, but you could see the strained nostalgia on his face, even as both of you
chuckled at the good little memories he could recall. You were almost finished with your current
glass of scotch, and starting to feel tipsy, when you pulled a photo of what looked like a teenaged
Bucky, proud smile on his face, and Steve on a sidewalk with three younger girls, all holding ice
cream cones.

"Ice cream parlor posse,” you teased, flipping the picture around for him to see.

The grin that crossed Bucky’s face was gentle, though maybe a little bittersweet. “My sisters.”

“Sisters,” you squawked out, surprised. You turned the picture around to look at it more closely, not
caring that your mouth was hanging open in astonishment. “Bucky, you had sisters?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, even as you managed to reposition yourself beside him so the two of you
could look at the photo together. He leaned a little closer to you and you told yourself the sudden burst of
warmth across your skin was the scotch doing its job when Bucky began to point at each girl.
"Mary, Eleanor, and Rebecca. I was the oldest. Only boy.”

"They’re so pretty,” you mused, looking over their features. All dark hair and winning smiles. You
glanced up at Bucky with your own grin. "Do you remember when this was taken?"

"Nah,” he shook his head, though the corners of his lips were still quirked up. "Know it was taken a
long time before I shipped off, though. They were all grown up by then. Hell, I think Mary already
had a husband. Didn’t need me to look after ‘em anymore."“

You chuckled at him a little as you put the photo back in the box. "Bet you were a great big
brother.”

“Tried to be, I guess,” he replied gravely, gulping down a large mouthful of his drink. There was
pain in his eyes again as he regarded the glass in his fingers, but he seemed to brush it off a little with
a shake of his head, a raise of his eyebrow. "Even still, I didn’t remember my own sisters until I saw
that little girl at the clothing store. Reminded me of Becky, so precocious. I asked Steve about them later. Said he didn’t bring it up ’cause he worried it would upset me.

"I’m sure he was just looking out for you, Buck," you offered gently. It made you wonder though. When he came home from his first visit with Steve, he’d been a little withdrawn, slightly upset even, but didn’t seem willing to talk. You figured he’d let you in on it if he wanted to, whenever he was ready. Maybe this was him being ready.

“I know,” he nodded with a tight smile. It softened some when he looked back up at you. "I know."

"Did you find anything out,” you asked, quiet, as you leaned your shoulder against his, trying to offer a small comfort.

“They’re…” He paused a second, like he was searching for the exact word he wanted to use. "Gone. All three of ’em."

"Aw, Bucky, I’m so sorry,” you consoled. You reached your free hand to tuck around his bicep and pressed your slightly numbed cheek onto his shoulder, hugging yourself into his arm. It felt like he relaxed some of his weight into your partial embrace. And you were more than happy to accept it.

After a few moments, he cleared his throat and it sounded like he was making a conscious effort to lighten the mood, just like you had earlier. "Mad as hell I missed out, but I guess I shouldn’t be too upset. Turns out they all lived long lives. Mary and Becky both got married, had a couple kids a piece… Hell, I guess that makes me an uncle."

"Uncle Buck," you snorted in amusement, straightening back up to look at him. He gave you a curious tilt of his head, though he still smiled somewhat, and you just waved him off. "Never mind. You said Mary and Becky had kids. What about Eleanor?"

"Ellie?” He surprised you by giving a fond little laugh, smile widening. "Never was one for the fellas. She lived with a ladyfriend until she passed."

“A ladyfriend? You mean…” Of course, you knew exactly what he meant. It just caught you off guard how offhanded he’d mentioned it. “Wow, that’s awesome! And you seem pretty cool with it.”

“Why the hell should I care,” he shrugged, nonchalant. “So long as she was happy and the gal was treatin her right. Just hope the rest of the world didn’t shit on her too bad.”

“That’s very progressive of you,” you grinned, a little impressed with the attitude he was taking.

“Progressive.” Bucky gave an annoyed grunt into his scotch, shaking his head slightly before taking a drink. “Never could understand people who gave a shit about all that, especially in a war. Someone does their job, why’s it matter?”

He paused a moment, thoughtful expression on his face, reeling in memories that bobbed to the surface of his mind. This one came with a knowing smirk when he looked at you again. “Knew a few gals liked women… or men and women. Fellas, too. Never bothered me any. And shit, if you don’t think there were guys tryin to get an eyeful-a me back then, you’re crazy.”

You rolled your eyes at him, though you couldn’t hide the amusement in your voice as you brought your glass to your lips. “Well, aren’t you a little cocky?”

“Ooh,” Bucky cooed smoothly. There was something almost wicked, suggestive, in that low voice of his and those gray eyes. “Much more than just a little, sweetheart.”
Snarfing that sip of scotch up the back of your nose was not a pleasant experience. It stung like hell even as you sputtered out a shocked guffaw. "Oh my god, oh my god! Bucky, you did not just fucking say that!"

You shoved his shoulder playfully, laughing so hard at his raunchy innuendo that your ribs were starting to ache and your eyes were watering. Bucky let you knock him aside a couple inches before rebounding easily. The grin on his face was wide and triumphant. Gray eyes squinted, but were soft and happy as he chuckled along with you. And you were glad to have your merriment and the scotch to blame for your blushing cheeks.

“Jesus, Bucky, that burned,” you whined out, wheezing as your uproar died down and sniffing and snorting a little through your nose. Your fingers gripped loosely at your aching sides while you shot him a look of feigned hatred despite the smile trying to keep hold of your face. "You’re a son of a bitch, you know that, Barnes?“

"Hey now,” he countered, pointedly. But his face was still bright with mischief as he started sifting through your photos again. "My ma was a saint."

“Yeah, for putting up with you,” you quipped back, giving him another slight nudge with your knee at his thigh.

Even with his head ducked, you could see his pleased expression at your comeback. It made your heart swell to have him so easygoing with you. Pride, you told yourself. Though you really were telling yourself that entirely too often lately. Your elbow was propped on the back of the couch, cheek resting in your palm to watch him with your somewhat swimmy gaze, when Bucky’s eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline.

“Talk about an eyeful,” he snickered gently, letting out a low whistle and pulling a photo out of the box to hold up for you. “Now this looks like my kinda gal.”

The picture was as old and weathered as any of the ones in Bucky’s box, grainy grayscale. A woman stood on a beach in dark bikini briefs and top, twisting at the waist to smile coyly over her shoulder at the camera in a pose as glamorous as any movie star from that era. One hand held a tropical drink, the other resting on the back of her hip. It had always been one of your absolute favorites and you were fairly sure you had contributed to most of the wear and tear at its edges over the years. “That’s my grandma. My mom’s mom.”

“No kiddin,” Bucky asked, casual, quirking a tiny smile at you.

“Yep,” you nodded. You polished off your scotch in a quick gulp, an act that would have made her proud. Gesturing around vaguely, you added “This was her house. Mom moved us here after my dad left, so grandma helped raised us. She was a pistol. Quick wit, sharp tongue, and still the kindest person you’d care to meet.”

“She’s beautiful,” he said in his tone that made it sound like the indisputable truth as he looked back down at the photo. “You look just like her. And from the way you describe, you sound like her too.”

You blinked a few times, surprised, wondering if you really just heard him say that. But even as buzzed as you were feeling, you knew you had. You felt your face and ears and neck grow hotter, your mouth go a bit dry. Certainly, he’d paid you a few minor compliments before, mostly about your cooking, but this… Bucky thought you were beautiful? No, it had to have been the alcohol that was making you read more into it than he meant. Right? Before you could even begin to think of a response, you saw him flip the photo over to read the back and his brow furrowed heavily. You
knew the inscription there by heart. *Honeymoon, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, 1948.*

"Jesus Christ," Bucky huffed as he put the photo back in the box. He looked up at you with a doleful shake of his head. "I’m old enough to be your damned grandpa."

This was firmer ground for you. As he took a sip from his glass, you offered him a genial smile, though your voice dripped with sarcasm. "C'mon, now, Buck. You don’t look a day over… 60, I’d say."

The wry look he gave you had you chuckling while grabbing for the bottle of scotch on the coffee table. Cork having long since been set aside, you held it up as a silent offering of another. He accepted by holding his glass out. You clinked the bottle a little too hard on the tumbler, no surer sign that you were past halfway to drunk. Yet you still poured yourself some more, noting that the bottle was much much lighter than before. When you started to tip too far toward the table, probably looking wobblier than you actually felt, Bucky’s right hand shot out to grab your arm and steady you.

“I’m good,” you smirked at him, answering the silent question in his face. But you put the cork back in the bottle as a form of appeasement while gripping his elbow to right yourself. And if Bucky’s lithe fingers seemed to linger a moment longer on your skin than necessary before letting you go, you chalked that up to kind concern and tried not to dwell on how much you enjoyed it. “Okay, my turn.”

Shifting through the box, you tried to find something that looked particularly interesting. You realized as you looked that aside from the first photo you saw, there were no pictures of Bucky or Steve from the Army. That was just as well, because surely if Steve hadn’t thought of that, Sam would have. Besides, if Bucky really wanted to see them, there was that whole exhibit at the Smithsonian. You were just considering if maybe you should visit there one day yourself when you saw a folded piece of heavy paper near the bottom of the box.

You had to undo two folds, revealing a painted scene unfortunately marked with worn holes at the creases’ stress points. The majority was still intact, though. It was a winter scene that didn’t quite reach the edges of the paper, brush strokes trailing off. A small copse of evergreen trees blanketed by tufts of snow, but decorated with little blobs of multiple colors and bursts of silver and gold. Ornaments and tinsel on Christmas trees. There were grayish smudges and short strokes that circled the ground between the trees. Footprints tracking through drifts. And white specks that littered the entire scene. Powdery snowfall. Though time had dimmed and cracked the pigments, it was still so detailed and darling.

“This is so precious,” you breathed, grinning so wide your cheeks were hurting when you presented it to him. “Do you remember anything about this?”

Bucky leaned forward for a closer look. As he studied the picture, he licked his lips thoughtfully, teeth dragging along the bottom one, brows furrowed, and his voice sounded more like a question than an answer when he said “I… I made this.”

“You painted this,” you asked, hearing the utter amazement in your own voice.

“Yes,” he nodded slightly as though everything was becoming clearer as he spoke. His eyes were a little distant, still studying the picture in your fingers, though a smile ghosted across his lips. “For Stevie’s mom. He was sick one winter… Nah, Stevie was sick every winter. But one winter, we musta been… 11? 12? I stopped by to check on him while he was laid up in bed and his Ma was home from work already. She was always fretting, so worried about him. Don’t remember how… I’m sure I was a little shit and said somethin about it, but it was about Christmas time and his Ma
mentioned how she felt bad about not being able to afford a tree. I made this for her. Figured I’d give her a… a whole little forest fulla Christmas trees as a present.”

“That is… ridiculously sweet,” you said softly. There was a silly little pang in your ribcage as you looked over the picture again, a part of you wanting to squeeze it tight to your chest. Or maybe it was Bucky you wished you could do that to. Instead, you just gulped down a mouthful from your glass. "This painting is really fantastic, Bucky. I had no idea you had such talent."

"Nah, Steve was the one with talent,” he countered, taking his own swig of scotch. He contemplated his drink a moment, pleasant nostalgia on his face as he rolled the glass between his metal fingers. "Took a class together… hell, he shoulda been teachin it. I just fooled around for kicks. He was a real artist."

"I’m sure what Steve did was great, but you shouldn’t discount this. It’s incredible, especially for an eleven year old,” you insisted. "I mean, seriously, if it still looks this wonderful now, I can only imagine how phenomenal it was when you first painted it."

"Tryin to gimme a big ego over somethin nearly a century old,” he asked with a disparaging chuckle.

"The fact that it’s still here doesn’t do that for you,” you replied. Bucky’s expression fell to confusion as he looked at you over the rim of his tumbler. Clucking your tongue at him, you carried on. "Steve’s mom must have loved it, Buck. She kept it. Then Steve kept it. And then someone kept it for Steve. Someone or other has been seeing the value of it all this time. Maybe it doesn’t hang in a museum, but that doesn’t make it not amazing."

You let that sink in for him a moment as you took another pull from your drink. When he didn’t respond by the time you felt the burn of scotch in your stomach, you decided to continue more casually. "Maybe you should think about painting again."

“I don’t think so,” he shook his head slightly, but there was no animosity to it, maybe even a bit of amusement, as though the idea of it was ridiculous.

"Why not," you questioned while carefully refolding the paper to deposit back in the box. "You had fun with it before and it could be a… a good creative outlet for you."

Without any other prompting, Bucky began to shuffle through the rest of your photos. Still, he took the time to reply "Like I said before. I ain’t that—"

“Ain’t that guy anymore,” you overlapped his words, rolling your eyes playfully and waving him off. "Okay, sure. You are not the same Bucky as before. Doesn’t mean you might not have a few things in common.

He huffed an exasperated laugh at your antics, gingerly picking through the contents of your shoebox album. It didn’t seem right to press him, your point having been made well enough for the evening. So you watched him search. Let your mind swim blankly in the alcohol fog where it didn’t matter that you were admiring Bucky’s strong jawline or the curve of his nose or the dimple in his chin or the width of his shoulders. God, but he really was so good-looking, even with that scruff on his face… or perhaps that was part of the reason. In so many of the photos he was dashing and lanky and almost pretty, but the man in front of you was more rugged and handsome and built like a brick shit house.

Before you had a chance to debate the finer points of either version of Bucky, he flashed a photo your way that completely derailed your inappropriate train of thought, slamming into your chest at full force, and you didn’t feel quite so drunk anymore. The moment you dreaded from the very
second you made the suggestion to swap pictures and stories. Still, you smiled weakly, because the
memory captured in the picture wasn’t itself sad at all. Two young girls in oversized sweaters and
jeans, standing next to a huge bundle of upright corn stalks, grinning in excitement.

"That’s me and my sister,” you informed, taking the photo from his hand. You saw his gaze turn to
piqued interest as he watched you. "This was at the local harvest festival. I’m 10 here and she’s 13.
Our mom and grandma took us when we were little to see the farm animals, play the games, see
what new fair foods they came up with. Then we started going by ourselves when we got older.
Sorta became a tradition, y’know? Just the two of us. We went every year until she signed up. Had
plans to start going again when she came home, but…“

You trailed off, already feeling the tears welling in your eyes. Sniffling against the sting of your
nose, you handed the photo back to him. "But plans change.”

Bucky took the offending picture and quietly tucked it back in the box on his lap. But you could see
it in his eyes. You’d seen it countless times, in the faces of almost everyone who knew about your
sister’s death. Just by his expression, you could tell Bucky wanted to ask. He would ask. And
whether it was because of the scotch or the need to vent or just because it was Bucky asking, you
couldn’t say, but you’d tell him. Heaven help you, you’d tell him.

“What happened over there,” he finally spoke after a long moment, face soft and curious, not sickly
sympathetic like you were used to seeing. It wasn’t quite what you had expected him to start with,
but it seemed fitting. He already knew the outcome, just didn’t know the cause.

“I never found out the details,” you answered, tossing back the rest of your glass’s contents as you
twisted to plant your feet firmly on the floor, setting Bucky’s box by your discarded shoes. You slid
the tumbler a few inches from you on the table, just to hear the comforting wooden rumble, elbows
propped on your thighs. With another gentle sniffling, you continued, slow. Because it hurt. It hurt
so bad. "Something she wasn’t supposed to tell me, or maybe just didn’t want to. All I do know is
that she was leading her team on a mission and something went wrong. That old tune you’ve
probably heard a million times before. Heavy casualties, mostly fatalities. In the end, she was the
only one who made it back home. PTSD, survivor’s guilt, losing the soldiers she led… no wonder,
man. No wonder.”

You paused to scrub your hand down your face, feeling your cheeks already growing hot and wet
despite how much you were trying to avoid it. Bucky had shifted beside you, moving to mirror your
posture, glass and shoebox of photos joining the rest on the coffee table. You could only manage a
quick glance to his face. It was still curious, still all questioning concern. More. He wanted more.
Fine, you’d give him that.

"It’s how I met Sam," you tried in vain to reel back your emotions a little. "He and his partner Riley
were the ones that pulled her out. Saved her life. They struck up a friendship when he started
checking in on her while she was recuperating enough to come home. After Riley died, Sam came
back and started doing support groups for veterans. He reached out to her, invited her to the
meetings. She went once a week for months. And it seemed to help… for a while. I went with her
sometimes, for support, to see what I might be able to do to make things easier. I… I should’ve gone
more. Should’ve paid better attention. Should’ve…“

Bucky’s right hand on your back silenced the wild babbling he must have heard coming on in your
voice. It shocked you to stillness a moment, a warm and unexpected comfort between your shoulder
blades that nearly crumbled the already leaky dam trying to hold back your tears. People had tried to
console you before, but somehow you felt more solace in this little gesture from him than you had in
all the others. Yet, you waited to hear him say what everyone always said. That it wasn’t your fault.
You did everything you could. And rationally you knew it was true, but that knowledge didn’t change the sinkhole in your heart whenever you got to thinking about it too much.

He didn’t offer those platitudes, though. Instead, in a low and careful voice, he asked "Were you the one who found her?"

The sobbing, laughing sigh that bubbled out of your mouth was particularly ugly sounding. How absolutely morbid and intimate a question. How absolutely important. Because you knew exactly why he would ask such a thing in such a way. He wanted to know just how bad it was inside your head, how deep the trauma went. Something about it was oddly relieving, in a macabre sense. It was an honest question, concerned and caring in its own odd little way. Bucky was asking you to confide in him. He had trusted you with his quiet pain so many times, how could you offer him any less than you asked of him?

With a slight shake of your head, though nearly enough to make your sloshy head dizzy, you finally gave your strained answer. "No. She, uh… she drove out to a secluded spot. Called 911 and told them where to find her body so no one else would. The chief responded himself. Saw pictures of the car on a cops desk that night at the station. Dunno if I was supposed to, but I did. It wasn’t pretty."

You realized your vision had begun to blur, watery, as you felt Bucky’s thumb brush ever-so-gently against your back in a small, soothing motion. Squeezing your eyes shut, you let the tears roll down your cheeks silently, trying to gather yourself together with your chin tucked to your chest. After taking a few moments to steady your breathing and push the images from your mind, you eventually let out a soft huff.

"Jeez, what am I doing? I’m supposed to be helping you through your shit, not blubbering about mine," you chuckled darkly, hearing your voice all nasally and full. Swiping a hand quickly at your face and wanting desperately to change the subject, you turned to smile over at him through trembling lips. "Hand to god, I’m not normally a sad drunk. Usually, by now I’d be wanting to dance. I bet you used to dance, huh?

"I suppose I probably did," he replied thoughtful, light, obviously understanding what you were trying to do, hand sliding from your back to rest behind you on the couch.

"Well, what d’ya say, Buck," you urged with a little sniffle. "Wanna move the coffee table and cut a rug?"

Bucky shook his head gently and gave you an amused smirk. "Even if I could remember every step, maybe now ain’t the best time."

"Just as well," you shrugged. The suggestion had been half-hearted as it was. Still, you laughed at yourself, sounding bitter in your own ears. "That’s me, though. Always ruining the mood. Honestly, sometimes I wonder why you even come back after your visits with Steve. I can’t be helping you much."

"You help," he replied, smirk having fallen. It was that matter-of-fact tone again, gaze distant as he gave a quick glance to his metal fingers dangling between his knees. "You make things a little easier."

Somewhere between the fuzziness of your brain and the fullness in your chest, you found yourself leaning over to press your lips to the stubble of Bucky’s cheek in a soft kiss. You held them there for only a heartbeat, yet as you pulled back, he turned his head to face you. There was a shared breath as his gray eyes searched your features, for what, you weren’t exactly sure in that moment. But you
offered him a small, thankful smile while you retreated from his personal space.

"Think I'm gonna call it a night, Buck," you sighed in exhaustion, lids having grown a bit heavy, limbs loose and weary. Gesturing toward the the boxes, you asked “You gonna stay up and go through these?"

“Yeah,” he licked his lips with a nod, brow knitted slightly.

Shouldering against him familiarly to bring his attention back to your face, you wagged a playful finger at him in a mock scold. "If they get to be too much, don’t hesitate to wake me up. Okay?"

The corners of his lips quirked up in a tired grin. "You got it."

You nodded with an air of authority as you went to stand. It was too fast. Or you were too drunk. Either way, you promptly felt lightheaded, swaying a little on your feet. Bucky had his right hand up in an instant, fingers gripping into your jeans at your hips to keep you from toppling. With a quick shake of your head, you regained your footing and snorted your annoyance at yourself.

“You gonna make it okay,” he questioned, looking up at you concerned. His grip had loosened on you, but his hand had not moved.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” you assured. You patted his hand sloppily until he let you go. "Four or five glasses of scotch on a near empty stomach isn’t my brightest move, but I can make it to my bedroom unassisted."

Bucky’s head ducked in understanding, but you could still feel his attention at your back, almost as palpable as his hand had been, while you made your way carefully around the couch to the hall. You were sure if you teetered even an instant, he would have been on you like lightning. But you didn’t falter again though your brain seemed to slosh a bit as you rounded into the bathroom for a pit stop.

Once back out in the hall, you chanced to see Potato slinking against the baseboard, headed the way you came from. Her eyes turned up to you, leery, as she paused. It took everything not to giggle at what looked like a pouty posture, but you managed to speak in what you hoped was a quiet voice. "Gonna go keep Buck company?"

As was usually the case when talking to the cat, she made a noise in response. This time an almost purring mrrow. Nodding in approval, you let her go on her way and turned for your room. You barely managed to change into your night clothes before you were face first in your pillows.

—

Groaning, you tried to fight your brain back to sleep. Even through closed lids you could tell it was morning and you squeezed your eyes tighter. Remnants of a dream were clinging to your memory, most of the details already fading away. All you could remember was a busy, sunny beach and Bucky grinning in his dress uniform, hat cocked to one side and paint dark like dirt under his fingernails.

The scotch was a dull ache in your temples when you finally opened your eyes. You had been right about morning, the sun peeking in through the window shades. It didn’t seem like you’d moved around at all during the course of the night. The alcohol must have zonked you out good. Rolling over onto your back, you pushed yourself up into a sitting position and paused a moment to let the pounding subside. When your vision focused, you immediately saw your trashcan by the side of your bed where it definitely had not been when you fell asleep. On your bedside table was the jug of
water from the fridge, condensation forming on the outside, and the bottle of headache medicine. Propped up between the two of them was that photo of teenaged you doing your chimpanzee impression. And despite the budding hangover, you couldn’t help but smile.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

An unexpected night out with the fellas

Chapter Notes

Another lengthy one. Sorry it took so long. Also I apologize in advance for any feels it may give you. Hope you are all having a wonderful New Year... now here I am to ruin it!  "evil laughter"

The version of "The Way You Look Tonight" is the Astaire version because I'm a sap and can't help myself.

The familiar crunch of gravel outside the house let you know that Steve had arrived to pick up Bucky. A week had practically flown by, despite how little ever happened at the house. Bucky did physical training in the morning, the two of you shared meals and movies and sometimes just quiet time together doing your own things. Thinking back on when you first met him, it was amazing how comfortable the two of you had become in each other's presence. Even the nightmares and panic episodes didn't seem to punctuate the time so harshly anymore. They were by no means gone, but he had become much better about letting you help. Sometimes it was enough just to sit close, shoulders or hands or knees touching, until he gained his bearings once more.

"Steve's here," you called out to Bucky from the living room. Of course, he probably already knew the car was pulling up. Supersoldier hearing and all that.

Moving to the front window, you peeked out into the dying afternoon sunlight to watch the car make its way down the drive. Bucky's footsteps sounded as he came up behind you, hand reaching past your shoulder to pull the curtains back so he could look out too. The move brought him close, chest just inches from your arm, creating an almost comforting warmth against the drafty glass. Glancing over, you saw him in his slacks and dark blue shirt once again. That color always reflected in his eyes when he wore it. You didn't even try hiding your smile when you checked to confirm it was just as true this time.

"Go through your wardrobe rotation already, old man," you snickered at him, nudging his ribs gently with the side of your elbow.
He turned his head to look at you, smallest hint of tension in his jaw and neck, but still gave you a little smirk. "We're going out tonight. Thought I'd dress decent."

"Oh yeah," you asked, delighted. Noticing a wrinkle in his collar, you absent-mindedly reached up to adjust it as you heard the car roll to a stop. "Where to?"

"No clue," he shook his head slightly while your fingers brushed his soft, clean hair from his shirt and smoothed the fabric at his shoulders.

"Bet you guys'll have fun though," you smiled. A quick appraisal of him and you nodded in satisfaction. "You'll have to tell me all about it when you get back."

The crease between his brows began to deepen, face looking thoughtful as he gazed at you intently. You were about to question him when a knock came at the door. With a reassuring pat on his chest, you carefully brushed past him to answer. When you opened the door, you expected a broad-chested blond with a lopsided grin. What you got was Sam Wilson, all dressed up, trying to look cool with a smug smirk. You let out a surprised laugh as he came crowding inside the house, arms wide, hands motioning for you to bring it in.

"Hey, stranger," you chuckled gleefully, wrapping your arms around him for a tight hug. You gave him a few sound pats on the back as he swayed with you a bit. "Ain't seen you for a month or more. How've you been?"

"Same old, same old," he pulled away with a shrug to move toward the living room, revealing Steve right behind him, equally well-attired, boyish grin in place as usual. "Fighting the good fight."

"Yeah, sure," you rolled your eyes, shoving at him playfully. Turning your attention to Steve, you ushered him in with an emphatic wave. "Hey, Steve! Good to see you again."

"Likewise," he ducked his head in greeting. As he stepped inside past you, you gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder which garnered a somehow even kinder expression from him. "How's the week been?"

It was the same every time you met. Certainly, Steve was becoming more relaxed and comfortable around you, especially since having him over for dinner, and it sounded like a cordial enough question. But you knew in the set of his eyes that his real concern, first and foremost, was how Bucky was doing. You could hardly begrudge him that. Still, with a knowing smirk, you answered
in sarcastic formality "Good. Quiet. Nothing to report, Cap'n."

Steve shot you an almost disapproving look, though after a gentle huff it melted into a chagrined smile. Nodding in understanding and maybe amusement, he returned your familiar gesture, hand squeezing your shoulder lightly before you shut the door. You followed a few paces behind him into the living room just in time to see Bucky and Sam drop a handshake. That surprised you a little as well, then again, of course Sam was probably helping out when Bucky went on visits more than you knew anything about.

"Bucky, you didn't tell me Sam was going too," you spoke in a playful chide as you moved to lean against the back of the couch. When his only response was a half-apologetic shrug, you shook your head in mock exasperation and looked between all three of the men. "So, where you fellas headed? If you don't mind my asking, that is. Don't want to endanger any top secret, boys-only operation."

"Actually, Sam suggested a place a couple towns over--" Steve began, confident and casual, but was cut off by Sam clearing his throat. His brows pinched together and he looked a little lost. His eyes flickered to Bucky, but there was no answer to be found there either. Just a stoic expression, maybe a hint of wariness as he looked between every other face in the room.

"The Hall," you asked Sam, knowing full well that's exactly what Steve was talking about. Crossing your arms at your chest, you raised an eyebrow at him, lips pursing in disapproval only when he gave you that wide-eyed innocent look like he didn't want to answer.

"Okay, yes. The Hall," he finally admitted with a nod. Steve gave a curious tilt to his head, a silent demand for clarification, which Sam answered. "We used to go there with her sister."

It was interesting to see Steve straighten so abruptly, eyes wide and mouth partially open in surprise for a moment before throwing you an awkward, distressed look. Bucky’s lips seemed to thin a little, gaze narrowing at the side of Sam’s head in annoyance for a long beat until his attention turned to you again, all soft concern and questioning. Asking if you were alright. And Sam, as capable and imposing a man as he could be, looked practically sheepish between the two supersoldiers, though the unspoken apology written on his face was sincere. You couldn’t help your broad smile as you looked at the three absolute goobers standing in your living room.

“Three of the biggest badasses in the world concerned about little ole me, huh,” you rolled your eyes with an entertained snort. This seemed to relieve some of the built-up tension and you did your best to dispel the rest by laughing at the sheer absurdity of it. “Guys, seriously, it’s fine. I was just giving Sam here a little shit. The Hall is a great place to hang out. Best wings around. Oooh, and those rarebit fries? Mmmm… to die for!”
“You sure,” Sam asked, giving you that look of his when he thought you might be covering something up. It always made you stop and question yourself, just to see if he was right. But this time, it really was unwarranted. “Because if it upsets you, all you gotta do is say so.”

“Honestly, it doesn’t,” you replied brightly. Pointing at the men on either side of him, you added, “In fact, now that I’m thinking about it, that old jukebox they have there probably has songs these two geezers would know. They’ll love it.”

You were glad to see Steve take your little joke in stride. He turned a wry smirk your way, something in the quirk of his eyebrow looking almost appreciative. But it was Bucky who pulled the room’s attention when he gave a quiet huff of amusement. Suddenly finding himself under everyone’s albeit friendly scrutiny, he seemed to grow slightly uncomfortable. He hooked his thumbs in his belt loops, thoughtful gaze sliding from Steve to Sam before resting on you, corners of his lips pitching upward.

“You should come out with us,” he finally spoke, that soft expression easing across his features, no matter how discreet.

You blinked rapidly, willing the burning sensation from your cheeks and hoping the minor shock in your two guests’ faces distracted them enough to keep from noticing. “Oh, Bucky, that’s sweet of you, but I don’t want to impose on your guys’ night out.”

“No imposition at all,” Steve countered quickly when Bucky looked to him for support. A jovial smile brightened his face as he gave a reassuring nod, offering up a hand in a welcoming gesture. “Really, we’d love for you to join us.”

“Would you guys just get out of here,” you rolled your eyes, waving them off though you were grateful for the invite, even after the fact. Yet, the three men seemed entirely undeterred by your haphazard refusal. Sam even had the audacity to fold his arms across his chest and raise an eyebrow at you, mirroring your earlier expression. Clucking your tongue, you motioned your hand to indicate your clothing. "Come on, does it look like I'm dressed for a night out?"

"We'll wait," Sam chimed in, unfolding his arms with a shrug to walk over to the couch and take a seat.

You opened your mouth to protest, maybe call him a traitor because he knew impromptu plans often annoyed you, but your jaw dropped further when you saw Steve move to follow suit. Lips turned down in mischievous approval, he carefully stepped around Sam's legs to join him on the opposite end of the couch, just barely glancing your way. Bucky began making his way around the back of
the couch, closing in on you in only a few strides. Your eyes narrowed at him in mock frustration when he paused in front of you.

"We could probably both use a night outta the house, doll," he implored, small grin a bit smug. But there was something under that facade of casual bravado, a rigidity to his muscles, a minute tightness to that smile, a silent plea you knew all too well in his eyes.

Before you could reach a hand for him, a move so instinctive to you now, he had already looked away. An edge of wickedness replaced the need in his gaze as he smirked and continued on his journey. He rounded to the armchair before plopping down with a nonchalant thud of his sturdy frame. Then he went about making a great show of settling in, stretching his legs out to prop his heels on the coffee table in front of him. His hands came up to lace fingers behind his head as he sat back and he raised an eyebrow at you in challenge.

Anchoring your fists on your hips, you turned a quick glare on each of the men in your living room, though Sam and Steve pretended not to see it. You sighed deeply, shaking your head in annoyance. "Fine, ya jerks. I'll get changed to go out, but I'm gonna take my sweet time doing it."

It was an idle threat though. You knew that the moment you turned to make your way down the hallway, ignoring the minor triumph that flashed over Bucky's face. The nervous entreaty of Bucky's expression might have convinced you, but a spark of excitement had flared up inside you, no doubt fueled by the idea of a bit of fun at an old haunt. Of course, that goading look of Bucky's and the quirk of his lips as he drawled out the word doll had absolutely nothing to do with it. No, obviously that was not the cause of your eagerness as you flipped through the hangers in your closet.

The night was supposed to get chilly, so you pulled out the pretty long sleeve dress you had, made out of a decently cozy fabric. Skirt free-flowing and ending just above your knees, your thigh-highs and garter belt seemed appropriate for keeping your legs warm. Once the belt was in place, you rolled up the heavy, opaque material of the stockings to slide over your feet and fondly remembered your grandma. It had been an old adage of hers that thigh highs and a good garter belt could turn a guy gaga, something she claimed to know first-hand from her younger years. As you clipped the stays in place, you tried not to wonder if that had been true for Bucky in those days.

You neatly fixed your hair up and out of your face before putting on some makeup. Considering there were people waiting and you were a little impatient to be finished, you went classic lip and eyeliner combo. It was something you'd practiced often not too terribly long ago, so you made relatively quick work of it. After finally stepping into your heels, a little wobbly at first as it had been a while since you last wore them, you took a moment to admire yourself in the mirror. You smoothed down a few wrinkles in your dress and smiled a bit.

The sound of your heels on the darkened hallway floor seemed to silence the guests in your living
room. When you turned to close the door behind you, you felt the front right stay of your hosiery fall loose at the movement. You let out a small, aggrieved sigh as you pulled up the hem of your skirt far enough to tighten the satiny strap. Skirt falling back into place once you were satisfied everything would stay put, you were startled to look up and find Bucky’s eyes on you. His position in the armchair afforded him a clear view of the hallway. And judging by his wide eyes and somewhat slack jaw, he'd also had a clear view of you bothering with your undergarments. He could probably see the blush of your cheeks too as you offered a pained smile and mouthed sorry as you continued down the hall.

"You okay, Buck," Steve asked just from out of your view, voice concerned.

Bucky finally tore his gaze from you, tongue darting quickly over his lips and clearing his throat as he nodded with a knit brow. "Yeah. Fine."

He hastily got to his feet a second before you entered the living room, just in time to see the other two men follow suit. They both turned to look at you, Steve offering a polite smile, but Sam's face spread in a wide, ridiculous grin. He tried to cover it with a stern look, chin jutting up a bit as he pointed an accusatory finger in your direction. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with my friend?"

"Oh, please," you scoffed with a haughty air, confidence bolstered by being so well received. "As though you boys are the only ones who know how to dress for a night out."

"Okay, okay," he chuckled, raising his hands in a placating manner before clapping them closed and rubbing them together quickly as he looked at everyone around him. "What are we standing around waiting for? Let's get the hell outta here."

Steve glanced at you with a long-suffering look that mirrored your own as he shook his head and followed Sam toward the door. You gave him an understanding nod, picking up your purse at the coat hooks to sling across body. Keys in hand, you excitedly ushered the men out so you could lock the place up behind you. Steve and Sam's footsteps rumbled across the porch and down the stairs at a fair clip, but Bucky stopped just outside the door and waited, jacket swung over his right shoulder by the collar, watching as you secured the house like he always did when you left together.

You checked over your shoulder to see the other two already at the car before giving Bucky an embarrassed smile, leaning closer to speak in a low voice once the deadbolt was turned. "Sorry about that impromptu show in the hallway. Didn't know you were looking."

"Definitely not the worst thing I ever seen," he replied, voice just as conspiratorial, though the
corners of his lips tipped up in a suggestive little smirk.

"Ass," you retorted, half entertained and half scandalized, and entirely grateful he wasn't making a big deal of it. You still shouldered into him in playful warning as you turned for the stairs which brought a grin to his face.

"Here, let me help," Bucky offered, crook of his left arm held out for you casually after moving his jacket to fold over his right arm.

"You trying to be a gentleman, Bucky Barnes," you teased even as you tucked your arm around his elbow to begin your descent.

He shook his head slightly, definitive, though you could still see an impish light to his eyes. "Nah, just wouldn't want you to roll an ankle in those heels, is all."

"Ugh, thanks," you laughed quietly. Glancing over to the two waiting at the car, you leaned in towards Bucky again to add "If I fall on my ass in these, Sam will never let me hear the end of it."

Your heart stuttered a little in your chest at the sight of Bucky's dimples when he gave a toothy grin and chuckled low, a few strands of hair falling down into his face as he helped ease you down the last step onto the path to the driveway. He combed them back with the fingers of his free hand, jacket bunching a little awkwardly in the crook of his elbow, but didn't make a move to retract his left from you. Instead, he urged you down the short walkway and helped you negotiate the gravel drive, smooth and easy, like he'd done it a million times before.

By the time you reached them, Steve had gotten into the driver's seat and Sam shot you a knowing smirk over the roof of the car as he slid into the back. Bucky grabbed the handle to open the rear passenger side door before you even had a chance to reach for it. You raised an eyebrow at him in amused accusation. Not trying to act like a gentleman, huh? The feigned unknowing innocence of his expression was almost too much when you started to lower yourself into the car.

Once you were situated, Bucky closed the door for you and hopped into the passenger seat. Steve put the car in gear, heading back to the road as you were pulling your seatbelt into place. The silence was suddenly interrupted by Sam coughing. It drew everyone's attention, even Steve's, who was trying to check on him through the rearview mirror. "Everything okay back there?"

"Oh, yeah," Sam nodded, clearing his throat and moving his hand in an exaggerated wave in front of
his face. But you could see the smile tugging at his lips and hear the joke in his voice as he continued. "Must be the dust kicked up from all this chivalry."

You were just taking a breath to respond when you saw Bucky lean back between the front seats a little. He was buckling in, adjusting the strap across his chest, all while giving Sam a slight glare with his brow knit. Then, after snorting derisively, he said in a serious tone "Not my fault the guy with amnesia's the only one who remembers how to treat a lady."

The whole car seemed taken aback for a second, Steve shooting a disapproving glare at the side of Bucky's head and Sam blinking in surprise before looking mildly affronted by the accusation. You were the first to sputter out a laugh, recognizing the crinkle at the corner of Bucky's eyes even as he turned to sit back in his seat and look out the side window. From your position, you could see his reflection in the glass, a pleased smile on his face that spread as the whole car joined you, even Sam with a chagrined shake of his head.

"So, this place we're going," Steve eventually asked after everyone had settled, turning onto the main paved road. "The Hall? What sorta name is that?"

"Used to be an old dance hall," you answered as you drummed your fingers on the seat between you and Sam. Unbuckling your seatbelt, you maneuvered yourself between the two front seats, reaching for Sam's iPod you'd spotted at the console. Glancing between the two men, you couldn't help the wicked little smirk that crossed your face. "Probably from back when you two shits were spring chickens."

Steve's eyes widened at that, throwing Bucky an amused grin over your head. "She usually like this?"

"Can't take her anywhere," Bucky replied with a shake of his head. You thought there might have been a bit of fondness in the glancing smile he gave you and in his voice when he looked over at Steve. "But she's a decent cook, so I let it slide."

Mouth falling open in a scoff, you shoved at Bucky's shoulder with your forearm, garnering a quiet chuckle from him, before handing the iPod back to Sam as you continued the story. "Anyway, it was a dance hall, but went abandoned for a long time. A few years back this whole area went through one of those revitalization deals where people were buying up old buildings to renovate. So, someone turned it into sort of a bar and grill. But they liked some of that historical appeal, so they left part of the dance floor intact and kept the jukebox."

"Food's pretty damn good, drinks are even better," Sam added, fingers already flicking through all
the songs he had while you moved back to your seat to buckle in again. "Music's not the worst either. Could use a little more MoTown, but nothing's perfect."

"Speaking of music," you ventured, raising an eyebrow at him because you both knew he was taking too damned long to pick something.

Soon the car was filled with deep bass notes and guitar rifts. Nothing less than the best from Sam Wilson's iPod. You'd heard most of them enough that eventually you and Sam started singing along in the backseat. Of course, this earned you both more than a few glances from Steve and Bucky, especially when crooning along to The Miracles or The Temptations with a little too much gusto. But it made the ride seem a lot shorter and soon the car was nearing its destination.

The place looked a little busy and you saw the barest, uneasy shift of Bucky in his seat. Steve drove down the street a bit looking for parking, but there didn't seem to be anything close by. Unbuckling again, you leaned forward, placing a soothing hand on Bucky's shoulder even as you addressed Steve with a gracious smile. "Think you could let me out here while you find a spot? Don't want to walk too far in these heels."

"Sure," Steve nodded, checking the mirrors to make sure he wasn't blocking anyone before pulling to a stop.

"I'll go with her," was Bucky's brusque announcement, and it hardly surprised you. He made eye contact with you over his shoulder, something about it telling you to stay put as he undid his seatbelt and reached for the doorhandle.

Sam raised an eyebrow at you, looking as though he was holding back from saying something smart, so you gave him a childish scrunch of your face just when Bucky was opening your door for you. Swinging your legs out, you took Bucky's offered hand to help leverage you to your feet. It took a split second to realize that it wasn't the feel of cool metal on your fingers like you were expecting, but warm skin that sent just as electric and strange a start through you. But once you were up and out of the way, he let go to close the car door behind you and gingerly slap the roof of the car. As they pulled away, you noticed that Sam had opted to stay with Steve.

The night was cool and damp, rain earlier that day having left its mark in puddles and run-off all over the place. Between two parked cars, you hopped a little stream to reach the curb, Bucky following close behind. You were almost a full block away from The Hall, a few other people just visible milling about outside the doors. Bucky had taken up the position on your right, between you and the street, but paused a moment to tug at his cuffs with slightly agitated movements, like he always seemed to do when confronted with public places, hooking his jacket over his rigid right shoulder in an effort to look casual. And, like you always did, you reached your hand out to entwine your fingers with his metal ones as you started to walk together.
"Probably gonna be loud and busy in there tonight, judging from all these cars," you commented, giving his hand an extra little squeeze though you could feel some of his tension melting with every step. "You sure you're good with this?"

"I'm in good company," he replied. The tightness of his lips loosened into a small, appreciative smile as he looked over at you.

You nodded, grinning and leaning in conspiratorially with your free hand hooking around his elbow. "Okay, but you know the drill. One word and I'll have you out of here. Even if I have to fireman carry you back to the car."

Bucky's sudden burst of laughter, an honest to goodness laughter, could've warmed you against the chilly night air alone, even only lasting a few fleeting heartbeats. He gave you a disbelieving shake of his head. "Sweetheart, there's no way you're gettin me off the ground, let alone carryin me anywhere."

"Never underestimate a woman in heels," you countered, though he might have been right. You hugged his arm close to your chest against the gust of wind that blew past and pouted up at him. "I'm a lot stronger than I look, you know."

"Lot colder than you look, too. C'mere," he clucked his tongue in a gentle admonishment, pulling you to a stop to swing his jacket out toward you. "The hell didn't you bring a coat, huh?"

"I'm fine, Bucky, really. It's only a little further. Besides," you let out a gentle breath before resting your hand on his chest near his left shoulder, where you knew skin and metal met beneath the fabric. His eyes turned questioning, looking from your face to where you touched him. "You should be wearing it. The cold bothers you."

When Bucky stilled a moment, you thought you might have upset him, bringing up what he'd told you that night after dinner with Steve, huddled together in your bed. But then he looked back up at you, shoulders relaxing, lines of his face softened, corners of his lips quirked up just a bit. "I ain't cold right now, doll. Honest. Now c'mere, let me get this on you."

"Fine," you sighed, rolling your eyes sarcastically as you worked your arm into the too-long sleeve. Still, you gave him a teasing smirk and flicked your finger against his left hand, producing a gentle ting. "But only to indulge you playing the knight in shining Armor."
"Hoooo, kitten's got claws, huh," he chuckled, good-natured, helping you into the other sleeve. He pulled the jacket closed around you, its high collar falling across your cheekbones and its broad shoulders sagging around yours. Tipping his head back a little, he gave you an appraising look down the length of his nose and tugged at the lapels as he grinned. "There now, don't you look like all kindsa trouble?"

You were fairly certain you looked like an idiot in an oversized coat as opposed to any kind of trouble. Jutting your chin up over the collar, you ignored the stuttering in your heart at his suave little gesture, instead opting to stick your tongue out at him and hoping like hell you could blame ruddy cheeks on the night breeze. Obviously that must have been why his were a little flushed with color as he tilted his head toward your destination. Even through the thick material of his jacket, you could feel Bucky's hand hovering just above the small of your back, guiding you down the sidewalk once more. It was gentlemanly, almost comforting, reminding you of a week ago when he'd consoled you over too much scotch and too many bad memories.

The puddles that littered the dips in the sidewalk were mostly easy to avoid, step around or give a quick little hop to get over, holding his hand for balance. But there was a particularly large one a few yards from the entrance that made you stop short to study it a moment and figure out the best way to negotiate the obstacle. It was in a dip of broken pavement, the other side not looking particularly sturdy or even and just far enough away a small hop wouldn't do it. You turned toward Bucky, having decided it best to cross onto the street to get around, only to have him flash an evil smirk as he reached his hands into the jacket you wore.

"What are you-- no, no, NO," you protested when his fingers gripped into your sides. But it was too late, he was already lifting you off the ground, taking a step through the puddle in his already scuffed shoes. You barely had the presence of mind to snap your mouth closed against the shriek of fear and exhilaration that bubbled up from your chest, hands gripping tightly into his arms. Bucky deposited you easily on the other side, none the worse for wear.

"Oh, you fucking asshole," you spat, any harshness nullified by the nervous laughter in your voice as you shoved at him feebly.

"What," he shrugged innocently, though you could see a silent chuckle shaking his shoulders. "Just helped you across. Didn't scare ya, did I?"

"You startled the shit outta me, that's all," you growled somewhat playful and shoved at him again. He let himself be pushed back a quarter step, lips twitching as though they were trying to hold back a bigger grin. You jabbed a finger at his chest accusingly. "But I owe you for that. Don't know when or where or how, but I fucking owe you for that, Barnes."
He only snickered low, reaching over to snake his left hand with your right, tugging you gently toward The Hall's entrance. The few people who had been standing out there were already walking inside, heavy doors letting out some of the music and ambient noise before shutting. You were prepared to wait outside, a bit thankful for Bucky and his jacket against the cold breeze, but it wasn't long before you saw Sam and Steve rounding the corner of the building towards you.

"Hey, sorry it took so long guys," Steve began as the two of them got closer. His eyes fell on you, then the jacket, obviously recognizing it, before giving a small grin as he looked to Bucky. "Ready to head in?"

With no objections being raised, you all made your way inside. Though, when Bucky went to grab the door for everyone, Sam stepped up beside you and ducked his head in close to yours, teasing. "Y'know, that jacket looks real familiar."

"Didn't you get schooled well enough in the car, Wilson," you countered, voice equally low and teasing, nudging your elbow into his ribs. He only smirked at you before pulling away to greet the hostess. You waited a second for Bucky to come in, seeing his calculating gaze scan the surroundings. No doubt mentally preparing escape routes and plans of attack should something arise. Steve had done it too, though his had been more a sweeping glance and his jaw and eyes weren't quite so tight and twitchy.

Sam was actually leading the hostess when you took Bucky's jacket off to hand back, Wilson confident and smiling and maybe a little flirty with the woman as he asked for a certain available table in the dining area set up beside the bar. You knew exactly what he was going for too, a strategic spot where one could keep their back toward a dead wall and their eyes on a majority of the area. A place that could make it easier on an anxious soldier. He'd done the same thing when going out with you and your sister. Everyone else left that particular seat open, like an impromptu little dance that had gone unspoken, but understood between you. If Bucky noticed, he said nothing and took the seat, with you moving instinctively to sit at his left, arguably the most vulnerable spot with your back to the entrance. Not that it bothered you, being surrounded by three of the best well-trained men alive meant you really didn't have to worry too much.

It was a little while before the waitress arrived, plenty of time for the four of you to peruse the menu and chat quietly. She was another very pretty young woman named Meg with a bright smile plastered on her face and her easy, cheery disposition gave the impression of a well-seasoned server. But when she rested her hand on Bucky's right shoulder with a familiar air, leaning close with a wider smile, you felt yourself bristle a little inside. Maybe it was made worse by how little Bucky seemed to mind. It was ridiculous, of course, entirely uncalled for. She was a server, making money on tips, and sweeter service meant sweeter tips. Besides, why should you care if someone were being flirtatious with Bucky? He needed to interact with the world outside your house and a cute, coquettish girl could probably make that a lot easier. You pushed it to the back of your mind as you handed your menu in, hearing Meg repeat the orders to make sure she got them right.
You were all chatting when a runner brought your orders out. Well, three of you were while Bucky just replied or commented here and there, understandably distracted. You watched him sometimes, from the corner of your eye, waiting for any indication that he might be uncomfortable and want to leave. And sure enough, you caught Sam doing that a time or two as well, though sometimes it was you he was checking on. You would give him a smile, silently reassuring him that you were just fine. There were memories sure, of your sister with a beer in her hand and a smile on her face or dancing on the floor with Sam or some other guy she'd pulled from the bar. Good memories and the company you had with you now didn't let your mind slip into bad ones.

In fact, you were there so many times with her that you'd come to know the standard music playlist by heart. Someone could choose something else from the jukebox at random, but there were always songs playing for people to enjoy. Everyone was nearing the end of their plates when you caught the song that was almost over and a grin spread across your face in anticipation. The men seemed to notice, looking over at you curiously.

"You remember what song comes next, right," you chuckled at Sam across the table.

He tilted his head as if to hear the current song better before smiling wistfully to himself and nodding. "Yeah, I remember. The Four Seasons Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."

"For old time's sake," you asked, because he knew damned good and well it was a favorite of your sister's and they'd danced to it every time it played.

Sam pushed his chair back and stood, straightening his shirt in exaggerated movements. Steve looked thoroughly confused, especially when Sam crossed behind him to stand beside your chair and offer you a hand. In a mocking prim voice, he said "It would be rude of me to refuse a lady a dance."

"Well, if a lady asks you, tell her she has to wait her turn, because I asked first," you joked, taking his hand and letting him pull you to your feet. You glanced back at Bucky only to find his brow creased a little. Giving him and Steve both a gentle smile, you added "We'll be right back, gentleman."

The familiar opening horns were just starting when Sam pulled you onto the floor amidst the other couples, hooking his right arm around your back to pull you close. You rested your left hand at his shoulder as the two of you began to shuffle around a bit. Once the rhythm was quickly found, you took advantage of having him alone to chat. "How've you been holding up, Sam? Everything good with you?"
"Hey, saving the world can be stressful, but it has its perks," he shrugged, spinning you around carefully. "People are pretty grateful, get to eat free some places... if they recognize you. Get to save all the damsels in distress I can carry."

"Sam," you shot back in a warning tone. "That's not what I mean. I know you've got all that Peer Specialist training, but that doesn't make things just go away."

"You're right, you're right," he nodded. "And I appreciate you worrying about me, but I promise, I'm doing good. So are you, by the way."

You leaned back to smile at him curiously, letting him lead you through the music. "What do you mean?"

"With Barnes," he informed, a playful edge to his voice. "I see you thawing out that Winter Soldier."

"Oh god," you groaned, rolling your eyes as you laughed. But you glanced over his shoulder where you could see Bucky sitting at the table. He seemed a little agitated, talking to Steve across from him.

"I mean it," Sam countered and you were thankful he was shuffling again instead of spinning you. "Can't say we're the best of buddies, but he's been letting me talk to him when he visits Steve. I can see him making progress."

You hadn't realized you were watching Bucky the whole time Sam was talking until those gray eyes looked up to meet yours. Even from that distance, you could see some of the tension in his features subside and you offered a smile, feeling your cheeks heat up like some little kid for having been caught, before looking back at Sam. "You know he's doing all the hard work, Sam. I'm just a quiet place to stay and someone to look after him until he can move on."

"What in the hell have I told you about selling yourself so short," Sam scolded you, turning you both around as the music swelled into the first chorus. "Do you really think that's all... You know what, we'll talk about this later because he's coming this way."

"Wait, what," you blinked, confused by his sudden change of conversation. "What are you talking about?"
"Y'know, tall, dark, and metal-armed," he replied, nodding his head over your shoulder. "He's walking over here and I'm pretty sure he's going to ask to cut in."

Just the idea of it had your heart thudding wild in your chest despite yourself, but your first instinct was to snark "What, and you're gonna pass me off like a church collection plate?"

"Hey, man," he shook his head defensively, smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "I'm not standing in the way of any man that looks at you the way he does."

Before you had a chance to respond to that bizarre statement, violins were replacing the horns in the music and Sam spun you sharply, letting go of your hand and twisting away fluidly. The move revealed Bucky approaching, just as promised, only a few steps away. Momentum from the turn combined with a gentle push at the small of your back propelled you forward to collide firmly with Bucky's chest. He caught you, arm around your waist, before you could stumble too far back, reeling you back to him as a gentle little gasp of surprise escaped your throat.

"Nice save," Sam congratulated with a wily grin. Though you leveled him with an unimpressed look when he feigned bewilderment. "What are you doing up here, though, Barnes?"

"Was gonna ask to cut in," Bucky answered, eyes barely darting to him before finding your gaze again. His tongue skimmed over his lips and something in his face seemed almost... nervous. "That is, if the lady doesn't object."

You rolled your eyes with a smile, waving Sam away if for no other reason than you were tired of the smug look he was flashing you from behind Bucky's shoulder. Offering up your hand, you recalled your last discussion of dancing and decided to tease him a bit. "So, did the steps come back to you during the week?"

"Nah," he shook his head slightly, sliding his right to the small of your back and carefully gripping your hand in his metal fingers. A gentle smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "But I figured I couldn't be any worse at it than Wilson."

Bucky was already starting to guide you along to the music as you chuckled. His movements were somewhat stiff at first, uncertain. Whether it was from lack of practice or not knowing the music, or both, you couldn't tell. But he managed well enough and you could hardly complain. A part of you was just so happy to have him out there with you, seeing him try to have fun, even giving an exasperated snort with any missteps. You could almost imagine that Sam was right. That you'd had anything to do with how well Bucky had come along. So far from those first days when he'd been more like a shadow than a man.
The music ended sooner than you cared for and more abruptly than you remembered. There was the familiar noise of someone actually picking a song, drawing your attention to the jukebox. You looked over just in time to see Sam and Steve walking away from the machine. They both sported rather self-satisfied faces that seemed to purposefully avoid the dance floor on their way back to the table. You were about to say something, but the sound of strings filled the air in a familiar melody. A thoughtful noise from Bucky had you turning back to him, realizing the two of you were still in a position for dancing, pressed close, barely a breath apart.

"I know this song," he remarked, eyes distant, concentrating a moment, before focusing on you again.

"The Way You Look Tonight," you filled in the title, though it was a version you hadn't heard in a long time. "Did you wanna take another turn?"

A boyish grin split his face even as he began to lead you again, the lyrics just starting up. "Well, I'm no Fred Astaire."

"That's alright," you laughed, shuffling with him easy. "I'm no Ginger Rogers."

This time around, Bucky seemed much more confident. The dance was fluid and graceful, like he was feeling the music instead of just listening, picking up as the song went on. It was so easy to let yourself go with him. Between the warm command of his hand splayed low on your back and the solid feel of his chest against your pounding heart and the nearly effortless way he twirled the both of you around, you were feeling a little dizzy and breathless in the best of ways. A quick glance told you maybe he was enjoying himself too. You could almost see that young Army sergeant from his tattered photo in the light of his eyes and the curve of his lips.

"You do look beautiful tonight, all dolled up like this," Bucky commented near your cheek in that matter-of-fact tone of his, somewhat subdued by his lowered voice, by gentleness, when the instrumental part took over the song. He leaned back to look at your face, offering a smile.

"You don't clean up so bad yourself, hot stuff," you teased back, trying to suppress the shiver in your spine from his breath on your skin and the sound of his voice.

Reaching up, you tucked an ever-errant lock back into place. You left your hand rested at his neck, fingertips wrapped in the ends of his hair, when he tugged you in impossibly closer for another few spins as the music swelled. And you hoped he couldn't feel the blooming heat in your face when his
cheek came back so close to yours. But you didn't have to worry about it much longer. The song ended too soon after that, much too soon, Bucky slowing your movements down with the tempo until the two of you glided to a halt. Yet, you didn't pull away immediately, something inside you wanting to just keep dancing the night away. Surely, only politeness could explain why Bucky made no move to separate himself from you either.

"You see," you finally spoke, voice croaky in your dry, winded throat. You forced yourself to look him in the eye as you smiled. "Not quite as bad as you expected, huh?"

"S'pose not," he shook his head with a smirk. His gaze scoured the features of your face a moment before he added. " Didn't step on your toes, did I?"

"Not enough to break any," you shrugged playfully. He gave a little chuckle even as you managed a partial step back, hand sliding down from his shoulder a bit reluctantly. "C'mon, I could use something to wet my whistle after all that exercise."

He nodded with a gentle snort, lacing his fingers with yours, metal sections warmed from your skin, as you both headed back for the table. Sam and Steve were there, seemingly engrossed in conversation, but you had the distinct impression they had been watching the dance floor while the two of you were out there. Your suspicion was validated when Steve fixed a raised eyebrow at his old friend over the beer bottle he had to his lips.

"Mighty fancy footwork there, Buck," he snickered once he'd set the bottle down.

"You had a lotta practice in the last 75 years, Stevie," Bucky shot back smoothly, grinning, as he took a seat. "Or 95 for that matter?"

Sam's eyes widened, looking like he was trying to hold back laughter until he saw Steve's reaction, but he let loose with it when Rogers gave a thoroughly amused tilt of his head, hands up in surrender. "You got me."

"The server been around recently," you asked once the laughter died down. There hadn't been much of your drink left when you went to dance and it was quickly gone when you returned.

"Not in a while," Sam shook his head, taking a swig of his own drink. Judging by the disappointing look he gave his bottle, he was almost empty as well. "But it's pretty busy."
"Well, gentleman," you sighed as you stood, finally feeling the ache in your feet from dancing in heels. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go freshen up. I'll see if I can't find her on the way back."

No objections offered, you picked your way between the groups of people, seated and standing, making your way to the restrooms. There was surprisingly little wait for a stall, and once finished you took a moment to check yourself in the mirror as you washed your hands. Some of your lip color was worn off from eating and drinking, but otherwise it looked alright. After a quick dry, you resecured your hair before putting your water-chilled hands on the back of your neck to help cool your skin, still warm from the exertion of dancing. Dress smoothed down and lips carefully rubbed together to redistribute the color, you were good to go. Though, you did silently wish you’d worn different shoes as you made your way out of the restroom.

Once back out, you looked over at your table and could see your drink had not been refilled. Bucky's eyes turned up to you from across the room, making you smile before you turned to try finding your server. It was no lie that the place was pretty busy. Not necessarily packed, but there was plenty going on and plenty of people to wait on. You were nearly at the bar when you saw Meg the server come through the double doors leading to the kitchen with what looked like to-go boxes in hand. The two of you made eye contact and she started to plaster that service-industry smile back on her face when a guy sitting on a stool at the end of the bar swung out and hooked an arm around her midsection, dragging her back toward the bar with him.

"Okay, real funny, pal," you heard her say with a strained voice, obviously none too amused as she fought against his grasp to right herself as you drew closer. It never even occurred to you to stop. "Now let me go. I've got work to do."

"I got somethin you can work on," the guy slurred out, drunk and sickening as he pawed at her harsher. She dropped the boxes in her hand and put more effort into getting away, pushing and slapping at his chest.

"Hey," you snapped hotly when you were right on the two of them. Why no one else had noticed or said anything, you weren't sure, but you certainly weren't going to ignore it. "She said let her go."

"Mind your own business, bitch," the guy threw laughingly over his shoulder at you, his hands moving to grip roughly for her ass to pull her into his lap.

Running on instinct, you gripped both hands at that same shoulder and pulled him around toward you on the swiveled stool seat. "Let. Her. Go!"

The unexpected turn loosened his grip on her and you moved to put yourself between them, shoving
her out of harm's way as her eyes went round. The guy went to grab for your waist this time, babbling something about you getting in his way, and you spun around sharply, elbow up and cracking him hard across the face. With an angry growl, one hand flying to his face, he shoved at you with the other, sending you stumbling backwards to hit the ground hard. Not half a second later, you were scrabbling to your feet, ready to come up swinging if you had to, but noises from behind you had you pausing to look back.

In the midst of your minor scuffle, you hadn't registered the sound of chairs being overturned. Or the startled shouts of concern from the crowd as people were being unceremoniously forced aside with brute strength to create a path. You hadn't heard much of anything outside the rush of blood in your ears until Steve's distressed cry of "Bucky!"

Your blood ran cold when the crowd parted, because the man who emerged wasn't Bucky. At least, not entirely Bucky. He was more like the weapon you'd heard about, the one Sam and Natasha and Steve and even Bucky himself were terrified of. Dark, cold anger etched his face, mouth screwed down in a deep grimace, such a stark contrast from 10 minutes before it made your chest ache. He wasn't running, but his determined stride ate up the distance just the same as he beelined past you to the drunk still holding his nose in pain, Steve still a few yards behind.

"Hey, man," the guy slurred angrily. "Y'need to keep a leash on your bit-"

A violent, mechanical whirring silenced the man a split second before a metal hand was around his throat. Without missing a beat in his step, Bucky pulled the man along with him, toes barely dragging the ground, to slam him back against the wall beside the kitchen doors. The strangled noises were nearly cut off by Bucky's constricting fingers. You were a step behind him as he raised his right fist, snarling something in another language. Russian maybe, but you couldn't be sure. All you knew for certain was that the other two had failed to overtake him yet and that Bucky had murder in his eyes.

"Bucky," you said, desperate to keep your voice even. You hooked a hand in his right elbow and felt his whole body flinch to stillness at the touch. "Bucky, hey. It's me. Can you hear me? Look at me, Bucky."

Steve had reached you by then, worried and disheveled, Sam on his heels, but both hung back as you rounded in front of Bucky, putting your hand on his chest as he finally tore his attention from the man in his grasp to look at you. "Bucky, let him go. It'll be alright. We'll take care of him. Just put him down."

Something changed in his eyes then, recognition, realization. His fist dropped slowly and you could hear the mechanical noise in his arm as his grip loosened enough for the man behind you to crumple to the ground in a sputtering cough. In your peripheral, you caught Sam rushing past you to check
on the guy, but you didn't look away from Bucky's face. He whispered your name followed by more Russian, voice pained as his eyes turned frantic, wild. His chest began to heave beneath your touch and you raised your other hand to his cheek in an effort to calm him.

"Shhh, shhhhh. Bucky, breathe. C'mon, breathe," you urged, even as you heard Sam from behind you say "Guy's alive. Conscious, but pretty banged up. Broken nose, bruising at his neck, but he seems to be breathing okay right now."

Bucky broke away from you then with a somewhat frenzied shake of his head as he turned nearly headlong into Steve. Rogers must have seen the distress in his face, because he gripped Bucky's shoulders with a concerned look. "Buck? You alright? Let's get you outside, get ya some air."

You went to follow the two of them through the crowd of dazed onlookers, so worried about Bucky, but Sam grabbed your arm gently to stop you. When you looked up at him concerned, he said "Just give them a few minutes. Let him cool down. Steve's got this."

"Okay," you nodded with a little sob, suddenly feeling everything that happened hit you all at once now that the adrenaline was wearing off. Your head and feet and elbow started to throb, hollow ache in your chest as your heartbeat returned to normal. Bucky had looked happy before, so happy, but now… "Shit Sam, I fucked up. All this is my fault. God, I fuck everything up."

"We'll talk about how much this is not your fault later, okay," Sam soothed with a shake of his head. "Right now, let's get the situation with this guy squared away."

You nodded again, taking one last look at Steve and Bucky disappearing toward the back door, before you wiped at the tears forming in your eyes and turned to survey the damage for yourself.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

A Bit of a Rewind... In which Bucky Barnes is an absolute romantic sap with a foul-mouth on good days.

Chapter Notes

long wait, long chapter. seems like a fair trade, right? Honestly, I feel pretty shitty about the way I ended this, it's not my best. But it was either put up what I had or never finish it. Hope everyone decides I went with the best option.

"Steve's here," your voice carried from the living room.

Bucky had already heard the gravel crunching under tires in the driveway, but he appreciated you warning him either way. He was already dressed and ready to go as he made his way down the hall. Steve had called during the week after completing his mission, knowing Bucky had been concerned. During the course of the conversation, Rogers had brought up the idea of going out with Sam to a restaurant not too far from your house. Bucky had been reticent at first. The places you had taken him to were quiet, low traffic, but still managed to put him on edge. A bar and restaurant were by nature neither of those things. He thought about saying no, a concept that was still strangely empowering in its newness despite it becoming easier to accept, but in the end, he agreed. Putting it off wouldn't help anything. And he trusted Steve to watch his back and make sure nothing got out of hand. Still, Bucky had felt the minute, cold thrumming of nervousness through his muscles since he woke up that morning, training harder and faster and fiercer to abate it.

