Back In Black

by LaTessitrice, Pollydoodles

Summary

Bucky’s the mysterious newcomer to Ramsay Street and everyone thinks he’s bad for Darcy. This is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Australian soap opera style.

Notes

This story was inspired by this Tumblr post (http://aosakai.tumblr.com/post/143684077580), wherein I commented that the font used matches the one in the Neighbours logo. Several headcanons later, Pollydoodles and I agreed to write this thing. We’ll be writing alternate chapters. You don’t have to have ever watched Neighbours to read this, though there will definitely be some in jokes you’ll notice if you have. You just have to have a working knowledge of soap operas: tropes and cliffhangers, basically. There are a couple of resources you may want to look at though: http://www.koalanet.com.au/australian-slang.html and http://perfectblend.net/neighbourhood/ramsaystreet.htm.

Dear Australia, we apologise, but you only have yourselves to blame.

Also, for the purposes of this story, Howard Stark was played by Alan Dale. He dies so beautifully.
Chapter 1

“Left, left a bit…perfect!”

Darcy Lewis glances over her shoulder at her foster-mother-of-sorts. “I can’t believe you’re making me hang decorations for my own birthday party.”

Susan Kennedy shrugs up at Darcy, who is balanced on a stool, her arms stretched up to pin a banner in place. “It’s not like there’s anyone else we could ask.”

“Two ex-soldiers, right next door. For a start.” Darcy points a thumb in the general direction of number thirty, where Sam Wilson and Steve Rogers live. “Both much taller than me. Longer arms. They wouldn’t even need the stool.” She’d mention Clint, but he doesn’t do mornings.

“Oh, nonsense. Us girls don’t need men for things like this.” A moment later, Susan’s expression turns coy. “Unless you want me to ask Steve over…”

Darcy hops down from the stool and pushes her glasses up from where they’ve slipped down her nose. “Too late now.” She ignores the bait Susan has laid out, one in a string of comments she’s made lately. It’s starting to irk, but Darcy doesn’t have time right now to tell her to can it. “I’d better shoot, or Madge will get cranky.”

“I’d offer you a lift, but I’ve got things to sort out here. Don’t forget the cake!”

“I won’t!” Darcy grabs her bag and hustles out through the front door of number twenty-eight and onto Ramsay Street, the suburban Melbourne cul-de-sac Darcy has called home for four years, give or take. (The take was the time she went home to West Waratah for a few months to stay with her dad. It really aged her).

Next door, Sam is walking up the driveway, still in his paramedics uniform and just getting home after the night shift. They exchange waves, and Darcy pauses to give Cassie the sheep a pat on the head as she passes by.

She enjoys the short stroll to the Lassiter’s complex she works on. Sunlight sparkles off the lake as she skirts around it, and it’s a peaceful sort of Friday morning. People are milling around the courtyard, some heading into Lassiter’s hotel, others crossing the bridge over the pond outside the Waterhole pub and out into the grounds. Life’s going well, after a troubled few years. She’s just been accepted into Eden Hills uni, having finally settled on teaching as a career, and for the first time she’s got a path mapped out in front of her. She has Susan to thank for that—her foster mother was the best teacher she’d ever had, and her encouragement over the years made sure Darcy focused on school even with all the drama her teenage years entailed.

Madge Bishop, her boss, feels very differently about the sort of day it is when Darcy turns up five minutes late. She’s waiting by the door of The Coffee Shop with her hands on her hips, red hair clashing with her lipstick, and when Darcy scurries in she tosses an apron at her. “I don’t know what time you call this, but it’s the second occasion you’ve been late this week.”

“Lay off her, Mum, it’s her birthday,” Natasha Ramsay calls from behind the counter. She’s serving Stan, an elderly regular, and he turns to smile at Darcy.

“Happy birthday, sweetheart!”

“Thanks, Stan.” She tugs the apron on and pins her hair up, joining Natasha behind the counter of
the little cafe. It’s quiet, the morning rush not started yet, so there’s time to chat.

“Did you get any nice presents?” he asks.

“Haven’t had chance to open any yet. My dad sent a nice big parcel from all the rellies though.”

The door swings open and Thor Odinson strolls in. Thor always enters a room like sunshine personified, even if he is built like a brick outhouse, and he’s the closest thing to a big brother Darcy has. “How’s the birthday girl?” he asks with a wide grin, which Darcy returns while she preps his usual order.

“She’s ready to celebrate turning nineteen.”

“Awesome! Ma’s on her way down too. You know she never misses a party.”

Darcy barely controls her wince. “Does Tony know?”

“What, you invited that mongrel?”

“Of course not, but if he sees her in the street he’s going to kick off.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Ma can handle him.”

“Is this Tony Stank?” Stan asks. He’s sat at a table sipping his tea and earwigging into their conversation.

“Stark,” Darcy corrects, biting back a smirk as she hands over Thor’s drink. “But feel free to call him that whenever you like.”

“Come on, Tony’s not so bad,” Natasha says.

“Yeah,” Thor agrees, and Darcy stares at him in surprise. “I haven’t had any aggro from him in at least two days,” he continues with a wink. “But that’s probably because we’re managing different parts of Lassiter’s at the moment and I haven’t actually seen him.”

Darcy smacks him on his unnecessarily large bicep. He’s still laughing as he heads back out, leaving her with Natasha. Though Darcy’s being spending more time with the older girl since taking the job in the Coffee Shop, she still makes Darcy feel desperately uncool. Natasha’s the embodiment of chill, plus she’s a knockout redhead. Darcy always feels a little frumpy in comparison. It’s no wonder Natasha managed to snag a guy like Clint, and Darcy’s yet to have any significant relationship.

“Don’t worry,” says Natasha, looking up from the text message she’s inevitably sending to Clint. “Susan won’t let any real drama go down and spoil your day.” She glances around, and when she’s happy that Madge is in the back room, leans in to murmur to Darcy. “Don’t mind Mum today. It’s the anniversary of Harold going missing this weekend. She’s always extra narky.”

“Ah, right. No worries.” Harold Bishop was Natasha’s stepfather, a man who disappeared before Darcy came to live with Susan. She’s only heard bits of the story, but it involved him apparently being swept out to sea, though they’d never recovered his body.

“I’m planning to get her completely sozzled tonight. Hopefully she’ll sleep all weekend instead.”

“Maybe we can get her and Susan hammered together. Then Susan might stop trying to matchmake with Steve—”
“She still on that?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“My commiserations. You not interested at all?”

“It’s Steve. He’s lovely, but it would be like pashing Thor.” And she knew that Steve felt the same way about her. “Besides, uni’s going to take up too much of my time to be seeing anyone seriously.”

“And just think of all the eye candy you’ll meet when you’re there.”

“Trust me, I am. It was my favourite part of the prospectus.” She and Natasha start giggling, which turns into cackling, before Madge returns from the back room to frown disapprovingly.

“Morning!”

Sam glances up from the post he’s flipping through in the driveway of number thirty to find Susan waving at them from next door. She’s feeding a carrot to Cassie the sheep, who’s grazing on the front lawn. He lifts a hand in response, and Steve pauses in waxing his prized VW Beetle, Peggy.

“Mrs K,” Steve says in greeting. It’s an old nickname for her, one he picked up during his time at Erinsborough High.

“She’s looking shiny,” Susan says when she reaches them.

“Can’t have her rusting out here in full view of the party,” Sam replies.

“Hey!” Steve objects.

“I’m just saying, I don’t know why you’re bothering. She needs to go into the shop and get that rattling noise checked out.”

“I know, mate. I already asked Thor, but they’re down to one mechanic at the moment, since their other bloke quit and Thor’s spending all his time managing Lassiter’s. Keeps telling me Rhodey’s only got one pair of hands.”

“Well, I just wanted to check you two are still on for this afternoon,” Susan interrupts, “but I guess if you’re making this much effort you must be.”

“Deffo,” Steve says. “Everyone’s welcome to use the pool too.”

“Good, good.” Susan is staring up at Steve with abnormal interest. “Darcy’s going to be there too.”

“It is her party,” Steve replies, a small frown of confusion appearing between his eyebrows. He’s oblivious to Susan’s intentions, and Sam has no idea how. She’s as subtle as a sledgehammer, but Steve never twigs.

“The pool sounds like a good idea,” Susan continues. “All you kids can get in your cozzies and brighten up the place. Alright, see you later!” She leaves with a firm pat to Steve’s forearm. Sam covers up his grin with a swift swig from his water bottle.

“Sam—” Steve begins when Susan is out of earshot, his frown deeper than before, “—I’m a little concerned here. I think Susan might have the hots for me.”
Sam chokes on his water.

Tony Stark just so happens to be staring out of the window of number twenty-two when a cab pulls up the cul-de-sac and stops outside number twenty-six. He pauses mid-sip of his coffee and leans closer to the glass. He’s fairly sure he recognises the passenger: hair pinned up in an elaborate up-do, and a ridiculous hippy dress.

He’s right. Frigga Odinson exits the cab, and Jane Foster comes rushing down the steps to greet her.

Tony rushes outside too, but it’s not to greet Frigga. “What are you doing here?” he demands.

Frigga ignores Tony, gathering Jane into a hug. “It’s lovely to see you, my dear,” she says, her accent not entirely Aussie. There’s a hint of something else, maybe northern European, in it that Tony’s never been able to figure out. It’s one of the many things about his ex-stepmother that annoys Tony: she’s so bloody hard to pin down.

“You’ve got no right to be here!” he continues, striding across the street until he’s level with the two women.

“On what grounds?” Frigga asks coolly, while the cab driver hastily retrieves her bags so he can make a quick get-away. “I own that house.” She gestures towards number twenty-six—the house Tony grew up in.

“Only because you’re a gold-digger who let my father die.”

“Believe what you want, Tony. You always do.”

They have an audience—Wanda has come running out after her father when she heard the commotion, and Toadie has also come belting over from number thirty-two, his wife Helen hot on his heels.

“Leave it, Dad,” Wanda tries to reason. “You can’t keep having the same argument.”

Tony ignores her and responds directly to Frigga. “Funny, I think with two husbands dead I have all the proof I need.”

“One husband,” Frigga corrects.

“Right, the other’s just in a permanent vegetative state. Has Thor been to see his daddy lately, Jane? How’d that go?”

Jane has the sense to ignore Tony’s comment, and Toadie takes the opportunity to speak. “Tony, as your lawyer, I’d advise you not to keep talking. She’s already lodged a harassment complaint. If you keep making a scene, you’re making it an easy win for her.”

“I loved your father,” Frigga says to Tony. “And I don’t care if you don’t believe me. Howard knew the truth.”

“Maybe that’s why Loki killed him.”

Frigga takes a step forward, her expression hardening with rage. For a woman who tries so hard to come across an Earth Mother sort, she’s damn intimidating when she wants to be. “You have no proof that he did anything of the sort.”
“Which is why he’s on the run.”

Tony can tell he’s rattled Frigga, so he allows Wanda to pull him away from the fray and back into the house. The fleeting satisfaction has already waned by the time they’re in the living room. Toadie follows them inside.

“ Seriously, mate, I can’t help you if you won’t help yourself.”

“I don’t even know why I keep you on as my lawyer,” Tony snarls. “All the work my father did, the business he built up, and she’s got half of it all.”

“I can’t work miracles. She’s right: there’s no proof that she had anything to do with his death, and his will was valid. Even if Loki’s found and charged, it won’t invalidate her claim to his estate.”

“So in the meantime, I have to work alongside her idiot son and hope he doesn’t run the business into the ground.”

Toadie shrugs and leaves, recognising that Tony wants to stew in his frustration. It’s like a persistent itch under his skin, knowing she’s so close by. Bad enough that Thor’s in his face, day after day, but whenever he looks at her, all he can see is her consummate performance of the grieving widow at the funeral. Black widow, more like.

“You shouldn’t take it out on Toadie,” Wanda says. “I know things are going badly with Pepper—”

“This has got nothing to do with her.”

“It’s got everything to do with her. You pushed her away with your obsession over this whole situation, and now you’re all alone again. You’re taking your misery out on everyone else.”

Tony fidgets under the stern gaze of his daughter. “Do you have to be so perceptive, kid?”

“One of us has to be. Just do me a favour and stay inside tonight. Don’t you dare ruin Darcy’s party, or I’m pushing you into number thirty’s pool.”

“I cannot believe the nerve of that man.” Frigga is pacing in the living room of number twenty-six, chiffon skirts trailing behind her, while Jane tries to fix some herbal tea in the kitchen. “After all the legal proceedings, all the loss I have been through—after I reached out to comfort him over our shared loss—and he still sulks like the brat he is.”

“I don’t think he’s really had much chance to grieve,” Jane calls through the open doorway in response. “Spending so much time around Thor seems to rile him up. He needs space, but he refuses to take time away.”

Frigga’s face softens, and she crosses the room to take Jane’s own face between her palms. “Always so willing to see the best in people. I’m so glad Thor found you.”

Jane pulls away, a little uncomfortable at the scrutiny. “I wouldn’t say that,” she mutters, busying herself with the kettle. “You haven’t seen me on a collision course with Dr Kennedy at the hospital. The man’s insufferable.”

“Any man who would throw away his marriage to Susan deserves a little needling. Honestly, why would anyone pick one of Tony’s cast offs over her?”

Jane holds out a mug to Frigga, who takes it gratefully. “Have you heard from Loki at all?”
A flicker of sorrow passes over Frigga’s face. “Nothing. If he would just come forward, I believe we could prove once and for all that he is not culpable for any of the crimes he has been accused of. But he was always a stubborn boy, and too clever for his own good.”

Jane hides her dubious expression behind her own mug. The Loki she’d met was definitely stubborn, and intelligent, but also capable of the harm he’s suspected of perpetrating. “And his father?” She’s never met Thor’s father—he’s in hospital in the seaside town near Sydney where Thor grew up.

“No change, and no prospect of it either. I only spend my time there in the hopes Loki will visit and I will have the chance to speak to him. At least we have the money now to ensure his father gets the best care.” She smiles wistfully. “Our marriage may have failed, but I’ll always care for him.” Her mood shifts again, perking up. “Enough of the doldrums. Time to prepare for this party!”

“I think Susan’s got it all in hand.”

“Nonsense. She won’t have bought nearly enough booze.”

Darcy stares in the mirror, frowning at her attempt to apply soft, neutral make-up. She’s not sure why she bothered, it’s only going to get messed up in the pool.

She got home from her shift an hour ago, and has showered and changed, her swimming cossie hidden under a sundress. She’s swapped her glasses for contacts, and it’s weird seeing her face without the frames. She can’t decide if it’s a good weird or a bad weird, but the lenses certainly make life a lot easier, even if she can only tolerate them for short periods.

Maybe she looks a little older, but that might not be the glasses, that might just be because she is. But without them, she looks exactly like her mom does in the few photos Darcy has of her.

No wonder her dad always looks a little melancholy when she visits.

There’s a knock at her bedroom door, and she turns around to open it. Susan’s on the other side, a pair of balloons in her hand. “We’re all ready. Food’s out and people have started drinking.”

“By people, you mean Toadie and Thor.”

“Yeah, but you know Thor, it’s like it doesn’t even touch the sides. You probably want to get out there before Toadie overdoes it again and needs to be put to bed early.”

“Alright, give me a minute.”

Susan’s brow furrows with concern. “Are you okay? Has something happened?”

“No, nothing. I’m just having a moment.” She shrugs and looks away, biting at her lower lip.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Susan reaches out to rub her arm soothingly. “Missing your mum?”

“Yeah. You’d think I’d get used to birthdays without her, but I don’t. And it’s another one where dad’s away working and can’t come visit. I’m feeling a little sorry for myself, I guess.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s bound to be hard. At least you’ve got some rellies here.”

“Yeah, I’m sure Toadie’s going to do his best to embarrass me in dad’s place.” Really, Darcy is thankful to Toadie. Her cousin was the reason she’d ended up in Susan’s care when her dad couldn’t cope with travelling for work and looking after her on her own.
“Worse. Your Uncle Kev and Aunt Angie are here too.”

“Crap. Who invited them? Hide the tinnies.”

By the time Darcy makes it out into the street, the party is in full swing. The sun is still full and warm despite it being early evening, and everyone cheers when she steps outside. Most of the inhabitants of Ramsay Street are gathered around the barbie Thor is grilling at, and somebody’s wired up a speaker system to play daggy old dad rock at full volume. On her way outside, she passed Principal Fury is deep in discussion with Susan in the living room, while Madge had cornered Uncle Kev and was reminiscing about the history of Ramsay Street again.

Out here, Maria Hill, the bartender at the Waterhole, is dancing with Wanda and Rhodey to Crowded House, and Natasha and Clint seem to be having a burger-eating competition. Only Tony is conspicuous by his absence, and no doubt Frigga’s presence is at fault there. Frigga herself is having a loud conversation with Aunt Angie, which can only end in disaster. The two of them were dangerous enough without putting them together in the presence of booze. Tony’s right to stay out of it for once.

“Get on over here and blow out your candles, Starry,” Toadie yells, using the family nickname for her, “so we can eat the bloody cake!”

“You need to slow your roll there,” she shouts back. “Or you’ll end up chundering in the pool again.”

Toadie snakes an arm around Helen’s hips. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

Helen gives him her best unimpressed face and steals his beer. “She’s right. I’m cutting you off for now.”

Darcy sniggers and wanders over the barbie, where Jane is acting as sous-chef. “Thank you for the pressie, Janie. I loved it.”

“Don’t thank me—Thor picked it out.”

The man in question gives a loud wolf-whistle. He’s looking at something behind her, and she glances over her shoulder. Steve and Sam have just come from their back yard—they’re already in their bathers and their torsos are streaming with water. Darcy has to admit the sight isn’t unappealing, especially Steve, whose shoulder-to-waist ratio is ridiculous. “Looks like someone hit the pool early!” Thor yells, and more wolf-whistles follow. Sam takes it with nonchalance, but Steve’s ear go pink, a sign he’s flustered but won’t admit it.

As if on cue, Susan is next to Darcy. She nudges her with her shoulder and tilts her head in Steve’s direction. “Not a bad view.”

Darcy withhold the sigh she wants to let out. “Sure. If you like that kind of thing.”

Even Jane gives her an incredulous look for that comment, and Jane has a prime specimen of hunk at her beck and call.

“Look, Susan,” she begins, ready to stop this nonsense once and for all, when she’s interrupted by the sound of an engine. A loud, obnoxious engine, which is getting closer.

Her mouth slams shut, but it doesn’t matter, Susan’s stop paying attention to her. Instead, she’s gawping, along with the rest of the guests, at the motorbike which has just turned into the cul-de-sac.
It skids to a stop some way from the party-goers, and the rider rises from it in a smooth motion. Darcy has the opportunity to take in a lot of muscle and long legs, wrapped up in black leather. Then the rider removes his helmet, revealing chin-length, shaggy brown hair and more scruff than is fashionable. Somewhere under the beard, there’s a frown, and steel-grey eyes stare out from beneath a furrowed brow. Everything about him, down to his stance, carries an aura of danger, but despite that Darcy finds herself taking an involuntary step towards him.

She doesn’t realise how quiet everyone’s gone, focused as they are on the gatecrasher, until Steve speaks.

“Bucky?”
“Oh my god.”

Three voices ring out in harmony in response to Steve; or, perhaps more accurately, to the pile of muscles, scruff and leather that’s currently shaking its head back and running one hand nonchalantly through the tangled mess of hair. Both the big blond and the scruffy looking interloper on the bike are turning their heads at the mingled sound.

The first is, to no one’s real surprise, Susan. Her eyes are raking over the bike, still warm and enveloped in a cloud of petroleum smoke, the leather-clad thighs of the shaggy-haired new comer resting against it. Susan stands up straighter, subconsciously reacting to the relaxed lean and slope of his broad shoulders. He unzips the the jacket, letting it fall open whilst pulling at the collar, revealing a tight white t-shirt and what she thinks might be the hint of a tattoo at his shoulder. Her arms cross in front of her chest, one eyebrow raised and her lips pursed together.

This man, she decides, is No Good.

The second is from Sam, water dripping from his chest still and his bright blue board shorts soaking wet against his legs. He’s pushed back his sunnies until they are resting on top of his head, but his eyes are firmly on Steve, not the tall drink of trouble who is now inspecting his fingernails and surreptitiously very aware of the attention he’s currently receiving. Sam’s head tilts, and if Steve is smart - and goddamn but he’d better be - he’ll be picking up on the what-the-hell-dude vibes that Sam’s sending him.

This, he thinks with a mental face-palm, can lead to nothing good.

The last is Darcy, eyes wide and dragging slowly from booted heel, across the slight flash of stomach that’s now just visible under the hitched t-shirt, right up to steel-gray eyes that - just for a second - fix upon her. She swallows, and his mouth twitches upwards on one side momentarily because he damn well knows the effect he has and it’s amusing.

This, she considers as she bites her lip, better lead to all sorts of trouble.

Steve, who sadly has not picked up on anything from his housemate and friend, bounds towards the figure on the bike with a wide smile and even wider arms. He envelops the man in a deep hug, hauling him forwards off his perch against the leather seat and the newcomer, this Bucky, awkwardly claps a hand to the other man’s shoulder in response.

“Missed you, mate.” Steve says in a low voice.

“S’not been that long, you dag.” Bucky grins back, tone dismissive.

“Long enough.” The blond replies pointedly.

“Yeah, well. Things got a little … Tough. For a bit.” He clears his throat, rubbing one hand self-consciously across the days-old stubble currently adorning his chin, and casts his gaze away from Steve. His eyes register a small dark-haired woman who by the looks of things is currently engaged in trying to peel his skin from his bones with the power of her eyes alone. He grimaces turns his head elsewhere to-

“You do not still have that car.”
Steve merely grins in response, arms crossed over his broad chest and pride doing well to puff it even larger. Bucky rolls his eyes and drops the helmet over the handlebar of the bike, shrugging his jacket off completely. The assembled crowd are finally starting to disperse back to the party that had been in full swing before he’d gatecrashed.

“That thing was ancient 5 years ago, Steve-o.” Bucky says, cocking his head to one side as he looked over the heap of rust and bolts that was parked on the drive. “Is it even still running or do you just keep it as an art installation?”

“Watch your mouth, Barnes. She runs just fine.”

“Excepting for that nasty rattling sound. And the way she drinks petrol like it’s going out of fashion, only to leave half of it all over the road. Oh, and then there’s the fact that you’re actually too big to fit in the damn thing—”

“You met my roommate, Sam?” Steve jerks a hand over his shoulder and, grinning, cuts off the tall black man who’s now approaching, eyes rolling as he looks over the car and slopping water across the pavement to stand just behind Steve. His posture is somewhat defensive, all straight shoulders and crossed arms, which amuses Bucky slightly given that he’s wearing bright blue boardies and thongs whilst he’s doing it.

“Pleasure.” Bucky drawls, and doesn’t move to offer a hand for shaking.

“Likewise.” Sam answers, as though it’s anything but.

“So what you up to, Buck? What brings you to Erinsborough?” Steve’s practically bouncing on his toes by this point, and Sam fights not to roll his eyes again.

“Bit of this, bit of that.”

“You got a place to stay? ‘Cause we have a spare room, you’d be more than welcome to put up, as long as you need.” Steve misses Sam’s incredulous jaw-drop, but Bucky does not. Allowing a small smirk to edge across his face, he shrugs nonchalantly in response.

“Sure, why not?” He shoots a wink at Sam who looks like he’s just been forced to listen to three hours of Kylie Minogue on a loop, before turning his attention back to the blond in front of him. “It’ll be fun. Just like old times.”

Steve beams.

--------

“So wait, I’m confused. Run through it again?”

Thor was manning the grill, flipping sausages and burgers like a pro. The man lived for a barbeque.

“He’s Steve’s old Army buddy.” Jane shrugs, slicing open buns as quickly as she was able to, in a futile attempt to keep up with Thor. She threw together napkins and plates, topped with an open bun and passed it across.

“I thought Sam was Steve’s old Army buddy?” Thor pauses, spatula in hand and flips his long blond hair over one muscled shoulder. Eyebrows creasing, he tilts his head towards his girlfriend, who shoves another bun towards him. He takes it obediently and slides a well-done - read, cremated - burger into the bread.
“He’s allowed more than one.” Jane laughs in response to his confused expression.

“I guess. And he’s going to live at the House of-” He breaks off as Jane’s hands find their way to her hips and her lips purse. Thor coughs hard, then readjusts what he’d nearly said, and tries again. “At Number 30?”

The petite brunette narrows her eyes at him before passing him another open hot dog bun. Thor dutifully shovels a steaming sausage into the bun and passes it left to Toadie, who’s operating on a one-for-the-table, one-for-me basis. This one makes it to the table. The next one does not.

“You know this guy?” Thor addresses Toadie, who turns to him with half a hot-dog in his mouth and a can of beer lifted as if to drink from it. The lawyer chokes slightly and swallows the food down with difficulty, chugging back half the can before he can clear his throat enough to answer.

“No clue, mate. No clue.”

--------

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

Sam’s beat his retreat poolside, beer in hand and dubious expression plastered all over his face. He’s perched next to Clint - who is singularly unconcerned with the events thus far - but his eyes are trained on the house. Through the window he can just about see Steve and this Bucky, lounging in the kitchen. His eyes narrow.

“Less rent, more beer. Why would it bother me?” Clint shrugs. He’s surfaced in time for the party, and looks forward seeing Natasha in her bikini once she re-emerges from the house. He has a beer in his hand, another one lined up and the sun is shining. Life is good. Some biker kid rolling into the spare bedroom for a couple of months or so won’t change that.

“Because he looks like he walked straight out of an ad warning about the dangers of unsafe sex.”

Clint pulls his sunnies down his nose slightly, and regards Sam over the top of them, taking a long drag on his beer before answering. He savours the taste of Carlton, letting it slide around his tongue and down his throat. “Sammy,” he says, cocking an eyebrow, tone serious. "You worried for your virtue?"

The look he gets in return is priceless, and makes him laugh before continuing. He waves a hand dismissively and replaces the sunglasses, before settling back onto the lounger again. “He’s Steve’s mate. How bad can he be?”

“Steve?” Sam asks incredulously. “The one who spent his time in the Army throwing himself out of things and into situations without the appropriate safety gear? The one whose pysch evaluation has ‘risk-taker’ underscored three times? That Steve?”

Clint considers the facts.

“Well, you’re friends with him.”

“And starting to re-think it.” Sam replies darkly.

--------

“So you want me to take a look at this rust-bucket or what?”
“She’s not a rust-bucket.” Steve replies automatically, frowning as he looks at the amount of cucumber he’s just chopped, and wondering whether anyone ever eats chopped cucumber at a barbeque. He looks back up at Bucky, who’s leaning across the kitchen counter and hanging onto a tinnie. He sighs. “Yeah, I guess you could check her over.”

“Gotta earn my keep somehow, right?” Bucky says and pulls his shirt off, dishevelling his shaggy mop of hair. Steve notices his dog tags still hang from his neck, the silver catching the light. “Let me guess,” The dark-haired man says over one shoulder, his t-shirt now slung across the other and sauntering towards the room Steve had directed him towards earlier. “You still have all the ancient tools you had last time I saw you, to go with the carbon-dated fossil you’re probably pushing halfway back from work every arvo.”

Steve rolls his eyes but can’t say anything. They’re exactly the same tools in the lock up that he’s always had. They pre-date Sam, they pre-date Bucky - hell, they might even pre-date the war. But even if they belonged in a museum, they’d also belonged to his dad and for that reason alone, they stayed.

He wanders into the small bedroom and rests his body against the doorframe.

Bucky’s shucking his leathers now as well, leaving him in just his boxers. He hunts through the backpack he’d slung carelessly onto the twin bed earlier, and drags out a pair of jeans that have seen better days. Quite a number of better days, and Steve raises an eyebrow at the state of them but elects to say nothing.

Buck’s always been a bit of a mysterious figure, even in their army days, and coupled with a wide streak of not-great-with-authority-figures, it hasn't always led him to the best situations. However, Steve knows well enough to know that he won’t be getting a lick of a back-story out of the other man until he's good and ready.

"Still got the backpack." He notes instead. It's about as battered as the jeans.

Bucky slides his jeans up over his hips and pauses briefly, head lowered and not looking at Steve. "Still got the backpack." He answers flatly, after a moment, and buttons his fly. His eyes meet the man in the doorway and for an instant, just an instant, Steve thinks he sees something darker there. Some sadness. Bucky blinks and the lazy grin he usually sports is back in place, and his hands are reaching out to Steve’s shoulders.

"Now you gonna let me loose on this thing or not?"

--------

“I’m just saying, who turns up with a bike, a backpack, and nothing else?”

Clint sighs and turns his head - all he’s willing to move at this point and that, frankly, is a stretch - to regard Sam. The other man is leaning forward on the edge of his sun lounger, beer and burger all but forgotten.

“You’re not letting this go easy, are you?”

“Don’t you think we have a right to know who we’re sharing a roof with?” Sam pauses, then considers other ramifications of Steve’s offer. “Sharing a bathroom with?” He adds, as though he’s hit upon both a trump card and the more horrifying thought.

“Relax, bro.” Clint waved a hand lazily in Sam’s direction. “You already share a bathroom with me.”
This, Sam concedes, is a fair point. However, it’s not furthering his argument and that’s not helpful right now.

"Steve said he's been hanging in the back end of Bourke for for the past five years."

"You sure it's that and not prison?"

--------

"Steve, pass us that wrench would ya?"

A tentative hand appears under the car and Bucky gropes for it blindly, bringing the tool up to his face after he's managed to catch ahold of it.

"Strewth mate, this is exactly why I fixed planes and you chucked yourself outta them; what in the world would I do with this?" The hammer came flying back out from under the car, skittering across the driveway until it finally rested with a dull clunk at the edge of next door’s garden. The sheep, initially startling away, came edging back closer and closer until she was taking an experimental lick up the rubber handle. Evidently finding it to her liking, she begins chewing thoughtfully on the end of it.

“You know what, Steve-o, on second thoughts just throw that hammer back on under. I’m gonna put this old girl out of her misery once and for all.” There was a low chuckle from under the car and then a chunk of metal was pushed out from underneath and with it Bucky, wiping greased hands across his bare torso and squinting against the sun up at the figure above him.

"Uh, Steve wanted to know if you wanted a coldie?" The brunette, the one who'd definitely been checking him out earlier, was standing, tinnie in hand and a cautious look over her face, looking down at him. Her little sundress hit mid-thigh just right, and he indulges himself in a slow drag of his eyes up her body from bare feet, sun-kissed legs, waspish waist and masses of dark hair tumbling around a small face.

"Angel, you turn up looking like that and handing me a beer, makes me think I've died and gone to heaven." He grins. She flushes under his gaze, and he sits up to pluck the can from her hand. Looping an easy arm around his bent legs, he downs half the beer then wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand; then offers it to her.

She accepts, tipping her head back and letting the liquid tip into her open mouth, and he gets a glorious view of her cleavage which does not go unappreciated by him, and unnoticed by the woman at the curtains of number 28.

------

"Ugh." Susan turns away from the window and just about resists the urge to put her head in her hands. Frigga hands her a large glass of wine and pats her sympathetically on the shoulder. “He’s just nearly brained my son’s sheep, he’s eyeing up Darcy like she’s a steak and I’m almost certain he’s just been under that car cutting the brakes or something.”

"He won't stay long." The other woman soothes, gathering her flowing skirts around her and shaking back her blonde hair, having pulled loose from the elaborate twisted mess she’s pinned it into somehow.

"You sure about that?" Madge asks tartly from the sofa, legs crossed and sipping at her own glass.

"Boys like that never hang around." Frigga answers and gracefully drops into an armchair, legs
curled nearly under herself. "Too flighty. Mark my words, Erinsborough won't be enough for him." She ends her words with a decisive nod as Susan drops into the seat next to her.

"Shame." Muses Madge from behind her wine, eyes sparkling. "He’s not bad looking, all that hair and leather. Reminds me of a young Lou Carpenter."

Frigga slaps a hand to her mouth to keep from laughing at that, and Susan drops her head into her palms, mumbling something that sounds an awful lot like she’s expressing a desire to throw up.

-----

"So you're a mechanic, huh?" Bucky is startled slightly as the world turns dark momentarily, and he looks to his left, eyes sliding from the pretty brunette, still with the beer bottle pressed to her lips, to find a large blond man towering over him.

"When the mood strikes." He answers cautiously, dragging himself to his feet and wiping his hands on the back of his jeans. He stands up as straight as he can, but even his six foot and change frame isn't enough for him to look this guy quite in the eye. Bucky rolls his eyes over the other man. He is quite simply the most enormous bloke he’s ever encountered.

“And how does the mood strike around not being unemployed?"

Bucky laughs.

“What are you saying exactly, big guy?"

“It's Thor.” The big blond mountain thrusts a meaty hand forward and Bucky tentatively shakes it, feeling his whole arm move as the other man enthusiastically pumps it up and down before continuing. “Listen, there's a space in the garage; we need a new mechanic, have done for a little while actually. Could use another pair of hands.”

Bucky considers.

“You usually do your human resources on a mate’s driveway?”

Thor shrugged.

“If Rogers is letting you tinker around with the love of his life-” He nods towards the Beetle, gleaming in the sun next to them. “-then you can't be total crap. So how about it?”

Bucky tilts his head to one side and his fingers grope and find the beer bottle that the girl is still hanging onto. Throwing her a smile as he plucks it out of her hand, he turns back to the enormous blond and sucks down thoughtfully before nodding.

“Okay, sounds like it could work.” He concedes slowly, then raises a finger as a thought occurs to him. “Trial basis.” He adds.

Thor cocks an eyebrow. “You're aware it's usually the employee who's on trial, right?”

Bucky shrugs, unfazed. He does things his own way, always has, and he’s not particularly bothered if other people aren’t on the same wavelength. Thor gives him another once over, and evidently decides he likes what he sees. He laughs suddenly, and claps a hand onto Bucky’s shoulder, causing him to shudder and grasp onto the beer bottle lest he lose it.

“Tomorrow morning. Steve knows the address, he's there often enough.”
“I'll bet.” Bucky replies, giving the blue Beetle a sidelong glance and sighing inwardly as he notices the large - and increasing - patch of oil around the driveway behind the front bumper.

“Oh and bring that bike of yours.” Thor adds. “I'd like to take a look at that beast.”

-------

“Has that old harpy left yet? Or is she having to get the broom serviced before she can get back to her flying monkeys?”

“Dad.” Wanda sighs, pulling back from the window slightly. “If you keep this up, you'll end up back in hospital with your heart again.” She runs her eyes over her father, who’s getting red in the face at the mere thought of his ex-step-mother. They really did not need a repeat of last year.

“Not me, kiddo.” He shot back. “Your old man’s strong as an ox now, and state of the art to boot.” Stark proudly taps the centre of his chest and the metallic casing around his heart clangs slightly as his father’s ring catches the casing. “I’m bionic, I’m gonna live forever.” Wanda winces.

“They didn't say you were invincible.” She murmurs, and pulls the curtain aside again. She can see Thor - her step-uncle, of sorts, though she's loathe to ever refer to him as such around her father - talking to a man she doesn't recognise. She slides a hand further up the curtain to draw it aside, and peers further out of the window.

“Who's that guy?” Her father appears at her elbow, peering out into the street with interest. His eyes take in the low slung jeans, the stubble, the long hair. “Hmmm. No one you know, I hope.” He answers himself pointedly, giving her a sidelong look as he does so. Wanda rolls her eyes.

“No idea, dad. Looks like he's mates with Steve?” She guesses, looking over the unknown Harley parked next to Rogers’ pride and joy.

“Looks like Susan is gonna have her hands full.” Tony commented drily, his eyes having slipped from the dark-haired grease monkey to take in the look on Darcy’s face as she stood between him and Thor.

-------

“Here five minutes and you've scored a house and a job. What's next on the list, stranger?”

Darcy tilts her head to one side and lets herself indulge in the shirtless and grease-smeared torso on display in front of her. Thor has wandered back to Jane, packing up the barbeque now that most everyone has had their fill and moved onto Steve & Sam’s pool. She can hear Clint singing off key to Men at Work, and what sounds like Toadie threatens to push him in the pool if he makes to the end of one more verse.

“Oh I don't know. Pretty girl, maybe.”

The dark-haired man - Bucky, she remembers - has a crooked smile and a wicked glint in his gray eyes that she’s aware probably comes with a large side of warning label. In fact, she considers, that sparkle probably is the warning label, but she still can’t manage to wrench her eyes away from him. Darcy graces him with a knowing smirk and works hard to keep the blush off her cheeks.

“So you gonna give me your name, or what?”

“You gatecrashed my birthday party. Don't you think you should be giving me something?” She counters, and pops a hip, one hand coming to rest on it as her eyebrows raise. Bucky bites back a
grin because this is exactly the kind of girl he likes, one who makes him work for it. One who sasses him, teases him, and has a spark of defiance running through her.

He can see it in this one already.

He steps closer, and she shivers as his bare chest comes to rest just inches from her. Bucky looks down and very lightly runs one finger up her arm, from wrist to shoulder. He tips his head in closer to her. He feels rather than sees the gooseflesh that follows his touch. His voice is low and he brings his mouth as close to her cheek as he can without actually pressing his lips against her.

“Oh, I can think of something I'd like to give you.”

“Darcy!”

The brunette jumps backwards at the shrill sound of her name that pierces through the pair of them like a knife. She - Darcy, he thinks, and it’s a nice name, a pretty name for a pretty girl - looks guiltily over at the doorway to Steve’s house, where the older woman with the narrowed eyes and unimpressed look from earlier is standing.

She looks even less impressed now, and he fights the urge to shake his head. As if he’s never seen that look before.

“Cake.” The angry looking little woman beckons to girl - Darcy, he reminds himself again, and he kind of likes the way it sounds in his head - to join her. Bucky assumes at this point, because he’s had some experience in the area, that the invitation in no way extends to himself. He steps back, hands raising up and palms out, almost as a show of deference.

“Hey Buck!” Steve appears in the doorway behind the woman. “You coming in?” He puts a hand on each of the woman’s shoulders and squeezes her tight. “That’s alright, isn’t it Susan?” Bucky can see that it’s literally the very last item on a long list of alright things for this Susan, but she must like Steve an awful lot because she grits her teeth - visibly, and he’s sort of impressed by that - and nods.

-------

Sam’s hanging with Clint still by the side of the pool as Susan emerges pushing an embarrassed Darcy in front of her. The older woman is motioning for the assembled party to begin singing, which they do, with gusto and a distinct lack of talent.

Darcy winces to hear it, but cracks a small smile even so, her brunette hair swinging over her face. She pushes it back behind her ear shyly as the ensemble fight their way through the song, ending in a rousing and off-key rendition of her name.

“Uh, thanks guys.” She hollers, and they all clap, accompanied by someone - probably Clint - shouting for her to get on with it and cut the cake already. Darcy rolls her eyes in his direction, making a fair assumption, and Susan, smiling, hands her the knife.

Whilst she’s cutting the frankly enormous sponge cake, and Bucky’s slipped into the garden alongside Steve, leaning back against the fence; Sam staring daggers at the newcomer and Clint’s eyes on the progress Darcy’s making with the cake, Natasha arrives.

“So what did I miss?” She says, tossing vibrant red hair over her shoulder, stunning as always in a deep blue bikini top and cut off denim shorts which somehow elongate her already long legs. She addresses this mainly to Darcy, but it’s someone else who speaks up, eyes wide and stepping forward, focused only on her.
"Nat?"

She turns, confused at a familiar yet unexpected voice.

"Bucky?"

"Who's worried about the walking venereal disease now, huh?" Sam says markedly to Clint, whose jaw has dropped watching his girlfriend turn towards tall-dark-and-dangerous.
“Didn’t expect to see you here, Natalia!” Bucky says, his mouth twisting into a smirk. It’s a pleasant smirk, one that has an unexpected but profound reaction on Darcy, and yet her insides have just turned to lead. She watches his gaze flick down Nat’s body and back up, and barely registers Clint’s movement next to her. Clint—laconic, eternally unruffled Clint—has just taken a step forward with his fists balled at his side.

The way Bucky is looking at Nat makes a lot of sense to Darcy. She should have expected it.

“What did he just call her?” Madge says, the question not as quiet as she’d intended it to be. Nat glances over at her mom and for a moment, her permanent chill seems to waver. Trepidation tugs at her face.

“It’s Natasha,” she corrects Bucky, eyes widening in a subtle hint for him to go along with it.

“Right. Of course. Easy to get it wrong when I haven’t seen you is long.” Bucky’s smile suggests he’s entertained at the lie she’s encouraging him to make.

“So how do you two know each other?” Clint asks, and the question is grumpier than he ever usually is.

“We met while I was travelling,” Natasha replies with a far-too-nonchalant shrug. “Is the cake ready? I didn’t get a burger and I’m starving.”

Everyone else has lost interest and their attention returns to food, beer, and divebombing the pool. Darcy especially focuses on the second thing, trying to drown her nagging disappointment: she’s not sure why she’s disappointed, or what it is she’s disappointed in, but something about knowing Bucky and Nat have a past makes her a little queasy.

She’s dancing with Thor, shimmying away to an old Savage Garden album that someone has dug an actual facts cassette out of the depths of Toadie’s garage, when her feet are doused in water. The spray catches her all the way up to her thighs. She shrieks and turns to glare down at the pool, expecting to find an off-his-face-Toadie. Instead, Bucky is staring up at her from the water. His hair is slicked back from his face, revealing razorblade cheekbones she swears weren’t there before, and the bronzed abdomen she was ogling earlier is now wet and glistening. A tattoo sprawls down his left arm, in shades of grey and black, but she doesn’t let her gaze linger long enough to figure out what it’s meant to be. His face is twisted in a half-smile, and her breath catches in her throat. Past with Nat or not, he’s the hottest bloke she’s ever met.

“You coming in?” he asks. “The water’s great.”

She’s still in the sundress, and over his shoulder, Nat is frolicking in her bikini, splashing around with Sam, while Clint sulks at the side of the pool, slumped in a deckchair with his arms folded. With her vibrant hair, ethereal bone structure and lower body hidden in the water, Nat looks like she could be a mermaid.

“Nah, I’m good,” Darcy replies, trying to inject some coolness into it. She needs him to know she is not affected by him, even though he’s obviously used to having an effect on girls.

The faintest frown wrinkles his forehead, and he looks like he’s about to speak again, but Wanda’s timing is spot on. She’s just swung through the gate into the backyard, carrying a six pack of
tinnies, and Darcy rushes off to greet her.

It all goes downhill from there. It’s not the best birthday Darcy’s ever had, or the worst, but it is the drunkest. She doesn’t interact with Bucky again, and the last thing she remembers is being slung over Steve’s shoulder and carried home to number 28.

“How’s your head?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Darcy has her forehead resting against the cool surface of the chiller cabinet in the Coffee Shop, and the first sign that Susan has come in is her ridiculous question. She knows that Darcy is regretting every drink she had last night, and has been since her stomach started rebelling at first light.

“Are you getting plenty of water?”

Darcy waves in the general direction of the cup Nat has been refilling every time Darcy empties it.

“Don’t worry Mrs K,” Nat says, “I’m taking care of her.”

At least while Darcy has her face melded with the fixtures and fittings, she doesn’t have to interact with Nat, who looks as radiant as ever. It’s unfair to Nat for Darcy to take her current grumpiness out on her, since it’s not her fault that she’s perfect and also has a history with the hot new guy, but if Darcy can use a hangover as cover for not talking to her, she’s going to take it.

“Thanks Natasha. I thought it was sweet of Steve to help her last night, too.”

Darcy groans, then has to make a show of gripping her head and reaching for the water to cover it up. Susan just won’t let it drop.

“I’m sure Toadie would’ve done the same thing,” Nat replies, “but he was already out for the count.”

Nat is a good friend, and Darcy resents her more for it.

“Oh, of course. I do think Steve’s a really nice bloke, though. Even if his taste in friends seems to be a little lacking…”

“You mean Bucky?” Nat asks.

Well, now she has Darcy’s undivided attention, as well as Susan’s.

“Yes, him,” Susan says dismissively. “What’s his story?”

Nat shrugs. “I barely know the guy. I don’t think many people know much about him—except Steve. They go way back, from what I’ve heard. Real blood brothers.”

“He looks dangerous,” Susan continues.

Nat laughs. “I don’t think he’s dangerous, but one of the things he has in common with Steve is an inability to follow rules. He definitely marches to the beat of his own drum.”

“Hmm.” Susan isn’t impressed. “So where exactly has he been all these years, then?”
Nat clams up, focusing on wiping down one of the counters instead of answering. After the pause becomes painful, Susan tries again.

“This is ominous.”

“It’s not my story to tell, Mrs K.”

“Right-o.” Susan fixes Darcy with a knowing stare. “Mark my words, that bloke is trouble.” Then she picks up her lunch and leaves.

Darcy knows better than to prod at Nat for more details about Bucky. For one, Nat’s never exactly verbose, and prying would make Darcy no better than Susan. Plus she’s not exactly keen on finding out how well Nat knew him, because she knows she won’t like the answer.

“How come you didn’t take the day off?” Nat asks to break the silence. “You should’ve asked Mum to swap.” It means Darcy has to lift her head off the chiller again to answer.

“I need the money, so I’ll take as many shifts as I can get. Besides, I think Madge would’ve fired me if I chucked a sickie.”

“Probably, but only because she’s nursing her own hangover. She’d have mellowed after a few painkillers. What do you need money for?”

Darcy glances around, making sure her foster mother is well and truly gone. “You can’t tell Susan this, but I’m planning on moving out. I want a place closer to the uni for when term starts.” Susan doesn’t like an empty house, and Darcy doesn’t want to give her time to panic at the impending prospect. Plus, she likes living with her—the closest thing she’s had to a mother since she was an ankle biter—but she has to strike out on her own sometime.

Nat raises an eyebrow. “Really? That’s interesting.” She comes to sit next to Darcy, offering her another glass of water. “How’d you feel about having a flatmate?”

“I’m definitely going to need one. Rent is ridiculous that end of town.”

“No I meant, how’d you feel about me as a flatmate?”

“Yes?”

“Sure. I want to move out but can’t afford anywhere on my own, not with what Mum and the Waterhole pay me.”

“I thought you’d want to move in with Clint.”

“Have you seen his bedroom? Or the bathroom at number 30? Nah, not until he’s house-trained, and that might take a few more decades. So, what d’ya think?”

Darcy bolts from her chair in the direction of the stock room. “I have to throw up.”

“So why’d you call this place the House of Trouser?” Bucky stares around at the dishevelled kitchen of number 30. The stack of dishes in the sink looks like it’s been there a long time, and he knows instinctively that it’s mostly Steve’s doing. The bloke never did get around to doing the washing up.

“It’s in the lease,” Steve replies.
“For real?”

“Yeah. It’s what Toadie called it when he lived here in his bachelor days, before he met Helen. We’re carrying on the tradition.”

“Right. I’m not signing any lease, not until I know I’m staying. But if this deal at the garage works out, I think I’ll be sticking around for a while.”

Steve beams.

“What’s the deal with next door?” Bucky continues, pointing in the general direction of number 28. “And why do they have a sheep out front?”

“That’s Cassie. Casserole,” he corrects. “She belonged to Susan’s son Billy.”

It’s not even the beginning of an explanation, but that’s not really what Bucky’s interested in. “Susan’s the one who was willing me to spontaneously combust last night, right?”

Steve lets out a bark of laughter. “Mrs K’s alright. She taught me at school. She’d have loved having you in her class though.”

“I’ll bet. And the daughter?”

Apparently his last question isn’t as subtle as he tried to make it. “Darcy’s not her daughter,” Steve replies with perceptive grin. “But she’s lived with Mrs K for a few years. Sweet kid. She’s Toadie’s cousin—somehow. I dunno, he has a lot of cousins, his family tree is more like a bloody forest. But Mrs K always likes to take in waifs and strays. If it doesn’t work out here, I’m sure she’ll find room for you.”

“Rack off,” Bucky says, giving him a playful shove.

Clint wanders into the kitchen, eyes barely open and hair still ruffled with sleep. He takes one look at Bucky and turns round, exiting again silently.

“What’s his problem?” Bucky asks.

“Ah, don’t mind Clint. He’s non-verbal at the best of times. Probably got lost on his way to the bathroom. We’re a drama-free household, it’s one of the rules of the House of Trouser.”

Bucky decides not to worry about it, instead turning his attention to the Beetle looming on the drive outside the window. “So I was thinking of taking the old girl down to the garage and taking a look at her with some proper tools. Reckon if I can fix her up and impress Thor, that’s a job guaranteed.”

“I wish you and Sam would stop acting like she’s as good as dead. Peg’s been good to me all these years.”

Bucky’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline. “You named her Peggy?”

Steve offers him an awkward shrug, with his hands jammed into his pockets. “Sure. I mean, why not?”

Bucky shakes his head. “I just thought after the way that went down, you wouldn’t want any reminders.”

“She’s a good reminder, though.” He stares wistfully out at the car. “It wasn’t Peg’s fault that
things ended like they did. It was mine, and I’d rather have those memories tied to something I value. Makes me smile when I look at her.”

“Crikey. I’d better do a good job on her then, hadn’t I?”

“Oh, Toadie, I’m glad you’re here,” Susan says, leaving the door of number 28 open for him to follow her inside. She’s got her laptop open at the table and wanders back to it, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

“I only came by to see if there was any cake left.”

“Sure, it’s in the fridge. Help yourself.” She makes a few clicks with her mouse, then frowns. “Do you know how to check prison records?”

Toadie looks up from the wedge of cake he is cutting for himself (and Helen, though Helen knows she will have to cede most of it to him). “That’s not really the kind of thing just anybody can look up.”

“Surely you’ve got access to that sort of thing for work.”

“I very rarely take criminal cases. Round here it’s mostly civil stuff: divorces, probate, that sort of thing. In fact, this last year half my time has been tied up in the Stark business.”

“So there’s no way of me checking if someone has been in lock-up over the last few years?”

Toadie creeps up behind her to get a good look at the screen. She has a few tabs open, and the one she’s looking at is a Google search for James Bucky convictions.

“Hate to break it to you, Susan,” he says, making her jump and shove the laptop closed, “but that’s not his name.”

“Then why on Earth does Steve call him that?”

“Dunno. Ask Steve. I’m not helping you stalk his mate. Why are you so interested?”

“No reason. Are you sure you don’t want more cake?”

All Toadie has to do is wait thirty seconds, wearing his amusement like dodgy aftershave, until she cracks.

“Oh, all right. Did you not see the way Darcy was looking at him? She’s your cousin, this should concern you.”

Toadie laughs. “Darcy’s got a good head on her shoulders. If he’s bad news, she’ll tell him where to get off.”

“Are you sure about that? Really sure? Because I saw the way he was looking at her too. It’s the same way you’re looking at that cake.”

That makes Toadie pause too, because the way he looks at cake is frankly obscene. “We need to trust Darcy,” he eventually responds. “Because you know what will happen if you get involved—he’ll become the forbidden fruit and she’ll go chasing after him.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of we prove why he’s no good, and point her in the direction of someone more suitable.”
“Susan, she’s not interested in Steve, and he’s not interested in her. Stop flogging that horse, and stay well out of Darcy’s love life. You’ll only create a situation that was never going to exist.”

Susan chews her lip and stares at the laptop thoughtfully. “Alright, you’re right. I need to butt out.”

“Good choice!” Toadie picks up his Tupperware and heads for the door. “Thanks for the cake.”

Susan continues to stare at the door for a few moments after he leaves, before reaching a decision. She flips the laptop screen back up and continues with her search.

Sam’s swinging by Grease Monkeys for a nutritious dinner after finishing his shift when he spots a familiar blue bonnet peeking from inside the garage. Bag of food in hand, he crosses the road to take a closer look.

“Steve?” he calls, expecting the big blond meathead to be lurking around his pride and joy, but instead Bucky steps out, trailed by Rhodey.

“Mate, you shouldn’t have,” Bucky says, retrieving the bag from Sam’s hand, tossing a greasy rag over his naked shoulder. Sam’s too late to grab the food back, too distracted by the thought that the bloke doesn’t ever seem to wear a shirt. By the time he makes a move, it’s too late, half the burger already shovelled into Bucky’s mouth.

Sam frowns and folds his arms. “That wasn’t for you.”

“I earned it,” Bucky replies around his mouthful. “Been hard at work all afternoon, but I got her singing again.”

“He’s right,” Rhodey agrees, helping himself to some fries. “The man works miracles.”

“I can’t believe Steve even let you near her,” Sam says, snatching the nearly-empty bag back. All that’s left for him is cooling fries.

“He trusts me, mate.”

Sam gives him a level stare. There’s nothing about this guy which screams trustworthy. “Where even is he?” he asks as he grabs the Beetle’s keys from the hook and heads for the driver’s side.

“He’s got a date.”

That stops Sam in his tracks. “You’re kidding me. Steve doesn’t do dates.” He’s been taking the role of bachelor very seriously since arriving in Erinsborough, licking his wounds from the Peggy fiasco.

“He does now. Met this knockout blonde at work and while he was trying to unglue his tongue from his mouth, she asked him out.”

This is big. “What’s she called? Where’s he taking her? Do we really trust him not to screw this up?”

Bucky gives a disinterested shrug, taking a long chug from a tinny he’s retrieved from his workbench. Sam adds ‘day drinker’ to his mental list of things that annoy him about this guy. He’d raise it with Thor, but Thor is the most laid-back person he’s ever met and wouldn’t care unless it interfered with his work. “Sally, maybe? Or Shelly. And he only told me he was taking her out.”

Sam climbs into the car and shuts the door behind him, glad to get away from his new housemate
for a while. To his dismay, the passenger door opens and the car dips with the added weight of Bucky clambering in. “Don’t you have work to do?”

“Nah, this was a trial day. Reckon I passed with flying colours though. Appreciate the lift home.”

To his unending chagrin, the engine really does purr when Sam turns it over, and the car makes it all the way back to Ramsay Street without any issues.

“I got Thai food,” Steve yells, entering the kitchen with three bags full. It works like a klaxon, bringing his three housemates to the table within moments.

Bucky’s got a shirt on for once, his hair freshly washed after showering to get the grease off, and helps Steve fetch cutlery to the table. “You’re in a good mood.”

The tips of Steve’s ears turn pink. “Maybe,” he hedges.

“Come on, man, spill,” Sam instructs as he heaps food onto his plate. “Your ‘pal’ here was vague on the details.”

“Her name’s Sharon,” Steve replies with an awkward shrug. “And I just took her for a run.”

Three face stare at him incredulously. “For your first date in years, you made her exercise?” Sam asks. “No wonder you’re single. You are terrible at this.”

“Not at all!” Steve protests. “She told me she enjoyed it.” He glances at Bucky for moral support, but all he gets is a raised eyebrow over a mouthful of noodles.

Clint is eating silently. There’s nothing new about this—he tends to inhale his food rather than chew it, and if you try and engage him in conversation, you get sprayed with whatever he’s eating. But the glare he’s levelling at Bucky is new.

“You got a problem?” Bucky asks, stealing a spring roll from Sam’s plate. He seems unconcerned with Clint’s attitude on the surface, but there’s a level of tension underneath, like a coiled spring waiting to release.

“No problem here,” Clint replies. He keeps eating, and he keeps glaring. “Unless there’s something you want to share.”

“I met you yesterday. I have no idea what’s crawled up your ass already.”

“Wanna explain how you know my girlfriend?”

“Not really.”

Clint bristles, and for a moment Steve thinks they might actually start a ruckus. For the first time he notices how Sam is glaring at Bucky too, and makes a mental note to get to the bottom of that.

“It’s not my story to tell,” Bucky continues. “You should ask her.”

Clint doesn’t say another word all evening.

Bucky follows Steve’s directions to the Coffee Shop, happy it’s a short walk from the gym to get some caffeine. He’s got his t-shirt slung over his shoulder, since he hates putting it on straight after a shower, and he’s only going to take it off when he gets to the garage anyway.
The woman behind the counter is Natalia’s mother, Madge. Natasha, not Natalia. He bites back a grin at the realisation she’d fed him a false name, all those years ago. Madge seems to be on her own, and he approaches with a little uneasiness. If she’s friends with Susan, and suspects that he’s got some history with her daughter…

“Mrs Ramsay,” he says, offering his warmest smile.

“It’s Bishop,” she snaps, before she recognises him and her expression softens. “What can I get you?”

“Black coffee, please.”

She must discern the surprise on his face, because she keeps talking while she fixes his coffee. “Don’t worry, Natasha’s told me everything. We don’t have any secrets. Sounds like you looked out for her.”

“I tried. She was a little out of her depth.”

A small body comes out of the stockroom, and it only takes Bucky a moment to place the dark curls. He dials up the smile a notch, so when Darcy glances up from the pile of boxes she’s carrying, it’s the first thing she sees.

He miscalculates, because apparently she’s too focused on his abs to look at his face. He definitely owes Steve a drink for that free gym pass. But when she’s stopped gawking, she snaps her mouth shut and steps behind the counter without a word to him.

“Nice to see you again,” he says, and she nods vaguely, apparently interested in unpacking the stock. This isn’t what he was expecting at all—at the party she seemed so into him, up until that moment by the pool where she shut him down, and now she was practically glacial. “Did I do something to annoy you?”

She blinks up at him. “I don’t know you well enough for you to annoy me.” And yet, beneath the benign tone of her reply, there was a well of fire. Oh yeah, somehow he’s managed to piss her off and he has no idea how.

It’s becoming a bit of a pattern.

“Then maybe we could spend a bit of time together, get to know each other. See if I get under your skin.” He flashes a little dimple, using the same lopsided smile that made her blush during the party.

In his peripheral vision he can see Madge scrubbing a table down and pretending not to listen in, but her amused expression belies her. No doubt she’ll be reporting back to Susan.

Darcy stands up straight and looks him square in the eye, only the slight flush on her cheeks indicating he’s had any effect on her. “I was wrong. I know enough already to make a decision about you, so it’ll be a no.”

She says it with enough conviction, but he doesn’t miss her gaze stray down his chest again. Yeah, she’s interested. If he can figure out what’s got her spitting her dummy, he can fix it.

“Alright. You know where I live if you change your mind,” he replies, like he hasn’t just crashed and burned. Instead, he moseys out of the shop, giving her a good display of his back muscles on his way. Girls always enjoy a view of his back, and it isn’t because he’s leaving, whatever they say.
He’s musing on how to put his cunning plan into place, when he spots another redhead coming up the path.

“G’day Natalia,” he greets her. She doesn’t get embarrassed, to his disappointment, instead putting on her most exasperated expression.

“Don’t call me that, drongo.” She gestures for him to follow her down the side of the Waterhole, so they could have a moment of privacy. “Do you know why my boyfriend is ignoring me?”

He huffs. “Leave me out of your relationship drama. It’s not like he talks to me either.” He spots an opportunity for a little recon. “Also not talking to me—Darcy. Why is she annoyed at me?”

“Because you have that effect on people. How am I supposed to know?”

“You’re her friend. I thought she might have confided in you.”

“Believe it or not, women don’t spend all their time talking about you.” She narrows her eyes at him. “Are you interested in her?”

“Just trying to be neighbourly.”

“Sure. Listen, Darcy’s not got a lot of relationship experience. You should think long and hard about what you want before you go cracking onto her, because if you let her down, you’re going to upset a lot of people.”

He leans into Nat, one hand on the wall next to her head. “There you go, making assumptions like everyone else. Maybe I’m looking to put down some roots for once. Maybe I’m tired of everyone looking at me like I’m worthless. Maybe you all need to stop rushing to judge me.”

“I’m only warning you. Thor thinks of her like a little sister. Toadie’s your landlord. You might want to think about what roots you’re putting down before you go making enemies.”

Bucky’s about to fire back at her, when there’s a crunch on the gravel behind them. He spins around to find Clint gaping at them.

“Well, this looks cosy.”
Clint is not avoiding Natasha.

Well. That’s what he’s saying. Shouting, actually. Multiple times. Despite no one actually having asked him whether or not he’s deliberately not speaking to his own girlfriend. Bucky’s taken one look at the militiant expression on Clint’s face and disappeared out the front door without so much as a nod to anyone else. Steve and Sam, exchanging glances and rolled eyes, convene in the kitchen.

“Mate.” Sam says, switching on the coffee machine and turning to the other man with a wild look in his dark brown eyes. “He’s not right.” He nods in a totally non-circumspect way towards Barton, who’s taken over the living room.

Steve sighs heavily and reaches for the mugs, one decorated with birds for Sam and the other with a merry red, white and blue motif for himself. Madge had gifted them some time last year, in an uncharacteristically altruistic move. The boys weren’t ones to look a gift horse in the mouth though, not when it wasn’t exactly unheard of for them to swig coffee out of Pyrex measuring jugs from time to time. Even Clint has one, a little pattern of purple arrows edging from one side of the china to the other.

He put a chip in it - accidentally, of course - the first day she’d given over the mugs.

“I’m aware of that, but what can I do?” Steve says in response to Sam, grumbling slightly and scraping at the last of the ground coffee that rolls around the bottom of the barrel. “If he won’t talk to her, and he’s denying there’s anything wrong … C’mon, I’m hardly qualified to deal with this sort of thing.”

Sam practically throws the sugar tin at him and Steve somehow manages to catch it one-handed. “Can’t live like this, Rogers.” Sam bites out, aggressively sawing - hacking might be a more accurate term, Steve thinks to himself, wincing slightly as he looks on - at the loaf of bread in front of him. “He’s - he’s building furniture. You know how I feel about IKEA furniture.”

