Stay

by thegraytigress

Summary

On the surface, he's a disabled war vet and she's his new neighbor. On the surface, they're both okay, surviving, working, living. But beneath his apathy, he's broken, bleeding, and drowning in his pain and loneliness. Underneath her smiles, she's lost, terrified, and trying to find a new start. Maybe it's fate that she moves in and he finds her. And maybe falling in love is their chance to heal.

Notes

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RATING: E (for language, violence, adult situations, descriptions of rape, sexual content)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: So this is the first real non-powered AU that I've written. I'm pretty excited about it, the world-building and new takes on familiar faces and all that, and I hope
all of you are, too. This story is inspired by this lovely post by missingthebetterhalfofme (thanks for letting me write this, by the way!). Considering the subject matter, I need to put a couple warnings up front: this story is dark and quite heavy. It's focuses on some potentially triggering material, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, past rape, and past domestic abuse. If that upsets you, please don't read it. I'll mark the chapters that explore some of the darker parts of what I just mentioned as further warning. Also, the major character death tag applies to past events, but I thought I better put it on here just to be safe.

This is Romanogers but not Romanogers like I have written it before. It's also a very different take on Steve than I normally do in particular, so be advised about that. And, like I said, use your discretion. Also, I do my research, but I'm by no means an expert on Steve's situation in particular, so if you spot mistakes, please let me know.

This fic is a gift to the amazing faith2nyc (who is also betaing and doing a lot of the artwork), and it's dedicated to anyone anywhere who's had to live through tough experiences like these. I hope I can do the subject matter justice.

With all that said, please enjoy! :-)

“Funny you’re the broken one but I’m the only one who needed saving…
’Cause when you never see the light, it’s hard to know which one of us is caving.
Not really sure how to feel about it.
Something in the way you move
Makes me feel like I can’t live without you
And it takes me all the way.
I want you to stay.”
– Rihanna featuring Mikky Ekko, “Stay”
“Prepare a list for what you need
Before you sign away the deed ’cause it’s not going to stop.
It’s not going to stop.
It’s not going to stop
Till you wise up.
No, it’s not going to stop
Till you wise up.
No, it’s not going to stop
So just give up.”
– Aimee Mann, “Wise Up”

The alarm goes off.

Steve’s not asleep. He hasn’t been for hours. Still, his arm is clumsy, his fingers numb and uncoordinated, as he reaches and fumbles to turn off the buzzing. It takes a couple tries, and not just because his body doesn’t follow his brain’s directions as well as it used to. He gets frustrated and eventually bangs the damn thing into submission.

Then silence.

Sighing, he rolls from his stomach to his back, looking up at the smooth, white ceiling of his bedroom. The last shadows of dawn are stretching there. He’s watched them get smaller and smaller, shrinking minute by minute, hour by hour, from the long, deep swatches of the middle of the night to these faint gray ghosts. He closes his eyes. They burn with exhaustion, and he aches all over with fatigue. Another sleepless night. Another one. They bleed together now, one after another after another, so many in an endless parade of insomnia. He can’t remember the last time he’s slept eight hours straight. A year. Maybe more. It’s long enough ago that he’s forgotten what the label of well-rested feels like. He grunts a little chuckle. His brain, making up for the months his body languished. God has a sense of humor apparently. A shitty one but one nonetheless.

He breathes a moment, focusing on that because doing much more seems too strenuous. Idly he thinks his sheets could stand a wash. He can’t smell the fabric softener anymore, and he feels… damp. Sweat from another nightmare he’s not going to think about. When he woke up at whatever time that was (2:36 am, his brain supplies), he was soaked through with it. The bed still feels unpleasant, his t-shirt sticking to his skin and the sheets sticking to it. Laundry. That seems like a decent plan for today. It’s Saturday, so no work. The alarm on the weekends is something his therapist suggested, something to help keep his body on a decent regimen. He has tons of things like that, little tools that are supposed to help him live a normal life. His life, a series of schedules and reminders and devices to help him recover.

Bullshit.