When he reached the living room, Bucky found you at the front window, peaking out into the oncoming evening to watch Steve's approach, and he moved to join you there. Reaching his hand out to pull back the curtain further brought him close to you, which did little to help his accelerated pulse as the skin of his cheek itched at the memory of the fleeting, scotch-fueled kiss you'd given him a week ago. That, he pushed to the back of his mind, though he could feel your eyes turn to regard him. Probably smiling. God, you smiled at him so much more than he deserved.

"Go through your wardrobe rotation already, old man," you asked, laughter in your voice confirming his suspicion as you nudged your elbow into his ribs, light and playful.

He looked over at your bright face and managed a smirk for you, despite his somewhat raw nerves.
"We're going out tonight. Thought I'd dress decent."

"Oh yeah?" Your smile widened as you turned to face him, like you were proud of him. It made Bucky's chest feel big despite himself, even as your fingers reached to adjust his collar, stilling something inside him. "Where to?"

"No clue," he shook his head slightly while your hands worked. He'd come to accept, maybe even enjoy, the gentle fussing you did over him. Sometimes your touch could calm the wild storms or muddied waters in his brain, like it did then. And he could almost imagine himself worthy of your little affections.

"Bet you guys'll have fun though," you offered pleasantly with a final smoothing of the fabric at his shoulders. After a quick once over, you gave him a satisfied nod. "You'll have to tell me all about it when you get back."

It occurred to Bucky then that he rarely saw you leave the house for anything aside from errands in the months since he had come to stay with you. Come to think of it, what with his weekly visits to see Steve, he had become the more social one, especially since no one had been coming by to check on him any more. And a wonderful gal like you not having a night on the town once in a while seemed like a damned travesty. A knock on the door pulled him from his thoughts, and you patted his chest reassuringly before brushing past him to answer it.

Turning to watch you, he saw your eyes widen in surprise as you started laughing. A split second later, Sam Wilson was crowding through the door, arms opened wide and you fell into them easily, swaying back and forth as you exchanged pleasantries. He couldn't rightly begrudge you the joy you exuded at the sight of your friend. It had been a month or so since he'd last come around and Sam seemed to be one of the few people you had contact with. Still, something scratched at the edges of Bucky's common sense at the sight of you so quick to wrap Wilson up in a hug, face bright and happy. He may have bristled more than he would ever admit.

That was all swept away quickly, though, when you rolled your eyes at Sam's smart comment and looked past him to usher in Steve. Wilson came toward Bucky with a genuine smile and an extended hand that he took with no hesitation. Of course, their initial dealings with each other hadn't been on the best of terms, but Sam didn't seem to hold too much of a grudge, more understanding and sympathetic that Bucky felt was warranted. Maybe Wilson trusted Steve as much as Bucky did. Rogers always had that way about him, instilling a certain loyalty in those around him. And Steve obviously trusted him, as did you, so Bucky was willing to give the guy a chance on such high recommendations. Not to mention Wilson's not so subtle attempts at trying to help Bucky along with the recovery process.

Over Sam's shoulder, Bucky saw you and Steve chatting in the doorway. There was an amused,
sarcastic tilt to your lips, Steve nodding with a grin like he’d been caught out before clapping your shoulder, familiar, friendly. It was good to see the both of you become more comfortable with each other. Though a part of Bucky feared for the remaining shreds of his sanity should the two of you ever realize just how alike you could be. Stubborn, sass-mouthed, and prone to recklessness; you two little shits might put him in his grave. Just the thought of it had him trying to suppress the grin that threatened to take over his face.

“Bucky, you didn’t tell me Sam was going too,” you chided, that sweet, playful look on your face as you trailed in behind Steve, branching off to lean against the back of the couch.

He offered an apologetic shrug, feeling guilty at his own thoughtlessness. Before he could begin to think of something to say, you were giving a gentle shake of your head, unconcerned, and glanced between Steve and Sam. “So, where you fellas headed? If you don’t mind my asking, that is. Don’t want to endanger any top-secret, boys-only operation.”

“Actually, Sam suggested a place a few towns over—“ Steve stopped short at the harsh, obvious clearing of Sam’s throat. Bucky watched Steve turn a curious eye to the man between them before it moved to him, but he was just as clueless.

“The Hall,” you asked, tone serious. It drew Bucky’s eyes back to you, with your arms crossed, giving a disapproving look at Sam’s weak attempt to seem innocent.

“All the way,” you snorted gently. The room eased with the sound of your reassuring laughter. “Guys, seriously, it’s fine. I was just giving Sam here a little shit. The Hall is a great place to hang out. Best wings around. Oooh, and those rarebit fries? Mmmm… to die for!”
Sam leveled you with a gentle fretting expression that you seemed to recognize. “You sure? Because if it upsets you, all you gotta do it say so.”

“Honestly, it doesn’t,” you assured with a bright smile. Almost as an afterthought, you pointed at Bucky and Steve with a smirk. “In fact, now that I’m thinking about it, that old jukebox they have there probably has songs these two geezers would know. They’ll love it.”

Bucky gave an entertained huff, both at your familiar banter and Steve’s look of wry amusement. He knew Rogers was just as appreciative of a wisecrack as he was. Unexpectedly, Bucky found himself growing uneasy under everyone’s eyes. An unconscious fidget had his thumbs hooking in his belt loops, though he realized there was really no need to feel so nervous. The whole group seemed to be having fun, just as promised. Seemed a shame not to keep it going for everyone. And he’d heard the tinge of excitement in your voice when you’d spoken about where Steve and Sam planned on taking him.

“You should come out with us,” he suggested when his gaze found yours, ignoring how taken aback the other two men seemed to be.

“Oh, Bucky, that’s sweet of you,” you demurred, blinking quickly in your own shock. He caught that sweet flush creep across your skin, that phantom itch of memory lighting over his cheek again, as you continued. “But I don’t want to impose on your guys’ night out.”

Bucky’s eyes darted to Steve, who understood in an instant, offering a bright rebuff and welcoming gesture. “No imposition at all. Really, we’d love for you to join us.”

With a roll of your eyes, you swatted your hand their way as if to wave the idea off in a thin objection. “Would you guys just get out of here?”

But Steve and Sam, who caught on quick, formed a united front with Bucky on this one. Wilson even crossed his arms with an unconvinced raise of an eyebrow, mocking your earlier stance with him. You clucked your tongue, motioning toward your clothes. “Come on. Do I look like I’m dressed for a night out?”

"We'll wait," Sam shrugged after barely a moment's thought.

The annoyed look you gave Wilson as you tracked his nonchalant movements to sit on the couch amused Bucky to no end. Even more so when your jaw dropped at the sight of Steve joining in on
the fun, picking his way around Sam's legs to perch at the far cushion, and Bucky could tell by the expression on his face that if he looked you in the eye he'd lose all semblance of seriousness on the matter. But there was still a twinge of worry in Bucky's mind as he passed you on his way to the armchair. Concern that you might flat out refuse this attempt at convincing you. He really did want you to join them, if not just for your enjoyment, then for his own selfish reasons he was too chickenshit to admit in that moment. It was too difficult to just ask, because he knew he had no right to. So, he went with smug snark, a language the two of you both knew well and used often recently.

"We could probably both use a night outta the house, doll," he offered up with a half-grin when he paused in front of your playfully aggrieved face.

A second later, Bucky realized he probably never even needed to say that. You saw right through him, like you so often did. You knew exactly what he was asking for and your immediate response was gentle concern and understanding, acceptance. And he didn't know whether to be in awe of you or to chafe at his own transparency. He looked away before you had a chance to reach for him, hardly willing to give up the charade as he flashed you a devious smirk before continuing toward the armchair. Once there, he dropped himself into the seat, dramatically plopping his feet on the table. Stretching his hands behind his head, he raised an eyebrow at you, banking on you accepting the unspoken dare.

You did. Bucky could tell, despite the glare you shot Steve and Sam, who avoided your gaze, your hands propped on your hips. There was no real bite to it, even when you shook your head in resignation and gave a heavy sigh, though you mustered plenty of good-natured sass when you spoke. "Fine, ya jerks. I'll get changed to go out, but I'm gonna take my sweet time doing it."

As you turned to head for your room, your eyes caught Bucky's to linger a split-second. He smirked, recognizing the light he saw there, excited and indulgent. Then you started to beat a slow retreat down the hallway and he had to force himself to look away from the deliberate sway of your hips. Straightening up to put his feet back on the floor and sit properly, Bucky frowned when he caught Steve staring at him with a strange expression. A curious, knowing smirk on his face, almost like the cat that caught the canary. Seemed apropos that Potato would pick that moment to saunter in from the kitchen, tail swishing in the air as she announced her arrival with a soft mrrr.

"It was real nice of you to invite her out with us, Buck," Steve said, smiling, as the cat bounded into Bucky's lap.

"Yeah, well, I should've thought of it sooner," he grumbled a little. He scratched behind furry little ears, setting the cat to purring hard against his chest. "Though you two assholes should have thought of it from the start. Especially you, Wilson."

Sam at least had the decency to look guilty when he nodded. "You're right. Guess I just got so used
to her saying no for so long, I figured it would be the same this time. Plus, I wasn't entirely sure how she'd handle the idea of going there."

"Handled it pretty damn well, considering," Bucky bit out, harsher than he intended. He knew Sam wasn't trying to upset you, and apparently hadn't. With a small snort, Bucky continued in a lighter voice as he looked up at Wilson. "But she's going now. Hopefully, she'll have fun."

"I'm actually kinda surprised she caved," Sam chuckled a bit, leaning back on the couch to glance between Steve and Bucky. "Hates having plans sprung on her."

Bucky saw Steve nod in understanding even as he gave his own thoughtful hum. The cat in his lap shifted, drawing his attention. She reached up to paw at his chest before headbutting him under the chin. When she settled back on his lap, she started batting at thin air, obviously begging. You'd made Bucky promise not to be so liberal with the treats since her vet visit, though one or two now wouldn't hurt. He was just reaching for the little bag on the side table when he heard Sam say "You know, I think she really likes you."

"Potato's a good cat," Bucky replied, giving the furball a considering look as he started handing over a treat. He couldn't help the smile the crept on his face as he watched her gnaw dramatically. "Stupid name, but a good cat. I think she only likes me for the food, though."

"Yeah," Wilson crooned, barest hint of laughter to his voice. "The cat."

Bucky looked up to eye Sam sharply, realizing he must have missed something in what was said. But before he could make sense of the mocking tone, Bucky was distracted by Steve's uneasy fidget in his seat. In a glance, he could tell Rogers was trying to find a way to bring something up he wasn't sure how to voice. Bucky couldn't pin point how or why he was so sure of it, except that he had the vague recollection of that awkwardness. Not on some superhero though. No, on a five-foot-four slip of nothin who was only ever sure of anything when he was throwing a punch at the nose of someone decidedly bigger and meaner. Bucky tilted his head at him, brow raised, waiting, though he was pretty sure he knew what it was about.

"Have you given any thought to what we talked about," Steve finally spat it out after a short sigh. Exactly as expected. Maybe part of why he'd wanted you along was a hope of avoiding this topic. Fat lot of good that did. Bucky cringed a bit, shaking his head as he looked back down at the cat. "Yeah, I just... I dunno. After all the shit I done? Hell, I can't believe Wilson or Romanoff, or anyone for that matter, would be going along with that idea."
"Hey," Sam interjected, friendly, but gentle. "I told you before, man. It was no meet-cute, but I'm pretty much over it."

"And no one expects you to jump right in to it," Steve added, trying to sound reassuring. "Meet the rest of the team first, then we'll go from there."

"Thor's been asking about you, by the way," Wilson smiled. "Says he's willing to spar again, any time you like."

"Thor," Bucky snorted derisively, though he cracked his own grin as he looked between the two on the couch. "How many big dumb blonds do you need on that team, anyway?"

Sam's hand flew to his mouth to hide the shocked, amused face he was making, even as Steve nodded with a long-suffering sigh. He looked up at Bucky with a thin smirk, though there was still some mirth in his voice when he replied "Y'know, I'd like to hear you crack that joke with him. Think the shield's bad? Try a magical flying hammer to the ribs."

Bucky chuckled despite himself, admittedly relieved the subject had been changed so smoothly. The movement jostled the cat, who decided to hop down from Bucky's lap and skitter off toward the window to look out into the night. Steve and Sam's accompanying laughter died down about the time Bucky heard a noise from down the hallway, your bedroom door opening. Turning in time to see you closing the door, he caught sight of you done up prettier than he'd ever seen before. Absolutely gorgeous. He smiled, feeling a quick stutter in his chest, until he saw your brow furrow. You sighed and hooked your fingers into the hem of your skirt, lifting the fabric up your thighs.

The action didn't reveal much skin, but it still managed to light something on fire in Bucky's brain, muscles tensing in his core, lips going dry at his gentle gaping, a warm fluid tug low in his gut. You adjusted the satiny strap of your garter belt and he remembered the distant, phantom slide of silk stockings and even softer skin wrapped around his waist. The taste of lipstick in his mouth. His hands winding through locks of hair, ignoring the sharp dig of bobby pins in his palms. And he remembered the feel of you pressed pliant against him, warm and sweet. The sound you'd made in the darkness as you settled in his arms echoed through his head.

His eyes were riveted to you, even when your skirt fell back into place and you looked up at him he couldn't look away. The flush blooming on your face at being seen didn't help either. In fact, it made it worse, because he wanted to know just how far down your skin that color crept beneath the collar of your dress. Jesus, if you were his girl, he would have already been halfway down the hall to find out. It was your cringing smile and silent offering of sorry that finally sobered Bucky a little when you made your way toward the living room. As though you'd done something unspeakable or
repulsive when he was the one who should, and was, feeling ashamed for his voyeuristic stare.

"You okay, Buck?"

The concern in Steve's voice finally pulled Bucky's attention. He'd forgotten the other two men were there for a few moments. Licking his lips, Bucky cleared his throat with a nod. His voice was still a bit hoarse when he replied "Yeah. Fine."

He stood quickly as you were about to enter the living room, ridiculously trying to remember his manners at this point, shoving away his wildly inappropriate thoughts. It seemed automatic in Steve to rise to his feet as well, though Sam was off half a beat trying to keep up. They both turned to look at you, though neither seemed as stunned as Bucky had been. Steve smiled, but Wilson was grinning mad before covering it in a mask of weariness.

"Okay, who are you and what have you done with my friend," he asked in mock accusation, head cocked back as he pointed a finger at you, though it didn't hold for long.

You straightened a little taller then, shoulders back and head up. More confident. And that smug, knowing smirk on your face had always looked a little too good on you if Bucky were being honest. "Oh, please. As though you boys are the only ones who know how to dress for a night out."

"Okay, okay," was Sam's laughing response, hands up in the air in playful defense. Then he brought his palms together with a sharp crack before rubbing them furiously and glancing around the room. "What are we standing around waiting for? Let's get the hell outta here."

Wilson made for the door and Steve moved to follow, though you and he shared an exasperated look across the couch. Bucky fell in line behind him, grabbing his jacket on the way out to hook over his shoulder. Waiting just outside the door for you was customary, even if the others seemed all too eager to be on their way. It gave him some peace of mind to watch you lock the place, as did sticking close to you once you had both left the relative safety and familiarity of the house. Though, when you glanced over your shoulder at the waiting car before flashing him a weak smile, he began to worry that his presence there was making you too uncomfortable.

"Sorry about that impromptu show in the hallway. Didn't know you were looking," you said, somewhat light, as you leaned in close to keep your voice low, stashing your keys in your purse.

Hell, he was the one who should be apologizing, not you. Bucky thought about telling you just that,
and to follow through with it profusely, but you seemed more amused than ashamed now and he wanted to keep it that way. Matching your tone, he smirked. "Definitely not the worst thing I ever seen."

He was rewarded with the astonished expression on your face that pulled into a bright smile. You shouldered into him, a playful, familiar gesture you often used when the two of you were comfortable together. Bucky grinned, happy he hadn't upset you, though you did give him a devious scoff. "Ass."

When he noticed your ankles seeming a little unsteady as you turned to the stairs, Bucky quickly folded the jacket over his right arm before presenting his left elbow. "Here, let me help."

You beamed at him, laughter dancing in your eyes as you hooked your arm around his. "You trying to be a gentleman, Bucky Barnes?"

"Nah," he shook his head a bit, easing you down the steps carefully. Couldn't rightly call himself a gentleman after those thoughts he'd had. The gesture had just seemed the right thing, the natural thing to do. Of course, being arm in arm with a beautiful woman didn't hurt matters either. "Just wouldn't want you to roll an ankle in those heels, is all."

With a gentle chuckle, you leaned in close to him again. "Ugh, thanks. If I fall on my ass in these, Sam will never let me hear the end of it."

Bucky smiled wide at the thought, trying and failing to suppress the quiet laugh. Ah jeez, what a sight that would be. He helped you down to the last step, brushing some fallen hair from his face. You probably could've made the rest of the trip on your own, even with the treacherous looking gravel in the drive. Better safe than sorry, though, especially if you were worried about appearances. Besides, it wasn't much different then you taking hold of his hand when you walked together.

He ushered you along carefully, arm still hooked with yours for support. Steve was already belted in and Sam just lowering into the seat behind him when the two of you got to the car. Anticipating your move, Bucky grabbed the car door first, opening it for you smoothly. You eyed him a second with an arched brow and a smirk. Sure, it was gentlemanly of him, but he still feigned innocent confusion with a little shrug. Luckily, you slid into the car before the grin broke over his face. When you were settled in, he closed the door gently before getting into the front passenger seat.

Steve had the car in gear and was nearly to the road when the quiet was broken by Sam’s violent coughing fit. Bucky flashed Steve a curious look before turning to see what was going on with
Wilson. You had a very unimpressed expression on your face, even as Steve asked “Everything okay back there?”

“Oh yeah.” Sam waved a hand in front of his face, clearing his throat as a shit-eating grin slowly emerged when he looked at Bucky. “Must be the dust kicked up from all this chivalry.”

Jokes, huh? Bucky grabbed his seatbelt, but made a point of leaning back between the front seats as he buckled in. Eyes narrowed at Wilson, unblinking, just enough to make the man a tad uneasy while he fixed the shoulder strap. Then, with a snort, he deadpanned “Not my fault the guy with amnesia’s the only one who remembers how to treat a lady.”

Silence, thick and tense, overtook the car for a moment. Bucky could feel Steve’s eyes burning a hole in the side of his head, but his stayed on Sam a moment, watching Wilson’s mouth fall open in shock. But you cracked into a laugh that proved infectious as he turned to look out the passenger window. Soon, Steve’s and even Sam’s chuckles were added to the raucous sound. A little proud for causing it, Bucky watched the dark outline of the trees that passed and smiled to himself.

The car had already hit pavement by the time everyone had settled down and Steve asked "So this place we're going, The Hall? What sorta name is that?"

"Used to be an old dance hall," you replied and Bucky could hear a gentle tapping on the fabric of the seat before the sound of you unbuckling your seatbelt. Looking over, he found you leaning over the center console between him and Steve, reaching for the music player connected to the radio. There was a mischievous little grin on your face when you added "Probably back from when you two shits were spring chickens."

"She usually like this?" Steve flashed him an amused look over your head. Sometimes, Bucky was reminded that his friend had not spent near as much time with you, but there was still appreciation in Rogers' eyes.

Bucky smiled down at you before answering with a glib shake of his head. "Can't take her anywhere. But she's a decent cook, so I let it slide."

You shoved at his shoulder playfully, mouth half open as though you'd been somewhat offended despite your smile. It was enough to make him laugh under his breath while you handed the music player back to Sam behind you to finish your explanation. "Anyway, it was a dance hall, but went abandoned for a long time. A few years back this whole area went through one of those revitalization deals where people were buying up old buildings to renovate. So, someone turned it into sort of a bar and grill. But they liked some of that historical appeal, so they left part of the dance
floor intact and kept the jukebox."

That sounded a lot like that cafe you loved in town, which Bucky was sure had been a soda shop at one point. First it, now an old dance hall turned restaurant. He was starting to wonder if you just had an affinity for older things made new when you were moving to sit back in your seat, buckling in again.

Then Sam's voice chimed in "Food's pretty damn good, drinks are even better. Music's not the worst either. Could use a little more MoTown, but nothing's perfect."

"Speaking of music," you implored and Bucky could hear the friendly impatience in it, no doubt directed at Wilson, who was fiddling with the device in his hands.

A scarce few moments passed before Sam seemed to settle on something and the car filled with music. Some of it sounded familiar to Bucky, songs that had been on the radio or that you'd played at the house to help catch him up some. The ones he recognized the most and found his fingers drumming along with against his knee were ones he'd heard you sing along to, excited and wild, never quite as bad as he teased you about being. Though this particular evening, you and Sam sounded like you were trying one up each other, crooning loud and sometimes purposefully obnoxious. At one point, Bucky glanced back, amused, but poised to say something smart, only to see Sam reach a hand out to grip your chin, pretending to serenade you. There was something too casual about it for Bucky's taste and there was a single, sick thump in his chest before you shoved Wilson's hand away from you with an annoyed expression. He turned back in his seat before that irrational scratch in his brain could take hold, ignoring Steve's gaze in his direction.

Still, the music seemed to make the ride go faster and soon Steve was pulling up at The Hall. There were too many cars, Bucky noticed. Too many people. That thrumming agitation started to rise in him again as the car rolled on in search of a parking spot. It was almost a block down when he heard a seatbelt being undone before he felt the familiar, delicate weight of your hand on his left shoulder. He looked over to find you smiling kindly at Steve. "Think you could let me out here while you find a spot? Don't want to walk too far in these heels."

Rogers nodded slightly, checking his mirrors as he came to a stop in the roadway. "Sure."

"I'll go with her," Bucky decided quickly, unbuckling himself as well. No way he was going to leave you to negotiate the block alone, at night, in those heels that you'd complained about. If the cool night air and some quiet time with you helped bolster him before going inside, then that was just an added bonus. He checked over his shoulder to make sure you were staying put in your seat before he got out.
Clutching the jacket in his left, Bucky opened your door and held his hand out, another instinctive thing, it seemed. You swung your legs out easily and your cool fingers slid across his palm to help pull yourself up to your feet. He felt you give a gentle start, but didn't have time to ponder it much before another car began coming up the street. Guiding you out of the way, Bucky closed the door and tapped on the roof to let Steve know you both were clear. Sam must have decided to stick it out and keep Steve company as they drove off.

It had rained earlier that day and there was a wet chill to the air now that the sun had gone down. Bucky saw you duck between two parked cars, hopping up onto the curb to avoid the water pooled at the edge of the street. He wasn't too far behind, putting himself between you and the road, though he paused at the distant sight and sound of people outside the bar's doors. Barely a moment after Bucky adjusted his cuffs tighter down, swinging his jacket over his right shoulder, your fingers found their way to entwine with his metal ones. Just like any other time you went out. And just like any other time, he felt a little of that anxious tension ease as you walked together.

"Probably gonna be loud and busy in there tonight, judging from all these cars. You sure you're good with this," you asked as you squeezed his hand tighter.

"I'm in good company," he answered with a smile, grateful for the gentle way you always checked in with him.

It was a welcome weight against him when you pressed in close, left hand tucking around his elbow as you nodded in understanding. With a grin, you said in a low, but reassuring voice "Okay, but you know the drill. One word and I'll have you out of here. Even if I have to fireman carry you back to the car."

Bucky couldn't help the sudden bout of laughter that roared out of him at the very idea of it. Just trying to imagine it made his cheeks hurt from grinning. Jesus, you were just too much sometimes. He shook his head in amusement, though he surprised himself hearing a bit of his old accent in his voice. "Sweetheart, there's no way you're gettin me off the ground, let alone carryin me anywhere."

"Never underestimate a woman in heels," you replied haughtily, though his metal arm registered the shiver that went through you when a gust of wind whipped by, causing you to hug in closer to him. "I'm a lot stronger than I look, you know."

"Lot colder than you look, too. C'mere," he scolded gently, clucking his tongue as he stopped to hand over his jacket. Crazy person, forgetting how chilly you usually get. "The hell didn't you bring a coat, huh?"
"I'm fine, Bucky, really. It's only a little further. Besides," you gave a little sigh, reaching up to gingerly press your hand to his chest. Your touch rode the line where skin and metal met, drawing his attention there. But your voice was gentle when you continued. "You should be wearing it. The cold bothers you."

The conversation in your bed, when you were tucked under his arm in a fashion, fingers sliding softly over thick scar tissue. Your voice had been filled with so much concern when you asked if the arm hurt. He had confided in you that it sometimes still ached deep when he was cold. He ran hotter than the average person and this night wasn't cold. Cold was being frozen and thawed between missions. Cold was water training in a bitter Siberian winter and trekking back to base in the same wet clothes. But even if the temperature had been bothering him, there was no way he could feel cold when he looked back up at your sweet face. With the sudden sentimental warmth filling his chest and the fact that you gave a single shit about him, he could travel through a goddamn frozen tundra and back, smiling the whole way.

"I ain't cold right now, doll. Honest," he assured, opening the jacket up for you. "Now c'mere, let me get this on you."

"Fine," you rolled your eyes as you slipped your hand into one sleeve. Flashing him a mischievous smirk, you flicked a fingernail against the metal of his left hand to produce a small tink. "But only to indulge you playing the knight in shining ARMor."

"Hoooo, kitten's got claws, huh," Bucky teased, easing you into the other sleeve. As he pulled the jacket closed around you, he cocked his head back to give you a once over. It was much too big, but something about the way your eyes sparkled out from just over the top of the collar made him grin. "There now, don't you look like all kindsa trouble?"

And you really did, to Bucky, anyway. Especially when you tipped your chin up to stick your tongue out at him with your blushing cheeks. He tried not to think about how easy it would be. A sharp tug of the lapels still in his hands, a duck of his head, and his lips could be on yours, kissing away the carefully applied color with both your faces half obscured by that high collar. The mental image actually made his own cheeks grow just a little hot, but he tilted his head toward the restaurant, trying to shake the thought away. Instead, he satisfied his need for closeness by guiding you along, hand just above the small of your back.

Most of the puddles left behind by the rain had been easy to traverse. A few Bucky quickly guided you around and a few he held your hand for balance as you hopped over. Nothing too difficult until you both came upon a rather large one not far from the doors. You hesitated at the edge and he watched you thoroughly assess the situation. He couldn't help but smile at how carefully you seemed to be considering your options, though judging by the look on your face, you were reading it as mostly hopeless. A simple, if mischievous, idea came to him at the same time you started turning toward him, so he quickly put it into action.
"What are you-- no, no, NO," you protested, but it was already too late. Bucky slipped his hands inside the jacket, fingers gripping into your sides, and easily hauled you off the ground. Letting out a muffled squeal, your nails dug into his bicep as he carried you through the puddle to set you down safe and dry on the far piece of sidewalk, not minding a bit about his hand-me-down shoes.

"Oh, you fucking asshole," you sputtered out a guffaw and shoved at him.

"What," he feigned innocence, trying to hold back his own laugh. "Just helped you across. Didn't scare ya, did I?"

"You startled the shit outta me, that's all," you countered, a little growl to your voice. When you pushed at him again, he let himself fall back a bit, feeling a grin come on when you jabbed a finger into his chest in a good-natured threat. "But I owe you for that. Don't know when or where or how, but I fucking owe you for that, Barnes."

Damn, but there was something about that wicked glint in your eye, especially when you were being a little feisty or aggressive with him in a playful way, like it didn't matter to you at all that he was so much stronger or lethally trained, you'd still give back everything he gave and take him to task for it. All Bucky could do was chuckle under his breath at your delightfully foul mouth, folding his fingers with yours again to pull you gently toward the door, wondering what you could possibly do for retaliation. The loitering crowd had already headed inside, exposing the sounds of the bar to the night air before the door shut behind them as he stood beside you to wait for Steve and Sam. Though, it wasn't long at all before he could pick out the sounds of their voices approaching.

"Hey, sorry it took so long guys," Steve called out once they'd rounded the corner. Bucky saw his eyes flash to you before giving him a cheeky grin, probably about you wearing his jacket. "Ready to head in?"

Bucky moved to hold the door open for everyone, wanting a moment before stepping into the crowded bar. But he was none too thrilled to see Sam swoop in close beside you. The ambient noise from the bar made it difficult for him to make out the quick exchange, though Wilson seemed to be teasing you about the jacket before you berated him with an elbow to the ribs. Sam moved on, unphased, to turn a flirty smile to the hostess while you paused and turned back to look at Bucky. He stepped up beside you, scoping out his surroundings and taking mental notes of anything important. No doubt Steve and maybe even Sam had done the same thing, but old habits and all that.

Wilson and the hostess led the way, the former pointing out a specific table as you handed Bucky back his jacket with a grateful smile. As the young woman left to help the next customers, Bucky watched the three of you pull a decidedly unsubtle maneuver in an attempt to leave the most strategic
There was plenty of time to go over the menu, you and Sam explaining what everything was and giving recommendations. Bucky went with one of your suggestions. You knew the foods he liked and he doubted you'd steer him wrong. Plus, he was a little glad you'd helped narrow everything down for him, squashed a little of that overwhelmed feeling the lively atmosphere was giving him. When the waitress finally arrived, a girl with a professional smile, she introduced herself as Meg and dropped a hand on Bucky's right shoulder. The unfamiliar touch, coupled with his already agitated state, chafed at him, but he recognized it as non-threatening and forced himself not to shrug it off rudely. It wouldn't be nice to cause a scene in front of everyone over something as innocuous as a little flirt for a better gratuity. He could endure it. Though he did almost childishly reach for your hand after you gave your menu back and the girl walked away.

When the food arrives, the three of you were chatting, Steve looking especially happy as a clam to be having a fairly normal night out with friends, and Bucky did his best to concentrate and be engaged. Sometimes his attention was pulled to a loud laugh or a hard scrape of a chair across the floor, but he still caught all of you checking on him every once in a while. Despite that, Bucky found himself keeping an eye on you, too. It actually helped him focus a bit, the concern that this place might bring upsetting memories to the surface for you. But you seemed to be doing just fine, even sharing reassuring smiles with Sam across the table that Bucky did his best to ignore. Obviously, Sam was just as concerned as he was.

At one point, when everyone was practically finished eating, Bucky saw your eyes haze over a bit, unfocused, head tilted a little as if listening. A good memory, he surmised from the way the corners of your lips began to curl up. He wondered briefly if that was the expression he had when he remembered things. If so, then maybe he understood a little better why you always smiled at him then. It was hard for him not to do the same as he watched your grin widen. Steve and Sam seemed to catch it too.

Your eyes turned to Wilson, excitement in your voice. "You remember what song comes next, right?"

Sam tilted his ear up to listen, a soft, nostalgic smile spreading his face with a nod. "Yeah, I remember. The Four Seasons Can't Take My Eyes Off of You."

Bucky realized there was a whole other conversation going on between the two of you when you asked "For old time's sake?"
He shared a confused look with Steve as Wilson made a great show of pushing out his chair to
stand. Crossing behind Rogers, Sam stood beside you with his hand held out graciously. He flashed
Bucky a smug little smirk before saying to you in an exaggerated, proper voice "It would be rude of
me to refuse a lady a dance."

"Well, if a lady asks you, tell her she has to wait her turn, because I asked first," you chuckled as you
took his hand. Bucky felt himself bristle inside again at the easy way Sam pulled you to your feet,
almost like rubbing it in his face. But he pushed it down when you smiled back at him, then at
Steve. "We'll be right back, gentleman."

With that, the two of you were off, hitting the dance floor as a song began playing that Bucky didn't
know. He watched Sam wrap a hand around your back and pull you in as you began to sway
together. Taking a swig of his beer, Bucky tried to wash the acrid taste from the back of his throat as
the lyrics began.

You're just too good to be true
Can't take my eyes off you
You'd be like heaven to touch
I wanna hold you so much

"Those lyrics strike a chord," Steve asked from across the table in a teasing tone.

Bucky glanced over to find a wide grin spread across his friend's face. The little shit was laughing at
him! He glared in response before looking back at you and Sam, taking another gulp of his drink
and wishing like hell he could still get drunk. He could see you chatting, laughing at whatever clever
thing Wilson may have been saying to you and his stomach lurched a little.

The warning expression did nothing to lessen the amusement in Steve's voice. "Jesus, Buck, since
when do you let someone else dance with your date?"

"She's not my date," Bucky countered, turning back to him again. Then, after another drink, he
grumbled a bit. "Besides, she's already picked someone to dance with."

"Sam's good," Steve said with a thoughtful shrug. His eyes darted to the dance floor before giving a
wicked smirk and tilting his head that way. "But I think she's considering other options."
Confused by that statement, Bucky turned his gaze where Steve had looked only to lock eyes with you. You had been watching him for who knows how long, but he caught your lips quirk into that sweet smile of yours. When that flush bloomed across your cheeks, you looked away, caught out and so cute Bucky found it difficult to breathe around the constriction in his chest for a second.

"Do me a favor, Buck," Steve spoke again. The teasing tone was gone, replaced with something sentimental and caring and sad that pulled Bucky's attention back to him. "Don't ever pass up an opportunity to dance with someone you care about."

Peggy Carter. Steve had told him everything that had happened after the train, and good lord if all of that regret wasn't written on the blond's face in that moment. He'd been crazy about Ms. Carter, more than half way to love if Bucky's broken memory served him at all, only for it to end like that. But Steve managed a smile through it all and offered an encouraging nod toward the dance floor. Bucky looked at him a moment longer then glanced over to you and Sam, remembering how he'd made excuses when you'd asked him to dance with you last week, before he nodded in kind and rose to his feet, determined.

Sam had obviously noticed his approach, eyes going a bit wide and a smile tugging his lips as he spoke with you and danced some more. Bucky was just stepping into the dancing area when Sam spun you sharply, oddly, as he twisted out of the way. Your eyes widened a little in surprise, whether it was from seeing him or from the shove Sam gave to the middle of your back, Bucky couldn't say. But you were suddenly moving toward him quickly to crash solid against his chest. The force nearly sent you stumbling and out of instinct, Bucky caught you around the waist and hauled you back up against him, the unexpected little surprised gasp you gave sending a shiver up his spine.

"Nice save," Sam commended with a sly smirk that garnered an exasperated expression from you. "What are you doing up here, though, Barnes?"

"Was gonna ask to cut in," Bucky replied before looking back at you. He licked his dry lips, determination faltering a bit. "That is, if the lady doesn't object."

You rolled your eyes, waving Sam off as you smiled. His nerves settled when you offered up your right hand, though apparently you couldn't help teasing him. "So, did the steps come back to you during the week?"

"Nah," Bucky smiled a little, shaking his head as he gingerly took your hand in his metal one and let the fingers of his right slide down to the small of your back. "But I figured I couldn't be any worse at it than Wilson."
This earned him a laugh from you as he started to guide you along to the music. Though, it seemed he spoke too soon. He was uncertain of the music and felt wooden. You had to half lead with every turn. But you still seemed to be having fun, holding back a smile whenever he snorted at his missteps. The song didn't last much longer though, and Bucky was at least glad he hadn't managed to break anything on you in his clumsiness. He was just starting to realize he'd have to part with you when he noticed the confused look on your face. Following your gaze, he saw Steve and Sam walking away from the jukebox, smug smirks in place as they avoided the dance floor.

Suddenly, the place was filled with familiar strings and Bucky gave a musing hum as you looked back at him, face so close your breath warmed his cheek. "I know this song."

"The Way You Look Tonight," was your keen response. Ah, that was it, from Spring Time. He thought sure he'd seen it, but he was distracted by your smile. "Did you wanna take another turn?"

"Well, I'm no Fred Astaire," he grinned, already feeling more confident as began to lead again.

"That's alright. I'm no Ginger Rogers," you teased back as you moved along with him.

Someday, when I'm awfully low

When the world is cold

I will feel a glow just thinking of you

And the way you look tonight

Yes, Bucky was much more confident with this song. The vague recollection of dancing to it with another girl or two tripped through the back of his mind, but it was different with you, though he'd be hard-pressed trying to explain exactly why. Maybe because it was just so sharp and real in the moment. The way you just let yourself go with him, body pressed warm to his as you trusted him to move you this way and that. You'd let out a dizzying little giggle when he surprised you with a turn or spin, clinging to him tighter. You looked so bright and happy, happier than he'd ever seen before. And Bucky loved it, absolutely loved it, that he was able to help you feel that way. Though he could've kicked himself for saying no last time, when you probably could've used it most. Maybe you had been right. Maybe there were still good things he could do.

"You do look beautiful tonight, all dolled up like this," he said gently when the lyrics had stopped for the moment. He was fairly certain he'd let himself get sidetracked from telling you before, but it was the truth and you deserved to hear it. Hell, you looked beautiful every day.
"You don't clean up so bad yourself, hot stuff," you laughed quietly, reaching up to tuck some hair back that had fallen from behind his ear. It was a tender little action you did so often that usually calmed him, but when your fingers curled around the nape of his neck, he couldn't call the rapid beat of his heart calm.

The music began to swell, and before you could move your hand away, Bucky pulled you flush against him to spin with you a few more times. He felt the heat from your cheek on his and worried his stubble might have burned your skin. If he had known the night would turn out the way it was, he would have shaved. But you didn't complain or pull away as the song drew to its close, much too soon in Bucky's opinion. Slowing with the tempo, he eventually pulled you both to a stop as the last notes were dying off, until you were both just standing in the quiet. He had a sudden hope that another song would start so the two of you could just keep on dancing.

"You see," you teased, sounding a little breathless as you smiled at him. "Not quite as bad as you expected, huh?"

"S'pose not," he smirked back with a shake of his head and a glance over you face, flushed with exertion, eyes sparkling. "Didn't step on your toes, did I?"

"Not enough to break any," was your shrugged, mischievous reply. He chuckled even as you stepped back from him, the slow drag of your fingers down his right arm making him want to pull you back in again. "C'mon, I could use something to wet my whistle after all that exercise."

With an amused snort, Bucky nodded and laced his fingers with yours to lead you back to the table. Steve and Sam were sitting there, pretending to make small talk at your approach. Bucky knew damned good and well they had been watching, especially when Steve raised an eyebrow over the beer he was sipping from.

"Mighty fancy footwork there, Buck," he snickered once he'd set the bottle back on the table. Steve and Sam were sitting there, pretending to make small talk at your approach. Bucky knew damned good and well they had been watching, especially when Steve raised an eyebrow over the beer he was sipping from.

"Mighty fancy footwork there, Buck," he snickered once he'd set the bottle back on the table.

Bucky sat down, in an exceptionally good mood, and volleyed back across the table. "You had a lotta practice in the last 75 years, Stevie? Or 95 for that matter?"

Sam was trying to hold back a laugh and you hid a smile behind the straw you were drinking from. Both seeming to wait with bated breath. But Steve knew a friendly razz when he heard one and this one tickled him well enough he threw his hands up in surrender. "You got me."
When Rogers let out a big, genuine laugh, so did the rest of the table. After it finally died down, you rattled the ice in your otherwise empty glass. "The server been around recently?"

"Not in a while," Sam replied with a shake of his head, taking a swig of his own. "But it's pretty busy."

You sighed a little, putting your hands on the table to push onto your feet. "Well, gentleman. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go freshen up. I'll see if I can't find her on the way back."

After you were met with shrugs of indifference, you left the table. Bucky watched as you wove your way around other customers to disappear into the little hallway that led to the restrooms. While you were away, Steve and Sam got into a discussion about alcohol that Bucky had no current interest in. Though he did hear something about Asgardian liquor that sounded like a topic he might want to revisit later. For the time being, he was perfectly content remaining in control of his faculties. By the time Bucky looked up to find you leaving the restroom, the waitress still hadn't shown up.

You seemed to realize this, flashing him a smile before turning toward the bar. Figuring you were going to just order another round of drinks on your own, Bucky excused himself from the table with the intent on helping you carry them back. Steve and Sam shared a look, but made no objections as he stood. He was picking his way around a group at a standing table when he saw Meg coming from what he assumed was the kitchen with what looked like Styrofoam clamshells in hand. She seemed to notice you approaching and started to smile when some asshole at the bar grabbed hold of her.

Bucky was forced to pause a moment, waiting for someone to scoot their chair out of his way so he could pass, which worsened the ire that had risen in him over the sight of the struggling woman. But when he caught sight of your face, having seen the action yourself, his throat tightened in fear. You were gonna do something stupid, he knew from the twist of your face. He'd seen it before, though not on you. Your feet were already carrying you, too hellbent and righteous to see the guy was bigger than you. Probably outweighed you by a good fifty pounds at least and had who knows how many inches or feet on you, but enough you could easily be at his mercy. Bucky stopped being quite so polite as he moved through the crowd.

He watched you pull up on the guy, saying something hotly. Judging from your features, whatever he shot back was as unpleasant as his actions. His hands gripped the waitress’s ass and Bucky was pretty sure he saw you lose your mind for a split second. Dodging people as quick as he could, heart beating frantic, desperate to reach you before anything happened, he saw your nails dig into the guy's shoulder, whipping him around. With his grip loosened, you shouldered your way between the two, shoving the waitress out of reach. Yet, the moment he realized the drunk was reaching for you, something shifted inside Bucky's head.
Cold fury flared inside him, all his senses sharpening to acute focus on his main objective. Any obstacles in his way were quickly neutralized. People shoved and he barely registered their cries of protest, didn't care. Chairs were tossed aside, with or without their occupants. A long table stood in his way and without hesitation he leaped onto it and made his way across the top with zero regard of the dishes rattling and breaking under his feet. All there was in his brain, all he could see or hear or smell or think, was that pile of shit putting his hands on you, trying to hurt you. Nothing was going to stand in his way to rectify it.

On his approach, he saw you spin in the guy's grasp, bringing your elbow sharply across his nose to cause a spray of blood. A proud, but vicious little thought flittered through his head. *Good girl.* Yet when the asshole's hand shot out, knocking you backwards to the floor, his brain scrambled even worse. There were no real thoughts left at all. Just a mission. Just a target. The crowd parted ahead of him.

No set mission parameters. Method of termination at his discretion. No conventional weapons readily available. Bare hands would suffice. Pure, crystalline rage pumping through his veins. Correction; bare hands were preferable. When the already bloodied fucker tried to get mouthy, the sound was drowned out by the gears of his left arm buzzing into overdrive. Metal fingers shot toward the expanse of the target's throat, well below full power. Snapping a neck was too quick, too painless. Instead, he used the momentum to drag the entire body to slam against the far wall. His grip constricted at the choked noise that bubbled from the throat beneath his grasp, hands clawing feeble and unfelt at metal, fear dancing through bloodshot eyes, even as his own growling voice filled his ears.

"Ты ее касаешься, я раздавлю твою трахею."

He raised his right arm, fist clenched white-knuckle tight, prepared to strike. Further obliterate nose, shatter jaw, cave in skull. But a hand touched his elbow, making him hesitate. Then there was another voice, not his, female, close but muffled. Familiar. He kept his eyes on his struggling target as he listened.

"Bucky... it's me... hear me? Look at me, Bucky."

Fingers loosening a hair's breadth, he made out the sound of footsteps, two sets out of sync by a fraction, stopping abruptly behind him. Something moved in his peripheral vision, a hand pressing into his chest, gentle, and he broke visual contact with his target to find a face, warm and bright and beautiful, but concerned, eyeliner deadly sharp and painted lips that began to speak again.

"Bucky, let him go. It'll be alright. We'll take care of him. Just put him down."
You. It was you. Bucky dropped his right arm slow, hand going lax as it fell to his side. His metal fingers sprang open, letting the target... the man, asshole that he was, slide down the wall to a heap on the floor. Someone - no... Sam. Sam rushed over, checking vitals no doubt. Your name tumbled from Bucky's lips in a desperate question. The fog in his brain was starting to dissipate, but a last little jumbled remnant slipped out. "мое солнышко."

Suddenly, it felt like he couldn't breathe, not enough air in the whole world to fill his frantic lungs. Images of what he'd done flashed through his mind. The still-fresh memories of searing hatred that flickered back to life for a split second at the thought of you being manhandled. Plates smashed beneath his boots. People shouting. Fear. Not just that night in that bar, but how many other times in how many other places? Though rarely with his bare hands and this time... this time no one had given him an order.


What had you seen him do?

Sam's voice rose from behind you, as if in answer. "Guy's alive. Conscious, but pretty banged up. Broken nose, bruising at his neck, but he seems to be breathing okay right now."

He had to get out of there. Had to get away from the situation, from you. Too much. Too much going through his head. Pulling away, he turned to bolt. But he nearly crashed into Steve, who grabbed his shoulders carefully. "Buck? You alright? Let's get you outside, get ya some air."

Steve was already pulling him through a sea of horrified stares before he could fathom a reaction. Though he had started to come back to himself already, when he burst through the back door into the alleyway, cold damp air finally help ease the fire in his lungs, his brain was still scattered. Fear and rage and self-loathing were eating him up and he needed to focus. He pushed Steve out of the way, finding a trash dumpster near the door. Gears in his left arm winding up in a sickening whir, he launched his fist at the image of the drunk's face his mind had painted on the front of the industrial metal bin. Another strike at Pierce's face though he knew the bastard was dead. Strike. Rumlow's. Strike. His handlers. Strike. The men who called themselves doctors. Strike. The trainers. Strike. Zola. Over and over again, every face he could remember that had ever made him lose himself. Even his own.

"Buck," Steve's voice rang in his ears, approaching cautiously. "Bucky, you gotta calm down. It's gonna be okay."
"Okay," he managed to bark out in disbelief, finally noticing the large dent he'd put in the dumpster. "You think this is gonna be okay?"

He rested his hands on the edge of the dumpster, letting his head fall between his arms as he leaned, catching his breath, more from exertion now though some panic lingered in his brain. Steve was still at a respectable distance when he spoke again. "Buck, that wasn't you..."

"That's where you're wrong, Stevie," he spat back, bitter and angry as he shook his head. Sweat dampened tendrils of hair smacked into his face and he didn't care. "That was me. No one gave me an order. I wanted to kill him. Strangle him slow, crush his skull with my bare hands. Because he touched her. Because he could've hurt her. That's what I've got in me now."

"Something in you was triggered," Steve began to explain, but the lip of the dumpster crumpled under a sudden metal fist.

"Yeah, triggered like a loaded fucking weapon," Bucky roared back, spinning toward Steve, though he had no violent intentions. "Is that what you want training your new recruits? Is that what you want watching your back or the backs of your teammates while on a mission? A weapon with a hair trigger and a nasty disposition? A monster? Huh? Is that what you want?"

Steve didn't seem to have an answer then. Only a sympathetic look that chafed against his anger, wore down the sharp edges of it until he gave a ragged sigh. He leaned back against the now-damaged dumpster, letting the weight of everything sag him down. So many things running through his head. The incident replaying through his mind. How you had stopped him from jamming his fist into the man's face.

"She saw everything, didn't she," he asked, looking up at Steve. Rogers nodded, looking a little distraught over having to deliver the news.

Bucky scrubbed his hand over his face, shaking his head, heart sinking as he remembered the way you looked as he twirled you on the dance floor. Jesus, it felt like ages ago as opposed to a mere 20 minutes or so. "She was having fun. Probably scared the shit out of her. God, how is she ever gonna look at me again? She was the only one who hadn't seen..."

"Give her some credit, Buck," Steve offered gently. "She's not some delicate shrinking violet. She's dealt with things before."
That might have been true, but the idea that you would shy away from him ate Bucky up inside. "I thought I was getting better. Maybe this is what I get for thinking I could be anything other than what they made me."

Again, Steve didn't seem to have a response. He only reached out, settling a hand on Bucky's shoulder, squeezing gingerly. Bucky didn't have the heart or desire to shrug it away. A few silent moments passed, everything replaying again and again on a constant loop in his brain. From the moment things had shifted in his brain to the moment Steve was pulling him away. But then the door to the alley flew open, breaking the stillness and causing him and Steve to both start in surprise as they looked up.

"Bucky," your voice rose a bit frantic, eyes searching as you took the iron wrought stairs to the asphalt faster than you probably should have in those heels. When your eyes fell on him, you sounded almost relieved. "Bucky."

Bucky felt like a deer in headlights, unable to move or think, as you ran toward him. There wasn't a trace of fear or hesitation in you, though your eyes were tinged red, like you'd been crying, as you brushed past Steve on his way to join Sam at the door. You crashed into Bucky, full force, though it barely swayed him, throwing your arms around his neck. For a moment, he wasn't sure what to do. "Oh, Buck," you whispered soft near his ear, concerned. Your voice broke a little. "Are you okay? I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry..."

He didn't want to question it. Maybe later, but not now. Right now, you weren't afraid. Right now, you were pressed against him warm and sweet. He wrapped his arms around you and pulled you a little tighter. Burying his face in the crook of your neck, he let the scent of you soothe the ache in his lungs. Let his mind still a moment as you babbled gentle, incoherent things and your fingers carded through his hair.

But it couldn't last forever, no matter how much he wanted it to. He remembered his surroundings and why he was there. That asshole had tried to hurt you. Worry shook him out of his daze and he gripped your hips to push you out to arm's length. There was a surprised look on your face as he started to pat and prod you gently here and there. "He knocked you down. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," you reassured, though he kept on with his inspection. "Bucky, I'm fine. He didn't hurt me."
"Why," Bucky suddenly found himself asking, voice strained as he cupped your face in his hands. His fingers were steady, but something inside him was shaking like a leaf as he looked into your wide eyes. "Jesus, sweetheart, why would you do something like that, huh?"

"What else was I supposed to do," you asked, brows knitting. "Didn't you see..."

"I seen it," he nodded, thumbs slipping haphazardly over your cheek bones. "But you could've gotten one of us. Me or Steve or Sam. We would've done something. You didn't have to put yourself in danger."

"Bucky, I wasn't ..." you began to argue. So goddamn stubborn!

"You had to know," he cut you off a little harsher, a little more desperate than he meant to. "You had to know I'd do anything to protect you."

Your face crumpled then, just for a second, striking Bucky dumb in the process. Then you took a deep breath to compose yourself, your exhale ragged and a little wet. Reaching up, you circled your fingers around his wrists to pull his hands from your face, giving him a weak smile. "I'm sorry I worried you, Bucky, but I didn't need to you to protect me. If I couldn't survive getting knocked on my ass once in a while, I wouldn't still be here."

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, but wasn't sure what to say. It didn't seem to matter to you anyway. You slipped the fingers of your right hand between his metal ones, still undisturbed by them, and tugged him along toward where Steve stood talking with Sam, who held Bucky's jacket in his hands. Wilson tilted his chin in acknowledgment as the two of you approached.

"Sam talked to the owner," Steve informed Bucky quietly. "He's not gonna press any charges. Just asked us to pay for any damages and meals he's gotta comp for customers. Shouldn't be a problem."

"Gotta love being bankrolled by the richest guy in America," Sam joked quietly, obviously trying to ease things a little.

Bucky still grumbled, though he appreciated the effort. "Stark gonna have a problem with that?"

"Doubt he'll even notice," Steve answered, shaking his head with a small huff of laughter. "Drop in the bucket for him. Probably still less than what he spends on a night out."
"And the guy," Bucky asked. The image of a bloodied face, body dangling from his metal hand flashed through his head again.

"His buddy's taking him to the hospital," you replied, surprising Bucky a little. "He's already on probation, so it's not likely he's going to call the cops. Plus, the waitress threatened assault charges if he did."

"Everyone else was just star struck at seeing Captain America and friends taking out a bad guy," Sam added jovially as he handed Bucky's jacket over. "Though a few were a little worried you might have been Banner."

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut with a heavy sigh. What a mess. What an absolute fucking mess he'd managed to make of the evening. And the three of you left to clean it up. He wasn't even sure why the hell any of you bothered.

"Hey, man," Wilson asked in a soothing voice, drawing Bucky's attention to him. "You keepin it together okay right now?"

He nodded, exhausted, and glanced over at you. "I just... Just wanna go home, is all."

You gave him a gentle smile and squeezed his hand a little tighter as the other two gave noises of approval. Steve went to get the car and when he rolled up, Bucky got into the backseat with you. The drive back was long and oppressively quiet, everyone ill at ease for good reason. He let you handle awkward good-byes to Steve and Sam before they headed home themselves. Once inside the house, Bucky ignored your concerned looks, let the cat follow him into his room, and shut the door behind him.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

After a rough night, Bucky's trying to do all he can to distract himself from his anger, self-loathing, and worry... can't wallow forever.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. Real life has a way of interfering with fun stuff. Hope you enjoy!

Sleep had been fitful for him, not much different than usual. But he had anticipated nightmares and there were none. He wondered if his mind were giving him a small reprieve. Perhaps reliving the scenes from the bar over and over in his head as he lay on the floor had been nightmare enough. Though, he supposed he dreamt while he dozed. There was an image floating around in his mind he knew he hadn't seen in real life. You, leaning against a fire escape back in Brooklyn on a sweltering summer afternoon, top buttons of your blouse undone as you drank from a bottle of Coca-Cola with the condensation pooling at your fingers, smiling at him. Whether it was a true dream or his mind wandering places it didn't belong while he tried to sleep, he had no idea. All he did know was that he wanted it bad, much more than he ought to.

Yet, when he was fully awake in the still, darkness of early morning, flashes of the night before kept replaying, reminding him of what he'd done, what you'd seen. He felt the anger and shame burn at the back of his throat, pressing him on as he ran the woods, twice. Past the creek that was now swollen with rain, the muck you'd fallen in hidden under gray water. Past the ruins of a well house where he saw your initials carved into the stone amongst a dozen others. Past a dilapidated deer stand, rusty and collapsing under the weight of years of disuse. He tried to keep his mind occupied with these things and the rate of his breathing and the snap of twigs and leaves under his feet. Anything to push away those thoughts.

It was barely dawn when he finally returned, the morning already proving to be overcast and dreary. The grass was too slick with dew and his mind and body too exhausted from overuse to do his normal physical training. It had been a while since he'd last inspected his weapons and he supposed that could prove a decent enough distraction from his own thoughts. But you would still be asleep and something about the air inside the house was stifling, heavy and expectant, like he was suffocating on his own anxious anticipation. Remembering a table he'd seen tucked away in the back of the shed, big enough to lay out his whole cache, he figured he could set it up outside to use.

After picking his way past the lawn mower and weed trimmer and several boxes of what looked like party and holiday decorations, he finally reached what he'd been seeking. But he gave an annoyed huff at the state of it now that he could see it in full. The table was laying on its side, unfinished both in terms of construction and staining or sealant. He wasn't sure what sort of wood it was made out of, but the top was one solid piece, soft and mostly smooth. One leg was already attached to the under table with three others leaning against the wall, cut and ready to go. For a moment, he considered just
trying to dry off the patio table, but it had a stone top which would be saturated at this point. Not good for the mechanisms in his firearms. Besides, judging from the one leg, it was a simple enough construction even he could piece it together.

Hefting everything easily to the shed's work bench, he rummaged through the drawers in search of tools. There was a power drill with a screw bit that he plugged into the outlet nearby. He pulled the trigger and it whirred to life, startlingly loud, but it worked. Another small drawer had an opened box of screws and a nearly empty pot of wood glue, the remnants already dry and cracking. Just as well. Glue took time to dry and he didn't want to wait that long. Screws would work just fine. Perhaps he could go back later and fix it properly, but now he just needed something simple. Double checking, he found all the legs were in fact the same length and started in on attaching them, careful so as not to split any of the wood. It only took about five minutes and it struck him as odd that someone would have done so much work already just to stop so abruptly, especially when everything necessary to complete it was on hand. But he decided not to dwell on that as he sat the table upright on the ground. It wasn't perfect, definitely not polished, but it was sturdy and would work just fine. With a small nod of satisfaction, he hauled it out to set on the patio.

He made quick work of gathering his weapons from each of their hiding spots, stuffing them into his black tac bag for ease of carry along with a couple stained hand towels. Pausing at your door out of habit, he held his breath to listen. There were only the soft sounds of you sleeping, shifting on your mattress. A part of him wondered, just for a moment, if it would be better, easier, to just pack some clothes in the same bag and leave. Take off before you got up and run who knows where. Something wouldn't let him, though. Something unnamed, but solid inside him. Besides, he'd done enough running and it was high time he took his lumps like a grown man. He fucked up and deserved whatever consequences it brought him. Still, if you asked him to leave... If you woke up and told him you thought he was too dangerous to have around, you didn't feel safe, he'd accept it and go. The knowledge that it was a distinct possibility sat like a heavy stone in his gut. It felt almost worse than the memory of the night before. His throat was thick with uncertainty as he returned to his little table to spread out the contents of his bag.

Usually, it took very little time to strip and clean all the handguns. He didn't do it too often, taking apart and reassembling a gun put wear and tear on it, loosening the connections and putting it out of commission sooner than necessary. Made it less likely to work efficiently when needed. He didn't use them enough, or at all since he'd moved in with you, for them to require much cleaning. But at its heart, this little exercise was about distracting himself, so he took his time. Made sure everything was spotless and everything slid together smooth and firm. He was contemplating finding an out of the way spot on the property to practice his marksmanship as he reassembled the last of the firearms and began to wipe his hands clean. Knives would be next.

"Mornin' Bucky."

He froze suddenly at the sound of your voice behind him. It was groggy and unreadable. Licking his dry lips and taking a steadying breath, he turned slightly to look your way, unsure quite what to expect. You were padding toward him from the back door in your house slippers and fleece pajama pants, hoodie zipped up to your chin against the morning air. There was a steaming coffee mug in each of your hands and a sleepy smile on your face. Hair mussed and the corners of your eyelids a little darkened with smudges of leftover eyeliner, you still managed a certain charm about you. The tight coil of his muscles began to unwind, though the certainty he was the cause of the exhaustion written on your face galled him.

Once you got close enough, you held one of the mugs out and Bucky took it easily. The fleeting sweep of your fingers against his nearly warmed his hand as much as the heat of the ceramic. It
reminded him just how cool it was outside, threatening goosebumps up his arm as he nodded in thanks before taking a sip of the black coffee. You cradled the other mug in your hands and glanced at what he had been working on. A pang of concern shot through him when your smile faltered a second. After last night, the sight of the weapons might be upsetting you. He'd shown them to you before, but they were hidden and maybe the reminder that he could have a gun or knife in his hand at any moment terrified you now. It took him a moment to get past his own dire thoughts to realize it wasn't the mini arsenal you were looking at, but the table itself. You reached a hand out to smooth delicately over the wooden surface.

"Is this... Is this the table from the shed," you asked, crouching down to check out the underside. "The one that was in pieces?"

He nodded when you looked up at him and had to wet his lips and mouth again. It had been half a day since he last spoke. "Yeah. I'm sorry. Should've asked first."

"No, Bucky. It's okay," you shook your head gently as you stood. The smile had returned to your face, a little brighter than before. "You did a good job putting it together. Maybe later we could go pick up some paint or stain or something and you could really make it yours."

His heart thundered in his chest at that. Certainly didn't sound like you were planning on kicking him out. That was a start, a relief, undeserved but welcome just the same. He watched you admire the table a moment longer, not sure why it seemed to strike a chord with you, before you finally took a sip from your mug. Your nose scrunched almost immediately as you swallowed your mouthful, tip of your tongue sticking out between your teeth in a look of disgust. A smile tried tugging at the corners of Bucky's lips despite himself, so he hid it behind his own gulp of coffee and an eyebrow raised in question. You both knew you weren't a fan of a plain cup of joe.

"Need the caffeine. I was up pretty late," you answered, forcing down another sip. That horrible twisting in his gut started again, and you must have read that distress in him, because you fixed him with a gentle look and turned to press your shoulder into his, surprising him with the familiar gesture. "Wanted to make sure I was awake if you needed me."

Bucky had lost count of how many times he considered knocking on your door that night. Just like he had after that first dinner with Steve. But though you had been comforting and understanding in the alley behind the restaurant, a part of him had dreaded the thought that you might have changed your mind about it, given time to process and think and calm down after the incident. His brain just couldn't comprehend how you could be so... so accepting, even now. Bringing the mug back up to his lips, he finally ground out in response "I didn't want to bother you."

"Bother me," you asked in a surprised laugh, as though the idea of it was ridiculous. You powered through another gulp of coffee before setting your mug on the table to look him square in the eye. "Bucky, you are not a bother to me. Ever. You could've knocked on my door any time. I know last night was rough on you."

"Bother me," you asked in a surprised laugh, as though the idea of it was ridiculous. You powered through another gulp of coffee before setting your mug on the table to look him square in the eye. "Bucky, you are not a bother to me. Ever. You could've knocked on my door any time. I know last night was rough on you."

There you went again, being so goddamn caring. Jesus, he didn't deserve it or the gentle way you spoke to him or how close you were standing. How could it not bother you? He could rationalize before; you'd only heard of the things he'd done from other people. Now you'd seen it with your own eyes. You'd seen him rampage through a public venue, seen him attack someone, nearly kill them. You'd heard people shouting in fear and the strangled noise the man had made under his hand and the animal snarl in his own voice. And still you looked at him like it didn't change a damned thing for you. Maybe Steve had been right last night, about you not shrinking away.
The feel of your fingers sliding across the back of his right hand pulled Bucky from his spiral of thoughts. His grip tightened on the coffee mug he held there as your thumb brushed over his skin, palm pressing against his knuckles. Those same knuckles he'd nearly driven into a man's face. He itched to flinch away, your touch so tender, so delicate, he wasn't sure which of you were more likely to break. But he couldn't because he wanted it. Wanted it so fierce and hot and vicious, just like his dream of you. You were looking him dead in the eyes again, not a trace of fear or mistrust. Only a kind, coaxing smile.

"I'm here if you wanna talk, Bucky" you said gently before offering a slight squeeze of your hand around his. "Whenever you're ready."

And like that, you let him go, his skin suddenly feeling cold where you had touched him. You grabbed your mug, barely controlling your grimace as you took another sip, then turned like you meant to leave. His heart sank in his chest with a sick thump. As nervous as he had been to face you that morning, now that you were in front of him, he had the sudden wild need to keep you near. Before he knew what he was doing, he was saying your name, more urgent, desperate, than he had meant. You stopped abruptly, turning back with a curious, concerned look that he couldn't meet for a moment.

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, feeling like he needed to say something. No, he wanted to say something, anything. He just didn't know what or how. Tongue sliding over his lips again, he turned back to the table, head ducked so that his hair obscured you from his view. There was just so much shit rattling around in his brain. But then, in his peripheral, he saw you set your mug on the table again. He could sense your fingers slipping between his metal ones, entwining them together firmly. It wasn't the same as with his right hand, but it still brought him a modicum of comfort. And that grew when he felt you lean some of your weight against him, hugging his arm to your chest and pressing your cheek into the sleeve of his shirt. Glancing over, he expected to find your eyes on him, but instead they were turned down, your face neutral except for the tiny lines of concern in your brow. The steady rise and fall of your chest, your heartbeat against the sensors in the metal plating, lulled him and helped uncoil the tension in his muscles even more, untwisted his tongue.

"I thought... I thought I was doing better," he finally spoke, quiet, though he could hear the gravel in his voice as he sat his coffee next to yours. He knew no one else was around to listen in, but sometimes it was easier to talk softly, like he was sharing a secret. He didn't need to be loud with you. "But I guess I'm still just the monster they made me."

"You are not a monster, Bucky," you countered, tone definite, if a little appalled. You pulled back to look into his eyes, though you still grasped his hand tight. "Monsters don't hurt over what they've done the way I know you do. And you have been doing better. You are doing better."

The insistence in your voice bit at him. Bitterness rose in the back of his throat and he ground his teeth against the onslaught of it. He shook his head slightly as he looked away again. How could you know how he hurt? You didn't have the flashes of memories, didn't have blood and death seared into your very being the way he did. Still, the feel of your soft fingertips sliding through the stubble on his cheek made his jaw unclench. When you urged his face back toward you, your expression was gentle and understanding, and he wanted it to be true. He wanted to believe in himself the way you seemed to believe in him.

"Bucky, what you're going through doesn't ever really go away," you told him, sadness and regret heavy in every syllable. The way you brushed the hair from his face before curling your fingers carefully against his jawline, your thumb gently caressing over his skin, was its own form of solace as you continued. "It's with you forever. You just learn to manage it. You learn how to carry it better,
how to let others help. Last night was a setback. They happen. They're human. *You* are human.

"I almost killed someone last night," Bucky breathed out in shameful argument, though there was little fight behind it.

Your hand moved from his face to rest at his chest, giving a gentle tug at the front of his shirt. "But you didn't, Bucky. You didn't kill him."

"I wanted to," was his sour admission. That spark of hatred ignited in him again at the memory, serving only to fuel his anger and guilt. It was hard enough admitting it to Steve, but you deserved to know, too. "I wanted to kill him with my bare hands. Because... because..."