They both look over their shoulders at the living room floor, where it looks very much as though a bomb has exploded in the midst of a furniture shop. Clint is on his knees in the epicentre of it all, hammer in one hand, for some reason a crowbar in the other and what appears to be a set of allan keys held in his mouth. The instructions have been discarded somewhere behind him.

“At least you didn’t have to go with him to buy it.” Steve mutters in response, spooning out several heaped teaspoons into the waiting cups. The memory of staggering through cheery fake room after fake room, arms full of wholly unnecessary household items, will stay with him for far longer than he considers okay. Even the meatballs weren’t enough to make up for it. They never are.

Sam shoves rough-cut bread into the toaster and pushes down the knob as forcefully as he can get away with without breaking it. “You know he’s taken the hearing aids out now as well?” He says, eyebrows almost touching his hairline and tone verging on accusing, because dammit, life was pretty much fine before mister-long-hair-and-glistening-abs showed up and Steve invited him home like a stray cat.

Steve sighs.
Bucky’s not immune to the fact that Natalia’s - Natasha, he reprimands himself, mentally making
the correction her green eyes had bored into him a couple of days previous - Natasha’s boyfriend
has a big issue with him. To be honest, he’s more than used to that sort of reaction, and whatever
the stocky little blond happens to think, he’s not actually saying it which suits Bucky just fine. It’s
just that he doesn’t really care enough to have the conversation. Especially if Barton doesn’t want
it, which it’s exceedingly apparently he doesn’t.

Bucky does, however, feel a vague stab of guilt at causing Steve issues immediately after rolling
back into his life unannounced and taking advantage of his hospitality, but he promises himself
he’ll find some way of making it up to the big lug, outside of fixing the damn car. Maybe by giving
him some dating tips. Bucky’s man enough to admit that he’s probably never met a bloke who’s
hotter than Steve, but by god does the guy need a clue or three when it comes to women.

He has no idea what’s going on with Steve and this Sharon chick, but making any girl sweat -
outside of the bedroom - has to be a no-go area.

Bucky is vaguely amused that all the trouble has come about because he was talking to Natal-
Natasha, he corrects himself again - about Darcy, however. He’s slightly less amused by the idea
that it’s probably gotten back to the brunette by now. She’s cold enough to him at the moment,
despite the way her deep blue eyes rake over his body every chance she gets, and he’s not
overjoyed that she’ll have yet another reason to add to the list she’s apparently compiling. He
wonders if that Susan has anything to do with it.

Small towns, he snorts to himself as he pulls up on Steve’s driveway, flicking the kickstand down
and flinging one leg lazily over the bike as it purrs into silence. Everyone living in each other’s
pockets all the time, knowing everyone else’s business - or thinking they do, more like. This is
precisely why he left Oakey, yet somehow he’s ended up right back in a similar town.

Still. Thor seems pleased with his work so far - and his bike, having poked and prodded and
eventually asking if he can take her for a quick spin, all shining eyes and eagerness - and Bucky’s
not had that sort of praise in a long while. He sort of hopes he can keep it up, although his track
record isn’t exactly stellar in that respect. Trouble seems to dog his heels no matter how hard he
tries otherwise.

Shirt already discarded and hanging backwards over his shoulder as he leaves the bike in the drive
next to Steve’s heap of junk - apparently the other man has decided he’ll cycle to work this week -
the hot afternoon sun beating down against his sweating skin, Bucky resolutely is not looking over
at number 28 and checking whether there is a curtain twitching as he shoves a key into the door
and twists it, unlocking the door and letting it swing open in front of him. Knowing his luck, if
next door’s curtains are twitching at him at all, it’s that battleaxe and not the curvy little bundle of
fun he’d been within a gnat’s whisker of pressing his lips against on this driveway.

Bucky closes his eyes briefly as he thinks of how close he came to claiming Darcy’s lips with his
own, then steps inside the door out of the unrelenting sun.

Whatever he might have been expecting to find as he enters the house, it certainly wasn’t what he’s
looking at right now. Bits of what he assumes is bookcase, or possibly bedside table or - to be
honest - quite literally anything by the looks of it, is spread across the living room floor like a
World War 2 film set in blitzed-out London. In the midst of it is Barton, spread eagled on the floor
and clutching at his left hand, blood spurting from an open wound that he’s doing an immensely
poor job of plugging with the other hand.

Swearing under his breath, Bucky throws himself to his knees without thinking, and slides across
the floor towards the smaller man, pushing aside bits of MDF as he goes.
“Did you hear about Natasha and Clint?”

Wanda’s eyes are wide and faux-innocent as she sit across from Darcy, sipping at a caramel macchiato in between words. Darcy sighs. She doesn’t really need to hear about Nat and Clint, she already kind of knows the situation, or at the very least can read between the wide-ass lines that the pair are giving off. Nat stomping her way into the coffee shop kind of said it all, really. That and the fact she had a great view of Bucky caging Nat against a wall with his bare arms and chest, as she’d lugged out empty crates to stack them in the recycling.

She realises that Wanda is hanging on for some kind of response.

“Oh, yeah. Poor Clint, right?”

Darcy sucks down her latte, hoping Wanda will change the subject soon, but luck is not on her side today.

“So what do you reckon his story is?”

“What story?” Darcy opts to plead ignorance, and Wanda isn’t fooled for the barest second.

“Darce.” She says, flatly, leaning across the small table towards her friend. “Literally the hottest thing to hit Erinsborough in, oh, I don’t know, the last ten years? The mysterious long-haired biker dude with a set of abs you could grate cheese on, the one who has everyone’s panties in a twist.”

Darcy shakes her head and Wanda’s smile takes on a wicked little turn.

“Including yours, Lewis.” She smirks from across the table, giving Darcy a sly little wink that has her blushing a deep pink and twisting the napkin in her hands despite herself.

-------

Barton tries to fight him off, and Bucky swears again, trying to wrestle the idiot to the floor, amidst blood and bits of wood. He pulls the t-shirt off his shoulder and tries in vain to wrap it around the twitching hand of the man underneath him.

“For god’s sake, Barton, hold still-” Bucky grits out, trying his best to pin the other man to the hardwood floor. Blood from the wound in his hand squirts upward and hits Bucky in the face, shortly followed by Barton’s other hand. As it lands a decent strike across his nose, Bucky holds his breath and tries hard to remind himself of the benefits of not leaving this bloke bleeding out on the living room floor. They aren't coming particularly quickly to mind.

“Stop-”

Barton squirms and Bucky swings his legs either side of the bloke’s hips, figuring that his heavier bulk might keep the smaller man in one place long enough for Bucky to get his t-shirt around the guy’s hand.

“-fighting-”

Blood is dripping everywhere, gushing in fact, from the hole in the middle of Barton’s hand and he’s now covered in it as well. Barton continues to struggle and catches him again with a flailing hand.
“-you STUPID-”

It’s roughly this point at which he notices the empty bottle of Scotch discarded on the sofa. Staring at it in surprise, the other bloke takes advantage and pushes him off balance. With a groan and a crash, Bucky lands in a pile of shelves.

“Jesus, what the hell have you done, you great lump-” Bucky wheezes as Barton catches him in the ribs as he tries to scramble upwards and takes his breath away. He’s small and untrained but by gods is he scrappy. If he weren’t currently engaged in trying to prevent the bloke from bleeding out all over the threadbare rug that graces the living room floor, Bucky would have to concede that he’s kind of impressed at Nat’s choice in men.

Bucky is pulled down to floor level, Barton’s fist in his hair and knee dangerously close to his groin, trying to throw him off balance again. As he wobbles trying to regain it, he kneels on an empty pill packet. Looking down and reading the word paracetamol upside down he groans and wrenches his head backwards, sacrificing a clump of hair in the process.

As Barton’s fist jerks forward and nearly catches him on the temple again, Bucky seriously considers the merits of just knocking the bastard out. It would certainly be easier. A smallish voice in the back of his head, the one that always sounds alarmingly like Steve, points out that it wouldn’t actually make his life any easier if he did.

Bucky grabs at the shirt that’s fallen from his shoulder and grasps at Barton’s flailing hand waving threateningly in front of his face. Thankfully, if one could find a positive about the whole situation, the Scotch seems to be finally taking its toll. He’s woozier now, still struggling a bit but with much less coordination.

“Mate? I’m gonna need you to calm the hell down.” He says firmly, and grabs the smaller man at the shoulders. Bleary eyes finally focus on him and he breathes a short lived sigh of relief that he might actually be getting somewhere.

------

Susan is putting out the rubbish when she thinks she hears a strangled yell, followed by a loud thud. Lowering the trash can lid slowly, she follows her nose - or rather her ears - to the alleyway between her house and number 30.

Suspicious, she tiptoes her way down the passageway between the houses, and peeps through the hallway window. What she sees floors her.

Barton, flat on his back on the floor amidst a great deal of broken furniture, blood splattered across him and his eyes unfocused. Steve’s so called friend, that Bucky, straddled over him, pinning him down and looking for all the world as though he were about to strike him again.

Susan puts her hand to her mouth and stifles a scream against the palm of her hand. The man was an absolute brute, and it’s crystal clear to her now that he must have a criminal record. How Steve knows him is a mystery beyond that which she can comprehend. She pushes herself off the window and high tails it to number 24, hoping that Madge is home.

She’ll need reinforcements if they’re going to tackle him.

------

Clint stares up at the fuzzy figure in front of him, blinking, and realises through a haze of whiskey that it’s only bloody Bucky Barnes. He appears to be talking, on his knees in front of him, hands on
his shoulders but Clint can’t hear a damned thing because his hearing aids are on the sideboard and frankly he doesn’t give a crap anyway because nothing that arsehole could possibly say would he want to hear.

He can, actually, read lips but he’s choosing not to and to be honest the way that Barnes’ mouth is moving in front of him is making him dizzy as hell. Barton shakes his head and tries to wriggle out of the other man’s grasp, but can’t quite make it happen.

He pushes at him, hoping he’ll get the hint and bugger off, but he’s still there, all two of him, and Clint’s annoyed at that. His hand hurts as well, stinging and smarting like a nail’s been pushed through it - oh. Clint focuses for a moment on his own hand and remembers, through a fog of booze and painkillers, precisely why it is that there’s a fog of booze and painkillers. Now he comes to think about it, his hand does hurt. A lot.

He brings the offending hand to his face and just about manages to register that there's a large jagged hole in the middle of his palm. He blinks. There's also a lot of blood but he's pretty sure there ought to be a nail in it too. In fact, he distinctly remembers looking at the way it had punctured through the skin, muscle and sinew of his palm, and the stained point protruding from the back of his hand as he’d turned it over.

That's roughly the point at which he remembers pulling the nail out, and his stomach appears to remember it a little better than his brain does because that's also the point when he throws up.

-----

Madge eyes Susan as she’s bent double in her hallway, gasping for air and trying to speak all at the same time. She resists the urge to say what she really wants to say, which is that Susan will be all the better for when school is in session again, and she hasn’t got the time to obsess over Darcy’s love life - or lack thereof, as far as she knows from Natasha.

“I’m sure it’s not-“

“You don’t know what I saw, Madge.” Susan wheezes hard in response, holding one hand up towards the other woman as she spoke. “That boy had Clint on the floor, helpless, blood everywhere - it was like a murder scene!”

“There must be a simple explanation for all of this-” Madge attempts, and is cut off again.

“Absolutely. The boy’s a maniac. Aren’t you concerned? He apparently knows your Natasha.” Susan snaps, managing to haul herself upright, albeit that she’s clinging onto the wall now for support. “We need to call the police.”

Madge rolls her eyes, and tries to keep in mind that Susan is genuinely worried and not just a nosy neighbour without enough going on in her life. She knows full well that Bucky Barnes is a decent bloke. Natasha might not always do the right thing in life and god knows that the girl had had her own troubles along the way, but she knows people. If Nat vouched for him, that was enough for Madge.

“Tell you what, why don’t you go get yourself a drink and calm down, and I’ll call the police.” With that she ushers Susan into the kitchen, parks her in a bar stool with a large gin and tonic, and shuts herself in her bedroom where prying ears can’t overhear the call she’s making.

-----

Bucky somehow manages to haul Barton into the blue Beetle, having first thrown him over his
shoulder fireman-style and carrying him bodily from the house. He’s stuffing him limb by awk-
ward, struggling limb into the back seat, and the t-shirt has come loose from his hand again.
The act is punctuated by indignant cursing coming from the other man, and not a small amount of
blood that spurts from his hand across the seat and the back window.

Bucky’s got one knee on either seat and he’s leaning over the central console as he tries to combat
all of Barton’s flailing limbs at once. Ducking and dodging, he’s not quite far enough annoyed at
the situation he’s found himself in that he’s not impressed at how the other bloke is managing to
keep moving. Somehow he manages to pin Barton with one hand whilst pulling the seatbelt across
from the left and clipping it firmly into the right hand side. With Barton now partially strapped
down, it’s marginally easier to repeat the other way.

“Keep the goddamn shirt on it, will you?” Bucky hisses into the back seat, sitting back and
admiring his handiwork briefly before twisting himself inelegantly into the driver’s seat with a
thud and a groan. He has no way of enforcing it on Barton, but hopes against hope that the other
man has retained some modicum of sense amongst all the pills and booze he’s consumed.

Checking the rear view mirror as he backs out of the driveway, he can’t help but see Barton’s left
hand slap against the window and slowly draw back down again, leaving a smeared and bloody
handprint against the glass. Bucky sighs heavily. Steve is going to kill him, and no mistake. Even if
Barton doesn’t die sprawled across the backseat.

He bites his lower lip as he throws the car into reverse and feels the wheels whir against the tarmac
as it shunts backwards, tries to evaluate how much he actually likes Nat – because her boyfriend is
sure as hell causing him more problems than he really needs right now – and hopes he remembers
the way to Erinsborough hospital.

-------

“I’m telling you, Mrs K’s really got the needle for that Barnes.”

Toadie squints at himself in the mirror as he shouts back through to Helen. He runs a hand through
his hair, and finds himself wistfully remembering the days when it was long and bushy. Turns out
being a lawyer means he has to be more respectful in the appearance department. Helen says she
doesn’t mind, but he can’t help but wonder sometimes which look she really preferred.

“She’s Googling him and everything.” He adds, pulling open his shirt collar and inspecting the
chest hair that’s scattered across him. He peers closely at it, leaning towards the mirror. Is it
possible, he thinks, to get grey chest hairs? It must be, he supposes, but why get them on his chest
and not yet on his head? What does that even mean?

“I swear she thinks he’s got some dark and shady past. The way she’s carrying on you’d think the
fella was Chopper Read for Christ’s sake.” He snorts at his own joke, and it suddenly dawns on
him that his wife isn’t actually responding.

“Hel?” He asks, poking his head out from the bathroom.

She’s standing at the window, blinds pulled back slightly. Toadie calls her name again, then more
loudly. Still getting no response, he sighs and pads his way over to her, running his hands up her
bare shoulders lightly before wrapping his arms around her waist and dipping his chin to rest on
top of her head.

He thinks to himself how lucky he is to have this girl.
“Toadie.” She says, breaking his train of thought, and he is surprised to hear a wobble in her voice as she speaks. Helen is a very calm sort of girl, always has been. It’s one of the reasons he loves her so much. “Why has that man shoved an unconscious Clint into the back of Steve’s car?”

-------

Of course they’re just metres outside the damn hospital when Steve’s car, clanking and clamouring its protest at being driven more than forty yards in one go, finally gives up the ghost. It shudders to a stop, a thick cloud of smoke enveloping the car. Barton, who’d been yammering his head off in a mixture of drunken ramblings and exclamations of pain - Bucky mutters to himself that he’ll feel it a whole lot more once that Scotch has worn off - has now, thankfully, passed out.

Bucky, cursing to himself under his breath about flat pack furniture and the idiots who buy it, hauls himself out of the car and slams the door hard. He's mildly satisfied to see an involuntary jump from Barton at the noise, but also grimaces to see the state of Steve’s back seats. No amount of soda water and elbow grease is ever gonna get that lot out.

Sighing to himself, he hunkers down to the rear bumper, shoves one shoulder against it and heaves hard. The car whines, not wanting to move any further, and Barton makes a sound like he's going to puke again as it lurches forward haltingly. Bucky slams a hand against the back of the car and hollers that Barton better not be doing what it sounds like he’s doing, and pushes as hard as he can.

They move, slowly, into the hospital car park.

“Son, you need to bend from the hips. Gets more motion going, you see.” He hears just as he’s managed to shunt the beast - more or less - into a parking space. Looking up, throwing his head back and tossing his sweaty hair out of his face as he does so, Bucky finds an old man smiling back at him.

Bucky can't find within himself any polite words to respond to that, but thankfully they're interrupted by Wilson. He jogs up to the old man, deep green uniform bright against the off-white concrete of the building behind him, and he’s so focused on the man that he’s not yet spotted the car.

“Stan, my man,” Bucky’s other number one fan says, clapping a friendly hand to the old man’s shoulder. “You just need to pop back inside the hospital so they can do your blood pressure.”

“Oh sure thing, sonny, sure thing.” Stan replies with a wide smile and turns back to shuffle towards the hospital doors.

“What the hell have you done?” Sam’s eyes are huge and his jaw is practically on the floor as he takes in the state of Bucky, who catches sight of himself in a car door mirror and realises that he looks like he's just arrived direct from Wolf Creek. Long dark hair is stuck with sweat, blood and grease to his forehead; he’s dressed only in the same battered jeans he belatedly remembers he’s not actually washed since he gatecrashed Darcy’s birthday party and he’s pretty sure Barton clocked him hard enough earlier to do some damage to his face.

“Other than saved his life?” Bucky snaps, tired of the situation now and jerking a blood stained hand back over his shoulder at the Beetle. Sam’s eyes follow the movement of his hand and Barton chooses this moment to struggle upwards, straining against the seat belts, show his face briefly above the roll of the back seat, and throw up again. Noisily.

Bucky closes his eyes and wishes he could erase that sound from his memory banks.
“That's what you call saving his life? Remind me to call the authorities if you ever decide he needs a beat down.” Sam says, causing Bucky to open his eyes again.

---------

“Seems like the new guy killed Barton.” Tony muses as he passes over his card. Darcy jerks her head back at him in alarm, shoulders falling as she stares at him and forgetting to take his card. He waves it at her impatiently and, blinking, she takes it.

“How many new guys are there in Erinsborough?” Stark scoffs in response and she has to accept he's got a point.

“What do you mean, killed Clint?” Natasha appears from behind him, an empty tray tucked neatly under her arm and an expression on her face that, had Darcy not known the other girl so well, would have been mistaken for indifference.

Stark shrugs, tapping his PIN into the machine that Darcy hands him on autopilot over the counter. “Apparently there was a bust up at the house, broken furniture, yelling, lots of blood. Then your man appears, stuffs Barton into the back of Herbie the Wonder Car and drives off. We know not where.”

He looks up, and realises that the two girls appear to be having a silent conversation without him. He huffs and grabs the latte and doughnut from the counter.

“No, surely not.”

“I mean, Clint wouldn't…”

“No, he's not the sort.”

“And Bucky?”

Natasha sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, considering hard before replying. “Probably not.”

---------

Sam and Bucky manage between themselves to haul Barton’s sorry arse into the hospital and deposit him in a triage bay. He’s halfway to singing sea shanties, badly off-key, and Bucky has no idea where that’s come from. Somewhere along the line of bleeding, fighting and puking the stocky blond has switched from scrappy-drunk to sappy-drunk and Bucky’s not entirely sure which he dislikes more.

“I need a coffee.” He groans.

“You need a shirt.” Sam says pointedly, before adding, in what Bucky considers to be an unnecessarily stroppy tone of voice, that actually he’s at work and has to go attend other sick people. Bucky watches the other man stride away before sinking into a chair outside Clint’s room and letting out a long breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding.

“So is this chapter one of the Bucky Barnes Guide to Winning Friends and Influencing People?”
Bucky peels one eye open tiredly at the sound of the voice next to him, and immediately wishes he had pretended to be asleep. Or dead. Dead is what he’s likely to encounter shortly anyway, so he might as well get used to the idea.

“There only is one chapter in the Book of Barnes, Rogers, you know that.” He says, staring at the magnolia and grey wall in front of him as though it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen. Steve huffs out a laugh in response and sinks to his heels next to Bucky. A moment passes, and then-

“I didn't lay a hand on him.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Bucky nods, but continues to stare ahead of himself, eyes fixed on a dark stain on the wall which might be mark made from a trolley bed glancing off the wall but could equally be a blood stain. He’s deliberately not looking at the big blond beside him, and Steve returns in kind. Silence stretches out between the pair of them, although the bustle of the hospital carries on around them.

Behind them, they can hear Barton yelping indignantly as he’s stuck with a tetanus shot. The doctor, a bloke Bucky vaguely remembers is called Dr. Kennedy - and that name makes him shudder a little, though he’s not sure if there’s any relation and he can’t be arsed to ask Steve right now - laughs and tells Barton that if he’d learn how to put flat pack furniture together properly, he wouldn’t be in this mess.

Bucky clears his throat, still staring at the wall, fingers knitting together in his lap.

“You see the car?”

“Yeah, I saw the car.”

Bucky huffs, shoulders sagging, and he wipes a clump of sweat-slick hair away from his forehead before twisting in the cheap plastic chair to look at Steve. The blond turns himself also, his face open and honest, as it always is, as it always has been. Not for the first time in his life does Bucky consider that Steven Rogers is his polar opposite.

“You’re the only friend I’ve ever kept long enough to actually call you one.” He says quietly, and his blue eyes flicker up from the floor to meet Steve’s before skittering away again. His tongue pokes at his cheek before rolling around to the other side of his mouth, and he screws his face up as he speaks again.

“I didn’t mean to ruin the car, Steve-”

“Buck,” The other man says, scooting closer and laying a hand on his bare arm. “I don’t care about the bloody car. I care that you’re okay, that Clint’s okay. That’s what matters. Not some ancient upholstery that’d already seen better days by the time I got hold of it.”

Bucky chokes out a wet laugh in response, and Steve grins.

“How are you here, anyway?” Bucky asks, straightening up slightly and shaking his hair out of his eyes.

“Let’s just say you owe Madge Bishop a favour, and it’d be best to steer clear of Susan Kennedy for a while.”

------
Nat hauls her little car around the street corners as though she’s on a test track trying to beat a personal best, and Darcy knows a lot better than to make any comment on the redhead’s driving. Instead she hangs onto the armrest, grits her teeth and stoically does not mention that the other girl does not appear to have touched the brakes since the wheels squealed against the tarmac of the coffee shop car park.

She all but abandons it in the hospital car park, storming her way up the steps and throwing the keys back over her shoulder at Darcy when the brunette yells to remind her that she’s not actually locked the damn thing. Darcy misses catching the keys but counts it as a win that she also misses being hit in the head with them. Scooping them off the tarmac she hits the remote central locking button and looks up to realise that Steve’s pride and joy, the blue Beetle, is right in front of her.

The back seat looks like someone’s died on it, and there’s a revolting mess over the floor that she doesn’t ever want to have to take a closer look at it. Wrinkling her nose and taking a step back, she decides that she also wants to be nowhere near Steve when he sees it.

-----

Clint grins up at Natasha as she blows into the little med bay room.

He’s now riding high on a little morphine that the doctor reluctantly gave him, and the last ripples of the Scotch and the Paracetamol that’s still finding its merry way through his bloodstream. They’ve cleaned him up, mostly, although his checked shirt is stained and ripped in places.

It’s the drugs, he’ll think later, when his mind is clearer, that dull him to the look on her face. If he’d had his wits about him then there’s no way he would have missed the warning signs.

Darcy appears cautiously at the door, hovering and opting not to cross the threshold.

“How are you?” The redhead asks, laying a hand against his arm tenderly. Clint rolls his head back against the pillow and thinks to himself dazedly that she looks like an angel, an honest to god angel, her head haloed by the strip lighting that glows behind her.

“M’fine.” He signs at her, fingers sloppy but happy, and then remembers he has something to show her. “Look-” he gestures, and contorts himself as he twists and turns to get a hand into his back pocket. He rummages and grasps and finally, triumphantly, presents to her a bloodied and now slightly bent nail.

He misses entirely the way that her face hardens as he waves the trophy in front of her.

Darcy on the other hand, does not, and takes a step backwards, wondering if closing her eyes to this will help or not if she tries for plausible deniability. She can’t fathom why he’d keep the nail that’s pierced his hand, but she knows that Nat won’t care for his little display of show and tell.

She escapes into the corridor just before the yelling starts.

-----

Bucky’s not so much sat as collapsed into a plastic chair in the corridor, still shirtless and head bowed. His dark hair falls across his face and he’s not trying too hard to fight the waves of tiredness that are washing over him right now.

He feels rather than sees a body take the chair next to him, and only bothers looking up when he hears them clear their throat.
Rolling his head up, every fibre of his being protesting in unison not to do it, he finds Darcy staring
back at him. He fights against the thought that pops immediately into his head as his eyes rake over
her, that she looks like a bloody dream sat there next to him, all dark curls and big blue eyes.

“You come to give me grief as well?” He doesn't mean to snap at her, not really, but it’s been a
long-arse day, he's beyond bone tired and still covered in crusted blood. Some of it’s his own, from
cut fingers torn on Steve's bumper, and from where Barton caught him good across the nose. It's
not broken, he’s pretty sure, but it's tender as hell and he thinks he's probably developing a black
eye, too.

“I came to offer you a ride home, actually.” Darcy shoots back, arching an eyebrow at him and
looking distinctly unimpressed. “But if you have a deep desire to sit in Clint’s puke then by all
means, be my guest.” With that, she slides herself up out of the chair and only stops when his hand
finds hers.

“M’sorry.” He mumbles, and chances to squeeze her hand with his. She looks down at where their
hands are intertwined and he remembers with a grimace that his hands are covered in blood and
grease. Bucky goes to pull away but she hangs on and squeezes back, just briefly, before she drops
it.

“I'm not good with people.” He says, voice still lower and his head dropping towards his chest. His
hand feels empty without hers clasped in it, and he tenses it slightly as he speaks, as though he can
feel her touch against his if he wills it hard enough.

“Behold, Captain Obvious, King of the Understatement.” He chances a look up at her as she speaks
and is gratified to see that, despite what she’s saying and the tilt to her head as she says it, there’s a
soft look in her eye that offers him more than a little hope. Even more, actually, than the way she
looks at him shirtless. That’s lust, pure and simple, and if he’s honest with himself he’s had enough
of that to last him this lifetime and the next.

No, the way that little Darcy Lewis is looking at him right now speaks of the possibility of
something entirely different, and he surprises himself by liking it.

-----

Madge has come to collect Clint, bundling him and Nat both into her station wagon and leaving
Sam and Steve to contend with the mess that is the Beetle. Sam’s not entirely sure how it is that
he’s wound up having to drive home a heap of nuts and bolts that by rights should never be
anywhere near a road, the smell from the backseat threatening to overpower him, when all he did
that day was get up and go to work as normal.

Bucky slips into the passenger seat of Nat’s car as Darcy starts the engine. He’s quiet,
contemplative, as he sits. He kind of wishes he had a t-shirt, but the one he offered to alter of
Clint’s broken hand is long gone now, discarded in some surgical waste bin along with the nail that
had caused all the problems in the first place.

It’s both the longest car ride and the shortest one he’s ever had, and somehow she’s already pulling
into the driveway of number 24 and parking the little car. Darcy’s a careful driver, all hands at ten
and two and signalling before every manoeuvre. It’s the opposite to how he drives, all loose limbed
and lackadaisical, but he can’t help but be charmed by her.

Darcy switches the engine off, and with that steady hum goes the lights, plunging them both into
semi-darkness. He can just about see the outline of her face, edged in the soft glow of the street
lamps, and he kind of wants to reach out and run a finger across that sharp cheekbone, but can’t
bring himself to do so.

Instead he stares at his hands, clasped together in front of him and that’s probably why he misses her sudden movement until she’s practically in his lap and pressed against him. Bucky stares up at her, mouth falling open because he hadn’t expected anything - not a single thing - and so his brain can’t process what’s going on right now.

That brain just about short-circuits as her lips meet his and he’s so out of it, so surprised by this turn of events, that he doesn’t even have the presence of mind to loop and arm around her waist and drag her flush against his chest like he’s thought about doing already. Later, lying in bed and running his tongue over his lower lip as he remembers the taste of her, he’ll castigate himself about how he’s lost his edge with girls.

The truth of it is, and it’ll take him a while to get there on his own but he will, eventually, that he doesn’t have any desire to play that edge with Darcy, the way he usually does with the girls he hangs with. And he’s hung with a number of girls, make no mistake about that, but this little spark that’s igniting in his chest, well this tastes different than the others and right now he can’t quite process that.

He will.

Darcy’s mouth is open against his now and he’s got enough presence of mind to run his tongue against hers, at least, so he’s not a totally hopeless case. They’re interrupted though by a bright burst of light that illuminates the interior of Natasha’s car and blinds them both.

She jerks off his lap, legs tangling with his as she brings a hand up to shield her eyes.

Susan Kennedy peers in, and she does not look amused.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which there are second thoughts, third thoughts, and wayward thoughts.

Chapter Notes

With a reference to an iconic scene from another soap opera, if anyone can spot it.

“I cannot believe what I just witnessed!”

Though it takes every ounce of energy she has, Darcy does not sigh at Susan’s words. Instead, she hums noncommittally and she grabs the kettle to fill it up, content to let her foster mother rant until she’s got it out of her system. She hopes it’s before Miss Fisher starts.

She can still taste Bucky, her lips echoing with the memory of his pressed against them.

“I have spent all day at my wit’s end, worried sick about Clint and what that man might do next, only to find him glued to your face, instead of locked in a cell where he ought—”

“Why would Bucky be in a cell?” Darcy asks, bewildered.

“Oh, it’s ‘Bucky’ now, is it? That’s awfully familiar, but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised given where his hands were.”

“It’s what everyone calls him,” she replies, ignoring the end of Susan’s statement. The water in the kettle has reached a nice, rolling bubble, so Darcy makes a show of grabbing mugs from the mug tree and fishing around for the chamomile tea. Something soothing is definitely needed.

“Well, I’d prefer to call him a criminal.”

Darcy bites her lip, glad her back is to Susan so her eye roll goes unwitnessed. “What on earth makes you think he’s a criminal?”

“He beat up Clint!”

Now Darcy faces Susan and laughs. “You could not have got this more wrong.”

“Really? Because I witnessed him giving the poor guy a right thump.”

On second thoughts, maybe a slug of brandy would be a better idea. “Did you? Because Clint’s not said a word about Bucky hitting him.”

“Yes! He had him pinned to the ground, blood all over the pair of them, grappling around while Clint tried to throw him off.”
“So you didn’t actually see Bucky hit him?”

“I saw enough!”

Darcy pours out the hot water, rooting through the cutlery drawer for a spoon and her last shred of patience. “You saw what you wanted to see. I got the whole story from Steve—Clint injured himself and got sloshed rather than getting help. He lost a lot of blood and would have ended up with a nasty infection if Bucky hadn’t been there.”

“So I’m supposed to believe he’s a hero?”

“For saving Clint from his own stupidity? Sure.”

She holds out one mug to Susan, hoping this is the end of the conversation. Susan takes it and stares at Darcy for a good long moment, before her expression softens.

“I know he might seem heroic,” she continues, and Darcy internally kicks herself for daring to hope, “but some men will act like they’re something they aren’t, to get what they want. You’re so open, he can probably read you like a book and knew you wouldn’t stop him.” She’s concerned and means every word she says, even if she’s way off base.

“I kissed him,” Darcy corrects her flatly.

The concern wavers, though Susan keeps going with the softly-softly approach. “I’m only trying to warn you to be on your guard, because he could try to take advantage of you.”

“It was just a kiss!”

“And you barely know him!” Susan’s back on full throttle.

“At least I’ve had conversations with him. You won’t even give him the time of day, which I think means I have more room to pass judgement.” Try as she might, her cool is fraying.

“Darcy, trust me, I know men like that. I have met too many of them, have seen the consequences of getting involved with them over and over again, and I’m only trying to protect you.”

“You aren’t my mother!”

The words are harsh, cold, and Darcy regrets them as soon as she spits them loose. A hand comes to clap over her mouth, and she’s staring at Susan with wide eyes.

Susan, on her side, hasn’t had the chance to let the words sink in. But when they do, she’ll be devastated, and Darcy can’t let that happen—not after everything Susan has done for her. She has a millisecond to put this right.

Her tea is abandoned on the counter while she throws herself over to Susan, to grab her by the arms and plead her case. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that!” she says, letting word vomit spill out. “I know you mean well, and I shouldn’t get frustrated with you because I know Mum would probably be telling me the same thing. It’s just been a long, weird day and I need to go to bed before I do more stupid things.”

Susan wavers, Darcy’s statement still hanging in the air between like an axe about to fall. In the end, she pats Darcy’s hand, the flash of hurt buried and a brave smile put on. “I know, love. Let’s just watch some TV and have a quiet one.”
“Good idea.”

Darcy knows, as they slink to their respective seats, that she is lucky to have Susan. Without her, Darcy would have spent her life being passed from one set of rellies to the next, like she was in the first year after her mother died. It was only on Toadie’s intervention she’d been brought to Ramsay Street and given a stable home, and Susan deserves more than to have that thrown back in her face. She is the closest thing Darcy has to a mother.

And yet Darcy also knows that this is not the end of the matter. Not as long as Bucky is living so close, not when she is drawn to him, and not while Darcy is dying to spread her wings.

Bucky winces at the raised voices he can hear from next door. Domestics make him want to take flight, but since he’s partially responsible for this one, he’s reluctant to put ear buds in and ignore it. He can’t hear the words, only the cadence of anger and frustration, and even that is because nobody sees a problem with leaving their windows open all the time around here.

He’d offer to do the chivalrous thing—the unlikely thing, if you were to ask Stevie—and go rescue Darcy from her guardian’s ire, but he knows it will only inflame the situation. He’s not much good with words. Even worse at holding his temper. And, truth be told, if he was going after Darcy, it was to drag her back to the car to finish what she’d started.

He’s wired. It’s been a while since his last entanglement, longer than anyone would suspect, but it’s not only a case of blue balls which has got him wound up. Darcy pressed up against him in the car, all warm skin and hot mouth, was enough to get anyone’s motor running, but it’s more even than that. It was the little moment they’d shared in the hospital waiting room, the one which had left him feeling a little vulnerable even before she rubbed up against him.

Everything had been promising one of the most electric encounters of his already eventful life, right up until the moment they were interrupted. Then Darcy went off to do battle with her foster mother, gesturing for him to stay out of it and leaving him with Nat’s car keys.

So now he’s in the empty House of Trouser, with adrenaline pulsing through him, and not a damn thing to do.

He could, upon reflection, clean the living room. In the dim light it could be mistaken for recently being hit by a bomb—he’s seen less debris during training drills. But cleaning would be giving into domesticity, and he’s already having regrets about this charming little cul-de-sac. This place is all about the domesticity, and it rankles with Bucky, everything he never wanted. Certainly not why he came to visit Steve.

Yet he has no desire to go back to his old life either. He’d worn that out, until there was nothing fresh he could wring from it, until the routine had become its own domestic treadmill. One day he’d woken up, realised it was stifling him, and bailed.

So Ramsay Street will have to do, until he can find a new adventure, a new path to venture down. Until then, he will try to keep himself from becoming tame. And the less he finds himself tangled with Darcy—willing and startlingly perceptive though she appears to be—the better. For her sake.

He’ll only disappoint her.

At least the noise from next door has stopped. He grabs leftover pizza from the fridge and retreats to his room, deciding a long shower tonight—while there’s no one around to whinge about him using all the hot water—and a round of sparring in the morning ought to sort him out.
“I’m glad you came.”

“I’m glad you invited me.”

Steve beams at Sharon, who looks good even with her hair pulled loosely back and no make-up on. She has flawless skin, and he knows his mates would rib him endlessly if they ever heard him say it out loud, but it’s true. Plus, warm, brown eyes which always seem to be sparkling and inviting.

“I wasn’t sure if this was a good idea for a, uh, date,” he fumbles.

“Are you kidding? I love hiking!”

“Good. Something we have in common.” He’s still beaming. “I guess it’s a little unconventional, so it had me worried that you’d want to do something a little more relaxing.”

“I reckon when you get asked out by a gym instructor, you’ve got to expect he’s going to want to do physical things.” She stops talking and stares at him in horror. “Not that—I didn’t mean—”

He laughs. “I know what you mean. Glad it’s not just me who manages to put their foot in it all the time.”

“Nah, it’s a terrible habit of mine.” She’s smiling again, with a faint blush dusting her cheeks, and it brings out her dimples.

“Well, at least it’s something else we have in common.” He gestures towards the trail they’re standing near the beginning of. “Shall we?”

“I owe you an apology, mate.”

Bucky squints up from his spot next to the bike to find Barton leaning over him, holding out a cold one. His hand is still bandaged up. “Is that right?”

“Yeah. Nat had a word with me, laid a few truths out. Anyway, you put yourself out there to help me even when I was being a complete dingo about it.”

Bucky accepts the beer and nods, using the universal bloke’s code for ‘apology accepted’.

“Reckon you owe Steve one too.”

“He’s making me clean out the car. And the living room.”

“Tough break.”

“Nah, I earned it.” Bucky silently agrees, but he doesn’t miss Barton’s sidelong look. “Unless you want to help an injured bloke out?”

Bucky doesn’t even dignify that with a response.

“Sooooo…” Wanda leans over the counter of the empty Coffee Shop, tapping chipped black nails on the glass. “Last night I happened to be casually looking out of my window when I saw something very interesting.”

Darcy stops wiping down the inside of the display cabinet to glance up at her friend. “Sounds like you need a hobby. You’re turning into your old man.”
Wanda waves a hand, entirely unconcerned with the jibe. “I think Nat would be interested in what I saw.”

Nat looks up from where she is cleaning a table and does a very, very impressive impression of someone who isn’t interested at all. “Reckon?” But the fact that she’s stopped what she was doing means she’s intrigued, and Wanda knows her well enough to figure this out.

“Definitely.” She pauses for dramatic effect, but continues when no one prompts her to go on. “I saw Darcy in a liplock with our new resident grease monkey.”

Crap. Darcy had assumed Wanda was going to talk about the bloodbath at number 30. The lights had been off in the car, for Pete’s sake, how had she even seen? The girl has the eyesight of a bat. Darcy steals a glance at Nat, worried how she’ll take this revelation.

Nat’s face lights up with a lopsided grin. “Is that so? Tell me more.” She sidles across to the counter. “Did you defile my car? Because I’m charging you to have it deep-cleaned if you did, but I’d also be very proud of you.”

Darcy is a little thrown by Nat’s reaction. There’s no hint of jealousy, no word of warning about how she should be careful with Bucky, nothing but conspiratorial interest. “No, no defiling.” She narrows her eyes at Wanda. “Not where anyone could see us, apparently.”

“Somewhere no one could see, then?” Nat asks, and now it’s a very wide, dirty grin.

“No, Susan caught them and dragged Darcy inside like a naughty twelve year old,” Wanda replies.

“Shame.”

“You two are terrible,” Darcy mutters.

“We only have a healthy interest in you getting to sample some prime beefsteak,” Nat says.

“It’s about time, too,” agrees Wanda. “Gotta run, but see you in the Waterhole later?”

They agree to meet up after dinner, and Wanda leaves with the last slice of Madge’s chocolate cake. Darcy and Nat continue to work in silence, but it gives Darcy time to think. The conversation has enlightened her on two things.

First, Nat doesn’t see any reason why Darcy shouldn’t pursue Bucky. If she thought he was bad news, she’d have said so, and Nat knows him far better than Susan does.

Second, even though Darcy doesn’t know the history between Nat and Bucky, it’s clearly old news. Maybe it was time to stop worrying about it, and accept that Bucky was guaranteed to come with a past. It didn’t mean that past had to interfere with the two of them.

“Hey, Nat?” she asks, as they are closing the shop down for the evening. “You still interested in getting a place?”

If Nat’s surprised by Darcy’s change of heart, she doesn’t show it. “Deffo.” She flips the sign on the door to Closed and swings the keyring round her index finger. “House of Bikini, here we come.”

Steve appears to be floating as he makes his way up the path towards number 30. Sam does a double-take, but it’s an illusion, constructed entirely of Steve’s apparent happiness.
Barnes seems to notice too. He wolf-whistles at his mate from his spot on the drive, next to the motorbike he is painstakingly detailing. Shirtless. Again. Sam’s tempted to buy him a pack of cheap tees, but the bloke would probably end up using them as rags while he works instead of wearing the bloody things.

“Did you rock her world?” Barnes calls. Steve pauses, a hint of pink staining his cheeks, and rubs the back of his neck.

“ Took her hiking. Had a really good time.”

“You did what?” Barnes speaks at the same time as Sam does, and Sam is reluctantly pleased that Barnes sees how ridiculous this is too.

“She had fun!”

“Were you not listening last time we had this conversation?” Sam asks. “You make it easy for them. Pleasant. Make them feel good.”

Steve goes off on an explanation about exercise-induced endorphins, which means Sharon will be feeling good, and Barnes knocks his forehead against the shiny chrome of his bike. “Anyway, she wants to see me again, so no matter what you drongos think, it can’t be that bad. I’m taking her fishing.”

This appears to be the last straw for Barnes. “Nobody gets endorphins from fishing, Stevie. Nobody!”

Steve shrugs and heads inside, pausing as the door swings open to reveal a pile of envelopes on the table inside the door. He picks them up and rifles through, then hands one over to Sam. He hadn’t checked before, and assumes it’s a bill until he realises the address on the front is handwritten. It makes him pause—for some reason he swears he recognises the writing.

He turns it over to check the postmark, which is obscured by a big glob of oil.

“Barnes!”

Susan pauses dusting inside number 28. Finally, she’s got a full name for this Bucky bloke. And it turns out Steve might be seeing someone who isn’t Darcy.

It might be too late to steer the two of them together. Might not be. But for now, she’s got enough information to resume searching for Barnes’ past and make sure Darcy knows exactly who she’s interested in.

Steve has dragged them to the local pub, hoping beer will lubricate the gears between his two oldest friends. Bucky thinks the solution is simpler—he just needs to remove the stick from up Wilson’s arse—but he’s never going to turn down a coldie. The Waterhole seems more civilised than the places he’s been drinking in of late, though he realises that’s probably a good thing. He isn’t going to have to spend the whole night avoiding being in proximity to the latest brawl, or even being involved in one himself. Though going anywhere with Stevie, you never can tell.

He isn’t expecting for Darcy to be there when they enter, sharing a booth with Nat—he winces internally at that—and another girl he recognises but can’t name. She definitely recognises him too, if the spark of intrigue in her gaze is any indication. Both Nat and the girl’s heads whip towards Darcy when they spot him, and he knows he’s been a topic of conversation. It’s enough to put
some swagger in his stride.

For her part, Darcy glances his way once, then away, but he watches her swallow down a mouthful of beer and try to act like she’s barely noticed he’s here. He realises he’s staring at her, even as Sam and Stevie head straight to the bar. He almost acknowledges her—a raised hand, or, hell, even a smile—then catches himself.

He isn’t here to put down roots. And Darcy, sweet Darcy who is giving him a sideways look, is definitely roots. She isn’t a shallow thing, barely clinging to the surface of the soil. No, her feet are planted so deep she can never really be untangled from this place.

So instead, he pretends like he hasn’t seen her, heading to prop up the bar with his elbows. There’s a blonde eyeing up Stevie, who hasn’t noticed at all, but she’s happy to turn her attention to him when he approaches. She’s a bit wiry for his tastes, but he’s always willing to look beyond appearances. Besides, it’s only for the evening.

“Can I get you a drink, sunshine?”

Darcy’s in a foul mood, and she’s sure everyone knows it. That has to be why she’s received a text from Jane, inviting her to have lunch at a little place near the hospital before her friend starts her shift. It’s a sign people have reached out to Jane rather than have to deal with Darcy directly. Poor Nat and Wanda already got an earbending on the walk home from the pub last night and probably want her to get it out of her system before they interact with her again.

Fine by her. She’s nowhere close to running out of names for that mongrel.

Jane’s waiting on an outside table, in the best patch of sunshine. Darcy flings herself down and pouts at her friend.

“That good, huh?” says Jane. “I already ordered for you. Thought you needed some potato cakes.”

“Deffo,” Darcy agrees. A shadow falls over the table, and she glances up expecting it to be the promised deep-fried deliciousness, but instead it’s Helen pulling up a chair.

“Good arvo,” her cousin’s wife says in greeting, grabbing a menu. It means she misses the look Darcy aims at Jane. She can’t have this conversation in front of Helen; not when there’s the risk she’ll report back to Toadie. “The quinoa salad looks good.”

Of course Helen thinks that. She’s tiny — she has to survive on rabbit food. Or maybe it’s because she’s a doctor she makes an effort to eat properly… nah. Darcy’s knows Jane could survive on burgers alone.

“Helen,” Jane begins, “can you promise not to discuss a word of this with Toadie?”

Helen looks at her friend over the top of her menu. “Of course. I always take patient confidentiality seriously,” she says, with a wink at Darcy.

It’s this terrible sense of humour that makes her a perfect fit for Toadie.

“Really?” Darcy asks. “You’re not going to be all ‘I share everything with him’?”

Helen snorts. “I don’t tell him jack. It’s the secret to a happy marriage.”

Darcy relaxes. “Okay, perfect.” And she proceeds to tell them about everything that’s happened
since Bucky arrived, right up to the events of the night before. How she’d been left feeling a little humiliated by Bucky ignoring her and flirting with a gym bunny for the entire night. The only saving grace had been that he’d left with Sam and Steve, leaving a disappointed blondie behind. She’s also positive they didn’t exchange numbers—not that she’s ever seen evidence that Bucky actually owns a mobile.

“What a sleaze,” Jane says when she’s done.

“Sounds like a total root rat,” Helen agrees, stealing a fry from Jane’s plate.

“Maybe.” But talking it over has given Darcy new clarity. “But I kissed him, not the other way around. Maybe I read something that wasn’t there and this is his way of making it clear to me.”

“He kissed you back, though,” says Jane. “And would have kept doing so if you hadn’t been interrupted.”

“He might have been about to shove me off. God, I don’t know. Maybe he felt sorry for me and was trying to let me down gently.”

So yeah, she’s mellowed when lunch is over, but no less confused. If she could get a few days to get her head straight, she might be able to not make a fool of herself the next time she sees Bucky.

It’s just her rotten luck that when she crosses the Lassiter’s complex on her way to work, he’s coming in the opposite direction.

Bucky makes a point not to regret many things; otherwise he’d have no time to do anything else. Yet he definitely regrets what he did last night.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, right up until Nat had spent all night glaring at him and the blonde—Teri? Sammy? Danni?—had turned out to be as interesting as cardboard. Even watching Sam strike out with the pretty bartender (Maria—her name he remembers, if only because she’s his new favourite person) wasn’t entertaining enough to distract him. He kept finding himself glancing over at the girls’ booth, where Darcy was making an impressive effort of pasting a carefree smile on her lovely face. The disappointment and hurt lingering underneath is obvious, though, even to a dipstick like him.

It had been enough to put him off more drinks, and in the end he’d slunk home early. The conclusion he’d come to was that maybe it wasn’t such a terrible idea to get to know Darcy and see where the chemistry between them led.

He’s probably blown his chances, but he’s willing to put some legwork into getting her to forgive him. Even if it means he actually has to talk to a girl for once. Really talk to her, and let her glimpse at the nonsense rattling round in his skull.

So when he spots a familiar head of brown curls moving in his direction at Lassiter’s, he’s torn between the urge to bail or go talk to her. The decision’s taken out of his hands before he can make it—she sees him, makes eye contact, and looks firmly away.

He’d rather not do this out here, but if this isn’t a poke from the universe to fix things, he doesn’t know what is. So he strides over to her with his most winning smile, the smile that usually ensured he wasn’t the one paying for drinks, the one that even made his Ma relent in the face of it.

“Darce,” he greets her with a nod. “G’day.”
Her eyebrows draw together slowly. She seems to be coming to some kind of conclusion, and he’s got a sinking feeling he is going to like it. “Is it?” He could keep a few tinnies chilled with the temperature of her words.

This is going as well as expected. He needs to do something drastic to turn things around, and he has no idea what.

She shifts to walk past him, and he moves to block her. “Can we talk?” he tries.

“I’m going to be late for work.”

“It won’t take long.”

“I’m sure it’s not the first time you’ve said that to a girl.”

He winces, but secretly he’s thrilled. God, she’s quick-witted. He also resists the urge to start bragging about stamina, because that is not what this situation needs, even if his ego would like defending. “I think I may have given you the wrong impression.”

“What, that you’re the kind of bloke who kisses a girl one day and then flirts with another girl the next? Where would I get that impression from?” She’s trying to edge around him and he has to keep moving to stay facing her.

“You kissed me, remember?” It’s a stupid detail to focus on, he knows, but he’s going to need a warm-up or something before he can actually deliver a sincere apology.

“I felt sorry for you,” she spits.

“Right,” he says flatly. The girl’s a terrible liar, but the blow still lands. “You pity me.”

“Listen, I don’t know what brought you here, but it’s obvious you don’t have much going for you, or you wouldn’t be scrounging off Steve.”

His ego’s definitely calling for reinforcements right now. She’s too perceptive for her own good, and it leaves him without a good retort. So he moves to an offensive strategy before his brain can remind him it’s a terrible idea if he wants her to like him. “So do you throw yourself at all the blokes you pity?”

For a second, Bucky thinks she’s going to wallop him. For a second, he thinks he’s going to wallop himself. Implying the girl he’s trying to win over that she’s easy is a level of stupid even Stevie’s never achieved, and if she decides to take a crotch-shot, he’s not going to stop her.

Instead, she shoves him out of the way. “Rack off, Barnes.”

He watches her stomp across to the Coffee Shop, the door slamming behind her as she goes inside.

There’s a bench beside the path and he shuffles over to sink onto it, dropping his head into his hands. Being demoted to last name status in her closing words makes it clear how badly that whole thing went. He’s not sure how he can salvage this, or even if he should try.

Nah, he’s going to. It’d be hard to stick to his no regrets policy seeing her every day and wondering what would have happened if he’d made the effort. Besides, he doesn’t need tension with a neighbour, not when Steve will be so uncomfortable with the situation he’ll inevitably try to fix it.

And Bucky really doesn’t want to give Susan the satisfaction of thinking she’s right about him.
But he’s not daft enough to follow Darcy straight into the Coffee Shop. Causing a scene while she’s at work is red card behaviour, and he doesn’t want to ruffle Madge’s feathers either. Darcy’s probably on the closing shift, giving him several hours to cool his heels before she’s free to talk again.

That’s fine. He can wait. There’s a bookshop close by he can get a Dostoevsky or something from to keep him entertained in the meantime.

It’s a good thing Darcy doesn’t rely on tips, because she wouldn’t be getting any this afternoon. The mood which cleared up after lunch reignited as soon as Bucky turned that easy smile on her, the one which said “this is the bare minimum effort I usually put in to get what I want.”

And despite making herself perfectly clear how she felt about that, he’s lounging on the bench outside, his nose stuck in a brick-sized book. She catches glimpses of him every time she moves around the shop to clear tables, and the fact that he is obviously waiting out there to start annoying her as soon as her shift finishes does not endear him to her at all. Even if she never, in a million years, expected to catch him reading Kafka.

Jokes on him. She’s going to leave through the back door tonight. He can sit out there all night if he wants.

Even Stan feels the need to comment on her mood when he comes in for his daily slab of cake. “It’s not like you to pout like this. You need a nice boy to lift your spirits.”

She shakes her head. “I’m off men at the moment.” She was never really on men, either, but that’s looking like a wise life choice at the moment.

“A nice girl then?”

Darcy ignores Nat’s face flashing in her mind’s eye at his suggestion, and slides the cake across the counter to him. “Think a hot bath and a bottle will do the trick instead.”

A few minutes later she’s back at the front of the shop, wiping down a table, when she realises the bench is empty. She assumes Bucky gave up and went home (smart bloke), until she catches a flash of movement in her peripheral vision. She turns to find Bucky in the centre of the courtyard, his face contorted in anger.

It’s the other guy’s face she’s worried for. The one Bucky is currently beating to a pulp.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Next posting early-to-mid next week for our intrepid readers ...

Bucky, as it goes, has a number of good qualities to his name.

They come wrapped in what's possibly a much larger number of bad ones, but that's by the by. He's never been quite able to work out whether his inherent inability to back down if he sees something going wrong falls into the good category or not. It's a trait he shares with Steve. In fact, it's the reason they became mates in the first place.

Sometimes he wonders if his life would be easier if he could manage to walk on past when he sees something going south, but as it's never happened yet, he's not going to find out the answer anytime soon.

Like now, for instance, he reflects as he throws a neat right hook at the other guy’s face and connects with a satisfyingly wet sound into the bloke’s nose. He's been quite happily sat outside the coffee shop, awaiting Darcy’ shift end, half-reading The Metamorphosis and half thinking on what he could possibly say to the little brunette to correct his earlier foot-in-mouth syndrome; when this guy comes up hassling the old woman on the table next to him.

Bucky might have been able to shake his head and bury his face back in his book - except that's a pretty lie, if he's being straight with himself, and whilst he might not always present all of himself at all times to others, Bucky does at least endeavour not to lie to himself - but then the guy had to pull a flick knife and start demanding she give over her purse.

That, he thinks as he pulls the bloke into a headlock and slams him knees first into concrete, earning a strangled scream that begins and dies in the guy’s throat as Bucky’s left hand reaches around and squeezes experimentally against the tendons in that self-same throat, was really the point he saw red.

It's also the point that he threw his book clear across both his table and the next at the other bloke, and clocked him neatly on the back of the head. Thank god for sniper training, inherently decent hand-eye coordination and hard-backed books. If he ever finally makes his way out of this godforsaken cul-de-sac, and finds himself in Prague, he’ll lay the blood-stained copy in Kafka’s house as tribute.

It's actually not the weirdest way he's ever instigated a fight, but it does the trick as intended and the bloke turns his attention from the old woman who snatches up her purse and scarpers, with barely so much as a backward glance. Turning towards Bucky, the bloke snarls - honest to goodness snarls - and stands up straight.

He's got to be at least a head taller than Bucky, and maybe 30lbs heavier. There's another thing about Bucky that he shares with Steve, they both like a challenge and they’re not afraid of the bigger man. Bucky grins.

He supposes that, since he's apparently giving himself over to introspection this afternoon, he
should probably count that as a character flaw - the fact that, as the bloke starts to barrel towards him, he's actually kind of looking forward to the impact. That said, the impact never happens - or, at least, not like the other bloke thinks it's going to when he puts his head down and moves his bulk like a battering ram - Bucky twists nearly to one side just at the last possible moment and uses the weight against his opponent.

Bucky brings a sharp knee up into the other man’s ribs and grins again as he hears the breath being knocked clean out of him. The bloke drops in pain but he's a tough old bastard and he's angling the knife in his right hand towards Bucky as he goes down slowly. If he weren't slamming a hand against the guy's closed fist to stop him from opening his chest from collar bone to hip, Bucky would confess to being a little impressed at the bloke’s stamina. As it is, the knife tip pierces his shirt and there's an unpleasant ripping sound as the material cleaves in two.

“That's my favourite shirt.” Bucky grunts as he throws his weight behind pushing that fisted hand away from his chest, and swings a leg wide and low into the back of the bloke’s knees with a crack as the tattered remains of said shirt flap around his torso. He glances down at himself and the sudden expanse of bare skin he’s now showing.

“Actually, that’s my only shirt.”

He reaches down for the knife, having forced the bloke onto the concrete, and kicks down reflexively onto the guy’s elbow. It achieves two things instantaneously; for one Bucky gains control of the knife, and this is a Good Thing. Second, he's pretty confident he's just fractured the bloke’s radial bone and that'll give him the upper hand.

“Bucky?”

It’s the sound of his name just as much as the way it’s being yelled that distracts him momentarily and his head flips the to coffee shop doorway where Darcy is stood, eyes wide and jaw to the floor. Some small voice in the back of his head tells him that this isn't going to play out well for him, but then he has a fist in his own face and the voice is smothered by a much louder one yelling at him to concentrate on one thing at a time.

The fist is followed in short fashion by the bloke’s forehead, and it connects hard with Bucky’s own as he jerks down in time to save his nose from being splattered across his face. Blinking hard in an effort to chase away the dizziness that threatens to overtake him, Bucky thinks to himself - so that’s how it’s gonna be, eh?

He still has the knife and that's a bonus, he thinks as he staggers backwards, blood in his eyes now and he knows it's his own from the smarting pain in his forehead. Bucky touches his free hand to his head and it comes away stained a deep red. The other bloke has struggled back to his feet again and goes for Bucky, arms around his waist like a rugby tackle, taking him down roughly against the concrete.

Bucky has the presence of mind to drop the knife at this point, send it skittering out of harm's way because he doesn't want the bloke to stab him, obviously, or anyone else, but he also really doesn't want to be the one on the other end of it either. Having a punch up outside the coffee shop is one thing but stabbing a guy, even for a good reason, is something that won't ever go away.

Dimly, in the background, he can hear a scream pierce through the air and something in him registers that it's Darcy. Blinking, and on his back on the ground as the other bloke wrestles him down again, Bucky manages to focus on her and sees that she's rooted to the spot, eyes on him, twisting a cleaning cloth in her hands. Leaning over him, the big bloke glances over at Darcy as well, before turning back to Bucky and grinning slyly.
“That your girlfriend?” He growls into Bucky’s ear as he struggles underneath him, and the guy applies his full weight to Bucky’s chest, crushing the air from his lungs. He resists the urge to spit in the bloke’s eye, but only just. He’s a good fighter, more than good actually, but he’s also happy to play dirty when it’s necessary to gain the upper hand. The bloke’s lips are so close to Bucky’s ear his words are almost wet as he speaks again.

“When I’m done with you, think I’ll have a little fun with her, too.”

Bucky, who’s met this kind of fella before and never had any time for any of them, feels his blood run cold in his veins around the same time his mind goes blank with rage. It’s bad enough hearing him spit out the words, but it’s coupled with a leer that drags over Darcy’s bare legs, dances around the hem of her cut-off shorts, and ends around her chest. Grimacing underneath the brute’s weight, he waves a hand frantically at her, trying to get her to leave, whilst aiming a neat jab with the other and bringing his knee up sharply into the guy’s groin.

It’s not a move he’s especially proud of, and he’d be more than pissed if it was used on him, but it does the trick and as the bloke rolls off him groaning and clutching at his crotch, Bucky scrambles the other way and reaches for a discarded crate that’s conveniently part of a stacked pile outside the shop. Tossing sweat stained hair out of his eyes and wiping his free hand against his bare chest, smearing blood from the cut on his forehead across himself, he takes a deep breath and shatters the crate against a nearby table.

The other bloke is back on his feet again, and whilst Bucky’s thinking to himself that the guy reminds him of the bloody Terminator at this point, the number of times he’s gone down and come right back again, he’s at least limping on his way back over. Bucky wields a plank of wood, what’s left of the crate, flipping it easily from one hand to the other and waiting on the bloke to make his move. Bucky chances a quick glance behind him to make sure that Darcy’s well out of the way, even if she doesn’t appear to be able to move back into the shop like he’d want her to, and then brings his head back around to find the bloke inches from his face.

“G’night, mate.” Bucky says cheerfully, and cracks him neatly over the head with the plank.

--------

Susan hovers between the pile of marking she really does need to finish before terms starts again, and the open laptop on the kitchen counter. A small part of her feels a little guilty at spying on Steve’s friend, but it’s only a very small part and it’s easily overpowered by the much greater maternal roar that’s drowning out almost anything else in her mind at the moment.

“James. Barnes.” She types carefully into the search engine, and eagerly awaits the results.

A number of results flash up in front of her, and she clicks on the first one. A Facebook page, belonging to a man who is definitely not living next door to her. He’s around fifty and balding. Susan sighs and clicks her way back to the results page. The next one takes her to an Instagram page. Artful photo after artful photo she scrolls through, but, although there’s no specific indication either way, she’s pretty sure the leather-clad biker boy isn’t sharing pretty pictures of his dinner to the world.

Undeterred, Susan keeps on clicking away until finally, on the third page, she finds something that she thinks is the right man.

--------

“You know,” Steve says conversationally as he drops into the chair next to Bucky in the hospital
corridor. “I’m torn between telling you we must stop meeting like this, and also pointing out that, whatever you might think of me taking Sharon hiking, it’s got to be a better way of impressing a girl than beating a bloke half to death in front of her.”

Bucky, whose head is now swathed in a large white bandage, raises an eyebrow at Steve’s words, but does not deign to answer him.

“Yeah, yeah. I hear you. You’re not trying to impress Darcy.” Steve continues, apparently not looking for audience participation in this one. “She’s just some girl in front of which you happen to keep making an arse out of yourself.”

Bucky maintains his silence.

“Thing is, a little birdie tells me that’s not strictly true, Buck.” Steve smiles in Jane’s direction as she wanders past, attention taken entirely by the clipboard she’s currently puzzling over. “And that little birdie tells me you were necking in Nat’s car with Darcy just two days ago.”

Bucky rolls his eyes, but he’s known Steve too long to crack so easily.