He opens his eyes again at the sound of loping feet as they click and pat on the hardwoods of the hallway and bedroom. There’s no chance to roll over; the bed dips and suddenly there’s a warm,
wet nose in his face followed by a rough tongue laving his cheeks. “Ugh,” he groans. Max is right there, practically pinning him down with his bulk. He’s a big dog, some sort of lab mix with white fur that’s thick and a tad longer than typical for this breed. Steve gives up on pushing him away, instead scooting over a bit so Max has room to lay right next to him. Those huge, brown eyes are watching him from where the dog’s laying his head on his shoulder. Max is always up first thing. At least he greets the day happy. But then he’s a dog; life is simple to him. Kibble and walks and smells and excitement over new people. Curling up to Steve all the time like the two of them are attached at the hip. Steve dismisses the bitter thoughts outright; being the way he is sucks, but it’s not Max’s fault. Max has been nothing but good to him, loyal and loving and simple, and that’s something he knows he sorely needs, something that, yet again, his therapist recommended. Sam was the one to get him the dog as a present last year. He’s been with Steve since he was a puppy.

Steve rubs Max’s ears and tries not to delve too much into it all. It’s been a weird thing, these last two years. Sometimes his brain seems to go on its own, bombarding him with things, some of which he can’t stand to think and remember and others just random and almost nonsensical. Other times he can’t make himself think, like it all just goes blank and his mind is disconnected from his body and from the world. No matter how he slices it, though, things are constantly betraying him. It makes for his sleepless nights and his difficult days. Sometimes… Just getting out of bed is such a chore he doesn’t want to try.

Having Max panting and licking and nosing him helps, though. It really does. So does the noise from the wall behind his bed. It’s a shared wall with the adjacent apartment, his bedroom butting up against what he’s always assumed is theirs. The guy who used to live there, Mr. Phillips, relocated to DC a couple weeks back, and whoever’s moving in is doing it today. It’s not a lot of racket, but these folks got a really early start, and he’s been listening to muffled voices and clanks and bumps and thuds maybe an hour now. The vent down to the left is where the noise is coming in the most, a direct conduit in a sense between the two rooms. He supposes he should be annoyed at all disturbance on a Saturday morning, but he can’t make himself care. As he picks up on a woman’s voice, his hand slows in in his petting. Max whines unhappily, looking at him with huge, pathetic dog eyes. “Alright,” he consoles, pushing him aside. “Alright.” Off go the sweaty, stale sheets and the comforter, and he levers himself out of bed. Things don’t work quite right after his injuries; the lady who does his physical therapy tells him he’s made tremendous progress, but he never quite feels it. He’s stiff and limping when he pushes himself up.

Down the hall in his apartment the noise is much quieter. He carries the dirty bedding to the washing machine and dumps it in. After adding detergent and turning it on, he goes back to his bedroom. Max follows him everywhere, his tail wagging, and he watches Steve expectantly as Steve stops and listens again. Definitely a woman’s voice. Something about moving the bed? There’s a loud whine of a big piece of furniture moving, and it thuds against the shared wall ominously. Phillips was always very quiet, an old, gruff, ornery guy who served in Vietnam and always wanted to talk military with Steve at a time in his life when military was the last thing he wanted to be open about. Truth be told, Steve’s kind of glad he’s gone.

He goes off to the bathroom. Runs through the routine on automatic pilot. It’s easier this way, helps him keep his mind clear and his goals obvious. He showers methodically, deciding it’s too much to waste away under the hot water today. He gets out. Dries off. Stands in front of the vanity and wipes the condensation away. He hates looking at his reflection, but there never seems any avoiding it. Sometimes the face that stares back scares him. He doesn’t recognize the pale skin, the blue eyes that seem lusterless and deadened, the beard he never feels like shaving. The dirty blond hair that’s always messy and has grown too long considering the neat, proper, officer’s haircut he used to sport. The scars. Those aren’t on his face (well, save for the one barely visible on his temple that goes far back under his hair along his skull). The obvious ones are lower, across his chest and his back. Thin ropes of corded flesh, silvery and textured, where his skin used to be.
smooth and unblemished. He never looks at them. His eyes see, he supposes, but the images
never make it to his brain, never manifest as anything other than sensory input. No emotional
connection. No memories and no deeper meaning. Detachment. His therapist talks to him about
that too, about how distancing himself from his traumas is a self-defense mechanism that’s in the
end doing nothing to help him. His therapists and doctors have a lot of opinions about everything,
and Steve’s not sure he cares.