"Because of me," you whispered with such surety, looking away. He caught a flash of pain and sorrow on your face as you moved both your hands from him to turn and pick up your cup for a grimaced sip.

In that one fraction of a second, Bucky realized you blamed yourself. For all of it, the things he had done and almost did. His chest clenched as he recalled what he'd said in the alley the night before, how he'd said you should have known. He never meant to put it on you like that, it was the panic, the fear of you getting hurt. Hell, even the idea of you just being upset now, especially because of him, caused an unexpected tightness in his throat, so that his response was a choked, somewhat alarmed "You stopped me."

"*You* stopped you, Bucky," you replied after swallowing your mouthful of coffee. Over your shoulder, you offered him a pointed look. "You could've just as easily ignored me, pushed me away and done it anyway."

"No," he blinked, voice low as he shook his head. And it surprised him just how true the words felt, just how sure he was. "No, I couldn't have."

Your brow furrowed gently before the barest hint of a smile ghosted across your lips, too soon hidden by the cup in your hand as you took another drink. Bucky contemplated his own coffee a moment, taking a gulp of it. Even quickly cooling, it tasted good to him. He could tell the little things you'd done to try to make it even better. A pinch of salt. A dash of cinnamon. Even though you usually didn't drink it yourself. You were always doing things for him. You made coffee for him. You cooked for him. You wrecked your sleep for him. Smiled for him. What had he done, before HYDRA or after, that warranted the kind of care you gave him? Because he sure as shit hadn't done anything during that made him worthy of a damn thing.

"I'll never understand it, sweetheart," he found himself saying into his now-empty cup, interrupting the silence that had fallen between the two of you. "Why you waste your time and energy on a fucked up thing like me."

There was an indignant look on your face when it suddenly snapped toward him, your mug meeting the table with a firm thunk as you set it down none too carefully. Though he was certain the laundry list of things he'd done in his life to deserve a look like that was a mile long, in that moment, Bucky was at a loss for which one it could have been. With your jaw set, you drew up to your full height. Shoulders squared and a bit of fire in your eyes, anyone else might've been cowed by you. Shit, the tiniest piece of him was even a little intimidated, if only because he wasn't sure what to expect when you opened your mouth to speak.

"Now you listen here, James Buchanan Barnes, and you listen good," you began, voice stern,
authoritative, but without much ire, though your finger was pointed at his chest in warning. "You
don't decide what is and is not worth my time. I decide that. And goddamn it, Bucky, you are worth
every second. Every ounce of energy. You're worth all of it. Just 'cause you don’t see it doesn’t
mean I don’t. I know you don’t think much of yourself right now, but I think the world of you,
Bucky. I think the world of you and I... I... I know Steve does too. And Sam understands what
you’re going through and wants to help. Even he thinks you’re doing better and he’s trained to see
that in people. And--"

Bucky recognized the way your voice began to pitch upward, the strain that overtook your brow
and the edges of your eyes. It happened in front of him a time or two before. You’d get worked up,
flustered, overwhelmed, and you would start to flounder for words to cover it up. And just as quick
and easy as you always reached for him when you seemed to know he was starting to spiral wild
inside, his fingers moved to brush gently against your elbow. The gesture seemed to calm you, words
tailing off in a deep, quiet breath. You shot him a sheepish look even as his hand skimmed down the
fabric of your sleeve to take hold of yours. Turning your face away like you were ashamed, your
eyes lit on the table and you let out a little sigh.

"The table was my sister's project," you breathed low. The wobbliness in your voice tore at him and
he squeezed your hand tighter as he tried to think of what he could say. But you squeezed back and
continued to speak, sounding raw. "Obviously, she didn't finish it. Seems kinda fitting, you coming
along and finally getting it put together. It's not done though. Still needs work. Don't give up on it,
okay Bucky? Don't give up like she did."

An ache settled deep in his chest when your eyes met his again, glistening wet with unshed tears.
And Bucky knew you meant more than just the table even as he shook his head in a silent promise.
Before he knew what he was doing, his left hand slid up to cup your cheek. The sight of metal
fingers on your soft skin seemed almost sacrilegious, yet you leaned into his touch so he didn't dare
pull away. You looked up at him doe-eyed, lips parted in question, scent of sweetened coffee on
your breath as it fanned across him. It made his heart stutter. But the flush that bloomed on your face
threw the nearly invisible scar on your cheek bone into more prominent relief. Tasting the guilt of it
acrid on his tongue, he slipped his thumb across the thin line, like he could soothe it away just for the
wishing. And he couldn’t feel the warmth of your skin there the way a part of him so terribly wanted.

Whether or not you could tell where his mind had wandered, Bucky had no clue, but after a lingering
moment you reached up to rest your hand over his metal one. The sensors in his palm registered the
slightest increase in pressure before you were gently pulling his hand away. You blinked rapidly,
shaking your head with a gentle sniffle. Trying to compose yourself, a weak smile tugged at the
corners of your lips as your eyes fell to the table again, though your hands still held his.

"At it again with the arsenal, I see," you commented, a hint of self-disparaging laughter cutting the
nasaliness of your voice.

Bucky was willing to play along with the change of subject, gnawing a bit at his bottom lip as he
offered up a slight nod. "Yeah. Finished with them just before you came out."

When you let go of his right hand to brush your fingers tentatively over the grip of the closest
handgun, he felt the fine muscles in his palm spasm involuntarily. But he ignored it, instead watching
as you eyed the weapons curiously. "Do you have to clean them so often? Like once a week or
something like that?"

"No, was just... something to do," he admitted and gave himself a wry snort. You spared him a
glance, as though you wanted him to elaborate, so he cleared his throat gently before continuing.
"The more often you use one, then more often you should clean it. Causes unnecessary wear and tear otherwise."

"I gotcha," you nodded in understanding, voice already evening out. Turning back to look at him, you raised an eyebrow. "Have you not been using them? Even for practice?"

Bucky shook his head with the barest of shrugs. "Probably should soon, though. Just to make sure they stay in good working condition."

A thoughtful expression crossed your face as you let your fingers slip from his metal ones to pick up your coffee mug, cradling it between your hands to sip quietly. It occurred to Bucky then that after he first let you see all the weapons he had, you'd never questioned why they were there or where he kept them hidden. He caught how you started a bit at the sight that day when he invited you in, yet you didn't press him on it. There was the possibility that you didn't care, though Bucky couldn't buy that. Not with what your sister did. The idea that you trusted him despite that wasn't lost on him, even now when he still wasn't entirely sure he could trust himself.

"If you want, I could go get dressed and show you a place that should be okay for shooting," you offered after biting back the final glowering gulp of your coffee.

He regarded you a moment, considering the suggestion. You looked mostly recovered, though red still tinged your eyelids from trying not to cry. The change in subject to the contents of the table had seemed like grasping at straws at first. Now, you seemed sincere, a bit eager, even. Maybe you needed the distraction right now as much as he did. Feeling a strange little smile threatening to tug at the corners of his lips, Bucky ducked his head in a quick nod. "Yeah, alright. Let's do that."

"Great," you replied, sounding a tad excited as a bright grin spread your face. You grabbed his mug, holding it up to silently ask if he wanted more, but he passed with a raise of his hand. "Alright, I'll go change. Be back in a minute."

It wasn't until you turned back at the patio door to give him a renewed smile that Bucky even realized he'd let his gaze trail after you. He hadn't meant to stare, his mind somewhat preoccupied by the quick determination in your walk and the gentle padding of your slippers on the concrete and what he thought might have been a poem itching at the edge of his memory that he couldn't quite grasp. Byron, maybe. After you disappeared into the house, Bucky went about gathering the weapons up into the tac bag again. The bag was slung carefully over his shoulder so he could use both hands to pick up the table. No sense in leaving it outside when there was room in the shed. Besides, if it meant so much to you, that would be the best place for him to work on it whenever the two of you managed to get the rest of the supplies. You were already outside, clad in the same hoodie, but with jeans and tennis shoes, heading in his direction when he stepped back into the yard and he decided to wait for you.

"Do you have any old bottles or cans you don't want to keep," Bucky asked when you reached him.

You offered him a curious knit of your brow before realization dawned. "No, sorry. But..."

Brushing past him, you made your way into the shed. He watched you rummage through a few of the decoration boxes, tip of your tongue sticking out from the corner of your mouth in concentration. You made a little triumphant cry when you pulled something from one of the boxes. Then, you turned your attention to the work bench, opening and shutting a few drawers as you searched. A minute or so later, you presented him with a package of colorful balloons and a staple gun. Bucky blinked at you for a moment, but couldn't suppress the smirk that grew on his face at the expectant
shrug you gave him. It was hardly conventional, but it was clever, resourceful. With an amused snort, he took the items from you to stuff in an outer pocket of his bag, looking up to find a hint of smugness cross your features.

You led him out past the shed through a small, overgrown field that pitched downward slightly, pock-marked with a few weed-cocked stumps. It grew rockier the farther out you took him until you stopped several yards from where trees began to grow again. Through the trunks and sparse foliage, Bucky could see a cliff face jutting up behind them. The slope of the ground pointed straight at it, any shots that might miss their mark would embed in tree or soil or rock. The line of sight was decent, even with the trees, just enough distance between them and far enough away from the road that it was unlikely someone could stumble into the line of fire without being seen. It really was a good spot to do some target practice, outside of a standard shooting range.

"Here ya go," you said, giving a wide sweeping gesture at the scenery before him. "Think this'll work?"

"Yeah, it'll work," he nodded as he slid the bag from his shoulder to set on the ground.

There was that gentle pride he saw flash through your smile again before he crouched down to unzip the main compartment and pull out one of the pistols. Your voice came with a curious edge from above his head. "Gonna do some shooting now?"

"Just a few rounds each. Make sure everything’s firing properly," he replied, checking the magazine before popping it in. Technically, he was going about it backwards, cleaning the guns before using them, but he was rolling with what the day brought him and he could always clean them again later.

"Would it be okay if I stick around to watch," you asked, tone polite, cautious, but clearly interested.

Bucky’s eyes shot up to you, somewhat taken aback at the question. Part of him was hesitant, uneasy that you’d be so comfortable seeing him practice those particular deadly skills. Then again, you witnessed him at arguably his worst in quite some time and hadn’t shied away. And he would be lying if he said he wanted you to leave. So, he nodded in agreement as he stood, watching your face light up a little before you went to sit on one of the stumps a couple yards behind him.

Content that you were safely out of the way, Bucky took position to aim toward the cliff. There was a tree set deep among the rest, nearly touching the rocky face, with a knot some ten feet off the ground. Three shots rang out, loud and familiar, echoing through the cold morning air. Three bullets lodged in the intended target, neatly clustered from years of training and decades of experience. Three was enough for him, enough to see that things worked fine. Any more than that and he worried what could happen. If his mind might fall back into old habits or if the thunderous spit of bullets might drum up dark memories to send him into a panic. He didn’t want to chance that happening. Not with a gun in his hand. Not with you so close. Better safe than sorry.

After three shots, he didn’t feel any pull on his brain and continued to the next gun. Check the magazine, unload three rounds to dislodge a strip of bark hanging from another tree trunk. Next one, a trio of bullets tore a tuft of grass on the cliff to oblivion. And it continued on. Each trigger squeezed in quick succession. Each aim true. By the time he reached the last one, he allowed himself the smallest modicum of pride for his unerring focus and precision before it was swallowed up again in his mind.

"Everything good," you called out when he’d finished firing, pulling his attention toward you.

Bucky saw you approaching at a considerate pace as he lowered the weapon still in his hand. "All in
"Good," you smiled. Yet he could see you mulling something over in your head as your eyes flicked from the gun back to his face before you stopped a few feet away from him. "So, do you think... do you think maybe I could give it a try?"

"You wanna shoot," he asked, brow furrowing in no small amount of confusion.

"If that's alright," you shrugged, though he could see eagerness hiding behind your nonchalance.

Bucky studied you a moment as he contemplated the request. It was one thing to accept weapons being stashed all over your home, it was something else entirely to hold one in your hand and use it. It hadn't even occurred to him you might want to, especially after learning about your sister. But he supposed you were nothing if not the resilient sort. And if it was something you really wanted to do, far be it from him to say no. After all the things you'd done for him and shown him the last months, he could indulge you this. Hell, if he was being honest, he would probably indulge you just about anything you asked.

With a tilt of his head, he motioned for you to come closer and you complied without a moment's hesitation, pulling up next to him as he asked. "Have you ever fired a weapon before?"

"No," you shook your head and carefully took the gun he handed over to you. He was pleased to see you leave your index finger resting along the frame, outside of the trigger guard, as you gave him a small smile. "But who better to teach me, right?"

"Just 'cause I can do it, doesn’t mean I should teach it,” Bucky countered with a soft huff, gently rearranging your hands for a more proper grip. “Tried tellin’ Steve that, but he never was one to listen.”

He saw your forehead crinkle a bit in question, but he was already stepping half behind your shoulder to check your position. “Gun’s supposed to be an extension of your hand. Point the muzzle like you’re pointing your finger. See that fallen branch down there?”

Your eyes followed in the direction he extended his hand. It led straight to a thick limb that rested partially buried in the dirt between two trees. When you nodded your affirmative, he lowered his hand back to his side. “Now, line it up in your sights and try to hit it.”

Another nod and he watched as you adjusted. There was a straight line down the length of your arm which was a good start, but you hadn’t braced yourself before you pulled the trigger sharply. The shot rang out, muzzle jumping so that the bullet missed nearly a foot high. With a bit of a startled yelp, the kick of it sent you stumbling back to slam against his chest. He caught you on instinct with his hands at your hips, fingers curling into the fabric of your hoodie and jeans to steady you. Before he could even think about letting go, you turned your face toward him with eyes wide and round and excited, breathing out through a forming smile “Holy shit!”

The shock and delight in your expression was too much and Bucky sputtered out a chuckle despite himself. Heducked his head, trying to regroup, only to hear you giggle brightly as you leaned into him, head falling back on his chest. The unexpected shift of your weight made him hyper-aware of every soft inch of you pressed against him, the gentle vibrations of your laughter almost electric over his skin. Swallowing thick against the dry, pounding heartbeat in his throat, the clean scent of your shampoo having flooded his lungs, Bucky slipped his tongue across his lips before smiling over to find you beaming at him. With a slight nudge, you were standing on your own again, though his left hand lingered at the small of your back. And while he could pretend it was just in case your next shot
kicked you just as hard, he knew better.

“Jesus, that was terrible,” you groaned in embarrassment, swiping a hand down your face as the other pointed the muzzle at the ground, finger along the frame again without even being told.

“Ah, wasn’t that bad,” Bucky teased gently with a shake of his head and a scrunch of his nose. “Only missed by a foot or so.”

The wry, unconvinced look you shot from the corner of your eye had him relenting with a smirk. “Okay yeah, it was pretty bad. Nothin’ you can’t work on, though. Aim again, but don’t shoot yet.”

You did as instructed, taking aim like you had before and he adjusted your arm slightly to brace you better. Then, he held his hand alongside yours as though he was holding his own gun, curling his finger repetitively. “Gotta use the pad of your forefinger. Slow, even pressure. If the muzzle jumps a centimeter, you’re off by a mile. Slow and even. Got it?”

“I think so,” you answered, eyes moving from his little demonstration back to the target. You fidgeted a little, like you might’ve been nervous, but there was determination etched in your face. Bucky couldn’t help the pride and admiration he felt warm in his chest at the sight.

“Now, take a breath,” he said low, moving back behind your shoulder. “Hold it to steady yourself and fire.”

For a split second, he thought he sensed you shiver beneath his hand, but then the crack of the gun sounded. It didn’t kick so bad this time, and you didn’t stumble back into him again, but it still missed. This time only by an inch or two. You gave an annoyed snort and aimed again. Another breath. Hold. Fire. The bullet grazed the top of the tree limb, sending a spray of bark spitting into the air. This time, he definitely felt you bounce a little in excitement when you glanced at him as though looking for approval. Bucky smiled slightly, tapping your back with his thumb, and tilted his chin toward the target again. You seemed to take the hint, hunkering a little, getting comfortable to shoot again. Another shot, another graze. Another shot and the bullet tore through the target neatly.

“Yes,” you hissed in triumph, pumping one fist as your other hand pointed the gun safely downward.

Bucky chuckled quietly at your animated display, backing away a few steps and trying to suppress the reluctance of it with a small shake of his head. “Good job, sweetheart.”

“Told you you’d be the best teacher,” you practically cooed as you smiled at him. But then he could almost see a thought flash across your face. “What does Steve want you to teach him anyway?”

“It’s not him he wants me to teach,” Bucky ground out, trying not to sound as bitter about the topic as he felt. Of course you had caught his little slip and would question it. Then again, maybe a part of him had wanted you to. Moving to sit on the grass, unconcerned with the left over dampness marring the thick fabric of his pants, he rummaged through his bag to start refilling the magazines of his other firearms. With a glance up to your waiting eyes, he urged “Keep practicin’.”

“What am I supposed to aim for,” you asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“Anything but me,” was his deadpan response, but he caught you smile before he turned back to the task at hand.

A few seconds later, the crack of gunfire roared. Judging by your grunt, you hadn’t hit what you
aimed for. “You gonna tell me who Steve does want you to teach?”

“Take a wild guess,” he replied with a sour scoff as he carefully, deliberately loaded each round.

“The Avengers?” The thoughtful tone of your voice hanging in the air was drowned out by another shot. When the echo died down, you gave a huff of disquiet laughter. “I suppose they don’t need you to show them how to shoot guns.”

Bucky looked up at you, firmly sliding the filled magazine into the handgun before picking up the next. You were watching him curiously, so intent on hearing what he had to say. After worrying his teeth along his lower lip a moment, he finally answered. “Steve and Sam thought I could help them all train and prepare for missions, maybe even join them in the field eventually.”

“Ah,” you nodded, contemplative as you positioned yourself to aim again. “Think you’re gonna go ahead and do that?”

“Not so sure I ought to,” he admitted, attending to the next gun in the bag. After another round of gunfire, hitting the target if the satisfied noise you made was any indication, he looked up at you again to ask “What do you think?”

You regarded him a moment, expression somewhat pleasantly surprised. “You want my opinion?”

“Course I do,” Bucky nodded, a little confused at the look on your face, like you didn't know how much weight your word on something held for him. Enough to make him question his own dark thoughts sometimes. "Never tried to steer me wrong before."

With a considering look, you raised the gun again toward some target unknown to him. Your face was a mask of concentration as you took aim and you barely flinched this time when you squeezed the trigger. The way your face lit up some, Bucky figured you'd hit your mark again. But when you lowered your gun, you moved to kneel on the ground across the tac bag from him, muzzle pointed away with the safety on and your finger wrapped carefully away from the trigger guard. If you truly never shot a weapon before, you were a quick learner and had at least paid attention to the way others held them cautiously.

"Honestly, I think you should give it a try," you finally spoke after settling into the grass, seemingly unbothered by the wet and cold. As if you knew exactly where his thoughts would turn, you raised a hand and fixed him with a serious look. "And yes, even after last night, I still think you should. I’m sure Sam and Steve do, too. It’s a chance to do some good.”

“Do some good.” Bucky repeated, sharp, skeptical, as he loaded the next magazine. “Forgettin’ all the nasty shit I done, sweetheart? All I’m still capable of?”

“I’m not forgetting a damned thing, Bucky,” was your gentle argument. He glanced over again when you heaved a sigh. “Look, you obviously can’t change what happened. It’s a part of you now. Far from the only part, but it’s there and you can’t get rid of it. You have to work with what you’ve got. Learn what you can from it and put it to good use. Maybe that can be helping save the world. And maybe it can’t. Won’t know until you try.”

Bucky continued the work in his hands silently for a moment, reflecting a little on what you’d said. It was going to take more than the span of a few heartbeats and some nice words, no matter how sincere, to erase his doubts on the subject. But hell if it didn’t make him want to consider it that much harder; made him wonder if maybe one day he could prove himself worth a damn, like you and Sam
and Steve all seemed to think possible. He found a soft expression on your face, intent on him, watching him think, when he looked over at you. Setting aside his internal musings, he offered you a quirk of his lips.

“You’re getting pretty comfortable with that gun in your hand,” he informed lightly, finishing his busy work before tucking it neatly back in the bag. “Wanna go for something slightly more precise?”

“Sure,” you nodded with a bright smile. And he was rather relieved that you let him change the subject so easily. “Though once I get the hang of this whole gun thing, maybe you could teach me to throw knives next? I could practice with the one you gave me.”

“You still have that,” Bucky asked, eyes widening. He knew exactly which one you were talking about. The one he gave you to sharpen, in the silent hope you might destroy or dispose of it. The one he saw embedded in the door frame beside your startled eyes after his brain cleared from the violent nightmare memories, cold sweat dotting his skin as a line of blood etched over yours. And you still had it?

You fixed him with a curious look, like you may have thought he’d gone crazy. “You only gave it to me like a month or so ago. Did you think I’d misplace it that quick?”

“Nah, I just…,” he trailed off, eyes flickering to your right cheek. “I figured you wouldn’t be too keen on keepin’ it, that’s all.”

He knew you finally got his meaning when you reached your fingers up to brush over the practically invisible scar, vision a little distant in thought. Then a sweet and playful smirk crossed your face as your gaze focused on him. “Hey, you gave me that knife and I plan on keeping it, thank you very much. Now, you were talking about something more precise?”

“Right,” he mumbled, shaking his head slightly, though he couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his lips. You really were something else. "So far you've just been aimin at whatever, not really thinkin about it, right?"

There was the barest hint of sheepishness to your nod as he reached into the pockets of his bag. It only made his smile widen when he spoke. "Thought I'd set you up some targets to shoot for."

An amused grin spread your face when he pulled out the package of party balloons. Tearing into it, he found a whole myriad of colors. Blue, red, green, yellow, purple, pink, white. He picked out three blue ones before stashing the package away again. The idea was to blow them up about softball size and staple them to one of the tree trunks. That would provide a smaller area to concentrate your aim. But when he brought the first balloon to his lips and started to fill it, you barked out an unexpected laugh that startle him enough to sputter, releasing what air he’d gotten out.

"What," he asked, eyebrow raised at you suspiciously. You were still laughing, a huge belly laugh that you seemed unable to contain, face bright and delighted as you waved him off a moment, trying to catch your breath. It might have been infectious if he weren't suddenly questioning your sanity. Still, Bucky could hear it creeping into his voice when he tried again. "What the hell are you laughin at, ya crazy person?"

"I just... Your face... Ah, shit," you tried to swallow down your giggles a bit, gasping for air. You shook your head firmly, like you were trying to knock some sense into yourself. After a moment, you seemed to get things under control, though your words were still shaky with laughter when you spoke. "Jesus, I'm sitting here with Bucky Barnes, Howling Commando, Super soldier, world class badass, who is blowing up balloons with his cheeks all puffed out... I can't... I just can't!"
Bucky leveled you with an annoyed glare, though he couldn't really bring himself to be mad. Not when you looked so goddamn happy, so absolutely tickled he almost didn't want you to stop. Especially when you puffed out your own cheeks to mock him and it sent you into another short fit of giggles. Still, he managed a fairly even tone as you came down from that little spell. "Are you gonna take this seriously?"

"Not if you keep making that chipmunk face," you barely got out as you renewed your attempt to calm yourself down, mostly succeeding.

"Well, then I guess we gotta call it a day," he shook his head in a facade of disappointment, watching expectantly for your reaction. "Can't keep practicin if you can't get a hold of yourself."

"Okay okay, no, I'm good, I'm fine," you quickly assured, sitting up straight and sucking your lips in to hold back your laughter. You cleared your throat as you tried to put on a mask of nonchalance. The corners of your lips twitched with the effort to keep yourself together. "I'm fine. Go ahead and do your thing."

Eyeing you one last time, just to see you redouble your efforts to keep calm, Bucky went about blowing up the balloons as originally planned. Once or twice, he caught you covering your mouth with your hand, trying to hide a smile. Each time he'd look at you, silently daring you to start laughing again. You were still hanging tough when he tied off the last one, though he did see you grin as he stood up with the staple gun to carry everything away. He chose a tree a fair distance from where he left you and stapled them down the front of the trunk, careful not to pop them. They swayed a little in the warming breeze. Perfect for adding a little more challenge.

You were already standing up when he headed back toward you. The gun's muzzle was carefully pointed down while you swiped at the bits of wet grass and flecks of mud that clung to your jeans. By the time he reached your side, you were smiling up at him a bit deviously. "So, what do I get if I hit them all?"

"A sense of accomplishment ain't enough for you, doll," he teased, stowing the staple gun back in the bag.

"Uh-uh," you replied in the negative, shaking your head soundly. A thoughtful look overtook your face before you gave a haughty little snort. "If I hit all the balloons, you gotta answer a question for me."

"What sorta question," he asked, unsure if he should be wary or intrigued by the proposition.

"There was something you said last night," you answered casually, like it was just a normal part of any conversation. "In another language. I think Russian, maybe, but I'm not sure. I was hoping you could tell me what it was you said."

The memory was a cinder block laid on his chest. And he wasn't even sure at what point during the morning that weight had lifted for it to feel so heavy now. How long had he gone without thinking so hard about it? Probably about the time you'd gotten tears in your eyes and nothing seemed as important as helping you change the subject to something better. He had to look away, tongue darting over dry lips.

"You sure you wanna know," he ground out around the constriction in his throat. The words he'd said rolled around in his brain, vicious and terrible. "It's not exactly pretty."

"Oh no! No no no, Bucky, I'm sorry, no, that's not the one I meant!" You sounded somewhat horrified, fingers reaching to brush across his cheek, trying to soothe. When he looked at you, you
were giving him a comforting, apologetic smile. "I didn't mean that one, honestly I didn't. It sounded like a pretty effective threat, but it's not my business to get into. It's just... its just you said something else. Something to me when I was trying to help you. That's what I wanted to know."

Bucky remembered those words, too. Remembered your face cutting through the fog in his brain, even when he didn't quite recognize it. Only knew it was familiar and bright. That was a much easier memory to swallow. A much lighter thing to think on. And the sympathy and caring on your face now helped the burden. Made it a little easier to set aside for the moment. He had time to worry about it later. Right now, he had a girl in front of him. A gorgeous girl with a gun in her hand and a glint in her eye and a grin on her face like she... You said you thought the world of him. That's what you had said when you started to ramble earlier. It just now clicked in his head, your words and the frantic way you covered them. Now, you could ask just about anything and all you wanted to know was what soft, secret little thing he called you in the midst of everything.

"Gimme the gun," he eventually said, clearing the hoarseness from this throat when he held his hand out. You did as instructed without hesitation, dropping your fingers from his cheek in the process, a somewhat defeated, but accepting look crossing your face. It didn't last long, because as soon as Bucky had checked the magazine and slid it back in, he was presenting you with the grip once more. "You got five rounds left. Hit your targets before runnin dry, I'll tell you what I said."

"Really," you asked, an astonished smile pulling your lips wide as you took the gun from him again.

"Yeah," he smirked back, ducking his head in a nod. Barely able to stand your excited expression, he tilted his chin toward the tree where the balloons hung and folded his arms across his chest. "Get a move on, dollface. Don't wanna be standin out here all damned day."

Peeking over, Bucky caught a glimpse of you getting into position. Feet shoulder width apart, two-handed grip on the gun, bracing properly. Those little lines of concentration etched around your eyes as you took the time to line up your sights. The same breeze that was kicking up wisps of your hair was jostling the balloons gently. Despite that, he heard you take a steadying breath, then... BANG! The bullet struck an inch shy of the target. A glance showed him your lips pursed in frustration before you clucked your tongue and took aim again... BANG! All that remained visible of the second balloon was a small strip caught in the tree bark.

A triumphant snort left you and your smile was a little proud when you looked over at him. Bucky held up his index finger, one target down, then three fingers to remind you how many rounds you had left. You seemed to understand, giving a sobered nod as you raised the muzzle... BANG! Two targets still hung on the tree. There was almost a growl in your next breath, and he had to hold back a snicker at that... BANG! All that remained visible of the second balloon was a small strip caught in the tree bark.

When your eyes met his again, Bucky flashed two fingers, then one. Two down, one round left. There was tension in your shoulders, determination in the downward twist of your lips. Even Bucky could feel the thrum of anticipation across his skin, though he was a bit torn on which outcome he wanted. Miss, and you didn't get an answer. You might be upset for awhile, but the two of you could always come out and practice again. Hit, and he'd have to awkwardly fess up to the words his mouth had formed when his brain was too rattled to have a filter. And that could prove uncomfortable for the both of you. How you'd take that tidbit of information was anyone's guess. But you were taking aim again, waiting, holding. One target, one round... BANG! The last balloon was gone.

"Ha," you barked loud in celebration. There was pure delight on your face when you turned to him. "I did it! I did it!"

"That you did, sweetheart. That you did," Bucky smiled, rather impressed with how quick a study
you turned out to be. After you gave the gun back, you shimmied your hips in a ridiculous little victory dance. He crouched down to deposit the weapon with the others, trying to distract from the sight.

"Alright, c'mon," you urged as he stood back up, offering a huge grin. There was a soft imploring whine to your voice as you bounced excitedly on the balls of your feet, fingers curling into the front of his shirt for a few quick tugs. "You said you'd tell me. Now, spill!"

Seeing how animated you were made Bucky simultaneously amused and apprehensive. He raked his fingers through his hair nervously before finally answering. "You were right, it was Russian. I... I said your name, then called you мое солнышко."

"Mi... milo soyneeshka," you tried to sound out, brow knit tightly.

"No," Bucky huffed a quiet laugh, biting into his lower lip as he shook his head at your unintentional mangling. He repeated the phrase, slowly. "мое солнышко."

"Moye solnyshko," you echoed, much closer this time. He had to admit, despite the clunkiness on your tongue and the circumstances that brought him to know Russian so intimately, he found himself a little smitten with the way your lips formed around each syllable as you recited it one more time. "It sounds pretty, but what does it mean?"

"It means..." He paused a moment, trying to figure out exactly how to explain it. Then he licked his dry lips and hooked his thumbs in his pockets, hoping he didn't look the fool for his fidgeting. "It means 'my sunshine.'"

"Oh," was your gentle breath of a response. Bucky saw something in your face then, in your eyes, as that flush colored your cheeks again. Flattered, bashful, vulnerable; it made his chest feel big as his heart thundered inside. But then you were blinking quickly, shrugging and offering a smirk to cover yourself, like you had let something slip you didn't mean to, again.

"Alright, Romeo," you teased, nudging at his chest playfully as you shook your head. "Well, you go ahead and finish what you're doing out here. I'm gonna go back and get lunch started. Sound good?"

Bucky could only nod, still somewhat stunned at the complicated expression he'd seen on your face. You just rolled your eyes at him, smirking, before you began heading back toward the house. His gaze lingered after you a few long moments, trying to process what had happened, how he was feeling. That look on your face, that reaction, no matter how quickly you worked to hide it... As sappy as it sounded, even in his own head, it had sparked something inside him, something ridiculously like hope. Waiting for it to get swallowed up again, to get snuffed out in the maelstrom of his brain, Bucky busied himself picking the spent casings from the grass. Then the bits of rubber left from the popped balloons. But when he dropped the pieces of litter into the bag to throw away later, that flicker was still there.

And it was still there when he finally reached the house, walking in through the back door to find you in the kitchen. Hell, it may have even grown the barest hint stronger when you turned that sweet smile of yours on him, like you were so pleased to see him standing in your doorway. There was a bit of laughter in your voice when you spoke. "Lunch'll be ready soon. Why don't you go get cleaned up?"

He moved to comply, intent on dropping the tac bag off in his room before hitting the shower, realizing the atmosphere in the house wasn't as thick as it had seemed earlier that morning. As he passed through the living room, something on the side table caught his attention. There was a small pile of mail there, including the county newspaper that showed up once a week. Advertised on the
front page was the local Harvest Festival, coming up in a few weeks. The picture they used was of kids standing around a bundle of cornstalks, remarkably like the photo of you and your sister he'd seen the week before.

Nibbling at his lip a bit, Bucky considered the newspaper a few moments. Thought about how happy the two of you managed to make each other today, even after everything that had happened. Remembered how you looked at him, how you told him he was worthy, how you said you thought the world of him. And good Lord, did he want to earn that from you. So given all that and any number of the little moments he could recall between the two of you, Bucky went ahead and made a decision.

Chapter End Notes

Sooooo..... In future chapters, there may be... "sexual content." Trying to decide how explicit/clean, smutty/fluffy, realistic/romance novel-y I want to make it. Any suggestions?
Chapter 18

To say you were surprised when Bucky suggested the two of you go to the Harvest Festival together felt like an understatement. It was barely over a week after the incident at The Hall when he brought it up, anxious and shoulders tense, even more so than usual after coming back after a weekend visit with Steve. You assumed it was because he remembered the quiet discussion over photos and glasses of scotch, when you'd told him how you and your sister used to go. And it would be a lie to say your throat didn't go a little raw and achy at the mere mention of it. But you were almost overwhelmingly proud of him at the same time. A person who wasn't anticipating being better, who wasn't going to work their damnedest at it, who didn't believe there could be a light at the end of the tunnel... well, they didn't generally make plans, even just a couple weeks in advance. So, if Bucky thought he could handle another very public outing, you were happy to tag along in support.

Almost equally as shocking was a week after that when Bucky was waiting for Steve and Sam to pick him up and he let you know he decided to meet some of the other Avengers that weekend. He said it almost in passing, like it was a common thing, except his eyes gave him away. There was a bit of tension there, nervousness that you tried to soothe away with a brush of your fingers over his. You didn’t want to pry, it really wasn’t your place, you just couldn’t help worrying he was pushing himself too far too fast to compensate for a perceived failure. But he assured you that he’d given the decision lots of thought and after a few discussions with Steve and Sam, they’d made arrangements to hopefully lessen his anxiety. Sam confirmed this in a text message after they hit the road again, because he probably understood your thought process better than you did yourself. And if the smallest, tiniest part of you felt a little bittersweet at the idea that Bucky might be moving on soon, that selfish sadness all but evaporated when he returned the next evening. He seemed pleased with himself, in a subdued way, more confident. It was obvious that he’d allowed himself to have a good time. You couldn’t possibly worry about your own silly thoughts when he told you how the visit went, that soft expression on his face that you had come to adore a little too much.

The day you two were set to go to the Harvest Festival, you were waiting for him to return from yet another overnight stay. It was usually rather boring without his company, but those two days had seemed to drag even worse. Probably the anticipation of having a night out again. You ate up the time with books and movies and TV. Anything to squash the anxious excitement and occasional wayward concern. You were practically elbows deep in dishwater, just finishing up with the large cast iron skillet, when you heard the front door open.

“Bucky,” you called out curiously. Though, honestly, who else could it have been? You’d given him a key to the house when he started his weekly excursions, just in case you were gone or otherwise occupied, like now.

“S’mee,” he answered, footsteps audibly approaching after the door was shut.

Expectant fluttering behind your ribcage chalked up to enthusiasm for the evening’s plans, you quickly drained the sink and turned to grab a dishtowel to dry the skillet on the counter. Bucky was already taking up the kitchen door, bag slung over one shoulder and holding a paper hot cup in his hand, when you flashed him a grin. “Hey there. How was your second superhero sleep over party?”

“Take you all weekend to come up with that one,” Bucky teased back with a raised eyebrow and a smile quirking up the corners of his lips.

“Nope,” you shook your head vehemently as you hefted the weighty cast iron into your hands,
leaning against the counter as you dried it. “It just came to me in a dream last night.”

“Oh, so you been dreamin about me, huh, dollface,” he asked, moving toward you, head tilted back a little in a cocky, mischievous smirk, almost flirtatious. That was something happening more and more lately and you were ashamed to admit once or twice you had to remind yourself it was just all in good fun.

“Now wouldn’t that have been a nightmare,” you stuck your tongue out at him playfully and were rewarded with a soft chuckle when Bucky pulled to a stop in front of you. Holding out the steaming cup to you, he grabbed the skillet from your hands. You took the offered drink, cradling it to warm your fingers as he tucked the heavy thing into its little cubby near the coffee pot. “What’s this?”

“One of those vanilla latte things you like, only hot,” he replied, resting his hip to the counter beside you and readjusting the bag on his shoulder. “Thought you’d appreciate something warm to drink with as cold as it’s gotten.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet,” you crooned cheekily, though you could tell it was still much too hot to attempt sipping on at the moment. You popped the lid carefully and put it on the counter to cool off a little.

“Nah, but the drink is,” Bucky countered. You resisted the urge to smile even wider, remembering him saying something similar over a bowl of oatmeal when you were sick in bed. “Too sweet if you ask me. You’re gonna rot your teeth out you keep it up.”

You scoffed at him, pretending to be scandalized as you gave him a playful hipcheck to shove him out of the way so you could deal with wiping down the counter. He let himself be moved aside easy, that soft grin on his face. “This, coming from the man who in one day had three slices –rather large slices I might add- of that chocolate cake I made?”

“Hey,” was his protested response, subdued laughter in his voice and his gray eyes. “First of all, in my defense, that cake was delicious. Second of all, that cake was cake. It wasn’t hot sugary milk callin itself coffee. Don’t care how much of that espresso shit is in it.”

Shooting him a dirty look over your shoulder, you busied yourself with your wipe down. No good comebacks came to mind. Perhaps some other time they might have, but not then. Not when you were practically overcome with Bucky standing in your kitchen, casual and talkative and… happy. Such a far cry from the way he looked when Sam ushered him through your door all those months ago. It warmed your heart and ached in your chest and all those silly little cliché things. He was doing better, tremendously better. Soon, he’d realize he didn’t need to stay with you anymore, that he belonged out in the world; that he was meant for much greater things than an old house in the middle of nowhere. And you consoled yourself with the fact that unlike everyone else before him, at least Bucky’s leaving wouldn’t be a tragedy.

"I'm gonna go clean myself up some before we head out," Bucky informed, interrupting your thoughts. If he noticed the unwarranted tears you felt trying to sting at the corners of your eyes when you turned to nod at him, he was good enough not the say anything. Just gave a gentle smirk before heading back out of the kitchen.

You finished up with the counters quickly, but crumbs and dirt clung to your shirt damp with dishwater. Definitely required a change. The latte was cool enough to sip now, sweet and delicious, when you picked it up to carry with you as you headed for your room. On the way, you noticed the bathroom door standing ajar and you stopped abruptly when you realized you could partially see
Bucky at the sink in front of the mirror. The water had only run for a minute, so you figured he’d just washed his hands and went to his room. But there he stood, shirtless with his jeans riding low on his hips, creases starting to peek out. You could just manage to see his mass of dark hair pulled up into a bun, a few locks loose and tucked behind his ear, and his face was lathered with shaving cream. He craned his neck with his gaze fixed on himself in the mirror. It took you a moment to realize the glint of metal that caught your eye wasn’t his left hand, but a knife in his right. The blade steadily drew up the curve of his throat and over the sharp edge of his jaw, leaving smooth glossy skin in its wake. When he reached the end, he withdrew the knife to wipe the blade clean on a cloth draped across the sink before beginning again with a new line.

"How’s the drink," Bucky asked gently, hint of a smile tugging at his lips though he never seemed to lose concentration on what he was doing, even when he nudged the door open wider with his elbow.

Of course he knew you were there. It was Bucky for crying out loud. Still, you hadn't realized just how intently you’d been watching, holding your breath, and you could feel your face heat up in embarrassment. But you took the silent invitation all the same, moving closer to lean against the door frame. "It's good. Thank you. How much do I owe ya?"

“Nah, my treat, sweetheart,” he replied as his eyes flickered to you a moment. When he finished the section of cheek he was working on, he offered you a devilish grin while he wiped the blade off. "In fact, I got us covered the whole night."

“Oh, yeah?” You raised a curious eyebrow at him, intrigued by his tone as you took a sip from your cup. The two of you never spoke much about the money situation, except that he knew about the weekly deposits you received and either cared very little or trusted you enough that he never made mention of wanting to change things. Part of you hoped it was the latter.

“Yeah,” Bucky nodded, looking a bit smug as he turned his eyes back to the mirror. "Let's just say, I doubt I'll be allowed to sit at any more poker games with that bunch."

The latte in your hand was the perfect place to hide your grin when he brought the knife back up to his skin. Your gaze followed the long line of his neck from the way he tilted his head back, the slow steady trail of the blade over his chin. After the initial swipe, he tucked his lower lip between his teeth and pulled taught, leaning a little closer to the mirror, inspecting. You realized with mild fondness that he was double checking the skin in the little divot there. And you told yourself it was probably the sugar and caffeine from your drink that made your mouth a little dry and sticky before you spoke. "I've never actually seen someone do that before in real life; shave with a knife like that."

"Well, your cute little safety razors just weren't cuttin it, doll," he quipped with a small chuckle before bringing the tip of the knife to the work around his upper lip.

"A-har-har," you let the sarcasm drip from your voice at his little play on words. Taking the few steps to the linen closet, you pulled out a fresh hand towel you'd washed the day before. There was only one in the bathroom, you'd noted, and he could probably use one to clean up with that wasn’t covered in shaving cream and bristly little hairs. When you returned to your spot against the door frame, you gave him a considering look before a mischievous smirk crossed your face. "I've never actually seen someone do that before in real life; shave with a knife like that."

Bucky's hand froze for a split second mid-shave. You might not have even seen it if you hadn't been watching so closely. Then, he just continued on as if nothing had happened, though his lips quirked up to match your own. "Just one'd be enough for me, gettin back into the swinga things an all."
"Ah c'mon," you retorted airily while holding out the clean towel to him. "At least two. Or perhaps another fella?"

He gave a playful look of consideration with a raise of his shoulders, jutting his chin out as he pretended to admire his face in the mirror. His eyes rolled your way before leaning in a little closer. "We'll see how the night goes."

At that, he plucked the towel from your fingers with a wink and you had to suppress what you were sure was only laughter fluttering away in your stomach. Oh yeah, he was doing much better. The cheeky bastard. Still, you couldn't help one last little tease before resuming your journey to your bedroom. "Just try not to scratch up your pretty face, okay?"

The sound of his gentle chuckle followed you down the hall a few paces. Once in your bedroom, you sipped your drink thoughtfully as you rummaged through all your drawers to find a heavy shirt. There was no need for dressing up fancy, it was only walking around the Harvest Festival, not like a date or something. Jeans and a shirt and sturdy walking shoes would be just fine. It was just that you hadn't left the house much in... well, awhile, aside from a few errands here and there, so you hadn't thought about switching out your seasonal clothes like you used to. Most of your fall and winter stuff was still in the storage room. Finally finding a long-sleeve shirt, you resolved to tackle the neglected room sometime that upcoming week, perhaps with Bucky's help. At least for moral support.

Back out in the hallway, you caught sight of Bucky just outside the bathroom door tugging a clean, dark shirt on over his head. He threw you a little grin once he'd pulled the fabric down his torso and you could see he'd taken your advice about his sideburns, though his hair was still up in a messy bun. "You almost ready to head out, doll?"

You hummed an affirmative as you took the last few sips of your latte. By the time your cup was empty, you were already standing next to him to answer brightly. "Whenever you are."

"Then let's go. But don't forget your jacket. S'gonna be cold tonight," he warned with a slight point of his finger as he headed into the living room.

"What and take away your chance to be a gentleman and offer me yours," was your laughing response, pausing a moment to deposit your trash in the bin just inside the kitchen as you passed by. "That hardly sounds like fun."

Bucky shot you a wry look from where he stood leaning against the back of the couch, failing to cover up the traces of amusement on his face. Grabbing the red flannel he was so fond of from the arm of the couch, he deftly slid it on and adjusted the collar and cuffs. If you didn't know him, you'd think it was all casual cool. But there was a minute tenseness to it, the barest hint of apprehension, that you caught out of the corner of your eye when you passed him to put on your hoodie, though it only seemed to last as long as it took him to join you near the door. Still, you felt compelled to reach out like you did so many times before.

"Hey," you asked quietly, bumping your knuckles against his left hand in a silent request for access. "Sure you wanna do this?"

It surprised you when he twisted his wrist to grab hold of your hand, metal fingers sliding delicately against your palm. His head tilted slightly in question, brows raised, soft gray eyes scouring your face and he gave a reassuring smile. "I'm sure. How bout you?"
"Yeah. Yeah, I think we'll both have a good time," you nodded with your own grin as you reached with your free hand to pluck some cat hairs from his shirt and smooth down the fabric. "But you know the drill. You need to get outta there for any reason, just say the word and --"

"Yeah yeah yeah," Bucky huffed a laugh to interrupt you. Rolling his eyes, his gaze dropped to where your fingers rested in his, metal thumb swiping across the back of your hand before he looked up at you again through his eyelashes. "Same goes for you, alright?"

The idea that Bucky was concerned about you like that had your heart threatening to skip a beat. But you just gave his shirt an affectionate tug, biting into your lower lip with a playful scrunch of your nose. "C'mon. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Those infectious dimples of his flashed as you gripped his hand tight and started pulling him toward the door. It was already dusk outside, the chill beginning to set in with the dimming of the afternoon sunlight. Bucky waited patiently as you locked the place, but when you turned to head down the steps, you noticed a sleek black sedan in the driveway parked next to your truck. There was no driver sitting in it and it only took you a second to realize exactly why you didn't see Sam and Steve when Bucky came home. Looking over, you found him with a mischievous smirk, one eyebrow arching up, and a set of car keys dangling from his right hand with a little jingle before he closed his fingers around them.

"Win that at cards, too," you asked jokingly while the two of you continued toward the vehicle. Though, you weren't sure you'd be surprised if he had. No doubt, he had a good poker face.

"Nah, just the chance to borrow it for the weekend," he answered, well-pleased with himself, maneuvering so he could hold open the passenger door for you. Despite your annoyed snort, he just grinned wider. "Figured if I was gonna take you out for a good time, might as well do it in style."

You paused to fold your arms and rest them across the top of the door, eyeing him with feigned offense. "Oh, is my old truck not good enough for ya anymore, Barnes?"

"I like your old truck just fine," he assured, leaning in a little closer. Some of the cockiness in his expression softened as he continued. "Every pretty girl deserves a fancy ride in a classy set-a wheels once in a while. Even if it's just to a country fair."

Bucky looked so young then, so self-assured. If this was him now, then you were certain back in the day Sergeant James Barnes could've charmed the robes right off the Statue of Liberty if given half a chance. Shaking the errant thought from your head made room for another, more pressing concern. "Do you even have a driver's license? At least, one that isn't expired?"

Blinking a moment, Bucky tore his eyes away from you with a low, laughing breath. The easy smirk was back on his face when he answered. "Don't you worry about that, doll. Worked out a temporary for the time being. Now would you get in so we can get goin', huh? Jesus, sweetheart, you're holdin up all the fun."

"Okay, okay!" You held up your hands in surrender before slipping into the seat, but you could see Bucky casting you a playful glare as he closed the door soundly behind you.

By the time you were belted in, he was already sliding into the driver seat and soon you were headed on your way. The interior of the car was sharp as the outside, all leather seats and fancy touchscreens at the console, a Stark Industries logo emblazoned at the bottom of the display. It took you a couple minutes, but you managed to find the radio controls, Bucky mumbling something about cars still not
being able to fly. You were barely able to hold back your snicker at such a crotchety statement. He must have heard it anyway, even over the music, because he shot you a warning look, though it gave way to exasperated amusement when you started to sing along with the radio. At one point, you even caught him tapping his fingers to the beat of a classic rock song you'd played for him a few times before. And if you hadn't known any better, you would've sworn you saw him mouthing along to the lyrics like he was enjoying himself.

Night was in full swing when you reached the festival. The sun was gone and the moon hadn't quite risen yet, but the lights of the fairground glowed bright tucked away in the darkness. The closer you drove, the more your nostalgic excitement grew. There were good memories you had there; laced with a little sadness to be sure, but good nonetheless. Laughter and happiness, and you were itching to share that with Bucky. When he pulled into a parking space, you didn't wait for his chivalrous insistence on getting the door for you. You were out on your feet in an instant, gazing across the lot and the groups of people coming and going. Parents pushing strollers with sleeping babies, little kids with balloons and mounds of cotton candy, the sounds of absolute delight filling the air.

Looking over at Bucky as he rounded the front of the car to meet up with you, you expected to find him tense, anxious, considering the crowd and the noise and all the things that could disrupt his line of sight in every direction. And maybe some of that was there, little traces at the edge of things, like the way his gaze darted toward a particularly loud squeal of a child in the distance, but it was mostly overshadowed by the soft smirk on his face and the way the corners of his eyes crinkled as he reached out to lace metal fingers with your flesh ones. "C'mon, doll. Let's get a move on."

It was a little wild to have Bucky being the one to gently tug at your hand, pulling you away from the car and toward the entrance. But it was wonderful to see that bit of excitement in him, that playful glint to his eye once you were in step at his side. He slowed his pace to better match yours, but you were having none of it, instead overtaking him so you could be ahead of him. Amusement colored his face and he let you drag him along with little fight until you reached the ticket booth. Bucky paid the admission price and shot you another look when you opened your mouth, like he knew you were about to protest. You clammed up about it, but not before sticking your tongue out at him, which made him grin before pulling you around the booth and into the fairgrounds. Though you did have the forethought to grab a map before you were out of arm's reach.

Maneuvering off to the side, away from the heavy throng of foot traffic, you unfolded the map to see what sort of booths were available and let Bucky have a chance to scan the layout of the place. He may have been in a spectacularly good mood, perhaps without much concern of being triggered, but you knew a part of him would always need those moments, a chance to take in his surroundings and calculate escape routes and possible threats, even if it was all subconscious. And you were more than happy to oblige. When you felt him close behind you, peeking over your right shoulder much like when he'd been teaching you how to shoot, you knew he was ready to continue.

"This place first," you urged, tapping your finger on the glossy paper in your hand.

"Thought the whole point of a place like this was wanderin around and findin interesting stuff," Bucky chuckled, though he began to move away from you in the direction the map indicated.

You shivered involuntarily, all the warmth of him and the width of his chest no longer blocking the chilly night air from your back. "We'll get to that. Just trust me. You will not be disappointed."

"Whatever you say, sweet cheeks," he replied with a good-natured shake of his head as you wrapped your hand in his.
It wasn't a far walk to the stall, but there was a line of people waiting to reach the food counter. You grinned wide as Bucky read the signs advertising a plethora of fried things to eat or barely edible sounding concoctions on sticks. Apparently this year's newest item was fried bubblegum. Bucky grimaced with a scrunch of his nose. "What the hell? Do people actually eat this stuff?"

"Oh yeah, fair food's a tradition," you informed primly. "But we are here for one thing and one thing only. Fried Oreos."

Bucky's eyebrows shot toward his hairline in concerned confusion. "Why would someone fry an Oreo? It's already a cookie."

"Look, back in your day, everything was boiled," you teased which earned you a derisive snort from him as you both moved forward in line. "These days, everything gets fried."

"Well, it sounds all sortsa wrong," he grumbled a little, though the corners of his lips were still tipped up as he glanced over at you.

"Oh, but it tastes all sortsa right," was your dreamy counter, the smell of frying foods already starting to make you salivate. Thankfully, you were next in line, so you didn't have to go crazy in anticipation much longer. "Come on, Bucky. Just try one. If you don't like it, I've got no problem eating the rest."

"Fine," he sighed in mock defeat before stepping up to the counter. "An ordera those fried Oreos and two Coca-colas, please."

The food came out piping hot, too hot even through the paper basket they came in, so you let Bucky handle those while you grabbed the drinks. It was crowded in the immediate area of the food stalls, but he managed to find a small table to stand at that was out of the way. Eyeing the powdered sugar covered mass in front of him with a bit of hesitation, he said begrudgingly "Well, they don't smell too terrible."

"That's the spirit," you joked sarcastically as you reached for one to pop into your mouth whole. Turns out, your desire for the sweet treat had overridden your common sense, because you soon realized just how hot it still was. Bucky's face lit up, trying and almost failing to hold back his low chuckle, when you made a no doubt entirely ridiculous face as you attempted to chew quickly against the burning sensation on your tongue. Still, you managed a sobbing laugh at your own stupidity after you finally swallowed and scrabbled for a drink of your cold soda.

"You alright," Bucky asked, amused tremor in his voice.

"Peachy," you smiled weakly after gulping down a good portion of your drink. When you nudged the basket in his direction, he gave you a disbelieving look. "Obviously they're good enough I risked half my taste buds to eat one. Just, y'know, be careful."

Chewing on your straw a little to mask your forming grin, you watched carefully as Bucky did as instructed. He tested the temperature of one of the Oreos with the fingers of his right hand. Either it had cooled down well enough or he wasn't nearly as effected by it as you were, because he had no problems picking it up to stuff in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, the little line between his eyebrows deepening. Something in the annoyed expression that finally crossed his face had you smiling.

"You like it," you stated knowingly, nudging his arm with your elbow as you grabbed for another.
Thankfully, this one was nowhere near as hot as the first.

His tongue darted out to lick at stray powdered sugar and oil that stuck to his lips as he gave you an unimpressed look. "They're alright."

"Oh, I see." With an understanding nod, you began to pull the basket closer to you. "Well, if you don't care for them, then you won't mind if I have the rest."

Quick as lightning, just as expected, Bucky reached out and snatched another one. The vicious little smile on his face was only tempered by the softness around his eyes when he bit the Oreo in half. Like he planned on savoring it. He studied the middle of it while he chewed slowly, though it eventually followed the first half between his lips. Bucky didn't even bother to finish eating before he asked "We could probably make these at home, couldn't we?"

"Probably could," you smiled, still a bit thrilled whenever he said we or referred to your house as home. A third Oreo made its way into his mouth, though this one managed a light dusting of powdered sugar on his chin. Without much thought, you used the back of your index finger to wipe the mess away as you continued. "But then you'd complain about me trying to fatten you up, like you did to the cat."

Gray eyes glowed with a little mischievous mirth as he looked at you and you took a moment to tuck one of those stubborn locks of dark hair behind his ear. But when you absently let the backs of your knuckles graze down his warm, freshly shaved cheek, Bucky started a little in shock, pulled away a fraction. "Christ, your hands are ice cold."

"Ah, I'm sorry, I didn't..." you began, dropping your hand to the table, though you trailed off when you realized Bucky wasn't really paying attention. Instead, he brought his left hand up to his cheek, face blank as he pressed the metal plates of the back and his palm to his skin for a second.

"Gimme your hands," he said in a quiet order, licking the sugar from the fingers and wiping them dry on his jeans before holding both of his hands out to you, palms up.

Your eyes narrowed in confusion at the little show, but you couldn't help the nervous laugh that escaped you. "What?"

"C'mon, sweetheart," Bucky urged gently with a smirk and curled his fingers into grabby hands a couple times. "I ain't gonna bite. Give 'em here."

Playing along with a gentle huff of laughter at the situation, you laid your palms in his. Both of his hands were warm, even the metal one, and you realized that's what he had been checking against his cheek. Making sure it wasn't cold. Bucky delicately circled his fingers around your wrists to draw them up toward his face before cupping your hands in his. The first warm breath that skittered across your skin surprised you, muscles jerking a bit of their own accord. But Bucky’s hold on you was firm and he continued what he was doing, moved your hands this way and that to give long, slow, warm exhales all over every inch of cold skin. It seemed an innocent enough gesture, probably something he’d done for his little sisters ages ago, you rationalized. And surely the goosebumps that raced up your arms were from the temperature contrast and not the one or two times you thought you might have felt the faintest brush of lips against your knuckles or across your wrists. That must have been your imagination, because each time when you looked up at him, the expression of pleasant concentration on his face never changed.

Finally, Bucky pressed your palms to his cheeks and gave a satisfied nod. “Better.”
“Thanks,” you replied, sounding a little hoarse as he set your hands on the table. Picking up your soda, you were about to take another drink to combat your dry throat when you paused, unable to hold back the tease that came to mind. “Always knew you were full of hot air.”

The painfully disgusted sigh Bucky gave off nearly made you snarf your drink. He bit into his lower lip, as if holding back a smile, as he glared at you. “Y’know, just for that…”

“Hey,” you scoffed with a laugh as he picked up the last of the fried Oreos between metal fingers and popped it into his mouth. There was a taunting look on his face while he chewed, pleased with himself, but you were distracted by something you saw on his arm as he reached out. “Hey, what’s that?”

Moving in closer to his arm to effectively block it from others’ view, you tugged his shirt sleeve up a little bit. Bucky didn’t protest, though his chewing slowed until he gave a hard swallow, eyes moving curiously from your face to where you touched the metal plating. Under the fabric, at a bit of an awkward angle on the outside of his forearm, was a splotch of blue about the size of a quarter that you hadn’t noticed before.

“Phthalo blue,” Bucky informed, sounding slightly annoyed, once you positioned his arm so he could see it.

You raised a curious eyebrow at him while he scraped at the color with his fingernail. “Phthalo blue? As in, paint?”

“Mmhmm,” was his hummed affirmative, nodding slightly as he worked. Then, he added in a distracted grumble. “Thought I got all this off already.”

“You’ve been painting,” you asked, that warm, proud feeling suddenly blossoming in your chest again. The image of that precious little winter scene with it's time-muted Christmas trees and the curve of Bucky's fond, nostalgic smile flashed through your memory.

He looked up from what he was doing then, blinking a few times and diverting his attention to his soda as the corners of his lips curled up. "Yeah. Been tryin my hand at it again with Steve and Sam."

"Aw, Bucky, that's awesome," you beamed. You wanted to remind how well he was doing, how strong he was being, and just how proud you were of him, though you were quite certain your opinions on the matter didn't mean nearly as much as you might wish they did. But out in public didn't seem like the right place to bring it up and you made a mental note to say something once you both were home and settled. For that moment, you just smiled wider and gently fixed his shirt cuff, which seemed to ease something in him you barely knew had tensed. "Think you might show me sometime?"

"They ain't much to look at, doll," he snorted with a shake of his head and picked up the trash, moving to deposit it in the nearly overflowing can nearby. You were only a couple steps behind him, pulling up alongside his left, when he looked over at you with his chin tilted up in that cocky, in no way at all charming, smirk of his. "But maybe. If you're nice ta me, that is."

“Nice to you?” Incredulous though you sounded, you still managed a surprised smile as the two of you started to meander down one of the main paths of the festival. “When am I ever not nice to you?”
“Always knew you were full of hot air,” he replied in a tone meant to mock, though he was grinning back at you. “You’re a fuckin smartass and you know it.”

“Awww,” was your crooning response, wrapping yourself around his left arm, pressing your cheek to his shoulder to pout at him playfully. “Am I too sassy for you, old man?”

Bucky barked out a quick burst of laughter, never lasting as long as you wanted them to, before giving you a fond expression that had your cheeks threatening to heat up. “Hell no, sweetheart. Always liked a gal who’s quick ‘n clever.”

“Yeah,” you questioned in a teasing tone with a nudge to his side, maneuvering to avoid a group ahead of you that had slowed down in the middle of the path. “Doesn’t mean a quick ‘n clever gal would like you back.”

“Ouch,” he hissed, clutching at his chest dramatically as if he were wounded despite the smile on his handsome face. It twisted a little then, wistful, eyes becoming slightly unfocused with memory. “Maybe a couple did. Once upon a time.”

Immediately, you regretted your thoughtless comment. You never really meant to make him feel bad, and sometimes, when things were so relaxed between the two of you, when you could forget why Bucky came to stay with you or why Sam knew you’d be available, when it felt like you were just two people enjoying each other’s company, you could lose your filter. Pressing in a little closer, with a reassuring squeeze of his hand and a pat to his chest, you tried to sound light and jovial. “Aw, don’t worry, Buck. I’ve no doubt you’ll be able to snag yourself another. Word of caution, though. We tend to raise ‘em a lot snarkier than you might be prepared for.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised, darlin,” Bucky countered, nowhere near as upset as you thought. “Now, pull out that map and let’s see where we’re headed.”

After perusing the list of booths and shows and attractions, you and Bucky decided to head in the direction of the rides situated near the back of the fairground. Though, on the way, there was a little petting zoo and pony ride area that had been set up for little kids that you insisted on stopping at despite Bucky’s attempt at a put-upon sigh. The people running the booth were getting ready to close up since it had gotten dark, the riding long since ceased to allow the ponies a chance to rest before the trip back. But there were still a few animals left to see and a woman sat at a folding table with a lock box and small bags of various feeds and treats you could buy to give to the animals. There was a muscular dark brown quarter horse just outside of the makeshift booth, ears pricking up back and forth at the sound of children passing by, sticking its head inside in search of apple slices or sugar cubes it was accustomed to receiving. It sniffed at your empty hand when you approached and seemed none too pleased, but let you stroke its nose as its ears perked toward Bucky, who was keeping a respectable couple feet between them. Before you could question it, the horse pulled its nose from your hand and bowed its head toward Bucky a few times, pressing its snout toward him expectantly. Slowly, though he didn’t seem afraid, Bucky raised his right hand toward the animal. The horse was undeterred by the carefulness of the movements and immediately shoved its nostrils to Bucky’s palm, mouthing a bit at emptiness before snorting loud and a little wet right into Bucky’s face.

“Thanks, pal,” he said evenly, relaxing after having instinctively braced for the impact. You had to chew at the insides of your cheeks to keep from laughing as he wiped at his face with his left sleeve and gave the horse a few quick pats on its neck. But there wasn’t any real ire in his voice when he added “Just had ta make me look bad, huh’
Bored at this point and with no other people waiting around with food, the horse simply turned around and walked off a few paces to its water trough to drink. Bucky raised his eyebrows at you in a silent, mild chastisement, obviously placing blame for the incident solely on you and your desire to see the animals. You couldn't hold back your grin at that, grabbing his hand to tug him along toward the little pen where pygmy goats were standing around, bleating every so often.

"Goats," Bucky huffed under his breath as you both stepped into the little area.

"What've you got against goats," you asked him, unable to contain your chuckle while a few young ones came up to greet you.

"Nothin, just..." he tried to wave the question off, but that look over took his face. Remembering. And a grin cracked across his face, hands sliding into his pockets. "On our way back from a mission, got late, decided to bed down for the night. No one really sleeps much in the field... 'cept maybe Dernier, I think. Anyway, me, Stevie, and Jones got an early wake up call. Roaming herd a goats got past Dugan and were chewin on our tent and riflin through our supplies."

"Oh my god," you breathed out, mouth and eyes wide at the story he regaled you with. You were already crouched down, petting one of the kids. "That's wild!"

Bucky shrugged a bit and hiked up the fabric of his jeans an inch or two so he could hunker down beside you comfortably. "S'how I found out goat doesn't taste too bad."

Your hands shot out to cover the goat's ears and it gave a gentle bleat in protest. The stern look you turned on Bucky had his shoulders twitching minutely in a soundless chuckle. Just then, one of the smaller kids turned and butted its head against Bucky's knee. It didn't accomplish anything besides drawing his attention, but the goat tried one more time before turning and head butting the kid in front of you right in the side, knocking it over with another short bleat.

"Ah, tough shit for a little guy," Bucky smirked before patting his knee to lure the kid back over, resulting in another ineffective headbutt. "Should name you after Steve."

"It's a girl goat, Bucky," you informed with a snicker, helping the accosted kid up onto its legs.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said to the goat with a serious nod of his head, nearly making you double over with laughter. Bucky hooked a thumb in your direction. "Should name you after her then."

Unsure exactly how to take that jab, you reached out and shoved at his chest lightly with a cluck of your tongue. Bucky was strong and agile and well-balanced, so you knew the instant he started to fall onto his ass, it was because he let it happen. Still, you hadn't anticipated the quick and fluid way one of his feet shot out to kick your support leg out from under you, sending your own ass swiftly into the dirt and straw beside him. He was on his feet a split second later, satisfied look on his face, as he held his hand out to you. You tried to glare, you honestly did, but there was just something too funny about the situation, the playfulness in Bucky's eyes, that wouldn't let it stay there for long. When you took his hand, he swiftly pulled you upright and after dusting yourselves off, the two of you wound up chuckling together as you made your way back out to the rest of festival arm in arm.

The lines for the few rides weren't as terrible as you imagined they'd be. Chalk that up to it being the last night of the festival and a Sunday night. It wasn't long before you were on the Scrambler, Bucky on the outside of the carriage so he wouldn't crush you during the spinning. You couldn't help but watch his reaction, certain it had been quite some time since he'd had the chance to be on an amusement ride. Things started off fairly easy, a smooth spinning that had the corners of his lips turning up ever so slightly. Yet, the faster the ride went, the wider his grin got, until he was laughing every time you were forced against his side with a giggled yelp of surprise. He was so happy and
having such a good time, you wished the experience never had to end for him. But all rides do end, eventually, this one with you leaning against Bucky a bit as you walked, somewhat disoriented. One off step as you exited the ride let you know he was slightly off-kilter too, but managing and still smiling.