“So.” Steve says, settling back into his chair and clasping his hands in his lap comfortably. “Are you at any point intending to explain yourself, or is this all an elaborate scheme to add to your dark and mysterious reputation?”

Bucky stares straight ahead and keeps his mouth firmly shut, as though he’d heard nothing at all. Steve’s lips purse, and he decides it’s time to bring out the big guns. Shaking his head in mock sorrow, ostensibly matching Bucky’s gaze over at the wall in front of them, he none the less keeps a sly sideways eye on his stoic friend.

“Mrs K is having kittens.”

“Why is that woman always around at the most inopportune moments? Does she have some kind of tracker that beeps when I’m doing something that’ll look bad?” Bucky explodes, finally cracking and turning on Steve only to find him grinning back, a mischievous look in his blue eyes.

“You’re an arse.” He says flatly, and returns to staring at the wall, arms crossed over his chest and a deep huff escaping him as he does so. Steve claps him on the back, gallantly forcing back the laughter that’s threatening to bubble right up out of him. He’s known Bucky a long time and, though he’ll always take the opportunity to rib him, he also knows when the boundary has been reached.

“Mr. Barnes?”

Bucky’s head lifts slightly as a man appears in front of him with a chart. He stands quickly, too quickly as it happens and he stumbles back slightly against the chair and throws an arm out to steady himself against the wall as the world spins in front of his eyes. The doctor looks at him somewhat disapprovingly, and Bucky remembers he’s still wearing his tattered t-shirt and a great deal of blood.

“I think you’d better come with me, son.”

------

Sam has received Steve’s text that Bucky’s landed himself - and someone else, apparently, and isn’t he just surprised as all hell at that revelation - in the hospital again, he just doesn’t care enough to respond to it. Staring down at the black and white text on his phone, he sighs and locks
the screen. Some things are just going to have to wait.

His shift is finally ending, after what seems like the longest twelve hours known to man. He’s been working the graveyard shift this week, and he’s more than ready for the rotation to end now. God knows Sam loves his job, but he could do with a few less idiot kids that think alcohol and surfing at night is a good mix. Then there’s the ones that think alcohol and an unsupervised beach fire is an appropriate end to the week. And he can’t even bring himself to consider the ones that are happy to hop behind the wheel of a car with a few tinnies sloshing around inside them.

Sam’s stripping out of his uniform and hauling on his jeans in the locker room when he knocks his backpack over. Grumbling, he bends to pick it up and hastily shove the spilled contents back inside it. iPod, a copy of The Female Eunuch that he was absolutely reading because it was interesting and not because he’d spotted a well-worn copy of it under the bar when Maria was on shift last at the Waterhole; thanks all the same Clint, a battered and squashed nutrition bar that he should really either eat or throw away today, and an un-opened letter.

His hand pauses briefly, hovering over the envelope, before grabbing it up and sitting down heavily on the bench. Backpack discarded at his feet, forgotten as he runs a finger over the address scrawled across the paper. Barnes has somehow managed to neatly destroy both the postmark and the return address printed on the back with oily fingerprints, but Sam knows that handwriting.

Speaking of things that would have to wait … Sam’s the kind of guy who likes to lead an uncomplicated life and, for the most part, he succeeds. This letter probably represents the one single complication that he has, and sue him for it but he’s not sure he’s quite ready to knock again on that particular door and face the demons that live behind it. Not when he thought it had been closed for good some years ago.

He’s still contemplating the benefits - or otherwise - of opening the letter, when Jane wanders in.

“Hey Sam.” She says lightly, not looking at him as he hurriedly stuffs the letter into the top of his backpack and shoves it down, even below the book he’s been trying to hide. He nods to her, throws his shirt on haphazardly and slings the bag across one shoulder as he heads towards the door.

Jane barely notices him leave, and it’s an unspoken agreement between staff that no one has to talk if they don’t feel like it. Some of the stuff they see on a daily basis, well… Not everyone wants to process that through idle chatter. Jane sighs to herself and opens her locker, digging through bags and coat pockets until she finds where she’s hidden her phone five hours beforehand.

She’s been working a long enough shift herself, and to top it all she’s just checked the patient board which turns out to include one James Barnes. He’s already been through triage, and is waiting on the doctor to check him out properly. Karl had given her a loaded look before taking the chart off the wall, and it spoke volumes.

Jane sits down heavily on the bench Sam has just vacated, phone blinking up at her brightly. She manages not to throw herself backwards across the bench and just flop there until the end of her shift, but it’s a close call. Instead she drops her head lower and stares mindlessly at the screen in front of her. Thor’s being distant, and she can’t work out why.

She thought it would be great moving in together, and for a while it was. He’s mostly house-trained and she’s laid back enough to not get stressed over part that isn’t. Jane’s the furthest thing from shallow but she knows he’s one of the hottest blokes she’s ever met, and boy does he know how to work a bedroom. He’s kind, supportive and and all-round good guy. He’s always treated her with the utmost respect. Everybody loves him, not least of all Jane.
So why does she get the distinct impression he’s avoiding her?

“Got in a bit of a scrap, have you, Mr. Barnes.” The doctor says with only a small trace of humour as he unwinds the bandage around Bucky’s head and peers at the damage underneath. Bucky does not respond and instead works on focusing his eyes at just one point in the room, in a poor attempt to control the wooziness he’s now experiencing. He’s also starting to understand why Barton chucked back a bottle of neat Scotch.

Bucky’s eyes re-focus on the doctor’s chest as the man shifts to stand directly in front of him, and find the light shining off his name badge. Embossed in black against a bright white background are the words Dr. Karl Kennedy. He groans out loud before he can stop himself doing so.

“Something wrong?” The other man asks, stepping back slightly with a look of concern on his face, and raising a hand to Bucky’s shoulder to steady him. Or possibly to direct Bucky away from his nice shiny shoes should it be that he’s readying himself to puke his guts up.

“M’gonna regret askin’ this,” Bucky mumbles, more to himself than anyone else. “You related to Susan Kennedy by any chance?”

Darcy is torn between heading home and burying herself under her duvet for the next month, or heading to the hospital to see if Bucky’s alright. She hates herself that any part of her is concerned for his health and well-being, having seen him kick seven bells out of another man right in front of her face.

The tiny traitorous voice at the back of her mind that pipes up and mentions that actually it was also seven kinds of hot seeing him handle himself like that is pushed down firmly and locked behind a metaphorical steel door.

As it is, she’s hovering around the front of the coffee shop when Stan appears, mind half on work and the other with the man who’d slung an arm around the bloke he’d just felled with a broken crate, and hauled him off towards the hospital.

“You catching flies there, missy?” Stan asks jovially, gracing her with a bright smile as she turns to him dazedly. Darcy can’t make her mouth seem to work, but the old man simply pats her on the head and wanders over to the counter, greeting Natasha as he drums his fingers on the granite surface and cheerfully orders his usual.

“You’ve met my ex-wife, then.” The doctor snorts, and picks up a penlight, reaching a hand around the back of Bucky’s head to cradle it slightly as he peers close and shines the light in his eyes. “Explains the groan.” He adds under his breath, though Bucky catches it and laughs slightly himself, whilst trying hard not to blink.

The light moves to the other eye, before turning off abruptly. Kennedy is stepping back and looking down at him.

“Well, young man, no lasting damage done.” He says, running his eyes over Bucky as he speaks. “Would be best if you laid off the beer for a day or so, but as I’ve read your chart and therefore know where you live, I also know the chances of that are remote. So I’ll just say use your head for something other than bashing someone else with it, and try to be sensible.”
Bucky squints up at him, eyes still dancing all colours and the two versions of Karl Kennedy he’s been looking at suddenly merge into one. He nods, carefully, putting a tentative hand to his forehead.

“Hang on there, kid.” Kennedy says sharply. “You still need stitches in that, the bandage only stopped the flow for the moment. Jane’ll see you right.”

Bucky just about stops himself from groaning again when he sees the little light haired brunette step up to replace the doctor who’s now leaving the room. They’ve not been formally introduced, but he knows enough from what he’s picked up at the garage and at home that Jane is one of Darcy’s good friends. Probably even her best friend. Add to that the fact that she's his boss’s squeeze, and Bucky’s screwed six ways from Sunday.

He also tries to hide the gulp he makes involuntarily as she advances on him with what he considers to be an unnecessarily large needle.

--------

“Susan’s right. I hate to say it, but Susan’s right.”

Darcy speaks aloud, mainly to herself, frowning as she cleaned the same table top for the fourth time in a row. Her head was spinning. She doesn’t want to like Bucky, she doesn’t want to care that he’s kissed her then chatted up some generic blonde, she definitely doesn’t want to care that he’s in the hospital right now. And yet her bloody mind won’t stop throwing up his stupid face every five minutes.

She also doesn’t want to have to face her foster mother and that all-knowing smirk when the woman inevitably finds out what Bucky’s done now. It was bad enough when she thought he’d beat the living daylights out of Clint, the fact that he actually has done it to some other poor bastard doesn’t bear thinking about.

“What’s that you’re yammering on about, and am I expected to have to form an opinion?” Natasha says loudly from the other side of the counter where she was restacking clean plates from the dishwasher. “If so, I’ll need more info than you’re giving me.” Darcy sighs, and flopped into one of the empty chairs, chin in hand and cloth thrown over her shoulder. Nat pops her head up over the counter and rests her forearms across it, eyebrows raised and inviting the other girl to continue.

“Bucky.” Darcy says heavily, mouth twisting as she speaks. “He was beating some guy to an absolute pulp outside the coffee shop, unprovoked.” She pulls the cloth off her shoulder and begins twisting it in her hands, pulling at the loose threads on one end of it absentmindedly.

Nat shrugs in response, apparently unbothered by the revelation. “Doesn’t sound like him.” The redhead pauses, then reconsiders. “Okay, it doesn’t sound like him to start something unprovoked, at least.”

“Saw with my own two, Nat.”

“Then he had a good reason.” She answers simply. Darcy frowns. “Look, I’ve known Barnes for a long time.” Even though Nat has seemed supportive of her previous interest in the bloke - the interest that she is currently squashing as far down into the pit of her stomach as it can possibly go - Darcy still feels an uncomfortable twist in her gut as the pretty redhead speaks. Nat emerges from behind the counter, eyes on Darcy and still speaking.

“He’s a decent bloke. Might not always go about it the right way, and yeah, he’s a total idiot when
it comes to girls, I’m not even touching that,” she laughs and lays a hand to Darcy’s shoulder. “But he wouldn’t just start on someone.”

Darcy remains unconvinced.

--------

It hurts like hell, more even than the fist and forehead combo that caused it in the first place. Bucky’s pretty sure that this Jane is not making too much of an effort to lessen the pain for him either, so he’s biting down hard on his tongue and digging his fingernails into the palm of his hand rather than give her the satisfaction of yelping.

Of course, he’s also enough of a masochist to feel that he deserves it, so that’s another reason he keeps his tongue to himself.

Finally, she steps back from him, hands still either side of his head, lips pressed together and giving her handiwork a last checkover.

“Right.” She says, in a voice that seems absurdly stern for such a petite girl. “Keep it dry, and don’t scratch. It will itch, just ignore it. That’s called the healing process, and it’s meant to happen. The stitches will dissolve on their own, so don’t get any bright ideas about taking them about and for god’s sake don’t listen to anything Clint Barton has to say about it.”

Bucky squints up at her under the harsh strip lighting and crooks a hopeful and small smile. He does not receive one in return. He shuffles his way off the bed instead and stands, painfully aware that his large frame is looming over hers.

“S’alright,” he says, one hand awkwardly rubbing at the back of his neck as he looks down at her. “I’ve had a few of ‘em before.”

“I bet.” She says tartly, and turns her back on him, silently collecting up the odds and ends of the stuff she’s been sewing him back together with. It's clear that she's ended this conversation, if that's what it amounts to.

Bucky rolls his eyes and turns on his heel towards the door, before a bolt of something a little like self-preservation shoots through him, head to toe. He’s never been much of a one to bother correcting people, because he’s never really cared what people have to say about him. He’s heard it all before, and small minds breed small gossip like rabbits in a pen, but for some reason he turns again and directs his frustration at her back.

“Yeah, I’ve hit a few blokes in my time. Been hit back, too. More than once, worse than today. And maybe I deserved it but they did too - every single one of ‘em. And you can go back to your poxy street with its twitching curtains and tell everyone whatever you like about me, but it doesn’t change the fact that if I hadn’t stepped in you’d’ve been patching up parts of some poor old woman instead.”

Bucky’s surprised to find that his chest is heaving and his voice has raised, and, as Jane turns back to him with eyes wide in her face and a kidney bowl clutched to her own chest, he drops his head and tries to regain some self-control. His fists are clenching and unclenching at his sides and he’s so focused on the way it feels like his skin is humming that he misses Jane stepping up closer to him.

“What happened?” She asks softly, and Bucky almost jumps back as a light hand presses against his arm. “I’m listening, Bucky. Tell me what happened.”
Susan leans closer to the laptop screen, practically fogging it with her breath as she peers over her reading glasses at the text in front of her. A photograph of a young man, hair not yet as long as it was now, eyes bright and smiling back at the camera, jumped out at her. This was definitely the right James Barnes.

She moves the page on, pausing to look over more photographs. One with a full regiment, Barnes only recognisable as a figure amongst the crowd, a full colour shot of him shirtless with a t-shirt wrapped around his head to shade from the sun, mouth open and laughing as he slung a rifle across his shoulders. Another photograph showed him with a young Steve, the pair of them sat on a rock in the middle of a desert, Steve with an arm carelessly around the other man’s shoulders, and Barnes looking down from the camera, cigarette held between his lips.

Susan flicks past them quickly. She doesn’t need to see picture after picture of Barnes with his shirt off, she can see that through her front window any day of the week at the moment. Now she knows that she has the right man, she is scanning for anything relevant in the text beneath them.

Finally, she finds it.

James Buchanan Barnes, of the First Combat Engineer Regiment, and later the Special Operations Engineer Regiment, was dishonourably discharged five years previous. Whereabouts currently unknown.

“I knew it.” She breathes, rolling the mouse as far down the page as she could take it. There was no more information that she could glean from the page, but this was surely more than enough to get Darcy to see the boy was no good.

-------

There’s a figure at the train station, a tall figure in a long dark trench coat that waits with impatience for a free cab to turn up. The figure has a large duffel bag over one shoulder and a smaller carry bag in the other hand. When a cab finally appears on the horizon, the figure steps forward and throws out an arm, signalling it down.

The cab pulls into the rank with a screech of tyres and a loud bang from the exhaust that results in a cloud of cloying smoke enveloping the car. Coughing slightly, the figure waves a hand to disperse it and the cabbie rolls his window down, peering up at the figure in front of him. He makes no move to get out of the car.

“Where to, mate?” He asks, pulling his glasses down to the end of his nose and inspecting the newcomer with poorly disguised interest. The figure pulls open the back door and throws in first the carry bag and then the duffel bag, sliding it easily across the seat and following it into the back of the car with a groan.

“Number 30, Ramsay Street.”

-------

“Uh, Buck?” Steve's head appears around the door apologetically. “There's a police officer here, wants to speak to you.”

“Yeah, they usually do.” Bucky answers heavily, turning to look at him with resignation.

“Hey, wait.” Jane catches at his arm and he pauses, looking back at her questioningly. “At least go
talk to him with a shirt on, eh?” She holds out a bright green and oversized scrubs shirt towards him, and he takes it gratefully, shucking off the tattered remains of the one he’s still improbably wearing, and pulling the new one over his head. It’s a little tight across the chest and a little long in the body, but it's making him look a damn sight more presentable than he was, so he’s not complaining.

“You don’t need to stick around on my account.” Bucky says to Steve as the other man hovers by the door. “Haven’t you got a date with Sharon or something? Weren’t you planning on teaching her to change a tyre or some other equally romantic scenario?” That earns him a swift punch to the arm, but he was kind of expecting it and laughs it off.

“This bloke, seriously,” Bucky gives Steve a playful shove as he rolls his eyes at Jane. “What man in his right mind takes a girl he likes fishing?” If Jane’s returning smile is a little tight, or a little forced, Bucky doesn’t notice as Steve draws him into a fierce hug before mumbling into his ear that he’ll see him back at the house.

--------

Clint’s relaxing on the couch in front of McCleod’s Daughters when the front door bangs open and Sam wanders through it. Not looking away from the television screen, Clint holds up a beer and waves it in what he believes is Sam’s direction.

The other man throws himself bodily on to the sofa next to Clint and accepts the beer without a word. They both stare at the screen until Sam starts to grumble that he hates this show and can’t understand why the hell anyone would want to watch it, let alone Clint.

Barton replies with his stock answer that it’s a bloody classic bit of telly and that, if Sam doesn’t like it, he knows where the door is. Sam, who’s bone-tired and not quite bothered enough by it to want to drag his body up off the couch and into the relative sanctity of his bedroom, remains sprawled at Clint’s side.

They both take a drag of beer.

“Oh yeah,” Clint says, suddenly remembering as the ad break kicks in. “You’ve got like, fifteen missed calls to the house phone.” Sam blinks, and tries to remember the last time he paid a bill. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t owe anyone anything, and he’s not one for leaving things until the last minute, unlike half the people he lives with. Barnes is an untested quantity so far, but from what he’s seen so far, Sam’s going to go on the hunch and lump him in with Irresponsible and Co.

“Sure it’s for me and not Barnes?”

“Yeah man.” Clint answers, attention starting to drift as the programme comes back on. “I caught the last one before it rang off. Some bloke, asking for you. Called you Samuel.” He chuckles and throws back the last of the liquid in the bottle before reaching for another one. Sam closes his eyes and hopes Barton’s memory is as shit as his taste in television.

--------

“Barnes, is it?” The officer gestures to a free chair which Bucky drops himself into, trying not to look insolent as he does so. The copper is tall, blond, youngish but older than Bucky, he thinks, and wears a deliberately blank look on his face that Bucky’s seen before on policemen. It’s the look they wear when they want to make you think they’re on your side, and they wear it right up until the point they aren’t.
He nods silently, opting to let the other man drive this conversation, find out where he wants to steer it before making any rash decisions. He’s had a little practice at it, and he tends to find that people like to talk. Giving them enough room to do so often leads him to places that they weren’t necessarily intending to take him.

“The thing is, Mr. Barnes,” The officer says, parking his arse on the desk in front of Bucky and clasping his hands together in his lap as he sits. “I’ve got two men in this hospital, both injured, and neither one apparently willing to shed any light on the matter. What do you think of that?”

Bucky snorts. Of course the other bloke isn’t going to want to speak to a copper. Not when he spends his days with a knife in one hand and a wallet full of cash that almost certainly isn’t his to flash around. He looks up at the police officer and arranges his face carefully into an approximation of the blank look the other man is still wearing.

He toys briefly with the idea of telling him the truth, explaining about the old woman, the threat he’d made over Darcy; but with no witnesses, the knife covered in his fingerprints as much as anyone else’s and Bucky having come out of it significantly better off, it doesn’t look great on him and he knows it.

The other man sighs. “Well, I’m guessing you had a significant reason to do so, seeing as before clamping up he was spouting gibberish and listing to the left when he walked, but seeing as neither of you will ‘fess up to why, all I can do is give you a formal warning for disturbing the peace.”

The policeman looks disappointed in him, like he probably knows there’s more to it than he’s getting, but that’s a look Bucky’s seen his whole life and frankly if he can ignore it off his ma, he’s going to ignore it off a copper he’s never met before and doesn’t intend on seeing again.

--------

It’s not the first time he’s been driven home in the back of a police car, but it is the first time they’ve opened the door for him and let him out. Small towns, Bucky thinks, with a shake of his head.

“Did you really need the lights going?” He asks as he unfolds himself from the backseat and slides out under the bloke’s arm.

“They're broken, mate, sorry.” The copper shrugs sympathetically. “Won't go off until the engine does.” It’s on the tip of Bucky’s tongue to offer to take a look at it, but he bites it back because to be honest the damage has already been done. He can see faces at windows and hurried movements as the blue lights bounce off the brickwork.

Nat’s little car is on her driveway, the steady hum of it drawing to a close as she cuts the engine, and the redhead is just sliding her long legs out of it as Bucky looks over. Darcy is tumbling her way out of the passenger door and something in his chest constricts as he’s hit full on with the memory of her pressed up against him, his hands on her hips and her tongue in his mouth in that self same seat.

She’s very deliberately not looking at him, and he fights back a sigh. Nat’s eyes meet his across the street and she shoots him a look that is half pity, half warning. Darcy scuttles over the road, head down and as she reaches the door to number 28 it opens before she can even get her key in the lock.

Susan Kennedy peers out, eyes narrowing as she spots Bucky, now leaning against the police car with his arms folded. The engine still purring next to him and the lights rotating merrily on the car
roof so that half his face flashes blue every five seconds, Bucky decides that he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and raises a hand to wave at her cheerily.

The sound of the door slamming shut in response reverberates around the cul de sac and Bucky shakes his head with a small laugh to himself. Nat’s rolling her eyes from across the street at him and the copper lets out a long low whistle and claps him on the back.

“Mate, if you're on the wrong side of Mrs K, you'd better fix it quick. I wouldn't want to be in your shoes.”

Bucky shrugs. It’s all he really can do, in the circumstance. Even if he saved her cat from a burning tree would that woman still hiss at him from behind her door and draw her claws.

There’s a cab pulled up at the side of the road as well, and both Bucky and the policeman tilt their heads slightly and watch as a large figure exits the car. The bloke is big, almost as tall as Thor, if not as broad. He hunches slightly, reaching into the cab to fetch out two bags before shoving some cash through the window.

“Mate of yours?” The copper asks.

“Never seen him before in my life.” Bucky answers with a shake of his head.

“Well he’s going into your house.” The other bloke points out, and he’s not wrong. Striding up the lawn and not bothering with the little concrete pathway Steve works so hard to keep clean, the guy raises one large hand to knock on the door. Bucky and the copper next to him both tilt their heads to the left as the door opens.

Sam answers the door, and immediately slams it shut again. For the second time in ten minutes, the sound echoes around the cul de sac. The policeman slides his gaze from the door of number 30 back to Bucky.

“Looks like you’re having fun tonight.” He says brightly, and gets back into his car before driving away. Bucky thinks privately he’s had more than enough fun recently to last him a lifetime, but he’d better go and find out what all the fuss is about. Hooking his thumbs into his jean pockets, he saunters up the pathway towards the front door and Sam’s mysterious and apparently unwanted guest.

“He usually reserves that sort of behaviour for me.” Bucky remarks casually as he draws level with the other man, who’s staring up at the house in front of him, apparently unperturbed at the lack of hospitality he’s currently receiving.

“Is that so,” The man replies, turning to look at Bucky. He has one eye, and a grim smile on his face that gives Bucky pause for thought. “I thought I’d raised my son a little better than that.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Everyone decides to drink away their sorrows.

Bucky’s a little thrown by the scarring around the bloke’s eye—it looks like the eyeball’s still in there, but it’s all white and clouded over, clearly unseeing—and it takes him a moment to realise that staring might be considered rude.

“You’re Wilson’s dad, huh?”

There’s something about the guy that whispers ex-forces, beyond the busted eye, but Bucky reckons he saw more than standard action. Intelligence or special ops, or some kind of service that made him twitchy standing here exposed even in a backwater like this.

“That’s not the way he prefers to put it, but yes.”

“Right.” Bucky’s torn. On the one hand, this is a golden opportunity to get up Wilson’s nose, and he’d be a fool to pass it up. On the other…well, if his own father turned up in Ramsay Street (not bloody likely), Bucky’d be doing more than slamming the door in his face. So this is the one time he’s lairy about the universe handing him such a plum chance. “Sorry, mate. Not getting involved.”

He fishes the house key out of his jeans pocket, assuming this is going to be the one time the door is actually locked. It almost looks like Wilson’s dad is going to muscle his way through, but Bucky’s day is already beyond the pale. He shoots the guy a warning look—special ops or not, he’s at least 25 years older and out of practice—and stomps his way inside, slamming the door behind him.

Wilson’s waiting in the hallway, arms folded. “You’re not letting him in?” He seems surprised.

“Course not.” He almost makes a biting remark about cold callers, but relents when he sees the tension in his housemate’s shoulders. Maybe the blood loss has softened him up. “Look, I know family drama, alright? I’m not going to drag it in here where you don’t want it.”

Wilson’s definitely surprised. “Thanks, man.”

Bucky nods at him, and for the first time since meeting, they aren’t being openly hostile with each other.

He’s glad Stevie’s not around to witness it. He doesn’t want to raise his expectations.

“Hey, either of you recognise this bloke?”

Jane looks up from the paperwork she’s completing. Or, the paperwork she’s been staring at blankly while Thor watches Aussie rules and Frigga twitches the curtains.

“No,” she replies, without even looking, chewing on the end of her pen. Thor doesn’t even reply. If you didn’t know him, you’d think he was focused on the game—he’s staring at the TV unblinking.
—but that’s not Thor at all. He yells, and shouts, and provides a running commentary during a game. Silence is worrying. Silence is ominous.

Silence has been more common than Jane thinks is a good sign lately.

Frigga waves a hand at her. “Come and have a proper look!”

When Thor doesn’t even blink, Jane dumps her papers on the coffee table and crosses to the window. She follows Frigga’s gaze to number 30, where a strange man is lurking on the doorstep.

“Doesn’t look familiar,” she says with a shrug.

“He turned up in a cab, then Sam slammed the door in his face,” Frigga recaps. “I reckon he’s related to Sam somehow.”

“It’s possible.” The man doesn’t look much like Sam, who is shorter and wirier, but Jane’s never met any of his family. She knows his mum lives in Eden Hills and keeps exotic birds, but he’s never ever talked about his dad before.

“I’m going out there to introduce myself.”

“You’re what?”

“Look at him—he’s got bags with him, so he was obviously looking for a place to stay, but he’s been refused. I can’t leave him standing out there like that!”

This rouses Thor, but a moment too late. She’s out of the door before he can say anything. “Is she—did that sound like she’s going to ask him to stay here?” he asks Jane.

“I think so, yeah.”

Thor leaps from the armchair to follow his mother, but it’s too late. She’s already striding back up the steps to the house, the man’s lightest bag in one hand, and the man himself following her.

Jane recognises the twinkle in Frigga’s eye. By the pained look on Thor’s face, he does too.

“This is my son Thor,” she says as she strolls back across the threshold, “and his girlfriend Jane. You two, this is Nicholas Fury. He’s Sam’s dad. He needed a bed to stay in, so I thought it would be the neighbourly thing to let him use the spare room for a night or two.”

“You did, did you?” Thor replies in a flat tone.

“Naturally. He’s here to repair his relationship with his son, and there’s nothing I hate more than fractured families. Anyway I can help is a blessing!”

How she got this much information in the space of, at best, thirty seconds, is beyond Jane. Thor doesn’t argue further, even though Jane is gesticulating at him behind Frigga’s back, silently pleading with him to keep pushing. “It is your house,” he says instead, offering Jane a shrug.

He’s right—she owns number 26, even if she doesn’t live here full-time—but surely he can make her understand how bad an idea inviting a stranger into their home is? If Sam doesn’t want him in his house, that can’t be a good sign. Jane’s worked alongside Sam long enough to trust his judgement.

“Your ma is an exceptionally kind woman,” Fury says, as if it will get him in Thor’s good books. Thor’s frown deepens, but Frigga’s beaming.

She thinks Thor’s watching her with concern as she heads over to Susan’s, but she only cares if he’s going to start using words to communicate with her again.

Perhaps the way she raps on the door is more forceful than necessary, but it’s a slightly pouty Darcy on the other side when it opens, so she’s not going to be admonished by Susan.

“Bad day?” Darcy asks, stepping aside to let Jane inside.

“Bad day,” Jane confirms. “Is Susan not in?”

“Nah, she went over to Madge’s a while ago. I got the impression she had something she wanted to gossip about so she won’t be back until late.”

“Oh, thank god. I need a drink and I need to vent, and I need to not have to go home until I can go straight to bed.”

“That bad?” Darcy asks with concern.

“Oh yeah.”

“Say no more.” She steers Jane to the sofa, and returns a minute later with two glasses and a bottle of wine. Then she settles in beside her, pouring a very full glass out for Jane.

Jane meeps with happiness and takes the glass, chugging half of it back immediately. Darcy stares at her with wide eyes and refills the glass.

“Come on, time to vent. I’ve never seen you put it away that fast.”


Darcy takes a gentle sip from her own glass and curls her legs underneath her. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

“He’s being quiet. It’s creepy. Thor is—”

“—Never quiet. You’re right, that is weird. Have you spoken to him about it?”

Jane grimaces. “I was plucking up the courage when Frigga arrived for the weekend. As she does. And now it looks like we’re not going to have any peace anytime soon.”

“How come?”

Jane tries her best to explain their new house guest, although it’s a weird one to explain, even by Frigga’s standards. “So now we’ve got a strange bloke living with us, all because Frigga took a shine to him. She says it’s only for a few days, but if he’s here to try and mend things with Sam, and Sam doesn’t want to know him—well, that’s going to cut down on my bathroom time in the morning.”

Darcy pats her arm sympathetically. “Maybe you could take Thor out to dinner for some privacy?”

“Maybe.” Jane tags another glug and sinks lower into the sofa cushions. “Maybe I don’t want to know what’s on his mind. He’s being so distant, and I can’t think of one good reason that isn’t going to end up with me looking for somewhere new to live.”
She hasn’t voiced it out loud before, hasn’t even allowed herself to think it, and now she’s said it, there’s a hard lump in her throat and her eyes are stinging.

“What if this is it?” Jane whispers. It’s all she can manage, her throat is so tight. “What if he’s trying to think of a polite way to end it?”

Darcy’s rubbing circles on her back. “Don’t be silly. You too are so solid, and you haven’t been arguing or anything. I’ve never seen a man look at anybody the way Thor looks at you. It must be something else on his mind, something he’s not shared with you. Could it be Loki?”

Jane shakes her head. “He doesn’t get quiet about Loki. He gets louder.”

“Then maybe it’s work. He has to see Tony every day, that can’t be fun, not with all the crap Tony gives him. He probably thinks you’re sick of hearing about it and doesn’t want to burden you with it. Let him know you want to know what’s on his mind, and you know Thor—you’ll end up regretting asking.” She backpedals when Jane’s lip starts wobbling. “In a good way! Not because he’ll break up with you, but because you’ll be fed up of hearing about Tony bloody Stark.”

Jane finishes her glass and holds it out for a top up. “I hope so.”

“You’re only going to miserable until you do it.”

Jane nods. “You’re right. I need to do that. Tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to hide away here and pretend I live with people who don’t just invite random people in from off the street.”

“If it’s any consolation, if Frigga didn’t do it, I’m pretty sure Susan would’ve instead.”

Jane laughs as she’s taking a sip, accidentally snorting the wine up her nose, and ends up coughing and spluttering while Darcy whacks her on the back and tries not to smile. When she’s done, her mopiness has receded a little. She’s got a plan of action, even if she’s happily procrastinating on it. For now, she can focus on Darcy’s relationship drama instead.

“It was a pretty brave thing Bucky did today,” she says, wrenching the bottle out of Darcy’s hand —she’s now pouring much smaller glasses, and Jane empties the bottle instead.

“Brave?” Darcy looks at her likes she’s grown an extra head. “Brave? He nearly beat a guy to death, then got himself dragged home in a cop car!”

“I guess you haven’t spoken to him then.” Jane takes a sip to hide her smile. “Not that I think he’d tell you anyway…”

“What?” Darcy leans in closer. “Janie, what would he not tell me?”

“That the other bloke was trying to mug an old lady, and he intervened.”

Darcy snorts. “Right. Of course that’s what he said, doesn’t want to get arrested.”

“No, he didn’t tell the police that. And he seemed very genuine when he mentioned it. Said the guy had a knife and—”

“That’s why there was a knife!” Darcy’s eyes have gone wide. “He—he tossed it away in the middle of the fight.” She frowns. “Actually, that does make more sense.”

Jane waves a hand. “See! I think he’s actually a pretty good guy, beneath all that brooding and leather. I think it’s all a—a mask to keep people at arms’ length.”
Darcy pouts while Jane helps herself to Mrs K’s liquor cabinet. “But I don’t want to be at arms’ length.”

Jane squints at the bottle she’s pulled off the shelf. Standing up wasn’t best idea; the wine’s hitting her pretty hard now they’re a bottle in. “Toffee vodka?”


Jane nods and returns with her prize. “I don’t think Bucky wants you to be arms’ length either.”

Darcy holds her glass out for a slug of vodka. “Good. ‘Cause then his abs will be in touching distance. I’ve seen them a lot and it would be a crying shame if I never actually got to put my hands on them.”

“I will drink to that.”

“You’re quiet.”

Sam glances up to find Maria stood next to his table. It look likes she’s been collecting empties, but he must look pathetic enough that she’s stopped by to check up on him nursing his beer.

“Thought you’d be enjoying the peace,” he says. “You can finally get through a shift without me failing to take the hint.”

She smiles, and it might be the first time he’s ever coaxed one out of her. On a normal day, it would feel like a bigger victory. “That’s what’s got me worried. You’re like rubber: no matter how many times I knock you down, you keep bouncing back.”

“Maybe I decided it was time to back off.”

“Nah. That wouldn’t have you staring down into that pint like you’re looking for answers. I’ve seen that look on too many customers, and I’m rarely the cause of it.”

“Rarely?”

She gave a nonchalant shrug. “Sometimes I’ve ratted out cheaters. Then they expect sympathy when they drag their freshly-dumped arse in here. But that’s not you: you wouldn’t flirt with me if you had someone, so it’s not relationship trouble. That leaves, what, work, money and family?”

He can’t control a wince at her last suggestion, and she offers a knowing look. “You’re good,” he says. “Do they teach you this when you become a bartender?”

“You do this for a while, you hear the same sob stories a lot.”

“Then you don’t want to hear mine.”

“Surprise me.”

He picks up the nearly empty glass, and swirls the amber liquid around before speaking. “It’s my dad.” He finishes by downing the last of his beer.

Maria’s expression melts into one of sympathy. “Next drink’s on me,” she says, collecting the empty from his outstretched hand.

“Really?” he calls after her, as she walks away.
She turns back to face him. “Really. It’s a story I know better than most. You look like you need a friendly ear, and I’m due a break.”

Sam’s left thinking this is the only thing he has ever had his father to thank for.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this!” Darcy whispers to Jane as they push at the gate into number 30’s back yard.

Jane holds a finger to her lips, silently giggling as the gate swings open silently. Although there are no lights on in the house—it was what made them even consider doing this—it would be just their luck for someone to discover them. They tiptoe through, closing the gate behind them and sprinting across to the poolside, in the shadow of the house.

“How did you talk me into this?” Darcy asks, toeing her shoes off. “I could have got my bathers—”

“No!” Jane turns to her with a stern face. “If I’m going in there without mine, so are you.” She passes the bottle of vodka—now considerably depleted—to Darcy so she can pull her blouse over her head. “And we are doing this because neither of us got to swim at your birthday party, so we’re doing this now.”

“Right, right,” Darcy agrees, nodding her head and putting the bottle down so she can strip alongside Jane (although she has her back to her friend). She’s just wriggling out of her undies when she hears the splash of Jane hitting the water. “Janie!”

There’s a moment of silence, then sloshing around, and Jane’s head appears above the water. “Come on, get in! The water’s great.”

With her hands strategically placed, Darcy takes the few steps to the pool, and while Jane swims to the other end, does a delicate hop into the water.

Or she aims for delicate. It’s probably closer to a belly flop, but she’s in.

Bucky stirs from his nap, awoken from a very pleasant dream where Susan Kennedy had not interrupted Darcy and him in the car. Darcy had been giggling in his ear, a pleasant, silvery sound which he wanted to cause again.

He’s not sure what’s roused him, and curses his brain for cutting him off at a very inopportune moment. Even his dreams are cockblocking him lately. He shifts on the sofa, a little stiff from sitting still for so long, his collection of bruises no doubt taking the opportunity to manifest. He only intended to rest his eyes, but taking a punch to the face had led to a headache, and a silent house had led to him reliving every crappy moment of the day.

The house is still silent, and has gone dark around him. Steve’s on his date—he’s late back, which is a good sign—and Sam took himself out to clear his thoughts. Clint’s off with Nat somewhere, and earlier Bucky was glad for the peace and quiet. Now he thinks he’s just going to muse on his own idiocy. Not only had he insulted Darcy earlier, but she’d then witnessed him during a prime bit of violence.

Bucky’s not ashamed of his capacity to fight. He’s good at it, even if it’s not a hobby he’s ever tried to cultivate, but he’s also aware that it tends to give women a certain impression of a bloke. Like he’s a brute.

Dreaming was easier. Dream Darcy very much liked him.
His only hope was that Jane put in a good word for him. But between her and Susan, he’d put his money on Susan having more sway over Darcy’s opinions.

He lets his head drop back onto the sofa, considering whether it’s worth putting the telly on or just hauling himself to bed, when he swear he hears Darcy giggle. He freezes, holding his breath, and wondering if auditory hallucinations are the sign of a really bad concussion. But now, he can hear more: splashing water and voices. People stage whispering.

He pushes himself up from the sofa, every bruise protesting, and creeps over to the window which looks out onto the pool. There’s just enough light pooling from the streetlamps to see two dark heads bobbing in the water, and a pile of discarded clothes.

“Janie, I’m a mermaid!” Darcy says, the over-loud whisper of a drunk person who thinks they’re being quiet. She bobs under the water, every inch of her disappearing, and his heart stutters in his chest. Then she rises back up, pushing herself up on the side of the pool, head tossed back and water spraying from her mouth.

It’s very obvious, even in the darkness, that she is not wearing anything.

Bucky averts his eyes and wonders if the universe enjoys teasing him this way. He’s frozen for a moment: does he go to bed and pretend he didn’t realise? Then he doesn’t have to go out there and talk to Darcy. Drunk Darcy—naked drunk Darcy—might just make him come unglued.

But if they’ve been drinking, it would too easy for something to happen to one of the girls. And his housemates will be home soon. If the girls are still out there, they could end up putting on a show for the entire House of Trouser.

The idea of Barton seeing naked Darcy seals the deal. There’s a hot flash of something in his chest which spurs him into action.

He gathers some towels from the cupboard Steve’s room (he’s pretty sure they’ll be clean) and heads out of the back door onto the deck area above the pool. He makes no attempt to be stealthy, letting his boots thud across the wood, and he hears squeals from below. He does not look over the edge. There’s more hissed discussion and sloshing water as he descends the steps, and when he’s halfway down there’s a flash of pale skin streaking away.

Bucky’s almost disappointed—almost, he’s not a complete mongrel—but also relieved at avoiding to have to deal with them. He keeps going to the bottom anyway, to double check they haven’t left anything behind. Like the responsible citizen he’s apparently becoming. Maybe there are tinnies to go in the recycling.

There are no tinnies. There is Darcy.

She’s still in the water, pressed up against the side of the pool so all he can see is her head, and he’s thankful to whatever deities still listen to him.

“Janie ran away.” she says quietly, a little like a child who’d just been abandoned by her parent. The image helps him concentrate on doing the right thing. Now is not the time for copping an eyeful, not when she’s vulnerable.

“Here.” He holds out the towels to her. “I won’t look.”

He turns his back and listens to the sounds of her hauling herself out of the pool. He screws his eyes shut for good measure. With his luck lately, even an accidental glimpse of anything would probably result in him being struck by lightning or turned to stone. He doesn’t want to risk it, not
when he wants her trust him. Needs her to trust him. It’s the only way to get her to see that he’s not a brute and she should maybe consider letting him take her out sometime.

“Janie told me what you did for that old lady,” she says. “It was brave. And hot.”

His mouth goes dry. This is not where he expected this conversation to go.

When he doesn’t respond, she continues. “Sounds like you’re a hero.” There’s a soft touch on his arm, and he glances at her without thinking.

The towel’s only wrapped around her lower half. Her wet curls cling to skin which shines brightly in the moonlight, and he turns his face away again, clenching his jaw. “You should cover up,” he instructs her. “You’ve had a lot to drink.”

He knows this because there’s a bottle of vodka among her discarded clothes. He grabs the pile of items, keeping his back to her, and this time when he turns she’s fully covered up. He realises too late that the lid is not on the bottle, so now her clothes are dripping vodka. Worse, her shoulders are slumped and there’s a downcast expression on her face.

It doesn’t matter. She’ll thank him in the morning.

“Come on,” he says gently, propelling her in the direction of the stairs. He should take her back to number 26, but delivering a naked and drunk Darcy to Susan would be the final nail in his coffin. Instead, he needs to get her dressed and sobered up enough to make it home under her own steam.

He flips the kitchen light on, and she blinks in the sudden brightness, shivering.

“You want coffee?” he asks, and she shakes her head silently. “Alright, well…” He rubs the back of his neck. “I’ll see if there’s anything you can wear.”

She nods, and he tosses the ruined clothes onto the counter, before heading for the bedrooms. Barton’s is the closest, but with one foot over the threshold Bucky realises it isn’t going to yield viable options. Not anything he’d subject Darcy to. Wilson’s room is no-man’s-land to him, and a quick survey of Steve’s drawers reveals that while he’s washed his towels lately, he needs to do laundry a.s.a.p.

That leaves Bucky digging out a pair of his own boxers (clean, and lightly worn anyway—he never sees the point of underwear in jeans) and an old t-shirt which has seen better days. It was once white, but a laundry mix up had turned it pink and Bucky never had the patience to bleach it back. It’s this, or the scrub top he’s wearing.

He heads back to the kitchen, where she’s propped herself in a stool, her head lolling against the counter.

“Sleepy?” he asks.

“Mm-hmm.”

“You can’t sleep here,” he points out. “And you should drink something too.” He fishes around in the cabinet for a clean glass, and fills it with tap water. She takes it from him, but only manages a sip.

It’s odd, being the responsible one. He can’t remember ever taking care of anyone like this. Maybe Becca, but she was so young when he left…
“Cold,” Darcy whines, and he resists the urge to sigh. Instead, he ushers her to his room, bringing the glass with them.

“You can get changed in here while I see if I can get your clothes clean.”

“Okay.” She sits down on his bed and takes a healthy gulp of the water, which is better. He nods approvingly and drifts back to the kitchen, searching through her pockets to empty them before he dumps the clothes into the washing machine. There’s just her phone, and a quick check shows Susan isn’t searching for her yet.

When he gets back to his room, Darcy is curled up in the bed, dead to the world.

“Don’t mind me,” he mutters. “I love sleeping on the sofa.”

But he makes sure she’s properly tucked in, retrieving the damp towels and tiptoeing away.

Then he sends two messages from Darcy’s phone: one to Susan, saying she’s spending the night at a Jane’s, and the other to Jane, telling her she’s Darcy’s cover story and she dropped her undies when she ran.

There’s no sign of his housemates, so he retires to the sofa to ponder the strangest day he’s had in a while.

“Who the hell is he and why is he in my house?”

Tony’s voice echoes around the cul-de-sac, waking those who’d prefer to sleep for longer. It is a delicate hour of morning, but Frigga supposes that he never much cared about other’s people wants or desires. She’s never met a more self-centred man; it’s no wonder the delightful Pepper had departed not long hence.

Frigga peers across at number 22. “Have you suffered a house invasion, Tony?” she asks innocently, knowing that playing at ignorant will wind him up more. It’s terrible, but she does enjoy doing it.

Tony turns a rather alarming shade of puce. “I mean him!” He jabs a finger in the direction of Nicholas, who Frigga is chatting to on the steps outside the front door. “Looks to me like he stayed the night.”

Nicholas glances between Tony and Frigga. “Problem?” There’s an authority to the way he speaks which Frigga finds delicious. Loathe as she is to inflict Tony on anyone, she does think any conflict between the two would not end in her step-son’s favour.

“Not at all,” Frigga dismisses with a wave of her hand. “Nicholas, I’d like you to meet my step-son Tony.”

“Stop calling me that! Have you moved someone into my father’s house?”

Frigga notices the way Nicholas eyeballs her ring finger. It’s bare—she wears the rings from both of her marriages on a chain around her neck. “It is my house, Anthony, and I cannot mourn your father forever. But Nicholas is only a guest.”

“Right. Sure. You couldn’t even wait six months, could you?” He turned his attention to Nicholas. “Word of warning, she is a black widow. She will eat you alive!” Then he retreated back into his house, slamming the door shut behind him.
Frigga glanced across at number 32, waving at the twitching curtain which meant Toadie had witnessed the little exchange. Tony never did make the poor man’s job especially easy.

“Your relationship with your step-son seems to be going as well as mine with my actual son,” Nicholas comments.

“At least you have a bond to repair,” she says encouragingly. “Tony never liked me much, and I doubt he ever will. He especially dislikes how much I inherited for such a short marriage, and cannot bear to consider that he is not the only one mourning.”

“And he thinks you’re going to come after me next?” Fury raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think I’d be worth your time. Don’t have much in the way of assets.”

Frigga grins at him. “Perhaps it’s not financial assets I’m interested in.”

Darcy drags the pillow over her face and wills Tony to shut up. She does not want to be conscious and he is not helping with that plan.

But when he does go quiet, she can’t get back to sleep. There’s a nagging sense of disquiet, beyond the pounding in her temples and overall queasiness, and it won’t let go.

It’s the scent that gives it away. The pillow, though pleasant, does not smell like her own.

She opens her eyes, regrets it immediately, and squeezes them shut again. But the ceiling was not hers.

Her memory helpfully begins to relay chunks of the night before: drinking with Jane, skinny-dipping in the pool, and then Bucky discovering them. Bucky helping her into the house and into his bed. In a very platonic way.

She’s grateful, she really is. There are a lot of men she’d be waking up next to this morning with regrets of a very different kind. Instead, Bucky had only helped her. He’d been a gentlemen. He’d been perfect.

And yet she had the nagging sense that he hadn’t been tempted at all, not even when she’d been at her most brazen (and god, how her cheeks burned to remember that). It might as well have been Thor or Toadie looking after her.

This is not how Darcy had hoped to spend the night in Bucky’s bed, and she suspects it’s the only way she ever will.

There’s a half-drunk glass of water on the nightstand, and she greedily downs it before climbing out of the bed on shaky legs to search for more.

The house is quiet and still, which she’s thankful for. Even if Bucky’s t-shirt hits her at mid-thigh, it doesn’t feel like she’s wearing much. She manages to navigate to the kitchen, where her phone is lying on the counter. She pours herself a glass of water, and then checks for messages, only to realise the battery died overnight. The door to the washing machine is open; her clothes are inside, damp and smelling like laundry powder, so it looks like they’re clean.

The sun’s out, so she heads out onto the deck to drape them over the railing to dry. By the time she’s done, there’s another body in the kitchen, one she instinctively recognises. It’s her bad luck that she catches her reflection in the kitchen window as she traipses back inside, to realise that her hair looks like it’s been backcombed to hell, sticking out in every direction. She’s never going to
get all the knots out.

“Morning,” Bucky greets her, and he’s got a nice black eye blooming. It should put them even when it comes to looking like crap, but it doesn’t diminish his attractiveness at all. He’s got coffee brewing too, which keeps him racking up the points.

“According to Tony.” She punctuates her grumpy comment with a yawn.

“You could go back to bed.” It’s suggested lightly, underscoring the gap between the way she sees him and the way he sees her. She’s not in any fit state to do anything strenuous, but it’d be nice to cuddle up with him.

“Nah, I feel guilty about stealing yours.” She takes a deep breath. “About that…I should thank you. For not taking advantage.”

He looks horrified. “I wouldn’t—you don’t need to thank me. You shouldn’t go thanking people for not being rotten bastards.” His jaw clenches. “I’ve got a kid sister, and the thought of someone thinking that because she’s drunk she’s fair pickings…I’m not an animal.”

“I know,” she rushes to reassure him, because she thinks by now she’s got some measure of him. He’s too used to people making snap judgements about him, and that’s not what she meant at all. “I was pretty blatant.”

He shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. You were drunk.”

She nods, staring at the glass of water. “I could use a shower.”

“Yes. I’ll put your clothes in my room when they’re dry.”

They drink a cup of coffee each in silence, and then he’s throwing a bundle of towels at her, warning her not to touch anything purple in the bathroom because it’s Clint’s and probably toxic. It’s an attempt at a joke, but she doesn’t have the energy to find the humour in it.

The less said about the bathroom in the House of Trouser, the better, but the water runs blessedly hot for a long time. Darcy’s fixated on the two things she learned in her conversation with Bucky: he’s got a sister, and he pretty much sees Darcy as a sister too.

She should have seen it coming. She was the one who kissed him. He was flirty to start off with, but backed off as soon as he realised she was into him. He’s done the maths on their age difference, and relegated her to kid sister.

Which is ace. It’s not like her tiny crush is threatening to become an out-of-control crush or anything.

Time to get yourself under control, Darce, and find someone in your own league.

Bucky has never met a morning which can’t be improved with coffee, and yet today seems to be a first. It’s probably because he’s drinking his while Darcy sits across from him, wearing his clothes and no bra, and he’s not had enough sleep to keep his focus from slipping. It’s bad enough that he knows his bed will now smell like her, but even as a hungover wreck there’s something soft about her that makes him want to gather her close.

The silence when she goes to shower isn’t much better. It gives him time to focus on the aches in his body, made worse from a broken night’s sleep on the sofa. Wilson had come home late and
drunk, Barton later and drunker still. Of Steve, there’d been no sign, but that hadn’t stopped Bucky lying up waiting for his key in the lock.

He’s gathering her clothes from the decking when Barton stumbles into the kitchen, far earlier than was normal. He looked panicked.

“Hey man, have you seen a necklace around here?”

Bucky narrows his eyes at Barton. “Can’t say I have.”

“Didn’t think so. Crap. Nat’s lost her grandmother’s necklace and she’s sure it’s somewhere in my room.”

“So?”

“It means she’s going to have to search my stuff.”

Bucky’s not sure why Barton’s the one who looks horrified at the prospect; surely that should be Nat. Nevertheless, the man’s swearing under his breath when Bucky passes his room to drop Darcy’s clothes off in his own.

“Can I stash some things in your room?”

“No!”

He hears the water stop a few minutes later, but leaves Darcy to it. He doesn’t want a repeat of last night, even if she is sober this time. Instead, he takes his second cup of coffee out to the deck, hoping this one will stick.

The house is waking up around her by the time Darcy feels refreshed enough to leave the shower, but she makes it back to Bucky’s room without encountering anyone. True to his word, her clothes are waiting on the bed, and she dresses in record time. She knows he’s not going to come in without knocking, but she suspects the other residents of the House of Trouser don’t have the same manners, especially if they aren’t expecting her to be here.

Her thongs aren’t in the pile of clothes on the bed. One is on the floor next to the bed, and she slips it onto her left foot. The other, she has to kneel down and sweep her hand underneath for. It obviously rolled when it hit the floor.

As she pulls it free, something else comes with it—paper—and she ducks her head to take a look.

There’s a stack of magazines, and though Darcy knows exactly what kind of magazines a man would keep under his bed, morbid curiosity makes her keep pulling them out, until they tumble loose out of the pile, photos and titles brazen across his bedroom floor.

She should stop to put them back, but she really doesn’t want to touch them. Instead, she just shoves the other thong on her foot and heads for the front door.

Redheads. She should have realised Bucky would have a type.

Bucky hears the front door open and slam a few times while he’s enjoying the sunshine. He supposes mornings are quite peaceful, if you like that sort of thing.

Nat’s voice drifts from inside. Barton wanders out, obviously deciding to stay out of his lady’s
way, and lays down on the deck. Wilson follows a few minutes later.

“Why is the house so damn noisy?” he grumbles, stealing Bucky’s coffee from the railing and sprawling down next to Barton. Bucky rolls his eyes and heads inside, brewing a fresh batch of coffee. When it’s ready, he takes a mug for Darcy, hoping she’s feeling a little more human after the shower. If she is, he wants to talk to her—somewhere out of earshot of the drongos he lives with—and clear the air properly. This would be a good opportunity to start over.

He knocks on the door, but it swings open at his touch, showing a clearly empty room. Darcy’s clothes are gone, the ones she’s slept in discarded in a rumpled pile on the floor. Also on the floor: nudie magazines. Magazines that Bucky definitely does not own.

He takes one look at the titles, and storms back out to the deck.

“Barton! Have you never heard of the internet?”

There’s a ruckus going on as Steve heads up the path towards number 30, and it’s already taken some of the wind out of his sails. He’s had the perfect night, but it sounds like he’s coming home to Armageddon. Again.

Luckily, Mrs K is waving at him from next door, and he heads over instead of going inside. Anything to avoid becoming a referee between his housemates.

She greets him with a smile, but her opening gambit is far from friendly. “I thought maybe now was a good time to talk about your friend.”

He stifles a groan. “Which one?” From the sounds of yelling drifting over from the back yard deck, they could all be deserving of her ire.

“The one sniffing around Darcy. The one with the dishonourable discharge.”

Steve does what he’s never done before. He starts yelling at Mrs K.
Steve’s not exactly proud of himself, because he doesn’t go around making a habit of shouting at anyone, let alone women he’s known most of his life and who used to teach him the correct way to spell ‘difficulty’ when he was still in short trousers, but he’s had his fill now of people assuming the worst about Bucky. Maybe his friend is happy enough to let people think what they like, but it sticks at Steve like gum on the bottom of a shoe and he’s choosing right now to scrape it off.

“You don’t know a bloody thing about Bucky,” He shouts, fists clenched at his sides, and Susan takes a half step back from him with eyes wide. Steve’s dimly aware of curtains starting to twitch and even a door or two opening, but he’s focused on the task at hand. He knows Bucky doesn’t fit with the twin-set and pearls set that suburbia wants, but damn it, the bloke has saved his arse more than once, and he’s not about to take this lying down. Not anymore.

“I don’t know where the hell you’ve been raking this stuff up, but it’s nobody’s business but his-”

“Did you hear that?”

Barton jerks his head up and away from Bucky, still sprawled on the deck as he was when the other man had thrown the door open and stormed out, looking very much like a dog who’d caught wind of sausages sizzling on a barbeque. He struggled up onto his elbows, scrunching up his face and listening hard.

Bucky, in full flow as he reels off a list of reasons why Barton is the biggest idiot this side of Sydney, not to mention noting a number of perfectly good internet sites where he can get his rocks off as much as he likes without - and this is the really crucial part - sodding up Bucky’s life, continues as the shorter man’s attention wanders.

“I’m not falling for that, and I’m not finished with you-”

Bucky’s silenced by Barton who’s surprisingly fast to his feet for a bloke who tends to move at a speed that even people in comas would find a touch slow. He’s more than taken aback by the hand that is clapped across his open mouth, and it takes a superhuman effort from him not to bite down in retaliation. The thing that keeps him from doing it is the thought that he’d probably only end up back in hospital for a tetanus shot if he did, and whilst Jane Foster might be a great nurse, it was bad enough having her stitch his head.

He does not want her anywhere near his arse with a needle.

Darcy, having stumbled her way back to Number 28 almost blindly, raises her head from the living room couch where she’d catapulted herself and her still throbbing head an hour or so before, and blinks. It sounded a lot like Steve. It sounds an awful lot like Steve was absolutely losing it, out in the street. But that would be like hearing a cat bark, so Darcy groans to herself softly and lets her head drop back onto the cushions.

Jane, having crept her drunken way back into Number 26, via the back fence which was no easy feat considering her lack of clothing, had thrown herself under a scalding hot shower and then into
bed next to Thor’s slumbering bulk. She’s lain awake into the early hours, grateful for the brief message from Bucky, letting her know that Darcy was alright and being taken care of. There’s a hope firing within her that the time alone will finally kick start what she can see simmering between them, even if they’re too stupid to get it together so far, and musing on the possibilities - as well as the churning feeling in her stomach that’s mostly toffee vodka but also not a small amount of lingering concern over Thor’s recent behaviour - that keeps her awake long after she should have conked out.

What feels like only five minutes of kip is rudely stolen from her by an angry raised voice out in the street, and she half-mumbles to herself, voice muffled by the pillow she’s holding over her head, that Tony Stark can go jump if he doesn’t stop the amateur dramatics soon.

It’s the ripple of muscles against her shoulder as Thor sits up in bed that rouse her further, shortly followed by him exclaiming, “Why the hell is Steve starting a ruck in the middle of the street?”

Jane’s not too proud to admit - to herself at least, and maybe Darcy later when she catches up with her - that a spiteful twist of anger spikes through her as she thinks it’s the first thing he’s said to her, properly, in ages; and it’s about bloody Steve.

-----

“-And another thing-”

-----

Wanda, who’s just returning to the street after an early morning run, stops dead in shock. Her ipod’s still blaring AC/DC’s TNT as her jaw drops open and she puts a hand to her chest as her breathing refuses to turn to normal. Steve Rogers, the universal nice guy and all ‘round chilled bloke, is standing on Mrs. K’s front lawn and absolutely losing it.

At Mrs. K, of all people.

Wanda’s the first to admit that Susan Kennedy has made her see the proverbial red, a few times even - she’s been taught by her, same as most kids in the area, and the woman’s not exactly a pussy cat - but Wanda’s a vastly different person than Steve. For a start, she’s a Stark, and whilst she doesn’t exactly take after her dad, it’s not like either of them are slow to an argument, as and when the occasion is called for. Steve on the other hand might as well be an advert for yogic calm.

She’s still staring, eyes wide and sweat starting to drip uncomfortably down the back of her t-shirt, when her dad wanders down from the house to the street, ostensibly to bring out the bins to the curbside, but in reality he’s rubbernecking at their neighbours just as much as she is.

“Should I even ask?” Tony says mildly, folding his arms and coming to a rest beside her. She pulls her earbuds loose as she tilts her head at him and he repeats the question, nodding towards Steve who’s turned an interesting shade of purple. Wanda shakes her head, heart still jumping in her chest - mostly from the way she’s pushed herself, but also because she’s known Steve a while and this is beyond out of character for him.

“Something.” She pants, bending slightly at the waist to catch her breath. “About Bucky?” Her dad looks down at her in mock confusion, shrugging his shoulders because he’s making out like he hasn’t got a clue who she’s talking about, and Wanda rolls her eyes. He liked to pretend that he didn’t care what was going on around him, which had to be the daftest thing about the man.
“The new guy? Steve’s army mate?”

Tony shrugs again, faking nonchalance, and Wanda hits him in the arm.

-----

“-You’ve no right to-”

-----

The shouting isn’t stopping, and Darcy cracks a reluctant eye.

She wishes she wasn’t awake. She wishes she didn’t have an epic hangover. She wishes that someone was around to wait on her hand and foot and bring her coffee every time she so much as makes a tiny groan.

Her mind unwittingly flashes to Bucky, who was kind of fulfilling that role, before her unfortunate discovery and her decision to flee back home, and that thought hurts even more than the pounding going on inside her head right now.

Darcy rolls onto her back, one leg dangling from the edge of the sofa, the other slung over the arm of it, and sighs. Even if Bucky didn’t have a clear preference when it comes to women - and she snorts, thinking of Nat, her luscious red hair and the way she’s got that curvy cat-like walk that Darcy will never be able to copy, not in a million years - he still thinks of her as a kid sister.

Even if she could learn to emulate Nat and the ease with which she stalks her way through life, leaving men - and the occasional woman - dropping like flies in her wake, it wouldn’t change the way he looks at her, red hair or no. Bucky Barnes hoicked her out of the pool, averted his eyes and tucked her up in bed like a kid sister, and she was going to have to learn to live with that one.

She should’ve known.

Fingers fumbling with the edge of her t-shirt for something to do as she’s letting the events of the past night tumble around the inside of her head, rolling it up her stomach and then down again, she thinks that she really needs to focus on something other than the hot guy next door who’s intent on flashing his abs at every chance he gets. She’s got more going for her than to moon over a bloke who’s not interested, and she resolves that, with the coming university year, she will be doing just that.

The shouting dials up a notch, and she winces.

-----

“I should go and see if I can help.”

Thor’s rolling out of bed, all muscle and naked back, and Jane rolls to one side with a not-insignificant amount of effort - given the tap-dance party that’s going on inside her head this morning - to look at him as he tugs on jeans and tries to work out which t-shirt he’s discarded across the bedroom floor is the cleanest.

“Maybe you should just leave him to it?” She suggests, voice low as she tries to pretend that sunlight isn’t burning her retinas, before giving up and pulling the covers over her head. Thor, already at the door, pauses and looks back at the heap under the bedclothes. He smiles, a soft look that stretches from one side of his face to the other like it might split him in two.
Jane Foster is the best thing that’s ever happened to him, and he’s going to prove it to her very soon.

-----

“Steve, I am only concerned for Darcy,” Susan attempts to cut in over the angry blond in front of her, to no avail. She’s never seen him like this, ever. Steve’s always been the solid, dependable type; the one who carries shopping for old ladies and helps out on school charity days without being asked. She’s always looked to him as a nice boy. She remembers him at school, earnest and try-hard. She remembers him when he graduated, beaming and hugging her, almost losing his cap in the process. She remembers when he was a boy scout.

Now the boy scout is towering over her and shouting at the top of his voice. She’s still not scared of him because, for all the surprise of it, the volume of his yelling and the way there’s a vein throbbing across his forehead, it’s still Steve, and she can see he’s purely wound up in defence of his friend.