He brushes his teeth. Quickly considers shaving that day like he does most days before dismissing
the idea just as quickly. Combs his hair. Today’s fairly decent already; he’s gotten this far without
losing motivation, so that’s something. Back in his room, Max is waiting on his bare mattress, tail
wagging and pink tongue flopping. Steve goes to his closet and finds a t-shirt and a pair of jeans.
Definitely laundry day. He’s made more of a concerted effort not to be such a slob. Again with the
strategies; staying organized, sticking to schedules, regulating his life… It helps. He’s better than
he used to be, he thinks, but today’s barely started.

Dressed and feeling fairly decent despite having gotten no sleep, he heads back out to the main area
of his apartment. It’s a nice place. Sam helped him get set up here after the army discharged him.
It has hardwoods throughout and tall ceilings, spacious with a decently sized kitchen, a big living
room, a spare bedroom that he’s turned into an art studio, and another bathroom. Out here the
walls are whitewashed cinderblocks, which gives it a bit of an industrial feel. As he appraises it,
Steve thinks he still hasn’t really made it a home despite having been there for a couple years. He
makes good enough money and he’s drawing a sizeable check from the government, so he’s able to
live in a nice building not far from where he grew up in Brooklyn. But he hasn’t done much to fill
the place with stuff. He’s got drawings on the walls here and there, but it’s all for work. The
furniture is mundane and serviceable, but he got it all secondhand. There aren’t pictures or
tchotchkes or accents. Nothing of him. Just white walls and wood floors and dull tans and taupe
and beiges. A blank canvas, he supposes. No, that’s too optimistic. An empty canvas, and the
artist is too worn and disenfranchised to fill it.

That’s disgustingly pessimistic and bleak, but it’s true.

Max is hungry. Steve heads over to the kitchen and fills his bowl with kibble. The dog goes to
town, entirely satisfied, and Steve pours his own cereal. He doesn’t bother with coffee even
though he feels like he needs it. Caffeine doesn’t always sit well with his meds, and he doesn’t
want to deal with it today. So it’s Cheerios and milk and a glass of orange juice (he needs to get
groceries too, milk and meat and juice and a load of other things, but then his fridge always looks
this spartan, so that’s nothing new). He eats in silence at the kitchen table. Across the way on the
counter, his phone buzzes. He doesn’t get up to get it. It buzzes again. And again. Someone’s
texting him. Sam. Has to be. He doesn’t want to look. Sam’s going to want to do something, and
Steve’s not feeling up to it. He loves Sam like his brother; the guy’s been nothing but wonderful to
him since they met right after Steve woke up Stateside. But he doesn’t have the energy or interest
to be dragged to this event or that get-together. Sam means well, but it’s too hard.

So he finishes his breakfast. Puts the bowl and the spoon in the sink. Then he refills his glass with
water and lines up his meds. All of them. So damn many. He needs to pick up his refills, he
realizes as he notes the nearly empty bottles. It would be nice not to, to just pretend this is the end
of them, because he hates taking them. It’s not just the side effects like the tiredness (when he’s
already so tired all the time) and the dizziness (which already assails him off and on from his head
injury) and the upset stomach (eating some days? To hell with it). It’s the dependence on them.
He went off to Afghanistan strong and standing, fighting, on his own two feet. Now he needs a
dozen pills a day to keep functioning. Pain medications. Anticonvulsants. Antidepressants.
Antibiotics. Anti, anti, anti. Again with his body betraying him. It’s almost constant, like the war
he fought and lost overseas has somehow been internalized and now he’s battling his broken brain
and his equally broken body.