"Let's hit the Ferris Wheel," Bucky suggested next and you noted the baseline of excitement in his voice and eyes as he tugged you along.

You didn't protest, though Ferris Wheels weren't exactly your favorite thing. Truth be told, outside of looking out of a window of a very tall building or maybe happening upon a nest of angry hornets, Ferris Wheels were probably one of your least favorite things. You and your sister always passed it up when you came to the festival. But the pounding in your heart and the flop of your stomach were a small price to pay to do something Bucky would enjoy. It wasn't like he asked for much. The fact that he asked for this was incentive enough to swallow down the measly bit of anxiety that crept up your throat. Besides, you told yourself, the Ferris Wheel wasn't really that tall, you could handle it. So, you waited in line next to Bucky, distracting yourself with the lines of his face, the sweep of his hair into its bun, the way his neck curved as he watched the cars circle, the light in his eyes when he smiled over at you. And you smiled back.

Soon, it was your turn to be ushered into a seat, the ride operator mechanically checking the safety bar after you sat down. Bucky's gaze was darting everywhere in wild curiosity as you began your slow ascent. Though, a few moments later, you heard him say your name with no small amount of concern. You weren't exactly sure when you managed to screw your eyes shut so tightly, but you had to crack an eyelid to see. Your car was only halfway up, knuckles of your hands gone white with the death grip you had on the front edge, and you quickly had to turn your attention to Bucky before your head started to spin.

"What's wrong," he asked, frowning with his brows furrowed in worry, obviously noticing your hands.

"It's nothing. I'm fine," you assured in a weak voice and forced your fingers to let go of the car to slide them into your lap.

Consternation took over Bucky's face then, looking at you in disbelief. "Nothin hell, darlin! You're shaking."

You were, the fine tremble of muscles wound too tightly for their own good. Taking in a deep breath, you let it out slow to try steadying yourself. And still you felt your heart thump heavy in your chest. "It's just... Ferris Wheels aren't my thing. Rollercoasters I'm fine with, high as you please, because they just move so fast I don't have time to think about it. Ferris Wheels are slow and all I do is have time to think about it."

"Then why the hell d'ya let me drag you on here for," he questioned in frustrated shock, though it sounded to you like he was just shy of shouting.

"Because you wanted to," you countered as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. And to you, it nearly was. "Bucky, I saw how excited you were. And we've been doing all the things I suggested, you deserve to do something that gets you excited. I will be a-okay, just gotta remember to breathe, is all."

"You're somethin else, you know that, sweetheart," Bucky sighed with a shake of his head after a moment. "You're crazy and ridiculous and absolutely somethin else. C'mere."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," you whined out involuntarily, fear taking over, snapping your eyes shut when
he shifted beside you and caused the carriage to swing as it started to inch closer to the top after a pause.

"Shhhh, shhh. It's alright," he soothed gently, left arm coming up to rest across the back of your shoulders, cool metal thumb swiping idly at the nape of your neck. "I gotcha, m'right here. Hey, look at me. Look at me."

The feel of his right hand warm against your jaw, urging your face towards his, surprised you. And with less effort than you expected, you managed to open your eyelids. Bucky's thumb and forefinger slid down to grip your chin, tilting it up until you were looking him in the eye. A gentle smirk pulled at his lips, reassuring, as he shook his head slowly. "M'not gonna let anything happen to you, sweetheart. Promise I ain't. Just keep breathin like you said, but I gotcha, alright?"

All you could do in that moment was nod. He gave a quick nod of his own in kind, smile somewhat pleased, and his hand moved from your face to slip his fingers between yours against both of your thighs. You felt your cheeks starting to burn, so let your attention fall to where you held hands. Metal fingers still curved delicately around the back of your neck. Remembering what he told you about the way his arm worked, you knew the few times his fingertips and thumb strayed across your scalp were purely for your benefit, soft mechanical whirring filling your ears. It did little to even your breathing or slow the thundering in your chest, but something about the gentleness of it and Bucky's calming voice did help you relax some.

"Sorry you gotta put up with my shit," you eventually groused, ashamed of yourself, when the carriage reached the apex. "This was supposed to be something fun for you."

"You don't hear me complainin, angel face," Bucky replied, laughing off your statement though you snorted at the moniker. Metal curled at your hairline a tad as his other hand squeezed yours and he continued in a proud, if not boisterous tone. "I gotta pocket fulla cash I won fair and square. I'm out havin fun on a gorgeous night in the company of a lovely young lady who doesn't much mind my rough edges. And I've probably got the best view in the whole damned state. I'm on toppa the world, sweetheart. Toppa the world. Only thing could make it better is knowin you're havin fun too."

"I am having fun. Cross my heart," you admitted while writing an invisible "x" over the left side of your chest.

"Even up here," he asked, eyeing you skeptically with a raised brow and a twisted little grin.

You cringed a bit as the Ferris Wheel started to move again, finally descending. With a shrug, you answered "Better with you than without you."

Bucky chuckled, those boyish dimples deepening at his cheeks. You had to suppress a tingle in your spine when metal fingertips ran gently across your scalp to give your hair an almost affectionate tug. "Hey, I'll take it."

"This really was a nice idea, Bucky," you told him seriously, taking his right hand in both of yours to smile at him. That softness eased across his face again as you added "I was a bit surprised you wanted to come out here after everything, but I'm glad you did. And I'm really glad you invited me along."

Between the way he was looking at you and the anxiety that tried to flare with every creek and groan of the ride, you knew if you didn't stop talking then, you'd probably start to babbling like an idiot. Certainly, neither of you wanted that. Instead, you wedged yourself against his side, under his arm, before leaning your head against his shoulder. Bucky stilled at that and you suddenly worried that
you may have overstepped his comfort zone. You were about to pull away when his left hand hooked around your far arm to hold you fast, inviting you to settle back against him. The ride didn't last much longer after that. Or at the very least, it wasn't as unnerving as it had been at the start. Though Bucky did make sure you got out of the carriage as quickly as humanly possible once it stopped.

Food was next on the agenda. You weren't sure you'd ever heard Bucky's stomach growl so loud since the two of you started sharing meals regularly. And after checking out the map again, he eagerly picked a place out. You ordered a cheeseburger while Bucky treated himself to three hot dogs that he slathered in mustard, grumbling about the lack of sauerkraut available. The way he wolfed down the first one after you found a place to sit, you considered signing him up for the next available eating contest. It was difficult trying to eat when you were on the verge of laughing. At some point in his eating, Bucky looked up at you, smiling with one cheek puffed out and loaded down with a half-chewed mouthful, licking a stray bit of mustard and crumbs from his lips, to say "They're no dirty water dogs, but they ain't half bad."

You barely managed to finish your burger before he was done with his hot dogs, because you'd taken his speed as somewhat of a challenge when he'd smirked at you. But you still won and that meant a little victory dance as you grabbed up your trash to throw away. Bucky wasn't too far behind you with his own. Once finished, you started down one direction only to feel a finger hook in one of your belt loops to pull you the opposite way.

"Ah, ah! This way, sugar britches," Bucky grinned, tugging you a little. "Somethin I wanna do next over here."

"Sugar britches," you sputtered out in laughter. "Jeez, Bucky. That your way of saying you think I got a sweet ass?"

There was little preparing for the devilishly delighted face he gave you, head tilted back with an eyebrow raised and his lower lip tucked firmly between his teeth, almost like you were good enough to eat. Or the unexpected fluttering in your stomach when he grabbed your hand and, in a heated voice, simply said "C'mon."

"Where the hell are you dragging me to," you asked, trying to sound more prickly than you really felt. It wasn't quite dragging, considering Bucky had paced himself for you easily, but he definitely seemed determined to get wherever he was going with a quickness.

"It's tucked away back here," he explained as he slowed a bit, apparently approaching the destination. Rounding the side of a stall, you saw exactly what he was talking about. An old school photo booth, graphics and fonts on the outside severely dated, but otherwise seemingly in good condition. You thought you might've seen it there well-over a decade ago, though the paint looked to have been touched up fairly recently and the curtain clean and new, but were surprised someone even still bothered to bring it, considering modern technology. Yet, Bucky smiled at you, walking backwards as he pulled you toward the booth. "C'mon, wanna get a picture with you."

Rolling your eyes, a little too fond at his enthusiasm, you let yourself be led easily, though you couldn't resist a light-hearted tease. "Y'know, we can take pictures on phones nowadays."

"Yeah, I know. Ain't the same though," Bucky countered as he reached back to draw the curtain open. When you fixed him with a warm smile and started to move past him, he stopped you with a hand to your elbow. You looked up to find most of the bravado gone from his face, brow knit in thoughtfulness as he seemed to be searching for the right words to say. His tongue darted out over
his lips and when he finally spoke, his tone was quiet, secretive, like whenever he shared what was going on inside his head with you. "Almost everyone's gone in all my photos. Same with yours. Figured we could both use some new ones."

"Aw, Bucky," you whispered, feeling the sting of tears threatening at the corners of your eyes. With a bit of a wet chuckle, you gave his chest a weak shove. "That is not the kinda thing you say to someone right before a picture. Now get in there."

He seemed to understand the gentle chastisement, a soft smile quirking his lips as he ducked into the booth. Taking a moment, you sniffled some and wiped at your eyes to compose yourself. Damn you and how emotional you got when Bucky was just being nice. One more sniff and gentle sigh and you followed him into the booth. It was bright and a little cramped inside, Bucky already settled on the little bench, reading the instructions as he waited patiently. You were just trying to figure out how to situate yourself so you could both be in the picture when suddenly his fingers gripped into your hips to pull you down toward him.

You let out a surprised gasp at being tipped off balance. An airy oof accompanied it a split second later when you landed on his left knee. Pivoting to face him better, you thwacked him in the chest with your elbow. Not enough to hurt, just in warning, though a half grin still crept across your face when you grumbled "Gonna manhandle you back one a these days."

The look Bucky gave you at that was entirely too amused and mischievous, corners of his eyes crinkling, but he said nothing as he reached into his pocket to pull out some money for the booth. You used that time to read the instructions yourself. They were simple enough. Insert money for 4 snaps, buzzer sounds to indicate when to pose, take your pictures on the way out.

“You know, you can do different poses in these, right,” you snickered at Bucky, brushing the stray hairs out of his face as he leaned around you to get the booth started. “You don’t have to sit perfectly still and wait like thirty minutes for it to develop.”

Turning wide eyes on you, he scoffed loudly while settling back on the bench with a chuckle. “Crissakes, sweetheart, m’not that old.”

“Just making sure,” you shrugged and grinned in return. To face the camera, you straddled his leg, sliding further up his thigh until your back reached his chest so you could both fit into the frame. And you tried not to think about it, how aware you were of muscles bunching beneath you as he shifted to get comfortable or the feel of his fingers curled loosely at the juncture of your hips and thighs. You cleared your throat quietly before throwing him a smile. “Get ready. First one, just regular, okay?”

“Sure,” he replied gently, nodding as he straightened himself to prop his chin over your shoulder.

The loud buzz sounded and a moment later was the faint noise of a shutter snapping closed. The next one, you and Bucky agreed on something silly. When the buzz went off again, the two of you were looking at each other; you held your chin thoughtfully as he reached for his hair bun. The third one, you made a shocked face, only partially exaggerated because you weren’t expecting it when he abruptly grabbed your upper arms and pretended he was going to bite your neck like a vampire. By the time the final picture came around, you were both laughing and you just lounged back against his shoulder, right arm hooked up so you could give the back of his neck a fond little scratch.

Admittedly, after the last picture was taken, you may have kept leaning against Bucky a bit longer than necessary. It was warm and comfortable in that spot. And there was something very appealing about being tucked away from the busy crowds of the festival with just him to keep you company.
Yet, as kind as he was not to just push you off his lap, you got to your feet before you had a chance to make him too uneasy. Grinning down at him, you noticed he looked like he wanted to say something, mouth slightly open with that contemplative expression. But then he just smiled as he stood up, shuffling you out of the booth and back into the night air.

The photos were already waiting for you and Bucky snatched them up before you had the chance. Cupping them in his hands, he held them up in the light so he could see them better. You watched his attention travel down the slip of photo paper, grin spreading until he got to the last one. Then, he blinked, eyes growing a little wide as his mouth fell into a lopsided smirk. His playful gaze darted toward you before he quickly ripped the bottom picture off and handed you the rest. "All yours."

"Hey, what about that one," you complained as you glanced over the ones he'd given to you. They were nice little pictures, even the plain smiling one at the top, but you were extremely curious about the one he was spiriting away.

"This one's mine," Bucky replied in the matter-of-fact tone, pulling out his wallet to slip the photo inside before shoving it back in his pocket.

Pursing your lips in an annoyed little pout, you asked "Don't I even get to see it?"

"Not a chance, sweetheart," he shook his head slightly, mischief in his smirk. "M'reservin it, case I need it for blackmail one day."

"What the hell could you possibly blackmail me for," you cried out, both astonished and amused at his reasoning, though you took a moment to carefully fold the photos at the breaks to fit into your pocket.

Bucky shrugged before entwining his metal fingers with yours and guiding you back to the main thoroughfare. "Dunno. I'll figure somethin out."

"You're a shit, you know that," you growled with a smile, nudging your elbow into his side.

"Hey now," he chided and wagged his finger at you. "Watch your fuckin mouth."

"Ah, fuck that noise," you waved him off while side stepping someone who had slowed in the path. This earned you a bark of low laughter from Bucky.

The two of you moseyed around a while, just to see what there was to see. A local band was playing and drew a small crowd. Not really your sort of music, but you paused long enough to let Bucky decide if he might like it or not. He wasn’t hooked, so you moved on. Neither of you were very interested in the Hall of Mirrors or the Glass Maze. You shared a look of mutual understanding and kept walking. Eventually, you found your way around to a small row of carnival games. There weren’t a lot of them, being a small festival and all, but there were still people watching and participating in chance and skill games. Big stuffed animal prizes hung in the booths to draw people in and small little consolation toys were tucked away behind the counters.

Bucky slowed to a stop in front of the Milk Bottles game, familiar, but calculating look on his face as he watched the person at the counter play a round. A pyramid of six milk bottles stood on a pedestal and it was your job to knock them all completely off said pedestal with only three softballs in order to win one of the grand prizes. The person at the counter did not accomplish this, instead only knocking four of the thick bottles to the table underneath. It still earned them a consolation prize though, a little souvenir cup, which they immediately handed off to the excited little kid beside them before both
scampered off to enjoy the rest of their night. When the way was cleared, Bucky shot you a grin before leading you toward the game.

“Oh, gonna try your hand at it, huh,” you asked, joking brightly when he pulled some money out to play.

As the attendant handed over the softballs, Bucky shook his head with a dour expression before cracking a knowing smile. “I’m gonna win ya somethin’.”

“Awful sure of yourself there, Buck,” was your chuckled reply, the two of you retreating to the designated throw line.

“Yes I am,” he preened a bit with his chin up. Handing two of the projectiles over to you to hold, he tossed the one in his hand a few times. It seemed like he was gauging the weight of it. “Could win ya somethin from all of em, if ya like.”

“Let’s just stick with the one. Wouldn’t know what to do with all those stuffed animals,” you played along. Then you added in a low voice, so only he could hear, “Cocky bastard.”

“Ooh, honey, you don’t know the half of it,” Bucky cooed back just as low, suggestive, leaning in close. With a scoff both scandalized and entertained, you hip checked him and he let himself be moved half a step to the side. He pushed back gently, just enough to clear you out of the way. Having fun. And your heart fluttered at that and the wide grin on his face. “You just thinka what stuffed animal ya want, alright, sweetheart?”

Shaking your head with an exasperated sigh, you backed up a couple paces to give him plenty of room. Bucky turned a small grin on you and winked before winding up and letting the softball fly. Something, you weren’t sure what, but something in the motion told you he hadn’t used the full measure of his strength for the throw. Still, it hit square in the middle of the makeshift pyramid and all but one of the bottles toppled, though only three fell off the pedestal and onto the table below. With two chances left, Bucky didn’t seem too concerned at the moment when you handed him another softball. He tossed again, getting a feel for it, before launching it. This one knocked the standing milk bottle completely off the pedestal, but only succeeded in pushing the other two a little closer to the edge.

Now, Bucky seemed a bit frustrated. Not angry, not verging on anything nearly like… you pushed that thought from your mind. But he was frustrated, you could see it in the slant of his brow and the working of his jaw, ignoring the coaxing of the booth attendant. He gave the remaining bottles a long look, as though he could scare them into submission. When he pulled his arm back to throw the last softball, you knew he was going to put some force behind it. On instinct, you stepped in close to him once the ball left his hand to watch it. A second later, it plowed through the two remaining bottles, knocking them to the table as intended. That was immediately followed by a loud thud and crack as the softball struck the back of the booth and splintered the wood there, leaving behind a decent dent.

“Shit,” Bucky breathed out, eyes wide in absolute surprise. It was obvious he hadn’t expected something quite like that to happen.

“Shiiit,” the attendant echoed, with much more feeling, and his face was somewhere between astonished and fearful.

You practically exploded with laughter, the whole scene too hilarious. The looks on both their faces, the sound of them both. Especially Bucky. You just couldn't hold it back. It threatened to double you
over. With no other thought than to stifle your wild peals of giggling, you gripped Bucky's arm and turned to bury your face in his shoulder, free hand curling into the front of his shirt for purchase. The fabric muffled your noise as you tried catching your breath against him. It finally started to subside, and nearly stopped abruptly, when you felt almost more than heard a deep, answering rumble vibrate through Bucky's chest and over your skin. Then his arms were snaking around you, right across the small of your back and his left hand pressed firm between your shoulder blades to keep you tucked in close. And as if you weren't having enough trouble before, the feel of his low, breathy chuckle warm near your ear made it damn near impossible to fill your lungs. Made you feel a little light headed.

Swallowing around a dry throat, you forced yourself to calm down, and not just from the laughter. It was only a hug, friendly, innocuous. You twisted your head to look up at his face and found Bucky grinning at you, thoroughly amused, with the barest hint of red at his cheeks. No doubt he was still a little embarrassed at the bit of damage he accidentally caused. When you pulled back to face him better, his grip loosened, but didn’t let go. Instead, he anchored both hands at your lower back and used the tip of his tongue to drag his lower lip between his teeth, scrunching his nose and eyes at you.

“C’mon, beautiful,” he snickered lightly. He began walking forward, forcing you to shuffle backwards a few steps, eliciting a surprised little squawk from you, until he finally let you go so you could turn around. “Gotta pick out the prize ya want.”

“You won, it’s your prize,” you argued with him over your shoulder, his pace keeping him close and his left hand just barely pressed to the small of your back as he guided you toward the booth.

“Nuh-uh.” Bucky shook his head vehemently, though the smirk never left. “You deserve a prize just for puttin up with me. Now, pick somethin.”

“Whatever,” you sighed with a roll of your eyes. After a quick glance at all the prizes offered, unfettered by the attendant who was still scratching his head over by the dent in the back wall, one of them finally caught your attention and you gave Bucky a triumphant, smug smile. “Fine. I’d like that huge polar bear.”

From the suspiscious look he leveled your way, you could tell he was onto you. The choice was meant to be funny, maybe a little irreverent, and you were prepared to change your mind if you had even the slightest inkling that the connection upset him. In truth, you weren’t exactly sure what reaction to expect. What you got was that soft expression, almost edging on bashful as he looked away with a laughing snort. “As you wish.”

Rapping his knuckles gently on the counter to draw the worker’s attention, Bucky called out “’Scuse me. Uh… sorry ’bout the wall.”

“No, no. That’s alright. Got a hell of an arm on you” the man replied with a distracted smile, sounding far from alright. It took him a moment to actually look at both of you and his eyes stuck mostly to you. “Congrats though. You can choose one of the grand prizes.”

Bucky gave a gruff, noncommittal hum before continuing casually. “The lady here’d like that polar bear, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh yeah, sure. Of course,” the man babbled a little as he moved to pull the polar bear from the hangers. When he brought it over, you realized it was even larger than you’d originally thought, as big as your torso with floppy arms and legs and a black nose with glossy button eyes. “Here you go,
ma’am. One polar bear.”

“Thanks,” you smiled, grabbing the stuffed animal and clutching it to your chest. You almost felt dwarfed by it. After a quick glance to Bucky, a somewhat fond expression on his face, you poked your chin out over the shoulder of the bear to comment to the attendant “I’ve recently developed an affinity for wintery things.”

The man was clearly confused, but managed a polite smile and nod as you turned from the counter. And that was just as well, the remark hadn’t really been meant for him anyway. A second later, you heard Bucky throw the attendant a half-assed thanks before he quickly caught up with you. There was a grin on his face as he fell in step beside you, looking a bit proud of himself. When his gaze turned down to you, you offered a mocking mirror of his earlier expression, tucking your bottom lip between your teeth and scrunching your face at him playfully. He chuckled under his breath before slipping his hand in yours.

It was starting to get late and little remained at the festival you and Bucky cared to check out. Between falling temperatures and the cumbersome ordeal of lugging a large stuffed animal around, the two of you decided it was as good a time as any to head home. Though, not before stopping to grab another couple orders of fried Oreos on the way out, per Bucky’s insistence. There was a remote starter on the borrowed car that Bucky had figured out, which meant it was already toasty warm inside. After popping the bear in the back, you sighed in sheer delight when you were finally settled into the passenger seat.

The drive home was fairly quiet; that comfortable, content quiet that comes with the winding down of a good day. You put on some more music and fiddled with all the buttons to see what they did while Bucky half-begged you not to press any buttons that looked like bombs, missiles, or ejector seats. There didn’t seem to be anything of the sort, though you doubted it would have surprised you much if it had, considering where the car came from. By the time he was pulling in the driveway, you already had your keys pulled out and in your hand to make a quick transition from warm car to warm house.

"Think you could maybe grab the bear so I can run inside fast, please" you asked, already undoing your seatbelt and flashing a cheesy, begging grin as he pulled up to the house.

"I guess," he replied with an exaggerated, put-upon sigh before smirking at you and grabbing one of the fried Oreos to pop into his mouth.

When he got out of the car to do as you'd requested, you reached for the paper baskets, intent on bringing them inside for him to finish. But when you looked down, you realized there was only one left. Technically, you’d eaten your half and this one was supposed to be Bucky’s, but you remembered him eating your last one earlier in the evening and a devious smirk came to your face. Picking up the powdered sugar covered morsel, you hopped out of the car and looked at him across the roof as he reached into the backseat for the bear.

"Well, look what we have here," you said in teasing tone, holding up the fried Oreo so he could see it. "Last one. Wonder who gets this."

Bucky eyed you for a moment, suspicious again, curious. With the bear in hand, he closed the door and ventured "That one's mine and you know it."

"Uh-huh," you nodded, shutting your own door and backing up a couple paces toward the porch. "But, the way I remember it, you ate my last one when we first got there. So, eating this one would make us even."
"That so?" Bucky's eyebrow raised and there was something almost predatory about the sly expression that grew on his face, something a little feral in his smile as he leaned his elbow on the roof of the car to point at you. "Sweetheart, you eat that and you will be in a world of trouble."

Originally, you'd only meant to make a light-hearted point, but the plans suddenly shifted with the way he looked at you. You slowly eased back a few more steps, his gray eyes seeming almost on fire with glee as he watched you, and said defiantly "Tough talk coming from a guy who's carrying a teddy bear."

His hand slammed down hard on the top of the car; the loud, resounding thud causing you to jump slightly with a surprised little squeak. There was no malice in the action or the hungry grin on his face, but before he could make a move to round the car, you were already turned on a heel, sprinting toward the house. A wild, excited laugh bubbled up from your chest as you crossed the path and hit the stairs, childishly taking them with the assistance of the sides of your fists, one clutching keys and the other trying to keep from crushing the coveted treat. Bucky could have easily overtaken you by this point, so when you reached the porch without being nabbed, hurriedly trying to unlock the door with your whole body shaking in amused anticipation, wrecking your fine motor skills as your fingers jingled the keys brightly, you looked over your shoulder to check. He hadn’t been chasing you so much as stalking, deliberate, confident strides eating up the distance, but leaving him still in the yard with one hand gripping the polar bear by the scruff of the neck. When you made eye contact, he paused for just a heartbeat with a wolfish stare before darting forward. This renewed your struggle with the lock and your hysterical giggling.

Finally, you managed to get the door open and you burst inside. This startled the cat from the back of the couch to send her bolting down the hallway. The door was left wide open as you turned to face it, backing up a few steps with a grin to toss your keys on the table, skin buzzing and lungs trying to catch your breath despite your laughter and exertion. Through the screen, you could just see the outline of Bucky taking the steps two at a time in pursuit. An idea flashed through your mind, not well-thought out, but seemed funny in the moment, and as soon as Bucky was through the storm door, you started moving your jaw, pretending to chew as you tucked the food into your palm. "Sorry, Buck," you muffled out around an imaginary mouthful, desperate to rein yourself in. "So good. Too bad that was the last one."

"I ain't buyin that for one second, doll." Bucky's voice was practically a growl, playful, but deep, as he kicked the front door closed behind him and tossed the bear over the back of the couch. You could see his muscles winding up as he prowled forward slowly. "Now, hand it over before I come over there and take it."

With a wide grin, you barely had time to turn in an attempt to flee before Bucky pounced. He moved lightning fast, left arm hooking around your waist to haul you back against him before you could get too far, making you cry out in giddy surprise. You could hear his deep, warm chuckle as you laughed and wiggled and twisted this way and that to keep the prize just out of his reach every time he grabbed for it. After a few moments, a low, mischievous growl rumbled through his chest as he repositioned his grip lower on you. You let out an undignified squeal when he hoisted you off the ground with his arm around your hips, feet dangling and kicking feebly off the ground with your ass resting high against his chest.

"Put me down, asshole" you shrieked, trying to break free to no avail. Even if you weren't laughing or your heart racing after the thrill of the chase, Bucky was too strong and he had a tight hold on you.

"C'mon, sugar," Bucky coaxed in a honeyed voice while still failing to reach your hand with the way
"This cookie? You want this cookie," you asked with rebellious edge to your voice, momentarily abating the twinge of nervousness from being in the air. "Oh, I'll give ya this cookie."

You had every intention of smashing the thing in his too-handsome face, in that smugly curved mouth of his, just out of delightful spite. Obviously, he must have realized this because as soon as your arm lowered to his reach, he caught your wrist, firm and gentle, and guided your hand smoothly toward his lips. Opening his mouth wide, he clamped down around the Oreo and your fingers alike, not enough to hurt, but enough to feel the quick scrape of his teeth against your skin there as he pulled the morsel from you.

"Eeew," you huffed in exaggerated disgust as you pitched forward to wipe your fingers dry on his shirt.

"Quit squirmin or I might drop ya," Bucky warned through his quickly chewed mouthful, though he still seemed to have just as good a grip on you as before.

"Don't you--" But you were cut off by your own gasp when Bucky gave you an easy twisting bounce into the air. The fluid motion had you facing him when he caught you in both arms and you let out a nervous, exhilarated laugh when he smiled proudly and licked the remnants of powdered sugar from his lips before lowering you to your feet. Your legs were like jelly from all the excitement, so you fist your hand in his shirt to steady yourself a moment. Bucky didn't seem to mind one bit, keeping his left arm anchored at your back when you gave the slightest indication of wobbliness. When you looked up to give him an appreciative smile, gray eyes were scouring your features and he took a wavering breath.

Then, Bucky's lips were on yours, warm and plush and inviting. Heart thundering in your chest, your eyes fluttered shut to savor the sweet sensation and you tilted your head, noses brushing close, to better mold your mouths together. There was a gentle whirring noise, muffled by fabric as Bucky pulled you flush to his body. And when his fingers slid into your hair, a soft sound escaped your aching lungs. You felt him shudder against you before the tip of his tongue darted out across your lower lip, teeth gently nipping and sucking at the tender skin there, like he was begging for more. A tendril of heat coiled low in your stomach and you pressed impossibly closer.

It was just about everything you imagined kissing Bucky would be like. Except... you weren't exactly sure when you had started anticipating it. When had your fairly altruistic desire to help someone in need suddenly become something much more selfish? Especially since you knew he wasn't meant to stay with you in the middle of nowhere. And by what strange turn of events had Bucky decided he wanted to kiss you? Perhaps it was just his good mood and the familiar setting of a fair, things that brought out the old charmer in him, coupled with your proximity. He just felt like kissing someone and you were there. If that was the case...

"Bucky," you panted gently, voice weaker than you intended, as your thoughts broke you from the kiss. Undeterred or misinterpreting, Bucky gave a deep hum of acknowledgment before his lips slid like silk down your chin and over your jawline. You began to crane your neck on instinct, but immediately shook your head to snap out of it. Flattening your palms on his chest, you gave a gentle push. "Bucky."

"What is it, sweetheart, hmm," he purred low and breathless, obviously detecting something off in your voice. He pulled back a little, kiss-swollen lips still close enough to share the same searing hot breaths, but you could see his eyes grown dark, pupils wide. "What is it?"

From the content slackness of his face, you could tell he had been lost in the act before you spoke. A
part of you just wanted to delve right back into it, ignore the voice in your head that was reminding you of reality. But you couldn't, so you took a deep breath and pulled further away from him, saying as evenly as you could "We've gotta stop."

"What's wrong?" Bucky's voice was more solid now, his brow furrowed in concern. You felt his grip on you loosen even as his hand slid from your hair. "I do somethin wrong?"

"No, Bucky. No. It's just..." You broke away from his embrace, taking a couple steps back. If you stayed too close to him, you might have lost your resolve. "We... We can't do this. It's not right."

"What do you mean? I thought you wanted..." The confusion that flooded his face tore at your insides.

"That's the problem," you explained, jamming your fingers through your hair. And damn if a part of you didn't already miss his there, but you bit that back. "I did want, and I shouldn't have. I'm still your caretaker, Bucky. I'm still in charge of you, and it's wrong of me."

Bucky winced then, and you weren't sure you could have gotten the same pained reaction if you had slapped him. You watched his Adam's apple bob before he licked his lips, eyes not meeting yours. "I thought we were past that."

"You have been doing so well, Bucky," you sighed, feeling like you weren't making your point well enough. You were fucking things up, fucking them up like you always do, but at least this time it was you trying to do something right. "Honestly, I don't understand why you keep coming back. But as it stands, you are still under my care. That makes a power imbalance. Doing this is me taking advantage of you in a vulnerable state."

"You think I can't decide for myself how I feel about something or someone," he asked in a low tone as his glowering gaze found yours again.

"I think your judgment is clouded in this situation." You could see the tension dancing in his features and there was a heavy stone in your belly making you feel sick as you continued clinically. "I think you were having a fun time and got swept up in the familiarity, the nostalgia of the festival. Might've brought up some old traits and you kissed me because I was here to kiss. Because I've been the only other person you've had extensive contact with in several months, outside of a handful of times you've been around others. That's why you need to be out in the real world, Bucky. You need to interact with more people and settle into this new century..."

"Oh, that's real rich comin from you, sweetheart," Bucky spat bitterly. The venom in the familiar pet name stung you more than you ever thought it could. "Tellin me I need to be out in the real world."

Bile burned in the back of your throat as you asked hotly, defensive, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"How long have you been holing yourself up in this house, huh? Hell, I leave this place more than you and I'm the one who's supposed to have a problem," he growled in reply, tone indignant, fine muscles twitching as the animosity that must have been growing inside him crested and flowed out in waves. "You wanna talk about takin care of people, like that's all you're meant for, but the moment, the very moment someone comes along and decides they wanna take care of you too, you push them away."

"I don't need you to take care of me, Bucky," you shouted back, your own temper flaring, something in his words hitting a raw nerve. "I was doing just fine on my own before you showed up and I will do just fine on my own after you're gone."
Your outburst seemed to blow some of the ire out of him, until he was standing straight and rigid, though there was still a guarded look to his face and his voice was gravel. "Do you want me to leave?"

"You have to at some point," you answered, tone too flat in your ears as you tried to cover up the pain. It hurt to say it out loud, somehow made it even more real. "You belong out there in the world, Bucky. Saving it, protecting your friend. That is where you find whatever atonement you think you need. Not stuck here."

Bucky didn't seem to have a comeback for that at the moment. You watched his jaw work behind lips pulled thin, eyes hard and deliberately avoiding yours. The sight ate at you, too much like when he'd first stepped foot in your house. Unable to bear it and the idea that you'd caused it with your less-than-tactful approach at the truth, before you beat a hasty cowardly retreat to your bedroom, you said as gentle as you could "It's getting late. You should probably try to get some sleep. It's been a long day."

---

Somehow, you managed to sleep a little that night. Tossing and turning and listening for even the slightest of sounds from Bucky had made it seem impossible. But you distinctly remember being awake when the windows were dark, worrying and wanting to go talk to him, and the next moment you opened your eyes to find sunlight filtering into your room. Sleep brought with it some clarity on the matter, and while it didn't eliminate the heavy burdened feeling in your chest, it did manage to lighten the load and give you a more solid understanding of what was going on inside your head. Obviously, you didn't handle things well the night before, but hopefully with time and a chance to review, you and Bucky could sit down and have a reasonable conversation about things. Discuss possible shared feelings and how to approach them together. Of course, you felt it was all going to start with your admittedly awkward apology.

Throwing the covers back to get on your feet, you felt a twinge of nervousness at the prospect of the first encounter. But you were the one who'd caused the issue, you could certainly take your lumps in dealing with it. Besides, it would be worth it to set things right between the two of you. Stepping into the hall found Bucky's bedroom door standing open. It wasn't too uncommon an occurrence lately, usually the cat poking her way in if he didn't pull the door to. You decided to peek in anyway, rapping your knuckles on the door to sound your entry. He wasn't there, just the bed neatly made and the newest addition of furniture; your sister's table, now his, finished and standing polished in the corner by a window. Though it was somewhat odd to see his dress shirts folded neatly on the table.

It was late morning from what you could gather without stopping to read a clock. Late enough Bucky should have been back from his run by then. You went to the kitchen to find the coffeepot still cold and empty unlike most mornings and realized you were starting to get a similar feeling in your gut. There was no sign of Bucky in the backyard doing his physical training when you looked out the kitchen window. The pit in your stomach grew larger as you rushed through the living room for the front windows. Something was off. Something was wrong. Potato was staring outside, but soon dashed from the window sill at your wild approach.

The sleek black car was gone from the driveway and suddenly your mind went frantic with worry. It wasn't the first time you'd discovered a car missing. Your heart clenched hard as the image of Bucky from the night before, looking so wounded, flashed through your memory. That was followed by the photos on the officer's desk in the station when the chief had called you in. Blood and a shattered car window. You couldn't breathe, panic washing over you like a tidal wave. The only thoughts in your head were to go get dressed, grab your keys, try to find him. There hadn't been a call or a knock on your door. Not yet. Maybe there was still time. Find him before it might be too late. You managed to
turn in your distraught stupor, intent on obeying the screaming voice in your brain. But halfway back through the living room, you noticed the stuffed polar bear sitting up on the arm chair with something pinned to the front of it.

You approached cautiously, as if it might come alive and bite you if you moved too quickly, though the added stress of the situation made every step feel like wading through molasses. Things were moving too slow when you needed them to move faster. It was a folded piece of paper attached to the bear's chest via safety pin, your name written on the outside in an unfamiliar, flowing script, though it didn't take a genius to figure that one out. Your hands trembled as you worked to undo the pin, nearly sticking yourself in the finger twice. Once you'd finally managed it, a part of you didn't want to open it, because you were positive what it was. Yet, you knew you needed to, if for no other reason than Bucky obviously wanted you to. Steeling yourself, you unfolded the paper and took a moment to decipher the handwriting.

"I know what you're thinking. Don't. I'm still alive and well... or as well as a fuck up like me can be. I doubt you'll ever believe me, but you didn't fail your sister. If anything, she failed you by giving up. And you sure as hell didn't fail me, doll. I left to go stay with Steve and The Avengers. Called ahead so they'd know I was coming. I'm sure Sam will expect a call from you to verify whenever you get this note. Just as I'm sure I'll be receiving several friendly lectures in the near future. I'd tell you to take care of yourself, but we both know you will.

Take care of yourself. Please, sweetheart. Bucky"

As you read the note, you sobbed in a mixture of relief and sadness. It was short, but you still had to blink away tears a few times to get all the way through it. And you read it three more times just to let things sink in. There was no reason to doubt he was still alive, like he said. Still, you'd definitely be texting Sam as soon as you could bring yourself to get on your feet and go find the cell phone in your bedroom. For the time being, all you could do was clutch the polar bear to your chest as you curled into a ball on the couch and let yourself cry in the silence of your empty house.
The first few weeks after Bucky left were rough. You ran the gamut of emotions from numb to sad to worried to angry and everything in between. While Bucky hadn’t added much noise to the household, the place somehow felt quieter, emptier. The cat sometimes meowed pitifully at the bedroom door or the armchair, like she was looking for him. That always tore at your heartstrings. Once or twice, you caught yourself staring out the kitchen window, half expecting to see him in the backyard training, your fingers always managing to land in the dent he’d put in the sink. Of course, there wasn’t much reason for you to tarry in the kitchen anymore, now that you had no one to feed except yourself. It was easier to make a sandwich or a TV dinner with less mess to deal with afterward.

Sam started calling or dropping by a couple times a week when he wasn’t busy, which was kind of him. A part of you felt selfish for letting him waste what little free time he had on you, but you knew if you protested his visits, he would give you that look. The same look he used the first time he’d shown up, a week after Bucky was gone, and you tried acting like you were perfectly fine. It ended with you trying to control your sobs as you recounted everything that happened that night and how badly you’d screwed up the whole situation. Everyone, Sam included, claimed that he didn't have any super powers, but you begged to differ, because if that man’s empathy and understanding and caring weren't beyond average human capabilities, then you were far more emotional than you cared to admit.

However in the end, you were unfortunately used to people leaving, whether by choice or by circumstance. This time, you consoled yourself with the knowledge that Bucky was alive and, from what you gleaned off Sam despite your fear of outright asking, doing good things like he was meant to. And though you were still hurt by what happened between the two of you and wished you could change how you’d handled things, you still couldn’t help feeling proud of him. By the time a month passed, you decided Bucky had a point about how hypocritical it was to expect him to grow and change when you were doing your best to stay static for so long. You weren’t necessarily ready for wild nights out on the town with strangers, especially whenever your mind flitted back to twirling on the dance floor and warm breath on your hands and soft lips against yours, but you could start at home. Sam seemed more than happy to help you sort through all the things left over from your sister and mother and grandmother. When you let slip why you decided to clear out the clutter, he gave
you a knowing, sympathetic smile and hugged you tight before going back to the task at hand.

While you made good headway over a couple weeks, there were just some things you couldn't bring yourself to part with. There was an afghan of your grandmother's that found a home on the little bench near the front window, its multicolored pastel granny squares a happy reminder of when you'd curl up in her lap in the long-gone rocking chair and gaze at the spring flowers growing in the field across the driveway. An old turntable and some of your mother and grandmother's old records ended up on a shelf in the living room; the ones you and your sister would dance around to when you were little and carefree. Sam's eyes were a little wet when you gave him a few of your sister's old Army things, including one of her dog tags, and some pictures of them together.

Maybe it was because the hurt was too fresh or because you could still imagine laughing, gray eyes and metal fingers against your skin, you never even considered getting rid of the few things Bucky left behind. The massive polar bear usually took up the armchair where the cat would lay against it, though sometimes when you were feeling particularly down and needy, it wound up being clutched to your chest. Two men's dress shirts and a black tie migrated to your room, and if you sometimes found yourself wearing one with the fabric hanging off you almost pathetically in an attempt to feel a little closer to something you lost, you'd probably never admit that to anyone.

Six weeks gone and Sam was called away from one of his visits earlier than expected on official Avengers business. Though he played it off with a cool smile, you could tell in the hard set of his eyes that it was probably something big. You tried not to dwell on what it meant when your first thought was whether or not Bucky would be in danger. Sam left with a box of knickknacks to drop off at the donation center on his way through town and a promise that his next visit would include a shopping trip to find frames for the pictures you were wanting to display. Once he was gone, the box of photos held your attention. You flipped through them, trying to choose which ones you liked best. It wasn't anywhere near as difficult as that night months prior, though your mind kept going back there. You worried your teeth across your lips at the phantom memory of stubble itching the skin there.

The sound of your cell phone going off startled you from your reverie. You twisted around where you sat at the end of the couch, fishing through your pockets, wondering if maybe Sam had forgotten something and was on his way back. When you saw the name on the screen, you froze a moment. Steve Rogers. You hadn't talked to him since before Bucky left. It wasn't as though the two of you were good friends. In fact, the only reason you originally had his number programmed into your phone was if... Your stomach flopped and your heart was beating sick in your chest as you pressed the accept call button. Before you even realized what was happening, you found yourself blurtting out frantically "Oh my god, Steve! Is Bucky okay?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, a sharp, confused sounding intake of breath before Steve's strained laugh. "Well, hello to you too."
"Jesus, Steve, I'm sorry," you sighed, running a hand through your hair and feeling the fool. Obviously, if Steve was willing to laugh, even like that, it couldn't be anything too terrible. "That was incredibly rude of me."

"No, that's okay," he assured. You could almost hear him shaking his head and moving his hand in that placating way of his. "Bucky's... alright. Though he is the reason I called."

Before you had a chance to inquire, Steve continued on, though he sounded decidedly less like that Steve you had gotten a little used to. No, something told you this was closer to the Captain America you'd seen on TV. It did nothing to put you at ease. "We've been called out on a mission. Bucky's coming along as support. But it's his first with the team and it could get dicey out there. I thought you deserved to know."

"Oh," was all you could muster for a moment. The implications, all of them, were ice in your veins as you tried to wrap your head around what he told you. Shifting on the couch, you moved to plant your feet firmly on the floor, suddenly feeling like things were trying to spin too fast. "Thanks, Steve. I appreciate you telling me."

A sigh sounded across the line, heavy with the weight of the world. But it was back to Steve's voice when he spoke again, cautious, but his. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," you nodded absent-mindedly, but thankful for a chance to think about something else. "Go ahead."

"What happened? Between you and Bucky," he ventured slowly, tone tinged with concern.

The question surprised you, both that he had to ask and that he even bothered. "Did he or Sam not tell you?"

"Bucky hasn't spoken about much of anything outside of training. He was starting to become engaged in things again, now... he's just there. Not as bad as when we first found him, but he's not where he was before he called me that morning. He's trying, there's just... just no real heart in it." You could hear the agitation in Steve's voice, the confused quality to it, desperate to understand. "Sam's talked to him a couple times. But it's not his place to out other peoples' business and I respect that. I wouldn't be asking myself, except..."

"Except you're worried about Bucky," you supplied, a ghost of a smile gracing your lips. "Trust me,
I get it and it's alright."

Blowing out a long, shaky puff of air, you tried to figure out exactly what to say. It just seemed so strange and surreal to be talking to Steve Rogers, of all people, about something as trivial as what amounted to a domestic fight. "Did you know he took me to our local Harvest Festival that night when he came back here?"

"Yeah. He'd been planning that date for almost a month. Seemed a little excited about it," Steve replied, sounding slightly curious, like he wasn't sure he was following along quite well enough.

"Date," you repeated with a tired laugh. Of course, in hindsight, that's what he'd wanted it to be. And of course everyone else but you probably knew at the start. "You know, maybe if he'd actually told me it was supposed to be a date, I wouldn't have been so caught off guard when he kissed me."

There was a moment's pause as you took a breath before Steve spoke, trying to summarize what you'd said. "So, Bucky kissed you, but never said anything about the way he might feel about you."

"Exactly," you responded, feeling as if he were finally understanding. "I mean, we sassed back and forth and he flirted. But you told me he used to be a flirt. Hell, he told me he used to be a flirt. For all I knew, he was just... feeling like himself again, dusting off an old personality trait. How was I supposed to know any different? And even if I thought he meant something by it, how was I to know it wasn't just because I was... convenient?"

"Did you not like him?" Steve's question sounded so simple, but was much more complicated. At least, it felt more complicated whenever you asked yourself the same thing during the last six weeks. But what did it matter now, all the complex things you felt, all the time spent questioning yourself? Bucky was gone and you'd missed any chance you had.

"I did like him, Steve. I really did, but I was scared," you admitted as much to yourself as to Steve. You rested your forehead in your hand, elbow propped on your knee, feeling the sting of tears threatening your eyes and the sharp tingle in your nose that you sniffed at gently. Suddenly feeling tired of dancing around the subject, you decided to go ahead and just rip off the bandage. Had to hurt less that way. "We got into an argument after I stopped the kiss. And I only stopped it because... because in the moment I thought it was a bad idea. I was overwhelmed and confused and worried that it was me taking advantage of him. Truth is, I was mostly just scared. Scared he was kissing a memory, an idea, not me. Scared about how easy and right it felt; how much I really wanted it. Because I knew he belonged with you and your team, Steve. He wasn't meant to stay with me. No one stays with me."
You managed to bite back a sob before it could escape your throat, sniffing again and trying to blink away the tears, trying to compose yourself. "Anyway, I guess I shouldn't be as upset as I have been. I'm sure it hurt him when he thought I was rejecting him. And I suppose I did tell him he couldn't stay here forever. I just didn't expect him to leave that night. I didn't want him to go. That morning I was gonna talk to him, apologize, maybe try to work something out between us. But he was gone. Worst part though, it took me a while to find the note he left, so in the first few moments it was just Bucky gone and the car gone. Just like... just like with my sister. I thought... I was just so worried."

"Oh." Apparently, it was Steve's turn to be at a momentary loss for words. Then there was a sharp intake of breath from his end, followed by a darkly amused huff. "Well, I guess that explains why Sam laid into him so bad when he came back from visiting you that first time."

"He did?" You were a bit taken by surprise at that. Sam never mentioned talking to Bucky. Then again, you did your best not to ask too much; maybe he was just trying not to upset you. It was equally as surprising to find out Sam fired off on someone like that. Sure, you knew he got angry, but it wasn't exactly like him to express it with someone he'd been actively trying to help.

"Yeah," Steve replied gently. "They seem to be on good terms now. Sam's still trying to help Bucky out, but I'd never seen Wilson so heated at someone who wasn't on an opposing side. It wasn't a knock-down drag-out fight, but Sam definitely must have called him on it. Neither would tell me why, just that there was an argument and they were dealing with it."

"Can I ask you a question, Steve," you said after a quiet second, imagining what that must have been like. When Steve made a noise in the affirmative, you gave a soft, somewhat bitter chuckle. "Am I a bad person for not being entirely upset with Sam for doing that?"

This earned you an answering, gentle laugh. "No. I don't think so. Honestly, if I'd known about it, I probably would've thrown my two cents in on the matter."

You weren't sure why, but the idea of Steve Rogers, not Captain America or an Avenger, but Steve, Bucky's best friend in the whole wide world, having some sympathy and understanding for you in this situation managed to make you feel a bit better. Like maybe you hadn't screwed things up as badly as you thought. Sighing a little, your eyes roamed haphazardly, landing on the coffee table in front of you. The indents from Bucky's episode still marred the wood there and you reached out to trace them with your fingers. "Might sound silly, given everything I just told you, but I miss him, Steve. I really do."

"Can I tell him you said that," he asked, something a bit knowing in his voice.
"Yeah," you replied quietly. Trying not to think about the fact it could be the last time you might ever get to communicate with Bucky, even by proxy, you added "Yes, please do. Could you maybe also tell him I said to be careful. And to pack a jacket in case it gets cold where you're going."

"I think I could manage that," Steve said and you could almost see his boyish grin. There was the sound of him shifting on the line, then he said in a low tone "I'm sorry. I've gotta get going."

"Okay, thanks for calling," you replied as brightly as you could. "You and Sam and everyone else take care too, alright?"

"We'll try our best," he answered a little more Cap this time. "Bye."

"Bye," you breathed into the phone before the line went dead.

Pulling the phone away from your ear, you cleared the call end message and locked the screen. It landed on the coffee table with a gentle clatter, the toss you gave it not too severe. You sat there a few moments, contemplating the conversation and everything behind it. Bucky was going on his first Avengers mission and Steve thought it and you were important enough that he wanted to tell you. You tried not to think about what Steve might consider a dicey situation. Turning back to the box beside you on the couch, you pulled out the neat little column of pictures from the photo booth, one missing with a slightly jagged edge left behind. Your fingers brushed gingerly over the images and hoped that, even if you never saw him again, Bucky would make it back safe.

---

Bucky sat alone in the idling quinjet, suited up and ready to go. The call for the mission had been sudden, but he was used to traveling light and already had a bag made up. It's what he'd been training for; what he'd been helping train the others for. Still, everyone else had things to deal with before take-off. Families to call, arrangements to make for their absences. All Bucky had outside of the team he was going with was the little photo booth picture he held delicately between his fingers and the clean scent of the shampoo he'd taken from your house. Every time he used it, he wondered if you noticed it missing yet.

The night of the Harvest Festival, when he teased you about keeping the picture, you naturally assumed he meant to blackmail you. On the contrary, if anyone got a hold of it, Bucky would be the one to use it against. He'd taken it out at least a hundred times since that night, practically had it memorized, but each time it still made his chest tighten like the first time he saw it. There he was, James Buchanan Barnes, the Asset, someone somewhere in between, gazing at you absolutely moon-eyed, like some love-struck idiot. And you, with your bright smile as you sat in his lap,
lounging against him easy, nails disappearing into his hair, his arms wrapped around your waist, you looked happy. You looked at home there. Even after six weeks, he could still feel the brush of your fingers at the nape of his neck; could still imagine the warm press of your body to his, the sweet taste of your lips.

"Hey, man." Sam's voice broke through Bucky's thoughts as his heavy booted steps echoed up the ramp into the jet. Bucky looked up to see him with his wings already strapped on, goggles dangling from one hand and a duffel bag in the other.

"Wilson," Bucky acknowledged with a curt nod, stuffing the picture back into one of the many hiding places on his person.

A smile quirked at the corner of Sam's lips as he settled across from Bucky. "She showed me the other pics you guys took in that photo booth. You two are cute together."

"How is she, Sam," Bucky asked, gruff, quiet. It was the same thing every time Sam came back from your place. No preamble, the barest of niceties, Bucky needed to know. Whether it was reassurance that you were okay or the sharp pain in his chest to hear you weren't because of him, it was better to know than not. The first time, Sam tore into him for what he'd done, told him about you barely able to speak for sobbing, about how the way he left was dangerously like your sister and how frantic you'd been. Any lingering feelings of hurt pride vanished and Bucky knew he deserved all of Wilson's animosity and more. He deserved the pain of knowing he hurt you, just like he deserved the nasty memories and the nightmares that woke him in a cold sweat over the last weeks without you there to help him. But since then, Sam had been kinder, more sympathetic, and sometimes Bucky wished he would go back to being angry, it was a much easier thing to deal with than the feeling of misplaced acceptance.

"She's doing okay," Sam replied, understanding in the smile he flashed Bucky. "Her sister's old room is nearly cleared out. She had a couple boxes of knickknacks and stuff she had me take to the donation center. Next trip, we're gonna grab picture frames to hang some of her old photos. I think she's really trying to take her life back."

"Good," Bucky nodded. A pang of something shot through him at the news, but he wasn't exactly sure how to describe it. Pride, relief, longing? Hell, maybe even the bitter taste of jealousy at the back of his throat that Wilson got to be there and he didn't. Whatever it was, he worried his teeth against his lower lip to stamp it down. "I'm glad she's taking care of herself."

There was a long pause, filled only with the sound of the quinjet's engines, and Bucky could only look at the floor between his feet, trying not to think about how you must have felt going through all those old memories on your own; how much he wished he was there to help. Still, he knew Sam's concerned gaze fell back to him well before his teammate began to speak again. "She's doing this for
you, y’know? Whatever it was you said to her that night, it made her realize she’d been sitting around scared for a long time. She said if you could work so hard at overcoming what happened to you, then she had no right to put in any less effort. As good as she’s doing though, I think it’d mean a lot to her if she heard from you."

"Sam," Bucky said, voice sounding closer to a warning than he intended as he looked up at him. For almost a month now, Wilson had been at this, trying to convince him to go back to you. Sometimes the suggestion was just to call or text you, send a letter, something, but he knew the goal. "You of all people know she deserves a lot better than someone like me."

"Whoa," Sam chuckled defensively with a shake of his head. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees to fix Bucky with a pointed look. "Let me tell you something, Barnes. That girl has been through a lot of unnecessary bullshit in her life, but this is probably the most unnecessary. What I know is that she deserves to be happy. I never saw her more happy than when you were around. And I'm betting she made you happy too."

Bucky narrowed his eyes a bit, unsure how to respond. Wilson knew goddamn good and well that you made him happy, sometimes happier than he had memories to compare to, happier than he thought he deserved. After a moment with no reply, Sam let out an almost defeated sigh before sitting back. "Look, man, she's still got stuff to work through, so do you. All I'm saying is, at the end of the day, you two would probably work better together than on your own."

Silence fell between them again as Bucky contemplated Sam’s words. It wasn't that he didn't want to go back. Hell if he didn't think about it at least once or twice a day. But he hurt you, bad, and as much as Sam told him otherwise, he couldn't believe you'd want him back around. Or maybe a part of him couldn't handle being around you knowing you didn't feel the same way about him. Worst of all, if he was being honest with himself, he felt he hadn't earned the right to be in your good graces again. Probably never would. You were much better off without him and his horrifying half-memories and blood stained past.

The sound of someone else approaching drew Bucky’s attention quickly. Steve clamored his way onto the jet in all his suited glory, shield at his back, cutting a figure that didn’t always mesh well in Bucky’s mind. Not when he sometimes remembered a kid who was all bony knees and elbows. Though the bruises and split lips and black eyes felt shockingly, painfully, familiar, even if they didn’t last so long these days. Steve gave him a questioning look, full of that concern that could get a little irritating from time to time, but was generally appreciated. If for no other reason than he was almost certain he’d looked at Steve the same way a long time ago. Bucky returned a curt nod, something to reassure his friend that he was alright.

"How’d that phone call go, Cap," Sam asked, a certain solemnity to his voice as he glanced at Bucky quickly.
Steve let out a long huff, anchoring his hands at his waist as he looked at the ground. Then, he pulled the shield from his back to lean against his knee after plopping down in the seat next to Wilson. "Okay, I suppose. Thought she was gonna start cryin at one point."

"Oooh," Sam winced a little and offered a sympathetic pat to Rogers’ shoulder. "Good thing she didn’t. We both know just how bad you are with women crying."

Bucky watched, somewhat amused, as Steve opened his mouth to protest with a defensive raise of his shoulders, only to falter and shake his head in defeat. Well, at least some things never really changed. "Who’d you have cryin on the phone, Stevie? Your girlfriend?"

"No, yours," Steve deadpanned coolly, Sam's eyes going wide and his lips pursing as if stunned and amused at the same time.

Jaw dropping slightly, Bucky felt his face heat up a little, unsure if the flash of anger in his chest was because of the touchy reference to you being his girl or because it sounded like the phone call upset you. "What the hell, Rogers? You called her?"

"Yeah, I did," Steve nodded with an almost indignant voice. And Bucky remembered that tone. Steve with the moral high ground, a holier-than-thou attitude that got his clock punched many a time. "I wanted to know what the hell happened. You weren't talkin and it ain't Sam's business to tell. So, I asked. And I gotta say, Buck, you're my friend and I love you, but what you did and are doing to that poor girl right now? It's not right."

"If you don't think Wilson put his all into rippin me a new one that first time he came back, then you're crazy," Bucky countered in a grumble. Steve was right, though, and he wouldn't do much to defend himself if Rogers did decide to lay into him just as bad. He’d earned whatever lashings he got. Still, it chafed him a bit raw that Steve would reopen that wound on you, especially after Wilson’s report that you were doing better. “That all ya called her for, Steve? Get her to cry after Sam left her in a decent mood?”

““No, it wasn’t, actually,” Steve informed, jaw set firm, authoritative. “I called her to let her know you were coming along on this mission.”

“You did what,” Bucky snapped hotly. He fixed Sam with an accusatory look, but Wilson’s brow had furrowed, looking none too pleased himself.
“C’mon, Buck, she deserved to know,” his friend shot back. “And I knew you weren’t gonna tell her.”

“Goddamn it, Steve,” he growled out, scrubbing a hand down his face. It took everything he had not to grab the little punk by the collar and shake the holy hell out of him, he didn’t care how big Rogers went and got himself. And all Bucky could see behind his eyes was you, anxious and unable to sleep, jumping at every phone call you got. Because even if he could convince himself you wanted nothing to do with him then, some part of him knew you couldn’t help that fretting nature of yours. “Now she’s gonna be worryin herself half to death because you couldn’t keep your fuckin trap shut.”

“Well, then I guess you’re just gonna have to call her when we get back so she knows you’re okay,” Steve reasoned with a blithe shrug, one eyebrow crooked up. Maybe no one else could see it, but Bucky recognized the superiority in that expression. Steve Rogers, master strategist, little shit, might not have planned it from the get-go, but he was going to force Bucky’s hand on the matter.

Glaring hard, Bucky wondered just how much worse of a person he would be if he reached over and slapped his friend upside the head. Not enough to do any real damage, just to knock some sense into his thick skull. Certainly, Sam wouldn’t protest too much, considering the exasperated shake of his head. Perhaps Bucky had more of a kinship with Wilson than he’d realized before. But then Rogers finally had the decency to look a little remorseful for what he’d done as he leaned forward with a sympathetic sigh.

“She didn’t want you to go, Buck. She just thought you were supposed to,” Steve said, the sincerity in his voice unmistakable and familiar, making Bucky’s anger falter somewhat. “She misses you, probably even more than she let on, but she asked me to tell you that. She misses you and she wants you to be careful. Also wanted you to pack a jacket, in case it gets cold.”

The last part seemed to tickle Steve; an amused smirk tilted the corner of his mouth and was mirrored on Sam’s face. Bucky blinked a moment as his eyes darted between the two of them before he snorted and bowed his head, tongue darting over dry lips. Raking his fingers through his hair kicked up the shampoo smell, tightened something in his gut. Stevie wasn’t lying. Even still missing hazy bits and pieces, Bucky knew that. It only reinforced the things Sam tried telling him all along. But the jacket comment, like an inside joke between the two of you. Like a shared secret whispered in the dark. Like the tip of an iceberg. Like a promise. He could feel the little spark of warmth in his chest threatening to spread. Maybe… maybe he should at least call you when the mission was over. Just to let you know he was alright so you didn’t have to go on worrying. Damned if he didn’t miss the sound of your voice.

But the mission had to be dealt with first and Bucky did his best to set everything else aside as the
rest of the team quickly found their way to the quinjet, minus Rhodes and Romanoff who'd been called away on other assignments. Steve went over the intel on the flight out. They'd gotten word that an arms dealer was meeting with a couple terrorist organizations to sell high-tech weaponry he'd managed to smuggle from a secret base in the middle of Europe. At this point, the political details didn't much matter to Bucky, and they all fled his mind the moment he saw Steve's jaw working bitterly before he informed the team that the base in question, and thus the weapons, were believed to be leftover remnants of a Hydra facility. Bucky steeled himself against the sick roiling in his stomach, a mixture of fear and hatred and loathing, all vying for top spot. Steve wouldn't meet his gaze, no small amount of shame in the Captain's hard grimace. Everyone else seemed to look sympathetic, even Stark didn't have a smartass comment in that moment. Though he found understanding when his attention fell on the solemn eyes of the Maximoff girl near the back of the jet.

When they landed in a clearing near a river, downstream from the old factory where the targets would be conducting business outside a bustling town, Steve led in the first wave of Wilson and Barton, hoping a bit of stealth might be able to handle things without much incident spilling over. Bucky nearly balked at being left behind to babysit until he took stock of who all remained at the jet. A highly-trained and possibly unstable killing machine who was too close to the situation, a man who turned into a giant green rage monster, a girl who could manipulate objects and minds, and a loud-mouth genius in a flashy metal suit. So, yeah, maybe keeping the heavy hitters on standby wasn't the worst idea Steve's ever had. Besides, Tony had already gone through a round of pouting over it and that had been headache enough.

Being the only one left behind with any real military training, Bucky decided to do a perimeter check to make sure no one would sneak up on them. The immediate vicinity was clear, the only sign of other people was the bridge several hundred yards away, choked with civilian vehicle traffic. Intel on a mission has never been 100% accurate, something Bucky knew from experience. And plans almost never go off without a hitch. When the distant echo of rapid gunfire reached his ears, Bucky wasn't so much surprised as immediately alert, already headed back toward the quinjet before a word was spoken on comms.

"They spotted us," came Steve's voice, breathing a little labored. "More than anticipated. We can't get to the factory. Dr. Banner, I hate to ask this, but we could use a hand knocking on the front door."

Bucky skidded to a stop as he rounded the nose of the jet, Banner already pulling off his shirt and pants. "You got it, Cap. I'm on my way."

"Cap, we've got multiple snipers as well as a few guys with heavy artillery on the roof," Barton informed evenly over the sound of more gunfire.

"Air support on the way, Cap," Tony responded as he suited up. "Wilson, you ready to take wing?"
There were the sounds of a struggle over the comm followed by the somewhat familiar noise of Sam's suit firing up, before he replied "You bet your shiny metal ass."

Banner had already disappeared into the tree line, a booming angry cry shaking the air just as Stark was taking off. Bucky practically itched to follow, wanting into the fray, wanting to get to Steve and help. But Wanda still stood in the clearing, eyes distant, and he knew he couldn't just leave her there even as he heard Steve shouting out orders to the others. It was a look he'd seen before, though nowhere near as intense. Seconds tick by at a snail's pace as he waited, anxious to go, but knowing something must be going on. Finally, she seemed to return to herself and she took a deep breath like she might have forgotten how for a moment.

"Captain," she called out, eyes a little frantic as she grabbed at Bucky, pulling him in the direction the others had gone. He went easily, gun at the ready, as she continued. "A group got past you, armed. They are headed toward the city to take hostages as a diversion so their leader can escape."

"Head them off," Steve order just as an explosion rocked the ground, though Bucky couldn't see it through the thick tree coverage. "We're almost in."

"There's a bridge over the river between them and the city," Bucky finally spoke across the comm. He and Wanda followed the bank, though she had taken to flying above and ahead of him. "There are civilians stuck in their vehicles."

Hatred had won out over fear and loathing in Bucky's gut. The cold flames of it licked at the edges of his mind, practically demanding the crack of bones between his fingers, the spray of blood from a well-placed shot between the eyes of someone who had anything to do with Hydra. But something just as strong kept pulling his thoughts back to that bridge. Lines of cars sitting stationary, innocent people like sitting ducks above the water. Someone needed to get them to safety, out of harm's way before they were either killed or captured. As much as he wanted to fight, take out his aggression on definite bad guys, he also wanted to help.

The teetering in Bucky's brain was finally tipped when Steve's voice sounded again. "Barnes, take Maximoff, clear the bridge. But don't let them get past you."

It was an order Bucky was more than willing to follow through as he doubled his speed. Wanda gave him a quick nod as she flew ahead and any other time Bucky might've marveled at the spectacle, but there was a task at hand. He was nearing the bridge when Stark did a low flyby, nearly buzzing the surface of the water as he turned glowing, helmeted eyes on Bucky to speak. "Took care of the snipers. Gonna fly ahead and take out as many of those guys as I can through the canopy, buy you and Hermione some time to clear the bridge."
"Appreciate it," Bucky huffed in response. Maybe there had been distrust between the two of them in the beginning, largely due to tragic incidents in which Bucky might have played a role. Yet, when all was said and done, there was an understanding and a bit of kinship between them, both knowing what it’s like trying to make up for a dark past. And though Bucky would probably never say it to his face, for fear of backlash, Tony was every bit the man his father ever was and then some.

"Just be careful, Gramps," Stark replied flippantly as he took back to the sky. "Don't want Capsicle to cry again."

"Can it, Tin Man. I got this," Bucky deadpanned before pushing himself harder.

Wanda was already at the bridge, urging people to flee their cars for the far side of the river. She was even stronger than when Bucky first met her, but she still couldn't manage all of the civilians at once. So she was doing her best to go from door to door without causing too much of a panic. Bucky didn't have that luxury, but being a rather scary looking guy with a gun certainly had its advantages in getting people to scatter. They had the lingering cars on the road and the first quarter of the bridge nearly cleared out when he heard the faint, but distinct sound of a rocket launch from far off over the chatter on the comm.