Even so that it’s giving her momentary pause. Susan has never known Steve to be anything other than an upstanding bloke. Yeah, he wants to see the good in people - actually, it’s one of the things she’s always liked most about him, one of the main reasons she’s been trying to angle him and Darcy together for so long - but he’s also a man who won’t stand for something he sees as wrong. Maybe, just maybe, this Barnes isn’t quite the villain she’s been seeing him as.

“Darcy’s perfectly fine with Bucky,” Steve says hotly. “He’d never lay a finger on her if she didn’t want it-”

“-So you’re saying she wants it?”

Susan can’t help but see red at that one, whatever else he’s been turning her head towards so far, tone turning a little hysterical. She can take being called out on her own front yard with the neighbours watching - and yes, she’s noticed the Starks staring from across the street, and that Thor’s stumbled out of the front door of number 26 with his t-shirt on backwards and pushing masses of long blond hair out of sleepy eyes - but she’ll not take anyone, not even Steve Rogers, suggesting that Darcy is some kind of scarlet woman.

“That’s not what I said,” Steve clarifies, closing his eyes briefly before continuing. How can she think he’s saying that? He’s known Darcy a while now, he knows she’s a good kid. “Not what I meant, and you know it.” He takes a step closer to her, sucking in deep breaths to calm himself and puts his hands on her shoulders, fixing startling blue eyes on hers before he speaks again. His chest is heaving, and he’s trying his hardest to get himself back under control, because it’s been a long time since he’s gone off at anyone the way he’s let rip at her, and he’s not actually enjoying it.

“Buck’s a good man, Mrs. K.” Steve says seriously. “Whatever Darcy thinks, whatever you think - she could do a lot worse than him.”

-----

“I think Steve’s killing Mrs. K.” Helen says conversationally as Toadie appears in the kitchen.

“Ha, yeah good one, Hels.”

Her husband stumbles toward the coffee machine, and she shakes her head despairingly, hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea as she leans by the kitchen counter. She can tell he’s not really listening to her, isn’t quite firing on all cylinders yet. It’s an automatic response to the fact
she’s talking rather than what she’s actually said, that she thinks somehow all husbands develop, like maybe it’s handed down to them, father to son or something. He’s in a singlet and pants, blinking at the way the sun is already streaming through the blinds, like it’s all a bit too much for him to take in at the moment.

Helen waits for the penny to drop, leaning back and shrugging her dressing gown around her shoulders more firmly as he wanders from appliance to appliance in front of her; because if the ability to formulate a response to words you’ve not actually taken in is a patriarchal inheritance, the patience to deal with it is the gift of mother to daughter.

“How,” Toadie says eventually, cup of coffee in one hand and a slice of buttered toast in the other, turning to her with a confused look painted across his face. “Is that Steve I can hear shouting?”

“Good man, is it now?”

Susan starts up again, determined to defend Darcy’s honour. Even if, a small voice whispers slyly in her ear, it was Darcy sitting in Bucky’s lap in Natasha’s car, rather than him bearing over her seat. Susan does actually recall what it was like to be a young woman, even if some days it feels like it never happened, though she’s trying her hardest to push back those indiscretions and teenage memories as she rounds on Steve.

“A good man who beats up his housemates? A good man who gets kicked out of the army?”

Steve takes a step back, and his hands drop from her shoulders.

Darcy, realising that the shouting isn’t apparently going to stop, hauls herself off the sofa with some difficulty and shoves back masses of hair behind her ears, focusing as best she can on the door. Tuning her ears into what’s going on outside, she realises that, aside from Steve, it sounds quite a lot like it’s Susan out there as well.

She digests that for a moment.

Remembers that, not so many hours ago, she was both naked and drunk in Steve’s pool.

“Oh crap, no-”

Thor approaches Susan and Steve with what he believes is a conciliatory smile on his broad face. He’s an objective outsider, never had beef with either of them, and whilst Susan can err a little on the snappy side at times, Steve’s always been an even-tempered sort of bloke. He’s confident he can bring a peaceful resolution to whatever is going on.

After all, he’s dealt with his father and Loki all his life. And his mother and Loki. And, now he comes to think of it, quite a lot of different people and Loki. It’s got to count for something.

Jane, who’s managed somewhat reluctantly to extricate herself from under the bed-covers, throw on one of Thor’s discarded shirts - she realises too late, bare-legged and standing on their porch, squinting into the sun, that there’s a large tomato ketchup stain from collar to hem on the left hand side of it - she knows that Mrs. K is unlikely to back down.
Jane’s a little more realistic about life than Thor, who likes to see the best in people, even if it’s not really there to see. Case in point, his brother, Loki. She’s as nice as the next person, provided the next person isn’t Thor or Steve, who exhibits a lot of the same personality quirks; but Loki is bad news and no mistake. Thank god he’s disappeared. She’ll never tell Thor, but she rather hopes they’ve seen the last of him.

She likes to think of her world view as more … Balanced. She chalks it up to working in a hospital. All day she gets to see humanity at its very pinnacle, the new lives brought screaming into the world, pink and healthy and full of promise - but also at its very worst. Gun shots, car crashes so easily avoided, domestic violence. And worse.

She’s been accused more than once of being cynical, but she’s seen a little too much of the crappy side of humanity to be able to view the rainbows and nothing else, so she accepts that judgement and owns it. Thor on the other hand remains optimistic, which, if she’s honest, is one of the reasons she loves him so much. Jane’s not so sure his simplicity will carry him through this one, though.

She rests back against the door frame, Thor’s shirt hitting her mid-thigh as she wraps her arms over her chest and wishes she had thought to bring out a glass of water with her.

-----

Darcy throws open the door and steps out into the street, unsure what it is that she’s going to say but feeling the strong need to step into whatever it is that’s going on outside her door. She’s not managed to catch anything thus far other than the raised voices, but given her antics last night and the fact that it’s Susan going off at Steve - because, come on, hell hasn’t frozen over yet so it’s obviously not the other way around - she’s got to be involved somehow.

“Uh, guys?” She asks, tentatively, pulling the door closed behind her and stepping onto the path towards the pair of them. Darcy gulps as she notices Wanda and Tony across the street - Wanda makes a tiny motion that she interprets as a wave of sympathy - and Thor bounding up the path towards them.

Jane is trying to make herself small against the door of number 26, dressed in a hideous tie-dye surfer t-shirt that Darcy knows has to belong to Thor, because no one else would be able to wear it unironically. The other girl send her a crooked smile and Darcy knows it’s meant, for now, as an apology for ducking out the night previous.

Darcy turns back to Steve and Susan, and sets her shoulders with a grimace.

“It’s not what you think.”

-----

Natasha, who’s been trying her best to ignore both the argument in the garden and whatever the hell is going down in the street in favour of retrieving her grandmother’s necklace from where it’s fallen behind the sofa - the result of a particularly amorous night, she now recalls, with an inward smirk, can ignore it no longer.

Fingertips finally closing around the little gold chain in triumph, she pulls back on her heels and listens hard. She tunes out the garden, because it’s Bucky yelling at Clint and, whatever it is that her boyfriend has done now, he probably deserves it. Even if he doesn’t, she’s not getting in the way of the boys, because it’s male bonding at its finest and Nat wants no part of it. Let them work it out, she thinks. It’s the only way things will finally settle.
What’s happening out on the street though, that’s a damn sight more interesting.

Steve, shouting at Susan? Somewhere, she thinks, the Guinness World Records team must be assembling. Rogers shouts at no one. Rogers doesn’t even raise his voice to a broken appliance, something that Clint had long since declared an indication of the man’s inhumanity. No one could possibly not lose their rag at a microwave that refused to heat up. He’s clearly a robot.

But that was the essence that made Steve, well, Steve.

That said, Nat isn’t wholly surprised to find that it was Susan Kennedy that had finally tipped him over the edge. Even though the woman was her mother’s best friend - or, possibly the very reason why - Nat thinks she is long overdue a good talking to. And it sounds very much as though Steve is giving it both barrels.

Nat decides she ought to go find out in person.

-----

Sam, who stumbled his way home through through the streets of Erinsborough and fell through the front door of number 30 happy in a way he’d not bargained for since his dad had unexpectedly made an appearance, puts his coffee mug on the decking and sighs heavily.

He’s had a great, if odd, night.

Maria is his idea of a woman, all power and no nonsense. The kind of woman that makes a man sit up and listen. The kind of woman he’s always been attracted to, but never really seen too much of. He’s been mooning after her for a while now, though he’s not really prepared to call it that, because that’s the sort of thing that Steve would do, and Sam knows he’s got more game than a bloke who thinks fishing is an appropriate dating activity. But he will admit to hanging around The Waterhole nursing a coldie or two of an evening and trying his luck.

Luck that has thus far escaped him, right up until the point he wasn’t even trying. How about that.

Returning his attention to the argument - or arguments, it appears - he wanders towards the fence and listens. Clint, hand still over Barnes’ mouth, widens his eyes and jerks his head at Sam. Barnes looks less than happy, and Sam’s smirking a little on the inside at that, but shrugs it off and puts his ear to gate. Sam’s had the dubious pleasure of once - once, mind you, just the once - hearing Steve let rip.

It was around three years previous and it was at a political debate on the television, not another person, but that kind of things sticks out when it’s a bloke who he’s actually seen apologise to someone else when they’d knocked into him and almost caught him in the eye with their umbrella. It’s been a long-standing joke in the House of Trouser that, should Steve ever be punched in the face, he’d say sorry for getting in the way and drive the other party to hospital to see about their broken hand.

Steve making it in the army had been widely regarded as the eighth wonder of the world.

Sam concentrates.

“Yup,” Sam says, pulling back and looking at the fence with a tilt to his head as though it might somehow give him an answer as to why his best mate is sounding off on the other side of it. Clint’s hand falls from Barnes’ mouth, and even Bucky is wearing a look of abject confusion. Sam points with a finger towards the fence before continuing.
“That’s Steve.”

-----

Thor approaches Steve and Susan brightly, arms open.

“Perhaps I could-”

“Shut up, Thor,” They say in unison.

-----

Nat throws open the door of number 30, and makes a face at what she sees outside.

Steve, leaning over Susan, whose face is just as red as his. Thor, standing to the side of them looking awkward. Wanda and Tony, across the street, the girl looking as though she’d rather be inside and no involved whereas her old man is plainly enjoying the free street theatre. Jane, looking the worse for wear and listing heavily to one side as she stands under the porch of number 26; Helen and Toadie twitching curtains across the way, not yet brave - or stupid - enough to join in the festivities.

And Darcy, approaching Steve and Susan with a determined look on her face. Nat knows suddenly where she’d needed most. Shoving the necklace into the back pocket of her shorts, she crosses the yard quickly and cuts Darcy off, hands to her shoulders and pushing the younger girl back slightly, re-directing her away from the action.

Darcy looks up at her in confusion, and Nat catches a whiff of her breath that tells her that, wherever Jane was last night, Darcy was probably with her. She looks a little better, she smells pretty clean - if with a slight scent Nat thinks she recognises from the house she’s just left, and that’s a story there she’s going to get to the bottom of - and she’s more upright than the nurse who’s visibly swaying on her feet against her own front door, but all the same Nat’s a connoisseur of various vodkas. Plus, she was the one who gave it to Billy in the first place.

“Come on, kid,” She says, as gently as she’s able to muster.

“But it’s about me-” Darcy whines, big blue eyes staring up at her with an air of confession about it. “I did a bad thing last night.”

Nat fixes her with a single arched eyebrow, and it hits home instantly that the smell on Darcy is shower gel. A male-branded shower gel, musky and strong, and she’s smelt it on Bucky before. “Spill.” She demands, tone brooking no argument, although to be fair Lewis is the least likely of all her mates to keep anything from her. What she gets, however, is slightly more than she was expecting, and she finds herself fighting back a choking laughter. Especially at the oh-so-serious look on the other girl’s face as she delivers the story.

“So Bucky thinks of me like a sister, I made a fool of myself and he likes redheads.”

Darcy realises, as the words spill out of her, that despite the coffee and the shower, she’s actually still a little drunk because there’s no way she really willingly wants to let on to Nat that Bucky has a thing for girls that look like her, and more-so that it upsets Darcy to know it. She wrinkles her nose and wonders what it would be like if the ground just opened up and swallowed her right then and there.

Bloody fantastic, actually.
Nat laughs.

“They’re Clint’s.” She manages, around a severe fit of the giggles, and Darcy can’t help but give her a look that’s sheer puzzlement. “He doesn’t know that I know, so for god’s sake don’t tell him, but trust me, those mags don’t belong to Bucky.”

Nat’s almost doubled up in laughter, but trying to keep it in check, and Darcy is trying to wrap her alcohol-soaked brain around it all. Okay, though, she thinks. Even if the mags aren’t his - and she’s not that naive, for all she’s been brought up in a small town, she does know what men like to look at - he’s still bundled her up in a towel and not even tried to cop a look at her boobs. It doesn’t really change anything.

Nothing changes the fact that Bucky Barnes isn’t attracted to her.

The thought is more sobering than anything else she’s tried that morning, and Darcy wishes like hell it didn’t affect her so. The crush that had kicked its way into her heart the minute he’d skidded that stupid bike into the street, the one that had intensified when she’d seen him strip to get in the pool, the curling hot feeling in the pit of her stomach as she’d climbed into his lap and the way he’d kissed her back with arms wrapped around her waist in the front seat of Nat’s car…

That crush was absolutely killing her.

-----

Bucky, Clint and Sam pile their way out of the side gate, practically falling over each other to do it, just in time to hear Steve’s parting shot.

“Bucky might have a dishonourable discharge, but he put his life on the line every bloody day for people he’s never met, to keep them safe. He kept me safe. He saved my life in more ways than I can count and no-one - least of all someone who’s never been to war, never seen what it’s like to be on the other side of a rifle - can judge him.”

Bucky, for his part, winces slightly.

He knows, academically speaking, that Steve is trying to be a good mate, fighting his corner and all that rubbish, but given the choice he’d’ve preferred that the whole street not know that he’d been kicked out of the army. He drops his head, dark hair falling in his eyes, but not before he catches what he can identify easily as embarrassed looks on both Barton and Wilson’s faces.

Barton might not know much better, but Wilson was a grunt and it’ll mean more to him.

He sighs, rolling his shoulders back and lifting his head, and instantly realises that the situation is so much worse than Wilson knowing his army business.

Darcy is stood, just feet away from him, Nat’s arm around her shoulders and the pair of them staring over at him. Nat already knows his dirty laundry, or at least the watered down version of it that he’d decided years ago he’d tell her, enough for her to be what he considers a secret keeper but not quite enough for her to be on the same level as Steve, who knows everything about him, inside and out.

Her eyes are looking at him with nothing but sympathy, and his gut twists to see it.

Bucky Barnes doesn’t think of himself particularly as a proud man, but he supposes, as he looks over at the redhead, that he must be one in some circumstances, because he’s not keen at all on the flash of pity that crosses her face as she looks over at him. Worse though by far, is the way that
Darcy is looking at him.

Whatever else it is that Steve’s said, she’s clearly stuck on the words ‘dishonourable discharge’ and that he can’t actually blame her for. Who wouldn’t be? Who would want to be shackled to a man with that kind of past, that kind of reputation? For one hot moment, one that ironically chills his spine from the base of his neck all the way down to his hips, Bucky sees himself as Susan Kennedy does, and he gets why it is that she’s warning her adoptive daughter away from him.

Wilson puts a hand out and touches him, briefly, on the shoulder.

Bucky thinks, and he knows it’s unfair for him to do so but he can’t help it, that the show of soldierly solidarity from the other man is making the whole situation so much worse.

-----

Darcy hears Steve, and she’s stuck on the fire behind his words when he spits out at Susan that Bucky saved his life. She remembers instantly the way that Bucky fought in front of the coffee shop, with an ease that was almost a dance, like he’d been born to it. If she’d not been petrified at the time, she might have enjoyed the way that his muscles rippled as he squared up against the other bloke.

Her eyes fix on the man, who’s dropped his head to the floor. She wants to go over there, to throw her arms around him, even though she knows it won’t be welcomed. Darcy might not be as worldly wise as some, not as much as Bucky, or Sam, or even Steve who goes about life like a stranger is just a friend he hasn’t met yet; but she can tell when someone wishes they could just turn invisible. Probably because she’s spend quite a lot of time in the same position.

So she sticks where she is, wishing for things she desperately wants but can’t have. To hug Bucky. To tell him it’s alright. To have him drop his head to her shoulder and his arm around her waist, to let him stay like that as long as he needs to in order to get his head square again. To feel him pressed against her and his lips on hers.

She shakes her head. Stop it, Darcy.

-----

Jane starts forward from the doorway as Thor falls back a little, and he wraps an arm around her instinctively, drawing her close to his side and tucking her firmly under. He drops a kiss to her forehead, almost absentmindedly, as he looks between Susan, Steve and Bucky.

Steve, biting his lip but looking defiant, has his eyes on his friend, the man who is stoically fixed on the concrete path under his bare feet like it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen. The other two are looking very deliberately in just about any direction but Bucky’s, and by extension Steve’s. He didn’t miss Sam’s brief touch to the shoulder, and he thinks maybe that, if nothing else comes of this, at least that might be a step in the long-awaited right direction.

Susan has reeled back, apparently noticing Darcy for the first time, Nat’s arms wrapped around her and the pair of them with their eyes on Bucky bloody Barnes. She’s still trying to wrap her head around Steve’s words, and the way he’s delivered them - all snarling passion and righteousness. She shakes her head.

It’s come a little late - perhaps even a little too late - but Susan Kennedy is starting to consider that maybe this isn’t a conversation she needs to be having on her front lawn first thing in the morning.
Even Tony’s feeling a little uncomfortable now, and he’s trying to nudge Wanda back inside the house. She starts, reluctantly, not because she wants to stand and stare at Barnes in his hour of embarrassment, but because she’d like to lend her support to Darcy. The little brunette is curled into Natasha’s side, staring over at the man she’s been crushing on, and Wanda feels for her. She makes a tiny call-me gesture over the street, and she thinks Nat might have caught it.

The whole street seems to have paused, holding it’s breath.

-----

“Marry me.”

Thor blurts it out loud, and he knows it’s not really the right time, but the words have been bouncing around inside him now for far too long, and now he guesses is as good a time as any. Except, of course, it really isn’t, as it turns out.

It’s as though the world has ground to a halt, like the needle on the proverbial record player has slipped a groove and every single person who’s made their way onto the street so far that morning is now looking at both Thor and Jane. He’s looking at her, and she’s staring right back at him not saying a word.

Thor’s been having to avoid Jane, for fear he’ll let it slip and ruin the moment. He wishes that he wasn’t the sort of person that had to do that, but he’s not great with words, however much he feels it all in his heart it all gets twisted and comes out lame. He wishes that he had the little ring box on him, the one that he’s been carrying around with him for the last three weeks like some kind of talisman, taking it out and thumbing it over in his hands as he practices what he wants to say.

He also kind of wishes that everyone else wasn’t staring at them.

He’d meant to do it properly, with flowers and candles and that sort of thing - make it a truly memorable experience that both he and Jane would carry with them the rest of their lives. It’s not like he doesn’t mean it, not like he hasn’t - actually - been thinking about more or less since the moment he first met her. The day Rhodey had unscrewed the exhaust from the car he was still underneath, and it had cracked him clean across the head.

Thor, being Thor, had been perfectly happy to just carry right on, even as he was dripping blood across the garage floor. Thank god for Rhodey, who’d seen a concussion or two in his time and wasn’t prepared to be responsible for his boss not waking up the next morning. Thor hadn’t been sure whether he was seeing stars because of the injury, or because the nurse they’d sent him to see was just that perfect.

It had been Jane, and he thought maybe she’d taken a good hard knock to the head as well when he’d asked her out as she was wrapping a bandage around him and she’d actually said yes, but it wasn’t as though he was complaining about it.

Jane; his precious, darling Jane, who’s looking up at him now with an expression that he can’t quite decipher. Thor crooks a smile back at her and hopes it’s the right thing to do.
There is silence in Ramsay Street. Everyone is frozen, gawping at Jane, their attention finally diverted from Steve and Susan’s spat. Jane herself is staring at Thor with the widest pair of eyes Darcy has ever seen, unblinking and apparently unbreathing.

Then her lower lip wobbles, those comically round eyes glazing over, and Darcy knows what’s coming next. She’s dashing across the street, hoping to get there before the histrionics start, with Natasha hot on her heels.

She’s not quite fast enough: the first tears are already falling when she pulls level with Jane, and hapless, hopeless, beaming-with-happiness Thor.

Jane’s always been a pretty crier, in a way Darcy could never attain: tears roll down her cheeks like fat little beads and cling to her eyelashes, making her skin dewy and it look like she’s wearing stellar mascara. But she doesn’t end up with snot running from her nose or a heaving chest, and she also doesn’t make a sound, unlike Darcy who has been known to dry-heave and hiccup her way through a crying fit. Her silence is why no one else has realised she is crying yet, other than Thor, and one glance in his direction suggests he’s under the misguided impression that these are happy tears.

Darcy bundles Jane back into number 26 before the spell breaks, with Nat ushering Thor at the rear. Then with the door closed, firmly keeping their audience at bay, Jane is free to whirl on Thor.

“I thought you were going to dump me!” she says to her boyfriend-cum-wannabe-fiance, and kudos to her, it is neither a wail or a whine. But it does pack a lot of the injury she’s been feeling over the last few days in.

For his part, Thor is obviously stunned. He blinks at her, then crosses to cup her face in his hands. Large as they are, they dwarf it. “Why would you think that?”

“You—you’ve been…” Jane’s bites her teeth, wriggling out of his grasp and furiously wiping the tears away.

“You’ve been a bit distant, mate,” Darcy supplies. “This kind of came out of the blue.”

Thor’s face crumples, like a puppy who’s owner just yelled at it for peeing on the carpet. “I knew I’d get this wrong.” He fumbles around for a way to rescue the situation, running a meaty hand through his tangled hair. “Wait a sec.”

Nat adds a helpful suggestion under her breath as he passes by, diving into the dining room and rummaging around in a drawer that no one ever goes in. Darcy takes the opportunity to fetch Jane a glass of tap water and some aspirin, which she gladly gulps down.

When Thor returns he is shirtless, and carrying a jewellery box.

“Jane, apparently I’ve been a bit of an idiot,” he begins, to resounding snorts from the three women, “but I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Darcy definitely hears Nat’s whispered next instruction. “Do it properly.”

So he does. He drops to one knee, balances the ring box on it, and opens it to display a rock the
“Jane Foster, will you marry me?”

Jane keeps crying, but the beatific smile which splits her face proves that now these are happy tears. “Yes!”

Somehow, Thor has the ring on her finger and Jane in his arms, spinning her out in the street like she’s already his bride. Darcy’s glad that Jane has something on under the t-shirt. “She said yes!” he yells to the still-gathered crowd, who are all lurking casually in the same places they were minutes before.

A ripple passes through their friends and neighbours, relief giving way to delight. The boys from the House of Trouser holler—even, Darcy notices, Bucky, who appears to be glad the attention isn’t on him for the moment—and everyone else shouts their congratulations.

“You know what this needs?” Sam yells.

“A barbie!” Toadie replies.

That settled, the gathering finally disperses, returning to their dwellings to discuss the morning’s entertainment with their significant others. All except Bucky, whose movements Darcy tracks as she crosses back to number 28. Instead, he disappears through the gate into the back yard of number 30, shoulders hunched and head bowed.

She wants to follow him, but Steve beats her to the punch, and she knows Bucky will want his friend’s company more than he could wants hers. So she ignores the urge to go after him, and instead faces her foster mother, who is lingering on the threshold with something like shame shadowing her features.

They have some talking to do.

All Bucky wants is some peace and quiet. He’s had a rough night, all told, what with spending it on the sofa, and he’s probably blown it with Darcy just as she seemed to be coming around. Now, the whole street knows his business, the very worst of him, and even though they don’t know half the story—all they’ve heard are those two bloody words—it doesn’t matter. They don’t want the story, they’ll be happy with whatever fiction they can spin up in their imaginations that fits with the version of Bucky Barnes they’ve decided he is.

Besides, it’s not like he can even try to give them the whole picture without beginning with the whole truth, and that truth would have them drumming him out of town.

So he’d like some space, to lick his wounds and contemplate his next move. It may even be an actual move—he hasn’t even fully unpacked, it would take him minutes to gather his things together and throw them on the back of the bike. He’d be on the road and out of Erinsborough before the morning was out. He could pick a new destination on the battered road atlas shoved in his pannier: somewhere on the coast, maybe, the ocean a contrast from his years in the dusty, barren interior. Pick up a bartending gig and see if this time, it stuck.

Only, story of his life, Bucky doesn’t get what he wants. Instead of being able to plant himself at the foot of the steps, where he plucked Darcy from the water last night, and fantasise about what could have been if she wasn’t drunk, Steve follows him down. Bucky huffs a sigh and drops his head back against the balustrade.

“I’m sorry.” Steve’s voice is quieter than he’s ever heard it, in contrast to being the loudest he’d ever heard it not fifteen minutes before. “I just got so angry at the stuff she was saying about you.
Didn’t realise we’d gathered an audience.”

Bucky shrugs but keeps silent. He’s not sure he can offer Steve the forgiveness he wants, at least not yet. It’s too fresh.

“They don’t understand,” Steve continues. “They don’t know what you did—why I owe you so much. It’s not their life. But I could try to explain—”

“Don’t.” He’s probably had enough of Steve’s good intentions for the day.

“Okay.”

The silence stretches on, long and thin and taut, until Bucky yearns to twist it around his fingers and snap it. Only, he can’t find the words to do that, not ones which won’t slice wounds into his friendship. And God help him, Steve is still the best friend he’s ever had. Even if he leaves, he’ll want to do it knowing he can still call him that.

Instead, it’s Steve who speaks first. “You’re thinking of going, aren’t you?”

Bucky shrugs again, like he doesn’t have it all planned in his mind. Preferably, he’d be riding out of here with one curvy neighbour pressed against his back, taking her to see the world, but that was never going to happen. Will never happen, not now.

“Don’t,” Steve implores. “Stay. Even if it’s just for tonight. Come to the barbie, and sleep on it.”

Bucky laughs at that, but there’s no humour in it, just sarcasm served up cold. “Sure, let me turn up to the party so they can all goggle at me and whisper behind my back. Sounds like fun.”

“Buck, I can guarantee you that something else will happen tonight to take the gossip away from you. That’s what places like this are like: news ages fast. It’s all forgotten quick, and people move onto other things. Besides, I know you. If you ride out of here, you’ll feel like they won. You turn up at the party, show them you don’t care what they think, and if you go tomorrow it won’t niggle at you.”

Damnit, but Steve’s right. It would eat at Bucky, knowing he’d run away like a dog with its tail between its legs, like the suburbs had beaten him.

“You can guarantee me they’ll be talking about something else, can you?” he asks his friend with a raised eyebrow. “You planning on giving them a show?”

The house buzzes with tension after Susan and Darcy step inside, but despite dealing with Jane’s calamity, Darcy knows she is still too drunk to deal with a serious discussion with her foster mother. Instead, she fetches herself some water and pills, and retreats to her bedroom to nap it off.

When she emerges later, the sun outside her window advising it’s well into the afternoon, Susan is waiting in living room, curled up on the sofa with a book in her hands. Oh, it looks like she’s reading, but Darcy knows better. She’s been waiting.

“How are you feeling?” she asks, as Darcy chugs another glass of water.

“Better. Don’t think I’ll be drinking tonight though.”

“Probably wise,” Susan agrees.

There’s a pause, and Darcy leans against the kitchen counter facing the sofa. She doesn’t want to
sit down, knowing that would encourage the discussion, but she doesn’t have anywhere else to go until the party starts later. And she’s wary—the way their last confrontation about Bucky went down, she needs to be careful with her words.

She could offer up so much in Bucky’s defence: how he took care of her last night, and then this morning, how Susan doesn’t need to worry about Darcy throwing herself at him, because he’ll only catch her to put her down gently, or how little Darcy understands about how adult relationships. But she doesn’t, because she’s not sure how much of what Steve said has sunk in, and she doesn’t want to inadvertently colour Susan’s view of Bucky any worse than it already is.

“So I guess you’ve been reading up on Bucky.”

It’s more accusatory than she intended, but it’s an accusation that Susan deserves to have laid at her feet.

There’s that flicker of shame again. “Yes, I did.”

“I don’t think Steve appreciated it.”

A smile tugs at Susan’s lips. “No, I dare say he didn’t.” She opens her mouth to say more, then pauses. “I think I may have overstepped the mark.”

“And?”

“And I owe him an apology.”

Darcy doesn’t bother asking who Susan owes an apology to; she raises an eyebrow and waits for Susan to continue.

“Fine, yes I owe both of them an apology. And you.”

Darcy’s shocked by that addendum. “Me?”

“I should trust you to make your own choices. You’re a wise young woman and I can’t keep treating you like a little girl. And if James Barnes is what you want, I need to let you exercise your own judgement.” She mulls over her words, while Darcy stares at her gobsmacked. “And if he’s friends with Steve, he really can’t be that bad. Not if Steve cares about him that much.”

Darcy pushes herself up from her perch and crosses to the sofa, where she tucks herself in next to Susan. “Thank you. It means a lot.”

“Especially considering I know you drank that awful vodka of Billy’s, and that points to some seriously questionable judgement on your part.”

Darcy holds up her hands. “Hey, that was Jane’s choice, not mine.”

“That would explain why it looked like she was about to lose her breakfast over Thor when he was spinning her around outside.”

“And if it helps, I don’t think you have to worry about Bucky. He doesn’t see me that way.”

Darcy doesn’t miss the flash of relief that passes over Susan, swiftly hidden behind concern. “What makes you say that?”

She shrugs; she still has no desire to spin out the whole sorry tale from last night, so instead she replies, “He’s made it pretty clear. I think I’m just too young for him.”
This seems to win Bucky a point from Susan. “He might be right.” For a moment, she’s torn, seemingly debating something before speaking. “But I think if he has told you that he isn’t interested, it’s not the whole truth. The way he looks at you isn’t the way a man looks at a woman he’s not interested in.”

“Really?” Darcy doesn’t want to believe it, but for Susan to be saying this out loud—for her to have decided it needed saying, rather than burying the thought and letting Darcy meander on in misapprehension—means she thinks it’s true. “Ugh.” Darcy drops her head back against the sofa cushions. “Men are so confusing.”

“Trust me, it doesn’t get any easier.”

“So when are you going to apologise?”

“At the party. I’ll find a nice quiet corner, with no eavesdroppers, and do it before anybody’s started drinking.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I hope so. And Darcy?”

“Hmmm?”

“James would have to be blind not to realise what a catch you are—and I’m not just saying this because I’m biased. But I promise you, if nothing ever happens, there will be men beating down your door in a few short months when you start uni. And I’ll be proud of you whatever happens.”

Darcy offers her foster mother a watery smile. “You only have yourself to thank.”

The party starts when Thor returns from the wholesalers with sufficient quantities of meat and beer, late in the afternoon. For once he’s relegated from his place as chef, since he’s supposed to be celebrating with Jane, and replaced with Toadie.

Darcy waves away the tinnie Nat offers her with a grimace. She needs to give her liver a rest. “I’m good. Sticking to pop tonight.”

Nat grins and tosses the beer across to Clint instead, who makes the mistake of opening it immediately and getting sprayed in the face with foam. Darcy laughs, but her attention is diverted by Susan crossing to where Steve is feeding a carrot to Cassie. Whatever she says to him is too quiet for anyone to hear with the speaker system blasting out Wolfmother, least of all Darcy from where she stands, but she doesn’t miss Susan’s hand gently resting on Steve’s forearm and the contrite expression she wears. The words they exchange are brief, but end in smiles and the easing of tension from both of their bodies.

It’s to be expected—Steve isn’t the type of bloke to hold a grudge.

Bucky, on the other hand, is an unknown quantity. And apparently not here. That unsettles Darcy, though she can’t blame him for not making an appearance if he doesn’t. He’s been humiliated in front of the entire street. She’d skip the next party, too, if that happened.

“Starry!” Toadie yells from his place by the barbie, waving at her with a pair of tongs. “Come give us a hand!”

He’s on his own, juggling cooking and serving, so Darcy takes pity on him and wanders over to
help out. Helen’s in the middle of the street with Jane, giggling over the rock on her finger, and it’s not really fair on Helen to be stuck behind the grill when she could be drinking. (Though Darcy notes that Jane, too, seems to be sticking to lemonade).

It keeps Darcy busy, since word has got around and there are plenty of staff from Lassiter’s and the hospital who turn up, alerted through the social media blast various friends sent round. It means the street is pretty hectic, so much so that Darcy doesn’t even realise Bucky is out in the crowd for a while. Then she clocks him sipping a beer and holding a quiet conversation with Rhodey—and it looks like Susan has just spotted him too.

Darcy is tracking her foster mother’s movements through the crowd, until Clint steps in front of her and demands a burger. When she shoves the bloody thing at him and he moves aside, Susan is at the spot she’d last seen Bucky, talking with a bewildered, shrugging Rhodey. Bucky is gone.

The pattern repeats a few times over the next ten minutes, with Bucky popping up in new places, but disappearing before Susan can get close to him. It looks a lot like he has no intention of hearing an apology from her.

When Susan herself comes over, shoulders slumped in defeat, Darcy holds out a hotdog for her. “Tonight’s probably not the right time,” she says.

“You might be right. I’ll try again tomorrow.” Something catches her attention: a newcomer to the party heading up the pavement. “Oh, what’s he doing here?”

Somehow, in his avoidance of Susan, Bucky has found himself in conversation with Thor’s mother. The woman is glowing at the events of the day, as much the centre of attention as her son and his new fiancee.

“And of course, as soon as I heard the news, I came straight home. I was showing Nicholas around the area, which is why I wasn’t there—and honestly, I am a little annoyed at Thor for proposing in front of everyone except me—but this had to take priority.”

Bucky silently wishes Darcy’s friend good luck. He’s heard of bridezillas, but he suspects she’s about to experience the mother-in-law version of that.

He has no idea who this Nicholas bloke is, until Wilson’s father makes an exit from number 26 cradling a bottle of fizz and makes his way over to Frigga. It’s certainly a turn of events, since Bucky assumed the guy took the hint and slunk away with his tail between his legs last night. Turns out if you stand still long enough on this street, someone will offer you a spare bedroom.

Bucky makes a break for it before he has to make small talk, but it’s no good joining Steve and Wilson for a beer: once the champagne is in Frigga’s hands, Wilson’s father heads for them. None of them realise it until he’s there, muscling in and holding out a tinnie for his son.

“Sam.”

“No,” is the automatic response, and Wilson’s gone, letting the crowd swallow him up. His father makes a move to follow, but Bucky blocks him.

“Stay out of this,” Wilson senior warns. “This is between me and my son.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says, automatically contrite. “I don’t know what’s got into him—”

Bucky has no such qualms. “I think you need to back off. Now’s not the time.”
“Knowing my son, there will never be a good time.”

He’s probably right, Wilson’s a stubborn S.O.B., but Bucky struggles to find any sympathy for his father. Wilson’s no drama queen, so he’ll have his reasons for avoiding the man. “Listen, mate, I don’t know the story. Don’t know if you deserve forgiving, assuming that’s what you came for. But if that’s what you want, you have to do it on his terms, or you’ll prove to him you only care about how you feel.”

He can feel that one good eye practically drilling a hole in his face, but hey, the advice he’s offering is sound. Bucky can’t force him to take it, but he knows if he was on the receiving end of this, gatecrashing a party would not put him in a forgiving mood. Eventually, Wilson senior nods and moves away, seeking out his new landlady once more.

At least no one seems to be paying Bucky any attention. The newcomer has usurped his position as the centre of interest, and for that Bucky’s thankful, though he earns a few curious glances as he moves through the crowd. Sometimes he thinks he hears the end of a whisper, cut off with a guilty look in his direction.

Then there’s Darcy, looking lovely over at the grill in a sundress, and more than a little lonely. There’s a gulf between them, one that can only be closed by one of them making the first move and them actually having a conversation. Conversation is not Bucky’s favourite thing, not by a long shot—not when it’s going to be a tricky one like this—but he either steps up and makes it happen, or risks it never happening at all.

Nobody ever accused Bucky of being a coward.

When Susan’s stormed off, her ire diverted by the arrival of her ex-husband, Darcy finds her attention drifting. It’s been a long day, and people are starting to hit the point of tipsiness, when it’ll stop being fun for those left sober.

Her head is bowed, focused on slathering butter onto bread, when a hand appears in her peripheral vision. It’s holding a cup of iced lemonade, and when she glances up, Bucky’s the one offering it.

She’s too surprised to say anything, taking the cup from his mutely, since she hadn’t expected him to come anywhere near her tonight.

“You want a break, mate?” he asks Toadie. “I think your missus was wanting to dance.”

Toadie doesn’t need to be asked twice: he whips the apron off, then thrusts it and the tongs in Bucky’s direction. “Make sure he doesn’t give anyone food poisoning, Starry!” he says over his shoulder as he dashes off to find his wife.

“Was that true about Helen?” Darcy asks.

“Maybe. But you looked bored, so I thought I’d keep you company.”

She nods, taking the tongs from him to poke at the sausages idly. She’s still at a loss of what to say to him.

“How comes he calls you Starry?” he asks, valiantly trying to break through the tension between them.

“It’s a family thing; we all have weird marine nicknames. He’s Toadfish, I’m Starry Triggerfish. He picked it because I tased Thor.”
He takes the tongs back from her, eyeing her with concern. “You did what?”

“Everyone makes this big deal out of it, but it was nothing. I was a kid and I didn’t know Thor, and my dad had given me a taser to protect myself. I’d just moved in with Susan—she did not know about the taser—and Thor scared me one night so I was a little trigger happy. Never did get the bloody taser back.”

Bucky laughs, and Darcy suspects it’s the first time he’s done so all day. “I like it. Might even start calling you that myself.”

She hides her wince behind her hair. It’s the last thing she wants to hear: whatever Susan said earlier, it’s tantamount to Bucky admitting he looks at her the same way Toadie does.

There’s another pause, stretching out, and it’s Bucky who breaks it again. “About what you heard earlier—”

“Hey, you don’t have to tell me anything,” she cuts in. “Susan had no right. You don’t owe me an explanation. Besides, I think I owe you an apology—I ran out of there this morning without saying goodbye and—”

“I know you found the magazines.” Darcy is amazed that Bucky actually appears to be blushing. If you’d asked, she’d have doubted he was capable of it, especially not when it came to sex of all things. That was her domain, getting all flustered and tongue-tied, but here he was, looking abashed at the idea. “I realised as soon as you’d gone…you shouldn’t have seen them—not that I was trying to hide stuff from you—”

Darcy takes pity on him and interrupts the ramble. “Don’t worry, I know they aren’t yours. Nat told they belong to Clint.”

He nods in relief. “Yes. Not mine.”

She glances around at the party. “I reckon people are done with food. We could shut the grill down and go talk somewhere quieter?”

The relief settles. “Please.”

Susan should have known. Her ex-husband does work at the hospital, after all, even if she’d never thought he and Jane were particularly friendly. But here he is, walking up to them with a bottle of wine clasped in his hand, like he had any right to be here.

She shoves the hotdog into her mouth and wanders off to find Madge. Karl won’t care she’s at the party, so she isn’t going to care that he’s here either.

The plan goes swimmingly until they’re gushing over Jane’s ring, and then he’s there, smiling at her like he didn’t cheat on her twice and she’s the unreasonable one for not wanting to talk to him.

“It’s really a lovely ring, Jane,” he says, and Susan’s a little gleeful to see that Jane’s smile is tight. Behind his back, Helen rolls her eyes, and makes the universal gesture for ‘Makes me want to vomit’.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be here,” Susan says.

“Well, these are my friends,” he replies, in that oh-so-reasonable tone, “and I wanted to deliver my congratulations in person.” Out of his field of vision, Jane wrinkles her nose at the cheap
supermarket plonk he’s handed her. “And since I don’t live here anymore, sometimes it’s nice to
catch up with people outside of work. After all, I wasn’t invited to Darcy’s birthday gathering.”

“Why would you have been invited? You barely know her!” Darcy has only met Karl a handful of
times, since the divorce had gone through long before she moved in, and most of those times
involved teenage shenanigans landing her in the hospital. His attempts at dispensing paternal
advice had usually ended in worse shenanigans.

But Karl’s attention is on the grill, where Darcy and Barnes are now in charge of catering. “I met
him! Jane had to stitch him up after he was in an altercation. Nice bloke.”

“Oh, is he.” It’s not a question. She’d never got the full story of exactly why Barnes needed stitches
and a police escort home, but despite Steve’s opinion of him, she can’t see how that adds up to him
being a ‘nice bloke’. Despite resolving earlier to let Darcy make her own decisions and to
apologise to Barnes, she realises that Karl vouching for him is one more black mark against his
name. She’ll stay out of it, of course, but she can’t place any trust in him. Not where Darcy’s
concerned.

The grill’s packed up, and their hunt for privacy eventually leads them to the living room of
number 30, since everyone is out in the street or by the pool. The search has given Bucky a few
minutes to mull things over. He’s grateful that Darcy hasn’t pried, because the full story is still a
bitter one, and there are twists to it he knows will have her walking away. But she seems genuine
when she says that she doesn’t want an explanation, and she hasn’t once looked at him with pity.

Maybe she doesn’t understand the implications, not like Wilson and the others, but he can’t bring
himself to care. One day, they might have to sit down and really talk this stuff through. If it looks
like they might be getting serious, she’ll need to know everything, but he’s desperately trying not to
put the cart before the horse here.

And the strangest thing is the realisation that he’s even contemplating something serious.
Contemplating, and not freaking out over it.

But first, they need to have a real conversation. Not a brief flirtation, not a discussion loaded with
misunderstandings. They need to speak freely and say what they both want. God, does he hope she
wants the same thing as him. From there—well, time will tell.

When they’re settled on the sofa, shifted to face each other, Darcy takes the reins.

“Thank you for looking after me last night. I know I already thanked you, but I think I owe you it
again. You barely know me, and you didn’t have to do anything.”

He shrugs. “Like I said, I’ve got a little sister. I hope anyone would act the same way around a
drunken girl.”

“Right.” Darcy nods, focusing on her fingers, which are twined together in her lap. Bucky has the
urge to reach out and uncurl them, but he doesn’t, because he suspects it’ll make her clam up.
When she speaks again, it’s in a rush, and she doesn’t look at him. “You said the same thing
earlier. I can take a hint, and I promise you’re not going to have to put up with me trying to pash
you in the car or flash you in the pool—I get it, so I’m going to stop embarrassing myself. There’s
probably something cliche about staying friends, except we’re not friends, and you only see me as a
kid, so that’s fine. No drunk Darcy in your pool, I swear.”

Bucky can only blink at her, trying to make sense of her words. “You think…you think I see you as
“Like a little sister. Or cousin. Or something. Yes, message received and understood.”

Her voice sounds casual, but her face says she’s miserable. He brushes her hair out of the way and tugs at her chin until she looks up at him. It’s a wonder she can look him in the eye when she’s basically admitting to having a crush on him and believing it’s unrequited, and he wonders at how brave she is. “Darcy, I don’t know where you’re getting your messages from, but they’re a little scrambled.”

Now would be an excellent time to kiss her, a little voice whispers in his head, but no, he’s going to do this properly. A kiss will probably only confuse her more, judging by the way her eyebrows are knitting together in confusion. He needs to use words to make it clear.

“You’re wrong, and I’ll prove it. Let me take you out.”
“Let me take you out.”

Darcy stares at him, and blinks. Bucky still has his hand on her chin, cupping her cheek gently and his blue eyes are fixed on her like she’s the only thing in the world he cares to look at. She’s heard the words he’s said, and individually they make sense, but strung together like that it’s just not hitting home for her.

“I, uh,” She stutters, and wonders if it’s polite to ask him to repeat himself or not.

At that moment, Steve and Sam come barrelling through the door, laughing their heads off about Helen pushing Toadie fully clothed into the pool. Darcy jerks back, and Bucky’s hand falls from her cheek as she turns a vivid scarlet. The newcomers seem not to notice, or at least notice anything out of the ordinary, so focused are they on the contents of the fridge.

Bucky half-sighs to himself, for he has noticed the blush spreading across Darcy’s cheeks and down her neck, and knows that his chance has been ruined. For today, at least. With all the crap he’s gone through recently, he’s not about to give up so easily. He lays a hand against her knee gently, and she jumps slightly at the touch, turning her head back to him with wide eyes.

“I’ll, uh, see you out,” He says quietly, nodding towards the doorway. She looks a little taken aback, and he’s not sure how to take that, but guides her up anyway.

“Bucky-” Darcy turns to him at the door, one hand on the doorframe and the other hesitantly hovering, almost laid against his chest but losing heart at the last moment to drop awkwardly to her side instead. “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“To the date. I mean-” she adds quickly, eyes widening. “-if you still want to, um, if that's still-”

He laughs. He can't help it, the relief bubbling up from inside him where a nasty churning feeling had been stirring for the last ten minutes. Darcy’s face falls slightly and he just manages to catch himself - remembering that, for all he's out of practice, girls don’t react well to boys laughing at them - and snatch up her hand before she stumbles backwards out of the door.

“Yes,” he says, serious now and calming himself. “Very much do I still want to take you out, Darcy Lewis.” He's rewarded with a shy but bright smile from her that lights up her whole face and not a small part of his stomach, which tightens a little as he looks at her. He realises that he’s still holding her hand, and squeezing it a little hard, and drops it hurriedly.

“So, uh…” Bucky says, running a hand through his hair. “Pick you up at seven?”

-------

“I don’t own a shirt.” Bucky announces to the living room, fresh from the shower and wrapped only in a towel which is slung low around his hips. The thought’s only just occurred to him as he was stepping from the shower, and water is still clinging to him as he stands in the doorway.

“We know.” Sam says shortly, and changes the channel without looking round at the other man.

“No, I mean-” Bucky pushes a frustrated hand through his wet hair, pushing strands of it back from
his face and belatedly thinking that perhaps he ought to have a haircut, too.

“I mean I don’t have a shirt that’s, that would be…” He trails off and throws Steve a hangdog look. “That would be okay for a date.” He mutters into his chest with his head dropped, feeling his cheeks flush as he speaks and finding himself starting to reconsider the wisdom of having this conversation so publicly.

Barton’s head snaps around so fast Bucky’s surprised it doesn’t break.

“Date?” Steve’s face cracks into a wide smile, and Bucky thinks that little show of enthusiasm perhaps might be a little worse than the confused head tilt that Barton has fixed upon him.

“C’mon, Buck,” Steve says, nudging past him and gesturing for him to follow. “I’ll have a shirt you can borrow.”

------

Darcy scrubs and, whilst she scrubs, she begins to worry.

She doesn’t have, she thinks, the right sort of dress to wear. Something grown up, rather than the sundresses she usually wears, all bright prints and cartoon characters. That’s not the right sort of thing for a date, not the right sort of thing for Bucky who’s a little older and - she thinks, with a sudden heaviness weighing on her heart - most like a lot more experienced.

She’s scrubbing the same part of the counter for the fourth time when Nat finally lets out an exasperated huff and throws a dishcloth at her.

“Darce, what’s on your mind? You’d better ‘fess up because the insurance on this place doesn’t cover damage by cleaning.”

Darcy straightens up with a sigh and the smallest smile she can muster in the redhead’s direction. Nat slides into place on the other side of the counter, and snatches up a milkshake glass, one of the tall ones Madge put a special order in for last summer, the ones that look like proper 1950s American diner glasses.

The other girl pours it full of milk, ice cold and straight from the refrigerator sat snugly underneath the counter, keeping her eyes on Darcy the whole time. Nat slides it across the counter towards her, head tilted to one side and says, in her best New York accent, “What’s up kid? Fella done you wrong?”

Darcy bursts into peals of laughter and Nat grins, pleased.


The eyebrow raises ever so slightly higher, and Nat remains mute.

“I just…” Darcy trails off, hands clasping in her lap as she sits back heavily on the stool behind her. She looks lost. “I just don’t know what to wear.” She looks up, blue eyes not quite meeting Nat’s own, and chewing at the corner of her bottom lip.

“Stick with me,” Nat says, decisively, putting out a hand for Darcy to take. “I’ve got just the thing.”

------
“Long-sleeved?” Bucky says doubtfully as Steve holds up shirt after shirt against his chest. He’s starting to regret this. Not the date, for all that he’s got an odd churning feeling in the pit of his stomach which is a new one on him, but looking to Rogers for any involvement. The other man is a little too invested in all this.

“You gonna cover up that tattoo or what?” Steve answers over his shoulder, still rummaging through his wardrobe. Bucky wasn’t aware that Steve even owned that many shirts. It’s a little disconcerting to see the growing pile amassing on the bed, but then he supposes not everyone can get by the way he does.

“You my mother tonight or something?” Bucky musters instead, raising an eyebrow at his friend who shrugs as if to say if-the-shoe-fits.

-----

Darcy stares at herself in the mirror.

Nat’s dress is…

Well.

Very Nat.

She turns to the left, casting her gaze down her body which is now encased in a dress that slides close to every curve of her body and flares slightly at her hips, ending in a modest knee length cut. It’s a deep red, and whilst Darcy wouldn’t have picked it for herself, she has to admit that it does give her a certain something.

Whether that certain something is what Bucky is after remains to be seen.

She’s just smoothing the material over her stomach again and squinting at her reflection when Susan passes her open door. Then backtracks and stops dead. She’s got a pile of laundry in her arms, freshly ironed and ready to go, but she looks as though she’s about to drop it all over the floor.

“Darcy Lewis,” She starts, and Darcy spins toward her on one delicate heel - also borrowed from Nat, she has nothing this fancy or this high in her own wardrobe - sure that she’s about to be read the riot act.

What she finds instead is Susan, one hand to her lips and a slightly misty look in her eye. If anything, that somewhat more alarming than being yelled at. At least she’s ready to be yelled at - she’s had a fair amount of practice.

“Susan?” She asks tentatively, and the older woman smiles at her, a genuine one, if slightly watery.

“Oh sweetheart. You just look so grown up!” She exclaims. “And so beautiful.” Darcy blushes and drops her eyes to the floor. “What’s this in aid of?”

Darcy, eyes still on the floor, grimaces slightly thinking that this was probably the point at which the beginnings of the tears in Susan’s eyes would dry instantly. And the yelling would start. She chewed on her bottom lip and chanced a look back up at the older woman, who was waiting expectantly, arms still full of ironing.

“I, uh, well.” She starts, then takes a deep breath and rushes the next part to get it over with. “I’ve-got-a-date-with-Bucky.” Darcy manages all of this in one breath and with her eyes squeezed shut.
Upon finishing, she flinches back slightly, tensed for the inevitable backlash. When it isn’t immediately forthcoming, she cracks one eye open.

Susan tilts her head at Darcy. Her smile isn’t perhaps quite as wide as it was before, but it’s still there. For now. “So he finally wised up, did he?” She says lightly, though both she and Darcy can see the work she’s putting into making it light and breezy. Darcy’s heart lifts a little. It means a lot that Susan can bite her tongue and let Darcy have this, even if it’s just the one night.

“Youh,” She says shyly, voice quiet. She’s kind of desperate to shout it from the rooftops, because she’s been dreaming about what a date with Bucky would be like since he rolled into the neighbourhood, but she’s smart enough to know that Susan is not the appropriate audience, however much she’s doing her best to be supportive right now.

“Well, he’d better treat you right.” Susan says, only half-joking as she says it.

-----

“You’re taking flowers?” Barton asks, incredulous.

Bucky gives him a withering look and then turns back to the mirror, straightening the tie he’s also borrowed off Steve. He’d not been thinking on having one, but spotting the deep blue material hanging in the back of the wardrobe he knew he had to have it. Bucky Barnes is not, and never will be, a vain man - but he knows what looks good on him.

“Flowers, Barton, are the only thing to take a girl on a date.” He says, squinting into the mirror and pushing a hand through his hair, carefully rearranging it to his liking. Bucky’s managed to dissuade Steve from forcing him into something patterned. He might not own a shirt, but he sure as hell knows what to wear on a date, and it ain’t paisley.

“Well, I’ve never taken Nat flowers.” Barton throws back, shrugging his shoulders.

“And that’s just the first of many reasons why you’re a terrible boyfriend, Barton.” Bucky dodges the tennis ball the other man throws at him with surprising accuracy, and it’s really only because he sees it coming in the reflection of the mirror that he manages to twist out of the way in time.

-----

“So where you taking her?” Barton asks with barely disguised interest, lounging inexplicably half-on and half-off the sofa; except in his own style Barton has his legs slung over the seat and his back flat on the carpet, staring in concentration at the juggling balls he has going.

“Like I’d tell you.” Bucky says flatly, stepping over him carefully. Barton doesn’t miss a beat, catching all three balls deftly in his left hand as the other man passes, and starting right back up again after he’s safely on the other side. “I don’t need you goons turning up and gawping.”

“Hate to break it to you, Buck, but there’s only so many places you can take her in Erinsborough.” Steve shrugs from the other side of the kitchen counter, hands wrapped around a Pyrex measuring jug full of coffee. Bucky slides into the stool opposite him and raises an eyebrow at the big blond, gaze sliding purposefully to the jug he’s drinking out of.

“It’s Barton’s turn to do the washing up.”

“Is not.”

-----
Nat R. “Dress okay?”

Darcy L. “It’s a little tight.”

Nat R. “That’s the point, Lewis.”

Jane F. “She’s right.”

Darcy L. “You don’t think the neckline’s a little low?”

Nat R. “He’s already seen your boobs, don’t sweat it.”

Jane F. “Wait, what?”

Darcy L. “Cheers, Nat. And he didn’t look, actually.”

Nat R. “That’s what you think.”

Jane F. “Is anyone going to fill me in?!?”

-----

Bucky, squaring his shoulders, presses the doorbell to number 28 firmly and turns slightly away from it as he waits for the answer. He’s holding the biggest bunch of flowers he could find, and he’s just straightening his tie again when the door finally opens. He turns, soft smile on face and pushing the flowers forward, to find Susan Kennedy staring back at him.

He swallows.

Susan for her part, almost can’t place the handsome young man lurking awkwardly at her door. Bucky’s wearing a smart pair of dark trousers that fit the taper of his long legs perfectly and a simple white shirt topped off with a deep blue tie that matches his eyes so vividly she finds herself staring at them in fascination before she catches herself.

“James?” She says, half-checking that this is actually Barnes.

“I…” He trails off, awkward and stance hesitant, for all he’s looming over her. “Mrs. Kennedy, uh-”

They’re both saved by the appearance of Darcy, who pops her head shyly around the door and latterly the rest of her body follows. She’s clasping her hands in front of her and twisting her fingers in and around the strap of her purse, but Bucky’s jaw is almost on the floor.

He thinks she’s pretty, obviously. From the first moment he looked at her properly, squinting up at her from under Steve’s car, her little patterned sundress riding high on acres of leg and her dark hair
tumbling around her shoulders, he’s thought she was pretty. But Darcy tonight; Darcy in heels, Darcy with a touch of makeup and hair in curls, Darcy in a dress like he’s never seen her wear before - she’s a knockout.

Susan looks a little stunned at the sight of her as well, and he thinks for one horrible moment the woman is going to order her back inside and well away from the likes of him, but then she blinks and smiles, and gives Darcy a little hug before moving aside. Dumbly, he presents her with the flowers, and she looks delighted, which warms him inside a little.

Darcy bustles back to the kitchen with the flowers, grabbing a vase and depositing them in it as quickly as she can to save Bucky loitering awkwardly in the doorway any longer than he has to, Susan keeping a careful watch on his every movement. The little brunette comes back to the door double-quick time, and Bucky, catching his breath a little, offers her his arm.

She slips her arm into his, trembling a little at the touch because she’s not had a chance to really take him in yet but boy she is now and it turns out that Bucky Barnes scrubs up well. She’s still not used to seeing him bare-chested and on display, for all that he’s rarely in a shirt, but this suited-and-booted version is causing her stomach to make funny turns.

“Hey - just a minute there, young man.” Susan shouts, recovering herself finally and following them out of the house and down the path, and Bucky bites down hard on his lip, arm loosely on Darcy’s waist and his free hand subconsciously clenching into a fist at the sound of her voice. Pasting a smile on his face, he halts and turns back to her, still holding onto Darcy.

“You’re not taking her on that thing, are you?” Susan nods to Bucky’s motorcycle, leaning on its kickstand in the driveway of number 30 and glinting in the last ebbs of the afternoon sun as it recedes over the rooftops of Ramsey Street. It’s not so much a question as a statement, and Bucky fights back a low chuckle.

“No, I’m not, Mrs. Kennedy.” He answers, politely. “I’m taking that, actually.” With that, he points across to a shining black BMW parked curbside. Susan’s face is a mix of impressed and concern. Bucky’s pretty sure she’s wondering where the car came from, and whether he’s stolen it. Pre-empting the inevitable, he answers the as-yet-unspoken question.

“Thor lent it to me, for tonight. It’s from the garage.”

-----

Bucky holds the passenger door open and Darcy neatly folds herself into the car, brushing past him as she does so. He catches the scent of her perfume as she moves past him and it’s just like her - fruity, and sweet. He smiles down at her and closes the door carefully once she’s settled properly.

He’s not above stealing a glance at the pale skin of her thigh that’s been exposed slightly as her dress rides up, but though a large part of him desperately wants to drop his hand to it and squeeze, he’s not going to do that. If this were just some quick fumble, a night of fun and perhaps the morning after too, he’d have had his hand further up that thigh already, never mind on the small patch of skin that’s bared right now.

But this is more than that, and the hope that’s building in the base of his chest is starting to rise up and up, the more time that he spends with her. Bucky can’t help but sneak a little glance over at her as he pulls away, dark hair carefully curled and her lips a polished red. He’s seen Darcy in all sorts, and he honestly thinks she’s beautiful however she comes, but seeing her all dolled up and knowing it’s for him - well, that sends an entirely different feeling flooding through him.
“Darling!”

Jane jerks her head back from the curtain where she’s been watching Darcy slide into Bucky’s car - loaned, for the night, with a wink and a smile from Thor - and comes face to face with Frigga. Or, as she supposes she ought to start thinking of her as, her mother-in-law.

“I thought we could just take a little look at these-”

Frigga gracefully drops into a cross-legged position - she takes yoga, obviously, like it’s her religion, and Jane considers that a woman of her age has no right to be that damn flexible - and spreads an armful of magazines across the coffee table in front of her. Jane steps closer and realises that these are bridal magazines. At least twenty of them.

She snaps her head up in desperation just in time to see Thor, shaking his head and disappearing around the doorframe. Git. She’ll make him pay for that one later. Frigga pats the floor beside herself enthusiastically and Jane drags her feet forward until she can collapse into some semblance of the neat figure Frigga makes.

“Now, a lot of girls will tell you that an Empire line dress is the most flattering, but I really don’t think that you can rule out the A-line. Yes, I grant you it’s a little different, but what bride wants to look like everyone else on her special day?”

Jane’s lost the will to live roughly halfway through the sentence.

“Should I, uh,” She racks her brains for something, anything. Frigga turns a bright smile on her and Jane’s shoulders fall in resignation. “Should I fetch a bottle of wine?”

Bucky slides the car carefully into a space and is out of the car and opening her door before she can even get the seatbelt off. She unfolds herself as elegantly as she is able - and it’s not something that comes naturally to her, so she’s concentrating hard - and stands up right into his embrace as he leans over the car door at her.

Darcy breathes in deep and is hit by his cologne, she’s practically able to taste it so close is she to his neck. He smiles down at her, a little one that tugs at the corners of his lips and takes him straight from handsome to dangerously sexy. She swallows and ducks under his arm, clutching her purse to her chest.

They are greeted at the door to Lassiter’s restaurant by a bubbly blonde that Darcy thinks looks strikingly familiar, yet cannot place. As the impossibly tall and thin waitress wiggles her way in front of them to their table - tucked away in the corner - it suddenly hits her like a cold shower. The waitress is the same girl that Bucky was chatting up in The Waterhole a week or so previous. Darcy’s heart sinks like a proverbial stone. Nat’s dress suddenly feels impossibly tight and too grown up for her, the heels too high and her makeup too much. She looks, she thinks - catching sight of herself in a polished chrome support beam - like a child playing dress up.

Blondie - Darcy thinks she might have said her name, but it’s something stupid and she wasn’t addressing Darcy when she said it, so she feels approximately zero compunction about forgetting it - presents the table and promptly runs a hand up Bucky’s arm, lingering around his shoulder. Darcy plops herself into the seat opposite, staring up at the dark-haired man who appears not to notice the
waitress who’s about an inch away from draping herself over him.

“Drinks?” Blondie practically breathes into Bucky’s ear, and Darcy grits her teeth.

“Glass of house white.” Darcy says firmly. “Large.”

The waitress raises an eyebrow in her direction which Darcy studiously ignores, and Bucky looks up to where Blondie is falling over him and tells her he’ll take a lemonade. She pouts, prettily, making some comment about how it’s a shame a man can’t have a coldie with his dinner, and Darcy feels like she could throw up right then and there.

Blondie finally takes her leave, not without running her hand down Bucky’s arm again, and wiggles her way back to the bar to place their drinks order. Darcy clears her throat, uncomfortable, and silence falls between them. Bucky’s eyes flicker between her and the bar, and if she’s being kind she’ll put it down to him being thirsty, but if she’s being paranoid, then well… She’ll put it down to him being thirsty.