At least he came back, though. He knows he shouldn’t be so damn ungrateful. Thus, with a grimace, he downs today’s round of medications and hopes they do their job without causing him too much grief.

His phone vibrates again. Steve puts his meds away in the kitchen cabinet and finally goes to answer it. Yep. A whole slew of texts from Sam. “Hey, man. You up?” Then: “I know you’re up, dude. Come with me to take Melly to the dog park.” Then: “We can stop by your office and drop off your stuff.” Then: “Meet you in front of my building in 30. You better show.” Steve sighs, smiling a little despite himself. “Wanna go for a walk?” he says to Max, and Max does, of course. Walking the dog is another of his scheduled tasks, so it seems like as good a plan as any.

He grabs Max’s leash and gets him situated. Then it’s a quick moment in his studio, where he gathers the ad copy he’s been working on for Mr. Fury. Fury’s ad firm picked up a bunch of clients of late who are into vintage drawings and sketches to sell their wares. They’re mostly local restaurants and boutiques, but it’s nice to do something other than digital logos and the like. What he does isn’t flashy but it’s a steady job and something he can manage without too much trouble. Back in high school, he thought once or twice about becoming an artist. He knows he has talent. But becoming a soldier was more of a passion, and he shelved his charcoals and paints in favor of a gun. A mistake, as it turns out.

Sure enough, down the way the new neighbors are moving in. The door to apartment 4B is wide open, and there are boxes piled high outside it. He hears women’s voices, a couple in fact, one higher-pitched and talking a mile a minute about where to put things and the other more soft-spoken and timid. That’s the voice he heard before. He stands at his door, watching down the way, but he doesn’t catch a glimpse of either of them.

“How’s it going?” Scott casually asks, taking a sip from a thermos.

Steve’s really grown to hate that question. How are you? How’s it going? You doing okay? No, no, no. But he stifles his irritation at the fake pleasantries – fake because he’s not sure anyone can actually understand his life now. He knows Scott and Sam and his friends do care, but there’s only so much caring one can do. Frankly, he’s at the point where he’d rather people just not ask and accept an unspoken description of surviving. That’s what he’s doing. Surviving. Regardless, he settles on something more normal for an answer. “Alright.” He gets himself untangled from Max, ignoring the pain in his right hip that almost makes his leg seize. “New neighbors?”
Scott looks down the hallway at the commotion. There’s a guy there too now, maybe in his late thirties with spikey brown hair and the beginnings of goatee framing his mouth. He’s carrying in boxes, but he stops to look around with a sharp eye. He seems wary, suspicious, and not at all comfortable with Steve and Scott watching from across the way. He says nothing, though, and hefts his box inside. “Yeah,” Scott slowly drawls. “Haven’t seen much yet. I think there’s just one, though. One of the girls. Hey, you wanna—” He stops himself as he punches Steve lightly in the bicep. Immediately he drops his arm with a wince. “Damn, man. You been working out again?”

Steve inwardly groans. Again? He’s never stopped. That’s another thing he’s been told to do by his physical therapist. Exercise. Hit the gym. Go a few rounds with the bag. He’s pretty sure she didn’t mean doing it as much as he does it, but whatever. It’s fine. It helps. Maybe it’s a little obsessive, and it damn well hurts sometimes and probably doesn’t do him any favors with his other problems, but it’s comforting and mind-numbing. His obsession with the burn and ache of exerting himself is what got him walking again last year, and he’s found it cathartic since. “Yeah.”

Scott tips his head and thankfully doesn’t press. “Anyway, you wanna stop by for dinner tonight? Hope’s making… Eh, I don’t remember what she said. Something good. There’s plenty.”

Grimacing, Steve shakes his head. “I don’t know. I have…” Nothing. “…work to do.”

“On a Saturday night?” Scott says incredulously. “C’mon.”

Truth be told, Scott doesn’t know everything about him, at least nothing beyond the basics. Steve thinks everyone who knows knows that much. But the specifics? No one outside his therapist knows that. There are parts of it he never talks about, can’t even remember (not that he tries). So even the threat of having to weasel his way out of a casual conversation that ventures too close to what happened to him is too much. “Nah. I think I’ll pass. Thanks, though.”