"Found him. In pursuit," Steve's voice was suddenly too loud and bordering on frenzied. "But he launched a missile. I think it's headed toward the town. Tony!"

"Already headed that way, Cap," Stark acknowledged as Bucky turned to see him swoop out from the tree line, heading toward the airborne weapon.

"Wanda," Bucky called out, pulling her attention over the crowd of scared, frantic civilians. "You're faster. Get to town, start getting people evacuated. I'll finish clearing the bridge."

She nodded, though finished dealing with the driver of the panel van where she stood before generating a burst of red energy to start flying in that direction. People were scrambling around on the bridge in front of Bucky as he made his way between the cars. A few were stopping at other cars along the way, trying to convince others to get out and run too. Whether it was from Wanda's insistence or his presence, Bucky wasn't sure. And it didn't much matter to him, so long as they cleared out. He herded them toward the other end of the bridge as best he could, short of firing off rounds which he knew would just startle people and make them drop to the ground. Hardly conducive to the plan. As he approached the midway point of the bridge, few stragglers left behind him, Bucky noticed a woman just then opening her car door to see what was going on. He was about to usher her along with the rest when Tony's voice rang in his ear.
"We've got a slight problem," he said, edge of his voice stressed near to breaking. Bucky looked up to see Stark keeping pace with the missile that was headed downriver. "Guidance system is taking too long to hack, so I'm gonna have to go about this the old-fashioned way."

Bucky watched as Tony flew in closer, grabbing part of the assembly and ripping it off. The metal piece went flying off behind him as he reached in and started yanking and tearing at the inner workings of the thing. Suddenly, there was a bright blue pulse of energy and Bucky could see the repulsors and jets and lights of Stark's suit suddenly flicker and dim before shutting off entirely.

"Pa... hell of... pun..." Tony's voice cut in and out as he suddenly started to fall out of the sky. He still had a gauntlet tucked inside the missile, the weight of him pulling the nose of it slightly downward before he slipped off to go hurtling toward the water. "I... ate wat... dings."

The missile had been thrown off trajectory just enough that it wouldn't make it to the city. Of course, the new angle had it pointing straight for the bridge where Bucky stood. Glancing down the length of the road, he saw that most of the people were reaching the other side. But the woman near Bucky was standing frozen in horror, watching the missile grow closer. Quickly, he grabbed hold of her, pulling her behind another vehicle just as the missile made contact. The impact caused the whole bridge to give a violent shudder, the sound of weakened metal and crumbling asphalt muted by the ringing in Bucky's ears. He twisted to block the woman from the shower of debris that was raining down on them. The smell of smoke and melting rock and metal and rubber permeated the air.

Trying to shake off the disoriented feeling, worsened by his mind's sudden overlay of a half-formed memory of ash and rubble, Bucky slowly managed to get to his feet to survey the damage. The missile had struck between two pylons, meaning there wasn't much fear of the bridge buckling and collapsing entirely. Instead, it had taken out a huge chunk of the edge and road. Pavement was slowly eroding, crumbling to follow the cars and debris that had fallen into the river below. Some cars still remained on the bridge, a few on fire, others thrown against each other to viciously crunch metal on metal. Some were teetering on the edge of the impact sight, one even falling over to splash loud into the water.

That's when Bucky finally registered the woman he'd pulled behind cover. She was running toward one of the cars near the edge, screaming while frantically pulling at the horribly dented back door. It wasn't English, but Bucky realized he understood just the same, though he couldn't readily supply the name of the language. "My son! My son!"

Without a moment's thought, Bucky was beside the woman again, shuffling her out of the way so he could see inside. A young boy, no more than seven or eight, was slumped against the far door. He was conscious and looked dazed, though there was a knot forming on his forehead around a small bleeding gash. Bucky tapped the window to get his attention, but when the boy saw him, he started
in fear causing the car to wobble on its precarious perch. The mechanical whirr of Bucky's metal arm sounded above the woman's desperate pleas before he anchored his flesh hand on the roof of the car and punched through the glass with one clean motion. Shards sprayed across the backseat, though none managed to further injure the boy who'd pressed himself as far away as possible. Metal fingers, once meant for nothing more than death and destruction, crushed around the edge of the car door. Another whirring and a grunt of determination, Bucky pulled with everything he had and ripped the thing right off its hinges, letting it clatter to the ground behind him. And your voice flittered through the back of his mind.

"...you've basically got a built-in jaws of life. If there were a really bad car wreck, you could pry off a door..."

"C'mon, kid. Let me get you out of here," Bucky spoke, trying to keep his voice as gentle as possible. It was difficult with his heart beating wild and using his weight to try keeping the car balanced. He reached into the backseat, but the boy shook his head rapidly and crushed himself against the door. Another crumbling of asphalt caused the car to fall another few inches, shifting the center of gravity. Bucky couldn't reach all the way across to grab him. There would be no anchor and they'd just both topple right over. He tried coaxing him again, this time using whatever language he thought the mother spoke, still not sure what or how he knew it and too desperate to care. "Please. I won't hurt you. Let me help."

The boy looked up at him, still wide-eyed and fearful, innocent and uncertain. Bucky didn't dare breathe over the unsteadiness of the vehicle and memories flashed through his mind. He wasn't just seeing this boy's face, but the little girl in the clothing store, a boy he'd given a piece of chocolate to during the war, the picture of you and your sister as little girls he'd found in your photo box, his sisters with their scraped knees and sticky hands. He'd been forced to do so many terrible things in his life, so much blood dripped from his hands he could drown in it. But these images in his head were good and bright, new ones and ones no amount of wiping had managed to erase entirely. He wanted nothing more in the world in that moment than to save this boy and add another happy face to his memory so desperately in need of them. Stretching his arm as far as he could, Bucky begged, begged the kid to just reach out and take his hand.

Suddenly, more of the road gave way in a sickening crunch and the car lurched over the edge. Despite all the strength the bastardized super soldier serum afforded him, Bucky couldn't hold the car any longer. He watched in disbelief as it plummeted away from him. The screams of the woman behind him echoed in his ears. From the gaping hole in the bridge, he saw the car roll as it fell, splashing heavy into the water upside down. Large bubbles broke the surface as the current splashed over the tires, pulling the vehicle into the depths of the river. It and everything inside was gone in a matter of moments.

Bucky collapsed to his knees, flesh hand digging into the pavement as he hauled the dangling boy up onto the road. In the last seconds before the car fell, the boy's hand had shot toward him and Bucky managed to grip his wrist just in time to keep him from toppling with everything else. He hadn't exactly been gentle about it, but a broken wrist versus a life seemed like no contest. Still, there didn't
seem to be any injury and the boy didn't cry out or protest at being manhandled a bit to check. In fact, his arms wrapped around Bucky's neck, crashing his small frame into his chest for a tight hug, still trembling a little in fear. After a moment, Bucky wrapped his right arm around the boy and allowed himself the smallest sob of relief. He'd saved the kid. It didn't change a bit of his past, but he'd saved the kid and possibly more. Just like Steve and the others trusted him to, just like you told him he could. And in the midst of fire and smoke and debris, hope fluttered hard in his chest.

Picking the boy up, Bucky stood to carry him over to his mother. Tear tracks stained her face as she quickly, manically grabbed the boy from Bucky's grasp. She cradled him as best she could, pressing her lips into chubby cheeks and swollen forehead while crying ever harder. It startled Bucky somewhat when she reached out and fisted a hand in his shirt, pulling him down to give him a smattering of grateful kisses to his face and babbling her thanks over and over again. He had to control the little smile that threatened to overtake him at the joyful reunion. But they weren't entirely out of danger yet. Quickly, he urged the woman toward the undamaged pedestrian walk along one side of the bridge.

"Hurry," he said, guiding her and the boy safely around some rubble and twisted cars. She seemed to understand well enough. Her hand gripped the back of her son's head, keeping it tucked in close as Bucky helped her over the railing. "Get to the other side of the river. You'll be safer there."

Bucky stood a moment as he watched her running, finally filling his lungs as she neared the other end of the bridge. The boy peeked up from his mother's neck to look at him, raising a hand to wave in farewell. Raising his in return, he remembered the little girl in the clothes shop again. You'd probably tell him he'd made the boy's whole life and for once he wasn't sure he'd even argue. Spinning back toward the bridge, Bucky surveyed the damage before calling in.

" Missile struck the bridge," he informed over the comm. "Unsure of any injuries or fatalities, but it had been mostly cleared. Stark's suit seemed to malfunction. He went into the water."

"Don't worry, Barnes," Wilson replied. "I fished him out. He's good. Heavier than he looks."

"Must've had one of your breakfasts," Steve chimed in with a winded chuckle. Another wave of relief washed over Bucky at the sound of his friend's voice. "Hulk, Barton, and I are still in pursuit."

"I'm almost back to the bridge," Wanda's voice sounded. "The group from the factory must surely --"

Rustling foliage and crunching steps had Bucky turning on his heel, pulling his gun from its holster. He saw a muzzle flash from the darkness of the tree line a split second before feeling the sting of a
bullet tearing through his skin.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Smutty reunion... you've been warned

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. Between losing a family member, finding out I'm pregnant, having a few complications that have thankfully been resolved, Civil War hype, and work just being an absolute mess right now, it's taken me much much longer than usual to get this out. Hope you enjoy it! Now, onto that long-awaited smut...

Five days. It was five days since Sam was called away from your home on an Avengers mission. Five days since Steve phoned you up to inform you that Bucky was going with them. Five days without a word from anyone about any of them. Five days of your nerves stretched so taut they probably could have snapped into a million pieces at the slightest of pressure. You had no idea what this mission was, where it was, or how long it was supposed to last. Before, you might have blamed your worry solely on the fact that you knew so little and the long stretch of radio silence. Certainly those things didn't help, but it was useless trying to lie to yourself.

Of course, you worried about Sam and Steve and their well-being; Sam had been your friend for years and you felt like you could call Steve that now, too. Yet, they had come back from many a mission together, more or less unscathed. Besides that, you had spoken to both of them before they left, and though you might not have had some deep conversations about how much either of them meant to you, you at least got to say some sort of goodbye. It was Bucky that ached in your chest. The idea that you might not see his face or hear his voice again, that you didn't get to say goodbye or tell him how you really felt, ate at you. He might have had an episode. He could have been caught by the baddies, recaptured by Hydra, hurt, or even...

For five days, you did your best to occupy your time and your mind with other things. There were a few trips to town. Once, to the market for a few groceries. Your fridge, chest freezer, and pantry had become almost disgustingly empty since Bucky left, and while you weren't exactly ready to start fixing up intricate meals for yourself, it wasn't feasible to keep going for fast food or take out. The closest thing to a fresh vegetable you last ate was doused in a brownish sauce when you picked up Chinese. The last fruit came from a can. It was high time you actually got some decent food back in your house. Though, it was a strange experience being there without Bucky. The cart wasn't nearly as full, overflowing with all the things he liked or wanted to try.

There were a couple trips to the library. All the books in your house had been read and reread a
hundred times over already, until you could almost imagine you had them memorized. Picking up a
different novel or two seemed like it would be a good idea to take your mind off things. Though,
after a couple days, you realized you just weren't able to focus on reading with everything else going
through your head. Not wanting to deprive others of a chance to read the books, it seemed best to
just go ahead and return them early. You did stop by the DVD section, just to see what might be
available, and happened upon the Sci-Fi Channel mini-series Dune and Children of Dune, both
favorites of yours and not available on any streaming service you had. Eagerly, you checked them
out, deciding movies were sometimes easier to digest for a busy brain than reading. It didn't hurt that
copies of the book series sat on your shelves. And Bucky had read and enjoyed them, at least until
the fourth book, which you couldn't really blame him for. A 3500 year time jump in a story could be
disorienting, even for people who hadn't physically experienced something similar.

But on the evening of the fifth day of what already seemed like an eternity, you decided to go
through more of the things in your sister's room instead, leaving the DVDs largely untouched in the
living room. With the dishes from your quick dinner already done, you changed into your pajama
shorts and t-shirt before getting down to business. Three boxes sat near the door, labeled either keep,
donate, or trash. Despite your desire to move on and all the help Sam had provided, it was still a
difficult process sometimes. However, it did have the desired effect of taking your mind off your
absent friends for a while. There were a few times when you got caught up in the nostalgia of things
you found. At one point, you opened a box only to discover your sister's old Walkman with stacks
of her CDs.

You brought the box down with you to sit crossed-legged on the floor, ignoring the bite of chilled
hardwood on the bare parts of your legs. There was already a CD loaded in the player as you
adjusted the headphones to your ears. As if by some miracle, the batteries were still good, so when
you pressed the button, your mind was immediately transported back to when you were a teenager.
Sitting in the same room, on the floor, you and your sister painting each other's nails while her mix
CD played. Alt rock, punk, early metal; her nails getting a thick coat of black lacquer while yours
were drying blood red. You could almost imagine the smell of that nail polish, the two of you
singing along dramatically to the music. How she ever ended up in the Army, you still couldn't
fathom sometimes.

It was a bit disorienting when the music ended. You managed to drift off into your own little world,
remembering, not registering much of what had been going on around you. The cat, who previously
took up residence on a chair near the window, was no longer sitting there staring into the darkness of
night. Putting the Walkman back in the box, you twisted around to look for your phone to check the
time, but it was nowhere to be seen. The nightstand in your bedroom. That's probably where you
left it when you were changing into your pj's. And sure enough, that's where you found it after
grumbling to your feet and rubbing at your tired eyes as you crossed the hallway.

There was a new text notification on your screen when you finally picked it up. Apparently sent
quite a while beforehand, received not long after you'd set the phone down to begin with. Sam.
You could've kicked yourself for missing it. Heart pounding a little faster in your chest, you pulled
up the message.
“Sorry for radio silence all week. Mission was more difficult than we expected. Got back this afternoon, been debriefing. Might have a surprise coming your way.”

Relief washed over you as you read the words again. No mention of death or serious injury. Granted, he might not have put that info in a text message, but there weren’t any missed calls or urgent requests for you to get back to him. Eyes fixed on your phone, you absently made your way down the hall toward the kitchen to grab some water as you typed a reply.

“Sam!!! I’m so glad to hear from you! Even happier you’re back! I was getting worried, but you know me haha. How is everyone? And a surprise? For me? That’s nice of you, but you didn’t have to do that... Actually, on second thought, yeah you did after 5 days of me being worried shitless. LOL”

No sooner had you set foot in the kitchen, snickering under your breath as you pressed the send button, than you stopped dead in your tracks. There was something out of the corner of your eye as you walked down the hall. With your attention on the screen, it took a moment for your brain to catch up. Now that it started to register, you felt a tight ache in your chest. How many times had you seen things, at least at first, after losing someone? Out of habit, out of misplaced hope. Not hallucinations, just the ghosts of memories; turn your eyes that way and they’re gone. Yet, you still felt that fluttering behind your ribs, because it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. Because Sam had mentioned a surprise. Because you wanted it more than anything as you clutched your phone tightly in your hand and carefully, quietly padded across the linoleum to the other side of the kitchen, the sliver of doubt still firmly lodged, slowing your progress, but unable to stop it entirely.

When you finally stepped around the wall, bringing the living room into view from the little breakfast nook, your heart jumped into your throat. He was there. Leaning against the back of the arm chair. Familiar red flannel shirt across his broad chest. Faded jeans. Scuffed boots. Long hair down and dark and soft-looking, stubble on his face. The cat rubbed her cheeks affectionately at the metal hand that lay rested beside him. He was there, mouth slightly parted and that line between his eyebrows showing, looking as transfixed by you as you felt by him.

"Bucky," you managed to speak, sob with relief, smiling wide despite the wetness pooling in your eyes.

This seemed to jar him from his stillness. With a few blinks and a quick swipe of his tongue over his lips, Bucky straightened himself. The fingers of his right hand combed through his hair to anchor at the nape of his neck. It made him look nervous, ashamed. "I... forgot to leave my key and you didn't answer the door. Probably should've called ahead, but..."

"I was so worried I'd never see you again," you interrupted, voice more strained than you expected. Admitting even just that little bit made you feel lighter, and soon you found yourself moving toward
"Yeah," Bucky breathed in quiet question. He let his hand drop to his side as he looked up at you, expression cautiously hopeful. As you drew closer, you saw the corner of his mouth quirk up just a hint. "Well, y'know what they say. Feed a stray and it'll always come back."

You couldn't help your gentle bark of sniffling laughter or the few errant tears that slid down your cheeks before you reached him, throwing your arms around his neck for a hug. After a beat, Bucky's arms wrapped around your back to pull you flush against his chest, right slung low and left snaked around your ribcage, pressed so tight you could feel both your heartbeats in your skin. Some of the tension eased from his muscles when the fingers of your free hand curled absently through his hair while you murmured "I missed you, Bucky... So, so much."

"I missed you too, doll," he whispered back with a ragged sigh. His thumbs slid against the fabric of your shirt, out of sync and comforting. "Christ, how I missed you."

A tingle slid up your spine and across your scalp when Bucky turned to bury his face in the crook of your neck. Warm breath tickled across your skin nearly as bad as the scruff on his jawline. But you didn't mind that or the fine tremble of his fingers that matched your own. You just held him and wanted to keep on holding him until neither of you could take it anymore. He was there and there was nothing else in the world for a while. So when the text alert on your phone went off, loud in the quiet of the moment, it startled both of you.

"Sorry. It's probably Sam," you offered sheepishly as you both pulled back a little to look at one another. Bucky shook his head slightly, waving off your apology, as he loosened his grip on you. Yet, his hands stayed anchored gently near the small of your back, like he was reluctant to let you go. Even as you felt your face flush at the thought, you weren't inclined to make him. Instead, you rested a hand on his chest as you used the other to pull up the text. But as you read, your face fell.

"LOL I'm guessing he's already there by now. You two have got a lot of catching up to do ;) Be careful with him though. Man might be a super soldier, but he's still human and taking a bullet isn't exactly doctor-recommended."

It took you a moment to process the message, then your gaze snapped up to find a concerned expression on Bucky's face. No doubt, it was a reaction to the look of horror on yours. "You were shot?"

"Jesus, Wilson," Bucky grumbled under his breath. His hands slid from you as he leaned against the armchair once more, eyes barely meeting yours. "I was waiting for a good time to tell you."
"You were shot," was all you could repeat. Your voice was strained to near-cracking, your throat growing tight and raw. The wetness was back at the corner of your eyes and you could feel that sting threatening the back of your nose. It was difficult to breathe with how hard and wild your heart was beating. It was hard to think straight. Eyes darting back and forth over his form, trying to locate the injury, you resisted the urge to start patting him down lest you cause more damage.

"M'okay, sweetheart. Honest. Just a graze. Here, I'll show ya." Bucky's look and tone had suddenly changed, seemingly desperate to reassure you. Nimble fingers, flesh and metal alike, made quick work of the buttons on his flannel, stripping off the outer layer to toss on the armchair behind him, startling the cat away, before he hiked the hem of his t-shirt up around his armpits. On his left side, just below where metal disappeared into the flesh at his ribcage, there was a clean, white bandage affixed to his skin with surgical tape. Carefully, he peeled it away, discarding it with his shirt to reveal a long shallow divot in his side a centimeter wide running from the front of his torso to his back, interrupted only by a few inches of undisturbed skin. It was pale and aggravated pink at the edges surrounded by the sick yellow-green of a fading bruise.

"See," Bucky urged gently as you dropped your phone on the armchair while leaning in for a closer inspection. "Almost completely healed up. Doesn't even hurt. Only got the dressin on to keep from scratchin. Fucker itches like a sonuvabitch sometimes, but nothin to worry about."

"Ah, Buck. Bucky," you whispered sympathetically, sniffling gently against your tears, frantic fear just barely subdued.

Before he could cover it back up, you reached out a shaky hand to press light and delicate over the discolored skin. Bucky's sudden stillness, accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, had you looking up at him, worried your touch caused him discomfort. There was no pain there, though. Just gray eyes studying your features with guarded interest, the furrow in his brow deepened. And suddenly you found yourself overwhelmed with everything. Him showing up after all this. The mission. His wound still under your fingers. Yes, it was nearly healed, but he could have died. Bucky could have died on that mission and the last interaction you would have had with him was a stupid argument because you were too scared to admit you have feelings for him, too scared to take one step when he took so many. Yet, there he was, alive, close enough to touch, to feel his chest rising and falling with every quiet breath he took. Bucky came back to you, when no one else could, and you had a second chance.

The only warning you gave was cupping your other hand against his jaw before leaning in to press your lips to his. Your eyes fell shut, savoring the softness there, the warm exhale across your cheek, the rasp of stubble. But your heart sank, more tears threatening to spill, when you realized Bucky was making no attempt to kiss you back. You pulled away, embarrassed, ashamed; your cheeks flamed as you dropped your hands from him. An assumption had been made on your part. Apparently an incorrect one, and you were certainly making an ass of yourself. Barely managing to glance up at his dazed and uncertain expression, you averted your eyes to the floor.
"Sorry," you croaked out, lower lip quivering traitorously as you backed away. Biting it a little too viciously seemed the only way to settle it while you put distance between the two of you, eventually settling against the little breakfast table. Though you still faced him, you couldn't bring yourself to look at him again while you spoke. "It must seem pretty ridiculous to you; me pushing you away one time and kissing you the next. I was just scared and stupid and confused. I didn't know you felt that way. Hell, I didn't know I felt that way, until it was too late I guess. But you're here now and I... I should've known after... after all this time apart you'd be over whatever infatuation you might've felt."

"Is that what you think this is to me?" Something in Bucky's tone, something fierce and almost offended, had your gaze finally meeting his. The look on his face was disbelieving. "You think I'm some kinda punk ass kid with a schoolyard crush on you?"

"Bucky, I didn't mean..." you started to counter, fearing you'd said the wrong things all over again, but you trailed off when you saw him moving to stand up fully.

"Lemme tell you somethin, dollface," he began a bit hotly with a slow, determined stride in your direction. The intensity in his expression wasn't exactly scary, but intimidating and you couldn't force yourself to look away again. "I spent 70 some-odd years gettin picked apart and rearranged like a goddamn jigsaw puzzle. There are some things I might never figure out cause of the missing pieces I won't get back. And maybe I don't got this all figured out either, and I sure as hell don't deserve it, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna stand by and let you keep thinkin this is some puppy love bullshit that's gonna up and disappear if I think about it too long."

By that point, Bucky was standing right in front of you. And though you'd been just as close and closer a number of times, you weren't sure you'd ever felt quite this type of vulnerable with him before. Speaking was practically impossible. His words and sentiment had your throat feeling dry and tight. All you could do was stare at him a little wide-eyed where his head bowed over yours at that angle. Tried to breathe into your achy lungs and chest against your wildly beating heart, watching his features soften as he studied your face again with a thoughtful brow. Tongue darting out over his bottom lip, teeth scraping there gently, there was a second's hesitation before Bucky's left hand reached up to carefully brush a few stray hairs from your face. You leaned into the touch, grateful for the cool metal against your heated skin. His thumb passed lightly over your cheekbone before his palm moved to settle against the side of your neck with the fingers curled against your nape. Then, his right hand rose to cup your jawline so achingly tender you thought your heart could burrow right out of your ribcage. They were liberties he'd only hinted at before and you couldn't help the way your insides fluttered.

Bucky said your name gently, in that low, intimate voice you'd come to associate with his open confessions. Now you could accept the physical effect it had on you, drawing goosebumps across your skin and pooling warmth in your belly. "I've seen you, kid. I seen you up and I seen you down, just like you seen me. They made me into a weapon, a monster. I thought that's all I'd ever
get to be anymore. You helped show me how to be a person again. Sure, I still got work to do, but
with you I just get to be a person. One who's crazy about you. And I am, sweetheart. I am
absolutely, goddamn crazy about you."

"Then," you breathed quietly, that overwhelming feeling starting to crash over you again. "Then
why didn't you kiss me back?"

"Are you kiddin, beautiful," Bucky countered with an amused huff and a roguish smirk crinkling the
corners of his eyes. The pad of his right thumb slipped feather-light across your bottom lip, gentle
and reverent, though it was like electric on your skin. "That moutha yours could shut down a city
block. Whaddaya think it'd do to a poor fella like me who ain't expectin it?"

You worried at you lower lip, part of you wanting to taste his touch there, but mostly to stifle the
laughter that bubbled up inside you. With your fingers wrapping into the front of his shirt, you gave
an affectionate tug that drew him just a fraction closer as you craned your neck to smile at him.
"You are so full of shit, Bucky Barnes. I'm surprised your eyes aren't brown."

“Yeah, definitely missed the hell outta you,” he chuckled low and grinned. Grinned so wide and
bright and... and adoring you all but melted, metal fingertips grazing over your shoulder and down
your arm to curl easy at your waist. His slow, measured approach was almost mesmerizing as his
right hand slid into your hair. “Maybe third time’s a char—“

Before he could finish, another quick tug to Bucky’s shirt brought him down until your lips met. The
sharp intake of breath, the feel of his smirk against your skin sent that fine, fluttery tremble back
through your body before he tilted to mold the curve of his mouth to yours. It was hard to say how
long the simple, sweet suction lasted. A handful of seconds or a few minutes that were every bit as
good as the first kiss. No, better, because this time you weren’t scared. This time, you knew exactly
how you felt and what you wanted. Pressing your body further into his elicited an unexpected, soft
sound from your own throat. Bucky broke away a fraction of an inch, noses still nudged together
and barely enough space for you both to fill your lungs, as his right palm trailed down the length of
your spine. There was only another moment of shaky breath to see his eyes, half-lidded and dark,
the corner of his kiss-swollen mouth, to wonder if you looked anywhere near as needy as he did, as
you felt, before he delved right back into the kiss.

It began again, more fervent; the tip of Bucky's tongue coaxing. And you were more than happy to
oblige. When your mouth opened just a bit, you returned the little gesture until your lower lip was
tucked gently between his teeth while you learned the taste of his cupid's bow. As the kiss
deepened, Bucky laved tender, carefully exploring the roof of your mouth, the edges of your teeth,
the length of your own tongue. The tickle of scruff across your face was its own little delight, making
your heart beat that much faster, weakening your knees. Hardly able to stand anymore, even with
his firm hold keeping you upright, you gripped his shirt in both hands to try leveraging yourself onto
the table behind you. Bucky seemed to understand and easily lifted you to sit there. The low groan
that shuddered through him when you pulled his hips between your thighs made you finally bury your fingers into his dark locks, nails trailing along his scalp. Suddenly, the kisses were harder, lips and teeth and tongues more urgent.

When you finally broke for air, you were light-headed, panting hard to catch your breath. It didn't seem to deter Bucky in the slightest. The silky, sinful glide of his lips under your chin and down your throat turned your already flushed skin unbearably hotter. You bit at your tender bottom lip, fingers still tangled in his hair, and arched with a tiny gasp as his tongue flickered out over the dip in your collarbones. One of his hands splayed wide across your back, bracing you and keeping your body close, fingertips curling into your shirt, mouth scorching back up your neck. It was almost imperceptible, the way Bucky shifted against you. Barely registered in your head until there was the sound of chair legs moving across the hardwood floor. Then, both his arms were around you, his nose nuzzled just under your ear, and he lifted and turned with you. All you could get out was a surprised squeak as you instinctively clamped your legs tighter around him before he sat down on a chair pulled out from under the table with you straddling his lap, toes just brushing the floor.

Bucky slowly breathed warm down the line of your jaw, the sensation and the closeness sending a shiver through you. It ended in a soft press of his lips at the tip of your chin. Tilting your head down earned you another kiss, gentle and lingering. The tips of flesh and metal fingers alike dipped just beneath the hems of your sleep shorts, palms firm against the outside of your thighs. His mouth hovered at yours a moment longer, then Bucky leaned away just a bit to look up at you. Those smoky eyes of his were still dark, soft as they roamed between your eyes and lips. When he tasted absently at his own, it seemed like he was committing it to memory. But you could hear the faintest edge of uncertainty when his tattered voice spoke. “This alright, doll?”

“Yeah, Bucky,” you managed quietly, feeling that flush at your cheeks again, though you weren’t sure when it had ever left. The way his lashes fluttered shut, the little contented exhale as your fingers slipped from his hair to brush delicately over the side of his face, his jaw, his neck, resting on his strong shoulders; it made your chest feel full and twisted something in your gut. And you wanted to always be able to soothe him like that. “Like you started to say, third time’s a charm. Just been a while for me.”

"Guarantee it's been longer for me," Bucky smirked. One of his eyes cracked open to look at you, something playful in the gesture while his hands slid up over the fabric on your hips to rest on your waist. They rucked your shirt up just an inch or two, his fingers carefully sweeping over the bare skin exposed.

"So, you didn't..." Your voice sounded smaller than you meant as you trailed off, unsure how to phrase the question, maybe even feeling a little insecure. It had been almost two months and there was no doubt in your mind that even in a broody or taciturn state he could pull a date or two if he really wanted. "Not even when..."
"HYDRA probably wasn't too keen on me havin a love life." There was unmistakable bitterness in his tone, despite how jovial he tried to make his words sound. And the way his fingers flexed and held tighter to you, the angry mechanical whir, spoke of protection against an unseen enemy.

"Not what I meant," you assured gently and cupped his face in your hands, thumbs sliding over his cheekbones until his eyes were focused on you again and he seemed to relax. "I meant you didn't see anyone after you left here?"

A lazy grin spread Bucky's face once he caught on. His hands inched up your skin and urged you to lean in closer to him. "Now, how was I s'pose ta do that when all I could think about was kissin you again?"

The smart remark you were formulating must have shown on your face, because when you opened your mouth to speak, Bucky immediately captured your lips with his own. You melted into it for a moment, let yourself just enjoy the heat of his mouth sealed to yours, the sweep of his thumbs just under your ribcage, the relief of finally. But you were hardly one to let a good line go to waste. Before too long, you broke from the kiss, tilting to pepper a few soft, fleeting ones against his rough cheek until you could drag the sharp edge of your teeth gently along his ear. There was the barest hitch in his breath and he shifted somewhat beneath you, though he left his neck slightly craned for you. Made a little bold by his response, you trailed the tip of your tongue behind his jaw while moving lower.

"Guess the real question is," you smiled mischievous against his neck. Judging from the way his hands smoothed back down your sides, he could feel your expression on his skin. "Can you still even get it u—"

It seemed to be Bucky’s turn to interrupt you this time. Lightning quick, hands grabbed your ass firmly and hauled your body tighter to him. No mistaking the deliberate upward press of his hips into yours, or the point he was trying to get across. The feeling of him hard, even through layers of denim and cotton, sent a jolt through you; a soft gasp making your mouth dry. And Bucky’s tone was honeyed, but fraying at the edges. "Trust me, sweetheart. Everything’s workin just fine in that department."

“Oh,” you asked quietly, leaning back to arch an eyebrow as you looked down at him. Tried to keep cool, control the quiver in your thighs, the heat low in your belly that was just begging you to squirm a little. The almost hungry gaze Bucky fixed on you and the way his fingers smoothed languidly over your skin under your shirt was not helping your resolve. “And how did you figure that out?”

“Sleepless nights, long showers,” he smirked in reply. Though when he looked away a moment, worrying his lower lip between his teeth with a considering look, you thought you might have seen a bit of color tinge his cheekbones before devilish, darkened eyes found yours again. “The thoughta
you fixin your stockings in the hallway.”

Both the memory and the admission shocked you, but you couldn’t suppress your wide, teasing grin. “Is that the kinda thing that turns on an old soldier like you, Barnes?”

“Certainly got my attention,” Bucky chuckled fondly. His right hand started a slow ascent up your spine as he leaned in to kiss along your neck. When his teeth scraped a sensitive spot behind your ear, a muted whimper slipped from your throat and your hips rolled against his of their own accord, chasing pressure at his zipper. There was a sharp intake of breath through his nose, you could feel it across your skin and in your hair, then a lukewarm metal palm stayed your movements in a silent plea.

“Well, y’know, Sarge, you’re not the only one with sleepless nights and long showers,” you offered in a low voice. It felt strange to be so honest about it, especially after all the time spent trying to deny your feelings. Strange and exhilarating. Spurred on by Bucky’s acknowledging hum tingling over your throat and the flex of his fingers at the base of your neck, you decided to lay it all out just like he had. “Thinking of you grabbing my hips and pulling me into your lap in that photo booth. Your body pressed against mine on the dance floor or in that alley...”

"You thoughta me while..." Bucky choked out hoarsely as he pulled back far enough to see your face. For a moment, the embarrassed part of you wanted to take it back. The cautious, unsure part that worried any wrong move could scare him away. But it was out in the open and it was true, so you nodded slightly. A stricken look crossed his face while a lusty, ragged groan rumbled from his broad chest and straight between your thighs, his left hand urging your hips against his once more while he pressed his hot mouth to the curve of your neck again. "Ah, Jesus... Sweetheart... Baby. You could kill a man tellin him somethin like that."

Buzzing with sensation and momentarily at a loss for words, your reply came in the form of fingers tangled through his hair and the arch of your body into his. A gentle tug brought Bucky's face back into view. His jaw was slack and his breathing growing heavy, what was left of focus in his soft eyes fixed on you. It made you feel like the only thing in his world at that moment. Just like he was the only thing in yours. You bent to kiss him proper, full and thorough, wanting to pour yourself into him. Bucky met it measure for measure with the same intensity, until you were starved for air and almost writhing. Until you were delirious, both physically and emotionally, and had to pull away, but only an inch or two, unwilling to go further, as you whispered "Bucky?"

"Don't gotta do anything. Nothin you don't want,” Bucky quietly informed, gray eyes barely open, nose brushing yours with your foreheads pressed together, words warm against your skin. He licked his lower lip quickly, swallowing thick despite his heavy breath, before he continued. "Just... please,
The plea ached in your chest, like every other time he was so open and vulnerable with you. Except it was bigger now, wasn't it? Made you want to start kissing him and never stop. You brought your hand up to his cheek, light scruff itching at your palm. The delicate skin at your neck would probably be irritated for quite a while after his ministrations, but that didn't really bother you so much. Your fingers moved to brush over his lips and he kissed at each fingertip playfully, making you smile. Then you curled your hand to grip his chin gently, letting your thumb tug his lower lip down a bit before resting at the little divot in his chin; all the while, Bucky looking amused and indulgent.

"Bucky," you said again, sure and even, before leaning down to press chaste kisses at either corner of his mouth. Both times, he followed after your lips like he wanted more, though he dutifully pulled back with a small smile whenever your thumb applied the tiniest amount of pressure. The third kiss was lingering and you let your arms circle around his neck, his hands gripping your waist eagerly, before you broke away again to level him with a hopeful expression. "Take me to bed?"

Bucky regarded you for a long moment, eyes searching your face, probably for any signs of uncertainty. But soon a cheeky grin spread his face as he nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

It hardly took any effort at all for Bucky to rise to his feet with you still wrapped around him. You stamped down the split second pang of anxiety that sparked in you, crossing your ankles behind his back and adjusting against him more comfortably. Of course, Bucky was strong and had a good hold of you, it just made you feel small and silly enough that you laughed into his shoulder. "Really? You're gonna carry me?"

"More efficient," he shrugged slightly as he started toward the hallway, though that smile still plastered his face. "Besides, I didn't wanna take my hands off you."

"Well, you better not drop me," you teased back before moving in to mouth along his neck and ear and jaw, a few stray locks of long hair tickling at your nose.

"Not a chance, kitten," he responded with a gruff little sigh when you nipped gingerly at his pulse point. Though he did maneuver you so that his metal arm carried the majority of your weight. His
right hand came up to brush through your hair before he ducked his head and stole a few quick kisses.

Once inside your dimly lit bedroom, Bucky closed the door soundly behind him without even looking back. However, a few strides in, he paused, presumably at the foot of the bed, and seemed to eye something half amused, half curious over your shoulder. Twisting to follow his gaze brought the large stuffed polar bear into view, laying on your bed with its stuffing unevenly clumped here and there, its limbs in disarray. With a heavy sigh, you buried your face in the crook of Bucky’s neck and shook your head a little. Of course, something this silly would happen to you.

"It's childish, I know," you told him sheepishly when you brought your head up again. "But you were gone and you won him for me, so..."

Where you expected to see amusement or mischief or hell, maybe even a dash of ridicule, instead you found Bucky somewhat crestfallen. The look on his face was familiar; shame, self-loathing. His gaze had fallen to the curve of your shoulder and his jaw worked slightly in annoyance. So much like the night he showed up in your room seeking solace after dinner with Steve. It only took a moment to realize what might have brought on the change in his demeanor.

"Bucky, hey," you soothed gently, moving a hand to his cheek, urging him to look at you. You thought about squirming down onto your feet, but his hold was still tight on you and you honestly still just wanted to be close to him. When he finally gave you his attention, you offered a gentle smile and tucked wayward strands of hair behind his ear with an affectionate tug. "You're here now. That's what matters. And we get a chance to make it up to each other."

Bucky's eyes flickered away for just a moment, and you took the opportunity to press your lips to the furrow between his brows. Then, to his temple. His cheekbone. The scruffy spot where you thought one of his rare dimples hid. By the time you reached the corner of his mouth, it was already pitched upward. He turned his head enough to kiss you directly as you felt him start to move again. There was the sound of mattress springs before you were being carefully deposited on the bed.

"You're ridiculous, you know that," Bucky mused with a shake of his head, tone almost laughing, leaning above you to set the polar bear on the floor beside the bed.
"Of course I do," was your proud chuckle. When he moved back down to kneel between your legs, body hovering just inches above yours, you used your fingers to comb back the curtain of dark hair that surrounded both your faces. "You still like me though."

Something in the familiar, soft expression that crossed his face said more than just *like*. A knowing smirk quirked his mouth before he tilted in to ravish your neck. The sensation soon had your head falling back on the mattress, back arching to give him free access. Your fingers kept a loose hold in his hair even as your body pressed into his. But it was the needy little moan that escaped your throat beneath his lips that seemed to make his ministrations more urgent.

"Can I see you, sweetheart," he asked quietly into the skin behind your jaw. There was a trace of whine in his voice, a gentle desperation, the promise of which made it a bit difficult for you to breathe. Bucky shifted his weight to his metal elbow, causing his hips to rock into yours, right hand skimming down your side to barely press his fingers beneath the hem of your shirt. "Can I touch you? Taste you?"

For a second, all you could do was nod absently, enjoying the weight of his chest and the feel of his mouth and the faint, enticing grind of his pelvis against yours. Scratching your nails lightly at his scalp, you finally managed to breathe out "Yes, Bucky. Please."

It took a moment or two, but eventually Bucky dragged himself away from your neck, trailing his lips along your torso as he slid down between your legs, your hands slipping from his hair. He nosed his way under your shirt, kissing low on your belly, making your muscles contract instinctively with your little gasp, before he began to slowly inch the clothing upward, a strong hand on either of your sides. Every so often, another kiss was planted on your skin, higher and higher, like he was savoring the reveal. When your fingers petted over his hair again to brush back the tickling ends, you could feel him nuzzle in a bit and thought you might have caught a hint of a smile there. The edge of the fabric soon threatened the undersides of your breasts and paused. A peek down at Bucky found him gazing up at you, eyes heated, before his thumbs slipped gingerly over the delicate, exposed flesh, tongue tracing along after metal. Your soft airy exhale was met with the slightly quicker movement of his hands to rid you of your top, which you helped by lifting your shoulders and tossing the offending article away. Barely a second later, Bucky was tasting and suckling sweet at your right nipple as his fingers caressed the other. It was easy to just let your eyes close and revel in the attention; to cant your hips a little to let him know just what he was doing to you.

Seemingly satisfied with his efforts for the time being, leaving you achy with need and your skin flushed and sensitive to every touch, Bucky's mouth began to travel back down over your stomach. Both metal and flesh fingers hooked in the waistbands of your shorts and panties as he slipped his
shoulders under your knees. An anticipating breath caught in your throat when he began to tug the fabric toward your feet, but it was only an inch or two before he leaned in to press a kiss into the bend of your left thigh where it met your hip. The location combined with the plushness of his lips and the scruff on his face and the long hair against your skin had you twisting away a bit with a huff.

"Tickles," you answered the concerned question in his eyes when Bucky glanced up at you. Mischief flashed across his face then and you were too slow and powerless to stop the onslaught of quick fleeting kisses and the scrape of his teeth that made you jump in surprise. He buried his face into the crease there and roughed your skin with his stubble and the ends of his hair, even blew a few raspberries for good measure until you were squirming and sputtering out laughter beneath him, trying to tug at his hair, practically squealing "Quit it, Bucky! Cut it out!"

When he finally showed you mercy, leaving off with his playful attack, Bucky grinned at you wide and bright. Triumphant. Happy. It stuttered in your heart as you smiled back. He turned his head to trail a few lingering kisses along your inner thigh before ducking his head out from between your legs. The move tousled his hair and he gave a little shake to get it to fall back into place while crooking your knees over his right arm. A trace of that grin still quirked the corners of his mouth as he slipped both hands beneath you, gripping at your waistbands again. You lifted your hips so he could slide them off and you could feel the deliberately slow and steady drag of his knuckles over your ass and down the backs of your thighs. The sensation added to the slight chill in the air sent a gentle shudder through you.

"You're so soft," Bucky whispered into the skin above your right knee, tone bordering on revelatory. Lithe fingertips glided up your opposite leg, feather-light and tender, as he stretched out beside you to prop himself up with a metal forearm in the mattress near your head. You watched his eyes follow the movement of his fingers while they journeyed over your hip and up your torso. He seemed to be studying, memorizing every detail of your body with rapt attention, barely breathing, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth despite a quiet smirk. And though you weren't used to such intimate scrutiny, you let him continue uninterrupted until he was delicately tracing your collarbone and the length of your jawline and brushing the backs of his fingers down the curve of your neck. The shaky breath he let out fluttered against your shoulder before he said "And you're even more gorgeous than I imagined."

"Sweet talker," you teased with a slight chuckle before reaching up to tug at his shirt a little impatiently. "And you're overdressed. It's making me self-conscious."

A toothy smile flashed across his face, dimples and all, as Bucky huffed out a laugh, wrapping an arm around your waist to pull you in close against him. The new angle had him partially leaning
over you from his position on his side and something about it felt warm and safe. He took a moment to swipe the hair out of his face before resting his arm across your midsection once more and gazing down at you with a wolfish smirk. "A bit eager, huh, sweetheart?"

"Maybe," you cooed in counter. Lifting your chin in mock defiance brought your face closer to his and you purposefully brushed the tips of your noses together. The playfulness that shone in his eyes was somewhat intoxicating with your bodies and mouths so close to each other. It lent you a bit of boldness as your fingers gently wrapped around his right wrist where his hand sat splayed across the side of your rib cage and began to drag his touch lower and lower on your stomach. When he seemed to understand your intent, gentle curiosity gave way to a heated, hungry gaze and a devilish smirk.

Bucky's attention never left your face while his hand slipped between your open thighs, touch tentative and exploring. Yet, as your eyes fluttered shut and your breath hitched at the sensation, he leaned down to all but smother you in another hot kiss. It must have surprised him to find just how slick and ready you were for him because he let out a deep rumbling groan when you canted your hips up and he easily slid a lithe digit inside you, soon followed more carefully by another; his mouth swallowing up the little sounds and sighs you made. He broke the kiss then, ghosting his lips down your chin and jaw and neck while you arched beneath him, writhed at the achingly slow pace of his fingers. There was no confusing the feel of his smile pressed into your shoulder at the somewhat shameless way you ground yourself against the heel of his hand, body begging for more. You wrapped your arms around him to press both hands under his shirt, fingertips desperate to map out the muscles in his back that bunched beneath his skin while he held himself above you.

"Bucky," you whined quietly, already feeling like a mess. A gasp escaped your throat when his thumb brushed over your sensitive flesh, that tightness in your belly starting to coil. The spasm of pleasure inadvertently had your nails digging into his back, made him buck against your hip with his own shocked noise muffled in the curve of your neck, and you could feel just how much harder he'd gotten.

"D'ya got somethin, sweetheart," he breathed hot against your jaw, voice tattered, before leaning back to look down at you. His hand slid away from between your legs, despite your disappointed whimper, to spread still damp finger tips against your stomach. And though his eyes were still dark, it took a second before they could meet yours, a reticent, imploring look on his face and an endearing tinge of pink coloring his cheeks that brought a little smile to your face. "Y'know, like protection?"

"Haven't had much call for condoms in a while," you admitted sheepishly, but you couldn't help tease for teasing's sake. Even if you were naked under someone you could now admit you'd been pining for. "Why, did you get into a different kinda action overseas, Sarge?"
Bucky shook his head with a fond, amused huff. "Nah, clean billa health, doll."

"Same," you assured with a slight nod. It didn't seem quite the time to go over several decades' worth of changes in the medical field, so you settled with a simple "I'm on birth control meds for other reasons, though."

"Birth control," he repeated thoughtfully, brow pinched a little and worrying at his lower lip in consideration. When you nodded again, he quirked a smile before sighing as he moved back in toward you. "Well, God bless the twenty-first century."

The chuckling grin you gave him was soon overtaken by his lips on yours, tongue delving in and teeth scraping and scruff itching at the tender skin. Your fingertips slipped from around his back to trace where the denim of his jeans rode low on his hips before they hooked two belt loops to tug him that much closer. When you pulled back to catch your breath, your voice sounded husky in your own ears. "Does that mean you still wanna do this?"

"Oh, sugar," he practically purred against your cheek, mouth pressing hot kisses along your jaw. "I don't think you know how bad I've wanted you."

"I think I might have an idea," was your low, playful response. At your current angle, Bucky's lips skimming across your neck, you managed to twist around enough to capture his ear between your teeth gently as you popped the button on his jeans.

There was a hitch in his breath, more felt than heard over the sound of his zipper, when he stilled above you. Palm flat against his abs, you slowly pushed your hand beneath the fabric. A somewhat vicious sounding little noise whirred from his left arm as you oh so delicately wrapped your fingers around the warm weight of him, metal and flesh hands gripping the bedding at either side of you so tight you half-expected to hear it rip. The experimental stroke you gave had Bucky hissing in pleasure before his teeth sank shallow into the skin near your shoulder. You gasped sharply and instinctively clutched at the back of his shirt, feeling his hips trying to rock into the firmer hold of your fist and your own muscles fluttering in anticipation.
"Ah, Christ, babydoll," Bucky panted apologetically after a moment, peppered tender little kisses around where he'd surely marked you with his mouth. "S'been so long since someone's touched me so sweet."

"Mmm... It's alright, Buck," you replied quietly, carefully moving your fingers over him again, making him shudder slightly. With a bold, wicked grin, you added "Though, I might be a little curious to see how you'd react to my lips instead."

An airy, laughing moan skittered across your clavicle, dark and smoky, sending a tingle down your spine. "Not this time, kitten. I get that pretty little moutha yours on me, I know I'll be done before I even get started. Right now, I just wanna be inside you. Wanna make things good for you, sweetheart."

"Then you... you better start by getting these off," was your hoarse, stilted whisper as you tugged his shirt in one hand and moved the other to push at his jeans and underwear, the promising words of this time echoing in your mind.

Wicked smirk firmly in place, Bucky moved to ply you with a lingering kiss. He gently pulled your right hand from its place at his pants, hooking his thumb with yours to brush his lips over your knuckles before resting it on your stomach. Your other hand you dropped on your own as he rolled to sit up beside you. When he bent forward to untie his heavy boots, you twisted up onto your knees to crawl behind, felt his hot gaze until you knelt at his back. Rucking the fabric of his shirt up revealed taut muscles, moving gracefully under skin while he dropped his boots to the bedroom floor, and a few fine, faded scars that you traced with a fingertip, wondering absently if they might be as old as you or older. You pressed a kiss between his shoulder blades and were rewarded with an almost inaudible sigh when your palms smoothed upwards.

Bucky reached back to pull his shirt off, discarding it haphazardly, by the time you reached his shoulders. Your hands worked their way through his hair to twist and tug the soft locks off to the right, out of your way. Another kiss at the nape of his neck actually made him shiver. Fingertips trailed over skin until they met metal, thumb meandering the ridge of thick scars, while your other hand swept around to hook under his chin, urging his head back a little. Bucky's whole body froze suddenly, nostrils flaring, and you stopped just as quick. Perhaps your touch across his throat, no matter how delicate you'd tried to be, was too much. Might've dragged up some terrifying memory when you'd only meant to make things as good for him as he wanted for you. But before you could let go or apologize, Bucky relaxed into you, tilted his head to rest against your shoulder, looking up at you with that soft expression. It made your chest ache to know how much trust it must have taken, how much he must have in you, and you leaned in to cover his mouth in a few gentle kisses before dotting more through the scruff of his jaw and neck, over smooth muscle, and against the marred skin
where metal disappeared into flesh. Your thumb swiped lazily over the scraped plates and flecks of red; all that remained in a discolored outline of the star once emblazoned there.

Some of Bucky's weight shifted back onto you and you gladly took it as he quickly raised his hips just enough to rid himself of his last articles of clothing. Once those were tossed away, he startled you by deftly swinging his torso back toward you, snagging you with his left arm around your waist and a playful growl buried under your chin, to pull you down beside him on the mattress. Your surprised squeak had him chuckling even as you weakly shoved at his chest, scrunching your nose at him in a bratty look for his effort. When he finally loosened his grip on you, though never letting his touch stray too far, you decided it was your turn to study the naked body before you. Just like he did with yours. Though, you couldn't help feeling you got the better eyeful.

You ran a hand down his closest leg, hooking your fingers in at the knee to draw your nails back up his muscular inner thigh. It made him twitch against his stomach, smearing a bit of wetness on the skin there. A sharp intake of breath and the flexing of metal fingers at your hip met you when you gently cupped a hand between his legs before running your fingertips along the underside of his shaft. You didn't tease him long though, deciding instead to move onto his stomach and chest. There certainly was plenty to admire in the lines and planes and tautness that made up the body of Bucky Barnes, but you couldn't help how your mind wandered. How something about it all still somehow echoed vicious strength and brutal discipline and years of being used for nothing but. And yet, despite all that, Bucky still sighed at the glide of your fingers on his skin. Still kissed you tender with gentle lips and soft eyes. It was almost too much for you to contain.

"Your wound," you said quietly, trying to control the emotion in your voice, when your touch drew closer. Some of the bruising had disappeared and the pale stripe of damaged skin had closed in on itself a little. You had figured he would heal fast, Sam had mentioned it was a side effect of Steve's serum and probably would be for Bucky's, but it was still amazing to see.

Bucky, for his part, made a show of looking unimpressed, swiping a hand over it before giving a small shrug. Then, in a deadpan voice, replied "I've heard kisses make booboos feel better."

Eyes wide in shock, remembering the exchange from the clothing store all that time ago, the laugh you sputtered out was far from the sexiest sound you've ever made. Bucky didn't seem to mind one bit though, only grinned proudly even as you shoved at his chest again. "Goddamn it, Bucky! You did not just say that!"
"Pretty sure I did," he teased back, eyebrow raised in a smug expression.

You lunged for him then, tossing your arms about his neck and shoulders and pressing yourself against him as you smothered that smirk on his face with a kiss. Bucky grabbed you tight and fell back into the mattress so that you stretched along his chest. A low groan bubbled up from his throat and around your hungry mouths when you moved to straddle his waist; angled your hips to grind slick skin against the hard length of him, reigniting that ache inside you. His hands slid down your spine to grip your ass and hold you still, kissing you fiercer. Though when you nipped at his bottom lip harsher than you meant, his own hips snapped up, dragging his tip across your clit and making your back arch with a whimpering gasp. Kiss broken, Bucky leaned up to mouth at your craned neck and rocked his hips once more. The moan it elicited was met with a lap of his tongue at the hollow of your throat.

It took a few heartbeats for your head to stop reeling. And when it did, you pressed your hands over Bucky's heaving chest to sit up, resting back against his lifted thighs to brush your fingers down his abs and flex your nails around the muscles there. Glazed, storm-gray eyes watched intently as you lifted onto your knees, though they fluttered and burned hotter when you maneuvered so he was just pressed at your opening. Finally, finally, after feeling his hands move to lightly grasp your hips and the twitch of his stomach under your palms, you slowly started to slide yourself down around him. Every single muscle between your waist and your thighs quivered at the stretching fullness, not a trace of pain or uncomfortable pressure with how much you'd been teasing each other. So good you hadn't even realized your eyelids had slipped shut until they cracked open again to peer down at Bucky laid out beneath you.

There was a pinch to his brow, something like concentration with his lower lip tucked tight between his teeth. Yet, his hooded gaze was still locked on you as though he didn't want to look away. Fingers bit tighter into your skin, but not enough to hurt or distract you. His attention was eventually interrupted when you pulled off him just a bit, adjusting to his size, before seating yourself fully with a firm roll of your hips and a quiet sigh. The way his head fell back, dark hair fanned against the bedding, strong scruffy jaw going a little lax with a throaty grunt as his eyes closed; it made you tremble just as much as the feel of him deep inside you.

"Alright there, old man," you teased gently, smoothing your hands along his chest as you squeezed yourself around him, wanting to move, but wanting to savor the moment at the same time.

"Hell yeah," came his breathless chuckle, an almost dopey grin plastered on his face, before he blindly grabbed at all the pillows on the bed to stuff under his head and shoulders so he was propped up some. Watching the process made you snicker to yourself until his attention turned back to you. It was that warm gaze again, like he couldn't get enough of just looking at you, with a lazy smirk that made your face flush, almost made you want to hide. Both of Bucky's hands slid up your thighs, but while his left settled at your hip, his right traveled over your stomach to your sternum and back down
again, fingers roaming absently, and his voice was distant when he took a deep breath and spoke again. "God, sweetheart. You feel like heaven."

All you could do for a moment was smile at him fondly and give a disbelieving shake of your head. When you eventually leaned over him to steal a kiss, Bucky wound flesh fingers through your hair, holding you fast to lave his tongue in your mouth and nibble at your lips and kiss you like he was starving. It was only a matter of time before his other hand palmed at your hip carefully as it urged you into a gentle undulating motion, aided by the fluid, rocking of his pelvis into yours. For a little while, you managed to muffle each other's ecstatic little noises. At least until Bucky started to thrust in earnest and it took a bit of effort to fill your lungs.

The only protest from Bucky was a concerned look when you sat upright again, trying to catch your breath and steady the tremble in your thighs. Your answer was a reassuring look and a rolling grind of your hips to let him know you weren't calling it quits just yet. His hands fell back to your hips even as yours anchored on his chest so you could start to ride him slowly. That hard heavy drag of him and the new angle had you biting at your lip, barely managing to hold back the wanton little sounds that tried to escape. When you dared look down, a shiver licked up your spine despite the sheen of sweat that was beginning to form on both of you.

Bucky looked like he was just barely holding it together himself. The muscles in his jaw worked tightly, brows furrowed with something akin to concentration as he panted. Fingers twitched at your skin like they wanted more but weren't quite sure of themselves. Hooded eyes, focus solely on you, seemed to finally notice you watching. It must have been enough to make up his mind, because his right hand slid up to cup your breast, thumbing over the nipple and squeezing lightly. You arched into his touch, not realizing how bad you'd wanted it again until it was there. At the same time, canting his hips just right pulled a gasping moan from you despite yourself. A short, triumphant chuckle, barely audible over the rush of blood in your ears and the sound of your bodies moving together, fell from his lips and he repeated the act again and again until you started to keen. And you didn't even mind; wanted more, in fact. With your brain a bit of a blank mess, you gripped his left hand at your hip, intending to bring it up to your other breast. But Bucky hesitated, pulled away somewhat, while he slowed to a stop beneath you, much to your confusion.

"Nah, sweetheart. You don't gotta." Bucky shook his head slightly, reticence in his eyes. It took your jumbled brain a few seconds to realize the problem. He'd touched you with his prosthetic hand here or there throughout everything, but for the most part kept it safely out of the way or someplace less delicate. As if he were still worried and ashamed over it. As if he still thought it might bother you.

"Ah, Bucky," you chided at him gently, taking a breath the focus past the desire to keep moving your body. A small pull and he let you move his arm again, bring a metal palm to rest against your
cheek where you nuzzled against it a little, your other hand holding his flesh one and swiping a thumb slowly across the back of it. "I told you before, it's a part of you."

Slowly, almost excruciatingly so, letting his intent gaze watch and giving him time to pull away if he truly objected, you pressed his fingers carefully downward. Lips parted a bit in wonder, it seemed to mesmerize him, the smooth drag of metal along your skin. His thumb brushed delicately against your jaw, your throat, your collarbone, until two strong hands were kneading at you gently with very little coaxing. You began to move your hips again, sighing soft and ragged, peering down at him through heavily lidded eyes over the curve of your cheek as you arched once more. "I trust you, Bucky. And I want every part of you."

Barely a heartbeat past before Bucky breathed in sharply. In no small feat of muscle control and strength, he bent up at the waist to wrap his arms around you and capture your mouth with his own. The surprising move knocked you off balance, but he caught you with metal fingers around the nape of your neck, sweat-damp tendrils of hair winding themselves around them, his other arm crossing low on your back to keep you close. It was easy for him to lift you up to adjust your legs around his waist before sliding you back down on him, thrusting up with those enhanced abs and thigh muscles. He kissed you hard and thorough until you were breathless, dizzy, hardly able to think straight, and grinning so stupid against his mouth it seemed to affect him too. Though, one errant thought caught in your mind, so that when he pulled back enough to let you breathe, your shoulders were shaking slightly with laughter.

"What," he asked sweetly, thankfully amused by your reaction instead of put off. He nuzzled his mouth against your cheek and asked again. "What're you gigglin at, huh?"

"No, nothing," you shook your head a little. With your fingers entwined in his hair, you tried figuring out the best way to maneuver in the new position he had you in. But even when you eventually managed to rock your pelvis into his, it didn't chase away the curious crook of his eyebrow for very long. "Really, Bucky. It was silly."

"Tell me anyway. I like knowin what makes you laugh," Bucky urged as his lips traveled to your jaw. His right arm tightened around you just a little and he thrust with a slight circular motion, almost certainly showing off considering the cocky smirk you felt against your neck when you let out a gentle moan.

You dragged your nails across his scalp, tugged his hair just a little mean as payback and were
rewarded with his pleasured hiss and a playful nip at your shoulder. Still, when you chanced a smug peek down at him, his expression was expectant. You pouted at him with an annoyed groan. "It's embarrassing."

"Baby, I'm buried so deep inside you, I can feel your heartbeat," he crooned, voice all smoke and honey. Between that and the way he punctuated the statement with a hard thrust, you felt your cheeks flare hot and your stomach flutter. "Think we're past bein embarrassed."

"Promise you won't think less of me," you asked somewhat breathlessly. You were starting to get flustered. The tone his voice had taken and how he guided you to lean back somewhat so his lips could skim down your chest and he could move both of you together in an achingly slow, but steady pace.

"Promise." Bucky's response was barely above a whisper before his mouth closed around one of your nipples.

Sucking in a breath, you closed your eyes and arched into the suction and nibbling. It jolted you a bit and you could feel that liquid heat coiling low in your gut once more. Every little sensation was so on edge a moment past before you could swallow around your dry throat to speak again, though it managed to come out a little broken with your heavy breathing. "Wondered if... if your arm might have a... a vibrate setting."

Everything stopped suddenly. Your bodies gliding against each other. Bucky's mouth on your skin. In fact, he pulled his face away entirely, leaving your nipple taut and achy and chilled. It made you cringe. Leave it to you to ruin the moment. Couldn't have just come up with something else. Not that your brain was necessarily firing on all cylinders given the circumstance. You worried at your lower lip, afraid to look at him. But after a few drawn out seconds, you felt metal graze from the back of your neck around to your jaw, grasping your chin gently to give a soft shake. When you dared crack your eyelids open, Bucky was staring at you with a feral grin and dark, dark eyes.

"Goddamn, sweetheart, where have you been all my life," he teased with a slight growl. You only got out a small, confused noise before he tugged you in for hard kiss. All teeth and tongue and rougher than you expected, it shocked you almost as much as when he pulled back just enough to whisper hotly at the corner of your mouth with a wicked chuckle. "Naughty little thing, aren't ya? Y'know, I could talk to Stark about an upgrade..."
"Bucky," you tried to scold, scandalized, but even if you hadn't sounded like a breathless mess, you knew it would prove ineffective. The tremble that ran through your whole body was enough to give you away when his left hand smoothed down your torso to palm delicately at your breast, thumbing gently until it ached as much as the other had.

"Would ya like that, sugar? Me bein able to do that," Bucky purred into the hinge of your jaw. A sigh escaped you as he began to work his hips into you again, quicker this time, though his hand crept lower. Your attempts to thrust back were foiled at the feeling of his thumb hooking between your two bodies to carefully rub against your clit. As your back shot straight with a gasp, he panted into your neck happily. "Yeah, y'would. Think my pretty baby'd like that a lot."

"Jesus, Bucky," you managed to spit with little ire. It was hard enough to think around the feel of him moving inside you and his thumb and fingers working against your sensitive spots. "The mouth you've got on you."

The weak chastisement did absolutely nothing to derail Bucky. In fact, it seemed to spur him on, nipping at your collarbone with a firmer roll of his pelvis. "Don't worry, dollface. Planned ta get this mouth on you later."

Just the thought of it and the sound of his voice thrumming across your skin had you moaning low despite yourself. He continued to thrust, pulling you down onto him to reach even deeper; long, drawn-out drags and short, quick ones like he didn't want you to get too used to one or the other. A particularly sharp snap of his hips accompanied by the slow stroke of his finger made you tug his hair tighter, cry out louder than you expected, followed by a whimpered "Bucky..."

"God, you say my name so sweet." His voice sounded strained, babbling husky against the curve of your neck, like it was all he could do to hold back. "And you feel so good. Always so good to me, my good, sweet girl."

It was becoming all too much for you. Every one of your senses sharpened fine, but only able to focus on Bucky and the way he was making you feel. Muscles coiling, close to snapping under the pressure. Overheated skin flushed and sweat-slick. The sound of heavy breathing and the eagerness of your bodies moving together. His strong hands, both at your hips now, urging you closer and
closer as he tasted at your skin and you dug your nails at his shoulder for purchase like you were drowning. He groaned at the act and thrust deep, making you cry out again in a tight, stilted sound, knowing you were about to go over the edge.

"That's it, baby. That's it," he encouraged, pleaded, breathless and shaky, pace picking up as he held you close. "Just let go. C'mon. I gotcha. M'right here. M'right here, sweetheart."

Your sudden shout was muffled by Bucky's lip as you came apart against him, around him. On instinct, you bucked and whined and clawed and shamelessly used him to ride out the waves of pleasure that overtook you. It lasted. It lasted so much longer than you expected, especially with Bucky still moving inside you, eyes screwed shut and fingers gripping tight at your skin, though he had slowed considerably. But even in your hazy, ecstatic mind, you weren't having any of that. With barely a moment to catch your breath and wanting him just as pleased and spent as you were, you mouthed at his neck and rolled your hips a little sloppily, walls still spasming around him. It took him a moment and a deep shuddering breath before he began to thrust again.

"You're so goddamn beautiful," Bucky murmured into your hair, tone on the verge of wrecked, right hand roaming up your back to clutch at you just as tight as his left. When you tilted up to nip lightly at his ear, he let out a groan and drove into you quicker. "Ah, Christ, baby, dunno how long m'gonna last."

A gentle whine escaped your lips as they ghosted against the hinge of his jaw. You canted your hips, opened them wider, squeezed around him. "Want you to. Please, Bucky."

That seemed to work him up a little and his thrusts became deeper, more erratic. And he sounded rushed and desperate when he spoke again. "Can I, sweetheart? Are ya sure? God, you feel so good on me. I wanna... Jesus, I wanna fill you up so bad. So bad."

"Yes, Bucky. Please," you whimpered against his rough cheek, nuzzling in to scratch up your lips and chin and nose. "Wanna feel it."

A thick, audible swallow sounded from Bucky's throat and you felt him nod slowly. Both arms came down to wrap around your waist and hips, angling you just the way he wanted as he moved fast and hard. He turned his head to catch you in a quick kiss, brushed his nose along yours, pressed
your foreheads together. His eyes were already hooded, even as he tried to look into yours, but soon they closed as his muscles strained beneath his skin. And you both panted and gasped into each other's mouths when he began to slam his hips against yours. It wasn't long before he suddenly pulled you in flush, buried deep inside you, and gave out a small, strangled cry that you swallowed up in a kiss. You could feel him spill inside you, twitching violent between your tight, fluttering walls. A few final, shallow thrusts and you knew he was spent by the way he let even just a bit of his weight sag into you.