Darcy flips the menu up and hides her face from Bucky, knowing that she’s gone deep pink again and willing it away before she has to lower it. She can hear him drum his fingers against the table, a rhythmic pattern that does nothing to allay her crisis of confidence. She shifts in the chair, uncomfortably aware that her neckline is plunging low and wondering whether she can get away with tucking her napkin into it.

Bucky’s barely able to speak for looking at her. Everytime he tries to form a decent sentence, some sort of intelligent question about her life or her hopes and dreams, he looks up at her tucked into that goddamn dress and chewing on her lip, and he loses it all. The words die a thousand deaths on his tongue and he fights the urge to roll his eyes at himself.

“So, you’re, um, going to university? Steve said-” He manages, but is interrupted by the waitress bringing their drinks to the table. She leans across, obscuring Darcy from his vision and he ducks around her arms to catch his date’s eye. Blonde hair clouds his vision and he sits back, frustrated. The waitress makes some remark he’s not listening to, and he belatedly realises that she wants him to order. Blinking, he tears his eyes away from Darcy and glances at the menu, struggling to focus at what’s printed there. Giving up, his mind all over the place as he tries to dredge up something intelligent to say, he orders steak and assumes they’ll have it.

Darcy orders a chicken salad, and he practically throws the menu at the waitress in the hopes she’ll go away and leave them be. Frustratingly she hangs around, adjusting his cutlery and fussing with the wine glasses. Bucky turns his head towards her and finally connects the dots. The girl is Danni - or Barbara - or Phoebe - or Maggie? He can’t remember that detail, but what he does remember with a sinking feeling is that he’d spent all evening feeding her his best lines in The Waterhole. Crap.

------

“So Thor and Jane.” Sam remarks, lounging across the sofa, legs hanging over one end and his arm flung above his head at the other. “Bit quick?”

“It’s nice.” Steve remarks from the armchair. He’s cross legged, oddly, but with a sketchbook balanced against his thighs. He’s idly doodling with a pencil across the open page, not thinking too hard on what he’s doing with it, but what’s taking shape has dark hair, a wicked smile and goes by the name of Peggy Carter. Glancing down at what he’s sketched without thinking, Steve is glad
that Bucky is out.

Barton is flat out on the floor, looking a little like he’s been shot the way his limbs are spread akimbo. He drums his fingers against his chest absentmindedly, and stares up at the ceiling fan, lazily rotating above him.

“It’s fast.” Sam decrees, switching the channel to an Aussie rules football game that has all three men sitting up a little straighter. They watch, avidly, communicating only in grunts and hand gestures around passing the popcorn and beer, until the commercial break.

“I don’t think it’s too fast,” Steve says lightly, settling back into the armchair and flipping a new page on his sketchbook. “They’ve been dating a couple of years, haven’t they?”

Sam snorts.

“Well if it’s not too fast for Thor and Jane, Clint’s way overdue.” He extends a leg as far as he can from his position on the sofa, and pokes Barton in the ribs with a toe. “Hey, birdbrain. You listening?”

Clint, who likes to turn down the volume on his hearing aids in the evenings, enjoying the peace and quiet it affords him - especially since Barnes moved in - jerks upwards at the sudden prod and turns the volume up. “Eh?”

Sam rolls his eyes at Steve.

“He said you should be married by now,” Steve says helpfully. “To Natasha.” He clarifies, because at the end of the day it’s Barton he’s talking to, and you can never quite predict how his mind is going to connect up the dots. Barton frowns in response.

“Really?”

-----

Darcy excuses herself to the ladies halfway through her chicken salad and stilted conversation. Staring at herself in the mirror, she feels a fool. All trussed up in someone else’s dress, heels that are far too high for her to comfortably manage, Bucky can’t seem to manage to string a sentence together to talk to her and she’s sure it’s because she looks a mess.

She sighs.

Adjusting her curls and smoothing the dress over her hips, Darcy pastes a smile on her face and makes her way back to the table. Upon arriving, however, she finds her seat is not as vacant as she’s expecting.

The lithe blonde waitress is sat in her seat, leaning across and making doe eyes at Bucky.

“Excuse me,” Darcy says tightly, one hand on the back of her chair. “Don’t let me keep you from your job.” The waitress throws her a perfectly groomed arched eyebrow and very slowly unfolds herself from the chair, standing up and over Darcy as she does so. Darcy stands her ground, only moving back at the last possible moment to let the other girl past.

She slides into the chair and looks over at Bucky, who’s smiling back at her like he has no clue what’s just happened in front of him. She sets her shoulders.

“Shall we, uh, get the bill?” Bucky suggests, and signals for the check as she silently nods. The ten
minutes it takes for them to prepare it and bring it over to the table pass in uncomfortable silence, Darcy with head bowed and picking at bits of non-existent fluff on her dress and Bucky shifting in his seat. He looks as though he wants to say something, but never quite manages it.

Finally, the bill arrives, and Bucky pats his left pocket. Then his right pocket. Then, with a wild expression that’s glued to his face, he proceeds to search both back pockets and then begins again from the left pocket.

His face drops, and he begins to stutter, looking over to her from the other side of the table with one hand over his shirt pocket and a look of total panic across his face.

“I’ve forgotten my wallet.”

Darcy shakes her head. “It’s okay. I’ll pay.”

“No, no, no-” He starts, but she interrupts him.

“Welcome to the 21st Century, Bucky. It’s not all on you.” She fishes in her purse and lays out the bills on the little china plate.

“I didn’t-” He looks miserable now, and his head is drooping, dark hair falling in his eyes. “You shouldn’t have to do that.” He looks as though he wants to ground to open up and swallow him whole, and for all the date has been a disaster, Darcy feels sorry for him.

“Seriously. It’s okay.” She insists, nodding her head at him from the other side of the table. Bucky twists his mouth and kicks one foot at the table leg, silent to her. She sighs inwardly.

------

Three hours later, and Jane thinks to herself that, if she ever sees another bridal magazine, she might just self-combust. Frigga has gone through pretty much every page in every magazine she’s brought, circled what she deems important things with a special pink marker and started a shoebox of clippings for anything ‘really special’.

“I so appreciate your help, Frigga,” Jane begins, laying a soft hand to the older woman’s arm. “I really do. But don’t you think this is all a bit too early?”

The other woman smiles at her beatifically. “Oh Jane, darling. Take it from me, these things can never be too early. Besides, if you want a September wedding, you need to get moving.”

“Who said I wanted a September wedding?” Jane asks, wrongfooted by that and confused.

“You did, dear.” Frigga flips another page and carefully circles a particular floral centrepiece that Jane for one thinks is utterly hideous. “In Brides Weekly, where the girl had that darling vintage themed outdoor set-wedding, and you said that you-”

“-Liked it, yeah.” Jane finishes, mumbling, and realising that she needs to learn to keep her mouth shut. Appeasement clearly isn’t working out in her favour. She rubs the back of her hand across her tired eyes, and thinks hard on an escape route.

“Well that just wouldn’t work in June, would it?” Frigga says brightly, starting on the next magazine.

“Oh my goodness, I just remembered that I promised to drop this, uh, this-” Jane scans around herself urgently for inspiration. She snatches up a DVD that’s lying on the sideboard. “This DVD,
to Helen.” She holds it up with a what-can-you-do shrug. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, but you know Helen. She likes to talk.”

With that, she’s gone - out of the living room, out of the front door and down the garden path so quickly the door barely has time to shut before she’s knocking on Helen’s door and shoving a DVD at the other woman.

Helen looks down in confusion after Jane has pushed past her, heading for the bottle of rose she knows is always on hand in the fridge. “Why have you brought me Australia’s Greatest Sporting Goals, Volume 3?”

-----

Bucky’s just trying to work out the best way to try and pull this date around, when the car starts to judder. Frowning, he looks down at the steering wheel which is beginning to pull to the left slightly. His brain is screaming at him, because this is not good, but outwardly he merely grits his teeth and tries to pump the brakes.

It doesn’t do much to stop the shuddering the car is doing, and if anything it might even make it worse.

He curses hard under his breath, but it’s enough to have Darcy looking over at him. He ignores her for the moment, and fights to keep the car in a straight line. The BMW kangaroo hops forward, and Bucky wants to rest his head on the dash when he sees a plume of smoke start to creep its way out from under the bonnet.

There’s nothing else for it.

He pulls over abruptly, hauling the car as best he can up onto a grass verge and away from any other traffic. He’s going to need Darcy out of the vehicle, especially if it’s smoking the way it is, and he can’t have her anywhere near the edge of the road.

“You need to get out. Sorry.” He says, and slides out himself, leaving her to unclip her seatbelt and follow. By the time she manages it, he’s got the bonnet propped open, his shirt sleeves rolled up, the tie slung back over his shoulder and a look of grim determination over his face as he stares down at the engine.

“You need to get out. Sorry.” He says, and slides out himself, leaving her to unclip her seatbelt and follow. By the time she manages it, he’s got the bonnet propped open, his shirt sleeves rolled up, the tie slung back over his shoulder and a look of grim determination over his face as he stares down at the engine.

“Just call a tow company,” She says, shrugging as she appears at the side of him.

“With what, sweetheart?” He snaps, wiping a hand on his - Steve’s - shirt as he bends back up to his full height from the engine, and smears a nice long grease stain across it. Darcy looks at him like he’s grown another head.

“With your mobile phone?” She says slowly, like he’s touched in the head.

“I don’t have one.” He replies, giving her the same treatment. She stares at him.

“What kind of unevolved caveman doesn’t have a mobile in this day and age?” Darcy says, incredulously.
“This unevolved caveman.” Bucky’s worked up now, frustrated by the awful way this date’s panned out, that he has a car in front of him he can’t fix and now the way that Darcy is looking at him. There’s a big part of him that wants to slam the car bonnet down and kick at the nearest tyre, hard, but he doesn’t. Instead he rolls his head back on his shoulders and lets out a deep sigh.

Darcy pulls a face at him and digs through her purse and finds her phone, luckily with a bar of battery or so left, and hands it off to him to call a tow company. “I suppose you do actually know the number of a company, right?” She says, only half-sarcastically. If he doesn’t know one off by heart, they're screwed.

“Yes,” He snaps, and turns his back to her, dialling with impatient fingers. Darcy contemplates throwing her purse at his head, but decides against it on the basis that the way her luck was currently running, she’d probably just wind up losing her house keys out of it. There’s a crack of lightning and an ominous roll of thunder overhead.

She has about thirty seconds to process what that means before the heavens open.

Darcy’s breath is taken from her entirely as what feels like a month’s worth of rain descends upon her head. About the only thought she can muster is that she’s glad at least the dress isn’t white. Her hair sticks to her face and water cascades down her back as lightning flashes across the night sky. Thunder rumbles in the background and she’s doused again as the rain seems to throw down harder than before.

She kind of wants to cry, but forces it back.

“Done.” Bucky says shortly, holding her phone out to her. Annoyance and anger at the tone in his voice as he says it zips through her like a bush fire; starting at her toes - cold and wet in her borrowed shoes - and fanning upwards until it bursts out of her mouth.

“I’m not waiting around in this.” She declares, snatching back the phone and shoving it in her bag. Bucky lets out a bark of laughter which serves only to anger her more, and she twists on her heel away from him, stumbling and nearly falling as her heel has wedged into the soft ground whilst she’s been standing there.

Swearing, she yanks it back out and marches forward, rain lashing against her face and stinging her cheeks so hard is it coming down.

“Oh wait - Darce - come on, where are you going?” Bucky shouts, hands cupped around his mouth to help his words travel. She either does not hear him, or - possibly more likely at this point - she’s ignoring him.

Darcy makes it as far as the pavement where she can slip off her heels and inspect the damage. It’s just as she’s standing there that another car flashes past, and sends a wave of dirty water over her. She chokes, soaked to the bone and with muddy water now dripping across her face. She’s starting to rethink the whole not crying stance.

About the only silver lining, if one can call it that, is that the rain is doing its best to wash away the muddied water as quickly as possible.

“Look, I’m no good at this, alright?” Bucky shouts in frustration, water hitting his forehead and running down his face. He can barely see her, standing two feet in front of him, the rain is so heavy now.

“You’re telling me!” She hollers back at him, and despite his irritation, despite the rising flush of
anger at the situation that’s rushing through his veins right now, he notices that her dress is soaked through, the material clinging to her legs in sodden clumps, and she’s starting to shiver.

“For god’s sake-” Bucky takes a step towards her and she reels back slightly. “C’mere.” He’s bigger than her, and it’s easy to wrap his arms around her and bring her in close to his chest. Bucky’s aware that his shirt is drenched to the point of transparency, and it’s doing her no good in terms of drying out, but he rubs his hands up her arms and over her back anyway in an attempt to warm her up.

She tucks her head down and away from him, and he wants, so badly, to drop a kiss to the top of her head, gently against her hair, but holds himself back. Instead he wraps his arms tighter around her, drawing her into his chest and trying to protect her from the rain. It’s a futile gesture, but he does it anyway.

“I haven’t got a jacket-” He starts, awkwardly. “Maybe my shirt?”

“You don’t have to give me your shirt.” She sniffles against him.

He huffs out a laugh in response. “It’s not even mine.” Darcy tilts her head back up at him, squinting at him through the rain. “Steve.” He explains, with a shake of his head that showers her in water, and he fights back a groan because he can’t even get that right. “I just - god. I just wanted tonight to go well. I’m not stupid enough to ask for perfect, because it’s me at the end of the day, but well would have been just fine.”

“It wasn’t-”

“Don’t you dare say it wasn’t that bad.”

“Trust me, I wasn’t going to say that.” Darcy cut over him, one eyebrow arched. “It’s the worst date in the history of dating, and they’ll probably use this as a textbook example of what not to do, so people can learn from it. It’ll be one of those urban legends by the middle of next week.”

Despite what she’s saying, she’s half-laughing by the end of it, and then he is too. Even if it is tinged with not a small amount of hysteria at his own bad luck. Bucky wraps his arms tighter around her and rests his chin on her head.

“Everyone’ll know someone who knows someone who was actually on the date.” He offers, and she laughs softly into his chest.

“There might even be a Wikipedia entry about it.” Darcy replies, and looks up at him with a twist to her lips that’s turning into a grin, tilting her head back and he brushes away wet hair that’s stuck to her forehead. It ought to be unattractive, her mascara’s run a little bit where it’s raining so heavily, and her curls have lost all their bounce, but he can’t remember a girl he’s thought more beautiful than Darcy in that moment.

“Darcy, I…” Bucky trails off, searching for words and everything he’s coming up with isn’t close to being good enough. To hell with it, he thinks. Now is not the time for words. Instead he brings his hand from where it’s been resting against her shoulder, to cup at her cheek and lowers his head to hers. He pauses, an infinitesimal second that almost lasts a lifetime, then captures her lips firmly.

Bucky winds his other hand around her waist and presses her closer to him as her hands sneak up and lock around his neck. She’s a little hesitant at first, but then she’s kissing him back with a deep ferocity to which he can’t do anything but respond to in kind.

They’re lost in each other, too lost in fact to notice the man who’s appeared by the side of them,
shifting from one foot to the other, until he clears his throat loudly and they break apart, blinking against the rain.

“You kids call for a tow?”

-----

Darcy wanders through the garage, and Bucky finds an old jacket of Thor’s hanging on the back of the office door that he drapes over her shoulders. She leans back into him as he does it, just for a second, and he’s shot right through with longing. Not just for her in his bed, though lord knows he wants that, but there’s more than a touch of want for something more, something that he’s starting to hope he can find with Darcy. That maybe he’s already found it.

“So this is where you work, huh?” She says, smiling, running a hand along the workbench nearest.

“Yeah,” He grins back, resting against the UTE that’s currently suspended in it’s bay, waiting on a new catalytic converter. “You not been down here before?” Darcy looks back at him over her shoulder and shakes her head. Thor’s jacket is drowning her, hanging almost longer than the dress she’s wearing, and he finds it desperately cute. She continues to look around.

“So what are you going to do after this?” She asks casually, looking up at the display of socket wrenches that Rhodes has screwed carefully to the wall above the bench.

“After this?” Bucky responds, only half listening as he’s found a spot of grease on the car he's been leaning against, and wipes at it with the edge of his sleeve, breathing on it and wiping again until it's gone. He resumes his stance with arms folded loosely over his chest and looks back at the little brunette.

“Yeah,” She says, turning back to him. “Like, what’s your proper job?”

Bucky tilts his head to one side and regards her carefully before answering. “This is my proper job.” He says slowly, something digging uncomfortably at the back of his mind that he tries to push away. Darcy looks a little confused.

“No,” She says, shaking her head. “I mean… Well, you’re not going to be a mechanic for the rest of your life, are you?” She laughs lightly, and steps forward. Bucky finds the smile that had been tugging at his lips die away as the little brunette came closer to him.

“What’s, uh,” He exhales hard with a little half-laugh of his own that holds approximately zero humour, and shakes his head too, subconsciously mirroring her actions. “What’s wrong with being a mechanic, Darcy?”

“Nothing,” She says, reeling back slightly as she realises she’s mis-stepped somewhere along the line and something in her expression telling him clearly that she doesn’t understand why or how she’s managed that. “I - nothing. Bucky, I didn’t-”

“You didn’t what, Darcy?” He answers, blue eyes hard and fixed on her face. She withers in front of him, clearly searching for words that won’t make this worse, but there’s nothing, not really, that can change the fact that she’s just told him that what he does for a living isn’t good enough.

She reaches out for him, to touch against his arm and he shrugs her off. Darcy steps back then, a scalded look on her face, as though he’s just slapped her hard. There’s something inside him that wants to reach out and comfort her, that hates to see that look on her face, but there’s a much bigger part of him right now that wants to shove her at the door of number 28, slam that door and never see her again.
“I should get you home.” He mumbles, turning his face from her, willing this not to turn into another argument, wanting to get his arse home so he can process this all in his own head before it becomes anything else. From the corner of his eye he can see Darcy’s mouth open, like she’s going to push this, then shut again into a thin line. He’s not able to work out whether he’s happy she’s leaving it, or not.

-----

“Is that them?”

Steve shoulders in next to Clint at the window, and peers out into the night. At the edge of the street, he can see two figures approaching. It is Bucky and Darcy, though why they’ve ended up walking back is a bit of a mystery, considering that Thor made a big show of insisting that he take the BMW.

Barton nudges Steve back and stares out at the pair of them. They’re standing close together, and Steve suddenly feels a little awkward watching. He can practically see electricity sparking between them, and he knows he wouldn’t want people gawping at him and Sharon, especially not at the end of a date when he’d be hoping to kiss her.

“C’mon.” He pulls Barton back from the window and lets the curtain fall back in place. Clint grumbles.

-----

They walk back in near silence. Bucky’s almost marching by the time they hit the close, and Darcy’s trying her best to keep up with the pace he’s set. She’s failing, because the heels are a little too high and she’s been in them a little too long, and eventually she gives up and slips them off, hanging onto them in one hand as she half-runs to catch him up.

Bucky’s mind is repeating for him on a loop the way she’d looked at him, in surprise, the little confused crinkle at the bridge of her nose as she’d tilted her head to one side and asked what he was really going to do with his life. It’s unhelpfully also interspersing that playback with sudden flashes of what it was like to kiss her, with her arms tangled around his neck and her body pressed up against his, the both of them rain-soaked and not giving a damn about it.

He growls in frustration, and spins on his heel to face her. She pulls up short, and it’s at this point he realises that she’s taken her shoes off. She looks impossibly small in front of him, Thor’s jacket still slung across her shoulders and her wet hair framing her face, clutching at her black heels and staring up at him. Bucky closes his eyes briefly and decides he’s got to say what’s on his mind.

“Look,” He says flatly. “I’m not interested in playing the poor working boy to anyone’s Lady Chatterley, alright? And I’m not going to be someone’s dirty little secret, either.”

“Bucky-” Darcy exclaims, but he’s cutting across her already, not letting her finish.

“Lewis-” Bucky continues, and fights back the pang that hits his chest when he sees the flash of hurt over her face as he uses her surname rather than her first. “I get it, alright? You’re some bright star little student who’s gonna go off and get her degree, change the world. And I’m just a washed up ex-soldier, only good for fixing your ride when you’ve forgotten whether it takes diesel or not.”

The little brunette takes a step back from him, eyes wide and quite visibly hurt at what he’s saying. He’s almost regretting it, except he also remembers the casual way that she’d asked him what he was going to do for a proper job, and that shuts down any remorse he might have been feeling.
“Okay.” She says, nodding her head, almost too much, like she’s doing it to distract herself. He thinks to himself that she looks tiny, still wrapped in Thor’s jacket which is swamping her small frame. “Okay, Barnes.” He feels that same hot stab in his chest, right, he realises now, in his heart, as she spits out his surname like a curse word.

“Thanks for the date.” Darcy says tightly, looking him right in the eye as she speaks, and it looks like she’s holding a lot back as she does so. “You were right. You wanted to prove what you’re about to me, and you have. So thanks. I appreciate it.”

“You don’t know a thing about me, sweetheart,” He snaps back hotly, his mouth engaging before his brain can catch up with it, or he might - just might - have pulled that punch. And what shortly follows.

It’s unlike Bucky to lose his rag, not because he’s like Steve, who’s just a nice guy - doormat, Bucky thinks, a little unkindly - but mainly because he doesn’t much care for what other people think about him most of the time. But right here, right now; there’s a flush of anger that, when he looks back on it later when he’s calmed down, he’ll recognise as disappointment. Disappointment in Darcy, because he wants her to be different.

“And that’s your problem. That’s always the problem with people like you.”

The words are out before he can think about them, and there’s a part of him standing back and looking on in horror at just how badly this is all turning out. That same part of him registers again how little Darcy looks in front of him, how big her blue eyes are as they stare back up at him and process what he’s just said.

“People like me?” She says icily, and he realises that where he’s taken a subconscious step towards her, she’s stepping right back up to him now so that they’re nearly chest to chest. The tension between them is so fierce it’s almost tangible, like he could reach right out and snap it, end the world right then and there. There’s a fire in Darcy Lewis, and he might just have set a match to it.

But never let it be said that Bucky Barnes doesn’t like to burn.

“People like you, in your ivory tower, looking down on everyone else because you think they’re not as good as you.” He steps up one more pace as he says it, biting out the words and now he’s towering over her and she has to tilt her head back to look up at him in the eye.

Darcy sets her lip, looks like she’s going to say something; apparently thinks better of it and then kicks him hard in the shin.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which there are lots of slammed doors, and several solid ostrich impressions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darcy feels a flash of shame at her violent outburst, but the stubborn jut of Bucky’s chin soothes it immediately. He doesn’t even flinch, like she might as well have kicked a wall, so she turns on her heel and stalks away without another word.

He doesn’t call out after her, and her anger carries her all the way inside number 28, where she slams the door. It’s a satisfying feeling, even if it does spook Dahl the galah off her perch.

She hears the answering slam from number 30 a few seconds later.

Distressed cockatoos aside, the house is still and quiet. Darcy vaguely remembers Susan mentioning spending the evening with Madge, and she’s fine with that. Hopefully Madge has kept her attention away from their display in the street, because the last thing she wants is Susan happy about the disastrous date. Or worse, happy and pretending not to be to appease Darcy.

The one shining light in this is that Darcy is not on the verge of crying, and isn’t that a first.

She makes swift work of rummaging for a clean wine glass and the bottle of rose Susan keeps in the fridge. She has no intention of getting blind drunk—he’s not worth the hangover—but she’s earned this glass. With the wine poured, she starts the bath running, craving the heat, and ready to strip out of Nat’s dress, which is still stuck to her skin like tissue.

She’s interrupted by a knock at the door, which she throws open without checking to see who’s outside. If it’s Barnes, she’s fully prepared to throw the wine in his face, but instead there’s a gaggle of friends on the doorstep. Jane, Helen, Wanda, and Nat, are all standing there with their best concerned faces pasted on.

Ranting seems like a much better plan than having a bath.

“Give me a mo,” she says, stepping aside to let them troupe in. “I need to change.”

She turns the bathtaps off, swaps the dress for pyjamas, and piles her hair up on her head, before returning to the living room. The girls are clustered on the sofa, whispering to each other, which cuts off abruptly when Darcy appears.

“It’s fine,” she preempts them. “I’m fine. Pissed off, but whole.”

“We saw,” Wanda says breathlessly. “What—um, are you okay to…uh, tell us—”

“What happened?” Helen cuts in. “It all seemed to be going great, and then you booted him!”

Darcy grabs the wine glass from the counter. “Seemed to be going great? It was terrible!” She
props herself on the arm of the sofa and proceeds to list the many things which had gone wrong.

“Sounds like rotten luck,” says Jane.

“Some of it, sure,” Darcy agrees. “But the fact that he’s been in Erinsborough for five minutes and we can’t even go for dinner without meeting a woman he’s strung along isn’t exactly a good sign. I mean, she was in my seat! And I can’t blame her because the last time she saw him, he was flirting with her like his life depended on it. And then he has the nerve to turn round and judge me. He knows nothing about me!”

Honestly, she’d spent most of the night feeling a little sorry for him. He’d put all that effort into making a good impression on her, planning stuff that would impress her, when it only made the two of them uncomfortable. She’d wanted to get to know him, but it seemed he’d been trying to impress a version of Darcy that lived in his head and didn’t really exist: the Darcy that expects dinner at Lassiter’s and a ride in a BMW, when she’s never been that girl, and he never bothered to find that out.

Nat’s the only one brave enough to pipe up. “But it does sound like you hurt his feelings, Darce.”

“I didn’t mean to! He took it completely the wrong way.” The matching winces on her friends’ faces aren’t a good sign. “What?”

“There’s no good way to take something like that,” says Helen. “You did kind of insult him—and you know as little about him as he knows about you.”

Something twists across Nat’s face, and Darcy pounces. “You know, don’t you?”

She shrugs, and Darcy still finds space in her mire of anger and confusion to note how bloody elegant the movement is. “A little.”

“But you aren’t going to tell me.”

“It’s not my place to. I think the pair of you need to sit down and have a proper conversation at some point—it’s the only way you’re going to understand where each other’s coming from. But I will say he’s had a tough life, and I’m not surprised at his reaction.”

That takes some of the wind out of Darcy’s sails. “How can I talk to him if we never get the chance? Something always seems to go wrong.”

“First, I think you’re going to have to apologise to him.”

It seems like a reasonable suggestion: a path to clearing the air and maybe getting to understand Bucky. Except her mind is replaying that moment outside. “People like you, in your ivory tower,” he says, with a sneer on his lips. A surge of anger flares through her again.

“Nope. I am not apologising to that mongrel.”

Bucky only finds slamming the door to number 30 satisfying for a moment, before he is faced with Steve and Barton stood waiting for him, arms folded across their broad chests.

“What the hell just happened?” asks Steve, his face set with a stern expression that would have put all of Bucky’s old commanding officers to shame. It only serves to snap Bucky into defensive mode, like this isn’t the mood he’d faced every night he’d arrived home during his teenage years.
“Hey, she kicked me,” he points out.

“I’m sure she had good reason,” Steve responds. “Darcy’s a good kid. You must have done something to upset her.”

Bucky resists the urge to facepalm and instead settles for running a hand through his hair, which is damp and tangled from the soaking it’s been through. “Right. Of course it’s my fault. Has to be.”

It comes out more dejected than he expected, and Steve softens in response. “What happened?”

“I’ll get the beers,” Barton offers, disappearing into the kitchen. It’s more likely that he’ll use this as an excuse to disappear and avoid the conversation than actually return with coldies, but stranger things have occurred.

Bucky stomps into the living room and flops down onto the sofa. Wilson is nowhere to be seen, and for that, Bucky’s grateful. The bloke seems to be around for his every humiliation. “Everything happened.” Steve snags the armchair opposite, prompting him to keep talking without saying a word. And Bucky does. He recounts the whole miserable experience, leaving out only the kiss and the tender moment they’d shared in the rain, before it all went completely tits up.

At the end, Steve is wearing his disappointed face. Bucky has rarely been its target, for which he was grateful, because right now he’s ready to squirm.

“I can’t believe you said that to Darcy,” Steve eventually says.

Bucky snorts. Sure enough, Barton never did return with the promised beers, and Steve has taken Darcy’s side. “Cheers for the support there, mate.”

“What, so she had a slip of the tongue and you decided to rip her a new one? Based on your assumptions about her? You know nothing.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she’s had a really trying time of it. Did she once not get the Barbie she wanted for Chrimbo?” Only the expression on Steve’s face stops him from rolling his eyes, and when Steve sits up straighter he knows he’s in for it.

“Did you honestly never wonder why she’s living with Mrs K?”

That brings Bucky up short. He hadn’t, truthfully, put much thought into it. He knows her cousin lives at number 32, but beyond that he’s never asked questions or even wondered about it. His only excuse is that he’s spent years among people from broken, fractured families, where the unspoken rule is not to pry.

“Exactly,” Steve continues. “We’ve all got our pasts, Darcy included. Yeah, she’s got a bright future ahead of her, but she’s dragged herself through hell to make that happen. Her family are thrilled about her, because she’s going to go to university and make something of herself. Only Toadie’s ever done that, and she’s managed it while living miles away from them, hoping that the kindness of people like Mrs K isn’t going to evaporate one day.”

If Steve’s succeeded in one thing, it’s making Bucky feel like crap. “I get it. She’s done well for herself, and maybe it hasn’t all been a picnic. Doesn’t give her the right to look down on me.”

“Are you so sure that’s what she was doing?”

“Does it matter? She clearly wants more than a mechanic, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not exactly in the running to become a brain surgeon here. Whether she realises it or not, she
thinks I’m not good enough for her.”

Steve shakes his head and unfolds himself from the armchair, patting Bucky on the shoulder as he passes by. “I think you’re wrong. And I also think you’re going to regret it if you let this be the end of you two.”

Bucky doesn’t reply when the room click into darkness, dragging himself off for a warm shower and what will probably be, if he’s honest with himself, a sulk.

It’s been a good night. Sam was able to slip out of the house without being questioned about his plans, because everyone’s so focused on Barnes’ inability to cope with basic social milestones, so no one knows where he’s been. It means they aren’t sticking their noses in his business, and that’s always golden. He’s had dinner with Maria—nowhere fancy, simply good food and better company—then got a tour of her apartment. It included a pretty thorough tour of her bedroom, and only his shift in the morning had him making his apologies and leaving.

Now the earlier downpour has stopped, in perfect time for him to walk home, and the flowers which got a drenching earlier are bathing him in their combined scents as he heads up Ramsay Street. It’s been an amazing night.

With any luck, he’ll make it into the house without having to hear about Barnes’ date. It’s not that he doesn’t care, he just…doesn’t care. Darcy’s a nice girl, but the pairing has ‘tempestuous’ written all over it, and he’d rather stay as far out of it as he can, while he can.

“Samuel.”

That’s the sound of his luck running out.

He tries to pretend he hasn’t heard his name and keep walking, but the tension in his shoulders must give him away. Fury—your father, his mother’s voice corrects in his head—steps out in the path in front of him.

“Samuel,” Fury tries again. “You can’t avoid me forever.”

Sam comes to a standstill. He knows the man will only follow him right to the front door. “You have to admit, I was doing a stellar job of it until you turned up here.”

“I tried to contact you in other ways. You blocked me at every turn.”

“So you found out where I live.”

“All I had to do was ask your mother.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s the truth. I’ve done many things, been many things, but I’m not a liar.”

“You’re right. I still don’t want anything to do with you.”

Frustration and weariness pass over Fury’s face. “I understand that. I’m not here looking for forgiveness; I’m not a fool and I’ve never gone chasing rainbows. All I would like is the chance to talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You said it all pretty bloody eloquently when you left.”
“There’s a whole other story you’ve never heard.”

“I’ve never been one for fairytales.”

“Please.” Sam thinks it may be the first time he’s ever heard his father use that word. Even he seems surprised that he’s managed to dredge it up from the depths of his vocabulary. “Talk to your mother. She’s heard it all, she’ll tell you if it’s worth listening to what I have to say.”

Sam will later tell himself he just wanted off that damn pavement and into his bed, but the truth is, there’s a moment of vulnerability in Fury, and it softens his resolve. “Fine. Not this week, I’m working. I’ll let you know when’s good, assuming you’re still at Frigga’s place.”

“I’ll be there.”

Because the entire universe is showing its arse tonight, Bucky’s plan for a long shower is thwarted by the fact that someone—probably Barton—has used all the hot water, so the best he can manage is five minutes of tepid bathing.

These aren’t optimum brooding conditions.

It’s not Darcy’s words that are prickling at him, so much as the way she’d said them: casually tossing them out, like it was obvious he’d have bigger plans for the future, and not understanding why it pissed him off so much.

Cliche though it is, it’s his pride that’s hurting as much as anything. And Bucky’s honest enough to admit that while he can take any swing aimed at him without suffering much damage, his pride is a much softer target. It bruises easier and takes longer to heal.

He gives up when the water starts to feel the same temperature as the rain did outside and grabs the only towel available, because his is nowhere to be found. Instead, he has to wrap the lower half of his body in an itchy fuchsia monstrosity to make the trip back to his room.

As he starts down the hallway, Wilson stomps through the front door.

“Bad night?” Bucky asks.

“Don’t want to talk about it.”

“Makes two of us.” Something in Wilson’s body language speaks volumes to Bucky. “Seen your dad again?”

“This seems a lot like talking about it.”

“Sorry, mate. Not prying. But if you know anyone who needs a good kicking, I’m in the ideal mood, and crap fathers are always at the top of my list.”

“You should probably let your hand heal from the last punch-up you got into it.”

Bucky shrugs. “The offer’s there.” He shuffles off to his room, careful to keep the towel anchored at his waist, and when the door is closed, flings himself onto the bed face first.

“Good morning!”

Darcy’s alone in the Coffee Shop this morning, while Madge is off at the wholesaler’s, so she
knows the greeting is for her. She makes a half-hearted grunt in reply, still brooding over the awkward conversation she’d had where Susan had pretended not to be thrilled with her and Bucky immediately hitting the rocks, then glances up to catch Stan’s face fall. She instantly regrets it and pastes a smile on, dropping the cloth she’s holding to reach for the cake slice. “What can I get you?”

“She’s a shame. My grandson is visiting while he’s on a break from studying and I think he’d adore you.”

Darcy doesn’t even consider it. The terrible date was only last night, and even if Bucky has shattered her romantic ideals and dreams, she’s not foolish enough to think her crush on him has shrivelled and died that quickly. Not when the memory of his kiss had echoed on her lips while she tried to sleep last night. “Trust me, he wants somebody who’s feeling more enthusiastic about the process.”

“Maybe. I’m sure he’ll want some of that Victoria sponge as much as I do, though.”

Darcy nods and cuts him a wedge.

“So what did she actually say?”

Clint’s eyes widen in alarm at his girlfriend. The expression on her face is the one he likes to call ‘murderously intent’, and he prefers not to have it aimed at him. Especially not when she’s got a knife in her hand, even if that knife is chopping up vegetables. He doesn’t think Nat’s ever murdered anyone, but it’s so bizarre for her to become this serious when she’s normally so laid-back that he has at least considered the possibility of it before.

“I don’t know! I didn’t stick around.” He takes a good step back before she can react, under the pretence of stirring at the pot of stew on her mother’s stove.

“But I text you to tell you to get his side of the story!”

“I know, but I didn’t read it until after I’d had a nap, and then Bucky had gone to bed. You could ask Steve.” He throws out the suggestion in the hope that if he’s helpful, she won’t hold his failure against him.

“Right-o.” She gestures with the knife again, apparently unaware she’s doing it. “Call him and tell him to get his buns over here.”

Frigga turns the page of the wedding magazine, scrutinising the fresh spread it reveals. Too floral, too light for an autumn wedding. She appreciates that Jane has not opted for the obvious spring wedding—even their ownership of the obvious venue, Lassiter’s, won’t overrule the fact that the next three springs are completely booked up—but she has half a mind to talk her into moving the time anyway. Maybe midwinter, perhaps even the solstice, which is one of Frigga’s favourite days of the year.

She makes a note in her project journal and keeps flicking through the magazine. This would be easier with Jane’s input, of course, but she’s so busy with her job that she’s left so much of the
planning up to Frigga. Frigga is secretly thrilled; she never had a much-longed for daughter, and finally, through her marriage to Thor, Jane is going to become one.

There’s a noise from the kitchen, and when she glances up Nicholas has entered through the back door. He’s been for a run, his arms bare and glistening with sweat. He keeps himself fit, and she appreciates that in men her age, especially considering what happened to her last husband.

“Tea?” he asks, and she nods. Such an attentive man, too. “Still knee-deep in wedding planning, I see.”

“Of course. Weddings are my favourite thing in the world.”

She smiles broadly, and he returns it, holding her gaze.

Another morning rush has passed, the Coffee Shop briefly empty, and Nat can tell Darcy doesn’t want to talk about it. Which is too bad, because that’s the only thing Nat intends to do.

“I think that table is clean, Darce,” she calls, as Darcy scrubs at the pristine surface. “They’re all clean. We can kick back until Mum drops by.”

Darcy’s gaze flicks up, then back down. “I like staying busy at the moment.”

“You know what would keep you busy?” When she doesn’t get a response, she keeps talking anyway. “You could talk to him.”

Darcy finally throws the cloth down and stomps her way back across to the counter. “Why would I do that?” she asks with her hands on her hips.

“So there’s actually a chance of you two working things out,” Nat replies. “The longer you leave it, the harder it will be.”

“I was planning on leaving it forever, so I don’t think it matters how hard it’s going to get.”

Nat raises an eyebrow. “That’s what she said.”

It doesn’t have the intended effect of making Darcy laugh. Instead, she flinches, and mutters something Nat doesn’t quite catch.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. I’m your friend and I want to help.”

“Except you’re also his friend. Or, you knew him first, at least. It’s not fair to put you in the middle.”

“Trust me, if I’m in the middle, it’s where I want to be,” she says with a wink.

Darcy shakes her head and starts filling up the straws.

“Honestly, Darce, I won’t tell him anything you’ve said to me. I only want to know if I can make this better.”

“I don’t know if you can. Maybe—” she starts fiddling with some napkins “—maybe we were
always going to crash and burn, so it happening up front was better. I mean, he’s seen the world; I’ve barely seen Melbourne. He’s going to have very different expectations from a relationship.”

Nat snorts. “Right. Like he’s got any experience with actual relationships. Darcy, he’s just as clueless as you when it comes to this stuff.”

Darcy picks the bloody cloth back up and trudges back out to the still-gleaming tables. Nat spots the colour in her cheeks, not there a moment ago. “Not that clueless.”

It only takes Nat a second to twig on. “Hey, despite his rough edges, he’s a good bloke. He’s not going to push for anything heavier than you’re ready for. Steve would have his hide at the idea of it.”

“I’m not saying Bucky would. But he might decide it’s easier to see that waitress instead, or someone who—” She makes a vague hand gesture, which Nat interprets as meaning someone with more experience than Darcy. “No, we’re too different to each other, and there’s no point pretending it’s ever going to work.” The expression on her face suggests she’s resolved, even if the misery underneath isn’t so easily hidden.

It’s going to be harder work getting these two bludgers together than Nat realised.

Fury’s late, and that about sets Sam’s mood for the entire meeting. Surely it’s in the rules that if you beg for time with your estranged son, you actually turn up when you say you will, but here Sam is in the living room of an empty number 26, waiting for his father to materialise.

Three strikes, and he’s out. Sam’s not sure if the first strike was him turning up in Ramsay Street in the first place. Or maybe it was walking out when Sam was a kid and leaving him to be raised by the stepfather who let him take his surname.

Ten minutes later than he should be, Fury finally strolls into the house, more collected than he has any right to be. Sam stops drumming his fingers on his thighs and mentally adds another half strike.

“Got caught up running an errand.”

He doesn’t elaborate, and isn’t that the story of Sam’s life.

“You’ve got five minutes,” he says.

“It’ll take longer.”

“Make it take five minutes.”

Fury looks like he’s going to sigh and thinks better of it. Instead, he takes the armchair opposite Sam. “Did you speak to your mother?”

“Yes. For some reason, her opinion of you has improved since the last time I saw her. This must be one hell of a story.”

“It is.” Fury fixes him with that unnerving one-eyed stare. “I didn’t want to leave the pair of you. I had to. The government made me.”

Darcy’s on her way to the Watering Hole across the Lassiter’s complex when she spots him
heading in her direction.

Not in her direction, specifically. Probably. Just in the direction of where she happens to be. Those broad shoulders and that mass of dark hair couldn’t belong to anyone else.

It was inevitable she’d see him again, given that they live next door to each other, but she’s still not prepared. She wants to play it cool, pretend that she’s over it, and maybe they won’t be friends, but maybe they don’t have to make every social gathering uncomfortable if they’re both there, either. Except she knows she’s not capable of cool, so instead she looks around for somewhere to hide until he passes.

Stan, bless his soul, is her saving grace. He’s on the path behind her, leaning on the back of a wheelchair, in which sits a very handsome, very buff man of about her age.

“Lovely afternoon!” she says, a little more loudly than she’d like.

“Darcy! We must have just missed the end of your shift—had to buy cake off that other girl. You remember me mentioning my grandson?”

“I do! Darcy,” she offers in greeting, holding her hand out to the guy. He’s got dark tousled hair and light eyes, but he reminds her of someone, even if she can’t think who.

“Josh.” He takes her hand and gives it a light shake, with a smile. “Gramps was telling me you’re starting at Eden Hills soon.”

“Hmmm?” It takes her a moment to process his words. She’s mentally trying to gauge where Bucky is on the path, because he should have passed by now, only he hasn’t. “Oh! Yes. I start in September.”

“That’s cool. I study out of state, but Eden Hills has a good rep.” Josh unveils a particularly charming smile, and in any other week, she’d have melted at his feet.

Bucky never passes by, even as Darcy maintains a solid five minutes of pleasant chitchat with Stan and Josh. Despite his good looks, she spends half of it wondering if Wanda would be into him.

“Well, I’m sure we’ll be around for more cake, so I’ll see you soon,” Josh says as the conversation wraps up, and Darcy bids him farewell. It’s only as she continues on to the pub—noting that Bucky is nowhere to be seen after all—that she remembers who Josh reminds her of: Thor.

It’s been a long day and all Bucky wants is to sprawl in front of the footie game, enjoying some quiet time while his housemates are all out with their respective women. (If Wilson thinks he hasn’t noticed he’s knocking boots with someone, he’s a bigger fool than Bucky thought). The garage has been under the cosh to get work done—including that bloody BMW which left them stranded in the rain—and he only just avoided bumping into Darcy on his way out of the gym. Instead, she’d been distracted by an elderly customer, and Bucky had been able to swiftly change direction like the gutless wonder he is.

Not before he’d noticed the smile on the bloke in the wheelchair staring up at Darcy, though. And hadn’t that made something hot and ugly clench in his chest?

Quiet time is not to be his, though. He almost turns on his heel and heads straight for the pub when he sees who’s waiting on the sofa.

Not Darcy. Worse.
“I’m sure Barton will be home soon,” he says, edging out of the room. “I thought he was taking you out tonight.”

“Told him he could watch the game at the Watering Hole. I’m a nice girlfriend like that,” Nat replies. She gestures for him to come sit beside him, with her teeth bared in a warning smile. He knows what the warning is without her saying a word; it’s the power she’s held over him since he came to Ramsay Street but has never threatened to unleash before. He shudders to think what would happen if he called her bluff.

“Right. I’m not dumb enough to ask why you’re here,” he says stiffly, settling into the cushions with a sinking feeling. Not all of it is due to the age of the sofa.

“Good. Things went south with Darcy, we all know that, but I don’t see how you two can’t move past it. Other than the fact you’re a pair of blockheads.”

He huffs. “The fact she doesn’t think a mechanic is good enough for her is a pretty big hurdle. Here I was, thinking I’d moved up in the world—not a cowboy anymore—but nah, she’s got me pegged as a no-hoper.”

“She never actually said that. You assumed it. Like you assumed a lot of things.”

Bucky shifts under her level stare, wondering if there’s anything he can use as leverage to get out of this conversation. Trouble is, Natasha never did care much about what other people thought of her.

“Look, Steve’s filled me in about her childhood. Maybe she wasn’t the little princess I thought she was. But that’s her past, not her future. She’s got bigger horizons.”

“A-ha!”

“Don’t you a-ha me.”

“That’s it, isn’t it! You’re worried. You think you’re going to fall for her, then she’ll leave you behind.”

He narrows his eyes at her. “Just because you were read a few books while you were travelling, doesn’t mean you can psychoanalyse me.”

“I’m right, and you know it. I bet you’ve never been on the end of a broken heart, but you know Darcy could be the first time. You don’t want to risk it.”

“You know what, I don’t care.” He stands up. “Tell whoever you want whatever you want. I’m done here.”

“Bucky—”

“She’s your friend, and I know you don’t want to see her hurt. Well, maybe that means you make sure she keeps her distance. We aren’t gonna work, and I’m not going to wait around to cop for it when I meet everyone’s low expectations. Stay out of it, Nat.”

He’s halfway out the door, ready to find her boyfriend in the pub, before she answers, yelling after him.

“You’re a bloody coward, Bucky Barnes!”

Sam remembers his manners a moment before he slams the door to number 26 behind him: it’s not
his house, and he doesn’t get to do that, even if the occupants aren’t home.

He heads unerringly in the direction of pub, hoping Maria’s working tonight and he can prop up the bar until closing. Maybe she’ll let him rant about the steaming heap of bull Fury just tried to feed him. The heap his mother apparently fell for: guff about undercover work and keeping them safe from his enemies, but they can reconnect now as that’s all a thing of the past.

As is his relationship with Sam.

If Thor’s at the Watering Hole, Sam’s going to have a word with him about getting rid of his house guest.

“Glad you could all make it.”

Nat stares around at the people in her mother’s living room.

Clint squints at her. “Didn’t realise it was optional, babe.”

She ignores him; they’ll have a separate discussion later about how he should be supportive of their friends. “It’s been four days, and things aren’t getting better, right?”

Steve shakes his head. “Buck’s moping around the house, pretending he’s angry, but I know he isn’t anymore. He’s over it, but he’s too stubborn to make a move.”

“Darcy’s the same,” Jane confirms. She’d been mysteriously thrilled when Nat interrupted a session of wedding planning to drag her over here. “She won’t even talk to me about it.”

“So we need to give them a little push,” Nat confirms. Everyone nods in agreement, except for Thor.

“I didn’t think we were supposed to interfere?” he asks, his face contorted in confusion. Clint nods along with the question. “Last time, you said—”

“We’re not interfering,” Nat interrupts. “We’re not pushing them to get together. We only want them to move past this, and they aren’t going to do that alone.”


Jane’s eyes light up. “And they have to stay that way until they’re on speaking terms again.”

“Yes! Good!” Nat says.

Steve fidgets, clearly not that comfortable with the thought of going behind his friends’ backs, even if he was happy to get involved. “How are we going to do that?”

Nat grins. “I’m glad you asked.”

“I’m sorry things went so poorly with your son,” Frigga says, laying a gently hand on Nicholas’ shoulder. He’s a strong man, hiding the pain he must be feeling behind a mask of calmness, but she will offer him the comfort he needs.

He covers her hand with his own. “Thank you. You’re an incredible woman.”

She beams. “You are quite the extraordinary man yourself. And however I may help you, I will.”
“No, I’ve impinged on you for too long already. Your son clearly wants me to go as much as mine does.”

“Let me deal with Thor. It’s my house, not his, and you can stay as long as you need to.”

Frigga knows she isn’t imagining the chemistry between them as he slowly withdraws his hand. She wonders, briefly, if it is too soon, but knows that Howard would not want her to be alone forever. Nicholas may even have been a gift to her from the other side; stranger things have happened in her life.

“If you wanted to try again, Sam will probably be at the Watering Hole for his lunch. I’ve heard he has a beau there.”

Nicholas kisses the back of her hand. “You are an angel.” She blushes and fluffs at her hair: he may seem gruff on the outside, but the man has charm. “I’ll seek him out.”

“Hey, Darce?”

Darcy finishes serving her customer and turns to Nat. “Mmm?”

“I need you to take this order to the garage.” She tries to hand over a bag with food cartons inside, and Darcy makes no move to take it.

“Me? Seriously?”

“He’s not there, I asked. Off getting parts or something, won’t be there all afternoon. Thor’s helping out, and they’re so busy they don’t have time to pick food up.”

“Can’t you take it?”

“No, there’s a delivery coming and I have to sign for it.”

Darcy doesn’t have the authority to sign for things, after an incident involving several hundred eggs. “Fine. If he’s there, I quit.”

“Wanda, have you seen my phone?”

Tony is opening up random drawers in the kitchen and peering inside them.

“No, dad. Are you sure you haven’t left it in the car charging, like last time?”

“Good idea. I’ll go check.”

When the door shuts behind him, Wanda whips his phone out of her pocket and sends a quick message. Then she shoves the phone between the sofa cushions where her father can find it later.

Sam’s late to meet Maria, but medical emergencies are hard to plan for. He’s not even at Lassiter’s yet, and might not have time for a hot meal before he has to go back to work.

He almost knocks Darcy over as he speeds towards the complex.

“Hey!”
He grabs and rights her, making sure she doesn’t drop the bag of food she’s carrying. “Sorry. Lost in my own head there.”

She offers him a sympathetic smile. “Family drama, right?”

He blinks at her.

“That was your dad going into the Watering Hole I saw, wasn’t it?”

Sam isn’t one for swearing much, but he thinks he invents some new ones on the spot.

Rhodey stares down at the string of gibberish he’s just received from Tony, heart sinking. This can’t be good—the last time his texting got this bad, he’d been day drunk for three weeks straight.

“You okay if I take my lunch early?” he calls to Bucky, who’s on his back under a jacked-up car.

“Fine,” is the reply, and Rhodey takes off for Ramsay Street.

“You don’t want to go into the pub then, I guess?” Darcy asks.

Sam groans. “Not anymore. I just want to eat.”

There’s a spark of an idea written across her face. “Hey, why don’t you to take this to the garage. Thor ordered it but there’s loads in there, he’ll share, and you can always go to Grease Monkeys while you’re nearby. I’ll go tell Maria that you had to go back to work.”

“How do you—”

“You’re not that smooth.”

He shrugs, and she hands over the bag.

Bucky shouldn’t be under the car while he’s in the garage alone, but he’d rather get the job done before taking a break. He hears footsteps a few minutes after Rhodey left, passing by and into the office at the back of the workshop. Either Rhodey forgot his wallet or Thor’s come to sort out some paperwork; neither is an exceptional circumstance. The bay doors are down and locked up, so only the side door is open, and customers don’t usually use that.

“Thor?” he yells.

“Not Thor.” It’s Wilson’s voice. “I brought his food order though.”

“Why would you bring it here?” he asks, automatically pushing out from under the car at the mention of food.

“Because that’s what he asked, or so I’m told.”

Bucky wipes grease on his jeans and strides across to the office. “But he works at the hotel. He could get it right from—” There’s an ominous clanking noise as the side door closes, and the sound of a key turning in the lock.

“What the—?” he and Wilson say in unison, heading for the door. The handle won’t budge, and Bucky’s pretty sure it was his spare key that just got used to lock them in.
They’re stuck.

Chapter End Notes

Anyone confused about who 'Josh' is, I implore you to Google "Josh Taylor Neighbours", who was a genuine character, and all will become clear. We're not building up to a love triangle, but he had to make an appearance at some point!
“The door’s rattling.”

Nat throws Steve an arched eyebrow, wondering to herself if his nickname in the army had been Captain Obvious, as he stares at the door in front of them, which is shaking on its hinges. She manages to hold her tongue and instead just tilts her head at him with narrowed eyes.

“Do you think they’re…” He trails off awkwardly and gestures towards to the door, which is still trembling in its frame. They can hear noises from inside, but not actual words, so it’s hard to tell specifically what’s going on inside the garage.

Nat wrinkles her nose and considers.

“No.” She says decidedly. “Bucky’s got moves, but he’s not that good.”

“How’d you know?” Clint appears at her other side, tilting his head at his girlfriend and narrowing his eyes, mostly in jest. She rolls her eyes back at him in response, giving him a light shove on the shoulder because they’re past all that stupid stuff now.

------

Sam’s been rattling at the door for the past five minutes, and Bucky’s still lying spread out on the creeper where he’s dropped himself in resignation, watching him do it. It’s beginning to cross his mind that braining Sam with the spanner in his hand might not be the worst thing in the world, if the other guy keeps it up. It’s a futile task he’s taking on - that door ain’t budging, not until someone unlocks it.

Bucky throws his head back and groans loudly as Sam aims a kick square at the centre of the door. It makes a satisfyingly loud clanging noise, but that’s about it. Undeterred, the paramedic follows it up with three more kicks, progressively more wild as he goes.

On the last one he lets out a howl of rage to go with it, spins and slumps to his heels by the door. Rolling his head back against the steel and then thumping it back again for good measure, making the door shudder in the frame. Breathing out so hard that it almost sounds like a curse, he looks up and fixes his eyes on Bucky.

“You.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow and does not answer.

“You,” Sam says again, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the general direction of the lock. “Can’t you pick the lock?”

Bucky rolls his jaw, eyes hard on Sam, and reconsiders the spanner in his left hand. “Why,” He says slowly, taking the time to heft the large spanner from palm to palm and hoping the other man takes the hint. “Would I be able to pick the lock?”

“Come on, man.” Sam snaps. “I haven’t got time for this. You, with the long hair and the motorbike, the mysterious leather-jacketed bad boy. The one that looks like a 14 year old wrote him into existence from her heart filled diary - you must be able to pick a lock.”
“I fixed planes in the army, Wilson.” Bucky counters, blood rising in his veins. “Special Engineers. That’s an elite unit, in case you forgot your own training. Not a bloody criminal.” Sam, who does in fact know what the Special Engineers unit does, mumbles something that sounds a little like an apology but is addressed mainly to his own chest and uttered in the world’s quietest voice.

“‘Sides.” Bucky sniffs. “That’s a Medeco Maxum deadlock. It’s not unpickable but we’d probably die of starvation before I managed it.”

-----

“Here’s to a job well done.”

Maria rolls her eyes but doesn’t ask any questions as the small line up at her bar solemnly raise a glass each. Nat downs hers in one, slipping Clint a wet kiss to the cheek that he’s too slow to reciprocate before she’s out the door and heading back to the coffee shop before her break ends and Madge twigs that Darcy’s not about.

“They’ll be married by dinner.” Jane says with satisfaction, taking a sip of iced tea. Steve crooks an eyebrow and wonders if he ought to have made it clear that Bucky Barnes isn’t the marrying type, maybe even before Nat had come up with this plan, but it’s done now.

And it’s not like Jane actually thinks that.

Right?

-----

“Can’t we just call someone?” Sam asks hopefully, after he’s exhausted Bucky’s knowledge of breaking and entering. Or, as it happens in this case, breaking and exiting.

“You have a phone?” Bucky answers, voice muffled as he’s opted to drop back down underneath the car and continue on with his work. Might as well get something out of this day, he thinks, grunting as he wrestles with the exhaust which remains stubbornly attached.

“It’s in my locker.” Sam says dejectedly. “At work. Where I should be.” Bucky hears another thump and thinks that it’s just as well the other bloke is a paramedic, because if he carries on the way he’s going, he’s going to need some medical attention.

“Well, I haven’t got one,” Bucky tells him, wiping a grease-stained hand across his chest and smearing a large stain across his t-shirt. Actually, looking down slightly, he realises that it’s one of Steve’s that he’d grabbed accidentally trying to get the hell out of the house that morning as quickly as possible. Read: trying not to bump into Steve and his disapproving looks again.

“Where do you even come from.” Sam sighs in response. “What about the garage phone?”

“We haven’t got one of those, either.” Bucky scoots out from under the car and hauls the t-shirt off in one smooth movement. He holds it up in front of him critically and decides he’d better throw it under hot water and some baking soda as soon as he can, or he’ll owe Steve a new one. “Everyone just calls up Thor personally, you know?”

“Neanderthals. Everyone I know, Neanderthals.”

-----

Rhodey’s pulled his car into the car park at Lassiter’s with a squeal, having been trying the other
man’s phone frantically since he’d received the garbled message. Stark can be an arsehole, more of the time than when he’s not been an arsehole, actually, but he’s Rhodey’s oldest friend. Even if Tony likes to sweep it under the rug and pretend, Rhodes remembers the darkest days.

Back when Howard died and Tony lost the plot completely.

He’s always been a drinker, always enjoyed a little too much of the good times than his fair share, but after his old man had passed away Tony hit the bottle hard. Then the next bottle, and the five or so after that.

Tony’s never actually stopped drinking, and he flat out refused to go to the meetings; but he’s been holding it more or less in check. At least when Pepper was still around, when he seemed to have something else to focus on. But now she’s gone, away from Erinsborough, and Tony’s too far up on his high horse to admit that he needs the pretty redhead in his life.

Rhodey, breathing hard, sits in his car askew over at least two parking spaces, if not three, and tries Tony’s phone one more time.

------

“So. Is now a good time to open up about your dark and troubled childhood?” Sam fixes him with hard look that tells Bucky exactly how little the other bloke thinks of that idea. He shrugs and holds his hands up in a peace-making kind of gesture. ‘I’m just saying. We have time.”

“Why the hell would they lock us in here?” Sam aims a kick at the door again which he’s fully aware will do nothing to change the situation, but does go some way to making him feel a smidgeon better about it. If only for around five seconds.

“Well, we’re not exactly mates, are we?”

“I am a grown man. I do not need my so-called friends Parent-Trapping me into a friendship I neither want nor need.”

“Cheers mate.” Bucky says drily. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

Sam sinks to the floor with a groan, and rests his head against a battered metal locker. Closing his eyes, he sighs heavily.

“Go on, then.”

“Go on with what?” Bucky asks idly, patting his pockets and hoping that he’s stashed a packet of smokes somewhere in the vicinity. He has a nasty feeling they’re going to be around for a while.

“Dark and troubled.” Sam cracks one eye open and fixes the other man with a long look before continuing. “Takes one to know one, I know that much. So shoot. You tell me yours, I’ll think about telling you mine.”

“What a bargain.” Bucky says, one eyebrow raised. “But since we’re not going anywhere fast, I’ll bite. First things first though.” He heaves himself up off the creeper and wanders over to Sam. The other man watches him in some alarm as he draws closer, and just manages to hold in his full-body flinch as Bucky slams a hand into the cabinet next to him.

The door pops open, revealing a mini-fridge. Bucky plucks two beers out and, after a small but considered pause, hands one off to Sam. The paramedic hesitates a second, and Bucky tilts his head. Muttering a small thanks, Sam takes what’s offered.
“So my dad’s an arsehole.” Bucky says conversationally, snapping the can open and taking a long drag after he speaks. Sam waits. He knows arsehole dads, and - if he’s being honest with himself - he’s waiting to see if Bucky’s version stacks up against abandonment and lies.

-------

“What’re you looking at?”

Barton giggles, having managed to down three pints to Steve’s solitary one sat next to him and by now feeling the effects of it. Pleasant and tipsy, he looks down at his phone where there’s a hurriedly snapped selfie plastered across the screen. Steve, arms folded and a look of mild concern on his face, Nat, a hint of annoyance as she caught the camera flash and himself - front and center - thumb raised.

“Oh just Darcy and Barnes locked in- wait.”

Darcy looks back at him with narrowed eyes.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” He asserts, one finger raised towards her with his head a little fuzzy, and trying to pull at multiple threads simultaneously.

“I’m getting the distinct feeling I probably won’t like where it is you think I should be, Clint.” Darcy’s arms are folded across her chest and he’s struck for a moment how similar that is to Steve. Then he blinks. Looks from side to side. Steve and Wanda have vacated the area.

He groans inwardly, then attempts a wide smile to which Darcy does not respond.

“Um—” Barton’s brain frantically tries to cope with two things at once; coming up with something plausible for Darcy and sending an urgent SOS text to Nat. His brain, unused to such complexities, fails on both accounts. Mouth opening and shutting as he stumbles for words, his fingers construct a message to Nat that has her scratching her head when she receives it.

-------

“So I told him exactly where he could stick his money and his so-called pride in his family, and I never saw him again.” Bucky punctuates the end of his story with a long slow drag on the tinnie he was drinking, finishing it off completely and crushing it one handed. He throws it lazily toward the bin and Sam feels a mild flash of annoyance when it lands square in it.

“Then what?”

Bucky sighs. “Then, I headed into the Outback.”

He reaches behind him, above his head, and jerks the fridge door open again, tipping out first one and then a second can. He hands one off to Sam without looking at him, and snaps open the top of his as soon as the other man has taken it.

“Worked on a farm, a cattle ranch. Way out Townsville-way. Little town, going absolutely nowhere, on the road to even more nowhere. Almost at the edge of the earth.” He snorts to himself as he speaks.

They’re both sitting on the floor now, backs to the workbench and legs akimbo. Bucky’s shirtless still, and Sam’s starting to feel the heat of the afternoon now, little trickles of sweat rolling lazily down his back, but he’ll be damned if he’ll stoop to Barnes’ level and remove his. That’s a step way too far.
“The Outback.” He says flatly, turning his head to the dark-haired man beside him with an unimpressed look. “You’re a walking cliche, Barnes.”

Bucky takes a sip of his beer, and shrugs, singularly unconcerned by Sam’s assessment.

“So what.” Sam continues, realising that the other man isn’t going to give up anything else without prodding. “You meet a girl? Love of your life? She break your heart? Let me guess, she broke your heart and you wrote terrible songs about it on a six-string.”

Bucky quirks a grin, more to himself than to Sam. He stares down at his beer contemplatively.


-----

“Another?”

Maria picks up the empty glass, previously full of lemonade with a twist of lime cordial, and quirks her head at the man hanging over the bar. He’s got a thick black leather duster, far too hot for the sun they’re getting right now, and she has to put that then down to aesthetics, which makes her think he’s a prize idiot.

Then there’s the fact he’s been nursing the same near-empty glass for getting on an hour now. One eyebrow raises as she looks at her customer, insofar as she’s willing to label him that. He keeps checking over his shoulder to the door, too, so it seems like he’s waiting on someone.

Someone who can’t be bothered to come meet him, clearly.

Fury looks back at the barmaid whose hand has drifted to her cocked hip whilst she waits on his answer. He’d say she was pretty, if she didn’t eclipse that sort of sentiment with an air of total control. She is clearly not a girl to be messed with, and he can respect that.

She reminds him a little of his wife. Ex-wife, he reminds himself.

“Yes,” He says, finally working his jaw into an actual answer. “Yes, another one will be fine.” He shoots another look over his shoulder at the door, which opens, but only to reveal a harassed looking redhead he’s seen around the street a few times.

-----

Tony’s spent the afternoon so far ripping apart the car, just stopping short of tearing the actual car seats open, looking for his phone. He huffs, hands on hips and frustrated. He’s many things, some of them even - to the surprise of the general populace - good things, but patient is not one of them.

He can feel his heart start to thump erratically in his chest, and puts one hand over the spot, wincing and bending forward in a futile attempt to ease the dull pain that’s threatening to become a bigger one. Tony scoffs in front of his daughter but, if he’s being honest with himself, the heart surgery did scare him a little.

Continues to scare him, in fact.

He hauls himself upright and half-staggers back up the stairs and into the main house.

Fixing himself a drink - lemonade with the smallest dash of gin, just enough to take the edge off
the harsh corners of the day. Okay, he thinks, maybe it’s a little more than a dash of gin, but it’s not like he’s going anywhere. Not without his damn phone.

He kicks the edge of the sofa in disgust and flings himself onto the soft cushion, expertly keeping his drink upright and - crucially - the liquid inside the glass. It’s not as comfortable as he was expecting it to be, and he shifts his arse up a little and feels under himself to dislodge whatever it is that’s sticking up.

His hands close around the familiar shape of his phone and he breathes a small sigh of relief before searching fingers hook around something else as well. Eyebrows knitting together, he carefully pulls out what he’s found and finds his heart hurting for an entirely different reason.

-----

“So you and Nat.”

On anyone else, it would have been a question. On Wilson, it’s almost a statement, and Bucky drains the rest of his beer to make him wait as punishment for his assumptions.

“She’s a good kid.” He remarks, and gains a solid punch to the shoulder for his troubles. “What?” Bucky says, indignant, though not far enough gone to rub at the smarting ache in his arm. He’s not giving Wilson that in a month of Sundays. “She is.”

Sam returns him a flat stare. Bucky laughs.

“No.” He says. “No to what you’re thinking. Nat’s a mate, always has been. Guess she always will be. Even if she can get a bee in her bonnet about things.” Bucky finishes off with a sardonic quirk to one eyebrow, eyeing the empty can in his hand before it too joins its comrades in the rubbish bin.

This time it’s Sam who reaches up and snags two more cans, tossing one to Bucky who snatches it out of the air. There’s an almost pleasurable moment where both of them forget that they’re trapped in a garage, that it’s starting to get unbearably hot, that they don’t actually like each other; and just enjoy a couple of beers.

“So if Nat’s just a mate.” Wilson starts up, having snapped his can open and tracing a finger around the condensation that’s collecting on the cool aluminium. “Then what’s stopping you with Darcy?”

Bucky bangs his head back against the workbench and groans. “You too?”

Wilson shrugs. “It’s a bandwagon, I’ll jump on it if I need to.” He sucks down a mouthful of beer, swilling it around his mouth and then raising the can to wipe it against his forehead, eyes closing at the cool touch of it before he speaks again. “Fess up, Barnes.”

“You not got enough going on with Maria? You need to pry into my lovelife for kicks?” Bucky snaps back, and Sam knows it’s touching a raw nerve, bringing up the little brunette from next door. Still, he’s stuck here for the foreseeable future so he might as well have some fun.

“Well, see,” He says, grinning. “I actually have a lovelife, with Maria. Not sure what you’ve got, apart from a total lack of game-”

Bucky’s empty beer can - drained in record time - connects smartly with Sam’s forehead.

-----
“Clint, you had one job.”

Nat’s unimpressed. He knew she would be, and he’s squinting up at her, unsure whether it’s safer to look at his girlfriend - the annoyed redhead - or Darcy, the equally annoyed brunette. He opts in the end for swinging on his barstool towards Steve and Wanda, who have now guiltily shown their faces to share in the blame.

“Actually,” Nat’s voice takes on a different tone and she turns towards the little brunette standing to the side of her. “You had one job. How did you mess it up?”

“I-” Darcy splutters. “Me? A job? My job, Nat, is to work the coffee shop. Not play into your ridiculous schemes.” She’s verging on genuinely angry, and it’s only the look on Steve’s face that’s holding her back right now. She knows, academically speaking, that her so-called friends were only trying to help. It’s not quite enough to be sure of preventing her from going postal, however.

“Just let them out.” Darcy says, tiredly. They’ve worked out between them by now that it’s poor Sam stuck in the garage with Bucky, something that explains the rattling and might well end in bloodshed. Steve’s looking more than a little worried. “I don’t want to be held accountable for this.”

“I need to make a phonecall.” Nat says grimly.

-----

Fury’s spent most of the day in the pub, and Sam has not materialised.

He’s somehow managed to eek out two lemonades, but his hospitality is clearly starting to wear thin and he slinks back to number 26. Fury is not the kind of man to give into emotion, but if he were, he might have to describe himself as dejected.

Closing the door firmly but quietly, he finds Frigga in front of him as he turns around. Her face is excited, and he knows it’s because she thinks that he can’t possibly have been out that long without talking to his son. His shoulder slump and her face falls with them.

“Oh,” She says quietly. “Oh, Nick.” The woman moves forward into his space and wraps her arms around him, lays her head against his shoulder and gently caresses the back of his neck with delicate fingertips. He sighs into her embrace, having spent a long time - too long, he thinks - without a woman’s touch.

Almost unthinkingly, he tips her chin upwards with his hand and captures her lips with his.

-----

Nat’s somehow managed to get Madge to cover for them both without too many questions but quite a lot of promises around future cover, though Darcy protests and points out at great length that she’s more than happy to run the shop whilst Nat rectifies her stupid plot. It falls on deaf ears, and Darcy is more or less dragged along to the outside of the garage, which is now suspiciously quiet.

“You think they’ve killed each other?” Wanda asks in a voice that is unhelpfully not as low as it should have been in Darcy’s ear, and Steve looks pained to hear it. Nat shoots her a look and Wanda falls silent. They all stare at the door in silence, a silence that is only broken by one man.

Clint Barton.
“Ooops.”

He says it quietly, almost as though it’s to himself, and no one else was meant to hear it. Natasha rounds upon him, eyebrows knit together because four years and change mean that she knows full well what an ‘oops’ from her boyfriend might mean.

“What do you mean, ‘oops’?”

“Uh-” Barton thinks as fast as he can trying to work out if telling the truth would aid his cause or not. Nat fixes him with a hard stare. He decides quickly that honesty is probably the best policy. Well. Not the actual best policy, but the one that’s probably more likely to result in him still having a functioning pair of balls at the end of it.

“Okay, you see that drain?”

“Clint.” Nat’s tone conveys quite clearly to her boyfriend that she is both disappointed and angry, the worst sort of combination. He pulls together a grin that she shoots down in flames with one single arched eyebrow. The others begin to drift away from the pair, fairly sure that the apocalypse is about to begin in earnest.

------

“Tony!”

Rhodey bursts into the living room, looking like he’s just completed a marathon the way he’s sweating and half-falling through the door, and Tony blinks back at him from his position spreadeagled on the floor.

“S’up, Rhodey?” He says blearily, with reddened eyes that are mostly gin-related. If the other man asks - and, to be honest, he won’t, because that’s an unspoken agreement between the two of them - he won’t be telling him about the part that isn’t due to alcohol. He’s been lying on his back for what feels like forever and is probably only half an hour, half-sipping at his drink and clutching at Pepper’s delicate gold necklace with his other hand.

The other man is bent double and has one hand on the back of the sofa before he’s able to even think about how to wheeze out his words. Having tried Lassiter’s, then the coffee shop - Madge was snappier than usual, Rhodey wasn’t sure quite why - then the pub and finally, when Maria looked him right in the eye and asked had he seriously not just gone to the house first, he’d made his way to Ramsey Street.

“You okay, man?”

“Never better.” Stark answers, fingering the chain he’s holding. He remembers when he gave it to her, the way the candlelight had illuminated the sharp edge of her cheekbones, the wide smile she’d given him when he’d presented it to her, and how he’d felt that he’d never be able to top that moment.

He’d been right.
He couldn’t top that moment.
He could do a hell of a lot to numb it, though.

Rhodey drops himself onto the sofa, and stretches an arm out towards his friend. His fingertips graze against Tony’s forearm, and it’s enough to ground him a little. To remind him that he’s not marching his life alone.
Not if he doesn’t want to.

“Well, we can just get Thor’s key, right?” Barton says hopefully.

“No chance,” Steve answers, looking up from his phone. “Jane says he’s had to go out of town to pick up a car part for that BMW. He’ll be gone a while.”

Nat curses loudly.

Bucky grunts a little getting up, a familiar twinge of pain that shoots up his left arm, and reflexively rotates his shoulder. He catches Sam eyeing him with a look that’s more professional than anything else and tilts his head back at the other man.

“What?”

Sam nods towards his arm. “Giving you trouble?”

Bucky sighs, and kneads the fingers of his right hand into the muscle of his left shoulder. “If I tell you it’s an old war wound, you gonna tell me that’s a cliche too?” Sam laughs, despite himself and after a moment, Bucky laughs as well.

“I got shot.” Bucky says quietly, still massaging at his arm. “Afghanistan, second tour. Still got shrapnel in there. You wouldn’t think to look at it, but there’s a ton of metal in this arm.”

“Bet you’re fun in an airport.” Sam says drily.

“Fire brigade?” Wanda suggests brightly, eyes lighting up as she looks around the solemn group.

“Oh come on, there’s got to be something we can do rather than drag the whole town into this.” Steve’s getting a little worried now about his involvement in all of this, and how difficult life is going to be in the House of Trouser when - his mind substitutes IF and he winces - the men are freed.

“You’ve got muscles, can’t you haul the the cover up?” Nat says to Steve. Clint looks mildly put out that she’s addressing Rogers and not him, but then again, second to Thor and possibly tying with Barnes, Steve is the most stacked guy he’s ever seen.

“Probably,” Steve says doubtfully, looking down at the hefty metal grid at his feet. “But I can’t fit through that gap.”

“Okay, so you can open it up, and then we just need someone small enough to fit through…” Nat tails off and her bright green eyes fix on Darcy.

“So my dad’s an arsehole.”

Bucky looks over at Sam, who’s staring straight ahead and not looking at him. “Yeah, I’ve met him. Seems a real bundle of fun.”
“He left.” Sam says, and it’s in a low voice. His eyes are now on his hands which are twisting together in his lap. He takes a deep breath and Bucky gets the impression he’s telling himself as much as he’s telling Bucky. Maybe even more so.

“He left me and mum. I was five. Old enough to miss him, not old enough to understand anything else. Just let us figure out how to be a single parent family until my step-dad came along. Mum wrote him a letter every week for the first year. Then, one day, they all got returned. Big bundle of ‘em, all un-opened. I think that broke her heart more than the day he actually went.”

Sam threw his empty beer can as hard as he could towards the bin, where it hit the wall and crumpled before bouncing off the rim and skittering back into the middle of the garage where it rocked gently from side to side until it finally came to a rest.

“And now he wants to waltz back here and give me some cock and bull story about how it wasn’t his fault.” Sam’s voice was bitter.

Bucky rolls his jaw. He knows arsehole dads well enough, but he would have preferred if his dad had upped and left their family, bullshit story or not. Unfortunately the fella was determined to hang around and it was Bucky instead who’d gone, for all their sakes.

“Sorry, man.” He says, not looking at Wilson and not having anything else to say.

“Yeah.” Sam answers, drawing one knee up to his chest and wrapping an arm around it, resting his chin on top of his knee. “Me too.”

------

“This is your stupid plan, not mine. Why do I have to help?”

“Because even if you don’t like Bucky right now, Sam’s your friend.” Nat says firmly.

“You’re lucky I consider any of you lot mates right now,” Darcy snaps back. “What the hell were you thinking? This isn’t a bloody soap opera, it’s my life!”

------

“You know, if it weren’t for Becca I’d’ve been gone from home a lot earlier.” Bucky says, partly to break the silence that’s fallen between them, and partly because it feels like confession time and Sam’s shared more than he has at this point.

“Becca?” Wilson asks, looking over at him.

“My little sister.” Bucky explains, a soft smile on his face as he thinks on the scrappy teenager he’d last seen too long ago. He calls, when he can, and writes letters more often than that. It was a habit he’d cultivated working out on the farm where there was only one phone line and it was usually broken. “Here-”

He scrambles, rooting around in his back pocket - ah, there’s that half-finished pack of smokes - and finally pulls out his wallet. Flipping it open, he hands it over to Wilson. A pretty brunette with a tie-dye t-shirt and braces on her teeth grins back at the camera, pulling a stupid face to match the bloke beside her.

“That you?” Sam asks, chuckling and tapping his index finger over the photo. Bucky nods, grinning. It had been Becca’s thirteenth birthday, and he’d managed to get leave, pull some strings. He’d ridden the bike for a day straight to make it there in time but it had been worth it to see the
look on her face.

His dad’s, not so much.

“You miss her?”

“She’s my kid sister. Of course I miss her.”

------

“Don’t you dare drop me.”

“I won’t drop you, Darcy.” Steve says patiently. He very carefully places his hands under her armpits and resists the urge to close his eyes, remembering that the reason he’s doing this is because Bucky is stuck in a garage and therefore can’t actually see him putting his hands on Darcy.

Steve, knowing Bucky a damn sight better than the other man is willing to admit, is under no illusions that - whatever has happened between the pair of them - Bucky would not be happy to see the blond with his hands so close to… Well. He carefully bends his fingers into fists and does not look down at her.

“Ready?”

“No.”

Nat motions at him to get on with it, and having already shifted the heavy metal grate to one side, he starts to lower the girl into the drain. Her complaints are muffled as she ends up knee deep in the water there, but the general gist of it is clear. Steve, lowered to his knees, finally lets go and she drops with a small splash.

“Ugh,” Darcy says to herself more than anyone else, and looks up at the faces peering in at her. Steve, looking sheepish, Wanda, looking concerned and Nat who’s making a wrap-it-up-kid motion. Darcy snorts and starts to kick her feet around, accepting that there’s a shower in her future and she might as well suck it.

The smell is vile. Using the tiny flashlight she has on her key-chain, Darcy scouts around the small dank space. There’s nothing obvious, and she’s starting to think she’s going to have to get on her hands and knees in the smelly water to find these bloody keys.

Goddamn, Clint.

The man in question is currently fashioning an old wire coat hanger he finds in the dumpster at the back of the garage. It’s easy enough done, and he’s always mildly surprised that more people don’t know how to do this sort of thing. Once he’s gotten it straightened out to his satisfaction, he approaches the door.

------

“Guys, I can’t find these keys.” Darcy shouts up forlornly, hands to her mouth to help her voice carry and soaked up to her thighs now in drain water. “You’re going to have to call a locksmith or something.”

“Oh,” Steve’s shoulders slump though he tries not to show it. “Let me help you out. Nat, can you Google a locksmith?” He says over his shoulder as he prepares to lay flat on his stomach and haul the little brunette back out again.
“No need.” Nat appears, jerking a thumb over her shoulder towards the door and her boyfriend, who’s on his knees with his tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth in concentration, working at the door lock. Ear pressed almost right up against it, he listens hard for the tell-tale click that lets him know it’s working.

“How the hell did you learn to do that?” Steve asks in amazement. Barton shrugs.

“Youtube?” He offers, and whilst there’s something in his eyes that doesn’t quite fit the fake smile he plasters on his face, it’s only really Nat that notices and she already knows everything about him.

Steve, half in the drain himself with Wanda sat on his thighs to try and keep him in place, hauls Darcy out of the drain hole, and she’s covered in slime and gunk when Bucky comes out of the door just as Steve’s pulling her up.

Bucky wrinkles his nose in her direction. “No need to dress up on our account, Lewis.”

Even Sam shoots him a look at that one, none of the assembled group quite able to believe the extent that Bucky is willing to go to in order to spite himself. Darcy, who’s managed to slip and fall into the drain water whilst trying to reach for Steve’s outstretched hand, just about manages not to push him in.

“You couldn’t have left him in there?” She says instead to Clint, coolly, and turns her back on Bucky with a sniff.

Steve’s able to come up with when he hears the full story behind the reason he’s had to spend the afternoon locked in a garage. Steve hands him a beer which he takes with a glare, even though he’s had more during the day with Bucky than he would ever have had normally, even on a weekend.

He knows there’s an awkward phone call in his future to his boss, and he is not looking forward to that. Sam can’t envisage a scenario where ‘my friends wanted to lock two idiots in a garage together so they’d kiss and make up, and it turns out they’re all bigger idiots than I ever imagined’ is an acceptable excuse for going AWOL.

“Well what would you have done?” Nat says, unconcerned and perched on the counter with her legs comfortably bracketing Barton.

“You’re all idiots. Absolute, flaming idiots.”

Darcy’s spent about an hour under the boiling hot spray of the shower, and it still doesn’t feel like anywhere near enough to wash away the stink and slime she’d had to wade through. Realising that she’s going to have to lump it for now, or risk using all the hot water in the street, she grumpily snags a towel and wanders back to her bedroom.

Bloody Bucky Barnes.
Bloody friends.
She sighs.

Darcy realises that her phone is flashing madly, and picking it up sees that she has five SOS text messages from Jane. Flicking through them, she snorts. Frigga is not letting the wedding thing go in the slightest, and Jane is calling for back up. And wine.

Darcy thinks she can probably work with that.

------

Bucky, who’s avoiding number 30 like it’s housing a plague of locusts, has taken his bike into Thor’s garage; the other bloke offered a while ago if he needed it as Steve’s place doesn’t have one and it’s threatening to rain. Dark clouds hang ominously in the sky overhead and Bucky thinks briefly that the inside of his head probably matches it right now.

He does feel like an idiot for what he’d said to Darcy, but somehow he couldn’t help it coming out of his mouth, like some kind of automatic defence mechanism. Truth be told, he’d wanted to wrap his arms around her when he saw her, looking utterly miserable and covered in god-knows-what. Unfortunately, Bucky Barnes has never had much of a sense of self-preservation, and his mouth stepped in before anything else could. He stops himself from kicking out at his bike in frustration, and reminds himself of what he’d felt instead when she’d looked up at him and basically told him he was going nowhere fast.

He might well be, but he doesn’t need Darcy Lewis to tell him so.

Darcy, bottle of wine in each hand - having receiving no fewer than four more text messages in the time she’d managed to haul on jeans and a t-shirt, her wet hair towel-dried as best she could - wanders across the street to number 26, and finds the garage light on. She looks up at the house and thinks it might be quieter to enter through the garage, out the back and slip up the back steps - assuming the back door is open - and avoid knocking.

She heads towards the door.

Sam, who’s had much the same thought as Bucky in regards to avoiding the collection of so-called friends still cluttering up his house, and is wandering past and skulking slightly in an effort to avoid his father who’s still residing at number 26, notices the little brunette, walking somewhat awkwardly with two bottles of wine. Sam watches, and knows that Barnes has taken his bike into Thor’s garage.

He stops, and wonders if he’s actually going to do this.

Sighing, and deciding that at least if he does it, he’s doing it with the right people, Sam walks quickly up behind the girl and hip-checks Darcy into the garage and throws the door down.

Darcy squeaks as she stumbles forward, and, righting herself miraculously without smashing one or both bottles, looks up. Bucky stares back, one hand on the leather seat of his bike and his mouth open as he takes her in. The door thunders down behind her and and she spins on her heel with a shout, but it’s too late.

Her shoulders slump in defeat and a myriad of curse words flood her mind just before there’s a loud rumble of thunder and the lights blink out.
“This is taking the piss,” Darcy hears Bucky mutter into the darkness. “Twice in one day?”

More thunder rumbles overhead, accompanied by a brief flash of lightning, forcing its presence through the cracks in the structure. It gives Darcy a second to try and gain her bearings: she creeps towards the wall, breathing a sigh of relief when she makes it without tripping over anything. She delicately lowers the wine bottles to the floor, waiting until she hears the gentle clink of glass on concrete, and straightens back up.

“The door should be easy to push open, right?” she asks.

“Not from this side,” Bucky replies, after a moment of contemplation. “There’s no way to get any leverage.” This time, when the lightning crack comes, she sees him shudder, but is distracted from puzzling over it by his next question. “Can’t you just call someone to come let us out?”

Darcy reaches down to her pocket, only to remember “Only if you know how of a way to use a mobile phone from across the street.”

“You don’t have it?” he grouses. “What’s the point in owning one if you don’t carry it with you?”

“Well, it’s not like we can use yours either, is it?” she snaps back.

He grumbles something under his breath, masked by the noise of the storm overhead, and she can feel her blood pressure rising. How she ever felt anything other than irritation around him, she doesn’t understand.

It’s not true, and she knows it, but when his face is masked by the darkness it’s easier to forget the reasons why she was ever drawn to him. Being enclosed in such a small space when he, once again, has abandoned all attempt at being fully clothed, is less of a temptation when she can’t see the goods and only has Mr Congeniality’s personality to assess.

But griping about Bucky won’t get her out of here, so she takes a deep breath and starts to think of a solution to the problem at hand. “What about the other door?” It was the one she’d been aiming at slipping through when she got locked in here.

“Thor reckons he’s keeping it locked at the moment while they’ve got a house guest.”
“Alright, but I know Jane is in the house, so if we make enough noise someone has to hear it.”

Darcy catches him shrug during the next flicker of lightning. “Fine. Worth a shot.”

“You try that door, I’ll try this one,” she suggests, wary of navigating the space in the darkness. Her eyes are adjusting, but it’s a slow process when there’s a brilliant flash every minute or so. She hears Bucky shuffling around, and then a rhythmic thumping start on the back door.

She gives the roll-down door an experimental tap, and it’s quieter than she hoped, the metal firm and unresponsive, so she forms a fist and begins to pound it.

“Jane!” she yells at the top of her lungs. At the same moment the heavens open high above them, and rain begins to fall in heavy, loud spatters on the roof.

“And for the bridesmaids, I was thinking avocado,” Frigga says. “I know it’s more of a spring-like colour, but if we’re going with a fresh, nature-based theme, I thought it was more appropriate than olive or lime.”

“Were we thinking of a nature theme?” Jane wonders, eyeing the scattered magazines and the large planner Frigga has assembled. “And I don’t think Darcy or Helen would appreciate green…”

“They’ll look wonderful,” Frigga insists, although she doesn’t seem to be listening to Jane anyway. Jane glances out of the window, wondering where Darcy is. She never replied to Jane’s pleas for help, and the only explanation Jane can come up with is that she’s still angry with them for earlier.

Jane can’t really blame her. She should have put her foot down when Nat announced the grand plan—it was obviously going to go wrong—but she only wanted to see Darcy happy. It looks like Jane will have to plead her case in person, and that’s not going to happen tonight. The rain is bucketing it down, and nobody in their sound mind would venture out into that. She just wishes Darcy would reply to her texts.

“That thunder sounds close,” she says, the constant low-level rumble making it even harder to concentrate on Frigga’s plans.

“Yes, the weather forecast said it was going to be a nasty storm. How about fuchsia as an accent colour?”

Darcy gives up pounding on the door when her hand begins to ache, and as soon as she does, Bucky stops too.

“I don’t think they can hear us over the storm,” she says, having to raise her voice over the rattle of rain above them. “But Jane’s expecting me, she’ll come looking for me soon.”

She thinks she hears him grunt, but he doesn’t answer beyond that. Realising they could be in here for a few hours yet—Jane might wait for the rain to stop before searching for her—she shuffles to the side, holding her arm out until her fingers brush the brick wall. She’s been in here plenty, helping Jane unpack when she moved in, and knows a little about some of the stuff shoved into the boxes on the shelves lining the garage.

“What are you doing?” Bucky asks when she starts to feel her way to one of the boxes.

“Looking for candles,” she replies. “They keep their Christmas deco out here, and I know they have some candles in with those. We might as well have some light.”
“Right.” She hears him cross to her side. “Any idea where they’re most likely to be?”

“Definitely on this side of the garage,” she says, with more confidence than she feels, because with her luck Frigga’s rearranged since then.

She might not be able to see much of Bucky, other than a darker shadow among the rest, but her nose seems to be attempting to compensate for her eyes: he smells like soap, a simple freshness, underscored by a hint of sweat which hasn’t turned ripe yet, so doesn’t seem unpleasant. She finds herself breathing deeply whenever they venture close together, trying to catch another lungful and decide whether she likes it or not. She hasn’t had chance to make up her mind before she stumbles across the candles wrapped in a garland, and there’s even a box of matches shoved in with them. They’re in over-the-top fancy candlesticks, meant to be used on the table for Christmas dinner, but Darcy’s not going to quibble if it chases the darkness into the corners.

At the first flicker of light, Darcy has to turn her face away from him. He is closer than she realised, in the darkness, wearing nothing except board shorts, and she swallows before taking a step away. The candlelight casts a golden glow over his bronzed skin, casting shadows which bring deeper definition to his muscles. He really doesn’t need the help in looking good, but the world seems to be giving it him anyway.

The thunder rolls again, and his hand trembles, tightening around the candlestick. She reaches out, instinctively, to wrap her hand around his and right the candle when he tips it too far, and notices how tight he’s screwed his eyes shut. His lips are pressed together too, turned into a thin white line, and though he’s doing his best to keep his emotions veiled, it’s not hard to pick out the fear and panic rolling through him.

She keeps her hand over his, though she’s got no idea if it will offer him any comfort. He obviously isn’t enjoying the storm—and that’s one more thing they don’t have in common, because she loves to stand out, catching the warm rain on her tongue and watch the lightning split the clouds—but it only takes a second to understand why it’s affecting him so badly.

She’s not equipped for this. If Sam and Steve have brought their own terrors back with them from war, they’ve never revealed them to her, and even if they had, there’s not much she can do while they’re locked in this garage. When she sees Sam again, because she’s pretty damn sure it was Sam who shoved her in here, she’s going to kick him where it hurts.

When the thunder stops, he opens his eyes, refusing to meet hers. He turns his back on her, visibly squaring his shoulders, and Darcy takes it as a sign that he doesn’t want her pity. That’s fine; she wasn’t planning on offering him any. But she offers him something else to take the edge of.

“Wanna share the wine?”

“Alright, Wendy, you’re good to go,” the gym instructor says, handing over a membership pass with a toothy smile.

Wanda doesn’t bother to correct him. She did that the first three times he got her name wrong, and has long since given up. She takes the pass with a meek nod and tucks it into her pocket, while he wanders away to help a willowy redhead on the weights.

She’s not entirely sure what she’s doing here. She hates exercise, but she has free access to the gym since it’s part of the Lassiter’s complex, even if she never ventured in before now. It seemed like a good time to get in shape, but the induction process is making her regret the entire idea.
“Wanda!”

She closes her eyes when she hears her name being called, recognising the voice and wanting to ignore it. She specifically booked her induction with one of the other instructors, but apparently the universe is having none of that. She considers slinking back to the changing rooms, but her name is shouted again, so she plasters a smile on her face and pivots around.

“Steve, hi!”

He bounds over with a big smile. “I didn’t know you were a member?”

“I just joined.”

“Nice one. You wanting to work on anything in particular?”

She wants to get rid of the residual puppy fat that just won’t go, but she doesn’t say that out loud. “No, nothing, but I thought it was a good time to get fit.”

“There’s never a bad time to get fit,” he replies with an enthusiastic grin. “Have you had your induction?”

“Sure, yeah, Brad just finished it.”

Steve glances over at his co-worker with a barely suppressed wince. “Well, if you need any help, just ask. I can put together a programme for you that fits what you enjoy doing, and there are tons of great classes that aren’t all about lifting weights or working up a sweat.”

“Are you ready to go?” someone calls.

Steve follows the sound of the voice, glancing over Wanda's shoulder, and breaks into a broad, besotted smile. Wanda follows his gaze, and a tall blonde has walked up to them. She’s athletically built, but with a sweet face.

“Sure, just give me a minute. Sharon, this is Wanda, my neighbour. Wanda, this is Sharon.”

“Nice to meet you, Wanda,” Sharon says, and there’s a genuine warmth to her words. Wanda feels a little flustered in front of her. This is exactly the type of woman she always pictured Steve dating, and she can why Steve is so obviously smitten.

On the other hand, no amount of time in the gym is going to turn Wanda into that kind of girl.

“I’m going to get changed,” she announces, although their attention isn’t really on her anymore. “Have a nice night.”

“You too,” they both reply, and she ducks into the changing room with a sigh.

Yeah, Wanda will never be like Sharon. She’s small, and a little dumpy, and a klutz. She’s still not really outgrown her goth stage, either. It’s why nobody ever looks at her twice. Especially not Steve…her ‘neighbour’.

Even Darcy has Bucky hooked—they might be at loggerheads, but Wanda knows that Bucky is smitten, even if he won’t admit it. And she can’t really blame him. Darcy outgrew her own dumpy stage and emerged with a figure, while Wanda’s left poking at the lumpy bits in the mirror.

She almost tosses the membership pass into the bin as she leaves the room, but pauses before she drops it in, and shoves it back into her bag.
Bucky and Darcy are sat on opposite sides of the garage, backs to the wall and legs spread out, with a bottle each. There was a corkscrew shoved in with the Christmas things, and even a couple of straws. Bucky protested the wine at first, saying he wasn’t a fan, but when Darcy pointed out it was all they had in here, he relented, grimacing with his first few mouthfuls of the rose. He declined a straw, but Darcy is sipping her wine daintily through one. He has to stare at his bike, and catalogue engine parts in his head, to keep himself from staring at the way her lips wrap around it, and her cheeks hollow as she sucks.

“You don’t seem to be drinking very quickly,” he says into a brief hush. The silence is pressing on him, and he’s desperate for a distraction from the storm overhead. The wine might help to quiet his head a little, but being alone with his thoughts won’t.

“Neither are you,” she points out.

“I’ve drunk my fill today,” though he lifts the bottle to his mouth for another swig, wincing once more at the taste. He wonders how women drank this stuff; it’s like something sour has been masked with far too much sugar. “I’m getting old, gotta give my liver a breather now and then. What’s your excuse?”

“That being drunk in front of you probably won’t end well,” she replies flatly.

“Huh.” He sets the bottle down between his legs. “I probably wouldn’t mind that. You’re a funny drunk.”

“Oh yeah, hilarious,” she muttered, drawing her knees up to her chest, her lips sinking into a pout. “That was one of the most mortifying experiences of my life.”

“Must be nice, living such a sheltered life, if that’s the worst of it.” It’s the wrong thing to say, harking back to that conversation and the gulf that’s existed between them since, but the wine hasn’t helped build a solid connection between his brain and tongue. The look she shoots him could ignite the rest of the candles.

“You don’t know anything about my life, so maybe you should keep your opinions on it to yourself.”

“Actually—” he takes a deep breath, steeling himself and meeting her gaze “—I know a little. Steve told me, after…well, after. Put me straight on a few things.”

It doesn’t soften her any, she stares back at him imperiously. “And?”

“And I’m sorry for making assumptions about you.” But the icy stare is getting under his skin, helping him remember that she wasn’t the only injured party. “But I don’t think I’m the only one who needs to apologise.”

She shifts, suddenly uncomfortable. “I’m sorry you were upset by what I said.”

“That’s not a real apology, Lewis, and you know it.”

“Fine.” She huffs, sitting up straighter. “I’m sorry that I said some things which were thoughtless, and offensive. I didn’t mean them that way, but it obviously upset you, and I wish I could take them back. I did as soon as they were out there.”

The wine’s obviously having an effect on her, her eyes glassy with the first hint of tipsiness. Bucky rises, crossing to her side of the garage, sliding down beside her and taking the bottle away from
“Since it was the most mortifying experience of your life.”

“One of, I said,” she replies, though she doesn’t try to retrieve the wine. “And it was.”

“Shame,” he teases, “because it was one of the highlights of mine.”

She stares at him from the corner of her eye, the cogs in her brain whirring away, until, “So you did look!”

“I did my best not to, sweetheart. I’d deserve a slap at the least if I hadn’t.”

“No, I mean…” She takes a deep breath and blushes. It’s a good colour on her and he’s left wondering if there are more effective ways of leaving her flushed than embarrassing her. “I thought you weren’t interested. I wanted to make you see that I liked you, and I’m not a kid, but you acted like it was no big deal.”

There’s no way for Bucky to explain how the sight of her, skin wet and glistening in the night, was seared into his memory without sounding like a creep, but something about her words has him going off on a tangent anyway.

“You had to get trollied to make a move on me? Am I really that intimidating?”

“A little,” her voice is small, and she’s staring at the patch of concrete between their legs. “It’s not that easy when you like somebody, and I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Darcy, you shouldn’t have to be drunk to have the courage to let a bloke know you like him. If you’re worried he’s going to do anything except let you down gently, then he’s not worth your time to begin with.”

“That’s easy for you to say…” she mutters, but he’s caught up in indignation.

“And Christ, any man who’s got eyes in his head would happily rescue you from a pool in the nuddy! If anyone acts less than grateful that you’re willing to let them near you, you walk away, because you can do better.”

She’s staring at him with wide eyes, a little confused, and he has no idea how to make her understand that she doesn’t owe anybody anything—that somebody, somewhere failed to make her aware that she’s incredible, that part of the reason he took such offense at her careless words is because he knows she can do better than him and he doesn’t want to be around when she does—but he’s never been very good with words, and that’s not about to start now.

He kisses her instead.

Rhodey’s the first one to break the quiet, unnerved by the way Tony is staring at the drinks cabinet in the corner of the room. The bottle of gin in his hand is mostly empty, and Rhodey is damned if he’s going to let Tony get another one. He knows that there can’t have been much left before Tony started drinking today: his friend isn’t drunk, no matter how much he’s pretending that his worn exterior is down to the booze and not his crumbling emotions.

“You could call her.” He doesn’t need to name her; there’s only one woman who ever walked away from Tony Stark. The rest, Tony burned through and threw away when things got rough. It’s why his relationship with his children is so fractured, Wanda the only one he has any meaningful contact with and that’s only because she lost her mother so young.
Pepper was different. She stayed with Tony through the dark times, though he pushed and pushed and pushed, until eventually even she cracked and left. Tony couldn’t resist testing her, couldn’t stop forcing her to prove that she really loved him, and when she faltered he took it as proof that she didn’t. And Tony would never admit out loud how much he regrets it, how much of a pillar of strength she was to him, and how he falls apart without her to keep him together.

“Or I could not,” is the blunt response. Rhodey expects that to be the end of it, for Tony’s denial to manifest in continued silence on the matter. Instead, he unfurls his fingers to reveal the chain clutched in his palm. And to Rhodey’s complete surprise, he continues speaking. “I didn’t deserve her.”

“You didn’t,” Rhodey agrees, equally as blunt in his answer. There’s no point denying the truth—Pepper left because Tony was poisoning her, and if she’d stayed it would only have led to her own emotional collapse. “But you could have done.”

There’s silence for a long time. Then— “How?” The question comes across as genuinely puzzled.

“You get your shit together, man.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Rhodey sighs. “You get help. Talk to people.”

“I’m not paying money to speak to a crank who will tell me I have daddy issues. The whole of Erinsborough knows that.”

“Then talk to me.”

Tony opens his mouth, frowns, closes it again, frowns harder. “I never thought of that before.”

Darcy’s pretty sure Bucky’s sufficiently distracted from the storm now. There’s no tremor in his arms where they touch her, his hands firm on her waist—she’s the one trembling, gripping onto his shoulders like the world might be about to tear her away from him. It’s their third kiss, and the longest they’ve gone without interruption. The one time she should be hoping for it, for someone to throw open the garage door and free them, and yet with the way his mouth is moving firmly against hers, she hopes they’re left alone for some time yet.

Somehow they shift, so she’s in his lap, straddling his legs just like she was during their kiss in the car. Only this time, there won’t be an indignant Susan to come and tear her away, only Bucky pulling Darcy tighter to him. He rocks his hips upwards, and she thinks the noise she makes might be a mewl, but her cheeks are already so flushed that she’s got nowhere left to display her embarrassment at the idea.

He breaks away from her mouth, pressing soft kisses down her cheek and jaw until she arches her neck so he can nuzzle into it. He pants her name. “We should stop,” he says a moment later, though he ignores his own advice, grazing teeth over her pulse and following up with a soothing swipe of his tongue. “I don’t have anything with me.”

And isn’t that a bucket of cold water. Darcy stops squirming in his arms, leaning away from him and raising herself to her knees so she’s no longer firmly planted in his lap.

“Darcy?” he asks, one hand leaving her hip to tug her chin down, so he can look her in the eye.

“I think…” She bites her lip, and watches Bucky’s pupils dilate as he takes in the motion. “I think
we should take it slow.”

She waits for his reaction—for the inevitable cooling at the realisation he isn’t going to get what he expects from her—but instead he nods slowly. “You’re right. We’ve not really made it through a proper conversation yet. We should probably fix that. Maybe make another attempt at a date.”

Darcy wants to breathe a sigh of relief: he’s still looking at her with what she thinks is fondness, and that should be enough, but it’s now or never. He deserves her honesty, and to know what he’s getting himself into. “You should know… I don’t have a lot of, uh, experience.”

The fondness doesn’t go anywhere, his eyes crinkling as he replies with an easy smile. “I figured that out a while ago. Don’t care.”

“No, I mean—I don’t really have any.”

His eyes widen a little at that, as the meaning sinks in, but he shrugs it off. Literally. “Still don’t care. This thing is just you and me. We’ll take it our own pace, right?”

He waits for her to mumble her agreement before claiming a sweet kiss and sliding her off his lap, so she’s sat beside him. Despite that, he slings an arm around her shoulders, so she can snuggle into his side.

“So what do we do now?” she asks.

“We have that conversation, I guess.”

“I know the power’s out, but do we need this many candles?” Nat calls from the sofa. Clint glances up from where he’s lighting another batch of tealights. He didn’t even know they owned this many candles, but Steve had pointed him in the direction of the emergency stash before he headed out to Sharon’s for the night. Sam’s at Maria’s, and Clint doesn’t know where Bucky is, but he’s not really interested.

“They set a mood,” Clint says. “Don’t they?”

“I guess.” Nat eyes him with concern.

“Since we have the house to ourselves for a while, I thought we’d make the most of it. And candles are romantic… right?”

“You’re trying to be romantic?” Now she’s really concerned, rising from the sofa like there’s a bomb that needs defusing. “What’s brought this on?”

“Nothing. Just trying to take advantage of the moment.” He edges into the kitchen, rummaging for what he hopes will be two clean wine glasses. Neither he or Nat drunk wine, but he thinks the beer will look classier in those, rather than drunk straight out of the can. “Here you go,” he says, handing her the glass with a flourish. She takes it tentatively, not taking her eyes off him for a second.

“You’re worrying me.”

He huffs. “Can’t a bloke treat his girl nicely without her getting suspicious?”

“Not if that bloke is you. And I’m not suspicious, I’m confused.”
“I’ve just realised that maybe, compared to some, I’ve been slacking when it comes to treating you right.”

Nat freezes, the confusion turning into outright panic. “Please tell me you aren’t going to propose.”

“I’m not going to propose.” He thinks it over. “Don’t you want me to?”

“Hell no. I am so not ready for that.”

“Oh, thank Christ,” he mutters before he can stop himself, and if Nat hitches an eyebrow it’s one of amusement. He can deal with amusement. “It’s just that Steve said—”

“How many times have I told you not to listen to Steve?” she interrupts in exasperation. “Honestly, this house is like a concentration of stupidity. I’ll decide when we’re ready to get married, and it won’t be before we’ve lived together, alright?”

“Alright.” He glances around. “Can I blow some of the candles out now? The smoke makes my eyes go itchy.”

“I can’t do this.”

Jane waits until she is alone with Thor in their bedroom, far from eager ears.

“Do what? Sleep?” Thor’s smile turns teasing, as he lifts her easily by the hips and drops her into the middle of the bed. She bounces on the mattress, and he grins down at her. “It’s easy when you have your favourite body pillow to snuggle up to. Me.” He peels his t-shirt off to demonstrate exactly why she likes snuggling with him so much, and misses the way her expression drops.

“No. I can’t…I can’t marry you.”

“So I’ve not seen Becca since I went into the outback, but we write whenever we can.”

Darcy offers Bucky a sleepy smile from where she’s curled into his side. The candelight’s doing her a lot of favours, not that she doesn’t look good in every light he’s seen her in so far. She’s got golden highlights in her hair, and her skin seems to glow. “You know, if you got a mobile, you could send her messages every day.”

“Nah, I like the letters. They have more permanence.” He drops a kiss onto her forehead, just because he can. He can think of other places he’d like to kiss her, but he doesn’t want to start something they can’t finish. Not when she’s admitted he’ll be her first—assuming he doesn’t screw things up again somehow—and she deserves far better than this cool concrete. “Are you cold?”

“Are you?” she asks, patting his bare abdomen. The muscles contract under her touch, and he resists the urge to drape her over him for the extra warmth.

“Might get that way if we’re stuck in here all night.”

The storm has moved away, so the garage is still and quiet, but it’s late enough that nobody is going to come looking for them now. He briefly considers getting up to rattle on the door again, but if the inhabitants of number 26 have already gone to bed, it won’t do him any good: the bedrooms are on the other side of the house.

“There might be things to wrap up in in the boxes,” Darcy suggests. “We could try to get comfy.”
“Mmm.” He doesn’t want to move, not when he thinks it would be pleasant to sleep next to Darcy like this, but he knows they’ll regret it in the morning, when aches and pains make themselves known. “Alright.”

But he doesn’t just get to his feet—he takes her with him, slinging her over his shoulder so she gasps.

“What’re you—put me down!”

He does, draping her over the seat of his bike so she has to straddle it to keep herself upright. She looks a sight, bare legs shining against the black and chrome, hair tumbling around her shoulders. “Wondered what you’d look like on there,” he says. “Going to have to get you a helmet and leathers so we can go riding.”

She bites her lip again, and he wishes she’d stop doing that, because it only gives him ideas. “Really?”

He turns his back to start poking his way through the jumble of crap in the boxes. “I was thinking about where we went wrong on that date. Neither of us were comfortable, so maybe we should stick to things we enjoy doing anyway. And I like riding.”

“I think I’d like that too.” Her voice is a little breathy, and he’s thankful that he’s not facing her. The thought of her pressed against his back while they fly down the road is worse than the lip biting. “And there are places we can go to eat that are nice but not expensive.”

“If I can get the other blokes out of the house, I can even cook.”

“You cook?”

“I’ve been a bachelor for a long time. Microwave meals lose their allure after a while. I’m not exactly Gordon Ramsey, but I can do more than barbie sausages too.”

She makes a hum of appreciation, and he finds a box full of blankets. In the next one are some cushions, a little dog-eared and losing their stuffing, but they’ll do for the night. There’s even a yoga mat shoved at the back of the rack.

Darcy clambers off the bike to take an armful of cushions and helps him make a little nest on the floor, the yoga mat forming a base for them to lie on. When they’re done, they worm into it together, Bucky on his back with Darcy’s head resting in the crook of his shoulder.

It’s not where he expected to spend the night, but he’s strangely content to sleep like this.

“What do you mean?”

Thor thinks he’s forgotten to breathe. It’s only been a matter of days, really, since Jane made him the happiest man on Earth, and now she’s changed her mind?

“I can’t—it’s too much. With the planning, and the dresses, and your mother. I can’t handle it.” Jane, on the other hand, appears to be breathing too fast. She won’t look at him as she talks, twisting her hands together in her lap. “And my parents refuse to be in the same room as each other, so I either have to pick between them or have neither of them there, but apparently I have to have at least fifty guests on my side for it to be even and I don’t like that many people, Thor, I just don’t! I’d have to start inviting people like Karl Kennedy, and I do not want him at my wedding!”
Thor drops onto his knees on the bed in front of her. “Breathe, Jane.” He tips her face up to his, taking deep, slow breaths until she copies him. “Is that all it is? You don’t want a big wedding?”

She shakes her head.

“But you do want to marry me?”

She nods her head fervently.

He grins. “That’s all I want too. And we don’t have to do anything for anyone else.”

“But your mother will be really upset if we don’t have a big wedding. She’s got her heart set on it.”

“She’ll be fine. She has a big heart, and it’s hard to break.”

“I can’t do it, Thor. I can’t tell her to back off. You can’t either, I know you. What if she throws us out of the house?”

Thor frowns. It’s unlikely, but not impossible. “She’s not an ogre, Jane. Just a little overbearing sometimes. But if it worries you that much, leave it with me. I have an idea.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I’ll speak to some people in the morning.” He brings her left hand to his mouth, kissing the back of it just above where the diamond rings sits on her finger. “I’ll always do everything I can to make you happy.”

Bucky’s woken by a rattling noise, followed by a burst of sunlight searing through his eyelids. He grunts and rolls, taking the warm body pressed against his with him.

“Well, this looks it worked better than expected.” Bucky doesn’t bother to open his eyes, instead grabbing the nearest cushion and aiming it in the direction of Wilson’s voice. Darcy whines into Bucky’s neck, burrowing closer.

“I’m tired and hungry, mate, so leave it,” he grumbles.

“Sorry, man, didn’t expect you to be in here all night. I was going to come back and let you out but I was at Maria’s and got a little…distracted.”

“I’ll get you back,” Bucky promises.

“Don’t know what you’re complaining about. You look pretty cosy to me. Almost like your night was as good as mine.”

Wilson whistles as he walks away, and Bucky keeps up the grumbling even as Darcy begins to stir properly against him.

Yeah, he’ll get his revenge on Wilson, but he can’t really complain about the result. He opens his eyes to take in her sleep-rumpled state, and even with what he thinks is drool smeared down her chin, she looks lovely.

“Morning,” he whispers. “We should probably get moving, before Susan wonders where you were all night and figures out it was with me.”

She blinks her eyes open. “Don’t wanna move,” she whimpers, and he knows the feeling. Their
“We gotta. Tell you what, though, if you meet me at the house in an hour, I should be ready to take you on a ride. Put on jeans and boots, and I’ll take you to the coast.”

She smiles, lifting her head from where it’s pillowed on his chest. “Alright. I bet if I ask Thor he’ll have a helmet I can borrow.”

“Right. One hour, and we’ll have that date.”

Fury clears his throat. He’s aware Frigga is awake, even if her eyes are closed. At the sound, her eyelids flutter open, and she offers him a small, content smile.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” he replies. She is lovely in the morning, her hair loose on the pillow and her skin glowing with happiness. “I could make us breakfast in bed.”

“No, let’s laze here a while. My son can be quite boisterous on a morning.”

Fury chuckles. “I’ve noticed.” He reaches out to stroke her hair away from her face. “I suppose I should take you on a proper date.”

“We’re hardly teenagers,” she scoffs. “If we know what we want, we should just…go for it.”

“I thought we already did that,” he replies with a knowing smirk.

She swats at him. “You know what I mean. We clearly have a connection, and we’re already living together, but you’re my guest. We could make the arrangement more official.”

“I’m listening.”

The hour is still early enough that when Darcy sneaks into number 28, Susan is in bed, none the wiser about Darcy being out all night. She recharges her phone, showers, and packs herself a little bag with a dress and her bathers. If Bucky is taking her to the beach, she’s going to make it worth his while when they get there.

Ready to meet him, she heads back over to number 26 to ask about a helmet, and to see if Jane has any leathers she can borrow. It’s likely she’s at least got a jacket she can wear. Darcy lets herself in by the back door, expecting to find the inhabitants eating breakfast in the kitchen. Instead, the house is still and quiet. On the counter, a note rests, clearly waiting to be read.

We’ve eloped. Sorry.
Chapter 14

Jane feels a twisting sort of guilt hot and low in the base of her stomach, curling around her innards, as she looks back over her shoulder at Ramsay Street, whilst Thor’s driving them out of it. She has on a simple dress, a flattering cut, and she knows that strictly speaking he oughtn’t to see her in it if they’re about to get married but she’s finding it hard to care too much about tradition.

Frigga’s kind of knocked all that right out of her the last couple of days.

Still.

For all she knows she couldn’t take a single minute more of the pressure about the wedding (and she feels like that should come with a capital ‘W’, just to really ram it home), she’s feeling that insistent stab of anxiety in the pit of her stomach that their friends won’t be around to see them.

------

“Bucky!” Darcy’s hammering as hard as she can on the front door of Number 30, and practically falls through it when the man himself throws it open. Laughing, he catches her and drags her against his bare chest, still not changed from the night before.

“Couldn’t wait to see you, either,” He murmurs with a smile he can’t help but feel spread across his face when he sees the brunette, pressing his lips to first her forehead, then her cheek and finally chasing after her lips. Darcy gives into him - how could she not - but pulls away quickly. Bucky fixes her with a surprised look.

“Jane,” Darcy chokes out, almost unable to speak.

He’s still none the wiser.

Darcy struggles to catch her breath, partly from the mad dash she’s made across the street but mostly from the shock of finding Jane’s note. Bucky rubs her back, and tries to guide her into the house but she resists, stepping back over the threshold and shaking her head.

“Bike.” She says firmly, poking her index finger into his chest.

“Is this like a scavenger hunt or something?” He says slowly, stepping through the doorway to follow the little brunette. She juggles what she’s holding, which he realises looking at her properly is a helmet and a backpack, then thrusts something at him - inspiration suddenly striking her - and he fumbles at the paper before bringing it to his face and reading quickly.

“Oh,” Bucky says, lowering the note and blinking at the girl in front of him. She nods wildly, bent double now and breathing in hard. He looks from her to his bike - now sat on the driveway once more in the early morning light - and back again. “You even know where they’ve gone?”

“Got a good idea.” Darcy manages, finding it a little easier to breathe now she’s apparently got Bucky onboard with it as well.

“Right.” He says firmly. “Best hop on, then.”

------

“What’s that noise?” Barton says sleepily, running a hand through his already dishevelled hair as
he wanders into the kitchen. His other hand is scratching at his stomach under his hitched purple t-shirt, though it’s edging lower and lower to the waistband of his pyjama trousers.

Natasha, who is sitting primly at the counter, looks like she just stepped out of the pages of Vogue, and Sam thinks - for what isn’t the first and certainly won’t be the last time - that if he didn’t know them as well as he does, he’d never be able to picture the pair together.

“Sounds like Barnes’ bike to me.” Sam shrugs without really caring, heaping sugar into his mug. Without Steve around to give him pointed looks and not-so-subtle coughs, he’s going to have as much of it as he damn well likes.

After last night, he needs the energy boost, he thinks with an inward grin.

“Where did he get to last night, anyway?” Nat says idly, flipping through the pages of a magazine Steve has left on the kitchen counter. It is, to the surprise of absolutely no one, a fitness magazine.

Clint collapses into the stool next to her, and steals Sam’s coffee right out from under him as he’s turning to get milk out of the fridge. He slurps around half of it with a deeply satisfied groan, and then shoves it back towards Sam who wonders how hard it would be to kill a man with a teaspoon. He pushes the mug back towards the other man who makes a who-me? gesture that doesn’t do anything to endear him to Sam.

Sam slams another mug onto the counter and begins the process again, as Barton mumbles to his girlfriend, lips wrapped around Sam’s coffee. “Dunno. His bedroom door was open, he’s not been home.”

Despite his annoyance, Sam grins widely.

Nat, who rarely misses a trick, fixes him with narrowed eyes. “Spill, Wilson.”

“Someone, who shall remain nameless, may have spent the night in Frigga’s garage, with another person who shall also remain nameless.” He says to the sugar bowl, and concentrates on heaping as much of it onto a teaspoon as possible before transferring it to his mug.

“Huh?” Says Clint, confused.

“You locked Bucky and Darcy in Frigga’s garage?”

Nat sounds mildly impressed, and Sam chooses to focus on that rather than how she instantly leapt to the correct conclusion. She’s inherently wasted on working in the coffee shop, and he’s often thought she could make a decent career for herself in the army, even if it would be the kind of career she’d never be able to tell anyone else about.

“Huh?” Clint repeats plaintively, and Nat rubs his shoulder.

-------

Bucky looks at the little brunette in front of him critically.

She’s just about drowning in his bike jacket, but it’ll have to do. Darcy grins up at him, a lopsided little smile that tugs at something in the middle of his chest. He’s never really considered himself an overly possessive sort of lover - though he knows that Steve might beg to differ on that score, dragging up one or two stories from his youth he’d rather went unmentioned - but there’s certainly something he likes about seeing his girl wrapped in his jacket, firmly on the back of his bike.
“Helmet on.” He says to her firmly, shrugging on a t-shirt he’s found stuffed in one of the panniers. He’s long since forgotten he’s put it there and, looking at it, it needs a damn good wash and probably originally belonged to Steve. He avoids sniffing too deeply, and hopes Darcy does, too.

Bucky checks that Darcy’s helmet is secured properly, gives her a soft tap on the crown of it as he’s unable to kiss her whilst she’s wearing it, and swings his leg carefully over the bike. Her hands immediately wrap around his waist and he closes his eyes briefly at the touch before he settles deeper into the leather seat.

Unable to speak to her properly with her sat behind him and the helmet on, he thrusts an arm back behind him and around her, encouraging her to sit as close to him as possible. Satisfied once she’s pressed up firmly against his back - and reminding himself that he’s not just a closet pervert and it really does matter that she’s holding on tight - he squeezes her leg gently and kicks down to start the engine.

It roars throatily into life, and Darcy clutches around him in surprise as the vibrations shudder through the bike. He laughs, happy to have her with him and a bike ride ahead of them. Bucky spins the bike on the driveway and guides it into the road, just as Susan sticks her head out of the front door of Number 28.

Her jaw drops open as she spots the familiar figure wedged up behind Bucky, but her exclamation is lost in the rumble of the engine as they ride out of the close.

-------

“Was that-?” Steve tilts his head in confusion and points slightly as a motorbike roars past him, looking an awful lot like Bucky’s bike, with a figure that unsurprisingly looks like Bucky but also with another wrapped closely around him that looks for all the world like Darcy, and that can’t be possible.

Sharon, jogging on the spot at his side, raises a hand to shade her eyes as she obediently follows the line of his finger. She shrugs, not really knowing his friends well enough to comment.

He’s asked her out for an early morning run, and Sharon eagerly accepted, appearing first thing at the door in her running gear. Steve’s trying not to look too closely at her legs in the skin-tight lycra leggings she has on, because he knows it’s not polite to ogle even if they are kind of dating now, but it’s a close run thing.

“You ready?” She asks, and he blinks at her in confusion. Sharon laughs and jerks her thumb over her shoulder, indicating that she’s ready to continue on. Steve smiles and nods.

-------

“Am I dead?” Tony asks blearily from where he’s awoken on the couch.

“No, but your liver thinks you should be.” Wanda answers, hands on hips as she looks down at him with folded arms.

“He’s not drunk.” Rhodey calls from the kitchen, and Wanda spins on her heel to find her dad’s best friend making pancakes. She throws an unimpressed look over her shoulder at her father, who’s struggling his way into a sitting position, and wanders over to the kitchen counter.

“If he’s not drunk, why’s he slept on the sofa and not in his bed?” She asks pointedly, leaning over the counter and stealing strawberries from the bowl Rhodey’s set out.
“He was having a heart to heart about you-know-who.” The man answers, pouring pancake batter into the frying pan and tilting it so the mixture runs across it and covers the whole pan.

“He still has a perfectly functioning pair of ears.” Tony grumbled, dropping himself into the stool next to Wanda. “And he’s smart enough to break your devious code.” He adds, pointing at Rhodey, who rolls his eyes.

“It’s not a code, Tony,” He says, not looking at the other man and settling the frying pan carefully over the hob.

“Did something happen?” Wanda asks, around a strawberry.

“No.” Her father says instantly, at the same time Rhodey says “He found an old necklace.”

Tony sneaks a strawberry out of the bowl but instead of eating it, he aims it squarely at his friend’s forehead. It misses by a clear five inches, and Rhodey shakes his head at him witheringly and retrieves it from the floor before throwing it in the bin.

“How’d you grow up so well-adjusted with him as a role model?” The other man asks Wanda, ignoring Tony and flipping the pancake with expert ease. She laughs.

“Mainly by finding other role models.”

-------

Thor, considering he’s managed to squirrel his way out of every wedding planning conversation that Frigga ambushed Jane with, has done surprisingly well. They’re at the beach, and there’s a little wooden gazebo he’s gotten covered in fairy lights and pastel-coloured bunting. It’s only cheap and quick, but it looks pretty and - more than anything else - he did it himself, for her.

It’s enough to send another hot little strike of regret through Jane’s stomach that her friends, or at least Darcy - who was excited to be a bridesmaid, albeit perhaps not one in avocado-green - won’t be there to see them get hitched.

She sighs a little, inwardly, but Thor notices.

“Love?” He asks, looking down at her with undisguised fondness, and rubbing his large hand across the bare skin of her back that the dress exposes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She lies, and he frowns, head tilted to one side, waiting for her to revise that statement. There’s a reason they’ve been together so long, and there’s a reason they’re getting married - they know each other far too well. Jane sighs again.

“It is what I want, and your mother was stressing me out far too much,” She begins, and Thor smiles. “I’m just a bit sad that Darcy won’t be around, that’s all.” The girl finishes up with a shrug, and Thor presses his lips to her forehead tenderly before he attempts anything else.

-------

Darcy squeezes Bucky’s thigh, to let him know she needs him to turn left, and he complies. The bike tilts gently and she hugs him tighter, tucking her head into the back of his shoulder as they turn. She’s not quite sure yet whether she likes the bike as much as he does, but then again she has a ton of adrenaline flooding her veins which is mostly to do with worrying about catching Jane and Thor in time, but also in part to being wedged up behind Bucky.
She’s seen his body many times now, whether it be in the pool or because he’s lost his shirt somewhere again, but feeling his muscles tense and relax as he guides the machine underneath them where he wants it go, easily maneuvering it through the lazy lines of early morning traffic, is something else entirely.

Bucky takes one hand off the bike for a moment to cover her own, clasped around his waist, and Darcy wants to kiss his shoulder. The helmet, bulky and big, prevents her from that, so instead she squeezes her arms around him briefly before he moves his hand back.

They turn off the main drag and follow the coastal road down towards the beach.

Darcy’s in no way sure that she’s made the right decision, that this is where Jane would come, but she’s hopeful against all odds. She tries to ignore the twisting feeling in her gut that sneaks around her insides and whispers cruelly that maybe, just maybe, Jane doesn’t want her there and that’s why they’ve eloped.

She blinks the feeling away, and hopes it’s just her overactive anxiety talking nonsense.

------

Wanda finds herself back in the gym.

Stuffed into Lycra she's well aware does little for her, she's feeling even more uncomfortable than she did on her induction. Brad, the trainer who walked her through everything - in a manner of speaking - gives her a smile at the front desk that lets her know he's already forgotten her from yesterday.

She's not overly bothered by that, much preferring to get on with this ritual humiliation under her own steam. Setting her jaw in determination, she approaches the running machine.

“Oh hey! Hey, Wanda!”

She closes her eyes and wonders what it is she's done in a past life to deserve running into Steve again. When she opens them, he's beaming down at her like an overgrown puppy, almost unbearably adorable, even with sweat lining his forehead.

“You came back.” He says, smiling.

“I, uh, I did.” She nods, one hand on the bar of the treadmill.

“So what are your aims?” Steve asks, also resting a hand on the machine. Don't you have a job to do? She thinks wildly, wholly unprepared to be stuffed into tight clothing and apparently about to sweat her ass off in front of Steve Rogers.

“Aims?” Wanda repeats slowly.

“Yeah,” He says cheerfully. “Like strength, stamina… Weight loss?”

Wanda wants the ground to open up right there and swallow her. Instead, she swallows hard and nods at him. “Yeah,” she says, shyly and looking at her feet. “Weight loss, I guess.”

“Okay.” Steve smiles, and nudges her foot with his so that she looks up at him again. “I'm gonna help you, and make you feel good about doing it.”

Wanda feels a significant wave of doubt about that, but he looks so determined that she lets him
grab her hand and lead her instead to the weight rack.

“Right,” Steve says with authority, firmly in the arena he knows best. “Best thing for weight loss is to work the biggest muscle areas first. Running is great, but really all you're gonna do is get good at running.”

Wanda’s not entirely certain she has any muscle area, let alone big ones, but obediently follows his lead.

-------

“Janey?”

Jane thinks she's hallucinating, because it sounds an awful lot like Darcy is calling her. She sits up from where she's been waiting in Thor’s car, he off scouting for people who could witness their ceremony, the one thing he's not been able to sort before the day.