Bucky slid his lips down your chin and jaw with lazy suction, until his face was stuffed in the crook of your neck, breathing deep. You held his lax body close to yours with your fingers carding through his hair and tried to calm the rapid beating of your heart. Though even as your body settled, your mind began to wander. It was so warm there, wrapped up together like that, wonderful and comforting, and you wished you could stay that way forever. With this man who made you feel vulnerable and safe at the same time. Wished you could always help him be at peace like this. Remembered how scared you had been to feel this way about him and how much it hurt when he left, thinking you didn't want him. How close he'd come to being gone forever. But he was back now. He was back and you never wanted to let him go again.

The burn of tears pricked at the edges of your eyes and you tried to stifle them as silently as possible. Still, Bucky must have heard something in your breathing, or maybe just known, because he pulled back to offer you a concerned expression and in a quiet voice asked, "Baby, are you cryin?"

"No, no," you denied it with a shake of your head. Yet, of course, when you blinked, a few treacherous tears broke free to slip down your cheek. You sniffled in annoyance, rolled your eyes at yourself with a huff. "Yeah, okay. I'm crying. A girl's allowed to get emotional sometimes. No poking fun."

"Ah, sweetheart, never. Not a chance in hell," he assured gently. His hands moved to cup your face, thumbs so tender as they swiped at the dampness there that it threatened to create more.

You chuckled at him wetly, trying to settle yourself. Pressing your hands over his, you gave a tap to the metal plates. "Careful, there. Don't want you to rust."

Bucky beamed at you, absolutely adoring, and urged you closer to him. "C'mere, you."
The kiss he pulled you into was sweet and sloppy. He cradled your face a few moments more before his fingers wound in your hair, caressed down your neck and shoulders, but it was comforting more than enticing. Not meant to heat you up, just to calm you down. It went on for a long while, until your skin had cooled from all the previous exertion and you could feel Bucky softening inside you. The slight trickle between your legs made you feel self-conscious, and maybe even a little dirty in a good way, if you were being honest with yourself.

"I should probably go clean up," you told him, having dragged your mouth from his long enough to breathe deep.

"In a minute," he replied, tone coaxing. Bucky gathered you in closer, arms wrapped around your back. That soft expression was back on his face as he quirked a smile at you. "Just wanna hold ya for a little while longer, that's all."

You nodded at him with your own grin, circling your arms around his neck and shoulders and nuzzling your lips and nose in the crook there. His fingers and thumbs traced along your skin gently and you let yourself relax against him entirely. The low sigh that escaped him was almost silent as he pressed his cheek into your hair. James Buchanan Barnes: deadly assassin, struggling super soldier out of time, romantic sap. God, how you loved him.
The next morning in Bucky's POV.

The first time Bucky woke up the next morning, you were pressing back against his chest, bare skin sliding along his as you adjusted your position on the bed. He slowly opened his eyes to find the curve of your neck and shoulder, the sweep of hair behind your ear. Early morning seeped through the blinds, washing the room in dim grayness. The pillow buffered your head against the metal of his upper arm; the memory of stray hairs caught between the plates aching behind his ribs and tugging his mouth into a smile. Flexing the fingers of his right hand where they draped loosely over the softness of your waist helped solidify the fact that it was all real. You were real against him. Not just the perfect, vivid dream he might've had before.

Of course, all thoughts of that were brushed aside when you moved again. No doubt you were awake, judging by the sound of your breathing and the deliberate stretch and arch of your back. It notched your bodies flush together, your hips snug to his. He sucked in a tiny gasp through teeth before they dug into his lower lip as he felt himself twitch sharply into the soft flesh of your ass. The attempt to calm down proved useless; his mind flooded with memories of the night before, nose filled with the scent of your hair and skin and sweat, the taste of you still lingering on his tongue. Sliding his hand to your hip, Bucky breathed your name into your shoulder in a hoarse, weak sort of warning, all bite lost from it with the low shudder that ran through him.

A small whine escaped your throat when you twisted your head, revealing your tinged cheeks and the poutiness of your mouth to him. It did nothing to alleviate the tightness in his chest or between his legs. Neither did the sight of the corner of those lips of yours curling up, sleepy and wicked, or the sound of your thick, groggy chuckle while you wiggled against him enticingly. "C'mon, Buck. Just one more."

"Didn't I wear you out enough last night, doll," he managed to snicker somewhat breathlessly behind your ear, despite the involuntary cant of his hips seeking out the delicious friction along your skin. Yet, your boldness about it made him grin. Somewhere between the second and third time he had you crying out the night before, the two of you had lost some timidity. But it was morning now and to find you still so eager, still wanting him, was both a relief and a turn-on.
You shook your head at his question, your hair tickling his nose and chin and coiling something deeper than physical desire in his gut. When you teased back against him once more, his eyes fluttered shut and a low groan rumbled in his throat, his mind momentarily devoid of any thoughts other than the feel of your body and how much he ached to be inside you again. Hardly able to deny either of you anymore, Bucky maneuvered you both so that some of his weight rested over your back and hips, though he was careful not to crush you. Metal fingers bit into the mattress just above the pillow as his flesh ones slid between your silky thighs to part them and press his right knee between yours. You opened so easy for him, shifted and canted your pelvis back just right that he could've been gone then and there at the first feeling of your slick folds along the length of him, ready for him. Instead, he mustered his willpower to hold back, stifling another laughing groan in the crook of your neck at the way you squirmed in an attempt to get closer. "Mmmm, my girl's insatiable, huh?"

"I'm allowed," you countered with an air of mock haughtiness. He could hear the playfulness in your voice which made him nip gently at your ear, causing you to giggle lightly. "It's new for us. We're allowed to fuck like rabbits."

That sobered him a bit. Not enough to make him pull away, but enough so that he moved his right hand to splay low across your sternum, something almost nervous fluttering in his own chest when he spoke again, quieter. "Y'know, it's more'n that for me, right, sweetheart? It's not... m'not just fuckin you."

"I know," you nodded as best you could, unable to turn you head far enough to see him. But he caught the flush on your face, felt your heart thundering beneath his fingertips, your lungs stilled the same as him. Blindly, you reached your right hand back over your shoulder and Bucky lifted to press his lips into your palm, then your wrist as you felt across his cheek and ear to tug affectionately at his hair, tingling over his scalp and down his spine. Your voice was so gentle then, so achingly tender when you continued. "It's more for me, too, Bucky."

The worry inside Bucky melted into a hopeful, dizzy kind of warmth as he leaned down to pepper kisses from your hairline over the mussed tresses until his lips brushed along the crook of your neck, your fingers tangled at the top of his scalp. Your nails dug into his skin somewhat roughly when he took his time burying himself inside you, watching in profile the blissful way your eyes closed and your lips trembled as they parted. A kittenish moan of approval slipped from your throat and jolted through him like lightning, made his hips snap up into yours quicker than he'd intended. The sudden jostle didn't seem to bother you at all, though you did remove your fingers from his hair to slide between his where they rested on your torso.

And when your bodies began to move together, the dark, self-loathing part of Bucky's mind was wonderfully quiet. There were no bloody or cold memories then. There was no brain-washed killer on puppet strings. There was no enhanced soldier so far removed from his place and time. He was just a man. A man making love to the woman who'd set his heart on fire, who helped make living
bearable again. Every deliberate angling of his thrusts, every hot kiss against your skin, was meant to pull those pleasured noises from you that drove him wild. Only one semi-coherent thought ran through his head; the almost desperate need to make you feel as good as you made him feel.

"Bucky... Bucky, please," you whimpered quietly at one point, voice somewhat muffled by the pillow you'd buried your cheek into. Still, his name on your lips was the sweetest sound he could ever remember hearing. "Please, touch me."

"Anything," he spoke into your tangled hair, though there was something wobbly in his breath and his insides as he slowed. "Anything my pretty baby wants."

Bucky pressed deep inside you, unwilling to lose any contact, before rolling you both to rest on your sides again. Taking quick care to make sure a sheet draped between skin and metal, his left arm snaked under you and around your ribcage. Cupping carefully at one of your breasts didn't feel quite the same in that hand, but he could still register the soft, suppleness there, the peak of your nipple as his thumb circled; and the fact that you trusted him to touch you so gently, let alone seemed to enjoy it with the soft little sounds you made and the way you arched into his palm, had him rocking his hips again at a measured pace. Your head tilted back to rest against his shoulder, the mass of messy locks cushioning against harsh plating, and Bucky leaned in to kiss and nip and lave along your skin. It afforded him a glimpse of your profile once more, your features worked up and flushed with a breathless little smirk on your lips so goddamn gorgeous it made his heart ache while his right hand slid over your stomach and down to the juncture of your thighs.

Once his fingers reached their destination, you let out a keening moan against the lower lip tucked between your teeth and your muscles clenched tighter around him. A short string of curses escaped Bucky as he pressed his forehead to your shoulder, trying to breathe through the sensation. He had to force himself to stillness to keep from coming undone before you were even close. All but his fingers that kept working delicately along your skin, seeking out the right pressure, the correct movements to make you gasp and tremble and writhe. After several long moments, he felt your right arm sneak under his to reach behind you. He lifted his head to give you a questioning glance, unseen by your closed eyes, just as your fingertips dug gently into his hip and urged him closer to you. It wasn't difficult to take the hint and soon he began moving again. This seemed to please you, a grateful sigh leaving your lips as you lifted your leg to wrap back around his, opening you up even further for him, making his gut twist and quake. The slight change in position let you shift in his arms until he could feel your hot little panting breaths against his face. Ducking his head let him seal his mouth over yours in a thorough, somewhat desperate kiss while he drove into you firmly and touched you as gentle as he could.

"Bu-Bucky, I... I'm..." you managed to stutter out after who knows how many moments or minutes of the two of you moving as one. Time wasn't really registering in Bucky's head, just the sound and feel of you.
"Yeah, baby. I know," he whispered back, pressing his lips at the corner of your mouth. And it was the truth. Your body was already starting to tense and there was a sweet fluttering around him that said you were almost there. He let out a half-amused huff. "M'not too far behind ya, if you say it's okay."

The small, frantic nod you gave him brushed your noses together and was accompanied by your fingers still on him gripping tighter, your body grinding back against his. "Course it's okay. C'mon, Bucky. Please."

"God, lookit you, sweetheart. You're so beautiful. Don't think I ever met a woman beautiful as you. Ain't just talkin about that pretty face a yours, or this body either," he breathed quietly against your cheek. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was babbling sweet, but he couldn't help it and he certainly didn't give a damn. Not when he had you there. "S'that feel good for you, kitten, hmmm? Feels good for me, wanna know if it does for you too."

The only response you could muster was another little nod and a soft noise in the affirmative. Bucky smiled, a swell of pride in his chest as he nuzzled along your jaw and behind your ear, fingers and hips still making you keen. "Always wanna make my girl feel good. So good it might be hard to walk straight."

"Bucky," you spat out, tone half laughing and half scandalized as you swatted at his ass playfully. But it just made him pick up the pace a little, eliciting a gasp from you.

"Shush and just lemme keep lovin on ya, alright," Bucky chuckled low and let his mouth and teeth and tongue roam along your skin. Your response was an appreciative hum, craning your neck so he could kiss wherever he pleased.

It didn't seem long at all before he felt that shift in your body again. A hitch in your breath. A quiver in your thighs. High, incoherent sobs from your heaving chest beneath his metal hand. The gentle squeeze and release along the length of him that made him shudder and groan even as he continued to move with you, urging you on with every slick touch. Then, all at once, you seemed to snap, trying and failing to hold back a loud cry while your back arched almost violently away from his chest. Bucky kept a tight hold of you, moving his hand low on your stomach so as not to hurt your oversensitive flesh, breath caught in his throat at the way your hips rocked back into him wildly. And just as predicted, every one of his senses overwhelmed by your release, it took only a few more sharp thrusts before he buried his face at the back of your neck to muffle his own obscene moans and grunts as he emptied himself inside you.

The comfortable quiet that filled the room seemed to match the still-gray morning light, tranquil, serene, disturbed only by the sounds of heavy breaths slowing and the reverent glide of Bucky's fingers along your skin. Your bodies were still connected and slumped together, his gladly accepting
the hot weight of you. He kissed at the knob where your neck and spine met, not minding the sweat-
damp tendrils of your hair that no doubt matched his own, trailed his right hand up to caress your
collarbone and gingerly over your breasts. Certainly, there had been peaceful, blissful moments for
him a long time ago, before The Asset, before the war, yet none he could remember held a candle to
the last several hours when he got to be nothing but a mass of tangled limbs with you, learning your
body better than his own.

After several moments, you stirred beside him, stretching out like a cat in a patch of sunlight. The
sleepy, vulnerable display brought a smile to Bucky’s face, though you both let out somewhat
disappointed sounding noises as your movement pulled your pelvis away from his, forcing the two of
you apart. When you leaned back into him, he could hear you laughing under your breath and didn’t
have time to suppress his fondness to ask before you were already saying in a lilting voice “I guess
you weren’t lying when you said you were close.”

“You kiddin me? Had ta stop myself a couple times. Ladies first an all,” he teased, shifting to prop
himself up on his left elbow and mouthing gentle at your skin where his facial hair had roughed it up.
“You just don’t know what you do to me, babydoll.”

Peeking up, he caught sight of your bashful little grin while he slowly kissed his way down and over
your shoulder. His right hand roamed idly; your throat, sternum, stomach. You shivered slightly,
goosebumps forming, whether from his ministrations or from the ends of his hair tickling you, he
couldn’t say, but he enjoyed it just the same. If this was all he got with you, the night before and this
morning, then he would savor every single second, every breath. Hell, the only reason he slept at all
was because he knew you were tired. And because the feel of you curled up asleep in his arms was
better than he could ever describe. It reminded him of that night months ago, in the same bed, almost
as intimate for different reasons. So close, so quiet, he could share anything with you.

“I held you like this,” Bucky confessed to your upper arm before huffing at his own ridiculousness.
“Well, not exactly like this. But I held you the night Stevie came over for dinner, after I came to see
you and you let me stay. Never asked, just did it.”

“Yeah, I remember. It woke me up at first, but I think you needed it; that comfort. And I definitely
didn’t mind,” you replied with no small amount of affection audible in your voice.

The nonchalant admission startled Bucky’s attention back to your face, your eyes shining up at him a
bit coy. You’d known this whole time? There had never been any indication, not a single word,
even that morning when he had been embarrassed to admit what he’d done. Then again, maybe that
was why. Now, he could only manage a self-deprecating shake of his head, feeling foolish even as
he pressed his lips to your skin once more. “You’re amazing, sweetheart.”

“Eh, I’m alright, I guess,” was your shrugged response, though he saw the small smirk gracing your
Bucky let out a playful growl before gnawing at your shoulder in a mock bite. When you sputtered out a giggle, rolling out from under his teeth and onto your stomach, he really couldn’t complain. Not with the nearly unimpeded view of you naked from behind, all soft and curved and sweet. Such a stark contrast from his own body, from anything he’d been able to really feel in a long time, and he relished it. The way you positioned yourself brought Bucky’s fingers to rest at your waist; it was so easy to let them lazily make their way across your skin. A contented sigh from you spurred him on further. Map the curve of your hip, measure the distance down to a knee, memorize the back of a thigh in vivid detail. His touch skirted close to the slick remnants of your lovemaking, the visceral sight of it stirring something big and strangely possessive in his chest that he couldn't name.

"We're gonna have to wash the sheets later," you murmured, just barely audible from the pillow you'd gathered under your face with both arms.

It shook Bucky from his thoughts and he licked at the sudden dryness of his lips and mouth when he looked up to find your ear, the back of your neck, and the tops of your shoulders dusted dark in embarrassment. He offered an acknowledging hum through his forming smirk as his hand moved up gently over your ass to the small of your back. The statement was definitely true. Both of you had contributed your fair share to the mess. Still, hearing you say we sparked a fresh hope in Bucky. He couldn't help leaning down to press his lips against the lower curve of your spine near where his thumb swiped affectionately.

You squirmed just a little under him with a gentle, amused snort. "Are you trying to get me riled up again, Barnes?"

"No, ma'am," he smiled into your skin. Though even he knew the denial seemed half-assed since he could barely bring himself to leave a single inch of you untouched or un kissed. "Just can't help admirin you, sweetheart."

"You're crazy," was your laughing reply, but it trailed off in a quiet little mewl when he smoothed his hand firm up your back.

"Yeah, 'bout you," Bucky countered cheekily while he continued planting kisses up the path of your vertebrae.

Over the next few minutes, he took no small amount of pleasure in lavishing your bare skin with all the tender contact he could, short of getting you both worked up again. Lips brushed along your shoulder blades. Hands worked along your muscles to feel them going lax in comfort. Fingers
roamed your ribcage, finding peace in the gentle expansion from your quiet breathing. But suddenly, a loud yawn broke the silence, muffled only slightly by your pillow, and Bucky watched you hunker down as if trying to melt into the bed, lips smacking dramatically lazy before quirking up at the corners. He nuzzled a silent chuckle at the base of your neck. God, he adored so many things about you and your random acts of ridiculousness were nowhere near the bottom of that list. "Gonna get up, dollface?"

"Nope. Still tired. You can really--" Your somewhat childish sounding reply was broken for a moment by another small yawn. "You can really tire a girl out, Bucky."

"C'mere then," Bucky urged with a grin, grabbing his own pillow to tuck between his head and his metal bicep. The other arm hooked around your back so he could haul you in a little closer. He had no intention of missing a chance to be pressed against you as much as possible.

When you twisted your head around to look at him, hair wound up plastered to your face in a chaotic mess. The way you blew at it from the corner of your mouth, brow scrunched slightly in concentration, proved futile. It was hard for Bucky not to laugh while reaching up to smooth the stray tresses away, revealing that soft, sweet smile of yours that made his heart thud too hard in his chest. Then, with his fingers still curled in your hair, you surprised him a bit by leaning over and kissing him. It was lingering and fairly chaste, yet still somehow full of emotion, lips parting just enough to taste at each other delicately, your hand cupping his jaw with your thumb gripping lightly at his chin, as though trying to keep him from moving away. Entirely unnecessary, though, considering he never wanted to leave.

"I'm so glad you came back, Bucky," you eventually breathed quietly once you'd pulled back a few inches. The hint of wetness in your eyes didn't go unnoticed.

"I'm sorry I ever left," he replied, hearing the shakiness in his voice and trying to clear it from his throat. He'd tried to give his apologies in words and actions all night, and though you accepted them, it felt like it would never be enough. That darkness and doubt trying to worm its way back in, Bucky ran his fingers through your hair and let his gaze roam your face, desperately trying to keep it at bay for as long as possible. "And m'sorry I hurt you, sweetheart. Don't ever wanna hurt you. Christ, I don't even deserve--"

"Shhh, shhh. Stop, Bucky," you interrupted him gently while pressing your fingers over his lips. When you seemed satisfied he wouldn't go on, you let your touch meander along the scruff of his cheek, his forehead, brow, down the bridge of his nose. It was comforting and eased some of the tension that had begun to buzz through him, but he saw the silent plea in your eyes as you continued to speak. "I hurt you, too. And I'm sorry. For pushing you away, making you feel rejected, when it was just my own stupid fear. That's what you don't deserve."
Bucky opened his mouth to reply, but wasn't sure exactly what to say to reassure you, how to react, and, apparently, you didn't expect him to. Instead, you shifted around on the bed, nudging him partially onto his back and nuzzling your way under his chin, elbow crooking around his torso to snuggle close. It seemed only natural to wrap his arms around you. Natural and comfortable and right. And he was certain he felt you smile against his chest. "Might sound silly, but I'm happy just being here with you like this."

"I'd be silly then, too, sweetheart," he sighed through a smirk, dropping a kiss into your hair and resisting the urge to squeeze you in as tightly as he could.

After several long minutes of stillness, Bucky felt your body begin to go slack against him. A few more, and your deep, even breathing let him know you were fast asleep. You barely even stirred when he deftly maneuvered the covers back up to drape over both your bodies, though it was mostly to make sure you stayed warm. Only when he knew you were well-guarded from any possible morning chill did Bucky let himself settle and start to drift. His mind skipped through shoddy memories; dalliances with other girls long ago that had either never gotten this far or not felt quite the same, all the times he wanted to touch you and how it felt to finally be able to. And he distantly realized he was on the verge of sleep as his thoughts wandered down paths he would never allow them to when fully awake, mixing new wants and old, almost forgotten dreams he couldn't let himself have anymore. Like the old courthouse steps where you stood in a bright new dress and a wide-brimmed hat to shade your face from the sun. Or the blanket his Ma knit before he was even born, wriggling gently in the bend of his metal arm.

---

The next time Bucky opened his eyes, it was mid-morning, judging by the way the room was lit. Much like the very first time he woke up next to you, after a deep, comfortable sleep that had been blissfully free of nightmares. Except this time, the sound of your quiet snoring let him know you were still in the bed with him. That fact made his heart quicken despite himself. You must have squirmed your way out of his grasp while you both slept, because only your hand rested on his chest then and he had to roll onto his side to look at you. You were curled up, head barely on the pillow, face peaceful besides the rapid back and forth flicker of your eyes behind their lids. Something in your breathing worried him a little. Nagged at the back of his mind with the memory of you being sick. Yet, when he reached out to brush his fingertips gently across your forehead and cheeks, he was relieved to find you weren't feverish. He bit into his lower lip to suppress a chuckle as your face scrunched in mild annoyance before going lax again. And he couldn't help his smile at the endearing noise of contentment you made when he pressed a kiss against your temple.

A few more moments were spent just gazing at you. The slow rise and fall of your chest. The soft sweep of eyelashes on your cheek. The barely-there splotches where he'd been a bit rougher with his lips and teeth than he'd intended. He would've been happy laying there beside you for much longer, but he knew he couldn't sleep anymore and he didn't want to risk waking you should he become restless. You gave only a small questioning murmur as he slid carefully out from under the cover and onto his feet before you rolled over to settle again. There was near-silence after that while
he pulled on his boxer-briefs and jeans, not even bothering to button or zip them all the way to avoid disturbing you again. He decided his shirt and shoes could stay, if for no other reason than to let you know he was still around. Just the idea of you waking up alone, thinking he'd snuck off on you after everything, made his skin prickle uncomfortably.

After a quick stop in the bathroom, pausing at the mirror to comb his fingers through his hair as he tied it back and savoring the ghosts of already-faded marks left on his skin by your nails and your sweet little mouth, Bucky padded quietly down the hall toward the living room. Sam told him you had made changes to the place and it was evident the moment he stepped inside the night before, but now he had a chance to look over the details. No more worn knickknacks collecting dust around the place. A turntable set up on a shelf with faded record sleeves in names, both foreign and familiar to him, lined up neatly beside. There was a blanket he hadn't seen before, a patchwork of pastels, folded carefully on the bench, its imperfections and dottings of cat hair telling him it was well-loved. Most noticeable of all were the few pictures on display here and there around the room. He recognized most of them from the shoebox you'd allowed him to look through; you, your mom, grandmother, your sister. All of the photos smartly framed, save the small strip of three photo booth pictures propped up alongside a snap of you, your sister, and Wilson, making his chest tighten. You'd definitely made changes, all right, but the place still had that unmistakable feel of home; a feeling Bucky itched for and hoped he hadn't lost a chance at.

The cat mewed at him softly from her place on the counter when he entered the kitchen before her attention turned out the window above the sink. As he drew closer, he followed her line of sight to find several song birds fluttering around a feeder filled with seed on the back patio. You must have put it out when it started getting colder. Even with the sun shining, the glistening frost had barely started to melt from the grass. Bucky huffed in amusement while he scratched behind Potato's ear, earning him a pleasant mrrrr and a headbutt to his knuckles.

"Don't think your Ma'd like you bein up here, Kitty," he chided quietly as he moved past her toward the coffee maker, pleasantly surprised to find it still tucked in the corner, ready for use. Though he didn't really need the caffeine, he'd been struck with a hankering for a cup of joe. Something about the chilly morning and the strange domestic urge Bucky didn't even want to question. There had been plenty of coffee at the compound, in so many varieties it had almost been overwhelming, but as he popped open the simple canister from its remembered place in your cabinet, the smell of the brand you'd bought just for him warmed his insides as much as the drink itself would.

An inquisitive sounding mrow had him looking over his shoulder to watch the agile feline stretch lazily, first her front legs, then her back. It was obvious she had no intention of heeding his little warning and no shame of it as she pranced along the counter top to rub her cheek along his metal arm. Bucky only chuckled under his breath, returning to the business at hand. Once he'd finished measuring out the ground coffee and filling the reservoir, rather entertained with the way she followed him to the sink and back, he finally flipped the machine on and reached out to pet along Potato's soft fur again. She startled a little when the percolating began, but she circled, deliberately smashing her face along Bucky's left palm, before gracefully sitting with her tail curled around her feet. His attempt to pull his fingers from her resulted in an indignant quack of a sound and an insistent batting of her paw until he reached up to tug on her ears gently.
"Gettin mighty pushy there, furball," Bucky snorted, but continued to indulge her a bit. It made the cat purr louder and tilt her head contently. As for him, it just made him roll his eyes sentimentally. "Yeah, yeah. Guess I missed you too, tuna breath."

Of course, petting could only hold Potato's attention so long before the fickle thing pulled away. She resumed her position near the sink, after a moment starting to chatter and trill quietly at the birds outside. With a shake of his head, Bucky ignored her mrrr of protest and scooped her up in one arm to deposit her on the floor. She looked none too pleased with the situation, but only plopped down on her side as she glared up at him.

"Was either that or let your Ma make hashbrowns outta ya," he shrugged, not caring that he was attempting to reason with a cat. "Speakin of hashbrowns..."

It occurred to Bucky that he should make you breakfast. You had cooked for him so often before, he felt it would be a nice little surprise for you, the least he could do. Not to mention that nagging desire that loomed at the edge of his thoughts, wanting to make amends for the pain he'd caused you. A night in bed and a meal wouldn't be enough, but he could start there. Just a matter of figuring out what to cook. He remembered you liked that breakfast pie thing... quiche, but he didn't see a recipe book anywhere and didn't feel it was his place to go fiddling around with your computer without your consent at this point. Not when he'd just come back after so long.

There were only a few eggs in the fridge anyway, rather sparse compared to what he'd seen before. A look in the pantry revealed mostly staples; dry pasta, canned soup and fish. Though, as he spotted the shelf with flour and sugar and all the miscellaneous needs for baking, a quiet, childhood memory skipped across the surface of Bucky's mind. Cold mornings, the smell of coffee brewing on the stove. Sitting on the counter, helping his Ma cook stacks of pancakes for the family, with butter and syrup or jam when they could get some. Hell, sometimes it was his Pop making up the simple breakfast before he had to go off to work, whistling a tune and a bounce in his step while Ma dealt with a fussy baby. When he asked why his father was the one in the kitchen, he only got his hair ruffled by the older man and told that one day he'd understand. And there, standing at your open kitchen pantry, if never before, Bucky was pretty sure he got what his Pop had meant.

It took a few minutes and a bit of concentration, but he was pretty sure he remembered the recipe from when he was a kid. At least, it looked about right as he filled up the mixing bowl. Of course, stirring was a lot easier than he recalled, due in no small part to enhanced strength and a bionic arm. If you walked in then, seeing him use his left arm to whisk everything together, he was fairly certain there'd be a smartass comment about him being an electric mixer. Bucky didn't even try suppressing a smile at the thought. You didn't happen to walk in during that part of the process. Instead, about the time he was setting the skillet to heat on the burner, he heard the faint sounds of you stirring in the bedroom. His guts twisted slightly in anxious anticipation until the bathroom door opened and shut, followed soon by the shower turning on. That would give him enough time to get started.
The first round of pancakes were just ready to come out of the skillet when the water turned off in the bathroom. A handful of moments later, they were plated up and the floorboards in the hallway creaked gently at your approach. Bucky turned around, intent on greeting you despite not being quite sure what he’d say, only to be rendered momentarily, foolishly dumb at the sight of you anyway. You stood paused in the entryway to the kitchen; damp hair, socked feet, bare legs, wearing the blue button-up shirt he’d left behind. The one he later realized matched the color of the jacket he wore while serving with Steve and the Howlies. And his mind reeled at the memory and the sight of you and the overwhelming idea that maybe you could be his. Still, he somehow managed to wet the dryness from his mouth and lips with a swipe of his tongue before he spoke.

"Mornin, солнышко," he smiled. The gentle endearment was true in a way, if you asked him. Seeing you walk toward him the night before, happiness and relief shining on your face, had been like seeing the sun for the first time in ages. Even the Russian didn't taste like ash on his tongue anymore when he knew it made you blush so sweet.

"Morning, Bucky," was your slightly groggy reply, ending in a big, wide yawn and a sheepish grin as you rubbed at your eyes. He turned to ladle another round of batter into the skillet as you drew closer, only to hear you add "Though I don't know if I warrant such pretty language after just rolling out of bed."

"Ты прекрасна в любом языке, голубушка," Bucky chuckled lightly with a shake of his head. When he looked over to find you at the counter to his right, so close, a look on your face somewhere between curious and annoyed, he let his fingertips reach out for you and pinch the collar of the shirt, tugging just a bit along the edge leading down to the top button as he gazed at your face starting to flush. "This my shirt?"

"It was here and I guess it sorta smelled like you," you explained quietly, offering up a weak attempt at a nonchalant shrug.

Bucky gave a curious hum, trying to play it cool himself despite the feel of his heartbeat picking up. Before he could talk himself out of it, he leaned in to press his nose where blue fabric met your neck to take a deep whiff. Your hand moving to rest on his arm and the way you craned your neck were both relief and encouragement to him. His hands found your hips only to feel you shiver against him as he exhaled along your skin. "Hmmm, smells like you now. Might want it back."

"Sorry," you replied in mock regret. Your fingers slid up his bicep and over his shoulders until both your arms were loosely circled around his neck. "This shirt is currently being occupied."

"We could fix that." He smirked into the hinge of your jaw, barely setting his teeth there in a playful
You squirmed at the sensation, tickled, distracted, and Bucky took the opportunity to swoop down and grab you by the back of the thighs, lifting you up off the ground. The startled gasp you gave sputtered into a thrilled giggle as he plopped you to sit on the counter. It made his chest feel big and proud, knowing he could elicit such happy sounds from you. Then, you kissed him through your laughter, soft and sweet and lingering. Between that and the feel of your bare thighs at his waist, he could've damn near melted right back into you. But the scent of pancakes getting too close to burning hit his nostrils, making him grip your chin with careful fingers to reluctantly pull you back.

"Would you quit distractin me? Can't ya see I'm tryin-a work here," he teased, brushing his thumb along your lower lip. It seemed to be your turn to nip and his turn to shiver when your teeth scraped gently along the pad of his thumb, your eyes a bit hazed, and Jesus if he couldn't've had you right then and there. Yet you relented with a somewhat triumphant grin, taking his hand in yours to rest at your knee. It was all he could do to ignore the sudden tightness of his half-done jeans so he could turn toward the stove.

"You didn't have to make breakfast, Buck. I could've done that," you informed in a gentle voice, your touch sweeping along his knuckles while he flipped the pancakes.

"I wanted to. I like doin things for you, sweetheart. For my best gal," he ventured honestly, feeling his own cheeks trying to turn traitorously warm and hoping he hadn't overstepped his bounds. When he dared to look up at you again, you seemed almost bashful, a crooked smile on your face. Something in it chipped away at a bit of the worry in his mind, making it easier to slot himself back between your legs with his arms around your waist, his own grin playing at his lips. "Think maybe you'd let me take ya out more now? Maybe to a show? Dinner? Dancin? Gonna let me show you off and make the whole world jealous?"

Snorting out a laugh, you rolled your eyes, and for a fleeting moment Bucky worried that you might never really understand just how beautiful he thought you were, how much you meant to him. It was something he definitely didn't mind working at if given the chance. But all that was pushed aside when you heaved an overly dramatic, put upon sigh. "I dunno, Bucky. You said I was your best gal. That implies there might be others I'm not aware of."

"You kiddin me, dollface," he beamed up at you cheekily, bottom lip tucked between his teeth while he reached down to grip your ass in both hands, making you jump with an adorable surprised squeak. "I got my hands full enough with you. Don't need nobody else, sugar. Don't want nobody else."

"Sweet talker," you admonished lightly, though your hands slid up his chest to lace your fingers behind his neck.
"C'mon, you like it," Bucky countered somewhat smugly. He couldn't help the flicker of confidence in him that fanned brighter at your touch or the way your soft, gorgeous eyes regarded him in almost equal measures of tenderness and want.

"Maybe a little," was your begrudged admittance. He found himself sort of smitten with the twitch at the corners of your lips, trying to hold back a wide smile that eventually burst through anyway. "Maybe I also like that you're making me pancakes for breakfast."

The sheer delight on your face was infectious and Bucky didn't even try to resist it as he leaned in closer to you, tilting his head as if he meant to kiss you but stopping a few inches shy. "Good choice, then?"

You nodded slightly, moving in to almost close the distance, letting your breath fan warm against his face, eyes lidded. "I think I could get used to being your girl, Bucky."

A quiet, possessive, triumphant beat in his chest had him capturing your lips with his own, pulling you to the edge of the counter so your bodies were pressed together. The kiss was thorough, more assuring than demanding. Suction and tongue and teeth all gentle. Your kittenish licks and nips were enough to make him sigh into your mouth despite himself. Breaking away from you was difficult, but as much as he wanted to just stay wrapped up with you like that forever, he was still acutely aware he had something on the stove to tend to. It definitely wasn't the kind of fire he cared to start.

This time, you didn't stay on the counter when he moved back to the task at hand. Instead, you hopped down to your feet, a little less than graceful. It must have scared the cat, because a split second later there was the sound of padded little feet scampering off toward the living room. Bucky glanced over to see you start to slip around behind him, but stilled at the timid glide of your fingertips along his side. Not because he was spooked, though he figured that's why you were being so gentle; because he wanted to memorize the feel of your arm slowly wrapping around his waist. There was caring in that touch. There was love in the press of your cheek against the bare skin of his back. In the sensation of the tip of your nose and the curve of your lips brushing along his spine, making his chest ache. Despite the banter and the playfulness and the time spent tangled up in each other, he still found it hard to fathom that after everything he'd seen and done he could find something like this, someone like you. That dark whisper in the back of his skull tried reminding him how much he didn't deserve it, but he wanted it too much. And the soft stretch of your body along his made it easier not to listen.

Your left hand slid its way beneath his metal arm, which he raised a bit to give you room, until it rested over where his bullet wound should be. He'd practically forgotten it was there over the course of the evening. As your thumb caressed idly back and forth at the edge of his rib, Bucky nearly
shuddered at the tender kiss you planted on the line of scars where metal plates met flesh. "You wanna tell me what happened?"

Plenty of batter remained in the mixing bowl, ready to be cooked. It hadn't occurred to Bucky that the recipe swimming around in his brain was enough to feed a family of six. Not that he couldn't polish off whatever you weren't able or willing to eat. But a few minute's wait wouldn't really hurt anything. In all the time spent with you and all the advice given by Wilson, he'd come to discover it really was best to talk when he could. It wasn't always a walk in the park, but if there were ever times that seemed to take the edge off, they were quiet moments with you. Bucky turned off the burner on the stove, moving the skillet to the side, before reaching up to lace the fingers of his right hand with the ones you had cupped to his side.

You stepped back, allowing him room to turn around, but Bucky quickly pulled you back in, the curious concern on your face giving way to a small smile. His lips lingered a moment on your forehead just as he started to gently tug you along with him toward the breakfast table right off the kitchen. There was no hesitation when he sank into one of the chairs and urged you to sit across his lap, though your arched eyebrow didn't go unnoticed.

"Easier to talk when you're close," he answered quietly, letting his arms rest around your waist. Some of the tension in his muscles dissipated when you hooked your arm behind his shoulders, leaning into him with an understanding nod.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, Buck. You know that." Warm fingers slid across his jaw, thumb slipping along his cheekbone like you'd done so many times before. There was something so satisfying in finally being able to brush a kiss to the inside of your wrist, a gesture he thought he might've wanted to do all along.

"I know I don't. I wanna, but I just..." He almost said he wasn't sure where to start. With his teeth sunk into his bottom lip, a derisive snort left him at the stupidity of that. Of course, you start at the beginning. He just wasn't sure what he should and shouldn't tell. A glance up at you revealed a patient expression as you dropped your hand to his chest.

"The mission was to stop an arms dealer who was gonna auction off HYDRA weapons," Bucky started again. Your uneasy shift at the mention of his old captors was oddly comforting to him, like you understood that it had to have been difficult for him, but you stayed silent. "A couple of our guys got spotted, which led to gunfire. Steve called us in, but some civilians were stuck on a bridge nearby and would've been caught in the crossfire, so I tried to clear them out with Wanda. A missile got launched that Stark wasn't able to stop. Ended up takin out part of the bridge. Most of them were gone by then, but there was a kid, a little boy trapped in car at the edge of the impact site."

The slight hitch in your breath was more felt than heard, drawing Bucky's attention. He gathered
you in tighter to his chest before offering a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, doll. I got him out. Jaws of life, remember? Sure, he was a little banged up, but I handed him over to his ma and they were able to get to safety. I was distracted though, that's how those guys got the drop on me. They only got in the one good shot before me, Wanda, and Barton took em out. The arms dealer gave Steve the slip, took us a few days to track him down again, but we did and were able to bring him in. So, one less bad guy walkin free. Go team."

There. That was the long and short of it. No need to worry you with details. Like how his wound might have healed quicker if he'd actually let himself rest while they were on the mission. And broaching the subject of Wanda's offer to help his memory with her mind powers could wait until later. There'd been enough people fucking around in his head for a lifetime, but he didn't want to decline it until he had a chance to think it through. Not now though. Now, he wanted things to be just about you and him.

"Go team," you echoed him in a much lighter tone than his sarcastic one. Your fingers brushed gently over the side of his neck as you kissed his cheek. "But you saved people, Bucky. Especially that little boy. That had to make you feel good."

"It did," he nodded, flashing you a tight smile. But his attention fell back to his metal hand at your waist, shiny fingers bunching the blue fabric somewhat nervously between them. "If I'm bein truthful, it's probably why I came back here. Sam told me how much I hurt you and Steve told me what you said on the phone when he called, but... But I still wasn't sure if I should or if I could. I guess knowin I helped out that kid made me feel like I earned it. Like I earned gettin to see you again after what happened between us."

"Bucky," you said quietly, tone sympathetic as you took his chin and pulled his gaze up to yours.

But he wasn't quite finished yet. There were things he wanted to say before he lost the guts, before they got all drowned out and swallowed up by the insecurities in his mind. Pulling your hand from his face to hold in his metal fingers seemed to let you know there was more and he licked the dry anxiousness from his lips. "Listen, baby, I know you're strong and smart and capable. Wouldn't've made it through all the shit you have if you weren't. You been on your own so long, you don't need anyone. Least of all a guy who ain't even got his head on straight all the time. A gal like you can take care of herself. I just want you to know that you don't gotta..."

"I don't want to be on my own anymore," you chimed in, the strain in your voice making it sound rough. Your hand moved from his shoulder to cradle the back of his neck, fingernails scraping softly at his scalp and sending a delicious shiver down his spine.

"Then you won't be, sweetheart. You won't be." A breath of pure relief escaped him, a load taken off him by finally saying it and by your response. Better than he could've hoped for. Bucky grinned
as he untangled his fingers from yours so he could cup your cheek and kiss you, still pleasantly surprised with the way you nuzzled into the metal like it made no difference. "Just wanna help take care-a you, like you always do for me."

He could feel that sweet smile of yours against his lips before you pulled back enough to look him in the eye. "Alright, yeah. I do kinda like the sound of that, Bucky. But you don't have to earn being here, okay? I want you here. I wanna be with you."

"You just keep right on tellin me that, beautiful. Any time you want," Bucky smirked in response, shaking his head slightly. "But I don't know that it's gonna make my brain work any different."

"I know," was your heavy sigh. He swore he could almost see the cogs turning in your head for a moment. No doubt trying to figure out what you wanted to say, just like he had. Then you shifted in closer to him, fingertips wandering idly along his bare chest. "So, if we're going to do this thing... And I so want to, Bucky... but if we're going to, then you need to make me a few promises."

"Name 'em," he replied quicker than he realized. It made him sound too much like an over eager kid and he had a quiet laugh at himself. "Hell, I don't guess there's much I wouldn't do for you, sweetheart."

The somewhat strained tilt of your lips let him know you were about to get serious before you even started talking. "I know you're going to go on more mission. It helps, I get it. But I also know that there are going to be times when it might get rough on you. So when you come back, you have to let me help. Sometimes you might wanna talk and sometimes you might not, but I need to make sure you're going to be alright. And if not me, then just someone, okay?"

Bucky nodded in agreement. The thought of your sister crossed his mind, but the request was a piece of cake in his opinion, considering he was already trying to do just that. Though he doubted he would need anyone besides you to help settle him. When you seemed convinced he understood, you nodded in kind.

"No taking off in the middle of the night," you continued. That one weighed a little heavy on him, remembering how he'd done just that to you before. But he didn't dare interrupt for yet another apology, no matter how much he wanted to. "I mean, you go for a run, you do your PT, you go to the bathroom, whatever. That's something different. I just don't want you to disappear after we might fight. I'd rather stay up all night working it out than go to bed angry or upset. And definitely no sneaking out on a mission. Wake me up if you have to. Because I just... I..."

"Hey, baby, shhh," he soothed, realizing you were starting to spiral a bit. The redness rimming your
eyes concerned him and he swiped his thumb along your cheekbone in the hopes it might calm you.

You took a steadying breath, but didn't try to backpedal out of it. And the fact that you let him see that soft spot in you, let him try to comfort you for a change, meant more to him than you could ever know. "One day, Bucky... one day I know you might not come back from a mission. It would eat me up inside if something were to happen to you and I missed one last chance to tell you how much I care about you."

"Look at me, sweetheart. C'mon," Bucky coaxed with a gentle tilt of your jaw until your eyes met his again. Wetness glistened on your lashes, made his heart clench just a little, but he managed an even voice and a slight smile. "You got every right to be worried, but it's gonna take a hell of a lot to keep me from coming home to you. So don't count me out too quick, got it?"

There was an amused huff before you ducked your head in a quick affirmative. Blinking caused some tears to roll down your cheeks and he gladly smudged a few away as you wiped at the rest. When his fingers slipped into your hairline, you gave a quiet sniffle before leaning in to press your lips over his. He kissed you gentle for a few long moments. Until the tip of your tongue flickered out to taste at his Cupid's bow. Your mouths molded together, teeth just scraping against each other's lips. His hand found its way back to your waist to pull you in tighter, even as your fingers looped behind his neck.

You broke away first, chest heaving slightly in an effort to catch your breath. Bucky felt chagrined. Maybe after such serious confessions wasn't the best time to try devouring you. Yet, you didn't seem to mind in the least. Brushing your nose along his, smile playing at your lips, you spoke again in a low voice. "There was another thing I wanted, Bucky. More than anything else right now."

"Yeah," he asked, somewhat breathless himself, trying to keep from pawing at your hips like an animal, but unable to stop the feral grin that took over his face. "Tell me."

"I want..." you whispered warm at the corner of his mouth. The feel of you pressing your torso flush with his and your nails skimming down his neck threatened to shudder through his whole body. And the way you nipped his bottom lip did the trick even after you let it go with a soft, wet little pop. You definitely had his undivided attention. "I want those pancakes you were supposed to be making me."

Bucky blinked in confusion, brain attempting to switch gears to keep up. It finally registered at your teasing snicker and he let his head fall backwards with a frustrated groan. Laughter at his expense was interrupted by his playful growl when he grabbed you up tight to bury his face at the crook of your neck. His teeth set to gnawing at the spot he knew was there. One of the few he'd discovered the night before where with just the right amount of pressure he could make you squeal in delight. And he was rewarded with exactly that, the high pitched sound breaking into giggles as you
squirmed in his grasp. He let himself revel in the sound and vibration of your laughter on his skin a few moments more before he relented and pressed a kiss just under your chin.

"C'mon, Bucky. You make a girl work up an appetite, least you can do is feed her," you pouted while shoving at his chest weakly with your forearms. Yet the tremors of your dying laughter made your voice lose any bite it might have had.

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled in mock annoyance against the fabric at your shoulder before pushing you up to your feet with a gentle swat to your ass.

No sooner had he stood himself, than you plopped right back down in the same chair. When he gave you a questioning look, you offered up a shrug. "I'm gonna stay right here. That way, you can't blame me distracting you if you burn any of them."

"Oh, that's right," Bucky nodded thoughtfully, lips pursed and brows pinched like he was remembering something. Then, he snapped as though he'd finally come up with what he was searching for. "You're the only one allowed to burn things in your kitchen."

"Damn straight." The smug smirk on your face was almost too much, especially as you made a great show of stretching your legs out to cross at the ankles and leaning back with your fingers laced behind your head.

Hell if Bucky could resist swooping in for one more kiss. Because he wanted it; this happiness you gave him, this real, physical reminder that his life could be more than just the terrible things he'd done. He really would earn it, no matter what it took. He promised himself that. Earn every touch and every kiss and every smile that warmed him like the springtime sun. Until then, he hoped loving you like nothing else would be enough.
Dusting had never been your favorite household chore. Not that you were particularly fond of chores overall, but there was something so mind-numbingly tedious about moving every little thing off a shelf, cleaning off all the nooks and crannies, and then trying to put it back just right. It was bad enough when you were a little girl, only made worse when you got older and the trinkets became sad reminders that you couldn't let go of for so long. Of course, there was less hassle now that the knickknacks were either packed away or donated so another family might make better memories with them in the background. Yet, even though you wished Bucky were home, for more reasons than just to take over the job for you with his meticulous eyes, you couldn't help but smile a bit as you wiped down the new photos that had cropped up among your old ones. Most were of you and Bucky, though Sam and Steve made appearances here and there.

You were just running a rag over a picture from Thanksgiving -- the one Sam took of the four of you at the dinner table using Redwing, where he looked at the camera "The Office" style as you and Steve laughed at Bucky holding up a turkey leg in salute to the drone -- when you heard the front door being unlocked. Your heart thundered in excitement, knowing it was Bucky back from the mission. This one had been nearly two weeks long and while he had messaged you a few times to let you know he was alive, it just wasn't the same as finally having him home again. Duffel bag dropped heavily to the floor, Bucky was already toeing off his boots and socks as you made your way toward him, the snowy-sludge caked into his soles starting to melt on the mat by the entryway.

"Welcome back, Sarge," you teased gently, tossing the rag onto a side table as you walked by.

"Ain't you a sight for sore eyes," he replied with an exhausted smile when he looked up at you. Bucky had only been on a few missions since the two of you decided to be together, yet you could already tell this one had been rough on him. Not necessarily terrible, maybe just... more difficult than expected. He hadn't even bothered to change back into civilian clothes, though his stubble was maybe only a day old. "C'mere, sweetheart."
Coaxing was hardly necessary and as soon as you were within reach, Bucky was folding his arm around you to pull your body tight to his. Tongue-damp lips pressed firm and fleeting over yours, then at the hinge of your jaw, before he nuzzled into the crook of your neck and breathed deep. With one arm slung around his shoulder, cheek pressed against his hair while your other hand smoothed along the unkempt locks, you could feel his slow exhale relieving some of the tension coiled under the leather and fabric of his uniform. In a soothing, quiet voice, you said "It's gonna be alright, Buck. You're home now."

The affirmative noise he made buzzed along your skin with his gentle nod, pressing even closer into you. Then, suddenly, there was no solid ground beneath your feet, just air and Bucky's strong arm across the back of your thighs as he hoisted you up around his waist. It wasn't long after finally confessing how you felt about each other that you realized he really enjoyed doing that; picking you up, carrying you, grabbing you, anything that gave him as much physical contact with you as possible even if it wasn't always sexual. Obviously you didn't mind, a small part of you always wondering if he remembered what you'd told him that first night. Still, whenever he literally swept you off your feet, this instance included, you let out a small surprised sound. Bucky's response was a chuckle buried into your shoulder, low and tired, but happy. He carried you easily into the living room, barely looking as he maneuvered around the furniture. Collapsing backwards across the couch, his body cushioning you from any real impact, caused the frame to shudder and give a low groan in protest.

"You're gonna break my couch if you keep that up," you chastised lightly, zero ire in your smile as you propped yourself up with your hands on his chest, his own fingers curled loosely where your hips straddled his.

For his part, Bucky gave a small shrug. The gaze he fixed up at you, head tilted slightly and his lips just curling up at the corners, was full of weary softness and so much love, like he could look at you for ages and never get enough. "I'll getcha a new one."

You stuck your tongue out at him, nose scrunching slightly, and it only made him grin wider. Those dimples of his flashed, as glad to be home as you were to have him there. Reaching up to brush a few stray strands of hair from his face, you let the backs of your fingers skim down his cheek and the edge of his jaw, just reveling in the fact you could touch him again. A chaste little kiss was planted on your knuckles while flesh and metal thumbs alike caressed lazily at the hem of your shirt before you spoke once more. "So, any wounds you need doctored, Mr. Superhero?"

"No, ma'am," he replied. The mock authority that danced across his features gave way to amusement in less than a heartbeat, his hands slipping from your hips to start in on the clasps near the top of his uniform. "Just a few scrapes and bruises. Already healin up nice."
"Do you wanna talk about it," you asked in a gentle tone, watching his face while your fingers moved to stay his own. Even though he had been very good about letting you in at his own pace, about telling you if he was physically hurt or mentally rattled, asking always made you hold your breath in anticipation. Always concerned it might bring him too much pain or make him shut down. But you had to do it, just to let him know you were there for him.

"Not right now. Eventually, I promise. Just... not right now." Bucky's voice had gone quiet, that little line between his brows deepening as his eyes fell from yours just a fraction. The response wasn't unusual, often following a patch of bad dreams or dark thoughts that swam through his head. Neither was the deliberate swipe of his tongue along his lips that pulled the lower one between his teeth to worry at for a second until his expression cleared a bit. The hint of a smirk seemed meant to reassure him as much as it was meant for you when his right hand reached up to cup your cheek. "D'rather relax with you for a while first, okay, sweetheart?"

"Okay," you nodded, content that he would keep that small promise in due time. Leaning down, you pressed a kiss to his forehead, then the tip of his nose before settling at his mouth. It seemed to help ease him some, features smoothing while he kissed back, quick and sweet. Pulling up from him again allowed his fingers to trail down the length of your torso until his touch rested at your thighs.

Your attention turned to the troublesome uniform at hand, the myriad buckles and zippers and snaps feeling needlessly complicated as you let the air in the room shift. It wasn't that you hadn't become pretty familiar with all of them, it was just a headache dealing with it, especially whenever you wanted him out of the damned thing quickly. Not for the first time, you wondered if the design of it offered him a meticulous sort of ritual, a way to calm and prepare himself for whatever the mission might be and a way to release stress whenever it was over. The fact that he never failed to patiently indulge your less than graceful assistance probably meant something, too. Though, also not for the first time, the vibrations of Bucky's silent laughter beneath you made you snort in annoyance.

"Are you hungry," you questioned with a quick glance to his smiling face, undeterred from your own little mission. "I volunteered at the library today, so there's only leftovers right now. But I could make something fresh if you want."

"I'm good for the moment," Bucky shook his head, amusement barely concealed in his tone. If you were being honest, something about the soft crinkles at the corners of his eyes had your fingers working a fraction faster.

"Aha!" was your triumphant cry when the last obstacle of his uniform jacket came undone in your hands. It earned you a chuckle and playful squeeze of the meaty part of your thighs as you pushed at the leather and fabric. "How about a shower then?"

Bucky sat up suddenly, the movement forcing you to rest back in his lap to make room, a small,
playful huff leaving him as he shrugged off his outer layer. "You tryin-a tell me I stink?"

"C'mon, Buck. You know I don't mind that macho musk of yours. Eau de Avenger," you teased, touch daring to ghost over his exposed abs when he reached behind his head to tug off his undershirt. Of course, he knew damned good and well what that display did to you. "I just want to make sure you have a happy homecoming."

"You're too good ta me, babydoll." The musing tone of his voice was accompanied by a quick shake of his head, bouncing long dark locks back into place after tossing his shirt onto the coffee table. With both arms snaking around your body, he pulled you in tight to his bare chest. His mouth was unhurried when it found yours, slow and easy and savoring, had you melting into the kiss in no time at all.

Soon, two strong, sure palms were smoothing their way up your sides, carrying the fabric of your top along with them, though the lazy pace he set never faltered. You were the one that had to break away after a moment, catch your breath, even as you raised your arms to let him peel the shirt right off you. “Getting a little frisky there, Buck?”

“Hmmmm... maybe later,” he breathed out a chuckled low and warm into your collarbone, the tip of his nose tracing the hollow of your throat. A shiver licked up your spine chased closely by flesh fingers until they deftly unhooked your bra. The contented little sigh he gave didn't help matters much when he slipped the straps down your shoulders to mouth tender at the indentations left behind. "Right now, I just wanna feel your skin on mine, sweetheart."

Once the undergarment joined his discarded clothing, there was no attempt made to tease or fondle. Instead, Bucky drew you close to press his face into the curve of your neck once more. Held onto you as if it was all he needed in the world. And when you reached up to comb your fingers through his hair, nails scratching gently at his scalp, you could've sworn you felt a faint whimper flutter from his plush lips. It was easy enough to maneuver him with your hands tangled up in his dark tresses. Sometimes, in intimate moments like these, both your bodies seemed to move as one. Or maybe it was a sort of trust you'd started to build together; an understanding that where one went the other followed with little to no hesitation. Either way, you managed to scoot off his lap and barely any contact was broken as you made to lounge back across the couch. Bucky, ever quick and observant, snuck one of the small pillows beneath your head with only the slightest peek over your shoulder before settling his hips between your thighs, his broad chest covering yours.

"M'not too heavy for ya, am I," he whispered, concern tingling his voice when he raised his head just enough to meet your eyes.

"No way," was your soft reply pressed with a kiss to his forehead.
The quirk of his eyebrow said he wasn't entirely convinced, yet he still made himself comfortable. His arms tucked beneath your back, sparing you the weight of his prosthetic, and he laid his cheek, almost scorching hot and somewhat itchy, against the open plane of flesh between your throat and breasts. The rise and fall of your chest and the beat of your heart made his head bob slightly in time with their rhythm. Bucky didn't seem bothered by it at all. In fact, he hummed in amusement when your quiet giggling shook him up even more. You let your fingers trace idle, intricate patterns just at his hairline, which seemed to lull him until he gave up trying to hover just above you. Uncoiling tightly wound muscles so that you were flush together and the press of him was a solid, welcome reminder that he was finally back with you.

"Tell me what happened at the library today," Bucky eventually asked after several moments where the only sound was gentle breathing and the brush of your hands through his hair.

You snorted a laugh at that before snuggling your face against the top of his head. "You're off who-knows-where, always trying to protect the world, and every single time you get back you want to know what I've been doing in my little mundane corner of it."

"Why else do you think we do that stuff, sweetheart," he countered and you could feel the faintest curve of a smile against your skin. "Besides, I like knowin what my lovely librarian gets up to when I'm gone."

Of course, Bucky knew you weren't really a librarian, just like you weren't a vet whenever you walked dogs at the animal shelter or a counselor when you helped set up refreshments at the clinic. They were just things to do to get you out of the house a few hours a week and back into the world again. But far be it from you to argue with your soldier just returned home. So, you regaled him with whatever unimpressive events you could remember from the day. And he inserted a comment or acknowledging noise here or there in response. A laughing groan when you told him about Potato nearly making you late by coughing up a particularly gross-looking hairball on your shoe. The mention of a patron who sounded like she had the plague incorrectly reshelving her own books earned you a gasp of mock horror. He was pretty amused by the fact that when he texted you to say he was coming home, your cell phone volume was turned up, drawing a few side-eyes from people and a fond smile from an elderly gentleman since Bucky's ringtone was the opening to "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." And for a split second it seemed like he almost cooed at your recounting of how Story Time Corner went with the kiddos. All this culminating in nothing more than coming back to the house and cleaning until he showed up at the door.

"Sounds like you've had a day," Bucky teased, rising up on his forearms above you. There was a playful smirk on his lips and a glint in his eyes while dark locks curtained both your face. "Maybe I should be offerin to make you food, huh? Or draw ya a bath? Would ya like that, my hard-workin girl?"
"Shut up, ya goof! You're the one that wanted to know," you laughed and squirmed beneath him to knock your knee into his hip and drive the point home.

Bucky just grinned down at you, the softness in his features that still managed to stutter your heart, before he ducked his head to kiss you again. It was sweet and gentle to start, tasting tender at each other's mouths through lips that couldn't shake their smiles. So many kisses since the first one and yet they all somehow retained that small spark that threatened to erupt in your chest. But as ready and willing as you were to fan that flame, that didn't seem to be what Bucky needed right then. Instead, you snaked your arms around his ribcage in a loose hug, hoping in these few precious heartbeats you could help keep him warm and safe. If not from the world itself, then at least from the things in his head that sometimes wore him down more than anything that could happen to his body. After clawing his way back from hell, choosing to fight monsters, both human and not, doing what he could to save the world and make amends for things he had no control over, he deserved peace and you would do what you could to give him that. Especially when it felt like of all the places he could go, all the people he could see, all he wanted was to be tangled up with you on an old couch in the middle of snow-covered nowhere.

"I missed you, Bucky," you told him quietly once the kiss had eventually broken, your lips lingering close to his a bit longer than necessary. Because even though you wanted nothing more than to be that stalwart comfort for him, he had slowly, but surely, become the same for you. Having him there just made things feel closer to right.

"Nowhere near as much as I missed you, I bet," he teased back with a stiff shake of his head. It made the ends of his hair tickle across your face, making you laugh and move your hands to shove at the practically immovable expanse of his chest. The deep, mischievous chuckle that rumbled through him lasted a moment or two before he tossed his head back and adjusted to swipe the strands behind his ears with an amused sigh. "Though, I hate to break it to ya, kid, I s'pose I should let you know I got another mission comin up."

"What," you croaked out, the sudden shock sinking your heart. Even you could hear the slight disappointed whine in your voice when you added "But... but, you just got back, Bucky. Are they really gonna make you leave again so soon?"

"Hey. Hey, uhn-uh. None-a that. S'nothin dangerous and it's only for a night," Bucky coaxed around a gentle, reassuring smile. That was a relief, at least, though you still didn't like the idea of being parted from him any time in the near future. So, it was extremely confusing when he brought his hand down to cup your cheek, thumb swiping aimlessly as the devious dimples appeared on his face. "In fact, this mission, I'm gonna need your help with."
Driving through the whited-out stillness that surrounded the Avengers compound, Bucky hazarded another quick glance at you in the passenger seat beside him and wondered for maybe the millionth time already that evening how the hell the two of you managed to make it out of the house. Especially with just how gorgeous you looked all dolled up like you were. It reminded him of the night when you'd first danced together, except there was something better about it now he just couldn't explain. Soft hair all pinned up to show off that pretty face, eyes lined as dark and elegant as you please, lips a sinful shade of red that made his blood rush if he thought about it too long. And that dress. You'd been eyeing it online since he first mentioned the party, but refused to treat yourself despite his coaxing. That is, until he struck a deal with you. If you bought the dress, he'd go out and buy an actual suit and tie to wear. Easier said than done on his part, and he had to recruit the help of a snickering Steve and Sam, but there were absolutely no regrets the moment he saw you all made up that night.

So, there you both were, dressed to the nines to attend a Stark party at the remote facility. It seemed Tony was intent on throwing a lavish celebration for every mission success, though no one rightfully would have expected anything less from him. Usually, they were held at his high-tech high-rise in the middle of Manhattan, which Bucky had easily and happily managed to avoid since becoming part of the team. He much preferred being at home with you to relax in peace, away from the buzz of strangers and the expectation of being social when all he really wanted was quiet and familiarity and you. This time, though, Tony made up his mind to have a smaller gathering at the compound; family and friends, as he put it. No doubt spurred on by a few others, namely Steve, after Bucky's refusal to join them in the past. And he was set to decline again, despite the little concession, until the Tin Man mentioned that you might enjoy having some fun outside the house and meeting the rest of the team that Bucky spent so much time with. He probably had Sam to thank for that one. Because Stark wasn't exactly wrong on that, and Bucky had wanted to take you out and show you off a bit.

"Wow," you smirked, peering through the windshield and out your side window with mild amusement as he neared the hangar. "Huge building in the middle of nowhere with a mini landing strip. Very covert."

Bucky couldn't help the huff of laughter that escaped him. "Yeah. And there's a huge 'A' painted on the roof. I think that's about as subtle as a Stark can get."

You chuckled under your breath, though it was soon replaced by a look of genuine interest when he pressed a button on the car's console. What had looked like a steel wall beneath said landing strip separated and folded in on itself to reveal the garage entrance; almost like something out of the science fiction shows you watched together. And Bucky was sure he heard just the slightest bit of surprise in your voice when you tried to deadpan "Okay. That's pretty cool."

The usually sunny hangar was lit softly by the perimeter lights, its glass wall giving a wide view of the snowy night beyond. Much quieter than normal without all the people bustling around working on one thing or another. Now, there were only a handful of recognizable vehicles alongside the dormant quinjets. Bucky parked next to one of Tony’s sporty, flashy numbers, wondering
momentarily if maybe Stark had ironed out the wrinkles in Howard’s flying car plans. When he glanced your way, your seatbelt was already undone and you were halfway to your feet. The smirk you flashed said you knew he would have liked to get the door for you, but hell if he could complain about the particular view it provided. After an amused shake of his head, he got out to join you at the front of the car.

"You actually get to fly around in these bad boys," you said, voice a bit awed as he led you past the jets with a hand at the small of your back, your heels echoing somewhat in the large space. "Ever pilot one?"

"I could, they can fly themselves though until something big happens. By then, I'm usually hip deep in the fray," Bucky smiled. It was a pleasant surprise to find you gazing around the place, a sparkle of wonder in your eyes. Maybe on another fairly quiet day, he'd have to bring you up to have a proper tour.

It wasn't long before Bucky had guided you to the elevator that would take you the common room, where the party was being held. Pausing at the door to press the button, he prepared to wait. Of all the new tech and crazy gadgets in the place, the elevator was notoriously slow in comparison. Usually, everyone would just take the stairs, but he didn't want to make the trek more difficult for you in your fancy things. Besides, it afforded you both a little extra time before having to deal with whatever sort of crowd may have gathered. Time apparently needed given the bit of nervousness Bucky sensed in you whenever you turned and began to fiddle with his tie and the lapels of his jacket.

"Hey," he soothed quietly, swiping his thumb tenderly at the soft fabric of the dress at your sides. When you looked up at him, he offered a little grin. "You know if it gets to be too much, you can tell me. We don't gotta stay all night."

"Pretty sure that's my line to you," you scoffed in a gentle tone, but smiled and sighed away some of the tension while your hands smoothed down his waistcoat before you switched subjects. "You know, you are so handsome. If you get any of that old swagger back I heard about, I will be out one hell of a boyfriend."

Bucky cocked his head at you, letting out a confused laugh just as the elevator doors opened and you both moved through them. "What the hell you mean by that, crazy person?"

"I mean, you would have the ladies just falling all over you. Surprised you don't now," was your nonchalant reply, settling back against the wall of the elevator car.
"You gotta be kiddin me, doll," he snorted and pressed the necessary button, not wanting to disrupt the conversation with a voice command. Instead, he crowded into your space a little, knowing that as much as it did for him to have you close, it offered you a certain comfort too. And the fact you'd let him be that for you never failed to make his chest feel several sizes bigger than it ought to. "I might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I'd be damn near certifiable to trade in a gorgeous gal like you."

You rolled your eyes at him affectionately, fingers curled slightly against his suit jacket, but it didn't stop him from wrapping his arms around your waist or leaning in to press his lips to your forehead, brush them reverently along the warmth of your right cheekbone where he always paid special attention. The small sigh you gave when he pulled back a little to look at you made the tip of your nose bump gently against his, had him grinning wide as he quietly added "Besides, I think you know by now you've done domesticated me, sweetheart."

"Oh, yeah," you cooed sweetly, a tinge of mischief in your eyes as you reached up to smooth back some errant hairs that had fallen loose from his bun. "Is that why I'm only getting forehead kisses? Afraid smeared lipstick might let your friends know how wild you got in the elevator?"

"Ah, hell, when you put it that way," Bucky smirked, just about always up to playing into whatever little wickedness overtook you, then ducked his head to kiss you proper.