“Jane!”

It's louder now, closer, and Jane blinks before hanging half out of the window of the car and peering back up the beach. She can see a figure - two figures, actually, and a motorbike - and one figure is waving manically at her.

She pushes the door open and tumbles out of it, dress tangling around her legs in her haste. As she's trying to set herself straight and close the door without shutting half the dress in it, hair all over her face, she's hit by another body that wraps itself around her in a fierce hug.

“D-Darcy?” Jane asks, because there's only one person she knows who hugs like that, and yet she still can't quite bring herself to believe that it really is the little brunette.

She's answered by a sniffling sort of noise before the other girl pulls back and smiles at her, if a little bit watery.

“How are you here?” Jane asks, overjoyed by confused. She's hit by a torrent of words immediately.

“Sam locked us in your garage so I couldn't come over, well I was over but I guess more underneath... Anyway I left my phone on my bed because I brought two bottles of wine and, oh god, that's still in your garage somewhere but anyway - we were gonna come to the beach but I needed a helmet and I figured you'd probably have one so I popped over to see you and explain about last night but then I found your note—”

Jane is sort of following but mainly she's impressed that Darcy is able to talk for so long without apparently taking a breath.

“- And I thought, well, I probably know where you'd gone if that was what you were gonna do, so we came down here as quick as possible to try and catch you, and you're not mad, are you?”

Darcy’s eyes are wild and her hands grip at Jane’s shoulders, worried that she's done the wrong thing. Jane shakes her head and laughs.

“Don't be silly, I want you here more than anything. I just - how did you get here? Who's we?”

Darcy blushing, hard.
“I, um, well. So Sam locked us in and we were there all night and had to sleep together - I mean, not like that - but so-”

Jane wrinkles her forehead in confusion, still none the wiser until a shadow falls across her face and a hand is grasping Darcy’s waist. She squints up against the sun, shading her eyes against it with one hand and finds Bucky Barnes looking down at her.

“I brought her.”

------

“So you gonna call her, or what?” Rhodey fixes Tony with a look across the kitchen, and the other man rolls his eyes and plays the innocent as he answers.

“Call who?” He says idly, stacking the last of the dishes into the dishwasher.

“You know damn well who.” Rhodey says, arms crossed over his chest. “Pepper.”

“She doesn’t want to hear from me.” Tony says quietly, back turned still and pretending as though the plates might need a reorganisation before the door can be shut. He tenses as he feels a hand clap onto his shoulder from behind.

“You can’t know that if you don’t call her.” The other man says reasonably.

“And if I’m right?” Tony says, spinning on his heel and nearly hitting Rhodey’s chest with his face as he did so, glaring up at his friend. “What then? I’m no better off, am I?”

“At least you’d know for sure.” Rhodey answers, putting a hand out to steady Tony. “But that’s not the Pepper I knew. You were a dick of the highest degree, and that’s why she left, but it doesn’t mean she doesn’t care.”

Tony chews that over for a moment before responding.

“You think?”

------

“Since you're here…” Thor trails off, hands shoved into his pockets and Bucky looks up at him from where his arse is resting against his bike, mind half on what the man might be about to say to him, but also lingering on how the hell a man so big could find a suit to fit all of him in.

“I thought maybe you and Darcy could be the witnesses?”

Bucky blinks. Darcy will be over the moon, and he knows she's got a change of clothes in her backpack that'll probably do for the ceremony but he's dressed in jeans he's been wearing for the best part of a week and a shirt that smells like something might have died on it. The only other thing he has with him is his boardies, and whilst Bucky's never been a major fixture at weddings, he knows that he ought to look like Thor right now, suited and booted.

“Uh,” He begins, one hand sneaking up behind his head to rub at the back of his neck, and he thinks he probably could have done with washing his hair as well, having spent the night bedded down in old cushions in Frigga’s garage.

Thor laughs, and claps a meaty hand to Bucky's shoulder. “You're fine as you are.” He says, guessing what was stopping Bucky from answering. “Jane is more than happy that you're here, not
about what you look like.”

Well, Bucky thinks. Whilst Jane is happy that Darcy is here for her big day, he's not so certain that the scruffy neighbour from across the way who can't keep a shirt on and whose head she's only recently stitched back together again is quite as welcome.

Just as he's thinking that, the girl in question appears at Thor’s side. She has a simple white dress on, some long flowing thing that's practically backless and suits her lithe frame. Her hair, twisted slightly into loose waves, is sun-kissed and tumbling over her shoulders in the sea breeze. She looks, he thinks, happy.

“Did you ask him yet?” She says, looking at Bucky but nudging Thor with an elbow into his side. Her husband to be grins, and Jane then addresses Bucky. “You'll do it, yes? Be a witness with Darcy?”

“Oh…” He trailed off again, and she puts her hands on her hips. For an instant he's reminded painfully of the way she'd approached him in her scrubs, and decides that Thor is a far braver man than he is.

“You look fine.” She says, soothingly, and he wonders how much worse he looks than he thinks he does for everyone to keep reassuring him about it. Then she places a hand on his arm and squeezes, smiling.

“We doing this thing?” Darcy appears at his side, voice bright and expectant, and Bucky turns slightly to look at her. She's changed, he guesses quickly in the back of Thor’s UTE, and she's taking his breath away.

He presumes she's not really quite dressed for a wedding either, her sundress riding high on her thighs and cut low at the back, showing off the criss-crossed straps of her halter neck bikini where it dips, but he's finding it hard to find any wrong with the picture in front of him.

Jane nods again, and turns back to the little gazebo where the justice of the peace is waiting for them. Darcy slips an arm through Bucky's, and holds on tight to him. For a moment he can't manage anything but staring at her, until the tug on his arm jerks him out of it and he follows Thor and Jane.

-------

Wanda is sweaty, aching and beyond knackered.

This would be a sorry state of affairs at any point, but right now Steve Rogers is smiling down at her as she's bent double in front of him trying to catch her breath and remain as ladylike as possible whilst doing it.

She's aware she's failing.

“You've done so well today, Wanda,” He says encouraging, one large hand rubbing over her back and she jerks upwards in alarm at his touch. “I'm really impressed.”

She digests that as she massages the stitch that feels like it's threatening to open her up, hip to breast, the way it's burning at her, and concludes that Steve is a little too kind to other people. Wanda refocuses on him, swallowing away the acidic taste that’s starting to accumulate at the back of her throat, and realises he’s still talking.

“...probably the best first day I’ve ever seen someone do.” He’s beaming down at her, with a light
sheen of sweat decorating his face that’s somehow making him look more attractive than he usually
does. Wanda straightens up and wipes the back of her hand across her forehead, and knows that the
sweat that’s currently drenching her is not doing the same thing.

“You wanna hit the showers and then we could grab a drink in the cafe?” Steve asks, tilting his
head slightly as he looks at her.

“I, uh,” Wanda stutters a little whilst she’s looking up, blinking at him in confusion. Is Steve
Rogers asking her on a date? What happened to the blonde girl? Sheila? Sharon, definitely Sharon.

“We can go over what you’re gonna do next time.” Steve adds, nodding happily.

Wanda stifles an internal groan. Of course he wants to talk about her personal development plan.
Why else would he ask?

-------

Darcy’s phone rings. Insistently. She grimaces and fumbles at the pocket of her sundress, fingers
all thumbs as she tries to extract it without pulling the hem up too far and as quickly as she can
without disturbing any more of the ceremony.

Glancing at the screen, she lets out a groan that cannot be covered up. Bucky looks at her askance,
his hand moving to the small of her back before hooking its way around her hip and tugging her
into his side possessively.

“What’s wrong, Darce?” He murmurs, tucking her into his chest and with lips pressed against her
ear so that his breath is warm against her hair. Darcy winces as the phone starts to vibrate again in
her hand, though at least now she’s managed to turn the ringer off. She opens her palm a little and
offers it up to him.

Caller: Mrs K

Bucky lets out a groan of his own, and this time both Thor and Jane look around.

-------

“Jane and Thor did what? You’re where? With WHO?”

Helen throws Toadie a loaded look as the shrill voice of Susan Kennedy filters through their
kitchen window. He can do nothing but shrug in response at his wife, who rolls her eyes and tugs
the window shut. It doesn’t do an awful lot, because Susan is pretty loud when she’s riled, and this
one sure sounds like a doozy, but at least it takes the edge off.

-------

“Your neighbours are a little…” Fury trails off as he lets the net curtain fall back into place over
Frigga’s bedroom window.

“Obnoxious?” Frigga suggests from the bed, sipping at the green tea he had so thoughtfully made
for her, and hazard ing a guess as to whom he might be referring. The man turns back to her, still
wrapped in his robe and smiling down at her.

“I was going to say loud, but you know them better.”

“You’ll get to know them well enough. Are you coming back to bed now?”
“Remember Mary Poppins?”

Nat quirks her head at her boyfriend and remembers why she gave up trying to follow his train of thought a few years ago. He’s standing with his back to her, staring at the wall. Nat leans her head around him and tries to work out what it is he’s looking at.

Clint turns back to her. “You know, like when they have to hold all the stuff on the walls because the cannon’s going off.”

She’s still none the wiser, until she hears a shriek of indignation from next door.

“Ah.”

“I cannot believe that you put yourself in danger on the back of that monstrosity.”

Susan fumes down the phone, feeling frustrated because there’s nothing she can do except vent to thin air and pace the living room. Again. Darcy makes a hissing noise down the phone as if to quieten her, and it only winds her up more.

“Do you have any idea how many people die every single day on motorbi-”

“Mrs Kennedy?”

The words die in her mouth as Barnes’ voice, apparently taking over from Darcy, filters through the phone to her ears. She sits down with a thump on the sofa and can’t make her jaw work properly to answer him.

“Mrs Kennedy? I know you’re not very happy right now, and I promise that you can shout at me all you like when we get back, but right now Jane and Thor are trying to tie the knot and you’re interrupting the proceedings.”

There’s a pause before he continues, and when he does his voice is softer.

“I’d never let anything happen to Darcy. I’ll bring her back safe.”

There’s another pause and then a click as he hangs up, and Susan is left staring at the phone in her hands and wondering what on earth she’s going to do.

Steve’s just paying for drinks in the cafe, Wanda waiting across the room at a table, when his mobile rings. He fumbles for it as it vibrates in his pocket, swearing under his breath as he finally manages to tug it loose without dropping his change or the bottles and it stops ringing.

He’s dropping himself into his seat and pushing a bottle across to Wanda, who opens it gratefully with a whispered thank you, when he looks at the screen properly. It’s a missed call from Darcy, and that sets off a minor alarm bell.

Steve’s tapping his foot impatiently when the phone finally connects - and nearly falls out of his seat when it’s Bucky that answers.

“What’re you-” He stutters out, before Bucky starts talking over him. Steve falls quiet, listening,
and Wanda watches from across the table as the grin on Steve’s face grows and grows the longer
the phone call continues.

Finally, he hangs up, having done little more than smile and nod down the phone. Wanda raises an
eyebrow.

“We need to get back to Ramsay Street,” Steve says, putting a hand across the table and squeezing
one of Wanda’s. Her heart squeezes inside her chest in sympathy, and she shakes the feeling away
abruptly with a short sharp shock memory of Sharon, Steve’s girlfriend.

“Why?” She asks, looking back at him.

“Thor and Jane got married.” Wanda’s jaw drops open. “We gotta get back and get everyone
mobilised to welcome the newlyweds home.”

---------

Bucky follows Thor’s car back to Ramsay Street.

Regretfully, he’s insisted that Darcy ride back in the car. Much as he likes the feel of her wrapped
around him, he’s aware that if he can claw any brownie points out of Susan Kennedy at all, it won’t
be roaring back home with her foster daughter on the back of his bike.

It also means that she can keep on her sundress, and there’s a selfish little perk at least.

Rounding the corner he can see that Steve’s done him proud, rounding up as many of the
neighbours and friends as possible, so that the happy couple aren’t missing out too much on the
party atmosphere that a wedding should bring. He doesn’t know too much about getting married
and he won’t claim to be an expert on friends either for that matter, but he does at least have a
vague idea of what other people might want.

Darcy’s cousin waves with a spatula in one hand and his other on his wife’s hip as he mans the
barbeque. Steve grins from the doorway of Number 30 where they’re dragging out Clint’s table
football for some reason, and Natasha is rolling her eyes as they do it. Even Sam manages a wink
as Bucky pulls up on their driveway, his hands busy with the pretty barmaid from the Watering
Hole.

Bucky makes the I’m-watching-you gesture at Wilson as he props the kickstand out and swings his
leg over the bike. He makes a mental note to research revenge techniques as he looks over at the
other man, and then promptly has the breath knocked out of him by Darcy.

“Hey,” He says, laughing, as she winds her arms around his middle and he responds in kind.
Dropping his head to her hair, breathing deeply the floral scent of it and then pressing his lips
gently to her forehead, Bucky lets his eyes close when she hugs him tighter.

“If you’re quite finished.”

Bucky lifts his head from Darcy’s with a mostly inaudible groan to find Susan Kennedy glaring at
him.

“I believe now is the point I shout at you for endangering Darcy?”

The girl in question lets her grip loosen from his waist, and shoots him a worried look. Bucky sighs
and holds his hands up in surrender.
Jane, whose elated feeling dies a little in her chest when she sees Frigga - her mother-in-law, she reminds herself - bearing down on her from across the street. Thor grasps her hand and squeezes, lending her his strength and gives her a little smile that she can just see out of the corner of her eye.

Jane braces herself.

“Frigga, I-”

“Oh, my darling, sweet girl.”

Whatever it was that Jane was about to say - and, in honesty, even she didn’t really know where she was going to go with it - is lost as Frigga sweeps her into a bear hug and swings her around. When the older woman sets Jane back down on her feet, there are tears pricking in the corners of her eyes and she brushes back wisps of curly hair as she looks down at her new daughter-in-law.

“You’re… You’re not mad?” Jane asks tentatively.

“Oh, darling,” Frigga bats at her softly before cupping her face in both hands and smiling down at her. “It’s your day. You do what you want, my lovely. Of course it would have been nice to watch you get married, but we are all here now to celebrate, aren't we?”

Jane sags a little, both in relief - because as frustrating as Frigga has been over the wedding, she has a good heart and Jane is very fond of her - and also because the adrenaline that’s kept her going so far is starting to run out.

“Anyway, my dear.” Frigga sparkles in a way only she can, all jewels in the rings on her fingers and glistening at her neck. “We will still all have the excitement of a wedding soon.”

Jane, confused, turns to Thor at her side who's a lot quicker on the uptake that his new wife. After all, he's had practice at this one. He groans.

“Thor?” Jane murmurs under her breath, as Sam's dad comes up behind Frigga, his hands around her waist and pressing a tender kiss to the side of her neck.

“Nicholas and I are getting married!” Frigga exclaims loudly, her hands coming together in excitement. Thor swears and, from across the street, Sam's head pops up.

“You have got to be kidding me.”
Chapter 15

As soon as the words are out of Sam’s mouth, Toadie’s ghettoblaster bursts into life, plugged in while they prep the inevitable street party.

*Why does it always rain on me…is it because I lied when I was seventeen?*

Sam shakes his head, turns his back on the assembled group, and walks away.

He needs a drink.

---

Thor watches Sam leave with a little envy. His friend isn’t stopped by anyone, even though Sam’s father scowls at his retreating figure. Thor, on the other hand, has to stay and deal with the fallout, no matter how he feels about the announcement.

His mother is beatific, the blissed-out smile on her face one he hasn’t seen for a long time, and he’s thankful for it’s return. He wants her to be happy, he really does. And yet…

She’s only known Fury for a few weeks.

“Congratulations,” he says, pasting a grin onto his face, though he pulls Jane closer into his side. Truth be told, he’s a little annoyed about his thunder being stolen like this, too. His mother beams back at him, oblivious to his internal disquiet, but the level stare Fury fixes him with makes it clear that Frigga’s new man knows exactly what Thor is thinking.

The backing track switches abruptly, Toadie finally finding the right tape and pressing play on *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, and Thor glances down at the woman in his arms. His worries melt away, even though Jane’s forehead remains creased as she stares at Frigga with a gaping mouth, because nothing, *nothing*, is going to ruin this day for him. He’s married to the love of his life, and he’s going to enjoy every second of it.

He regrets the thought when he looks up and finds Tony storming out of his house towards them.

“You cannot be serious!” Tony yells. Rhodey only hears him, since it’s taken him a moment to catch up. One second they were in the living room, distracted from Tony’s favourite film by the commotion outside, and the next his friend is out of the door.

“I assure you, Tony, I am,” Frigga replies, and Rhodey stifles a groan. Toadie is out here as a witness, along with half the street. Tony might be about to earn himself that restraining order.

“My father is barely cold in the ground, and not only have you moved somebody in, but you’re marrying him? You really are a black widow.” He turns his attention to Fury. “I warned you, but you didn’t listen. It’s nobody’s fault but your own when she gets one of her boys to knock you off.”

“Tony, that is *enough.*” Frigga has gone pale, the commanding tone something Rhodey has never heard from her before. He thinks Tony might actually be aiming for a thumping, and Frigga seems happy to deliver.

Tony ignores her, still talking to Fury. “You must have some money, huh? Otherwise, what’s she after—or are you man enough to keep up with her in the bedroom?”
Fury takes a step forward, nostrils flaring, and Rhodey recognises the warning signs. The man’s prepared to protect his lady with his fists, and he’s a hell of a lot bigger than Tony is.

“Tony, maybe this isn’t the time—” he tries, taking hold of his friend’s shoulder gently, but he’s shrugged off. From the corner of his eye, Rhodey sees a horror struck Wanda loitering on the edge of the crowd.

“What are you going to do?” Tony baits Fury, then turns his attention to Thor. “Maybe the mummy’s boy doesn’t want to hear about how she’ll lift her skirts for anyone who asks.”

Thor clenches his fists, but doesn’t move. He doesn’t have much of a temper, so isn’t easily baited, and Rhodey’s thankful for that: one swing from the bloke could do Tony some real damage. It’s dawning on Rhodey that his friend might have been drinking, even though Rhodey swears he’s had nothing but coffee all day, because this is more than anger spilling out of him.

When the smack hits him, it comes from an unexpected source, but it still leaves Tony reeling. Jane stands staring up at him, face contorted with fury, breathing hard.

“You are ruining my wedding day,” she growls, “and that is my family you’re insulting!”

Rhodey has just enough time to witness Thor’s proud smile at her words, before he hauls Tony away towards the car.

“I’m not done!” Tony yells.

“You are,” Rhodey replies, opening the door and shoving his friend into the passenger seat. “You really are.”

Bucky’s happy for the distractions provided by Frigga and Tony, even if it’s drama he’d rather stay out of. In the chaos, Mrs K doesn’t notice him slip away with Darcy into an empty number 30. She’s still wearing his jacket, even though she changed out of the little dress for the ride home, and the possessive little creature that’s taken residence in his chest is very happy at the sight of her in his leather. He’s got her pressed up against a wall, and taking it slow seems like a much harder prospect than it did last night.

Steve’s ugly shirt has been removed too, so her hands are on his bare skin. She seems unsure where to touch him, first gripping his shoulders, then sliding her hands down his chest, finally coming to rest around his waist, palms firm against his abs. He’s happy wherever her hands are. For his part, he keeps his flat against the wall, because he’s not sure where her boundaries lie yet. They need to have that conversation, only talking is the last thing on his mind.

There’s the sound of someone clearing their throat behind them, and to his chagrin the annoyed look he throws isn’t for the benefit of one of his housemates. Instead, it’s Mrs K stood there.

When your friend owns Lassiter’s, getting a room is no issue, even when it’s heavily booked. Rhodey’s got Tony stashed in a budget suite, which he is bitching about at length, when he’s run out of bile for Frigga. It’s been a long loop of complaints and anger, some of it taken out on a defenceless chair.

“I don’t even know why you brought me here!” he protests for the umpteenth time.

“Because you were about to get your arse kicked, and I don’t think you could have counted on Jane to fix your wounds afterwards.”
“Then I’ll sue them! All of them, anyone who dares lay a finger on me!”

“And Frigga will countersue! She’ll win, and you’ll be forced out of your house, stuck in places like this. Is that what you want?”

Tony mumbles a sullen no, and continues pacing.

Rhodey glances at his phone. There’s a message chain with Wanda, who’s mortified at the way her father acted in front of the entire street. Again. It’s another relationship that Tony is destroying and will lose before he’s had chance to realise what he’s doing.

This morning, Tony had been all ready to get in touch with Pepper and ask her to give him another chance. Now, his focus is squarely back on Frigga. He won’t be calling Pepper, and honestly, Rhodey thinks it’s for the best. She won’t come back when he’s like this. She definitely wouldn’t stick around.

“I tell you what I’m going to do,” Tony says. “I’m going to hire a private investigator to find Loki. We find that little mongrel, and we prove what he did, then I get back everything she took from me.”

Rhodey’s not sure if Tony really understands that there’s nothing he can to do to bring his father back.

“So am I to take it that you two are a thing now?”

All Darcy wants to do is keep kissing Bucky, but the universe isn’t so kind. Susan is furious, nostrils wide and eyes narrow, earrings swinging as she asks her quiet, deadly question.

“Yes,” Darcy replies. “I’d say that’s a pretty obvious assumption to make.”

Cheek isn’t going to help calm Susan down, but Darcy’s beyond caring. She’s not a little girl: it was her choice to get on the motorbike, and it’s her choice to be with Bucky. For his part, he looks away from Susan, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling, and all it does is expose the line of his jaw to Darcy. She gets the urge to lick it, and has to dig her fingernails into the palm of her hand to restrain herself.

She said she wanted slow, but even she’s not sure exactly how slow she meant.

To her disappointment, Bucky pushes himself away, apparently sensing that staying pressed up against her wasn’t going to win him any points with Susan.

“Oh, is this how it’s going to be?” Susan asks, when she’s over her shock at Darcy’s response.

“This is how it’s going to be,” Darcy responds, seeking out Bucky’s hand to hold. From the corner of her eyes, she can see him staring at their interlocked fingers with a curious expression, but she doesn’t have time to examine that now. “I’m with Bucky.”

“Fine. But this isn’t over.”

Susan leaves through the open door, and Darcy sags against the wall. She knows she’s in for a world of arguments at home.

“That kind of killed the mood,” she moans, and Bucky smirks at her.

“I’m sure we could recover it,” he says, raising their clasped hands to his mouth and kissing the
back of hers. Her legs go a little bit liquid at the gesture, and she’s glad for the support of the wall at her back.

“What about the party?” she replies. “People will want to use the pool.”

“Are you going to put that dress back on?” he asks, face lighting up as he steps close to her again.

“You like the dress?” she asks as his mouth drifts to her exposed collarbone, brushing her hair away gently so he can nuzzle in.

“I do. I think you look beautiful in it,” he breathes against her skin.

It’s like she’s got fireworks going off inside her at the compliment, and she whimpers as his lips keep moving up her neck. She’s beaming, biting her lip trying to contain it, even though it doesn’t matter since he can’t see her face. “Then I’m putting the dress back on.”

He hums in contentment, then adds, “But keep the jacket on too. I like you in this.”

She can tell.

The next person through the open door to interrupt their pash is Clint. “Change of plans,” he says, without even waiting for them to break their liplock. “No street party. We’re doing a bucks’ night instead. Meeting out front in twenty.”

“What about me?” Darcy asks, as Bucky wraps his arms around her waist.

“Dunno. I reckon the girls are doing something too?” Clint replies with a shrug, before wandering back out.

Bucky drops his chin to rest on top of her head. “We could hide here,” he suggests. “Make the most of the empty house while everyone’s out.”

She lets him know what she thinks of that idea by snuggling into the crook of his neck, but then lets out an unhappy whine. “Can’t. Jane’s my best friend. I should go celebrate with her.”

She doesn’t exactly rush to leave though.

“What, mate, I really don’t see the point of this,” Thor says, though he still takes the tinny Toadie is holding out to him. “I’m not a buck anymore, so a bucks’ night seems redundant now. I’ve got a honeymoon to sort out!”

The men are gathered at the head of Ramsay Street, waiting for the few stragglers in their group. The late notice, and the fact that Toadie is the only other married man in the group, means there’s a distinct lack of the usual bucks’ night paraphernalia. There’s not even a stash of stuff in anyone’s garages.

The assembled men cheer when Bucky emerges from number 30, still shirtless and with the swollen mouth and mussed hair of a recently ravished man. There are wolf whistles, and Bucky gives them all the one-fingered salute in response. Beyond that, he looks pretty unruffled.

Steve’s not had much chance to talk to Bucky, but it looks like he and Darcy are an item now. He’s pleased for both of his friends—he reckons they’ll be good for each other, and good to each other. There’s an obvious attraction between the pair which has won out over whatever differences they had.
“Nothing is getting you out of this,” Toadie says to Thor. “Not after what you did at mine. It took two months for my eyebrows to grow back!”

Thor laughs heartily, before his expression turns wistful. “I just wanna spend the night with my wife.” He gets a goofy smile on his face when he realises what he just said, and repeats it. “My wife. Jane’s my wife!”

Clint makes retching noises until Bucky punches him in the arm. “Grow up.”

“It’ll be a quiet one,” Toadie promises Thor. “Plenty of time for you to get back and get down with your new missus.”

“We’re not coming back,” Thor says. “I’ve booked us the honeymoon suite at Lassiter’s, so whatever happens, make sure you drop me off there, okay?”

There’s another round of wolf whistles mixed in with the promises to get him to Lassiter’s.

“Where’s Wilson?” Bucky asks.

“Drowning his sorrows in the Watering Hole,” Clint replies.

“Right, that’ll be our first stop then,” says Thor. “No way he’s getting out of this, I’m in the same boat as him.”

They all wince at the reminder of Frigga’s afternoon revelation, but follow Thor’s lead to the pub.

Darcy takes a deep breath before she lets herself into number 28. She knows Susan is in, and probably waiting for her, but Darcy doesn’t plan to stick around long. She’s just getting changed before all the girls gather at number 30’s pool, generously loaned out to them for the evening since the blokes will all be out.

Sure enough, Susan is standing behind the kitchen counter frantically chopping up carrot with a stormy look on her face. Darcy pastes a breezy smile on her face and blasts past to the hallway.

“Are you coming to Jane’s party?” she calls over her shoulder, leaving her door open when she enters her room, knowing Susan will follow if she wants to talk. Susan doesn’t follow, and there’s no reply. Five minutes later, when Darcy emerges, Susan is still pulverising vegetables. “So. Are you coming?”

“No,” Susan replies sharply. “I’m not really in the party mood.”

“Are you sure? I think we could do with a relaxing night among friends.”

Susan throws the knife abruptly into the sink. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d want me there.”

“Why would I not want you there?” Darcy asks, truly perplexed now.

Susan answers her mouth to reply, pauses, and apparently thinks better of it. “Never mind. Go. Have fun. I suppose if you don’t come home I’ll know where you are.”

Darcy hovers on the threshold, chewing her lip. “I’ll be coming home,” she promises.

“Listen, you’re an adult, as you keep reminding me. If you want to sleep elsewhere, it’s none of my business.”
“I’m not sleeping with him.”

That gets Susan’s attention. She does a wonderful fish impression, mouth flapping while she struggles to think of a reply, so Darcy carries on.

“I’ve told him I want to take it slow, and he respects that. If you gave him a chance, you’d realise there’s more to him than bikes and tattoos.”

“And being a hopeless drifter with a dishonourable discharge. Yes, yes, I’m sure.”

Darcy shakes her head. She’s tired of having the same argument. “If I don’t come home, it’ll be Jane’s fault,” she says as she leaves the house.

Wilson wasn’t best pleased they found him and muscled in on his pity party, right up until Thor decided he was buying all the drinks. Now he was as into it as the rest of them.

They hadn’t made it further than the Watering Hole, but Bucky was okay with that. He wasn’t planning on stop out late anyway, not after he’d spent most of yesterday drinking and locked up in confined spaces, then today doing the dash to the beach. He was looking forward to his own bed, even if it was a little emptier than he’d like.

“So how did you sort out the marriage licence?” Toadie asks Thor, interrupting his thoughts. “Because you can’t get one of those overnight.”

“I’d already got on,” Thor answers. “Soon as she said yes, I applied, thinking we’d be doing it quickly, with no fuss.”

“Only your mum took over.”

“Yeah. And I thought it was what Jane wanted, but as soon as she told me it wasn’t, I knew what we had to do.”

Thor gets another round in, and everyone gathers round the darts board while Toadie and Wilson hastily invent the rules for Drunk Darts. Bucky slips away to use the can, and on his way back notices a pretty brunette coming through the front door of the pub. She’s not as pretty as Darcy, in his opinion, but there’s definitely something striking about her big, dark eyes, perfectly set curls, and bright red lips. Something a little too high-maintenance for his liking, probably, but also something that strikes him as familiar.

She takes a look around the place, like she’s been here before, until her gaze falls on the bucks cheering on Clint, who has been blindfolded to give the rest of them a decent chance of scoring. Her eyes widen with recognition, and she falters.

Then she’s gone.

She definitely knew at least one of their party, then, but Bucky can’t for the life of him figure out where he knew her from.

Wanda stretches out on her towel, determined to enjoy the last warmth of the afternoon sun. She’s not normally one for tanning, but she just read an article in a magazine about it helping you appear more toned, so she willing to give it a go. The other girls talk around her, while Frigga and Madge giggle in one corner, a stack of wedding magazines beside them.
Susan’s the only one absent from the gathering by the pool. Wanda might not have much experience with maternal figures, but she knows there’s trouble between her and Darcy. There has to be, the way Susan was ready to ream Bucky this afternoon, before Tony made a fool of himself. Again.

She’s already tried to apologise to Jane and Frigga, who both waved it away like it had nothing to do with her. And it didn’t, not really, but he is her father and he keeps embarrassing her. Frigga is family, and Wanda barely knows her, because she knows how Tony will react to them spending time together. Now Jane’s part of that extended family, and Wanda feels more isolated than ever.

Speaking of the new bride, Jane is glowing. She keeps bursting into one of the brightest smiles Wanda has ever seen, then biting her lip and trying to smother it like it’s something to be embarrassed about. Instead, Wanda’s enjoying basking in the reflected happiness. They could all do with a little bit of that.

“Excuse me?” All heads turn in the direction of the voice, where a bloke is poking his head over the gate. “I’ve got a delivery for Mrs Odinson?”

Frigga rises, before Madge taps her on her arm and quietly reminds her that she’s Mrs Stark and has been for a while. Instead, Jane beams again.

“That’s me!” She rises from her lounger and skips over to the gate, Darcy trotting after her out of curiosity. The gate opens to reveal a case of champagne and a bouquet of flowers roughly the same size as Jane herself. “They’re from Thor,” she announces, reading the card and smiling so widely that Wanda’s cheeks are starting to ache in sympathy.

“I’ll get the glasses,” Darcy says, heading up the steps towards number 30, before remembering it was a poor choice for clean glassware and changing direction for number 26 instead.

While she’s gone, Nat sidles over to Wanda, unrolling herself onto the spare towel with that effortless grace that Wanda envies. “Hey,” she says in greeting, and Wanda offers her awkward smile, because she never knows what to say to her.

“Would I be right in thinking,” Nat continues, unphased by Wanda’s awkwardness, “that you might be wanting to get out of your dad’s house?”

Wanda stiffens. “What makes you think that?”

Nat raises an eyebrow, but there’s sympathy in her stare, and she doesn’t elaborate further. “What if you weren’t the only person looking for new digs?”

“You want to move out too?”

Nat glances across at her mother, who is gushing over taffeta dresses with Frigga. “Maybe,” she replies in a quiet voice. “With the right housemate, to cut costs.”

“It’d have to be away from Ramsay Street. Nothing’s up for rent round here.”

“There’s a place over near Lassiter’s. Two bed, nice and bright, views over the lake, and close to the pub.”

Wanda considers it. She’s never short of money herself thanks to her dad, but she’s never taken the plunge to move out because she wasn’t keen on the idea of living alone. This might be the ideal solution.
“What were you thinking? House of Bikini?”

Nat tsk s. “Only if you want Clint moving himself in. I was thinking more along the lines of House of Pyjamas and No Bras.”

Wanda doesn’t need to consider that any further. “Sold.”

Nat smiles, an unfurling of her lips that looks like the cat that got the cream. “Awesome. I’ll book us a viewing as soon as poss.”

Darcy returns with an armful of champagne flutes, and Nat rises to help her pour. The first toast, naturally, goes to Thor, and all the ways he’s going to bring Jane happiness.

Susan can hear the laughter drifting up from the pool next door. She knows she could go out and join them, but the events of the day have left her in such a sour mood, she doesn’t want to spoil anyone else’s.

Instead, she’d resolved to do a little online shopping, picking out a lovely present for Thor and Jane since they won’t be having a big ceremony. Except, with that ordered, she’d ended up clicking on a bookmark she added a few weeks back, before her argument with Steve and her promise to keep her nose out of things.

She can’t. She knows it makes her an interfering old busybody, but Susan worries about Darcy. Even if James doesn’t appear to be taking advantage of her naivety, even if he’s trying to do the right thing, something about him niggles at her. Darcy can do better, and Susan knows this is only a youthful fling before she starts uni and meets the kind of men she can build a future with, but there are mysteries around James which unsettle her more than she can bear.

Where did he go after the discharge? If he was such a good friend of Steve’s, why did he never come to visit? It was strange how Sam had followed Steve to Erinsborough after they left the army, but James had stayed away for years. Had he been running from something?

The discharge records aren’t easy to get hold of on the internet, but she can do other searches. His full name is unusual enough that the results are easily whittled down to stories about him.

And the headlines which emerge confirm her worst fears.

Bucky trails after Thor, the pair of them stumbling along the pavement towards Ramsay Street. He remembers the promise to get Thor to the honeymoon suite, even if the other bucks—scattered around Lassiter’s lake in varying states of drunkenness—appear to have forgotten. Either that, or they’re unable to fulfil their promise due to their inability to move beyond a crawl.

The only reason Bucky’s still going is pure stubbornness. He’s not risking an arrest, and he’s also not risking the accusation of being a lightweight, so he’s still on his feet and on the heels of one loudly singing groom.

Thor’s still going because…well, the bloke’s a bloody tank.

There are giggles and the splashing of water from the top of the street, and the two men follow the sound towards their respective ladies. Bucky’s glad it’s leading him to his own back yard, so there’s less way to move to get to his bed. He’ll call Thor a taxi or something.

Thor throws the gate open hard enough that it rebounds against the fence, leading to squealing
from the girls and the shattering of at least one champagne glass.

Bucky doesn’t care. A moment later, he’s got an armful of Darcy, and she’s wearing that dress. He can’t even explain what it does to him. He’s not an eloquent man at the best of times, and right now he’s only a step above Neanderthal, but it hugs her everywhere and shows just enough thigh to keep him wondering.

“Hello,” he greets her, nuzzling into her neck. Her unfocused gaze suggests she’s as drunk as he is.

Over her shoulder, he spots Thor swooping his bride off her lounger and into his arms.

“You’re supposed to…” Bucky pauses to consider what the rest of his sentence was meant to be.

“Lassiter’s. Yeah. Lassiter’s.”

“I know, mate,” Thor replies.

“Taxi?” he suggests.

“Nah. I’m going to carry her all the way. Not putting her down till we’ve got a bed.”

Thor leaves to a chorus of uproarious laughter, and Bucky can feel Darcy’s giggles all down his body where she’s pressed against him.

“This is nice,” she murmurs.

“Mmm.” He wants his bed, but he also wants Darcy, and right now the two things are incompatible.

“I promised Susan I’d be going home tonight.”

“Then you should…you should do that. Yes.” He nods his head firmly.

She doesn’t move, and neither does he. “Or I could not.”

He growls, pulling her a little closer. “She hates me. And so would you.”

“I don’t mean that. Just sleeping. Sleeping was nice.”

“Sleeping was very nice,” he agrees.

“Then we do that.”

“Bed’s only a single,” he slurs.

“Was a yoga mat last night.”

“True. Alright. We sleep.”

He briefly considers picking Darcy up, like Thor did Jane, then glances up the steps to the house. Nah. He’ll do his best at chivalry but his back’s not what it was. Instead, they head up the steps hand in hand.

Don’t drink on a work night. Don’t drink on a work night. You’ve known this is a bad idea for years, and you’re only getting older. Why won’t you learn?

Helen peers blearily in the direction of the hospital, thankful that the party was at least cut short by
Thor’s arrival and Jane’s departure. But her tolerance is not what it was, champagne is the worst for a hangover, and she’s really not sure how she’s going to get through her shift. At least she’s not on a surgical rotation.

At least she isn’t Sam, who she watches stagger through the hospital doors looking like he’s ready to be admitted instead of start his shift. The leaf stuck to the back of his head suggests he might not have spent the night in his bed. That might be a clue as to where Helen’s husband is, because it certainly wasn’t in her bed.

She ducks into a cafe for a triple espresso, and joins the line behind a brunette with amazing curls. They’re glossy, and absolutely precise, reminding Helen that she might not have brushed hers before she left the house. She’d regret it more, except she’s going to have to pin it up before her shift anyway, and there’d be no point even washing it when it’s likely to have some form of bodily fluids smeared in it before the end of the day. Hungover shifts are always those kind of shifts.

The brunette shifts to one side and Helen shuffles forward, mumbling her order to the barista and handing cash over before resting her forehead against the cool glass of the display case. People can stare if they want, she doesn’t have the energy to care. The brunette’s hand rests a few inches from her head, scarlet nails perfectly oval and chip-free. She’s got a white line on her ring finger, paler than the rest of the skin.

From the corner of her eye, she sees the other woman stiffen beside her and shift further away. Helen wonders if she stinks, which is not outside the realms of possibility but she did get in the shower this morning and therefore gets points for trying. Not everyone can be an immaculate glamazon.

It’s only when the brunette picks up her coffee and hurries away that Helen gets a look at her face, hastily hidden behind the mask of her hair.

“Peggy?”

Darcy feels a pair of hands snaking around her waist and hopes, for Clint’s sake, that they belong to her boyfriend and not one of his housemates. It’s hard to tell with the bathroom mirror fogged up while she brushes her teeth, but the rasp of a beard she feels on her bare shoulder the next moment confirms the identity of the man behind her.

“Morning,” Bucky greets, voice low and raspy, the brush of his prickly jawline reminding her of the stubble burn she has in some places which will be hard to explain.

They really did only sleep together, but convincing Susan of that’s going to be an uphill battle.

Luckily for Darcy, there are enough discarded garments in the house from various female guests that she doesn’t need to go home to get dressed. Instead, she’s got a better idea.

“How’s your head?” she asks.

“It’s been better.”

“You want greasy food?”

He groans, a sound he’d only made when she’d slung her leg over his hips the night before and accidentally brushed against forbidden parts. His fingers flex against her hips. “So much.”

“Good. Grease Monkeys when you’re showered—it’s a date.”
She feels him smile against her skin. “Really? Burgers count as a date?”

“Yep. It’s a thing we both like, right? And that’s what we said we’d do.”

“Alright. Give me fifteen minutes to make myself human again.” He leans forward to wipe the mirror clean with his hand, and she catches his gaze in the glass. She thinks it might take more than fifteen minutes to make him look like he didn’t spend the night on the razz, but that’s the point of going for burgers. Even with bloodshot, sunken eyes, and his hair matted around his face, he’s still the hottest bloke she’s ever met.

Despite the way he’s holding her, and the content little smile tugging at his mouth, she has a sudden moment of self-doubt. “Are you okay?”

“Mmm. Will be,” he hums, closing his eyes and dropping his entire face into her shoulder.

“No, with last night.” She takes a deep breath. “With just sleeping.”

His face reappears, frowning this time. “Of course. You want slow, we’ll go slow.” The expression softens when they lock gazes in the mirror again. “We were both off our face’s last night. No way was I on top of my game, and sweetheart, when you want to do more than sleep, I’m going to make sure you have no regrets. You deserve that. Until then, you want into my bed, all you have to do is ask.”

Darcy slips out of the bathroom feeling like she’s about to go to the ball and dance with the prince.

Peggy looks like she’s going to keep walking, but Helen hurries after her, shoving herself between the other woman and the door.

“It is you!”

Peggy pastes a wide smile on her face, the feigned surprise not reaching her eyes. “Helen—I didn’t see you there! What a lovely surprise!”

Helen’s not seen Peggy in a few years, and they haven’t kept in contact since Peggy left Erinsborough. Still, despite her precisely maintained facade, Helen sees through her old friend. It’s an illusion, Peggy’s war paint to hide what’s going on inside; it always had been. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Peggy lies, only the momentary pause before she answers giving her away.

“Then why are you back in Erinsborough? Why aren’t you wearing your wedding ring?”

Peggy’s smile evaporates, and her dark eyes widen. “Please don’t tell Steve,” she pleads. “I’m not ready for that yet.”

“You aren’t just visiting, are you?”

Peggy shakes her head, chewing on her lip as she glances around at the other customers. “No. I’ve taken a job at the university.”

“And you’re alone.”

That elicits a sharp nod, and a determined stare at the wall. No way was Peggy about to show a chink in her armour in front of strangers.

“I’m here for you,” Helen promises. “I know it’s been a while, but you’ve got friends here.”
Peggy returns her gaze to Helen. “Thank you,” she says warmly. “I appreciate it. Maybe we could arrange to meet for lunch or something?”

“Sure.” Helen glances at her watch. “I have to run, my shift starts soon, but don’t you dare wriggle out of this and think you can avoid a heart-to-heart! I know you!”

Peggy watches her leave with a guilty shrug, and Helen books it for the ward she was meant to be on five minutes ago.

Wanda doesn’t know how Nat does it, but she’s disgustingly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning, despite rising early enough to cover the morning shift at the Coffee Shop. Wanda received a text from her around that time (not that Wanda read it until hours later), telling her a viewing of the flat was booked and to meet her on Nat’s lunch break.

So here she is, watching Nat finish serving her last customer before Madge takes over. Wanda had hoped that an hour in the gym would blast the cobwebs away, but now she feels like her mind, body, and soul have all been squished through a blender.

At least Steve wasn’t there, though Wanda had glimpsed Sharon across the room, effortlessly pounding away on the treadmill.

“Can I get an Americano?” Wanda asks, switching tack to a caffeine blast. She doesn’t normally take her coffee so strong, but she’s been doing some reading, and the calories in milk made her go wide-eyed. Sugar was definitely out.

“Sure. On the house, potential roomie.” Nat replies with a wide smile, turning her back to set the machine grinding. “Mum, can I take my lunch?” she yells in the vicinity of the back room.

Madge emerges, and whatever voodoo her daughter possesses which makes her immune to hangovers, was not inherited from her. “Alright, but be quick, there’s a delivery due this arvo.”

Nat hands over the Americano to Wanda and swings herself around the counter, tossing her apron behind her. “Sorry, I’m taking the full hour. Stuff to do.”

They’re at the door before Madge can ask her daughter why, and Nat pretends not to hear her rather than answer.

Nat’s rambles about rent and bonds on the short walk to the flat, and Wanda pretends that it’s important stuff, when really she can easily cover it on her own. She’d offer to pay for the whole thing, if she knew Nat wouldn’t reject the idea. Wanda’s time at the gym has clarified her thoughts, convincing her that moving out is the only way forward. She’s given her dad a chance, she really has, but his behaviour is getting worse. Let Rhodey do his best to save him, but she thinks Tony needs to hit rock bottom before he’ll change. She has no intention of being dragged down with him.

The flat really is only around the corner from Lassiter’s, the top floor of a converted house backing onto the grounds. The only outdoor space is a balcony, but said balcony looks over the lake, as do both of the bedrooms. Wanda’s already mentally redecorating as they look around, and she can tell by the gleam in Nat’s eyes that she is too. Sure, it’s on the small side, and basic, but that’s easily remedied with some paint and furniture.

“We’ve had a lot of interest…” the agent says, and Wanda knows it’s patter, a sales hook to get them to bite, but she doesn’t care.

“I’ll pay the full bond up front today to secure it,” she says. Nat glances at her sharply, surprised.
more than offended, but if the agent notices she has the grace to pretend she didn’t.

“Excellent.” The answering smile suggests someone just hit her target for the week and is already planning the champagne dinner to celebrate, but the thought of champagne only makes Wanda’s stomach lurch. “I’ll get the paperwork.”

Despite Darcy’s promise the evening before, it’s early afternoon before she comes home. Susan’s barely slept, thoughts swamped with her discovery the previous day and the implications. It all makes sense now…the more she dug, the worse it got, and Susan’s been fool enough to let Steve convince her she was wrong. How James has so many good people fooled, she doesn’t understand.

She hears laughter outside first, Darcy sharing a goodbye kiss with him at the bottom of the path, and Susan’s stomach twists at the sight. Not just with the image of seeing Darcy in his arms, but with the weight of the knowledge she carries, and what she has to tell Darcy. It won’t be pleasant—it might destroy Darcy, and will certainly squash her burgeoning happiness. Yet, what kind of person would Susan be if she kept quiet?

So she doesn’t launch into the lecture that Darcy is inevitably expecting when she strides through the door. Instead, she greets her quietly.

“Darcy? Can you come here?”

Darcy pivots back, halfway to her room already, and the defiant set of her shoulders eases when she takes in Susan’s expression. She crosses the room to where her foster mother is waiting for on the sofa, laptop open on the coffee table. She sits down next to her gingerly, fingers twisting together as she struggles to divine what the request will relate to.

“I have something to show you,” Susan says. “Something important.”

She picks up the laptop, the movement knocking the screensaver away so the sites she’s been reading are visible. A row of tabs line the top of the screen, different articles that Susan has found, different facets of the same story. But the one that’s open is eyecatching, a bold black headline which leaves no room for subtlety.

Soldier arrested for manslaughter.

Darcy frowns, curiosity drawing her to read further, and Susan watches emotions flicker over her face: confusion, shock, fear…denial. With the last one, her expression shuts down, turning stony and impassive.

“You had no right…” she begins, her anger undermined by the waver in her voice. “This is for him to tell me. Not you.”

“I don’t think he had any intention of telling you, love.” Susan tries to keep her response as soft as possible, but Darcy is already on her feet.

“I need to talk to him. Remember, when Steve had a go at you? He’ll have been around then, has to have been, and he still backed him up. Bucky’s not a killer, I know it.”

“Darcy, he admitted it. It says so in all those articles!”

“No.” Darcy paces away, hands in her hair. “I need to hear his side, not whatever you’ve dug up.”

“What I’ve dug up?” Susan sees red, her voice rising in volume to match Darcy’s. “I just told you
that James is a killer, and somehow *I’m* the bad guy?”

“You don’t know him like I do! You want to believe the worst, and you always have.”

“Because he *is* the worst. He’s dangerous, and this proves it. I’m supposed to protect you, and that means I cannot have you seeing that man while you live under my roof.”

“Darcy, be reasonable.”

Susan is wavering on the threshold of Darcy’s bedroom, wringing her hands, as the little brunette hurriedly thrusts whatever she can grab out of her drawers into the largest holdall she can find.

“I think the time for reasonable evaporated when you Googled dirt on my boyfriend.” Darcy says shortly, not looking behind her.

“It’s hardly dirt if it’s true-”

“You’re getting apparent truth from a newspaper article and not even questioning it because it serves your own ends, can’t you see that...Ugh.” Darcy bites back on the words that are starting to tumble out of her, because this is already a messy situation and it doesn’t need any more fuel to make it full on nasty.

-----

Bucky slides in through the front door of Number 30 with the taste of Darcy’s lips still seared across his own, happy in a way that he’s not felt for a long time. Removing the expectation from his relationship with Darcy - the pressure to be the perfect date, take her to the perfect place, say all the right things - has left the pair of them with nothing to be except themselves.

And they work.

They really, really, work.

He’s not the type to crow about a relationship, and he’s even less the type to divulge the intimate details - not that they have any yet, but he thinks, with the way that she looks at him and the touch of her hand to his chest, it might not be so long until that happens - but right now, Bucky feels like he’s walking on air.

Steve looks up from where he’s sat at the kitchen counter, and smiles. Bucky managed to stay longer at Thor’s celebration than he did, and boy does it show even at this late hour and after he’s eaten, but there’s something else under the mussed hair and red-rimmed eyes.

Bucky, noticing Steve’s goofy look and knowing what his friend is thinking when he makes it, flicks the other man’s ear as he passes, heading straight for the coffee pot. Steve throws the biro he’s been using to doodle on the back of the newspaper at Bucky’s head with a laugh.

“You two done pretending you’re in a sitcom?” Clint says blearily from the sofa where he’s still stretched out. He stumbled through the door - or, more accurately, through the window - around four in the morning. He’d made it to the sofa and no further. He squints up at the sun which is streaming in through the partially opened blinds, and pulls a cushion over his face with a deep groan.

Steve swivels on the stool and regards Barton.

“Coffee?” Bucky asks lazily, turning himself with one hip propped against the kitchen counter and throwing a smile at Steve as he addresses the other man.

“Thought you’d never ask.” Answered the cushion.
Susan’s not getting the hint, following Darcy out of the house and down the path to the pavement, calling after her. She’s trying to ignore it but curtains are starting to twitch because, well, this is Ramsay Street and that’s what people like to do with themselves. Even if the vast majority of the street is still hanging from the previous night’s celebrations.

“Susan,” She hisses, seeing doors start to open as well now. “Just drop it.”

“I can’t drop it when my foster daughter wants to throw her lot in with a man who’s-”

Darcy slaps a hand over Susan’s mouth, cutting off where that sentence was going. She’s dropped the holdall on the path and practically snarls into her foster mother’s ear.

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare try to ruin someone’s life in public without having all the facts.”

Susan bristles under Darcy’s hand, feeling anger rising in her throat. She’s only trying to help. Any responsible parent would be doing the same thing - and more - if they’d found what she’d found. The fact that she’d known all along that James Barnes was a bad sort and this only proved her right… Well that was just a happy circumstance of fate.

“I saw Peggy.”

Helen feels a spike of guilt run through her, but she has to tell someone and Toadie is her husband. He won’t tell anyone else.

“Peggy?” He says absentmindedly from the kitchen and Helen thinks to herself that maybe Toadie’s worth in secret keeping comes less from trustworthiness and more from the fact that he’s always a little out of it when it comes to gossiping.

Not that she’s gossiping.

This is important.

“Peggy. Peggy Carter. Steve's Peggy?”

Toadie turns to her, bleary eyed with coffee cup in one hand and half eaten toast in the other. He chews thoughtfully and Helen waits. She's used to waiting on him to catch up. She thinks sometimes that he uses all his brainpower at work, and has to work up to it properly at home.

He opens his mouth, only to be interrupted by the sound of Susan Kennedy shouting. Toadie sighs, rolling his eyes at Helen, who crosses to the kitchen threshold and listens.

It's far from unusual to hear Susan, but she thinks she can hear Darcy as well, which has her throwing Toadie a worried look over her shoulder.

Bucky, Steve and Clint are comfortably drinking coffee in companionable silence, Barton still sprawled on the couch, Bucky next to him on the floor with his back pressed up against the sofa and legs hugged to his chest. Steve is lolling in the armchair, one leg slung over the arm and idly considering the crossword in the newspaper.

He’s pretty sure that ten down is ‘serendipity’, but he’ll just note it to the side for now, in case he’s
wrong.

It’s Steve who first notices the shouting from outside, and his head turns towards the door instinctively. He nudges Bucky with a bare foot, and the dark haired man turns as well, frowning as he tries to work out what - or rather who - it is making the ruckus.

They more or less realise together where it’s coming from, and Bucky’s on his feet in seconds, shoving his coffee mug at Steve, who is also trying to scramble from his position sunk into the armchair. Bucky knows full well that whatever Susan has to shout about is going to involve him on some level.

-----

“S’that noise?” Tony says from the dining room table where he’s got two laptops set up and a number of files spread across the rest of the mahogany table. Try as he might, Rhodey had been unable to get the man to stay away from Ramsay Street. As soon as the housekeeping had come knocking on the door at Lassiter’s, Tony had been up and back into the clothes he’d arrived in.

Unfortunately he’d shucked those clothes the minute he’d walked back into the house, and is now wrapped in a silk dressing gown over boxer shorts. Rhodey wishes he could say this is the worst he’s seen Tony in, but that would be a bare faced lie and no mistake.

He’s also been unable to dissuade him from the notion of hiring a private investigator to track down Loki. Privately, Rhodey can’t see why anyone would want to go to the trouble of finding the man. He doesn’t believe - as Tony staunchly does - that Loki killed Howard, but there’s no denying the guy is trouble.

Ramsay Street does not need any more trouble.

Tony, however, is a man possessed.

There’s a tiny part of Rhod, an infinitesimally small and overly optimistic part of him that hopes that having something to focus on might actually be good for his friend. The much larger and more rational side of him, watching on as Tony rifles through papers and works two keyboards at the same time, knows that this is not going to end well.

He crosses to the window and pulls the blinds back a little. Susan Kennedy is out on her garden path, having a heated argument with her foster daughter. Rhodey sighs. He doesn’t know Darcy all that well, but she pops up at the garage every so often to see Thor and she seems a good kid. He’s just not sure that Susan’s realised yet that Darcy’s days of being a child are fast disappearing into the distance.

-----

Bucky hauls open the door to Number 30 and crosses the yard quickly to Darcy’s side. He’s aware it probably won’t help the situation any, but he’ll be damned before he lets his girl face anything on her own. Susan hits him with a look that could curdle milk at twenty paces, and he reminds himself that he’s faced worse in the army.

Probably.

“Are you okay?” Bucky murmurs, wrapping an arm around Darcy’s waist protectively and throwing a worried look towards Susan, who glares back at him. Darcy leans into his embrace, and he tightens his hold on her. Mrs Kennedy steps forward, hissing out the next words to him, practically spitting at him as she does so.
“I know all about you, James Barnes.” She says with a snarl, and the next word from her cuts through him like he’s just been plunged through ice.

“Killer.”

Bucky’s breath catches in his throat and his arm falls from where it was curled around Darcy. He stumbles back, face pale and steps into Steve who’s now made his way across the front yard to try and diffuse what’s going on.

Darcy turns to him, but Bucky can’t find the strength to meet her eyes. Eyes he knows full well will be full of accusation, anger and disappointment. Instead he executes a small turn and looks at Steve instead. His friend looks as sick as Bucky feels, and he’s swallowing hard so that he doesn’t vomit all over the pathway.

-----

Toadie stumbles his way out of the house, Helen on his heels, to find Darcy and Susan facing off against each other, and Barnes looking as though he’s about to lose his lunch all over Steve. Toadie’s not feeling dissimilar himself, and the unpleasant churning sensation in the pit of his stomach is just another reminder that he’s not as young as he used to be.

Ignoring the lads, he turns to Susan with what he sincerely hopes is a placatory expression plastered all over his face. He’s guessing that, whatever this is, it has something to do with Barnes, and he fights back the urge to say what he really thinks to the woman - which is to step the hell back and let Darcy make her own mistakes.

He’s had a lifetime of watching people - usually men, always someone other than him, he learned early - that trying to tell a Rebecchi woman what to do rarely ended well. Usually for the person trying to tell them how to do it.

He knows how well that would go down, and so he holds his tongue - for now.

But Toadie also spent most of the last evening with Barnes, and he saw the smile that stayed on the other man’s face the whole evening, like he wasn’t quite present in the room with the rest of them. Whatever Susan might think, they’re good for each other these two, and he is going to have to find some way of mediating between Susan and Darcy before the whole street gets taken out in the process.

“Susan,” He begins in a conciliatory tone. “Why don’t we step inside for a minute, sort this out?”

-----

“Nat?” Wanda says, lifting her head to peer from the window of Nat’s soon to be ex-bedroom. The redhead, still bundled into her bedclothes where she threw herself last night, mumbles something unintelligible.

Wanda, throwing a glance over her shoulder at her new roommate, smiles. She’s never seen Nat so uncomposed, and it’s a little refreshing if she’s honest. Something about the prospect of freedom meant that Nat really knocked ‘em back last night, and she’s suffering a little for it now.

Wanda on the other hand limited herself sternly to just three gin and slim-line tonics, having read up about the horrors of alcohol and calorie content. She’d kept herself mainly to herself at the party, enjoying the others letting themselves go, and happy she’d been included considering her father’s ridiculous outburst earlier in the evening.
Jane had given her a hug - champagne fuelled to an extent - but it meant a lot.

She turns back to the window and watches on as Darcy and Susan have a shouting match on their front lawn. It’s not the first time, and it probably won’t be the last, but it seems like everyone else is looking to join in as well. Bucky appears, shortly followed by Steve and then Toadie’s wandering across with Helen.

Wanda’s wondering who else is going to stick their oar into this one when she hears a door slam shut that’s a little close to home. Jerking back, she looks down to see Madge crossing the street. She falls back and prods the Nat-shaped lump urgently.

“Nat, you need to wake up now-”

------

“I can’t work with this racket going on.” Tony declares, getting up from the table and wrapping his dressing gown around himself firmly. He grabs at the cut glass tumbler on the table, pausing only at the drinks cabinet to top himself up with a generous measure, blithely ignoring Rhodey’s attempts to talk him back inside.

“No, no - I’m going to see what all the fuss is about.” He says, and stumbles backwards into the sideboard as he fumbles with the catch on the front door. Finally getting it open - along with dashing a fair amount of his drink down his dressing gown - he disappears out of the door.

Rhodey, with a groan, follows.

------

Darcy’s staring at Bucky, and he can’t bring himself to look at her, not now he knows that she knows. He doesn’t think he can ever look her in the face again. He doesn’t know exactly what she knows, whether all the gory details were there for her to pour over in black and white - Bucky chose not to look at the papers, though his father took great delight in collecting a copy of each one that had covered the events.

Printed proof of the disgrace that his son was, more shining examples of how he’d never amount to anything.

She catches at his hand, and he finally turns to her, a wild look in his eyes and something he can’t read properly splashed across hers. She opens her mouth to speak and he steps back, into Steve’s chest, not prepared to hear what she’s going to say, the inevitable crush of her leaving him.

Darcy doesn’t manage to say the words though, because she’s interrupted by the arrival of Madge, Tony, Nat and Wanda. Rhodey appears just after, looking for all the world like a zoo keeper who’s just seen his penguin waddle off out of the enclosure, a little too fast for capture.

“Just when you think things can’t get worse-” Steve says grimly into Bucky’s ear, and he almost - almost - chokes out a wet laugh. His life feels like a goddamn circus, why not have an audience to witness the moment that he gets pie in his face?

------

“Toadie, I can't stay at Susan's anymore.” Darcy says bluntly, and Toadie runs a hand over his chin whilst throwing a look to Mrs K. She looks about ready to explode, and he's not entirely certain what's keeping her held together right now.
“What's wrong Darce?” He opts to say, focusing on his cousin who's getting steadily pinker in the face the longer she stands there.

“Not important.” She shakes her head, and Toadie's gaze slips from Darcy to Steve's friend Bucky, who is looking more distressed by the minute. Toadie assumes - and he's pretty good at reading people, provided he's had a cuppa or three first - that whatever this is, it has more than a little something to do with Barnes.

He sighs.

“You know you're always welcome with us-” Toadie begins, before Helen’s foot meets his ankle sharply. He winces but has been a husband long enough to read the signs, and switches tact smoothly.

“...it's just that we are redecorating in the next week or so, and we won't have the spare room. Gonna be full of paint pots, then paint fumes.”

“Darcy, you can stay with me.” Madge says kindly from the other side of the little assembled group, thinking that she can at least allay some of Susan's fears if she has the girl at home with her. “You can bunk in with Natasha, be like when you were kids.”

Nat clears her throat and looks a little awkward. “Uh, mum, the thing is-”

Madge turns to her, confused. Nat bites on her lower lip, then opens her mouth to respond.

“We're moving in together.”

It's not Nat that says it, but Wanda. Several pairs of eyes slide to the girl who is standing a little awkwardly but also a little defiantly to one side.

“Uh, when was this going to pop up on my radar?” Tony asks, turning to his daughter with arms spread wide, some of the bourbon in his tumbler splashing over his hand as he turns. Wanda resists the urge to facepalm as her father stands in the middle of the street in the afternoon, wrapped solely in his silk dressing gown with a half-drunk glass of neat alcohol in his hand. She can feel Madge’s pitying look on her, and Rhodey - stood behind her father - looks pretty much like Wanda feels right now.

“I was going to tell you today.” She says, defensively. “And I guess now is as good a time as any.” Her chin tilts a little, and Tony stares back at her, apparently unable to command the appropriate words for this situation, before spinning on his heel back to the rest of the group and losing more of his drink.

“Well then.” He snaps, not looking at Wanda, who mouths an apology at Natasha. “Why don't you come and stay with me, Darcy? Looks like I've got a spare room I didn't know about.”

The sarcasm in his voice is clear, and Wanda twists her hands together, looking worried. Madge shoots a look at Susan, and there's a silent and hurried conversation between them that has them agreeing - no matter what is going on between Susan and Darcy, there is no way she can move in with Tony.

Madge also slings him a sidelong look and makes a mental note to check in with Nat about Wanda. Although following the impromptu wedding almost everyone is nursing a hangover of varying degrees, despite the fact that it's now afternoon, Tony's clearly been drinking all through the day.

She thinks maybe she can understand why the girl wants to get out.
“Why is everyone standing in the street?” Jane asks, wrinkling her nose. She and Thor are making their way lazily back to Ramsay Street from Lassiter’s, having thoroughly enjoyed their wedding night, even if it was more of a wedding morning by the time they’d managed to fall into the same bed.

Thor squints.

“Hope it’s not another celebration.” He mumbles, feeling mildly ungrateful for saying it. He’s had the best couple of days of his life, all told, but now he kind of needs to recover from it a bit. He wouldn’t put it past his neighbours - especially those residing with Barton - to insist on a third day of partying, but he’s going to have to put his foot down if that’s the case.

“I don’t think it’s a party, Thor.” Jane says slowly as they draw closer.

“Darcy.” Susan says, forcing her tone into the closest to reasonable she’s able to manage, knowing what she knows and seeing her foster daughter standing so close to a man whose life story she’s spent all night reading up on. “Let’s stop being silly, and just go back inside-”

“No.” Darcy says bluntly, and the assembled group - with the exception of Susan - takes a collective step back.

Susan grimaces, and Darcy shoots her a warning look. She knows it means to keep quiet about Barnes, and she thinks that if she has any hope at curtailing Darcy’s flight from her household, it’s the only thing she has left that might keep her there.

“Darcy,” She tries again. “Toadie and Helen don’t have room, Madge needs to speak to Natasha I think, obviously you’re not staying with Tony-” She laughs a little at this point and Tony opens his mouth to argue, only to be pulled back by Rhodey. “And there’s no one else.”

It doesn’t go unnoticed by Susan that Steve gives Barnes a hard jab in the ribs with his elbow and a pointed look, and even Darcy’s eyes flick towards to the man for an instant, but he keeps his silence. It’s about the only thing that Susan can give him kudos for, although she’s unwilling to grant much of that either.

She can see in his eyes that he knows exactly what she’s found, and the fact that he’s made no attempt to explain himself or defend it just goes to show that she’s right to do what she’s doing. Susan squares her shoulders. What’s that saying? Cruel to be kind?

Darcy might not understand now, but one day - maybe when she has a family of her own - she’ll see that Susan is just trying to protect her.

“Obviously Darcy will stay with us.”

Jane’s clear voice cuts through the crowd, and Darcy turns to her gratefully, not having seen her best friend approach. She flings her arms around the other girl and buries her head in her shoulder, eyes glancing up to Thor who’s smiling down at her as well.

“You sure?” She mumbles into Jane’s ear. “Don’t want to cramp your married life.”

“Don’t be a drongo.” Jane whispers back fiercely. “You helped make married life happen. Stay as long as you need.”
Madge takes Susan’s arm as Jane steers Darcy into Number 26, and Thor hefts the holdall onto his shoulder easily. Susan is staring after them, watching as Jane slips an arm around Darcy’s waist tenderly and pushes the door open.

“Come over to my house,” Madge says kindly, though she has to repeat it twice before the other woman hears her properly and looks up at her, blinking. “Come on. I’ll fix you some lunch, and we can talk.”

Susan goes with her, reluctantly, and as Madge passes her daughter she says, in a low voice, “Moving out then, are we?” Natasha pinks - barely - but nods with a slight defiance that is part of what Madge is most proud of in her. “Good for you.” She says. “But make sure you look out for Wanda. I think she needs it.”

Nat throws a glance over her shoulder at the other girl, who’s watching as Rhodey steers her father - with some difficulty - back to his house. She turns back to her mother, and nods again. They’re due to pick up the keys today, and Nat’s not seen Clint surface yet. She’s been hoping that Steve and his friends would help them move, but looking over at the big blond with Bucky, she doesn’t think either of them will be in a fit state to help today.

“Why didn't you ask Darcy to move in here?” Steve asks when he’s managed to steer his friend back into the house, Barton thankfully having crawled from the sofa to his room to die more peacefully on his own.

Steve’s surprised - more than surprised - that Bucky made no move to claim his girlfriend. He knows that Susan is far from happy about the relationship - Bucky filled him in on the finer points whilst they were celebrating - but he’d have laid money on Bucky taking a stand for Darcy’s sake. Buck’s not the kind of man to leave his girl at a loose end, not if he has the power to do otherwise, and even then sometimes if he doesn’t.

Bucky looks up at Steve, and the blond hasn't seen such a look of desperation on his friend’s face since - well, since his army career came to an end.

“She knows, Steve.” He says hoarsely. “That's what all that was about.”

“She knows what?” Steve asks slowly, but he's just going through the motions because he damn well knows what the only thing likely to have Bucky on the ropes like this could be.

Bucky doesn't answer, but throws himself face first into the sofa. He lays there for a moment, and Steve is rooted to the spot watching him. Then a hand thrusts forward and fumbles at the catch to the drink cabinet.

Barton picked it up at a flea market, ostensibly as a gift for Natasha, but after she’d turned her nose up at it - predictably - he’d carted it home to pop it pride of place in the living room. The glass door was cracked on the left hand side, and the bottom hinge needed replacing, but it still held their liquor just the same.


“No, it's not the answer.” Bucky says shortly, not looking at him as he wrenches out a bottle of cheap whiskey that's been there since Clint won it at a fairground shooting gallery. “It's the solution to numbing the inevitable answer she's gonna give me once she's unpacked at Jane's
“Buck-” Steve says again, but the dark haired man has twisted the cap and is taking a long drag. The look on his face as he lowers the bottle says he's seriously considering spitting it back in, but it's a testament to the severity of the situation that he shakes his head and takes another mouthful.

“This stuff could strip paint.” Bucky coughs, between swigs.

“Yeah, that's why we've never drunk it.” Steve says, wondering if he'd be able to get the upper hand on Bucky to retrieve the bottle. Steve has a few pounds and an inch or two on his friend, but Bucky's always been more of a dirty fighter than Steve.

In this state, he wouldn't count on not getting a knee to the balls.

“Steve.” Bucky says sharply, and the blond focuses on him properly. “I can see the cogs whirring from here. Either join me in this frankly awful whiskey, or bugger off.”

There's realistically only one thing Steve can do right now. He sits down heavily on the couch next to Bucky, and the other man solemnly hands him the now half-empty bottle. He looks at what's left, and is tempted to make a comment on how much Bucky's just managed to put away in a short space of time, but he knows it'll only end in an argument and at least it's less that he's going to have to drink.

-------

“Why is it that Darcy couldn’t stay with us?” Toadie asks mildly as he and Helen make it back into the house. “And I think we’re going to need to redecorate now, seeing as the whole street just heard me say that.”

Helen sighs, sinking into the couch and looking up at him with big dark eyes.

“I know,” She says. “I'll help paint. It’s just - Peggy, remember?”

Toadie does remember, now he thinks on it, the brief conversation they’d had before all the drama. He nods slowly, not quite connecting the dots yet and counting on his wife to fill in the picture for him.

“She’s - well I don’t quite know yet, exactly - but she’s not with her husband any longer.”

Toadie’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. Peggy Carter was the love of Steve’s life, and the day she’d left Erinsborough… Well, it hadn’t been great for Steve. The gossip, such as it was, said that Steve had pretty much run away to the army to escape it, but whether that was strictly true Toadie had never had any desire to confirm.

Steve was a good guy. Peggy Carter - or whatever her married name was - arriving back in Erinsborough was sure to throw him for a loop. Helen gazes up at him from the sofa, her legs tucked under herself and her arms curled around her the way she did when she wasn’t sure on something.

“I just… I just think maybe we might need the spare room for Peggy.” She confesses. “I’d never turn Darcy away, you know that, but there’s so many people happy to take her in if she needs it - I’m not sure Peggy would have the same.”

-------
“Bucky?”

He manages to lift his head - barely - and finds that Darcy is standing in his doorway, all wide eyes and hands twisting together. He groans and shuts his own eyes. The whiskey’s taken its toll and he’d stumbled his way to his own room - with a little help from Steve - to try and sleep it off.

He’s not prepared to hear what she undoubtedly has to say. Bucky’s long since known how badly he’s managed to mess up his life, but just when he thought he’d found something good amongst the wreckage, he’s not really desperate to listen to her tell him the reasons she’s going to walk away.

“Bucky Barnes.”

He opens his eyes again, and finds her now at the foot of his bed with her hands on her hips. She’s wearing that goddamn sundress again and he pauses for a moment in the midst of his wallowing to consider that the universe must both love and hate him, to send him his girl - the girl who used to be his, all too briefly - wearing the very thing that’s graced his thoughts the past couple of days.

She sighs heavily, and he’s jerked back to the present time again, only to find her on her hands and knees and crawling her way up the bed until she’s curled into him with a leg slung over his and her hands fistling in his shirt.

“What are you doing?”

His tongue feels heavy in his mouth, and his throat is dry - words cracked as they tumble from him.

“Showing you how much of a bloody idiot you are.” She snaps back, and presses her mouth to his. Bucky blinks, frozen immobile in surprise, and it’s only when one of her hands snakes around his neck and tugs him closer that he can find something inside him to kiss her back.

They tangle together for what could be seconds or hours, and then she’s drawing back from him and Bucky remembers why they’re there, why she’s cuddled in against his chest and that tight feeling in his chest rushes back and threatens to consume him.

“Darcy…” He mumbles, and she pressed a chaste kiss to his mouth before pulling back once more.

He tries again.

“Darcy, look I-”

She places a finger to his mouth and her clear blue eyes are serious when she speaks.

“You tell me when - and if - you want to do so.”

Bucky opens his mouth to argue, but finds it shutting again almost of its own accord at the look on her face.

“You don’t get to have that taken away from you by someone else.” She speaks with a ferocity he’s probably never heard applied to himself before, like she’s fighting for him. He supposes, in a way, she is. “It’s your, your life, your story. And you get to choose when to tell it, and to whom. Not because someone can’t keep their nose out.”

He can practically taste the anger in her words, the way her fingers bite into him as she clutches to his shirt, and he can see that it’s both against Susan and for him. Bucky’s not sure that anyone, save Steve, has ever stood up for him like this before. He’s not entirely certain he really understands how to process that, and so instead of stumbling over words he’s not sure will come to him, he wraps his arms around her tightly and kisses her deeply.
After a while, he’s vaguely aware of a salty taste, and - breaking the kiss for a moment - realises that it’s him, and it’s because he’s been silently crying. Bucky wipes furiously at his eyes and cheeks with the back of one hand, scrubbing hard and knowing he’s making his skin red and angry.

Darcy gently tugs his hand away and presses light kisses over both cheeks and then his eyelids, soft and tender. Bucky leans into her touch and finds his hands gripping at her sides and hips, pulling her to him needfully.

“It’s not…” He sighs heavily, and lets one hand drift from her hip to her cheek, brushing back dark curls that frame her delicate face. “It’s not only my story, Darcy.”

“And it’s about time we told it, Buck.” Steve said firmly, from the doorway.

------

“You’re not mad, are you?” Jane asks, as she makes up the spare bed for Darcy. Thor, hauling out spare towels for their guest, smiles as he turns to his wife.

“No.” He rumbles, dropping the towels in a heap on the vanity and crossing the room in two long strides to wrap his arms around Jane, dropping a tender kiss to her forehead and feeling the ridiculous smile that crept onto his face at the beach begin again on his face.

“She won’t tell me what they’ve fallen out about,” Jane frets, pressing her cheek to his chest and sighing deeply. Thor strokes an errant section of hair back from her face, and tilts her chin up towards him, sneaking a gentle kiss from her lips before he answers.

“She will, when she’s ready.” He says, knowing Darcy well enough to know that - if she’s going to open up to anyone - it will be Jane. “Sometimes things take time. Sometimes you need to sort it out in your own head first.”

“It must be pretty big, for her to walk out on Susan.” Jane says, extricating herself from Thor’s arms and flopping onto the bed. “God knows they’ve come to blows before, but never like this.”

“It’ll sort itself out in the wash, one way or another.”

------

Bucky’s trembling a little, his hand still in hers but shaking slightly, and Darcy squeezes it tight to try and reassure him. She’s not read the articles Susan thrust in her face, not properly anyway, and even if she had, she knows enough about journalism to know it’s likely only the barest of facts reported there anyway.

Steve’s still standing in the doorway, looking serious, and she’s scrambled into a sitting position next to Bucky on his bed.

“Buck, you wanna start off?” Steve asks gently, and the man beside her takes a deep breath. He’s not looking at her, focusing instead on the light switch fixed to the wall by the door, and Darcy allows him that, tangling her hand in his as firmly as she can to let him know she’s listening.

“It was when we were in the army,” Bucky starts slowly, his jaw working hard and his eyes still fixed on that one point. Steve’s head is bowed as his friend talks. “We went to a bar. We’d been on tour for three months, long ride, lots of enemy fire. The squad needed to blow off steam.”

Steve’s head rises slightly, and Darcy notices that his blue eyes are a little wet as they fix on the dark haired man at her side. Bucky, for his part, doesn’t waver - the words tumbling from him as
though he’s afraid to stop them now they’re coming out.

“It was a good night. Lots of laughs. Lots of drink. But not everyone likes squaddies in a bar. This guy, big guy, steps up to Steve. Got a problem with us being there. Asks us to leave.”

“In not so many words.” Steve supplies quietly, and Bucky nods.

“Not so politely. He - well, he started on Steve. Nasty, back street fighting. Steve’s good.” Bucky breaks off for a moment, and nods at the big blond, who quirks a half smile back. “But he’s only got one pair of fists and the bloke had a mate.”

Bucky rolls his tongue across his teeth and shakes his head a little, closing his eyes briefly at the memory.

“Came at Steve from behind, with a bar stool. Would’ve smashed it over his head, but he never got the chance.” Bucky pauses again, raises a hand to his face and pinches the bridge of his nose, breathing hard. Darcy sneaks a quick glance at him, then at Steve, who takes up the story instead.

“Bucky laid him out.” He says, nodding his head. “One punch, down. I never even saw the guy coming - Buck saved my life.”

There’s a choked wet sound from Darcy’s side and it’s Bucky, a half-laugh of derision escaping from him at Steve’s words.

“He never saw it coming either.” He says darkly, and Darcy squeezes his hand as hard as she can, clutching it to her. Bucky glances at her briefly and she drops a light kiss on his shoulder, letting her head rest against it as he continues. “Caught him right in the temple, and that was that.”

Bucky lets out a shaky breath.

“I never set out to hurt him. I never meant to - to kill him.”

“He was just protecting me.” Steve says firmly, catching Darcy’s gaze and holding it, eyes serious as he looks at her. She cuddles into Bucky’s side, running her free hand up his forearm gently, soothingly, as his breath shudders in his chest.

“Anyway.” Bucky says, shifting a little to wrap an arm around Darcy and draw her in closer to him. “I got court-martialed, went to trial. There was a self-defense plea-”

“Witnesses testified that we didn’t instigate it-” Steve interjects.

“But it wasn’t enough. Enough to keep me out of prison - barely - but not enough to keep me in the army.” Bucky’s voice is a little bitter as he speaks, and Darcy kisses against his temple, tender and soft, letting him know she’s there. “Not enough to keep my name out of the papers.”

Darcy drops her head a little at that. There’s still a burning fury bubbling inside her about what Susan’s done, and she knows she’ll have to address that somehow, but today is not that day.

“The Colonel who presided over it - he had an issue with Bucky.” Steve says, with a careful eye on his friend, who snorts at what he’s saying.

“He didn’t believe I belonged in the army.” Bucky adds with a sardonic shake of his head, fingers twisting into the material of Darcy’s sundress as it bunches at her waist, before smoothing it out again. “Said I was no good, would never amount to anything - and there I was, just proving him right.”
“He was wrong to say that, Bucky, and you know it.” Steve says sharply. “You had a case against him, you could’ve fought it. You didn’t have to take that dishonourable discharge.”

Bucky laughs, short and with a total lack of humour. “Yeah, Steve. You’ve been saying that for years now, change the record would you?”

Darcy twists from his grip and she’s on her knees, straddling his thighs with a light in her eyes. Her hands are on his shoulders, and his hands drift to her waist in confusion as she looks at him excitedly.

“Let’s do it.” She says, nodding, looking back over her shoulder to Steve quickly before fixing back on Bucky.

“Do what?” He asks, confused.

“Fight it.” Darcy answers, determination running through her like lightning. “Fight that discharge.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So. It's been a while. Blame my* fickle muse. But after many, many moons, there's a new chapter. And it definitely won't take months for the next update, I promise.

Fair warning: starting in this chapter (although has been hinted at previously) there will be depictions of an eating disorder and body dysmorphic disorder. We don't intend for this to get very dark, or descriptive, but if this will upset you should probably back out now. We aren't throwing it in for shock value, either, but because it's a common illness among teenagers which doesn't often get covered in fiction despite it touching a lot of people's lives. We aim to do it, and the character, justice.

*latessitrice, not pollydoodles

“Toadie?” Darcy calls out before she knocks, already striding into her cousin’s kitchen without waiting to be invited.

Helen’s used to it: Toadie’s lived here longer than he’s known Helen, and his little cousin was often to be found running to the closest thing she had to a big brother for comfort when she was younger. It’s a habit she’s never quite grown out of, even if it’s happened less since she grew up, and Toadie got married.

For the first time, though, Helen’s amused—and bemused—to see Darcy’s brought someone with her. Bucky’s being dragged along by their clasped hands, looking both startled and reticent. Whatever’s brought Darcy over here, and by extension him, he’s not entirely happy about it.

Helen loves Darcy. She really does. But she also hopes the girl’s not here to beg for a place in the spare room after all.

“Is he in?” Darcy asks when she spots Helen at the sink, rinsing the dishes clean.

“In the shower,” Helen replies.

“That’s okay, we’ll wait,” Darcy says, at the same time as Bucky mumbles, “It’s fine, we’ll come back later.”

Darcy stares up at her boyfriend with a raised eyebrow. “It won’t hurt to ask.”

Bucky shifts on his feet, not quite meeting Darcy’s eyes. Helen’s got a sneaking suspicion this all
has something to do with the shouting match that went down in the street earlier. “It’s not urgent, sweetheart.”

Alright, so Helen is officially intrigued, which means she’s fine with her quiet evening in being interrupted. She’d rather know what’s up. “He won’t be long,” she reassures them both. “And he doesn’t have anything to do this evening except get the painting gear out of the shed, which can wait.”

“If you’re sure…” Darcy responds brightly, and Bucky chews his lip like he knows he’s lost the battle. Darcy sits herself down, and waves for her boyfriend to follow. Helen busies herself with making them all coffee while they wait, and sends a discrete text to her husband to make sure he doesn’t come strolling through the house in the altogether.

It’s a habit. Darcy’s seen it all before—though Helen knows she’d rather not relive the experience—but Bucky’s a guest, and it’s not fair to inflict it on him.

By the time the coffee’s ready, the man himself makes an appearance. “This looks like an ambush,” Toadie says as he wanders in, hair still damp from the shower. “Should I be worried?”

“No, we just need a small favour from you,” Darcy says with her sweetest smile. The way Bucky huffs suggests that the favour is likely to be far from small.

“So I should definitely be worried then,” Toadie jests, dragging out a chair at the kitchen table so he can take a seat.

“You know Bucky used to be in the army with Steve, right?” Darcy begins, before pausing. She throws a questioning glancing towards Bucky, followed by an almost imperceptible head nod towards Helen.

“Oh, I forgot, I have errands to run,” Helen says, rising from her chair without waiting for Bucky’s answer, but he waves her back down.

“It’s fine. You might as well know. Pretty sure Susan’s going to make sure the whole street knows her version of events, anyway.”

“So this is to do with what you were all arguing about earlier?” Toadie asks as Helen plants herself firmly down, trying to keep the eagerness off her face as she comes to the same realisation.

“Yes,” Darcy continues. “See, Susan did some digging on Bucky’s past to try and discredit him. Bucky’s told me the whole story, about how he got discharged from the army, and I think he should challenge it. Steve agrees.”

There’s a long pause while Toadie considers it all, before he answers. “That’s military law, Darce. It’s not really my area of expertise.”

Bucky opens his mouth, probably to thank Toadie for listening and close the matter, only Darcy’s faster.

“Maybe you could listen to the details, do a little digging, see if you think he has a case? Find someone who could help us?”

“I suppose I could. It’s not really what I was planning to do with my weekend but—”

“But it would make you the best cousin ever?”
Toadie sighs. “I’d better get a mug saying that.”

“You will!” Darcy promises, and reaches down to squeeze Bucky’s hand. He’s still looking a little dazed and anxious, but his gaze drops to where their hands are joined, and his entire being softens.

Helen knows the signs. The boy has it bad.

She makes her excuses, not needing to listen to the ins and outs—she can get them out of Toadie later. (Bucky’s not a client yet, so there’s nothing stopping Toadie from sharing what he knows). Instead, she slips into the living room, closing the door for privacy, before selecting a number from her phone’s contact list and dialling out.

It rings for a long while before the person she’s calling picks up, the tail end of an annoyed exclamation aimed at someone else leaking through before there’s a terse “Yes?”

“Angie,” Helen says, “I need to you to find someone for me.”

There’s a moment while her mother-in-law processes who’s calling and what she’s just said, before she’s straight into the nitty gritty. Angie never stands on ceremony and wastes time on pleasantries; it’s one of the things Helen likes about her.

“Is it Thor’s toe-rag brother? Because Kev reckons he saw him up near Bendigo last week.”

“What? No, not him.” That’s the last thing Helen wants. Loki—if it was him—needs to stay far away from Erinsborough. Helen doesn’t want to lose precious time with her husband to paperwork and legal proceedings. “It’s an old friend of mine, actually. I know she’s in town, but I don’t have any contact details.”

“She owe you money?”

“Nothing like that.” Helen pauses before giving into Angie’s silent curiosity. It’s the only way to get her interested in the search for Peggy. “I think she’s split from her husband and she’s avoiding me so she doesn’t have to talk about it. I’m not going to let her do that, not when I know she needs someone to be there for her.”

“Aw, you’re a good heart, Hel. Knew my boy picked well when he married you.”

“Thanks, Angie.” Helen gives her Peggy’s name—maiden and married—and a description. “She’s working at the university, but she’s not listed on any online directory yet.”

“Yeah, we’ve got a cousin working there.” Of course they do. The Rebecchi family tree has infinite branches. “Should be a piece of cake, I’ll let you know when I know something.”

Helen thanks Angie and ends the call, listening to the muted sounds of the conversation in the next room. Here’s hoping that Angie tracks down Peggy as quickly as she reckons she will.

“Dad, it’s not a big deal! I’m eighteen, you must have realised I was going to move out at some point.”

Wanda watches the weaving, listing figure of her father with concern and more than a little wariness. He’s criss-crossing the living room, his hands free of a tumbler of alcohol for once, but he’s uncharacteristically quiet.

“Why? You have plenty of space here. You don’t need to go anywhere.” He might as well be
talking to the wall, his back to her as he gestures.

“I do. I need my own space.”

“I’m not your mother—you can do whatever you want. Come and go as you please, bring home whoever you want, I’m not going to stop you. You know I wouldn’t mind.”

That’s half the problem. He won’t mind because, if history is anything to go by, he’s about to reach the stage where he starts bringing home whoever he wants. She doesn’t particularly want to be around for that.

“I know, I know. But I have to learn how to stand on my own feet. Everybody has to leave home sooner or later.”

“Then why can’t it be later? It feels like I only just got you back!”

He still isn’t looking at her, and Wanda’s eyes tear up at his plea. She has only been here a few years—but there’s been little happiness in those years. Brief flashes of sobriety and then…this.

She’s tempted, all too briefly, to turn this into an ultimatum. If he could stop drinking, then she’s willing to stay put—stay and support him through until he’s the father she thought she was moving in with in the first place. The man who had, for such a short space of time, got his shit together enough to come looking for his estranged teenage daughter and offer her the home she needed after the loss of her mother. Wanda could make it a condition of her remaining, and make it up to Nat by paying for her share of the rent anyway. She’s sure Nat wouldn’t really mind having the flat to herself.

The words are on the tip of her tongue, when Tony reaches for the drinks cabinet.

No. It’s no good. He didn’t change for Pepper. He won’t change for her. Her best option is to follow Pepper out of the door.

“Dad, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I’m going. And there’s nothing you can do to change my mind.”

She heads up the stairs to finish packing.

Across the street, Darcy finishes hanging up her clothes in her new wardrobe. It’s been a whirlwind of a day and she’s ready to flop into bed, thankful that her bedroom is nowhere close to Thor and Jane’s. Thor’s managed a last minute honeymoon booking but they won’t leave until tomorrow, which Darcy presumes means they’ll be practising for it tonight. She’s never known Thor to do anything quietly.

Bucky had walked her home after they’d finished at Toadie’s, his silence and furrowed brow indicating he was thinking heavily about everything they’d discussed. Darcy’s trying not to be too optimistic, but hope bubbles inside her anyway. From what Toadie’s said, it should have been black-or-white. Either Bucky had been guilty, and therefore gone to prison, or he wasn’t and therefore cleared and able to remain in his post. But Colonel Ross, the man who’d pushed for the prosecution even when the evidence was clear cut, had never forgiven Bucky for having a fling with his daughter. So he’d found another way to force the discharge through.

The bloke is right at the top of Darcy’s shitlist.

She stuffs her now-empty holdall under the bed and finally sits down.
She regrets how things went down with Susan. She really does. But Susan’s casual disregard for Bucky’s privacy—and for the truth—can’t be ignored. Even if this thing with Bucky doesn’t last (and Darcy’s not foolish enough to think they’re going to be together forever), it’s a hard thing to forgive her for. One day, probably some day soon, Darcy’s ire will cool enough to attempt some sort of reconciliation, but right now she’s got plenty of other stuff to focus on. Bucky, Bucky’s appeal, work, her upcoming studies…and the fact that she’s going to co-habiting with Thor’s mum and Sam’s dad for the next few weeks.

That’s going to be fun.

Helen’s phone buzzes on her way to work the next morning; Angie’s calling her.

“Hels, it’s me. Big Kev’s step-cousin Si works at the uni, he’s found your girl. She starts working in the admin office next week, just before term kicks in. I got a number and an address for you.”

“Let me get a pen,” Helen says, fumbling in her back, then leaning against the nearest postbox to take a note. “I don’t need the address, just her number.”

She writes it down, thanks Angie, and makes a mental note to invite her and Big Kev round for dinner soon. Then she sends a message to Peggy.

*It’s Helen. Lunch tomorrow?*

“This is awesome, where did you get it?” Nat asks Wanda, pulling a stained glass lamp out of one of the boxes piled up in their new living room.

“Just this little furniture place in Eden Hills. I thought it was cute.” The furniture place was more of an antique shop, really. Wanda doesn’t mention how much it cost; it doesn’t matter.

“It can go on that little table next to the sofa.”

Wanda nods, hefting the box she’s carrying in the direction of her new bedroom. When she comes out, Clint is staggering through the front door, loaded up like a donkey. Sam’s not far behind him.

“I’d better be getting a lot of free pastry for this,” Sam warns as he drops another box onto the kitchen counter. “Since I’m still not sure how I got roped into this.”

“Free coffee for a month at the Shop, how’s that sound?” Nat replies. “And Maria gets it too, putting you in her very good books.”

Sam considers and nods with a bright smile. “You know how to sweeten a deal. I’d better go help Steve with that chair before he does his back in trying to haul it up by himself.”

“How come I don’t get free coffee?” Clint whines.

“If you want to sleep in the bed, you have to make sure I’ve got a bed to sleep in,” Nat tells him pointedly.

“I can’t believe you managed to get all this furniture put together last night,” Wanda says, waving her hand in the direction of the coffee table and bookshelf that weren’t there a day ago. “Especially since—well…” She nods towards Clint.

Everyone witnessed the aftermath to Clint’s previous failure at furniture assembly.
“It’s fine so long as I read the instructions and he follows mine.”

Clint lopes off with a grumpy look on his face, muttering about being unappreciated. Nat grins after him and catches Wanda’s eye. “Gotta make sure they know who’s boss.”

Wanda’s never sure what brought the pair of them together, but there’s no denying that they have chemistry—which is why Wanda’s glad the two bedrooms are at opposite ends of the flat—or that Nat’s the one in charge. Probably because Clint’s so laid back.

Nat pulls the fridge door open. “Oh hey, if you need to go food shopping we could probably ask Steve to take us while he’s here.”

“No, I’ve got everything I need.”

Nat casts her a dubious glance. “You barely have anything in here. Or in the cupboards.”

“It’s fine. I…tend to eat out a lot anyway.”

“Fair enough.” Nat retrieves a juice carton and shuts the fridge. “I’ve got this idea in my head that I’m going to become a whizz at cooking, but I reckon we’re going to end up living on takeaways instead.”

“Exactly,” Wanda replies with a nod and a forced smile, although she’s seen the calories in takeaways. She loves Chinese food, but even a single spring roll isn’t worth it. “And this way, there’s more room for Clint’s beer.”

“Ugh, don’t encourage him. He’s only going to be a guest, we can’t let him try and sneakily move himself in.”

“We probably need more pastels then. And cushions. Make it really unwelcoming for him.”

“You know, I don’t think he’d even notice.”

Peggy doesn’t reply to Helen’s message until that evening.

How did you get this number?

Helen glances up to make sure Toadie’s engrossed in the footie match on the telly—he is, and she’s not sure why she felt the need to check—before responding.

Friend of a friend. Cousin of a cousin. You know what the Rebecchis are like.

Then she followed up with Knew you wouldn’t follow up from when I saw you last time.

I know. I’m sorry.

There’s a pause and Helen starts to compose a reply, when another message from Peggy comes through.

It’s just all so raw still. Trying to get my head around it.

That’s why you need a friend to talk to.

You’re probably right. But not in public.
Here, then?

Where’s here? Another gap, then Do you still live on Ramsay Street?

Like I could drag Toadie away from this place.

No, then. Absolutely not. I know he’s still there.

Helen knows that Peggy doesn’t mean Toadie: it has to be about Steve.

He’s not here all the time—works at Lassiter’s. I can probably find out his shift pattern, you can come round when he won’t be home.

What about Toadie? What about everyone else?

Helen understands the concern there. There’s a lot of people on the street who know her, and could drop it in conversation to Steve, or to one of his housemates. It doesn’t take much to start the gossip going.

I’m on lates for the rest of the week she types. Come round during the day, everyone will be at work.

I don’t know…

Or I could come see you.

It’s a dive. I’m sharing with grad students until I can find somewhere better. That’s what happens when you have to find somewhere last minute.

Then I’ll double check when Steve won’t be around and you let you know. And if you try and back out of it, I’ll be on your doorstep instead.

Alright. The longest pause yet, before Thanks. I don’t really have anyone else to turn to.

“Who are you texting, love?” Toadie asks absently. There must be a break in the game. He drags her legs into his lap for a foot rub while she sets her phone aside.

“Only Jane. She’s all flustered about going on honeymoon, you know?”

He nods and takes a swig from his beer, before turning his attention back to the TV.

“Don’t let ma forget that she doesn’t need to cook nearly as much when I’m not here,” Thor says to Darcy, vaguely gesturing towards the kitchen, where Frigga has just finished making a supersized breakfast.

Jane appears from the direction of the bedroom, dragging a suitcase behind her, and hands it off to her new husband. He takes their assorted luggage out to the waiting taxi, and Jane pulls Darcy into a hug. “This is awful timing,” she mutters. “I shouldn’t be leaving you alone with everything that’s just happened!”

“It’s not your fault,” Darcy replies. “And you deserve this. Two weeks on a tropical island? There is no way I’m letting you wriggle out of it.”

“But we could delay it—”
“Nope. You’re going, and that’s final.”

“Okay. But don’t let Frigga drag you into her wedding plans. And if you need anything, I’m just a phone call away—we can catch an early flight back or—”

“Get out of here!” Darcy waves her friend out of the door. “I only want to hear from you about amazing sunsets and all the cocktails you’ve drunk.”

Thor reappears to take Jane by the hand. “Ma will look after her, Janey, don’t you worry.”

They exchange one last hug before they persuade Jane to get into the taxi, and Darcy stays at the top of the stairs waving until the car turns the corner. Behind her, she can hear Frigga and Fury clanking around in the kitchen, putting the breakfast dishes away. She should probably get into the habit of helping with that, like she did at Susan’s, since she’s going to be here for a while.

She shuts the door and heads in. “They’ve gone,” she announces, before coming to an abrupt halt and trying to backtrack when she realises she’s caught them in a clinch.

Yeah. It’s going to be an interesting few weeks.

Frigga peels herself away from her beau and smiles at Darcy bashfully. “Do you have any plans for the day, dear?”

“I’ve got a shift this afternoon, thought I might swing by Bucky at the garage this morning.”

“Oh! Then you can take the leftovers from last night for him. Thor didn’t get a chance to eat them.”

Darcy nods and continues her backwards slide out of the kitchen. She’s rescued by a knock at the door. “I’ll get that,” she offers, knowing that as soon as her back as turned gross things will start up again.

Frigga deserves to be happy, but yikes, Darcy did not need to see that much of her tongue.

She opens the door, not sure she’s expecting, only to find Susan on the doorstep.

Darcy’s momentarily floored. Susan looks miserable—huge bags under her eyes, her skin sallow—even if the set of her jaw does not indicate she’s here to apologise. And until she does, Darcy’s going nowhere.

“This came for you this morning. Thought I’d better drop it off, it looks important.” Susan holds out an envelope and Darcy manages to take it from her without fumbling.

“Thanks,” she mumbles in return. There’s a seal on the envelope that indicates the letter’s from Eden Hills University. “Guess I need to get my address updated with them.”

Susan gapes, like Darcy’s just slapped her, but then she shuts her mouth and lifts her chin. “Yes, you probably should.” She turns and leaves without another word.

Darcy shuts the door and leans against it, eyes screwed shut as she replays the last few minutes. It was, in hindsight, a bit of a callous thing to say, but she hadn’t planned the words. They’d spilt out in the absence of any better ideas.

It doesn’t matter, not really. Darcy’s an adult, the letter in her hand confirmation of the next chapter in her life beginning. If she burns a few bridges along the way, it’s only to be expected.
And when Susan sees that Bucky is a good bloke, things will settle down. An exoneration will help with that.

She heads back inside, avoiding the kitchen and going to her room instead to read the letter in private. With everything that’s being going on over the summer, she’d almost forgotten about her impending enrolment, but term starts up soon. She’s nervous, if she’s honest with herself, but that’s normal. Everyone else will be too, and she’s a year older than them. She has an extra year’s life experience, a little more maturity.

Except. Well, no, that’s not important. It’s none of their business anyway.

She can handle this.

“Morning!”

“Ungh.”

“Not a morning person? Noted,” Nat says, still far too cheerful for Wanda’s liking. She’s stood at the cooker, poking at some bacon in a pan. “You want some breakfast?”

“No thanks. I don’t eat breakfast.” Honestly, she’s feeling grouchier than she normally would in the morning - she feels exhausted and there’s a line of pressure behind her eyes that’s been getting worse over the last few days. The bacon smells amazing, her stomach growling like it’s the cure to what ails her, but Wanda knows that’s wrong. She needs water, and endorphins. That’s all.

“You sure? There’s a few different cereals in the cupboard if you want some of those instead.”

“Not for me,” Wanda replies with a tight smile, hoping Nat will stop pushing. “I’m just going to have an orange juice.” She knows it’s full of sugar, but right now she’s craving it, and at least it’s got fruit in it. She’ll burn it off later.

There’s a faint look of concern on Nat’s face, as she stares at Wanda for a moment too long, before Clint stumbles out of the bedroom and heads nose-first for the bacon. Wanda takes the chance to flee, heading for her first gym session of the day to work off her funk.

The first rush of commuters has passed, so it’s quiet as she walks across the parkland and past Lassiter’s lake. The pressure in her head has increased, to the point she can feel each pulse in her temple, hear it echoing through her eardrums. She rubs at her temple fruitlessly, vowing to grab water and aspirin when she gets to the gym. That’ll help her until the endorphins kick in.

She stares ahead, focusing on the trees that line the path, but she finds that she can’t, not properly. They’re blurring, shifting, taking on the same grey as the sky. And when did the sky turn that grey? It was blue a few moments ago. Wanda wonders if there is rain due, but that doesn’t explain why everything is going dark so quickly.

She doesn’t feel herself hit the grass. She’s already unconscious.
Chapter 18

Chapter by LaTessitrice

Chapter Summary

Helen proves her worth as a friend and all round good egg, Toadie proves his worth as a lawyer, Bucky proves his worth as a boyfriend and mechanic, the universe proves that it likes to bring people together even if they don't want it to.

Chapter Notes

I think I caught all the times I went [insert Australian slang for *word* here] in the draft, but if you spot a stray note to myself as you read this, please let me know so I can hurriedly fix it and pretend it never happened.

“Wanda?” Someone’s shaking her, a gentle hand resting on her shoulder. “Come on, kid, you’re scaring me.”

“What?” She blinks, wondering why’s staring up at the sky when a moment before she’d been upright. “Helen?”

Toadie’s wife is leaning over her, concern etched on her face. She puffs out a breath of relief as Wanda’s eyes flicker open. “You had me worried there.”

“Why am I—what happened—how—” She tries to sit up, but the world tilts around her again, the thudding of her pulse echoing loudly for a moment. “Ohhh.”

“Hey, easy. I don’t know what happened, but I’d say you passed out. Lucky you were on soft ground. You don’t remember?”

“No. I—” She shakes her head and glances around, “I guess I must have fainted.”

“You think?” Helen’s expression is inscrutable as she helps her sit up. “You ever fainted before? No? I think I should call you an ambulance, just to be safe.”

“You don’t need to do that. I feel fine now.”

“Well, at least let me look you over. I don’t have anything with me, but I want to be sure you didn’t hit your head. I could call Sam to bring me a first aid kit—”

“No!” Helen frowns at Wanda’s sharp tone, and she hurries to provide an explanation. “He’s on night shifts, right? I don’t want to wake him when he should be sleeping, and if you call an ambulance my dad will know and freak out. Then he’ll insist I move back home. I’m okay, I think I just need to eat something—I left without getting any breakfast.”

“Are you sure?”
“Yes. I’m going to go straight to the Coffee Shop. I promise.”

“Alright,” she relents, holding out a hand so she can scramble to her feet. The world still doesn’t feel right around her, like she’s been cocooned in something and she has to reach out through a cloud to interact with it, but it’ll pass. It has to. “But I’m walking you to make sure you get there.”

“Fine, fine.”

Helen chatters as they walk, one hand loosely resting on Wanda’s elbow in case she pitches over again, describing how Clint had looked the time he’d arrived on her ward covered in his own blood.

This is a warning from her body, Wanda knows. She has to eat sometimes, especially if she’s going to keep going to the gym every day. There probably won’t be anything appetising at the Coffee Shop, but Madge might whip her up a protein smoothie or something she’ll be willing to eat. And Nat won’t be there. Nat doesn’t need to know.

“Hey you!”

Bucky pushes himself out from under the car as soon as he hears Darcy’s voice. It’s odd, how that sound can perk him up so much, interrupting his musing about the legal action he’s contemplating. Hearing Darcy makes every cell in his body thrum with happiness, and he’s not sure how to deal with it.

There is one way, and that’s kissing her, even while she squeals about him getting grease on her. “If you take the dress off, you won’t get it dirty,” he says, before he nips at her jaw.

She lets out a broken little gasp. “I only came to bring you lunch—leftovers.” She hoists the bag in her hand aloft to illustrate her statement.

“Mmm, my girl comes to see me and brings me food.”

She dips her head and flushes when he calls her his girl, every single time, and that means he has no intention of stopping doing it. There are other reasons, mostly based on the way she feels in his arms, but her blush is a pretty big one.

“You could come see me tonight,” she suggests, with a lip bite that is probably not intended to be suggestive but his second brain definitely is treating as. “I’ve got the house to myself. Be lonely without company…”

“Sweetheart, all you have to do is ask. I can swing by somewhere after work and grab us some food.”

“No need. I can cook. Plus I think there’s still plenty of leftovers.”

“You moving into Thor’s place is turning out to be an ace move.”

“I think so too. Also, with Thor being on vacation, I was hoping you could play fast and loose with your hours today?”

“Oh yeah? Want me to bunk off so we can spend the afternoon pashing?”

“Nothing as fun as that. Toadie’s asked if we can stop by his office.”

“Can’t we say we’re going to Toadie’s office but pash instead?”
“Not if we want to get the ball rolling on getting your discharge changed.”

He whines, and he’s aware that it’s an unmanly thing to do, but he can’t help it. He wants to keep playing the ostrich, ignoring the unfairness of everything that happened to him, and get on with this life. But when Darcy turns those big eyes on him, full of determination and concern—all for him—he can’t tell her no.

“Alright, we can go. Means I might be a bit later to dinner though, got some work to finish up here. Think I can get Peggy back up and running for Steve today.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure you’ll make it up to me.”

“I’ll try. In fact, I reckon I should start now—”

And he spends the rest of his lunch break kissing her.

Helen worries about Wanda all the way across the Lassiter’s grounds. She’d been steady enough on her feet when Helen left her outside the Coffee Shop, but the dark circles under her eyes and the fact that she’d passed out for no apparent reason weren’t good signs in Helen’s opinion. And it’s a medically-trained opinion, so she feels entitled to it.

It might just be stress—the Stark family drama is out there for everyone to witness—but those kind of blood pressure problems in someone so young would hint at bigger issues that would need treatment. Helen likes to think a dramatic fainting spell would prompt anyone to visit their doctor for a follow-up, but the way Wanda had snapped at her hinted at denial. No doubt things will get worse before they can get better, but Helen can’t shoulder everyone’s problems. Not when Toadie is nose-deep in articles about military law, and Peggy needs a shoulder to cry on.

Helen shakes off her thoughts as she approaches the front desk of the gym, smiling at the young girl behind the counter.

“I’m Stacey, how can I help?”

“Hi Stacey,” Helen begins, making a show of rifling through her purse for her membership card. “I haven’t actually been here in a while—” which is the absolute truth “—and I wondered if I could book in some sort of reintroduction thing with one of the trainers? I’m not sure where to even start getting back in shape and I think that would help.”

“Sure,” Stacey says, taking the membership card to load up Helen’s details in the system. If there’s a history on there, it will show that Helen only ever came for the induction session and sauna visits. Well, it’s a freebie from Tony to Toadie as a thanks for the legal work, so it’s not like she’s paying for it. (Helen’s preferred gift of gratitude is alcohol, something she’s sure she has in common with Tony and yet he got it so wrong). “I can see who’s available.”

“With Steve, please.” Stacey flashes her an indulgent smile. “He’s my neighbour and I think I’d feel more comfortable with him.”

Stacey clearly doesn’t believe a word of it, and Helen vaguely wonders how many women insist on only having him as their trainer. To be fair, if she were still single, the idea of Steve being her trainer would actually get her to use the bloody membership. Then again, if she weren’t married to Toadie, she wouldn’t even have one.

“Steve is in every day this week. What time suits you best?”
“Is he not doing any evenings? What about the weekend? I work shifts so days this week doesn’t work for me.”

Stacey shakes her head. “Not this week. I can look at next week for you.”

“No, I don’t have my roster yet. Do you have a number I can call when I do?”

Stacey dutifully hands over a business card, and passes back the membership card too. Helen scuttles back out before anyone she knows spots her. Her cover will be fine if anyone mentions this to Steve, but she doubts that will happen or that she’ll actually end up having to go to the gym.

Outside, she pings a quick text to Peggy to let her know they’re on for lunch tomorrow with Steve safely busy at work, and heads back to the Coffee Shop for big slices of that cake Peg always liked.

“Alright, Mr Rebecchi’s ready for you now,” Toadie’s receptionist announces from behind her desk. Darcy looks up from the gossip rag she’d been pretending to read and glances at Bucky sat beside her. He’s been staring silently at the knuckles on his left hand since they arrived, the hands that’s clenched in his lap. Darcy puts the magazine down on the pile left out for visitors, and reaches over to take his hand, smoothing her thumb over the back of it.

“It’s just Toadie,” she murmurs, too quietly for the receptionists ears. “Nothing to worry about.”

“It’s a big step,” Bucky replies. His body remains tense, but his fist loosens enough to allow Darcy to thread her fingers through his. “What if it makes things worse?”

“We’re only here to talk. You can back out at any time. Let’s just listen to what he has to say, and then you’ve got all the time in the world to think about it.”

He takes a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s see what he’s cooked up.”

They stand up together and head into Toadie’s office, which is one of the blandest, beige-est spaces Darcy has ever been in. It has a window, but that only looks out over the concrete wall of the building next door, and Darcy is almost sure that if Bucky stretched his arms out, he’d be able to touch both office walls. Still, Toadie’s done what he could, plastering photos of Helen in tasteful frames across one wall and cluttering up half of his desk with them as well.

“Thanks for coming in,” Toadie greets them, rising from behind the desk to shake Bucky’s hand. “I know it’s short notice, but I wanted to speak to you while I had it all straight in my head. Like I said, military law really isn’t my strong point.”

“You’ve only had a day and I’m not even paying you, so I’m grateful for whatever you’ve done,” Bucky replies, settling his bulk into a chair meant for narrower people. Darcy sits down beside him.

“Right, well—I got in touch with a bloke who’s an expert on this sort of thing. Used to be in himself, nowadays specialises in these types of cases. I outlined the basics to him and he reckons you’ve got a solid chance. It sounds like it was a civilian matter and your commander overstepped the bounds in discharging you. Of course, he’s going to need to look over the case files to make sure before he goes any further—not a fan of losing, by all accounts—but if what you told me matches what’s down on paper, then he thinks not only can he get your dishonourable discharge overturned, but get you some compo too.”

“This isn’t about money.”
“I know that, but for him, the promise of compo is the clincher. He doesn’t come cheap, but the way he works is he only charges a fee if you win.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, said in his email that people don’t usually go ahead with cases if they have to pay up front because they don’t have the money, but that’s why he likes to do extra vetting before formally agreeing anything. Anyway, he’s faxing over some paperwork for you to sign, so he can get your files and the police files and give them a go over. If he likes what he sees, he’ll be in touch, but I’ll stay involved as an adviser because I’m closer to home.”

Bucky takes it all in, mulling the information over with a face deep in contemplation.

“Sounds promising,” Darcy says with a nudge.

“Hmm.” It could be a noise of agreement, or just acknowledgement that she’s spoken. Hard to tell with Bucky sometimes. “I’m not signing to go ahead yet?”

“Nope,” says Toadie, “you’re basically getting his well-informed opinion for free.”

“Alright. I can let him do that. You can bring the paperwork around to number 30 when it’s ready.”

“I’ll do that,” Toadie agrees.

Bucky rises, ready to leave, and Darcy follows suit.

“One last thing. What’s this bloke’s name?”

“Bernie Rosenthal.”

“Did you have a good day?”

Wanda looks up from the spaghetti she’s pushing around her plate with her fork and nods at Nat. “It was fine. Didn’t do much. You?” Truthfully, she’d got in two gym sessions and then gone job hunting. She doesn’t need the money, but she needs something to focus her energy on, and there’s no way she’s taking a job at Lassiter’s.

“Not much,” Nat replied. “Covered a shift this afternoon, mum said you came in this morning for breakfast.”

There’s nothing accusative about Nat’s words, or even her expression. But there is mild enquiry, and Wanda can’t avoid it, not when she’s living under the same roof as her friend now. “Yeah, I realised I was hungry as soon as I got to the gym.”

“Okay.” Nat pauses, looking down at her own plate. “You don’t seem all that hungry now. I know I’m not the greatest cook—”

“No, it’s great! Like you said, I’m not very hungry.” She bites a lip and hurriedly concocts an excuse. “I had a late lunch, at that place near the uni that serves massive cake portions?”

“And you didn’t bring me any home?” Nat says with a pout. “Ouch.”

“Sorry. Still getting used to this sharing a flat deal. But no point wasting this, I can put it in the fridge for later.”
“Good plan, but you’d better eat it soon if you want it. If Clint sees it when he comes over, it’ll be finders, keepers.”

Wanda gets up to wrap her plate, thankful to have got out of eating the meal. Nat has nothing to worry about when it came to her cooking skills—it tastes awesome—but the combination of pasta, cream and cheese is not something Wanda can bring herself to eat. With any luck, Clint will demolish it without Nat realising, and Wanda can claim the meal as her own later on.

She volunteers to wash up anyway, quietly bemoaning the lack of a dishwasher, and missing the concerned frown Nat aims at her back.

Dinner finds Darcy and Bucky curled up together on the sofa, taking full advantage of the empty house. The kiss is heated, Darcy’s hands under his t-shirt, one leg crooked over his hips. It’s a pleasant position to be in.

“Bucky?” she moans, and it’s all he can do not to roll her under him. He’s happy to take things at her pace, knowing it will be better if she’s sure about sleeping with him, but moments like this make it easy to stop thinking and just feel, move, act. The blood’s not exactly rushing to his brain.

“Hmmm?” he replies, vaguely aware that she was trying to ask him something.

“We should—we, we should—” Her hand slides between them, and he catches it just before it drifts off his thigh.

“I thought you wanted slow,” he replies, bringing her hand back up towards his chest.

“I do. I did. I…”

He pulls back to look at her, all flush-faced and swollen mouth. There’s conflict in her eyes. She wants this, but she’s not sure, and while that’s there, he’s not taking this any further.

“It’s okay,” he reassures her. “When you’re ready.” He’s always ready, and the way they’re pressed together means she knows it.

“No, this is good. Like this.”

“No, sweetheart, it isn’t.” He presses a kiss to her forehead. “What’s brought this on?”

She flops backwards with a sigh. “I don’t know. I just…”

“You start uni next week.” She’d shown him the letter over dinner.

“Yes. And you know, I’m already a year older than most of the freshers.”

“So?” He disentangles them further, but only so he can pull her into his chest properly. “What, you think you’re going to be the only virgin there?”

She flinches at the word. He’s never said it loud around her before, and she’s only ever skirted around it. Now she’s acting like it’s something to be ashamed of.

“They don’t need to know,” he tells her, brushing her hair away from her face. “It’s nobody’s business but yours, and most of them will be lying when they brag about what they’ve done.”

“I’ve never been a very good liar.”
“I’m not telling you to lie, I’m just telling you not to bother getting involved in all that. This here, it’s between us, and nobody else has the right to dictate what we do or when. Because I don’t want you to have any regrets, not about me.” They’re building something, an intimacy he’s never had before, and he’s not going to throw it away for the sake of something easier.

Darcy stares up at him, her eyes a little glassy, and the trust that blooms in her expression turns his chest tight, knocking the breath right out of him. Nobody’s ever looked at him with that much trust, not except Becca—not even Steve, the great galah.

He makes a silent vow never to do anything that will make her lose that trust.

“Bucky?” she murmurs, hesitant and quiet.

“Yeah?”

“I—”But the hesitance wins out, and she shakes her head, changing her mind about whatever she was going to say. “Thank you. I don’t deserve you.”

“Are you kidding?” He lets out a bark of laughter. “After all you do for me, after all you’ve put up with, and you’re the one who doesn’t deserve me? You’ve got it all backwards, Darce.”

“No, you don’t get it. So many girls—well, you should hear the things my friends’ boyfriends said to them. It’s why I never had a real boyfriend before, I was always worried about being pushed, or them only wanting one thing, but you…you don’t mind.”

“Then I’m glad you never did have anyone before me, or I’d have faces to be breaking. Got half a mind to track down these blokes your friends were with and do it anyway. There are more important things, believe me. The faith you have in me—that’s one of ‘em.”

She beams, one hand slipping up to caress his face, then her fingers stroking over his lips. “So can we go back to kissing? Are you okay, if that’s all we’re going to do?”

“Sweetheart, you never have to worry about me wanting to kiss you.” And he proves it.

It’s another bright, sunny morning on Ramsay Street, and Helen is out watering the front lawn, one eye on the bottom of the cul-de-sac. Toadie’s already left for the office for the day, and Helen also watched Steve stroll off in the direction of Lassiter’s earlier. In fact, she’s been carefully watching the comings and goings as she weeded the flower beds, making a note of who’s home and who’s away. As far as she can tell, no one is around who will recognise her impending visitor. She’s confident enough to send an all clear message to that effect, and keeps vigil while feeding leftover salad to Cassie.

Just before eleven, a figure begins to make its way up the street on foot. It’s an unobtrusive figure, clad in neutral colours, hair hidden beneath a baseball cap, but there’s no mistaking that walk. It’s the hip sway of someone used to walking in heels, and used to getting attention for her hips.

Helen has the door open before Peggy reaches end of the garden path and ushers her inside.

This might be the first time Helen’s ever seen her without perfect lipstick on, her usual curls hidden beneath the cap, but that and the shapeless hoodie she’s thrown on are soon discarded.

“Coffee?” Helen asks, unsure at first how to proceed with her old friend.
“Tea, please, if you have it. Mind if I go put some lippy on? I feel naked without it.”

Peggy disappears into the bathroom while Helen prepares drinks for the pair of them. By the time her old friend returns, her mouth a familiar magenta, there are mugs on the table with a plate of bikkies.

Peggy thanks her and takes one of the chairs. “It’s weird,” she says, glancing around the kitchen. “It feels like I’ve never been away.”

“I told Toadie the decoration was stuck in the 90s.”

Peggy chuckles and shakes her head. “No, it’s lovely, and the decor’s completely different to when I was last here. But the room—God, I spent so much time in this house.”

Of course—this was the house where Steve grew up, long before Toadie ever moved in. “I remember.”

“Had my first pash over by the sink. Awkwardest thing ever, especially when Steve’s mum walked in on us.”

“Sorry. Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s actually kind of nice, the nostalgia. I haven’t been here for so long. Feels like coming home.” Then she dips her head, face crumpling, though a moment later it’s a mask of stoicism again. “How did I make such a mess of things, Hel?”

“What’s happened, Peg? What’ve you made a mess of?”

Peggy takes a deep breath. “Married the wrong man, didn’t I? Everyone knew it—even I knew it, I was just too stubborn to admit it, even to myself. Shouldn’t be surprised it all went wrong.”

Helen remembers it well, the day of Peggy’s wedding—the day Steve had made a dramatic return from his military stint to win her back, and the day she’d turn her back on him to marry someone else. The day she walked out of Erinsborough and away from her childhood sweetheart for good.

“I thought things were going well with Daniel? Every time we spoke, you seemed so happy.”

“I was putting a mask on it. I tried, I really did. That was the whole point of moving away with him—fresh start, new life, make a go of things. But from the beginning, it wasn’t right. He accused me of being distant, of not letting him get close to me—told me that I was still doubting my choice. No matter how often I told him that I didn’t want Steve, that I loved Daniel, that I was committed to him, he wouldn’t believe it. And eventually—” She pauses, licks her lips, then presses them firmly together. It’s an old habit, smoothing the lipstick out so she’s outwardly immaculate. “He found someone else. Not that he thought to tell me that.” There’s fire in her words now, but Helen recognises the hurt and betrayal underneath the anger. “No, she was the one who had to break it to me.”

Helen idly wonders if Big Ange has some family members in the town Peggy moved away to, who might be interested in a casual leg breaking. “So you came home.”

Peggy gives a bitter laugh. “After several arguments, a reconciliation, and a messy break-up when I realised he’d gone back to her. Yeah, I came home. Head between my legs.”

“Peg, there’s nothing to be ashamed of. You made the best choice you could at the time.”
“Best choice for who? It wasn’t the best choice for Steve—I broke his heart.” Tears have started falling. Finally, Helen seems to have got through the tough outer shell, the facade her friend was always famous for. “Wasn’t the best choice for Daniel either, because he was right, he wasn’t my first choice and never could be. I thought it was the best choice for me, but when I think about it, I was just trying to prove something. Prove to Steve that I’d moved on, or prove that he should never have left me behind. I don’t know. But in the long run, it didn’t help anybody. It only proved that I should not have married Daniel, but I burned my bridges too thoroughly with Steve too.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t be friends. All those years together, how much you meant to each other, shouldn’t be thrown away. Not when a little time and distance means you’ve both had the chance to heal.”

“No, Steve and I can be many things, but friends isn’t one of them. We don’t work like that together.”

“Still, if you’re back in Erinsborough, you’re bound to run into each other eventually. You’ll need to face him sooner or later.

“I know, I know. Later is my preference, though the world has proved often enough that it doesn’t give a damn about what I want.”

Wanda’s on the treadmill, staring at the flatscreen TV which fills the wall above the machines. Sometimes they show soap operas with subtitles on, but today they have music videos playing. Slim, willowy girls gyrate around a pool to a beat she can’t hear.

_I’ll never be like them. No matter how much weight I lose, I’ll never look like that._

Not far away, another willowy figure paces the gym floor, keeping a watchful eye over the patrons. Sharon’s hair today is sleek and glossy, her flawless skin clear of make-up. Lately, Wanda’s skin has started to look sallow, and no amount of water seems to help with that. Now, though, she knows she’s red-faced and sweaty. Still not exactly the stuff of desire.

Another figure stops close to Sharon, and Wanda doesn’t need to turn around to know who it is. No one else’s shoulders are that broad, but it’s like she’s developed radar for him as well. Anytime he’s near by, her attention switches to him, drawn like a magnet that, in Wanda’s opinion, needs realigning. Because it’s no good mooning over him, not when he casts a glance around the gym for watchful eyes before grabbing Sharon’s hand and planting a kiss on the back of it.

Wanda’s not watching this in the chrome reflection of the treadmill’s bars like a creeper. She really isn’t.

“Steve!” Sharon hisses, pushing him away, but there’s a playfulness to it that proves she’s not really upset. She likes the attention, even if she doesn’t want to make a thing of it at work. Wanda could solve that problem—get the pair of them in trouble, because Tony would do it if it meant pleasing Wanda—but he doesn’t want to hurt Steve. She just wishes it would stop hurting to watch them together.

She turns her attention back to the screen. The colours have dimmed, the new video lit in weird grey tones.

Oh.

The world tumbles from one breath to the next. One blink, and she’s staring up at the ceiling tiles, pain lancing down her forearm.
“I’ll call an ambulance,” someone is saying.

“No ambulance,” Wanda manages to reply, the words surprisingly firm in her ears despite the way she feels like she’s swaddled in cotton wool. “No hospital.”

“But Wanda—” and the next words come in clearer, like a radio that’s been tuned properly, Steve suddenly extremely close. “—you fell pretty badly and we’re not sure if you hit your head.”

“I didn’t.” She’d know, but there’s no pain in her head like there is in her arm. There are hands on her—around her—holding her, she thinks.

“—You still need checking over.” She thinks that’s Sharon.

No. She knows that’s a bad idea. Tony will see, and that will be the end of her little adventure in adulting.

“Told Helen not to fuss—” she tuts, pushing herself upright, ignoring the hollowness inside and the spinning of the room. The hands dislodge themselves, and she takes the time to investigate her arm. It’s…grazed? The skin is an angry red. She must have banged it on the way down, or the caught it on the belt of the treadmill.

“Helen?” Steve asks. “What’s she got to do with this?”

“Maybe we should take her to see Helen,” Sharon suggests, “if she’s refusing the hospital. She can help.”

“Right. And if she can’t, Sam’s home.”

“I’m not a child,” Wanda protests, but the hands are back, lifting her off the ground. Steve has her cradled against his chest, and it’s everything she ever wanted, but terrible at the same time.

“It’s this or the hospital—” he tells her.

“And if Helen says you need to go there, we are,” Sharon says, trailing behind them as Steve dashes out of the gym with Wanda scooped in his arms.

There’s a thrum in the air, an annoying low buzzing that sounds like a drunk bee somewhere in the distance. Helen does her best to ignore it, focusing on Peggy, who has wiped away her tears, fixed her make-up, and now looks every inch the old Hollywood starlet again.

“Maybe this is the change you need,” Helen says, sliding the plate of biscuits across the table. “Coming back to Erinsborough.”

“Really? Because it feels a lot like slinking home with my tail between my legs.”

“There’s a reason you came back here, Peg. If you wanted a fresh start you could have gone anywhere and started over.”

“I’ll admit, Erinsborough has its appeal. It’s home, for one thing. It feels safe, even if I am spending all my time at the moment acting like I’m avoiding paparazzi or a stalker.”

“And Steve’s here.” Because Helen can’t help prodding at that chink in Peggy’s armour.

“No, that’s not safe at all. That’s bloody terrifying.”
“Because you still love him.”

Peggy shrugs. “Maybe. Not sure I’ll ever really stop, but I’m not sure I’ll ever forgive him for running off to join the army and abandoning me. He wasn’t the only one grieving…”

The thrum is getting louder, and it’s familiar in a way Helen can’t place. She reaches over and gives Peggy’s hand a squeeze. “That’s one reason to come back. It’s close to your mum.”

“I’ve been able to leave fresh flowers for her at least. Actually, I think Steve has been too. Probably leaves them when he goes to see his mum.”

It made sense. They were buried side by side, best friends even in the grave.

“What’s happened?”

She prays that Peggy has heard the noises and fled further into the house, but instead turns to find her friend hovering on the doorstep, taking in the scene with wide eyes. To Helen’s surprise, it’s not Steve she’s looking at.

“Sharon?” She’s confused, but then so is Helen. When did they meet?

Sharon freezes, her gaze flitting between Peggy and Steve, and if Helen didn’t know better she’d swear the woman looks guilty.
“Peggy?” Steve’s question is much quieter, and there are a million emotions bundled into those two short syllables. “What—wh—how do you know my girlfriend?”

It’s Peggy’s turn to still, taking a beat to distill her conflicting emotions, her own confusion and dismay dripping away from her face to be replaced by pure, cold fury. “How do you know my cousin?”

Works inspired by this one: Outback Retreat by ibelieveinturtles

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!