It wasn't a scorching hot liplock, but there was a quick, sweet thoroughness to it; that you'd both tasted and nibbled and weren't left entirely unsatisfied in the end. Thankfully, there were no other stops along the elevator's ascent to interrupt the two of you. By the time it began to slow toward its destination, Bucky was almost positive his mouth would be ruddied up and he'd have to rush to clean away the evidence. Yet, when he looked down at you, he found your lips still neatly painted in that vibrant red, not a wisp of color out of place. He rubbed absently at his face and his fingers came back clean as well.

"No smudge lipstick," you beamed at him, the tilt of your smirk teasing as you slipped around him to stand at the elevator doors. "It'll take something a lot firmer than those soft lips of yours to mess it up."

A delicious tingle licked up his spine when your meaning finally registered, but the elevator opening on the common room prevented any sort of retort. Jesus, the things you could do to him with hardly any effort at all. The right words, the right tone, the right sway of your hips, and he was gone for you. Even with his brain all Swiss cheese, he knew he'd never been so dizzy over a dame before. And you knew it, too. You had to, because you apparently weren't planning on pulling any punches when you reached back with an adoring smile to grab his hand and pull him out of the elevator.

The place Bucky had become somewhat familiar with was comfortably lit, holiday lights strung up
across various surface and along the walls. Snacks and sodas littered the counters, though there was a bar set up with an older, mustached man in large glasses slinging drinks for people. Most of the faces were familiar; teammates and some support crew and staff. Apparently, Tony had kept his word about it being a much smaller affair than the ones Bucky had heard about. Steve and Sam gave you both a quick salute with their beer bottles when they noticed you, but it was Stark, ever the exemplary host, who broke away from the small group he was chatting with to greet the two of you as you drew near.

"Barnes. I see I was right about that tailor I recommended making anyone look good," he quipped in a jovial tone, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet. Then his attention turned to you with a bright, charming smile and a gracious flourish of his hands. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Tony Stark and you must be the lovely young lady who I've heard has thawed the old polar bear's heart."

Despite knowing Tony was perfectly happy in his relationship with Ms. Potts, Bucky still chafed just a little at the easy ooze of charm; not really insincere, but something about the smoothness of it serving as a sudden reminder of how difficult for him it had been at the beginning. And it wasn't helped by your grin or the amused hum you gave in contrast to Bucky's quick snort. "You need new material, Stark. Joke's been made before."

"But not by me, and that's what really matters here." Tony countered with a haughty look.

"Mr. Snark-- I mean, Stark. Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm so glad to finally meet Bucky's teammates and the place looks fantastic." Your words brought both men's gazes back to you. There was a bit of chagrin to your features, but Bucky caught something devious in your eyes as your thumb swiped sweetly against his. You leaned in just a hair, a conspiratorial tinge to your voice, when you added "But honestly, between you and me, I think I've got the better end of this relationship. I mean, he's a world class assassin. Have you seen what he can do with his bare hands?"

Bucky's heart leapt into his throat; torn between shock at the boldness of your words and being impressed that you'd managed to render Tony Stark momentarily speechless. Stark's eyes had gone a fraction wider, mouth agape, probably not too unlike what Bucky's face looked like if he took a second to think about it. Yet you looked quite pleased with yourself, offering a look of mock sympathy before turning give Bucky an innocent smile and shrug. Damn if he wasn't close to smothering you with a kiss right there, his sharp-tongued gal. But Tony had quickly recovered with a sputtered laugh.

"Oh I like you, you saucy minx. Barnes, I like her. She must be giving you a run for your money," Stark joked once he'd regained some composure. This time, Bucky couldn't help the swell of pride in his chest at the aside. "Come on, you've got to let me introduce you to everyone. I'm sure they'll all love you."
You turned a questioning look on Bucky then. Whether it was asking permission or reassurance or both, he couldn't really say. With a hand at the small of your back, he pulled you in closer to reply quietly. "Go on, sweetheart. I'll grab us a couple drinks and join ya in a minute."

"Okay," you smiled, leaning up to press a quick kiss at the corner of his lips, fingers grasping gently at his lapels only to slip away as you moved to follow behind Tony.

Bucky stood watching for a moment, caught the lingering look you threw him over your shoulder and the deliberate swish to your step he knew was a show meant just for him, before turning toward the bar along the back wall. The bartender was occupied with other orders at the moment, so he stood leaning against the corner to wait patiently. Quick glances around the room to pass the time ended up back on you. At one point, you were shaking hands with Colonel Rhodes, a polite smile gracing your lips that grew more emphatic as Steve and Sam approached the conversation. Yet even though his main focus was on you, he still registered the two people that sidled up to the bar beside him.

"You are so in love with her," a thick, familiar Sokovian accent teased gently just behind his right shoulder.

With a quiet chuckle, Bucky turned to find Wanda and Natasha both already holding a drink and looking very much entertained by him. "Don't take a mind reader to see that one, I suppose."

"It also doesn't take one to know she feels the same way," Natasha replied with an enigmatic smirk that nearly got lost in her glass as she took a drink.

Her gaze darted past him, just a quick flicker, but enough that he followed on instinct. He caught sight of you glancing at him from the little group that had formed around you and Tony. That sweet blush crept across your cheeks when you seemed to notice being caught. Absolutely beautiful. Though Bucky could've socked the guy who passed through his line of sight and broke your eye contact. When he could see you again, your attention was back on the group, though your fingers were playing absently with your collar like his had been earlier that evening back at home, when you oh so sweetly reminded him that admiring your new dress could be done without the use of his hands.

"I've got no idea why," he admitted with a tight smile when he turned back to the two beside him. It had occurred to him to flat out deny Romanoff's statement, but he wasn't sure he could. He wanted to believe it and you made it so easy, even if those dark things in his head tried to say otherwise.
"Obviously she does," Wanda retorted in a laughing tone, not put off in the slightest by his tone. Bucky knew from experience that both women, whether through powers or special training, could read a person better than just about anyone else in the world, so either they were being polite or they were being honest. Either way, Bucky appreciated it.

"Besides, what's not to like, Barnes," Natasha added with what he'd come to realize was her playful tone of voice, only subtly different from her biting sarcasm. "Big broody guy like you? I bet you're an absolute kitten when she gets you alone."

Before he could reply, Wanda was jumping in with her own little smirk. "Do you know what would make a great present to show your affection? Those paintings you hide in your room."

"You ladies been snoopin, huh," Bucky narrowed his eyes at them, but knew from the looks on their faces they were hardly intimidated. Which was fine as far as he was concerned; he was a little more embarrassed than angry that they knew about them. It hadn't really been a secret that he occasionally joined Sam and Steve whenever they set aside time to do artistic things.

"I do not snoop," Maximoff answered matter-of-factly. Natasha, on the other hand, gave a considering tilt to her head before nodding. "I do."

"предателей," Bucky shot back in an amused huff. It brought a round of laughter from them both as he spoke to the bartender who had finally made his way over. "Two double scotch on the rocks, please."

"C'mon, witchie-poo. I'll introduce you to Bucky's lady-love," Natasha prodded gently at Wanda, each of their face still lit up and mischievous. "Maybe take care not to accidentally look inside her head. The way she's been staring at him, I doubt her thoughts are entirely pure."

All Bucky could do for a moment was watch the two pick their way toward you as he waited for his drink order. Romanoff drew your attention with a touch to your shoulder that turned into a half hug before you smiled brightly at Wanda. No doubt the three of you would be fast friends. The little scene warmed something in Bucky's chest. Almost like he might have felt bringing a girl home to meet his family when he was a kid, and everything falling into place. Though when he'd started considering his teammates his family, he really couldn't say.

By the time he rejoined you, Rhodes and the two women had moved on, but Dr. Banner had found his way to the small circle, giving a welcoming tip of his head so as not to interrupt the conversation he and Stark had going about some new tech they'd heard about earlier that day. Bucky handed you one of the glasses which you took with an appreciative smile, moving in closer to him. And you
seemed to practically melt into his side when he wrapped his left arm around your back. An act that did not go unnoticed by Wilson, who then elbowed Steve to bring it to his attention. Soon both men were giving Bucky knowing looks, making him roll his eyes in annoyance. Luckily, your attention had been engrossed in the science conversation taking place and the pleasant smile that graced your lips at your first sip.

"Scotch, I see. A woman after my own heart," Tony eventually switched subjects, having finally noticed the addition to his little audience. Bucky got the feeling Steve and Sam had only stayed put during the whole thing to keep you company.

"It's very good," you replied as you raised your glass slightly and leaned even further under Bucky's arm.

"Only the best for my guys. We work hard saving the world from certain destruction, I think that earns us a good drink or two," Stark smiled with a jovial clap to Banner's shoulder. The normally subdued scientist gave just the barest hint of a flinch before raising his own drink in salute, followed by the rest of the small gathering. Then, he turned his attention to Sam, Steve, and Bucky and gave a quick, accusing shake of his finger, though his voice was all flattery. "What I wanna know is, why the Three Amigos here let you stay hidden away from the rest of us for so long. Especially since you've technically been contributing to the team, helping Barnes and all."

Steve opened his mouth, no doubt a diplomatic defense perched at the tip of his tongue, while Wilson seemed content to let the words slide off his back. But Bucky knew you were more than capable of speaking up for yourself, as evidenced when you beat Steve to the punch. "No use in blaming the boys, Mr. Stark. I'm afraid I hid myself away. All of this seemed... a bit out of my league, I guess."

"Tony, please," Stark insisted with a wave of his hand. Bucky braced for a snarky remark or a probing question, something that might put you ill at ease. But the otherwise flamboyant billionaire offered up a sincere smile and his tone grew a little gentler. "Well, I hope you know now that's not the case. Glad we got Barnes to bring you around. Maybe you'll make sure he actually shows up for more non-mission get togethers in the future."

"I'll try my best," you grinned brightly, peeking up at Bucky's face. He could feel the lilt of your laughter tucked close to him and the light dancing in your features made him very happy he'd brought you out, too.

"Good," Tony replied and suddenly it was like a switched was flipped in him, that thrum of energy taking over him again. "But I've monopolized enough of your time already. You and Terminator Two should mingle and I should go see about getting my own glass of scotch."
And like that, Stark was off toward the bar, absently slapping a hand on the back of Steve's bicep as he passed. Rogers just raised an eyebrow and shook his head while he brought his beer bottle up to his lips. "You never know with that guy. He really is a character."

"Pretty sure the same could be said for all of you," you volleyed back with no hesitation. A shit-eating grin spread Steve's face as Wilson and even Bruce chuckled at the retort. And Bucky didn't even give a second thought to pressing a kiss into the hair above your temple, earning him an adoring smile and both your arms wrapped around his waist.

The rest of the night went better than Bucky would have expected. He still wasn't much for small talk even with people he'd grown fairly comfortable with, but he felt he did a decent enough job making remarks and answering questions here and there despite the distracting bustle of the room around him. You, on the other hand, seemed to be engaged in each new person, your voice grounding him in the conversation, whether you were laughing at a joke or excusing yourself for another drink. From Thor and your excited introduction to Dr. Foster and her assistant Ms. Lewis, to Barton, the only member of the team that you seemed remotely starstruck by; Bucky was more captivated with your performance than by anything anyone else really had to say. Though, as the hours rolled on, he noticed some of that energy starting to wane.

"You doin alright, sweetheart" he finally asked, pulling you over toward the bar after running into Wanda again who had suggested possibly joining her and Natasha for yoga and some self-defense lessons sometime.

"Yeah," you nodded with a smile that was a bit tight at the corners. Bucky barely had to raise his eyebrow before you let off a light sigh. "Just a bit draining, is all. Meeting so many new people."

Gentle concern flaring in him, he trailed the back of his knuckles delicately down the curve of your cheek, metal hand curled around your waist, until you leaned into his touch and looked up at him through your eyelashes, some of that weariness melted away. “D’ya wanna head home? Doubt anyone would kick up a fuss if we left now.”

“I dunno. It’s nice being out of the house, and I think you’re enjoying yourself more than you let on,” you snickered, fingers tugging affectionately at his suit jacket to close some of the small distance between you.

“Just enjoy spendin time with you, seein you happy,” he grinned in counter and took your chin between his thumb and forefinger, tracing gently at the curve of your lower lip. Remembering what Natasha and Wanda had been saying when your eyes went all soft and hazy and a rush of color touched your cheeks, making his heart skip a little. “How ‘bout we take a break somewhere quiet,
figure out if we wanna call it a night?"

Wrapping your arms around his chest to pull yourself flush, you crooned sweetly “You are too good to me sometimes, Bucky Barnes.”

“Ain’t no such thing when it comes to you, babydoll,” he shook his head before planting a kiss on your forehead.

No one said a word when the two of you slipped away from the party. Though, Bucky was sure when he made a sweeping glance of the room Natasha was just looking back to continue talking with Steve and Sam. There was only the slight din of the crowd to be heard and the crisp sound of your heels as he led you to the hallway that housed the smaller living quarters on the same level. Not all of the team kept the facility as their main home and a few, like Nat and Wanda, just liked having smaller rooms. Stark, of course, always needed a big place for himself and despite not living there permanently he kept a whole lower floor dedicated to his rooms, Banner’s apartment, a secondary lab (no doubt where Vision had been hiding away during the party,) and a place for whenever Rhodes stayed after a long mission.

But Bucky was leading you to the stairwell at the end of the hall, confident he could see you safely up one flight of steps, even if he had to carry you. Not that he really would’ve minded. It was one floor up that housed the larger apartments where Steve and Sam had each taken up residence. One of them had been Bucky’s when he stayed at the facility and he supposed it technically still was, considering it had not been reassigned or changed since he’d come home to you. Seemed as good a place as any to take you away from the party and make you more comfortable.

"Wow," you mused once inside, lights turning on automatically at the door being open and providing you with a view of the living area. He caught your gaze linger momentarily on the small kitchen area and the two doors off to the side, one wide open and leading to the bedroom, the other one the bathroom. "Is this yours?"

"Sorta. It's where I stayed when..." Bucky trailed off, brushing the stray hairs from his face and rubbing bit nervously at his neck while he settled against the back of the couch. You offered him a soft little smile and an understanding, reassuring squeeze of your hand before venturing from his side a few feet to explore. Saying the place was his was a bit of an overstatement. It had been designated for him, but it was austere and very much how it had come. Nothing personal about it. The TV system, the pots and pans, the bedsheets, even the couch you were running your fingers along had all been provided for. In fact, almost everything that had been his found its way back to your place. All except... "Actually, there's somethin I thought I'd show ya while we're here."

You turned back to him with a curious tilt to your brow. It took only a few steps before you were back in front of him, wrapping your arms around his waist comfortably. "Oh yeah? Whatcha got?"
"It's in the bedroom," he informed, but immediately let out an amused snort when you gave him a mischievous look. Cupping your face in his hands gently, he leaned down to brush a kiss across your lips. "You've been on fire tonight, sweetheart."

"You told me to have fun," was your sweet counter, though your cheeks had tinged with color. "I can tone it down if you want."

"No way," Bucky shook his head with a smirk, kissing you again before standing up straight and shuffling you backwards a bit and letting his mouth linger warm and close to yours. "But I did promise I'd show you this thing if you were real nice. And I guess you've been just about the nicest thing that's ever happened to me, doll."

"Your paintings?" You had stopped him short, face lit up with excitement like he just handed you the world, and the fact you remembered that little tease after all this time and everything that happened clenched something deep in his chest and wouldn't let it go. The delight only seemed to build and break into an enthusiastic bounce when he nodded. "C'mon! Show me!"

With a soft chuckle, Bucky turned you around and ushered you toward the bedroom door. Well, it was a bit more like you were leading him, half a step ahead of him the whole way, but he couldn't complain. The lights turned on in there as well once you passed through the sensors, another innovation Bucky had taken a liking to, thankful he didn't have to talk to a disembodied voice every time he wanted something. It was just as sparse in there as the rest of the apartment, aside from the corner across from the door. There he'd set up shop at a desk with all manner of supplies, now covered in minute splotches of various colors. So many new things had been invented since his day, and he still couldn't name all the different techniques and styles his muscles seemed to remember better than his brain. Everything had been an experiment. Therapeutic, Sam had called it.

You bee-lined right to that corner, a cute sort of eagerness seeming to buzz through you. A hand reached out toward the sketches and small paintings piled there, but paused before looking up at him with barely subdued glee. "Can I?"

"Sure," he nodded gently as he took up the space just behind your left shoulder. His right hand slipped idly at the small of your back; a bit nervous if he were being honest. You'd seen so many bad parts of him, he wanted to share these little things he managed to create, even though all that ever stood out to him were the flaws. Of course, judging by the awed look on your face, you saw right past them. Just like you always seemed to do.

"These are amazing, Bucky," you breathed gently, ruffling carefully through everything. There was a pastoral scene you picked up gingerly by the corner, beaming over at him. The colors on the
leaves were slightly off and something about the slope of the ground wasn't quite right, but you didn't seem to notice. "This is the Patterson farm from the highway, isn't it? You've even got the mismatched shingles on the roof!"

Another perusal, face still delighted, and you landed on a sketch in colored pencil he made of the cat. There was something wrong about the angle of the tail that still bothered him, something he knew he should be able to fix, but couldn't think of how. Still, you made a soft little squeal under your breath. "Awww, Potato. Y'know, I think you've been giving her too many treats again."

"Tryin-a make up for lost time," Bucky countered innocently when you gave him a sideways look of accusation. The smirk at the corner of your lips let him know he probably wasn't in too much trouble for it.

"Uh-huh," was your unconvinced response, jostling your shoulder back against his chest lightly. He pressed a kiss there by way of apology and reveled in the soft fabric under his lips until you gave a gentle gasp. "Bucky, is this...?"

Peering over your shoulder, he saw you holding an unfinished work he started just before his first mission; you being the subject. It was a rough sketch he'd started to refine, a bit of shading here and there, but no color. Part of it was from the photobooth picture kept somewhere on him at nearly all times, part of it was from memory. The one of you in the kitchen after you let him stay in bed with you, face half-lit by the morning sun in the window as you brought him coffee. "Yeah, s'pose ta be you, alright. Though there's no way I've done ya any justice."

"It's beautiful," you argued quietly, head tilted as you regarded the sketch a moment longer before replacing it on the desk. There was a teasing quality to your voice when you added "I dare say, I never looked so good."

"Ah, come off it. You know you're absolutely gorgeous," Bucky snorted in amusement while his arms wrapped around your waist, pulling you back against his chest. Skimming his lips along the exposed skin of your neck made you shiver slightly, made him grin goofy into the hair just behind your ear. "You're like walking poetry, dollface."

The disgusted groan you gave had your head falling back onto his shoulder. He could just see the heavy roll of your eyes, your deep chuckle matching his own. "Oh my god, Bucky! Seriously? Alright, Romeo, what Shakespeare line are you gonna spout off?"

"Nah, not Shakespeare. Byron," he informed matter-of-factly, feeling the broad smile tugging at his lips when your right hand moved to cover his fingers at your stomach and your left reached up and
back to smooth across his cheek. It really had been Byron stuck in his head the day after the both of you had gone dancing, when he thought you would turn him away, but you'd only managed to further surprise him with just how kind and caring you were. Ate at him for the longest time, not being able to remember the words. They came back, though, at least part of them, anyway. "She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies. And all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes. Thus mellow'd to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies."

"Always such a sweet talker," you sighed dreamily once Bucky finished murmuring the stanza into the crook of your neck, the gentle shudder up your spine not going unnoticed by him. He loosened his grip when you moved to turn in his arms. Fingers of one hand catching at his lapels, the other stroking absentely along his tie, you pressed in close to him with a devilish little gleam to your eyes. "Tell ya what, I had a surprise I was gonna give you when we got home. But you've been so wonderful tonight, maybe I could give it to you now."

Eyebrows raised in curiosity, Bucky couldn’t help the smirk that overtook him as he leaned in for a quick kiss. “A surprise, huh? What kinda surprise?"

“Go close the door and I’ll show you,” was your cheeky answer planted along his jaw before you nipped there playfully.

It took a few heartbeats before Bucky could finally muster up the gumption to pull away from you, all the soft fabric and softer skin anchoring him to the spot. Eventually, you shoved at him gently, giggling as his fingers ghosted down your ribs. With a frustrated groan and a put-upon roll of his eyes, he stepped away to do what you’d asked. The door was barely pushed to when he heard the unmistakable sound of a zipper behind him, making him freeze momentarily. Hell, but you were a spitfire sometimes. He had expected as much, as sassy as you’d been all night. Though there was always something a bit thrilling about you getting all frisky someplace that wasn’t the bed you shared, even if it was still a bedroom, just somewhere else.

Admittedly a bit cocky if he were asked, Bucky slid the lock on the door before turning around. He’d seen you in various states of undress at this point, but it hardly prepared him for the sight of you then, making him inhale sharply, catching his lower lip between his teeth, guts swimming, the doorknob nearly crumpling under the sudden constriction of his metal hand. No wonder you’d been so bold with him all night; if he’d known what was going on under that dress of yours, he would’ve dragged you from the party hours ago. There you stood, dress draped over the desk chair, wearing a black bra with a hint of frills, small bow between the cups like a gift begging to be unwrapped. An equally dark, lacy garter belt slung low on your waist, satin stays holding up silk stockings, reminding him of when he’d caught you in the hall; still fantasy fodder to this day. Those high heels still in place and accentuating every curve. Yet the real kicker had to be the decided lack of any material at all to cover the juncture of your thighs.
"You just gonna let me keep standing here all awkward," you asked with an amused huff, but there were uncertainty in your voice. As if you didn't know exactly what you were doing to him just by standing there like that.

The combination of that sultry get-up and the almost innocent flush that deepened your cheeks did something to Bucky he couldn't put words to. Absently, he swiped his right hand over his mouth, half-expecting to be drooling all over himself. It was dry though, his lips, mouth, throat. He had to wet them as he advanced towards you. Each step measured, a small part of him afraid that even after all this time you might disappear or shy away, everything about you still so unreal, too good to be believed, too good for him. But you didn't move an inch. Just waited for him, your breath hitching when he was finally close enough to touch along the exposed skin of your stomach, gliding around your waist.

"Jesus, what'd a bum like me ever do to deserve you, sweetheart," he whispered, lips just inches from yours.

"Just lucky, I guess," you breathed warm across his skin. "And that makes two of us."

Then your lips were on his in a kiss slightly needier than he had expected. But he let himself fall into it, teeth and tongue meeting yours measure for measure, hot and hungry. He itched to touch you all over, maybe for the hundredth time, each one feeling as exciting as the first. You had other plans though. Delicate hands slid slowly up his chest, gliding under his suit jacket to press the fabric over and down his shoulder. He was forced to break away to take it off completely. It joined your dress across the chair. Your fingers worked at loosening his tie next, untucking it from his waistcoat. The kiss you gave him was softer then, sweeter, yet no less enticing. The way you grinned into it stuttered in his heart. Once it was discarded with the rest, you moved back in again, fingertips dancing along the buttons of his waistcoat but he stayed you a moment. With his hands cupping your face, he tried to catch his breath as he regarded you. Seemed damn near impossible.

Your eyes were dark and a little hazy, but the smile on your deep red, kiss-swollen lips was all warmth when you gave a gentle laugh. "What?"

"You know what, doll," he smirked, thumbs slipping lazily over your cheeks. "You know exactly what."

"Nope, you're gonna have to tell me," you insisted with the slightest shake of your head. Your fingers had slowly started up again on those buttons, gaze never leaving his.

It seemed a lot easier to just show you, yet you were right. Sometimes a thing needed to be said to
make it real, to give it extra substance, to remember. "I love you, sweetheart. And not just 'cause you're the prettiest damn thing I ever laid eyes on."

"I love you, too, Bucky," you replied, the slight quiver in your voice barely hidden by the mischievous raise of your eyebrow. "Don't get all gussied up like this for just anyone."

"I hope not," he chuckled low while leaning in to press kisses along your jaw and down the arc of your neck. Metal plates and calloused fingers alike caught on delicate fabric as he finally let his hands roam your body like he wanted. He shuddered involuntarily when your nails found his scalp, the sigh that escaped you little more than a vibration felt on his lips at your throat. "Hope I'm the last man ever gets to see you this way. All flushed and soft and sweet for me."

"If you treat me real good tonight, maybe you will be," you teased, tugging at his hair just right to make him gasp and force him to meet your gaze. "Maybe I'll even do that thing with my tongue you like so much."

"Christ, baby, you're killin me here," he groaned at the thought. But the discomfort in slacks took a backseat to the sound of your stuttering gasp against his cheek when he sought a little revenge, right hand cupping gently between your legs, letting his fingers press along already slick skin. He couldn't help a bit of the triumph in his voice. "Don't I always treat you real good, sugar?"

"Yeah, Buck. Yeah," you moaned gently, eyes half-lidded as you pulled him in for another kiss, deep and thorough.

The wetness at his fingertips and the way you ground down at his hand nearly had Bucky then and there. He was just about to bend low, lift you up against him, and carry you to the bed when suddenly a familiar sound chimed from his pocket. Star-Spangled Man with a Plan. God damn it, and god damn Wilson for setting that as Steve's ringtone on his cell phone. When you stilled against him, Bucky let out an angry snort. "Just ignore it, sweetheart."

"No, answer it," you countered, eyes still a little glassy and fluttering shut when his fingers slid along your sensitive skin while you pulled away from him. But you gave him an understanding look, a bit of a smile. "It's Steve. You know you'll worry if you don't check it out. Besides, I'm not going anywhere."

You were right, as usual. As annoying as it was to be so rudely interrupted, he was a little anxious to find out what was going on. He growled a little under his breath, pulling you back for quick kiss. "You better not go anywhere. Not finished with you yet, dollface. Not by a long shot."
Your finger came up to mark an "x" over your heart, smirk dancing over your lips as you moved to sit at the edge of the bed. Taking out his phone, Bucky turned away, more than a little agitated while working at shrugging off his waistcoat one handed. His annoyance flared even worse when he pulled up the missed text.

"Guess you two decided to stay the night? haha"

One of these days, Bucky swore to himself, he was gonna slap that little shit right upside the back of his head. He was fairly certain no one would try to stop him. Probably not even Sam, maybe the only other person in the world who knew how much of a menace Steve Rogers could be if given half a chance. Rolling his eyes, Bucky quickly typed out a response.

"Mind your own damn business you overgrown, patriotic turtle. Same goes for your fine feathered friend."

Assured the message was on its way, he tossed the phone none too gracefully on the desk just in time to hear the bedsprings shifting behind him. And all the ire was driven from him in one quick, lungful of air at the sight of you crawling up the blanket toward his pillow, pausing to glance at him over your shoulder, lips tucked between your teeth and bowing your back just a little to give him a show. The phone chimed again, but fuck if he could hear it over the rush of blood in his ears as he tugged the rest of his clothes off to join you.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

It's not all sunshine, lollipops, and rainbows every where just because you're happy and in love. The past has a way of rearing it's ugly head... heads?

Chapter Notes

I actually finished a chapter in less than a month... huh. Would ya look at that?
Delivering a baby is soon upon me, but I promise I will finish this fic come hell or high water! (or poopy diapers)

I do want to address a thing though... I've had this fic planned through for the last year, and nothing that has happened in my personal life has changed the original intended outcome of this story. But, there may be some happy coincidences.

Hope you enjoy!

Winter seemed to drag on much longer than usual. Nowhere near as bitter cold or harsh as ones you remembered from your childhood, though there were a few heavy snow falls here and there.

Maybe it was Bucky leaving on missions that caused time to slip by so slowly. Even though you'd spent quite a few winters alone at that point, having him gone felt like forever. He hadn't been on many, and there were weeks when you both were together at home or the weekly trip to the facility, despite the few times he woke up in a cold sweat and needed your comfort more than usual. Yet he was still occasionally called out with some of the others to who knows where. The latest one had taken a small toll on him. You didn't pry too much, but had learned that there were some civilians injured, including a couple kids. No fatalities aside from some bad guys, but it was still the sort of thing that always hit Bucky a little harder.

It was only a few days after Bucky came home from this last mission when you woke up in darkness to discover he was no longer beside you in bed. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence after rougher mission. He would be up well before dawn and go for a run or do physical training in the yard. Bleary eyes registered the glare of the digital alarm on his side of the bed reading in the 5 o'clock hour. A few hair ties were piled up in the glow, something you knew was his little reassurance to you that he hadn't left like before. Still so early, though. You figured maybe it was him leaving the house that woke you in the first place.

You considered rolling over and just going back to sleep, but there was still a gentle voice of concern in your head. It always worried you when Bucky was so withdrawn after a mission. Certainly, he had eased up some in the last few days, but it obviously still bothered him if he was gone at such an hour. The least you could do was be up when he got back, maybe have something nice and filling
for him to eat for breakfast. That always seemed to cheer him some; quiet meals shared together, sitting close at the small table. With your mind made up, you shoved the covers back to stand, grumbling faintly at the chill of hardwood on your bare feet.

Potato was standing inside the bedroom door, tail twitching in agitation, and she let out an annoyed *mrrr* before skulking between your legs and into the room that Bucky used to keep. Probably looking for him and his treats, albeit fruitlessly. The rest of the house was dark and quiet, save the silver glow of moonlight from the windows in the living room and kitchen, made more intense by a thick blanket of snow that had fallen the day before. You could hear and smell the coffee pot going in the kitchen, no doubt started by Bucky before he headed out. Yawning wide and stretching as you padded down the hall, a cup of coffee seemed like a good idea to help you wake up better, even if you still hadn't really acquired a taste for it.

Running on auto-pilot, you moved to the cabinet above the coffee maker to grab two mugs, one set aside for Bucky and the other getting a healthy, or probably unhealthy, dose of sugar in the bottom. Yet, when you pulled the carafe, it was heavier than you expected, almost completely full. Strange, since Bucky usually only started a pot right when he left so it would be waiting for him, ready to suck down like he'd never had anything so good in his life. No way could it be that full already if he just left a few minutes ago. Your brain was just starting to pull out of the fog of sleep when you heard movement close behind you, cold fear suddenly licking up your spine and flooding across your nerves.

Much later, once the dust had settled and your mind could try sifting through murky memories of what happened, you might have been able to say exactly what was off about the moment. Maybe you caught something in the reflection of the glass. Or there was a different weight to the footsteps behind you. No one else should be in the house that early. Bucky was always absolutely silent or absolutely deliberate, no false steps in between. But all your brain could process in that instant was the certain dread that someone was sneaking up behind you and meant you harm.

Moving before you could really think, your grip tightened on the handle and you spun in a quick arc, barely recognizing the angry, grunting shout you spat. The man behind you -at least that's what your mind was saying in that snapshot of time, a man in tactical gear, no helmet, no weapons drawn-looked slightly startled, but raised his arm in time to block your swing. Yet, it couldn't stop the hot coffee from sloshing out violently across his unprotected face. He screamed and grabbed at his burning skin and eyes, dropping something from his hand in the process, but the blood thundering in your ears dulled the sound as you brought the coffee pot down on him once, twice. The third time, half of the glass shattered on impact and you abandoned the makeshift weapon for the sudden erratic thought of fleeing. But the man lunged for you blindly, red-faced and growling, leaving you just enough time to hop out of his reach. This backed you into the corner and your hands scrambled behind you for anything else to defend yourself with. There wasn't even any time to think when your fingers grasped the handle of your cast iron skillet in its little cubby as the man lunged again. Swinging the heavy thing wide, you only managed to hit his shoulder, but it sent him stumbling back a few steps, still blinking against the damage to his eyesight. Just enough space to swing again, this time it cracked hard across his head, the momentum and gravity forcing the other side of his skull into the edge of the counter before he slumped to the floor like a ragdoll.
There was a sudden burst of sound from the living room, shuddering, splintering wood and the groan of the front door's hinges, followed by another man's voice shouting something that might have been a name. You started to bolt for the patio door, unthinking, only to be met with the jagged pain of broken glass biting into the soles of your bare feet, slipping on the pool of coffee until you tripped over the motionless body in front of you. It sent you sprawling across the floor, hitting hard and knocking some of the wind out of you and the skillet from your hands even as you heard loud boot falls approaching. You gasped, trying to fill your lungs, knowing you'd never be fast enough to get away. But just in your eyesight was the object the intruder had dropped; a syringe filled with a sickly colored liquid. The fingers of your right hand closed around it a mere second before footsteps hit the tile floor.

You stayed as still as you could, though there was no way to control your gasping. It must not have seemed strange to the new person, who only gave a disgusted grunt before moving closer. A noise of shuffling and creasing leather came before a hand gripped your upper arm roughly to haul you up. Just as you were being turned over, you twisted your arm around to grab his bicep and yanked at him hard with all of your weight. The action plopped you back on your ass, but managed to pull him off balance and onto his knees beside you, his neck meeting the syringe in your hand halfway as you plunged it quickly. His fist struck hard across the side of your face, sending you reeling, the taste of blood bathing your tongue from where your teeth cut into your cheek. He swore and insulted you, but it was muffled by the ringing in your ears as you tried to scrabble away across the tile. You were cut short by a hand closing around your ankle, trying to pull you back. The strange and distant sound of your own fearful keening finally registered in your brain as you kicked and fought against his hold. Another solid tug dragged you a foot closer, practically up under him, his fingers moving from your leg to the back of your shirt. But the grip there felt weaker and as you flipped around in an attempt to fight him off, you were met with the sight of his eyes rolling back in his head. With a sluggish pitch forward, he collapsed across you, unconscious, pinning you beneath him with a heavy exhale.

Laying there a few heartbeats allowed you to catch your breath despite the heavy weight on your chest; let you make sure he was truly out for the count. HYDRA. It had to be. HYDRA had shown up and they were after Bucky. Panicked, you started to shove at the body on top of you. He was heavy, even more so with all the tactical gear and weapons he was clothed in. And you were tired, so tired. Muscles ached and your face and feet burned. But they were after Bucky. They didn't have him though. No, if they had him they wouldn't have bothered with you. They would have left you alone to think he ran away again or they would have killed you instead of trying to drug you with whatever was in the syringe that made the guy crushing you pass out instead of keel over dead. They wanted you as leverage, as bait. They didn't have Bucky. That one thought rang through your head and with a surge of effort, you managed to push the intruder off of you and roll to your knees, then up to your feet, hissing at the pain.

Not knowing what to do, just knowing you had to do something, you shot toward the front door, standing wide open with the door frame splintered. The inches of snow on the porch numbed the sensation in your soles, even as your heart dropped into your stomach at the sight of a large black van in the driveway. A driver and passenger saw you, the latter turning to bang on the wall behind him. A split second later, the back doors swung open and more boots hit the snow. No way
you'd make it to either vehicle or past them down the driveway. Hopeless and desperate, all you found yourself able to do for a moment was scream out as loud as you could, hear it echo across the farmland in the cold stillness of the snowy morning.

"BUCKY! RUN!"

The heavy crunch of snow behind you made you duck and spin with your fist raised, like Nat and Wanda had taught you once. You just dodged the arms meant to grab you, connecting with the groin of your attacker. No time for self-congratulation or a thought to the impact jarring up to your elbow as you tugged his shirt to dart around him, tumbling him down the porch steps in the process. Your snowy, bloody feet slipped on the living room's hardwood floor and you nearly wiped out rounding the corner down the hall, just caught yourself with your fingertips to gain leverage, pulse pounding in your ears. Your phone. Your phone was still in the bedroom. You had to get to it, call for help. Someone, anyone.

You threw the bedroom door closed behind you, but wasted no time in trying to barricade it. Instead, you scrambled across your bed to reach your nightstand. Jittery fingers pressed the buttons on your phone despite your mind racing and blanking at the same time. Somehow, the screen lit up with "Sam the Man" on display being dialed. You hit the speaker button to hear the ringing as you pulled open the drawer and began to rummage frantically.

"Please, please, please," you whispered over and over as the ringing continued and the sound of multiple people entering the house drew closer.

Your fingers closed around the handle of the knife Bucky had given you about the time you heard a click on the line and a familiar, winded voice asked "Hello?"

"Sam! Sam," was your relieved sob, as though hearing him alone could save you from the men approaching.

The door flew open behind you, two men barging in and quickly making their way toward you. You gripped the knife hard, backing up as much as you could, hoping Sam could make you out as you started yelling "HYDRA! HYDRA! SAM, IT'S HYDRA!"

You slashed fruitlessly at the first to reach you who easily deflected it with a swat of his hand before shoving you back hard enough across the night stand to break the lamp between your back and the wall behind it, knocking the phone to the floor. There might have been the sound of Sam calling for you through the receiver, but you couldn't say for sure as the man in front of you grabbed your wrist in one hand and your neck in another, forcefully pulling you away from the wall. He turned
and began to drag you back toward the door and into the hallway. You struggled against his hold, feet fighting for purchase, until he squeezed tighter on your throat. It wasn't enough to choke you, but the promise was there in the action and the cruel twist of his face. Rounding into the living room, he took the time to beat your closed fist sharply against the corner, forcing you to drop the weapon in your hand with a loud clatter. Soon, you found yourself back outside in the cold, spots of blood lining the ruts your heels made in the snow.

A handful more heavily armed men stood around the front yard, but there wasn’t a chance to count them before you were unceremoniously thrown into the snow at someone’s feet. You gasped at the shock of icy wetness to your hands and knees, toes already aching. The figure beside you crouched down and you tried to scurry away only to be stopped with a rough hand on your arm, forcing you around to face him. A man with a military haircut and a worn face stared at you with his jaw clenched; the passenger you had seen in the van.

"Where is he," he asked simply, tone neutral.

You shook your head slightly, swallowing hard against your aching throat and the coppery taste lingering in your mouth. "I don’t know."

"You can do better than that," the man countered with a smirk as chilly as the air around you. Suddenly, he was hauling you up to your feet along with him, none too gentle in the process. With a violent shake, he tried again, sounding more menacing. "Tell me where he is."

"I don’t know," you ground out as you turned your face away from him. He had you too close, too tight, hot condensed breath puffing across your skin, and your heart was racing wild. "He... he wasn’t here when I woke up."

He gave an annoyed grunt and grabbed at your face to turn it toward him. It flared the searing pain in your cheek; the cuts inside grinding against enamel. Every bit the scared and injured animal backed into a corner, you snapped at him, sank your teeth into the meaty part of his hand between the thumb and forefinger. This earned you a vicious growl and then his other hand fist into your hair sharply to rip you loose, making you flinch and reach for his wrist on instinct. The cold press of metal under your chin a moment later could only have been the muzzle of a gun.

"Gotta whole lotta fight in ya, huh," was his dark snicker. You winced when he yanked at your hair again. "No wonder he likes you."

When his attention turned past you, you managed to squirm onto your tiptoes to relieve some of the scalp pain, though his vice-like hold never loosened as he barked out orders to the others. "Set up a
tight perimeter. Both vehicles are still here. Doubt he would’ve wandered off from his pretty little plaything for too long."

From the corner of your eye, you saw the one who dragged you from the house turn around to start gesturing at the other men. Everything was interrupted by a crack of gunfire. A split second later, a mist of red and fine chunks exploded from the back of the same intruder’s head before he fell to the snowy ground. It kicked up a flurry of movement and orders as everyone repositioned toward where the shot originated, apparently inside the house, and a few fired several shots back. You were being shuffled backwards by the firm grip of your hair, the gun pressed at the corner of your jaw while you tried to keep up with the man behind you. Two more of the group were shot dead, only about 4 now you saw, by the time their leader reached the van. You heard the driver’s side door open and panicked for a moment that he was going to pull you inside to drive off. Instead, he wedged himself behind you and the door, both now makeshift shields to protect him. The gunfire from the house ceased suddenly, though the men in the yard popped off a few more rounds.

"Hold your fire," the man behind you called out, the commanding volume buzzing in your ears. One of the others held up a fist and all the rest pulled up slightly from their positions, weapons still at the ready. There was a sudden, searing twist to your hair that made you cry out despite yourself. "I know you’re still alive in there, Soldier! Come out now or she’s not gonna look much better than my second in command you just took out!"

Tension was stifling thick in the air despite the chill and the moments passed like molasses. And your brain was running wild in its fear; worry that Bucky was hurt in the house, hope that he’d just run away. That might give Sam and the others time to get there. You could survive this until then. There was a gun pressed into your skin and you were scared shitless, the adrenaline making you light headed and your face and feet beginning to throb, but you could do it, because you had to. Even if they didn’t make it in time, even if it meant... Bucky couldn’t go back. He just couldn’t. You wouldn’t let it happen. So, it was a strange mixture of relief and sadness to see the familiar figure emerge from the doorway; light winter running gear courtesy of the facility, tendrils of hair loose and plastered to his skin, a tight-lipped, angry expression to his features.

"No, Bu—" you began to call out, but were cut off by a sharp yank of your hair that made you hiss in pain.

Bucky’s eyes flew to you and, for the barest fraction of a second, fear and hopelessness flashed there before a mask of resignation fell across his face. The few remaining men crowded around him when he reached the bottom of the steps, weapons still at the ready. Two of them forced him to his knees in the snow. There was no fight in him, just that look of self-loathing and defeat. And you knew in that moment he would let them take him as quiet and easy as possible; no doubt on the off chance they’d let you go free, or at least not make you suffer. The biting sting of tears in your eyes began to well up as the man shifted around behind you a bit until he finally pushed the both of you away from the van toward the small group.
You were shoved down to your ass with a heavy plop some yards from where Bucky knelt, but the tight grip at your scalp remained. The man jostled you until your gaze met his, and you noticed there was a red leather-bound book with a black star tucked into his tac vest now that hadn't been there before. Something he must have grabbed from the van. With a sneer somewhere between amusement and contempt, he said "Try to run, you'll be dead before you hit the ground."

Then, the hold on your hair was released as the man made his way closer to the others. His gun was still drawn, but his free hand worked the book from his vest. You rubbed at your scalp to ease some of the pain while moving to your knees in the shivering cold, despite the warning. Bucky, who had previously been staring blankly at the snow just in front of him, looked up at the approach. Bewilderment colored his features for a moment when the man waved the book back and forth in the air.

"You remember this, Soldier," the leader asked in a mocking tone, crooking his knee out a bit so he could open to a marked page one-handed, gun still trained at his captive.

Your heart clenched at the sudden look of horror that crossed Bucky's face. He lurched forward, gray eyes darting frantically to you and back again, but the men surrounding him grabbed him roughly and pulled him back down. A sickening snicker was heard as the leader brought the book up. "Yeah, you remember."

"Don't. Please," Bucky finally spoke in a strained voice. There was a fine trembling in the condensed puffs of his breath. Whatever was in that book had him scared.

"This is what happens when dogs run off and try to play house," the leader informed with a twinge of dark glee. "But since you were such a good dog before, instead of putting you down, you get sent back through obedience training. Of course, we'll just have to keep a shorter leash on you this time."

You thought you were going to be sick. Between the sound of that asshole's cruel words and the sight of Bucky so helpless, your stomach was roiling. Sam might have been on his way, but you didn't know how long it would take. You didn't know how much time you had. It felt like every inch of your body was throbbing in pain. You wanted to just double over and vomit right into the blood spotted snow. But you couldn't. Your eyes were glued to the scene before you. And when the leader spoke again, this time something in a foreign language --Russian maybe-- Bucky's reaction had your veins running colder than your skin against the winter air.

Bucky flinched, face pale as he shook his head. You couldn't hear what he whispered over the distance or the sound of your own pulse. When he tried to bring his hands up to cover his ears, the two flanking him grabbed his arms to keep them down. He fought against their hold, nearly dragging one to the ground beside him, but one of the men at his rear lowered his weapon before
producing a short rod that he shoved into Bucky's back. It must have been electrified, you realized, as Bucky's face twisted in pain, his jaw clenching hard to barely stifle an anguished cry. The others let their weapons hang loose at their sides in favor of keeping him stationary when another Russian word was spoken.

"Stop," Bucky shouted, ragged plea in his voice. Another jab of the rod in his back had his face turning feral, muscles straining against the four men surrounding him.

The words. There was something in the words that was hurting him just as much as the electricity they kept hitting him with. You couldn't understand what they were, but you knew enough to figure that much out. Tears were already trying to freeze to your cheeks as yet another word was spoken, making Bucky twist and writhe like he was being ripped apart. The sight of him enduring so much agony clenched in your chest and held tight; the knowledge that this had been his life before and they wanted it to be again flaring sadness and anger and outrage inside you. You didn't know exactly when you managed to get to your feet or started moving despite the wobbliness of your knees. All you knew for certain was that by the time the man's mouth opened again, you had more momentum than you thought possible. This time the vicious cry that cut through the moonlit pre-dawn scene wasn't Bucky's, but your own.

You launched yourself at the leader just as he was turning around, tackling him to the ground with the full weight of your body. His gun went off, firing wide, bullet catching the one to Bucky's left in the shoulder. The distraction was enough that you caught sight of Bucky starting to fight back as you wrenched back the arm of the man beneath you. He growled and tried to buck you off, but you jammed your knee into the side of his head to force it down into the snow. This seemed to disorient him slightly and you took the opportunity to yank his gun arm back again at the wrong angle. Holding his wrist, you cracked your thigh across his elbow, trying to wrestle the gun from his grip, only to feel the sting of pain jolt across your skin. Undeterred, you did it again and heard a horrible snap and the man's pained cry mixed with the sounds of a nearby scuffle you didn't have time to worry about.

Quick and frantic, you pried the gun and book from his hands. Yet, the shift in your weight allowed him to finally throw you off. Snow barely cushioned your hard landing and you had to gasp against the sudden sharp pain in your side as you tried getting to your feet once more. The man was already on his knees, right arm hanging limp at his side, left swiping at your legs and taking you down once more. Both gun and book went flying out of your grip to land a few yards away. You flipped onto your back to face your livid attacker as he tried grabbing at you. But unlike in the kitchen earlier, you were closer and had the presence of mind to knee him sharply in the jaw. When the impact jostled him, you kicked out from under him, managing to land your heel solidly right on his nose. The move rewarded you with a faint, squishy pop and a spray of blood against your skin.

The wet snow offered your feet little purchase, making you scrabble with your hands to try getting away. A desperate need to reach the book seized you, not just the gun for protection, not just to avoid the grasp of the man behind you. You had to keep the book away from him. Even if you had
to claw the damn thing to shreds with your frozen, bare hands. There was no way you'd let him use it to keep hurting Bucky. Both book and handgun were within a few feet of each other, and after grabbing the weapon, you turned to lay yourself over the book, back pressing it deeper into the snow. If luck existed, maybe the melt would ruin the pages and render it useless, but you still brought the muzzle up with your trembling fingers.

He was several steps behind you, blood pouring from his nose as bruises started to form around both his eyes. It didn't lessen the look of rage on his face and he didn't seem to care about the weapon in your hands as he loomed closer. You pointed the gun and squeezed the trigger, but let out a high keen when your unsteady hands caused you to miss, just barely grazing the limp arm at his side. The slight injury didn't faze him and you took aim again. This time the shot struck him square in the chest, stopped by a bullet-proof vest. He slowed momentarily with a gritting of his teeth as he continued to advance. Pulse pounding in your ears, barely able to breathe, you blinked away the tears blurring your vision. He was so close now, a final lunge and he'd be on top of you. Before you could pull the trigger again, the man stopped suddenly with a jolt. His eyes widened in confusion, though not a moment later he crumpled to the ground. Sitting up, still clutching the gun, you surveyed the body before you and saw a familiar knife --the one Bucky had given you, the one you'd been forced to drop in the living room-- embedded in the base of the man's skull.

Raising your eyes brought Bucky into view, chest heaving somewhat from exertion and blowing steaming puffs of air into the night. Four more bodies lay scattered around him with red blossoming across the surface of the snow. His intense gaze was focused on the form in front of you as he closed the distance to crouch beside it. Fingers brushed over the blood smeared throat, maybe searching for a pulse. Seemingly satisfied with what he found, it nearly startled you how swiftly Bucky was kneeling beside you. His metal hand grasped the gun you forgot you were holding and pulled it from you to tuck away on his person somewhere. His eyes and fingers gave you a quick once over, quick and efficient, searching for injuries, apparently taking mental note at any hiss or squirm you gave as you tried to catch your breath and calm your heart. It was a few long moments before you realized he never once made eye contact with you, same blank mask on his face. Or that you hadn't spoken a word to him, your mind still buzzing like static and just barely able to focus on the fact that he was alive. You both were alive. But by then, Bucky was scooping you up in his arms, pausing only a second, you realized, to grab the red book that had been partially buried beneath you.

You clung to him as he carried you into the house, still unable to form words. Just wanting to hold onto him and know that he was safe. But something felt... off. He was rigid and cold, not like the normal way the two of you melted together when you touched. Absently, your hand reached across his back, remembering the pain he'd been in, the rod scorching the fabric of his shirt, wanting to soothe what had happened. Muscles spasmed beneath your touch, though he never slowed his pace, and you let your fingers drop away from him. Soon, you were in the bedroom, where he sat you easily on the edge of the mattress and hesitantly deposited the book on the comforter beside you. Then he bee-lined for the closet where he pulled out a duffel bag, stuffing it with a few articles of clothing from the hangers before turning to rifling through the drawers.

"Bucky," you finally managed to speak in a hoarse voice while you watched him. He didn't pause
or give any indication that he heard you, so you cleared your throat to try again, standing to move toward him. "Bucky? Bucky, please. Please, look at me."

"Глупо. Безрассудный," you heard him mumble gruffly, never pausing in his search and stash through the drawers. "Мы оба."

You crept closer, concerned by the sound of Russian on his tongue, ignoring the pain in your feet as feeling began to return. "Bucky, we're okay right now. We're okay..."

"Я должен защитить тебя. Ты моя миссия." There was a sudden stiffness in him that stilled his actions. The duffel bag plopped to the dresser top before he leaned some of his weight on his metal arm there, almost wilting a little, right hand buried in his hair as his head shook vehemently. "Но... мое солнышко..."

Of all his muttering, that last part you remembered. It gave you a spark of hope while you reached out to press your fingertips to his shoulder. Lightning quick, Bucky spun on you, gripping your upper arms tightly, almost painfully, and you gasped despite yourself. The look on his face was every bit as fierce and menacing as that night at the bar, maybe even more so. His brows pinched in confusion, a minute twitch in his features, when you brought your hands up to splay across his chest. "Bucky, it's me. It's just me. We're home. We were attacked. But we're okay right now."

Something broke in his expression then; crumbled in a wash of pain and recognition like he was seeing you for the first time in ages. The hands on your arms loosened, holding you carefully instead of at bay. And when he breathed out your name, the tremble in his bottom lip made tears sting at the corners of your eyes. This was your Bucky. They had tried to take him from you, but he was still there, just under the surface, just needing purchase to claw his way free.

"Oh, sweetheart... baby..." he whispered, thick with sadness, as flesh fingers gingerly brushed at your swollen left cheek. The dull throb there had taken a backseat to everything else going on.

"The men in the kitchen," you told him quietly. The memory skittered through your mind. The loud clamor of cast iron on skull echoed in your ears. "I don't know if I..."

"They're dead," Bucky informed coolly, the tone of his voice telling you he was taking responsibility for it. Though whether it was the truth or him trying to ease your mind, you couldn't say.

Your mouth still tasted like old pennies as you carefully licked your lips with a nod. "I... I managed
"Good." Bucky smoothed a hand over your hair, nodding slightly in kind. There was the slightest tilt to his lips, a weak attempt at an encouraging smile that just couldn't fully seat itself. "Good. It's safer for them to come to us now. The vehicles could be rigged..."

His voice trailed off, eyes turning down from yours. More pain and self-loathing crept across his features. He was kicking himself in his head. It killed you, just killed you to see him trying to close in on himself like that. Your poor Bucky, blaming himself like always. As though he caused your wounds himself. Your hands moved to cup his face, forcing him to look at you again.

"Bucky, I love you," you said, pleading for him to listen, a frantic need in your heart for him to believe you as tears threatened to spill. He flinched like he'd be slapped, but you soothed your thumbs across his cheekbones until he begrudgingly met your gaze once more. "Now more than ever you need to know that. Please, Bucky, I love you. I love you..."

Slowly, carefully, Bucky's hands came up to rest over yours. He swallowed thick as he pulled out of your touch. Your heart sank, a stone in your gut. Though there was the barest glimmer of hope when he brushed his lips furtively at the inside of your wrist.

"Sam, probably Steve too, might be here soon. They'll take us to the compound," he swallowed thickly. His fingers lingered a moment at your hands before letting go. "You should gather some things together. We can come back for more later. I'll... I'll go find the cat so she doesn't get left behind."

And with that, he was gone, heading out into the hallway, just barely glancing back at the doorway. Once alone, you let out a shaky breath and didn't try to stop the tears that fell as you sank to your knees before the weight and pain you were feeling forced you down anyway.

---

Bucky sat in the quinjet's co-pilot chair across from Steve, watching silently as Sam patched you up in the back. Only the two of them had shown, both suited up for a fight that was already over by the time they got there. That probably irked Rogers to no end despite his silence on the matter, but he'd get over it. Right now, Bucky was more concerned about your well-being. And he felt more than a little helpless and a whole lot of self-contempt at the sight of you so beat up.
It was just a run, like any other day. Maybe this one somewhat more aimless than usual as he tried to work through the nastiness in his head. You were sleeping when he left, no need to wake you. Set the coffee pot, go for a run, be back in time to see the sunrise and you smiling at him sleepily from a mound of covers. Complacency. He'd slipped. He wasn't vigilant enough. And now you were sitting with bruises and blood covering your sweet skin. The sight of the black van in the driveway, the sound of you screaming his name, telling him to run, because you were dumb and brave and prepared to sacrifice yourself to save him; it all scratched at the inside of his skull until he could almost scream.

Sam seemed to be nearing the end of his ministrations, wrapping your feet in gauze and sterile bandages. That was another thing stuck in Bucky's craw. It wasn't until he came back to the bedroom to find you kneeling on the floor that he noticed the small knicks and slashes on your soles. Somehow he'd missed them while checking you over in the snow and in his haste to be away from you, just for a moment. He hid from you, from all that love shining through a half-swollen face that he didn't deserve, and left you in a pain that you never gave voice to. If he had known, he would have made you stay on the bed, would have tended to the lacerations then and there instead of letting you bleed. That was the least he could have done.

After fastening the bandages in place, Wilson gave you a comforting stroke of his hand along your forearm. You nodded, looking absolutely exhausted, before he stood up to approach the cockpit. Bucky expected anger from his teammate. Hell, he deserved, almost needed it even. Anger, a reprimand, a fight, to be told off for all the things he failed at, all the ways he should have protected you and didn't. While there was a tightness to Sam's features, nothing more than a concerned tone accompanied his sigh.

"It's mostly bruising. Face, ribs, thigh," he informed quietly as he rested his elbow on the back of Steve's chair. " Minor lacerations to the inside of her cheek, knuckles, and feet. We'll have Dr. Cho take another look when we get in, but she's probably gonna heal up just fine."

Bucky nodded in understanding, glancing back at where you sat, head resting against the wall. There was a thick blanket wrapped around your shoulders. Your skin had been so cold, nightclothes soaked through from snow and sweat. The specifics of what happened before he got back to the house were still a mystery, but judging from what he saw, you'd already been partway through hell by then. And yet you fought through it. You were still upright and conscious and held together. Shock, probably, and that would wear off, but it was still so damned impressive. You were more of a survivor than he ever thought, than he ever cared to learn.

"Your turn, Barnes." Sam's voice startled him out of his thoughts. "Let's check you out."

"I'm fine," he shook his head as he shifted in his seat. Truth was, his back ached where they'd shocked him and his head was killing him, but it was nothing. Nothing compared to how you were and what kind of cruel irony was that. They were there for him and yet you were the one they ran
into first. You were the one to come out swinging. It almost could have been funny if it weren't so
terrible. He doubted HYDRA ever would have expected so much hell out of a civilian like you.

"Bucky," Steve began to argue, giving him that stern, authoritative expression as though being
Captain America meant shit to him.

"I said no," Bucky snapped gruffly. He didn't need to be tended to. He didn't deserve to be.

"Fine, but take your ass back there with her," Wilson ordered. His jaw was set tight, shoulders
squared as if expecting blowback, but when Bucky shot him a questioning look, he softened just a
bit with a shake of his head. "She needs you, man. You. Just go be with her."

This time, Steve's face held concern and sorrow as he inclined his head by way of gesture, telling
Bucky to go ahead. It didn't make any sense. He was the reason you were back there all bruised
and broken. Why would you want him with you? How could you possibly? But the silence of his
two friends brooked no argument. They would wait him out if need be. And maybe a small part of
him did want to go be by your side. No, that was a lie. A huge part of him wanted that, it was just
getting smothered by everything else in his head. Eventually, he stood, moving to let Sam take his
place at the co-pilot station.

"Hey," Wilson called out before he got too far. Bucky turned back to find him looking a bit torn,
like he wanted to say something, but settled with "There's pain meds and water in the med locker. In
case she needs to take the edge off before we get back."

Bucky swiped his tongue along his lower lip absently, giving a nod before he continued toward the
back. His approach was slow, deliberate. Even more so when he realized your eyes were closed. If
you were sleeping, he didn't want to wake you. You could obviously use the rest. Yet when he
paused a little ways from you, your eyes fluttered open to give him a tired smile. God damn it. God
damn it, how could you smile at him like that after all that had just happened?

"Bucky," you said quietly as you reached a hand out for him and made as though you might stand.
He crossed the distance between in you two or three quick steps.

"Whoa, whoa," was his soothing reply, grasping your elbows gently to still you. He took a knee in
front of you to help ease you down. "Just relax, kid. Take it easy."

"I'll be fine, old man. I told you before, I'm one tough cookie," you chuckled weakly, but let
yourself settle back without a fuss. The bandaged hand you slipped tenderly across his jaw broke his heart a little more.

"You ain't lyin," Bucky tried to joke back. It sounded hollow in his own ears. Nothing to be done about that. His fingers slipped from your arms down to your feet, wanting to make sure you hadn't already bled through from your effort. Still clean, but your heels and toes were like ice. "You been tough enough for a lifetime, though, sweetheart. Just rest now, okay?"

After you nodded in acceptance, Bucky leaned over to search through your duffel bag of clothes, ignoring the questioning mrrr of the cat in her carrier nearby. A balled up pair of white socks sat near the bottom, just what he was looking for. He separated them before carefully slipping each one on over your dressings, muttering sadly to himself "Jesus, but you took a beating, doll."

"Yeah, well," you sniffled, wincing a bit when you lifted the foot with your bruised thigh. "I guess you should see the other guy."

Bucky sobbed out a broken laugh at that. The fact you would spit a witty cliché despite your red-rimmed eyes and the visible weariness of your body; it made his chest ache. Always so sharp, his gal. "I did see 'em, remember? Barely left anything for me to take care of."

You started to smile at that, but quickly dropped the expression with a pitiful whimper, closing your eyes to shift uncomfortably. Bucky nervously settled his hands at your knees and smoothed circles at the fabric there. "D'ya need me ta get ya somethin, baby? Help with the pain?"

"No. No, not yet," you shook your head slightly. When your eyes opened again, you brought your fingers to his face, trailed them easy along his cheek. "Have you let Sam take a look at you yet? Especially your back?"

"Nah, I'll be alright til we get to the facility," Bucky replied, swallowing against the lump that formed in his throat at the idea you were worried about him.

Pain flashed through your eyes, a gentle sniffle at your nose. "They were hurting you, Bucky. I saw it."

"I heal quick. You know that," he countered quietly with a twist of his head to press a kiss into your palm. "Only hurt I got now is knowin you're all banged up 'cause of me."
"Bucky," you breathed and the softness of it was the final crack in his resolve.

"I'm sorry," he croaked out, unable to look you in the eye anymore, to play along like he deserved your comfort. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I should have done better. I should have been there to protect you."

"Bucky," you attempted to soothe him, voice ragged, though he still refused to meet your gaze.

"The book, the words, the things they could have made me do," he finally admitted, as much to himself as to you. He slumped down on his heels, pressed his forehead to your knees, remembering the way his mind had frayed at the edges, knowing he would have had to obey any order they gave him. You sat in the snow looking terrified, too close, and he knew what they would do. "They were there for me and they hurt you, sweetheart. They hurt you because of me. Would have done worse because I love you. I'm so sorry."

There was silence for several long heartbeats as Bucky worked to compose himself. The position he was in struck him as surprisingly fitting, begging forgiveness at your feet like a damned penitent. And despite you always, always telling him to talk when he could, to share, it didn't seem fair to lay this all out on you like he had. That was never more evident than when he felt your trembling fingers card through his hair. It eased him some, lessened the pounding in his skull, but with it came the stuttering feel of your body starting to shake. No doubt a side effect of shock wearing off. He finally looked up at your face only to be stricken with grief at the sight of your trembling lips and tear-stained cheeks.

"Please don't run away, Bucky," you managed between sobs, a keen to your voice that twisted his gut. "It's- it's not your fault. I knew this-- I knew this could happen when I took you in. Please don't run away from me again."

In that moment, everything else, every dark thing and every doubt in Bucky's head was temporarily swept to the side. Because Sam was right, you needed him. He could come up with a thousand excuses why not, why it should be someone else, but you still needed him, just as much as he needed you. Nothing else mattered. And if he felt wetness spill across his own cheeks, who the hell cared? Carefully, gently, he scooped you in close, maneuvering you both so he sat on the floor of the jet with you resting across his lap, cradling you to his chest as you clutched at him and sobbed into his shirt.

"Shhh, shhh," he cooed softly, running his hand along your back. "No way in hell I could give you up so easy, sweetheart. And even if I could, it wouldn't stop 'em. They'd still come for you to get to me. I won't let that happen, not again."
"It's not your fault," you repeated, muffled by your wracking sobs and your unwounded cheek pressed against him. "The things they did, what they made you do. None of it. They came to our home, Bucky. They drove us from our home! Tried to take you away again."

Petting gingerly over your hair, remembering the harsh treatment and how your scalp might hurt, he pressed his lips along your forehead to murmur quietly. "You're my home now, baby. So long as I got you, I'll always be home. That's why I gotta keep you safe. Even if it means..."

You didn't seem to notice how he trailed off in thought, just kept holding onto him for comfort and support and that was fine by him. He was content to just keep you close. But knowing you were at least momentarily protected in the quinjet and in his arms allowed him to wander down the path his words had been going. He had to keep you safe. That was the truth. Even if it meant taking the fight to them. Cut off one head and two grow back, but cauterize the stumps, burn the body to ash... Those kinds of things might still be locked away in his head somewhere. They had the notebook, a small triumph, but that probably wouldn't be enough. The decision was made to see you to the facility, checked by the doctor, and resting comfortably in his rooms before having a talk with Wanda. Until then, he held you as tightly as he dared while the sun began to rise through the windows of the quinjet.
Bucky's about to embark on a mission and who know for how long

11 months almost. I'm sorry. Hope you all think it's worth the wait.

Ten days could feel like a lifetime. In Bucky's case, maybe even more. Ten days of concerned looks from Steve, Sam, the other teammates, you. You with the swelling in your face receding, still hobbling a little on your feet no matter how much he tried to get you to sit. Ten days of checking in on your progress almost constantly, but barely being able to meet your gaze as bloody, visceral memories came flooding back. Ten days of little sleep from the nightmares and feeling guilty every time you reached a bandaged hand over from your side of the bed in the middle of the night to comfort him. He would have moved out to the couch so you could rest easier, except he knew you wouldn't. He knew you wanted him there and he wanted to be there in case you really needed him, in case your own dreams turned dark and violent. Ten days of bustling doctors studying the notebook, long and grueling sessions with Wanda, and his own grim determination, and the words no longer worked the same as they did before, no longer ripped him away from himself entirely. Not everything they put in was gone and not everything they took out was regained, but it was a start.

In the midst of those ten days, Natasha and Clint managed to ferret out information on the HYDRA detail that attacked the house. They were able to pinpoint their closest base of operations and took recon pictures to bring back to the team. A few of the photos were disturbingly familiar to Bucky, the sight of them giving way to more buried images in his head, information toppling into place like dominos. It was that revelation, how going after one base might lead to the next and the next for him, which made up his mind on what he had to do. His initial thought was to sneak off alone and take out anything and everything he could without endangering any of his teammates, but he'd made a promise to you. That and Steve still knew him better than he realized. The argument that ensued was only quelled when he reluctantly agreed to take Wilson and Maximoff along after they volunteered to accompany him. But telling you about this new mission, especially so soon after what happened; that was the most difficult part. Because even though you eventually talked about it together, when he came back to the apartment after the meeting to tell you, all you did was stare at him a few moments before giving a small nod and wrapping your arms around his waist to bury your face in his chest.

The night before they were set to leave, Bucky stuck around the quinjet assigned for the mission, yet another equipment check occupying his mind and helping him ignore the no doubt concerned looks from Sam and Wanda as they retired for the evening. He reasoned he didn't need much sleep, and the flight to the first HYDRA base could afford him even more time to recharge, but deep down, he knew the truth. It was his last night with you, probably for a while, maybe even... No, if he wouldn't let you think like that he wouldn't let himself. Not this time. There wasn't a thing in the universe that would keep him from coming home to you one way or another. Still, as much as he itched to be
with you, a part of him wasn't sure he could bear the sadness and pain he was certain he'd see in your eyes when the two of you parted in the morning.

An echo of footfalls behind him pulled Bucky from his thoughts. The sound itself was familiar enough now, despite distant memories of a much different gait, that he didn't even need to look to know Steve was approaching up the ramp. "Shouldn't you be getting some rest?"

"Making sure everything's squared away," Bucky replied, closing the weapons locker firmly before turning around to find his friend standing in civilian garb. "One less thing to hold us up in the morning."

Steve nodded with a glance around the interior of the quinjet, shoulder leaning against the entryway. Of course, he had more he wanted to say and Bucky braced himself for a renewed fight because if one thing never changed about Steve Rogers, super soldier serum or no, it was that he didn't let things go easily. Sure, he could pack it away for a while, but if there was still a chance he could get his way, he wasn't going to drop it. Bucky's suspicions were confirmed when Steve opened his mouth again, trying to make himself sound almost meek. "This mission's gonna be a tough one. Sure you couldn't use an extra set of hands?"

"I'm sure," was Bucky's gruff counter as he moved to brush past Steve on his way out of the quinjet. "I'm only takin Wilson and Maximoff to shut you up in the first place. And don't think I don't know why they're the ones that volunteered. Not everything's back in my head right and they're worried it's gonna get fucked all over again. Can't say I blame 'em."

"C'mon, Buck, they just wanna help," Rogers tried to soothe, though his tone was slightly strained in exasperation. "Same as I do."

"Goddamn it, Steve. It's bad enough I'm gonna be worryin about my girl every other second, last thing I need is to be distracted lookin after your reckless ass the times in between!" Bucky turned on his heel to face his friend, but any further tirade died on his lips at the somewhat wounded expression he found Steve sporting. The guilt there was all too familiar; a feeling that sometimes hung heavy between them, both sides trying to make up for it in their own ways. With a heavy sigh, Bucky continued in a more even tone, hoping Rogers would finally get it through his thick skull. "This is how you help me, okay? I don't know how long we'll be gone or how far this whole thing will take us. I don't know what could happen. I need to know there's someone here that can protect her while I can't. She means the world to me, Steve. And there's no one I trust more than you to keep her safe."

There was a moment's pause where it seemed like he might question or argue further, but then, as if by some small miracle, Steve closed his mouth with a thoughtful nod. He gave a defeated sigh, smile tight as he propped his hands at his hips and replied "Okay, Buck. Of course. I won't let anything happen to her."

Although plenty more could have been said on the subject, there was hardly enough time for all that and Bucky didn't have the inclination. Instead, he gave an appreciative duck of his head by way of thanks. It was enough between them; that much he'd been able to remember on his own. Anything else was understood or could wait. Yet, something remained he couldn't put off much longer, no matter how difficult he knew it would be, and he had just about worked up the gumption to face it when the door opened up to the hangar.

"Tony," Steve questioned by way of greeting as Stark came striding in, dressed-down and noisily twirling a ratchet wrench in his hand with one of his robots carrying a toolbox in tow. "I didn't know you were at the compound."
Neither did Bucky. If he had known, he might have high-tailed it back to the apartment much sooner to avoid a chance meeting with the last person he thought he could face that week. Too late now. He shifted uncomfortably as Tony approached, eyes locked on him curiously. "Pep's headed out of town on a business trip. Thought I'd personally make sure the quinjet was tuned up and ready to go.... Shouldn't you be ravishing your lady love before you go gallivanting off at first light or something?"

"I was headin that way in a minute," Bucky replied with a slight nod. He reached up to run a hand through his hair. Nervous didn't even begin to describe what he was feeling at this unplanned encounter with Stark. Yet, maybe it was for the best because it forced him to deal with another thing that had been troubling him. "But maybe... maybe we should talk."

"If it's about your arm, you should be fine," Tony waved him off as he headed past the two super soldiers toward the quinjet. He threw another look back over his shoulder as he reached the ramp, gesturing with the tool in his hand toward Bucky's metal arm. "No one's controlling that mechanical marvel but you anymore. I threw a jammer in there so no one can gain remote access."

Bucky clenched and released his metal digits at the memory of Stark tinkering around in the bicep access point. He hadn't trusted the Winter Soldier at all yet, Barnes really couldn't blame him, but he still took the time to help. Probably for Steve's sake, or some sense of duty. Either way, it made what Bucky had to say that much more difficult. It wasn't enough that HYDRA made a cold-blooded murderer of him, setting him loose on an old acquaintance after stripping him of the few fond recollections he had from a bleak time of war; circumstance played just as cruel, putting him in the path of that same man's son and giving him all those memories back. And if Tony wanted him gone after this mission, well, Bucky wouldn't blame him for that either. He was just banking on that the same sense of duty, or at least Steve's urging, meant you'd still be kept safe at the compound.

"It ain't about the arm," he sighed heavily with a shake of his head. There was no going back now. For all the tension between them, Tony deserved to hear the truth from his own mouth. "It's about the... the memories I've been gettin back."

Judging from the split second of shock that crossed his friend's face, instantly swallowed up by a determined set to his jaw and a sorrowful glance at the other man, Steve knew exactly what was about to happen and decided to plant himself right there to see it through. Solidarity, Bucky supposed, though he hardly felt worthy of it. Apparently, Tony had figured it out too, because he stopped dead in his tracks half way up the entrance ramp, so quickly the robot at his feet took an extra beat to come to a halt. He went relatively still, save his fingers jostling the tool he held in agitation, before turning around with mock casualness that didn’t reach his face, chin tilted up and features cautious.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky wet his lips nervously before he began. How does a person even start a conversation like this? "Howard... your parents..."

"Don't." Tony's rough croak barely matched the severe, thin-lipped grimace as he shook his head vehemently. His knuckles had turned white around the wrench and Bucky was both alert and resigned to the idea of a physical backlash. No doubt Steve was, too. But Stark only closed his eyes tightly for a moment, gesturing slightly with his free hand while taking a few harsh breaths. "Just... don't."

"Tony," Steve began, urging and placating all at once. Leave it to him to butt in on Bucky's behalf even when it wasn't entirely necessary. Though Barnes was maybe more grateful for the gesture than he'd ever let Rogers know. "Maybe you should listen to what he has to say."

“No, you listen,” Tony ground out harshly as he shot Steve a scathing glance. Bucky felt himself
lurch on reflex, the muscle memory of dozens of times when he would put himself between Steve and the trouble he drew in like a magnet. The instinct made keener this time since the backlash should be his alone to bear. But Stark seemed to bite back on his anger, his jaw working for a moment as he regarded both men before some of the tension left him. Some, but certainly not all.

"Look, I knew the possibilities when we brought SubZero here onto the team. I don't need to hear it. I don't want to hear it."

With that, Stark turned on his heel to continue up the quinjet’s ramp, trying to seem casual again and failing miserably. But Bucky couldn’t let it end at just that. Maybe Sam would say he needed it off his chest, closure, but more importantly, Tony deserved something. “Okay, but just… lemme say one thing. In case I don’t get a chance to later, alright?”

This earned another glaring look from Stark, but he remained silent as he turned his attention back. Bucky was damn near close to squirming under the scrutiny, though the unease was the least he deserved. Instead, he took a breath before he began. “Howard - your dad - I knew him. Maybe we weren’t best pals, and maybe my brain’s still stuck on static half the time, still I got to know him a little between missions with the Howlies. He wasn’t perfect, but he was a genius and he wanted to make the world a better place. And… well… all those good parts’a him, I see in you. Times ten, if I’m bein honest.”

A rousing speech, it was not. But it was what he had and he hoped it came off better than it sounded in his own head. Hoped it was well-received in the spirit with which it was given. Bucky chanced a quick look at Steve behind him, only to find his friend watching the scene play out with a cautious gaze. When he looked back, Tony had his head cocked with a strange, guarded expression before his brow creased and the corner of his mouth twitched up slightly.

"Is this… Are you trying to have a moment with me, Barnes? Is that what this is,” Stark asked, gesturing back and forth between the two of them with a flourish and a slight shake of his head. Bucky was confused for a moment until Tony’s eyebrows crooked up in that tell-tale sign of snark and he seemed to relax back into himself a little. “Because last I checked, we’re both spoken for and I really don’t think you could handle a man like me.”

"Ten times the cocky ass attitude, too. Holy shit," Bucky mumbled the expletive through a chuckle as he pinched the bridge of his nose. A glance over his shoulder revealed Steve just managing to rein in a smile as he ducked his head to hide it. Looking back, Tony let go of a gentle huff, half-hearted smirk and unaffected facade seeming slightly more genuine. Bucky knew firsthand how cracking a joke could lighten not just the mood of a room, but the weight someone might be carrying, if only for a short time.

"How about this, Robocop," Tony called out, finally entering the quinjet and taking the wrench in his hand to a panel near the entryway, his eyes never leaving his work. "You get back here in one piece and we can discuss things like civilized adults; with a bottle of scotch even older than you and lots of manly tears."

All Bucky could do for a moment was nod, caught off guard by the suggestion and the elusive idea that maybe one day he could be forgiven. It was one thing for Steve and Sam, for you, for anyone to tell him it wasn’t his fault, but quite another for someone made victim, even by association, from the monstrous things he’d done to show him something close to understanding and friendship. Eventually, he managed to choke out through the tightness in his throat “Sure, Stark. It’s a date.”

Tony shot him an annoyed look, though maybe there was a hint of amusement in his features before returning to the panel. “In the meantime, Encino Man and I will make sure that little spitfire of yours
stays nice and safe, out of harm’s way. Speaking of whom, don’t you think you ought to be tending that flame about now?”

“Don’t gotta tell me twice,” Bucky chuckled weakly, feeling his gut twist in time with the flutter of his chest. “And thanks, Tony.”

Stark made a noise in the affirmative, waving him off haphazardly as he quickly became engrossed in his project, muttering either to himself or the task at hand. A clear dismissal that Bucky didn’t even really mind. When he turned back, he shared a quick nod with his friend, hoping it conveyed his appreciation well enough for the moment. And it must have, as Steve gave a warm, lop-sided smirk, almost reassuring, and nodded in kind before Bucky headed out of the hangar.

The compound was quiet, everyone either gone out or hunkered down for the evening. It felt almost stifling, though Bucky was certain that had more to do with his nerves than anything else. He opted for the stairs to reach his floor, the elevator notoriously slow in comparison to him or Steve on foot. You’d been kept waiting long enough. Besides, the motion of his steps offered a slight distraction from the churning inside him. Still the staircase didn’t last forever, and by the time he reached the apartment door, he had to take a moment and a deep breath, trying to school his features some before he even touched the doorknob. You didn’t need to see him so nervous, not when it would compound your own worry.

There was the slightest hope that you had fallen asleep while you waited for him. Of course he knew you wanted to spend these last hours with him, but he couldn’t deny the appeal of seeing you resting peacefully, of scooping you up into his arms and carrying you to the bedroom where he could lay with you tucked against him until the morning, commit the sound of your breathing and the scent of your hair to memory all over again to see him through the mission ahead. All that would have to wait though, because before the door was even open all the way he could hear the scrape of a kitchen stool across tile, letting him know you were awake.

“Bucky,” you called out quietly, hope and concern in your voice at once. It sounded like he felt and he found some relief in that, but there was hardly any time to dwell on it when he saw you in your soft cotton nightgown get up from the kitchen island to move toward him, trying to avoid the cat darting around your feet.

“Hey, hey, whoa! It’s okay, sweetheart. Sit back down,” he urged gently as he rushed to meet you. It had been a battle with you to take it easy ever since the two of you came to the compound. The swelling had gone down and the bruises and bandages had begun to disappear, but he could tell pain lingered in the slight hobble you tried to hide and the determined furrow to your brow.

“I’m fine, really. The doctor told me to start moving around more, remember,” you assured, though your hands gripped his open arms and let him take some of your weight. When you cleared your throat and looked up at him, the sickly, sallow splotch along your cheekbone made his heart sink. “Is everything ready for when you… for tomorrow?”

“All loaded and waiting to roll out in the morning,” Bucky replied, holding your elbows carefully and trying to keep his tone neutral, somewhat pleasant even.

You managed to give him a small smile, tight and almost reaching your eyes, putting on just as awkward a show as he was trying to. “Are you hungry? I could make you something.”

“Nah, don’t worry about that. I ate something with Sam and Wanda, goin over mission specs and everything this afternoon…” He trailed off when he noticed your face start to fall. Something like hurt flashed across your features, cutting Bucky to the quick before you were able to hide it again.
“Oh. Okay,” you nodded weakly as you slid your hands from him to stand on your own. “I had a late lunch anyway. Nat and Clint were kind enough to invite me along.”

It wasn’t until you turned back to the counter, closing a familiar cookbook that migrated from the house to the apartment, that it dawned on him just how thoughtless he’d been. Lunch, dinner; the meals themselves weren’t the issue. It was the connection they always provided, from when he first met you to before and after every mission that took him away from you. You were violently uprooted from your home with little to show for it still but some clothes, a few books, a cat who just now started coming out of hiding, and him; the man who was supposed to be taking care of you. Sure, he checked up on you throughout the day, made sure you were healing, but in his own damned foolishness, his own cowardice to face you, he never stopped long enough to just be there with you despite knowing how much you worry, how much you’d been through.

“M’sorry, sweetheart. I should’a been here. I should’a...,” he began quietly, but was cut off by you turning back to face him with a pacifying wave of your hand.

“Honestly, it doesn’t matter,” you shook your head and let your hand drop to your side. “I’m just glad you came to see me tonight at all.”

That stung him, and deservedly so in his opinion, shame searing hot on his face and clogging his throat until he was able to swallow it enough to speak again, tongue swiping at the dryness of his lips. “I promised I’d never leave without saying goodbye again.”

“I know, but you’ve been distant with me for a while now. Ever since we got here. I wasn’t too sure.” Your humorless chuckle died almost immediately, fell into a quake of your lower lip that you bit into as your shoulders slumped and you sighed wetly. Whatever fear or self-loathing doubt that kept Bucky rooted to his spot all this time wasn’t strong enough to stay him any longer. Not when it looked like you were about to crumple in on yourself with your eyes rimmed in red and tears dancing at the corners. He went to hold your face in his hands, hesitating before slipping metal fingers across your unbruised cheek. And it would never cease to amaze him how you melted into the unnatural touch of it or eased when he crowded into your space instead of cowering as you looked up at him, sniffling before you spoke again. “I know you’ve been taking care of a lot of things. Trying to get your head straight. Planning a mission. I just… I miss you. You’re not even gone yet and I miss you, Bucky. So much.”

“Tell me to stay and I will. I’ll scrub the whole damn mission if you need me here.” Bucky’s reply came out in a rush of words, desperate for you to understand he meant it. “I’d do that for you, sweetheart. I’d do anything for you.”

Another sniffle and you gave a small, resolute shake of your head, though your fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt held a fine tremble that ached in his chest. “Of course I don’t want you to go, Bucky. But you need to do this. And not just to protect me. You need to do this for you, to help you heal. I could never ask you to give that up. I was just hoping tonight…”
“What is it, baby? What were you hoping,” he asked when you bit into your lower lip, obviously trying to clamp down on whatever thought had been going through your mind. Pressing his metal palm to your jaw, trying to physically lift your fallen gaze back to his face proved fruitless.

“It’s nothing,” you said quietly. Your hands slid from his shirt and idly smoothed down the fabric from where they’d held on. “It’s really not important right now.”

“No. Don’t do that. Don’t you dare,” Bucky chided softly, daring to rest flesh fingers at the curve of your waist while he inched a little closer. He heard and felt the quiet hitch in your breath even as your eyes caught his fleetingly. “If you thought it, it’s important. It’s important to me.”

“It sounds really selfish compared to everything you’re going through, but…” you began as you covered his hand with your own where it rested at your cheek. A light flush colored your skin and you looked embarrassed when you spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. “This is the first time you’ve really touched me since what happened.”

Guilt twisted in Bucky’s gut and he had to force his hands to stay right where they were. It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about it in all that time. There were little moments where he’d made to reach out, touch your hair, brush his fingers along the inside of your wrist, press a kiss to the crook of your neck. But then your bruises would stand out or you would wince in discomfort from some small movement and he was reminded that he was the cause of all your pain. The cut on your cheek from before had been one thing; eating him up inside for so long. He watched it heal in time with parts of himself, though like the scar, no matter how faint it became the damage would always be there. Yet, to see the violence of his past come screaming back at him to paint itself across your body in vivid colors, purple and red, was too much. How could he take comfort in you when you were suffering because of him?

“You were injured, needed time to heal,” he countered, though it sounded like a feeble excuse even in his own ears.

“Dr. Cho cleared me for most activities days ago, you know that. And besides, that wasn’t stopping you from… from holding me or kissing me,” you replied, letting your hand fall from his. Your eyes slipped closed and you took a deep breath, seeming to steady yourself with a furrow of your brow. “If you don’t want to… If you don’t want me anymore…”

“What,” he startled out. The idea that you of all people, the woman he loved, that his brain conjured dreams of when it felt truly at peace, could feel unwanted by him was almost enough to knock the wind out of him. “How could you ever think that, sweetheart? Christ, it feels like that’s all I ever do is want you. But hell if I deserve you, especially now, after all this.”
Bucky brought his right hand up, hesitating a split second before gingerly resting his palm along your jaw, thumb ghosting over the bruise at your cheekbone. A sympathetic wince scrunched his nose when you turned into his touch, but it melted away when your eyes finally met his again, brow furrowed and teeth scraping along your lower lip. “What do I deserve then?”

“Are you kiddin me, doll? You deserve a whole hell of a lot better than me.” He shook his head, disbelieving, something in him feeling half-hysterical that you even had to ask. “You deserve the world.”

“And all I really want is you,” was your quiet response and the sadness and longing in your voice tore at his insides. “You’re leaving tomorrow for who knows how long… maybe even forever…”

“Baby—” he tried to soothe, but you continued undeterred, silencing him with the plea in your eyes.

“But it’s you I want, Bucky. I just want you to be with me one last time before you go. Really with me.”

He regarded you silently a moment, trying to process, trying to accept what you were saying to him. There had been comfort in your closeness and your touch almost from the beginning, before he even recognized that feeling again, when he was afraid even breathing too loud would have you sending him packing. That same fear had crept up on him once more, the same dark voice that reminded him of what he’d done and what he was still capable of. Except it was amplified by every cut and bruise that marred your skin. So he denied himself the comfort that you came to embody for him. He never thought his self-imposed punishment could affect you so much. The idea that after all the pain and blood and death you could need his touch as badly as he needed yours was mystifying. Yet there he stood, cupping your face delicately in his hands. No trace of fear or loathing in your eyes. There was only want, need, love; your soft features watching him expectantly, drowning out the darkness in his mind.

The kiss was only meant to be a brief, chaste thing; a reassurance that he was there now. It started out that way, at least. But then you opened up beneath his lips, gentle breath pulling him in deeper, until your bodies curved into each other like they were meant to. Lost in the sweet familiar taste of you, Bucky almost forgot there had been so many days and so much distance between you both. It was indescribably easy, absolutely perfect to have only you filling every single one of his senses. When you finally parted, but only barely, your breath on his skin was as rapid and fluttery as his heartbeat.

“Please, Bucky,” you whispered and he knew exactly what you were asking of him by the soft, breathless little whine in your voice that still sent a shiver down his spine no matter how many times he heard it.
“Ya gonna let me make love to you slow, sweetheart? All soft and sweet like?” He sounded rough and gravelly in his own ears, your faces still close enough his lips grazed yours as he spoke. “Let me take my time so I can savor every moment I got with you tonight?”

The slight hitch of your breath when you gave a small nod had the corners of his lips quirking up just a fraction. You seemed to find your voice as his left hand slipped from your face to find the small of your back, holding you close as you trembled against him. “Yes, Bucky. Anything you want.”

“My sweet girl,” he sighed at the flush that colored your cheeks as his right thumb glided reverently along your plump lower lip, teasing it out from between your teeth. He gripped the very tip of your chin before molding his mouth to yours again.

Then, in one quick move, Bucky scooped you up into his arms bridal style to carry you to the bedroom. The little noise you made as your arms slung around his neck held less of your usual surprise he’d come to enjoy and more relief. He tried not to wonder if that was because you were pleased to get your way or if your poor, torn up soles had been aching again. That did give him an idea, though, and once he’d deposited you carefully on the mattress he plied you with a few more quick kisses before shifting down the bed to kneel at your feet.

Seeing you laying there in your simple nightgown and fluffy socks, it was difficult, and painful, to imagine all that you’d been through that harrowing night ten days ago. Dr. Cho patched you up and gave you something to calm your nerves not long after the quinjet reached the compound. You were afforded several hours of sleep… or rather, you passed out for several hours as Bucky stood watch over you. Then came the debrief, where Bucky sat beside you and listened as you relayed what happened, equal parts proud of your tenacity and sick at the thought of every injury, every time someone laid their hands on you in malice. And now he silently cursed himself again for not coming back to you sooner, because once he’d gotten past that fear and guilt of seeing you tonight, he wanted nothing more than to tend to each and every wound and spend hours, days, the rest of his life making it up to you.

Metal fingers curling around your left ankle, Bucky lifted your foot from the mattress and carefully removed your sock. While the cuts to your soles bled heavily for a long while and needed minor stitching in a few spots, luckily there was no sign of permanent damage. Still, they weren’t entirely healed and ached when you stood too long. He ran his thumb gingerly over the clean bandage wrap, remembering the scene he discovered of broken glass and spilled coffee and the motionless bodies of two men that had come for him but found you first, before he gently pressed his lips into the arch of your foot.

It was a spot he knew to be sensitive, ticklish even when handled properly, but the slight flinch of your muscles had him glancing up at your face, worried that he’d caused you pain. When he found
no discomfort, only a curious fascination to your smile, Bucky moved his hand to cup behind your knee and peppered a few light kisses up your calf. A disgusted groan had him stilling suddenly, his gaze shooting up to you again in concern.

This time, your forearm was thrown over your eyes with a cringe scrunching your nose. “I haven’t shaved my legs in forever.”

“Me neither,” he huffed into your thigh just above your knee, amused, relieved.

And then you laughed. A real, honest to goodness laugh that shook your whole body and had Bucky lifting his head to catch you covering your face with your hands. It was a summer rain after too long a dry spell, finding every arid crack and breathing life back into him. It was so goddamn beautiful it made Bucky’s heart stutter against the fullness in his chest. Because if you could still laugh like that, at some stupid comment he made, after all that happened to you, then he knew everything in the world could be right again.

Your giggle was starting to subside as he managed to work the hem of your shirt up over your hips, but was cut off abruptly when he settled between your legs to bury a kiss in the bend of your thigh at your left hip. That sweet little spot he remembered from the very first time he made love to you, the one that could still earn him a gentle gasp. This time was no different and there was a comfort in that and in the feel of your fingers brushing the hair back from his face to caress lovingly along his cheek. Bucky sighed into your skin at the sweet, familiar gesture, a source of comfort since the very beginning. Reaching up, he cupped the back of your hand with his own metal palm so he could brush his lips against the inside of your wrist, noting the racing heartbeat beneath your skin. Then he turned your hand over to lavish some affection on your tender knuckles.

“What are you doing,” you asked, playfulness lilting your voice as your fingers wound into his hair.

“What’s it look like I’m doin?” With a mischievous smirk, Bucky pushed your nightgown further and further up your torso until the muted bruise along your ribs was exposed. He nosed carefully along the splotch just beneath your left breast where you’d fallen hard in the snow after creating a distraction for him to fight back, but he wouldn’t let the memory of fear and worry completely pull the smile from him now as he looked up at your beautiful face, safe and sound with him. “I gotta kiss all your booboos, sweetheart. Make’m feel better.”

The warm chuckle you gave turned into a sigh with a hitch of your breath when Bucky continued his ascent, drawing the fabric in his hands up over the swell of your breasts. His tongue laved sweet over a nipple, gentle suction puckering the sensitive bud, and he hummed contently at the needy way you arched toward his mouth. He didn’t linger, though, instead leaning back up enough to strip off his shirt. Of course, you were a bit eager and hastily tried to follow suit, but the slight wince that crossed your face had him catching your nightgown before it even made it past your elbows,
lowering you down to the bed again.

“Easy now. Just lie back, baby,” Bucky coaxed, lips brushing gently along your discolored cheekbone while his hands finally pulled the shirt from you to toss aside. “Slow, remember? Wanna pretend like we’ve got all the time in the world together.”

“We do, Bucky,” was your quiet reply, though he felt almost dizzy at the promise in your words and your soft smile.

His mouth found yours in the same breath as your fingers laced through his hair. The kiss was languid and careful, not wanting to disturb the small, healing cuts left from your teeth when you’d been struck. Another lingering kiss dropped to the barely there scar on your right cheek before he moved his way back down along your jaw and neck. He took his time at your collarbone, relishing the subtle little movements you made against him in your eagerness, how your chin tilted up, the way your fingers scratched absently at his scalp when he tasted at your pulse point. You loved him and you needed him and you wanted him… it was enough to make a man giddy.

“Though, you know,” you mused gently, the smirk practically audible in your voice, matching his own. “A girl can only take so much teasing before she combusts.”

“Ain’t that the point,” he chuckled into your skin as his lips moved lower.

Any sassy retort you might’ve had was cut off in a groaning sob when his mouth teased over your other nipple. Bucky took a little more time here, until your grip tightened in his hair along with the delicate skin under his ministrations and you began to pant for air. After one last flicker of his tongue, he broke away to pepper kisses down your stomach, onto the spur of your hip, along your thigh, paying special attention to the waning bruise marring the silky softness he loved so well, the result of snapping a man… a monster’s elbow in two to save you both.

Once he was satisfied with his affections there and with the fine tremble of your muscles beneath his touch, Bucky slipped his hands beneath your hips to leverage you up a little, trying to keep some of the pressure off your feet. Flesh and metal fingers alike hooked into the back waistband of your panties to slide them slowly down your legs. Looking to where your head rested on the pillows, he caught your gaze and held it as he went. Each brush of his knuckles on your skin was a deliberate act so that he could watch your eyes darken, no doubt mirroring his own. The journey was over much sooner than he would have liked, but he didn't neglect slipping off your other sock and laying a final kiss to the clean bandages on your right sole, signifying the end of his little mission.

He took a moment to admire his view of you, laid bare, all flushed and vulnerable for him. The
thought of you trusting him with all your softness, not just your body, but everything, never failed to send a thrill through him. It was an image he wanted to keep forever, one that helped burn away the darkness whenever it threatened to consume him. Nothing as strong and beautiful and lovely as you would choose him if there wasn’t something worthy hidden away inside him. And he’d earn it, too, even if it was the last thing he ever did in this world.

The weight of your attention was heavy and hot on his skin as he moved to finish stripping down. If he went a little slower than necessary, letting you get an eyeful, you definitely didn’t seem to mind. Looking up revealed you leaning up on your elbows, eyes roaming his body, and he couldn’t help his smirk at your sheepish expression when you realized you’d been caught ogling him. There was a time when being stared at would have made him uncomfortable, but never with you. Now the only discomfort was the aching need to be cradled in between your thighs again. Your head fell back to the pillows as he crawled the short distance up the mattress toward you.

“My pretty baby,” he hummed against the bend of your knee, adoring the quiet catch in your throat and the way you opened again at the gentle press of his fingers. They slid along your inner thigh until his hand came to rest at the juncture of your legs with his mouth trailing behind. “So soft and sweet for me.”

The kittenish noise you made when his teeth scraped against your tender skin shivered down his spine. And he could hear the slightest bit of desperation in your whispered “Bucky…”

“Ah, sugar, I know. You need it bad and I’m gonna give it to ya, promise,” he soothed, palming at the suppleness low on your belly, thumb caressing affectionate circles there. Glancing up at your heated expression, he had to lick the dryness from his lips. Hell if you didn’t know exactly what he was asking for. “But it’s been too long and I’d like the taste’a you fresh in my mind for when I can’t be with you.”

Your fervent little nod was all the answer he needed. To ease some of the strain on your body, Bucky quickly grabbed an unused pillow to prop beneath your hips before dropping a kiss just below your belly button. The feel of your fingertips dancing along his scalp had him sighing into your skin as he slipped his shoulders behind your knees. Your smell and taste were familiar and thrilling in equal measures, as was the gentle gasp you made when his tongue eased its way between your folds. He groaned in pleasure at finding you already slick with arousal, feeling himself twitch against his stomach. You bucked at his first tentative swipe and he moved his hands to your hips, holding you steady as he kept going. But that didn’t stop your fingers from twisting in his hair or your heels from digging into his back, urging him on with every lick, every dip of his tongue into your entrance, brushing the line of his nose along your clit the way he knew drove you wild. Soon, you were moaning sweet and panting, chest heaving when he looked up the length of your body. He had to pull away before his own instinctive rutting against the sheets overcame him.

“Sorry, sweetheart. Got a little carried away,” he murmured, pressing his lips to your quivering thigh
at the disappointed whimper you gave.

“Just get up here and kiss me,” you huffed with an affectionate tug of his hair.

Bucky smirked at the firm command you mustered despite how breathless and flustered you were. It was definitely an order he had no problems following. “Yes, ma’am.”

The journey was peppered with a few kisses up your torso, but he didn’t dare take too long before his lips met yours again. Truth be told, he was probably more desperate for it than you were, especially now with his desire whet on the taste of you. A shudder ran through him at the way your knees slid to his waist, offering yourself up to him with a tilt of your pelvis, and he swallowed your gentle gasp in another kiss when he nestled himself along your folds. Your fingers tightened in his hair as he teased himself against you, slicking his underside and nudging at your sensitive little bundle of nerves to make you whimper, to help ease his way soon.

“Bucky, please,” you panted quietly, hot breath searing across his cheek when you broke away for air.

He stole another kiss before leaning up with his metal palm pressed into the bed near your shoulder. Gaze sweeping down your beautiful, flushed skin, he swallowed thick at the sight of your bodies notched together so intimately. And his voice was rougher than he realized, lips parched from the fluttering in his stomach, when he locked eyes with you again, taking himself in hand while he spoke. “Keep lookin at me. Please, baby?”

You didn’t question him, only cupped his jaw with one hand, fingers of the other trailing down the web of scarring where skin and metal fused to rest over his heart, making it beat all the faster, as he gripped your left hip and slowly sank into you. God, he missed this even more than he realized, the snug, silky heat of you, yes, but also the pleased way your lips parted and the soft noises of approval you made as you tried urging him on. His own muscles shook with the effort to keep from just snapping his hips forward. Especially with the way your head fell back on the pillows, still managing to keep your eyes on him over the curve of your cheeks. But he was able to restrain himself, the bruises serving as a reminder of why he needed to, and took his time until he was seated deep inside you.

“You always feel so goddamn amazing, sweetheart,” he murmured, hearing bit of awe in his own voice as he pressed in close with you again to kiss along your collarbone. “Don’t think I ever felt anything as good as you.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” was your quiet chuckle as your fingers curled over the tender
little spot on his rib cage, just below the line of scars and metal, that often sent a jolt through him. This time it was eclipsed by his low groan when you let your knees fall wider, let him slip that much further into you. You set your teeth playfully at his chin and kissed at the corner of his mouth before you spoke again. “And I love the look you get. Like you’ve died and gone to heaven.”

Bucky couldn’t help his gentle snort of amusement as he mouthed his way down your jaw. “Sometimes I think I might’ve. But it can’t be near as beautiful as the faces you make. Especially when you’re comin for me.”

“Bucky!” Though you tried to sound scandalized, there was no hiding the laughter in your voice or the way your shoulders shook with it while your nails scratched along his scalp. “Always such a sweet talker.”

A mischievous smirk and gentle roll of his hips was the only response he gave, catching the airy moan that fell from your lips with his own. True to his word, Bucky kept the pace slow and easy to start, savoring, memorizing you all over again. Lips and tongue tasted the salty sweetness of your skin everywhere they could reach. The scent of your soap and shampoo, the beginnings of sweat and blooming arousal, made his head swim. Every blissful sigh and hitched breath and delicious moan etched themselves into his mind, playing in time with his own pleasured sounds, a recording of a favorite song he hoped would never wear out no matter how many times he listened. And, oh, the way you clung to him; legs hitched around his waist, fingers in his hair and clutching at his skin, drawing his body in flush to yours as though he’d ever want to pull away. He kissed you hot and thorough, poured everything he had into your eager mouth and into the steady rhythm of your bodies. Only your nails down his back truly threatened his resolve and he had to grit his teeth a bit to keep himself in check. Though not for the first time, he wished the angry red lines or your sweet little love bites could linger on his skin to mark his body as yours now, freely given, instead of the jagged old scars of a half-life he never wanted.

It could have lasted this way forever, as far as Bucky was concerned. He wanted it to, anyway; no world outside the two of you. No mission to take him away, no responsibilities, no danger or darkness lurking just around the corner. Nothing but you and him and the warmth of your bodies pressed together, the breath shared between you. But none of that could stay the tight coiling of pleasure deep in his gut or the growing neediness in your movements and the sounds you made for him. When he felt that tell tale flutter and tension around him, he knew neither of you would last much longer.

“You gettin close, baby,” he asked, voice rough as he leaned back to look at you. Your only response was a breathless nod and a whimper when he slowed his hips to a deep, gentle rock inside you despite the somewhat desperate squeeze of your thighs at his waist. An adoring smile curved his lips while he reached to brush back some fallen hair from your forehead, metal fingers skimming over your flushed skin. “C’mon, then, beautiful. Wanna watch your face when you come for me. Almost as good as feelin it.”
His hand slipped down to cup your cheek, thumb caressing along the delicate skin of your bottom lip, kiss-swollen and red from his stubble. Your eyes quickly snapped up to his, dark and hungry, at the same time your right hand closed gently around his cybernetic wrist to hold it there. Not quite sure what to expect, Bucky paused his movements to watch awestruck as the tip of your tongue teased out along the pad of his thumb. The sensors went haywire when your hot little mouth closed entirely around the digit, the feedback of suction and swirling wetness shuddering through him to settle at the base of his spine. It took everything in him not to finish taking you hard and rough right there. Hell, that was probably what you had been hoping for. But he kept his composure for the most part, though a low groan escaped him when you released his thumb with a soft pop.

“Please, Bucky. Touch me. I need it,” you whimpered quietly. The slight tremor in your voice would have been enough to convince him, but your teeth worried at your lower lip as you slid his hand down your skin and there was no questioning exactly what you were after.

“Anything for you, sweetheart.” He bowed his head to steal a few quick kisses while his fingertips dragged down the length of your body until they were brushing low on your stomach, thumb sneaking its way between your folds. The kittenish noise you made and the accompanying quick clench of your muscles had his forehead dropping to yours with a sigh. “My sweet girl is always so good to me, how could I say no?”

Bucky eased back into movement, though the answering cant of your hips urged him into a quicker pace. Soon, you were breathless again, soft little moans as your fingers gripped at him anywhere they could find purchase, your touch solid and real and as desperate as the ache inside him. He knew he found just the right spot, the right angle when he watched your back arch with a gasp.

“C’mon, baby. Come for me,” he coaxed, dizzy on the sensations himself, repeating the rolling thrusts firm and deep, letting you feel every inch as he continued circling your clit carefully. “Ah, fuck, honey, you’re so close I can feel it. M’right there with ya, you feel so good. C’mon, pretty baby. Lemme see you come.”

And it was the truth, too. You were trembling beneath him, head thrown back in the pillows, the quiver of your thighs tickling around his waist, nails sunk so deep in his skin he thrilled at the thought you might actually bruise him. Even your voice sounded stretched taut and ready to snap. “Bucky! Oh God, Bucky! Ah!”

“Christ, sweetheart, the way you say my name.” His whole body shook with the strain of holding back, rhythm faltering as he ground out “Again. Please, baby, say it again.”

It drove him wild, the way you obliged him. A breathless, groaning chant, over and over in time with his thrusts. Somewhere in him, he knew he could never forget his name again, not with the way it sounded falling from your lips with each building keen. Then, with one last press of his hips
and stroke of his thumb, you were crying out as you came undone around him, bucking against him for more. The sight and feel of you awash in pleasure were more than he could withstand and a moment later he groaned out his own release and spilled deep inside you with a few gentle rocks of his pelvis.

Hips still flush with yours, Bucky settled himself over you once again, weight held up on his forearms to keep from crushing you under his spent form. Your fingers along his spine and in his hair slowly, slowly calmed the wild beating of his heart as you both caught your breath. He covered your mouth in a brief kiss before slipping down your jaw, along your neck to bury his face in the crook there. Revelling in the soft pulse of your muscles around him, the way your bodies wrapped and melted together as if nothing else existed, Bucky filled his lungs full with the scent of you and promised himself, just knew that no matter what happened out in the field the next day or the day after or the day after that, no one would ever be able to truly take this away from him. Not this, not you, not ever. He’d never give them a chance.

---

The only sort of pain you felt in those quiet moments was the sweet ache of exertion in your muscles and the pang in your heart knowing that, come morning, the man you loved would be leaving and you didn’t know when - or if - he’d ever come back. It was difficult when Bucky first told you his plan, to meet Hydra head on with the memories that came tumbling out of his mind after the two of you came to the compound, but you accepted it. Not running away, like you feared might happen, not with Sam and Wanda in tow. Just taking action, taking the fight to them. It still hurt, and the distant way he handled you did nothing to soothe your worry.

But he was here now and that was what really mattered when all was said and done. The warm press of his body along yours was a reminder of that, caged in close beneath him as your fingers slipped through his hair, hips and thighs still cradling him close through the last few tremors of pleasure, sighing at the gentle twitch of him as he softened inside you. His contented hum tickled across your neck and you could almost feel a smile on his lips.

“Are you mine, sweetheart,” Bucky breathed quietly. The adoration in his voice left you flushed and breathless for an entirely different reason than before, each soft kiss making your skin tingle. “Really mine?”

“Of course, Bucky. For as long as you want me,” was your gentle reply. You should have been used to this sort of thing by now. As big and strong and broody as he could get, Bucky was more often a huge sap when the two of you were alone, especially when you were tangled up together so intimately. Yet, it could still catch you off guard, like now when it flared that ache in your chest.

No doubt it was your gentle sniffler that had him pulling back enough to look at your face. A few
stray tears snuck down your temples when you blinked furiously against them, but he only gave you a warm little smile, leaning down to kiss away the wet tracks left behind, murmuring “Forever, then. Forever.”

You held him tightly as his mouth found yours a moment later, the brush of his lips soft and sweet. It was more soothing than enticing, so much like after the first time you were together. You had to stamp down the scared little voice in your head that worried about it possibly being the last. Now wasn’t the time for that. Now was the time to kiss him back like there was nothing in the world but the two of you. Luckily, despite everything you'd been through, that was still such an easy thing to do.

When you finally broke for air, that soft expression you’d grown to love so well shone on Bucky’s face as he looked down on you. The tilt to his lips and the gentleness in his eyes said almost as much as any words ever could. You brushed your fingers along his bristly cheeks, combing the long hair back from his face so you could take it all in, commit it to memory all over again as you scratched lightly at his scalp. His smile grew wider, but no less loving before he leaned in for another quick kiss. This one was broken by the quiet noises you both made as he pulled his hips away from yours.

Bucky settled onto the bed to your right and you rolled lazily into his arms, teeth nipping your lower lip at the sweet ache in your thighs. The metal plating of his left arm was body-warm, the ever present hum and whir fading into the background as he cradled your body close, flesh fingers tracing the curve of your face, your shoulder, your waist. And despite the dreaminess of his gaze, you could practically see the wheels turning in his head before he spoke gently. “You gonna wait for me, sweetheart?”

Something told you there was the barest hint of real concern flittering around his brain, but he covered it with a playful smirk as he toyed with the ends of your hair. No doubt he was trying to keep the mood light and you were more than happy to oblige. With a wide-eyed grin, you reached to cup his jaw, thumb slipping across his stubble while you chuckled “Oh, how many girls did you ask that back in the day, Sarge?”

“There were no girls,” he huffed out in a quiet laugh with a slight shake of his head. But then he pursed his lips and scrunched his nose in a mock look of consideration before smirking again. “Well... there were girls. Just none I would’a asked that. None I pictured myself comin home to.”

Teeth worrying his lower lip, Bucky looked almost bashful as his eyes searched your features. And if your heart hadn’t already been so much mush over him, it definitely would have melted at that. You leaned in closer, fingers dancing down his jaw to give his hair an affectionate tug, making him grin when you nipped the divot of his chin. His smile widened while you moved to prop yourself up on an elbow, side of your head resting in your hand. It let you survey him with your own thoughtful look though you didn’t try to hide the way the corners of your lips quirked up.
“I dunno, Buck. There was that guy at Stark’s party,” you sighed, smirking at the confusion that crossed his face. “You know, that bartender? Had his eye on me the whole night.”

The deep, incredulous laugh Bucky sputtered out shook his whole body, scrunched his face as he shook his head. “Christ, baby, you mean that geriatric with Coke bottle glasses? The one who kept shoutin ‘Excelsior!’ every time somebody put a dollar in his tipjar?”

“What can I say? I like ‘em old,” you shrugged, trying to feign nonchalance and failing as your heartbeat stuttered at the sight of his unchecked amusement. “The older the better.”

“Well,” he clucked his tongue with an affronted look while he played along. “S’pose it’s a good thing for me that Thor’s already taken by Dr. Foster.”

You scoffed in shock before narrowing your gaze and launching yourself the short distance toward him. Sheer delight crossed his face as he caught you easily enough, though it forced him onto his back and you wound up half-splayed across his chest in a peal of laughter, his own throaty chuckle echoing the moment’s playfulness. Left arm draped around your back to keep you close, his flesh hand cupped the back of your neck and pulled you in until your lips met again. Your hair slipped through his fingers like water as his palm slid along your jaw, thumbing carefully over your bruised cheekbone while he rested his head back against the pillow to gaze up at you, quiet and adoring.

“Assumin you’re still available when I get back,” Bucky teased and you gave his chest a sharp smack as you snorted. It made him smile, but it was subdued, a little nervous even, as he weaved his fingers between yours and brought your hand up to kiss your palm. He sighed through his nose and just barely met your gaze when he spoke in that low, intimate voice he had. “I thought maybe… maybe you’d let me make an honest woman outta ya.”

It took you a moment to register his meaning, the confused pinch of your brow giving way to a slack jaw as you stared at him. Your heart skipped a beat or ten while your brain tried desperately to catch up with the rest of you. Marriage. He was talking about marrying you. In the time you’d been together, in all the things you’d been through, it had never been a topic of conversation. Of your dreams, perhaps a time or two, but never spoken aloud between you. Not even as a joke. In hindsight, it made sense that Bucky wouldn’t make light of a subject like that. It was a big deal; even bigger when he was young, before the war and worse had taken away any hope he might have had for a normal life.

And yet, as Bucky’s eyes watched you expectantly, you still found yourself trying to lessen the gravity of the situation, tried to cover up the depth of your emotions with a weak chuckle and a self-deprecating smirk. “Well, why start now?”
You realized the error of it when the little line between his eyebrows darkened and his smile fell. It was only by a fraction, but you knew him, loved him well enough to recognize the thoughts that must have been flitting through his head by that look alone. Your heart sank at that and you sat partway up with your hand on his chest, shaking your head as if that alone could scare away what was in his.

“No, Bucky. No. I didn’t mean…” You sighed, biting your lip as you tried to gather your thoughts to explain. “I’d love to marry you, Bucky. You have no idea how much. I just… Things are different now. People stay together without getting married. I don’t want you to think you have to ask because of tradition or because we’ve been together or because you’re leaving. You shouldn’t feel obligated to…”

“I want to,” Bucky interrupted your babbling with his matter-of-fact tone. A fond little smirk curled his lips as he cupped your cheek gently because, you realized, he knew you. He knew you just as well as you knew him. “Sweetheart, I want to marry you. It’s not an obligation. It’s not a knee-jerk reaction in the face of this mission. I want to be your husband, not just because you make me wanna be a better man, but because you’ve been helpin make me one.”

“Bucky,” you managed to breathe out, although your throat was tight, constricted, your chest full with so much you could barely form words for it all. You weren’t sure if it was a plea or a warning or just the only way to describe the stutter in your heart.

“Honey, you’ve been savin my life since the moment I walked through your door.” His face was soft again, but sure, fingers gently gripping your chin as his grey eyes wandered your features before settling on yours. “And I wanna spend the rest of that life with you, if you’ll let me.”

The words had barely left his mouth before you were kissing him, trying to pour back into him every ounce of love and happiness that he’d managed to drum up inside you. And for a moment even the looming sadness of his departure wasn’t enough to hamper the ecstatic laugh that bubbled up in your throat as you smiled against his lips.

“When you get back, Bucky.” You leaned back enough to see the corners of his eyes crinkling with his grin, arm cradling you tight to him while flesh fingers carded through your hair. “Ask me when you get back. I guarantee future me won’t say no.”

“I’ll hold ya to that, sweetheart,” he chuckled quietly, amused at your antics, though you could see some reality trying to worm its way back in. “It’ll gimme somethin nice to dream about when I won’t have you with me.”
There was no stopping the smirk that tugged at your lips. You never were one to pass up a bit of cheekiness, especially when the serious option seemed almost too much to bear. “Oh, I can give you something nice to dream about. The least I can do is give my soldier a proper send off.”

His small bark of laughter was muffled by another kiss, a bit more playful and heated this time as you pressed your body flush with his. The easy way the noise slipped into a deep groan was its own little reward, fingertips tracing down your spine as yours slid up to tangle in his hair. It was gentle nips and tender suction, tasting sweet at each others’ mouths, only pausing when you hiked a knee up to his waist and moved to straddle him.

“Baby… ya sure you’re up for another go,” Bucky husked out, concern evident in his voice even as he looked up at you in a slight daze, palms skimming up your thighs to rest at your hips.

“You certainly seem to be,” you smiled at him wickedly. Hands planted on his chest, you canted your hips back to rock yourself along his already-growing erection, the mix of your arousal and his release creating a smooth glide that made a delightfully filthy mess of his stomach and crotch. Teasing like that always did something to him and this time was no exception, the way his eyes darkened and his teeth caught his lower lip, stifling a moan while his fingers bit into your skin.

“Already at attention, huh, Sarge?”

Right hand reaching to cup the nape of your neck, Bucky pulled you down to him with a playful growl until your lips were just brushing his. There was mischief in his smirk when he rolled his hips against yours, making your breath catch. “Yes, ma’am. But whaddaya expect when my gal’s grindin on me like she can’t get enough?”

“Maybe she can’t. Maybe she knows a good thing when she’s got it, Sarge,” you grinned back, giving a little wiggle until you felt him pressed along your folds again. And though it was said in a tease, you meant every word and the flash in Bucky’s eyes told you he knew it too.

“Aw, sugar, always so insatiable,” he smirked gently as his fingers tangled in your hair to bring you in for another kiss, hot and thorough. His metal hand held your hips still and soon you were whimpering softly into his mouth as he slid inside you, seating himself fully with a small snap of his hips and a pleased groan. Then both hands were in your hair, holding it away from your face while he gazed up at you with so much emotion your stomach did a flip. Tongue wetting his lips, he finally spoke again in that intimate voice, quiet and rough at the edge. “Christ, I love you, sweetheart. I love you so goddamn much. Luckiest schmuck on God’s green earth to have you like this.”

Your lips captured his again, needing a moment to still the flutter of your insides, calm the wave of emotions that threatened to bubble up out of your control. He seemed eager enough to accept and return the kiss, lips trailing down your jaw and neck when you broke away for a shaky breath. “I
love you, too, Bucky. More than anything. More than I could ever explain.”

He leaned back to look at you again with a tender smile, knowing, understanding, as he cupped your jaw in his hands. “Then show me, darlin. Just show me.”

That was a much easier thing to do, to give yourself over to the feel of him between your thighs, the press of your bodies, shared breath between kisses, whispered sweetnothings in the dim light. The night continued on much the same, over and over, both knowing sleep would be impossible either way. It was soft desperation and quiet reassurance by equal turns, trying to stretch the hours to stave off the inevitable as long as possible. All the love and tenderness managed to hold the sadness in your heart at bay, at least until Bucky urged you into the shower with him in the wee hours of the morning. He insisted on washing you himself, from the shampoo in your hair to the suds pooling at your feet, swiping carefully around the cuts and bruises, cupping the washcloth gently at the crux of your legs, all so reverent, like he might never get to touch you again. You couldn’t help the swell of emotion that crested then or the tears that started to flow beneath the cascade of water. Bucky held you through it, kissed your wet shoulders until the quiet sobs that wracked your body subsided, made love to you again with a little urging when you pressed back against him, wanting that connection to help ground you once more.

After that, you both tried to rest, though full sleep was beyond reach. Instead, you clung to each other, Bucky pulling you to his chest to tuck your head beneath his chin and your arms wrapping around his waist to hold him close. Between the feel of his fingers slipping idly through your hair and the sound of his heartbeat, you were sure you dozed at some point. Maybe he even did as well, but you were awake enough when his arms tightened around you hours later and you knew your time together was starting to slip away.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured into your hair, the ache in his voice evident.

“I know,” you answered with a small nod and gave him an extra squeeze before pulling back to look up at his face. “Is there time for some breakfast at least… before you go?”

A sad little smile quirked his lips as he cupped your cheek and leaned in to brush a kiss on your forehead. “Yeah, baby. I’m gonna suit up first though. And you should probably take your medicine.”

“Yeah,” you whispered. Behind the tightness of your heart and the twisting in your gut, part of you wanted to cry at how ridiculously mundane, how terribly useless and pitiful you felt in the moments leading up to him leaving for a mission, every time before, but especially now. Yet, you still gripped his chin in your fingers and tried to soldier on with as much mirth in your smile as you could muster. “I’ll probably need those pain meds if I wanna walk straight later.”
He snorted in amusement, though the emotion never really reached his eyes. There was too much sadness there to make room for much else even as you pressed your lips to his. You lingered there, not wanting to part, but after another quick peck, you headed for the bathroom. It was business as usual, despite the ache in your heart, going through the motions like any other of the last ten days, except your antibiotics were almost done and you had to take a little extra time to compose yourself in the mirror before you returned to the bedroom.

Bucky looked up at you from the bed, fingers pausing on the buckles of his leather gear as you moved to dress quickly. You could feel his eyes on you as you went and you purposefully tried to hide your face so he didn’t have to see the red no doubt still rimming your eyes. Of course, before you could leave the room, he caught you gently by the wrist as you passed him. One tug was all it took to urge you between his thighs while flesh and metal palms alike cupped your cheeks and pulled you down for a soft kiss. You sighed into it, letting his presence and the delicate swipe of his thumbs along your skin steady you until your fingers moved to help him finish getting ready. And you reminded yourself that he wasn’t running away from you; he was facing the darkness of his past head on so that you both could build a future.

As much as you wanted to make this meal together something lavish, stretch out the time that remained, you didn’t have the heart for it. Or the stomach, either, really, with as much sadness and anxiety as you had churning away in your gut. Scrambled eggs and toast. You were sending the love of your life off to fight a faceless Nazi death cult, one that held him brainwashed and used him for nefarious purposes against his will for decades, on nothing but scrambled eggs and toast. You almost could have laughed about the utter absurdity of the situation if you weren’t so close to crying as you stood in front of the stove. Bucky was only a few short steps away, further than you cared for though you didn’t dare say anything, at the ready with butter by the toaster. Neither of you even bothered chastising the cat when she jumped onto the counter between you with a soft mrr. He was too busy scratching behind her ears and you… you didn’t really see the point.

“Sweetheart?” Bucky’s concerned voice and the feel of his fingers at your waist pulled your attention from where it had been lost in your own head. You hadn’t even noticed him moving closer to you.

“Hm? Oh shit,” you barked in surprise, suddenly realizing the eggs you’d been idly pushing about the pan were starting to brown and sizzle, the scent of burn just starting to bloom. Quickly, maybe even a bit more frantically than necessary, you turned off the heat and moved the pan around before dumping the contents on the plate beside the stove. The sight of the nearly-ruined mess had you plopping the pan back on the burner none too delicately as you shook your head at yourself. “Jesus, I can’t believe I’m fucking up scrambled eggs. I wanted things to be perfect and I’m screwing up the simplest goddamn…”

“Honey… Honey, it’s fine. Really. I like ‘em hard-cooked,” Bucky soothed, drawing you in close and pressing a kiss to the side of your head. “And, honest to God, anything is better than
You couldn’t help your slightly amused snort against his chest, even with the little memory it conjured up. “Y’know, my sister used to say the same thing. Of course, she was the one who tended to burn things.”

“Well, she wasn’t lyin. I’d’a eaten eggs burned black an gone back for seconds over powdered,” he chuckled quietly into your hair before you looked up at him with a soft smirk that you were sure matched his own. His fingers reached up to brush the hair from your face, kissing the tip of your nose. “мое солнышко… C’mon. Let’s eat.”

The eating was mostly show, really. You took bites here and there, chewed slow as if it could affect time itself, knowing that Bucky would have urged you to eat otherwise. He most likely only ate for your benefit as well, picking at his plate quietly with one hand while metal fingers rested on your thigh beside him, comfort and reassurance for you both. But it couldn’t last forever, and all too soon you were putting half-empty plates in the sink while he grabbed his duffel bag. It was slung easily over his shoulder when he rejoined you at the edge of the kitchen and the sight alone was enough to make your chest tighten that much further.

Bucky’s hand never left yours on the way to the elevator, only moving to slip around your waist and hug you tightly to his side as you waited for the car. Once it arrived, he shuffled you both inside and turned to press the button for the hangar’s floor despite the somewhat desperate grip of your fingers on the straps of his uniform. Something close to pain flashed over his face when his gaze found yours again, but before you could say a word the duffel bag was on the floor and his arms were around his shoulder when he rejoined you at the edge of the kitchen and the sight alone was enough to make your chest tighten that much further.

Your heart sank with the slowing of the elevator reaching its destination. Bucky’s mouth lingered on yours momentarily before he parted from you with a reluctant sigh, tangling flesh fingers with yours as he stooped to grab his bag. He shouldered it just as the doors started to open onto the short hallway that led to the hangar. The walk was somehow agonizingly slow and all too quick at the same time; the twisting in your gut making you question if what little you ate would even stay down. A gentle squeeze of your hand brought your attention back to Bucky and his wane smile before he opened the door to the expansive hangar.

It was hardly the first time you’d been there, but the sight of the quinjet prepped and ready to go hit you a bit harder than expected. Sam, Steve, and Wanda stood waiting near the entrance ramp, talking amongst themselves, all three looking up as you and Bucky entered. Wanda moved to meet you halfway with a soft smile. It only seemed to grow a little when her eyes darted from your joined
hands to Bucky’s face, knowing and pleased. They exchanged quick nods, Bucky giving you a reassuring smile and your knuckles a gentle swipe of his thumb as he headed toward the two other men.

Wanda greeted you by name in her thick Sokovian accent, swooping in for a hug that you gladly returned. Needed, if you were being honest, and she probably knew that. Her hands slipped down into yours when she pulled back, gesture and soft smile both familiar as she regarded you. “I would tell you good morning, but I’m not sure you would agree. Why don’t we settle for, good to see you?”

“It’s good to see you, too, Wanda,” you chuckled quietly, squeezing her fingers. You knew some of the power they held, some of what those hands were capable of, and you trusted them to keep Bucky as safe as possible, but in that moment, just the kindness and warmth of the simple touch meant more to you than any of that. “I’m gonna miss you, Wanda.”

“And I will miss you, my friend,” she replied, squeezing back before turning to walk with you toward the others at a slow pace. She hooked her arm with yours to lean in with a playful, secretive tone. “But do not fret. You will have Clint and Natasha to keep you company when they return from their mission tomorrow. And the Captain, of course. Though, I think perhaps he may need the same consolation as you will.”

You followed the guiding tilt of Wanda’s head to find the three men talking, too far away to overhear, but most likely mission related things, judging by their demeanors. Steve nodded at something, a dour look on his face until he cast a furtive glance at Sam beside him. There was something in his expression you hadn’t noticed before that was mirrored when Sam returned the look, soft and subtle but recognizable even from halfway across the hangar. You’d seen the same thing in Wilson’s eyes a time or two when he would dance with your sister what felt like a lifetime ago. And it was almost identical to the gaze Bucky fixed you with over his shoulder when he glanced back at you.

“These powers I have cannot show me the future,” Wanda sighed gently beside you, drawing your attention back to her. There was a soft smile on her face as she turned to cup your cheek with one hand. “But I promise to look after them and do whatever I can to help you all have the happy endings you deserve.”

“Thank you, Wanda. Just don’t forget about the one you deserve too,” you nodded, squeezing her elbow slightly just as you caught the three men starting to move your way out of the corner of your eye.

She grinned with a soft chuckle before leaning in to kiss your cheek, a gesture you returned easily. “Good bye, сестра. Take care. I think when we return, there will be many happy things to
You snorted in laughter at that, even as she started moving away from you. “I thought you couldn’t see the future?”

“No.” Wanda’s smirk was almost mischievous, a considering tilt to her head. Her eyes flickered to Bucky for a moment as the group drew closer only to land back on you. “But some people hope so strongly for things in their hearts, it is difficult not to overhear them a little.”

She knew. Of course, she knew, whether it was because it had flashed through one of your minds this morning or she’d seen Bucky contemplating it for however long, but she knew he’d brought up getting married when the mission was over. You couldn’t help the fond shake of your head as you squeezed her hand one more time. “Be careful, Wanda. And stay safe. I want to celebrate those things with you, too.”

Wanda nodded, swooping in for another quick hug to you and then Steve before turning to head into the quinjet. It seemed no sooner had she disappeared from your line of sight than Sam swooped in to grab your attention and your shoulder with a firm grip. He flashed you that dazzling, cheeky grin of his that you knew so well before his face fell into mock authority as he regarded you, affection still evident in his eyes.

“Allright, young lady,” he began, pointing his finger at you, and you were torn between a playful sigh of annoyance and wanting to tear up. “I’m trusting you to keep this place in line while we’re gone. No coffee for Tony after five. Clint cannot keep any stray dogs he finds. Steve’s bedtime is 9pm. And no wild parties. It’s no fair if you guys get to have fun without me.”

“Sam,” you breathed, sounding a little watery. Of course, tearing up was quickly winning out over everything and the slight quiver in your lower lip wasn’t helping matters.

“Allright, c’mere.” With a soft cluck of his tongue, Sam pulled you in for a tight hug. Your arms grabbed him up easy, clinging to the man who’d been your friend so long, who became family as sure as any blood, there through grief and heartache and, now, happiness for a change. If you held onto each other a little longer than what was conventional, you were certain no one could fault you for it. When he spoke again, he sounded serious enough, reassuring. “I got his back, kiddo, like I know he’s got mine. Same with Wanda.”

Despite all his playfulness and banter, when it came down to it, Sam didn’t make promises about things he wasn’t sure about, especially when it came to missions, but this statement alone was enough for you. “I know, Sam. Thank you.”
He planted a kiss on your temple before pulling back to smirk at you again. His eyes glanced over to Steve and Bucky, your own gaze following and finding them apparently breaking from their own farewell embrace, Bucky clasping his friend’s - his brother’s shoulder.

“You and Steve look after each other, okay,” Sam smiled when you looked at him again the other two men making their way toward you. “Or else.”

“Or else what? Huh,” you asked, sniffling slightly but managing a small smirk. “Is Steve gonna tattle on me and I’ll be grounded?”

He chuckled under his breath with a fond shake of his head. “Something like that.”

After another quick kiss on your forehead and a ruffle of your hair, Sam pulled away from you. It was difficult to let him go, but the look he shared with Steve told you they needed a moment of their own. Knowing you were that much closer to their departure, them actually leaving, only amplified the sinking feeling inside you. You’d nearly forgotten how to breathe in the second it took for Sam’s hand to be replaced by metal fingers curling gently between your own.

“Sweetheart,” Bucky whispered, quiet, reverent, but whatever else he had to say was cut off when you threw your arms around him. There was no hesitation in the way he pulled you in close, bodies flush, and you buried your face in the crook of his neck to muffle your sob.

You tried your best to keep it together, but that didn’t stop the errant tears that trailed from the corners of your eyes or the tell tale sniffle as you tried to breathe him in again, desperately trying to tell yourself that it wouldn’t be the last time. And it seemed he was doing the same, tip of his nose and his scruff tickling the delicate skin of your neck until you felt him drop a few soft kisses there. A few too-short moments later, he moved to cup your face in both his hands, thumbs caressing over your cheekbones and eyes glistening a little with their own wetness. There were so many things running through your head, so many things you wanted to say; sappy things and silly things and things to reassure you both, but there were no real words to say them with. Yet, even as his mouth closed over yours, you were certain he knew them all just the same.

“I love you,” you managed to whimper softly against his lips, fingers circling his wrists, wanting to savor the feel of him touching your face for as long as possible.

“And I love you, darlin. I know you’re worried and scared, but I swear, there’s nothin in this whole wide world that could keep me from comin home to you.” Bucky looked you in the eye, voice
matter-of-fact, that certainty in his voice he had that brooked no argument. Whether he needed to hear it as much as you, you couldn’t say, but the conviction in his words struck you and eased a little of the terror fluttering in your chest. Then a soft smirk cracked his lips, muted but hopeful. “And when I do get back, maybe you’ll let me call ya Mrs. Barnes.”

You sobbed out a laugh, more tears spilling despite yourself while you nodded. “Of course I will, Bucky. Of course I will.”

The small grin of his widened, though you caught his gentle sniffle as he swooped in to kiss you again. It was thorough and lingering, all shared breath and trembling fingers and the need to feel each other one more time. A few more soft, quick kisses and Bucky was pulling away from you. No one had to say it was time, you could read it clearly by the pained expression on his face and the sympathetic look Sam cast you from right behind his shoulder. It took everything you had not to clutch at him, though your fingers stayed laced together until you were nearly out of reach as he backed away.

“Hey, punk, take care’a my girl while I’m gone,” Bucky called out to Steve. “She can be as stubborn as you. Might be a taste’a your own medicine.”

A quick glance at the blond’s face as he sidled up beside you showed he wasn’t barely better off than you were, though maybe without quite so many tears staining his cheeks. That lopsided grin of his managed to show through anyway. “Can’t be much worse than you, jerk. Keep your nose clean.”

Bucky nodded, clapping Sam on the back before fixing you with a reassuring smile his last few steps to reach the ramp. And then they both turned to disappear into the quinjet, your heart practically stopped as Steve urged you a safe distance away with a gentle hand on your elbow. You couldn’t take your eyes off the aircraft, desperate not to miss one last glimpse of them. It paid off with a final wave as the ramp began to close, your gaze locked with Bucky’s the whole time.

As the engines roared to life, Steve’s arm wrapped around your shoulders and you finally let yourself break down a little, the sound drowning out your sniffs and sobs while you both watched the takeoff. It surprised you a little, how easily he tuckled you against his chest, but you were too overwhelmed to question it. Instead, you hugged at him somewhat until they were out of sight, feeling like your heart might have gone along with them. When you started to pull away, already chagrined that you clung to him, Steve just squeezed you in a little tighter.

“Y’know what my favorite thing is about this new century,” he asked, making you swivel your head up awkwardly to fix him with a confused and curious look. His eyes were somewhat distant, still staring at the hangar doors as they closed as he heaved a gentle sigh. “It’s the sheer variety of ice cream to choose from now. There’s about five different kinds in the freezer right now, alone.”
You blinked up at him a moment, brain trying to catch up before you sputtered out a wet little laugh. He finally looked down at you with that boyish grin almost reaching his eyes and gave you an affectionate jostle. “C’mon, let’s see how many we can get through.”

It seemed all it took was your nod of approval and he was tugging you back toward the compound. Ice cream wouldn’t fill the hollowness in your chest at watching the love of your life flying off to fight bad guys, but it couldn’t really hurt. Neither could leaning on a friend for support, especially one who was going through the same sort of pain. “So, you and Sam, huh?”

The grin did reach Steve’s eyes this time, though his face turned the most fantastic shade of red you’d ever scene while his hand scrubbed the back of his neck. Despite your chuckle, you still wished Bucky was there to laugh at it with you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!