Scott looks genuinely disappointed, and Steve genuinely feels a little like a selfish asshole for turning him down. He’s gotten used to that guilt, so he’s able to shut it off before it even has a chance to fester and drive him into regretting his decision enough to change his mind. Scott sighs. “Alright. Offer stands, though, so you know.”

It’s hard to fake a smile when you’re drowning alone like he is and being so goddamn stupid as to throw the life preserver right back at the person trying to reach you, but Steve manages. He always manages. “Sure.”

“Come on, sweet pea. Dance is waiting.”

Cassie takes her father’s hand and waves as they head down the steps. “Bye, Max!”

It’s probably stupid and childish, but Steve waits until they’re gone before following. He casts a look at the open door of 4B once more, but the standoffish guy is gone and the two women must be deeper inside. He can’t hear them anymore. Sighing himself, he grips Max’s leash tighter, adjusts his bookbag, and heads down the steps.

It’s a beautiful summer day outside, early June so not too hot but warm enough that Steve regrets not wearing shorts. He fishes his sunglasses out of his bag immediately and slides them on before the brightness can bother him. It never takes much to trigger things, migraines or worse, so he’s careful to limit exposure. Just going outside is damn difficult somedays. Today seems to still be cooperating, so he chances a few deeper breaths of the humid air before gently tugging Max’s leash and heading down the sidewalk. Flatbush is busy with the fine morning, cars thick on the streets, vendors out and already selling, people everywhere as they go about the day’s activities.
This is a good area, not too far from where he grew up. His old apartment building and high school are within walking distance in fact. It was comforting to come home after being away for so long, first at West Point and then deployed overseas. His first tour in Afghanistan lasted for two years, his second cut short, but then he was down in DC for quite some time recovering before returning to New York. All in all, he was away for almost eight years. Sometimes things still seem different to him, new but blunted around the edges and dull, and he knows part of that is because of the way his brain works now. It’s frustrating, that things don’t quite… fit together like they used to. He has both focal brain trauma (which was “repaired” by surgery, or at least treated) and diffuse brain damage (which is permanent and bordering on intractable, though his neurologist isn’t ready to surrender on that one). There are a bunch of long and complicated terms for his condition, post-traumatic epilepsy and temporal lobe damage and complex partial seizures and aphasia. It all boils down to things never being right anymore. Sometimes he can’t come up with words he needs, though this isn’t as much of a hindrance now as it was when first woke up. Sometimes his memories are screwy. Sometimes he can stare at a problem for hours and not be able to make heads or tails of it, and other times he’s as good at things as he used to be (and he used to be so good – he graduated top of his class from high school and West Point). His situation is serious enough to be considered disabled but not serious enough to have him stuck in a hospital the rest of his days. It’s a fucking struggle, is what it is, and he’s not always sure he’s winning it.

And it’s not just all that, though that’s bad enough. It’s that he’s different. He left this country young and bright and raring to do some good, to fight to protect people. To stop terrorists and help the innocents forced to be their victims find safety and justice. He left the perfect picture of a young, strong soldier with his best friend and his company at his side, and he came back alone and shattered. He doesn’t see things the way he used to. He knows he doesn’t, that the optimism he once had is long gone. It always feels like there’s this nightmare at bay, not just all his problems but all the damage. He can’t escape it, the darkness in his head. Seeing what he’s seen, doing what he’s done… He can’t just go back to this normal life and these normal places with their normal people and be normal. He was upset about that once, when the shock of reintegrating into civilian life was overwhelming, when it really sunk in that there’s no going back. Now he’s too tired to be bothered anymore.

It doesn’t take long to walk to Sam’s place. He lives just fifteen minutes away, closer to Prospect Park. Max has learned to keep to himself around strangers; he doesn’t approach people they don’t know on the sidewalk. He keys off of Steve, who walks silently and steadily without making eye contact. They get to Sam’s building without bother, and Sam’s right there waiting by the stoop. “Hey, man,” he greets, as sunny and cheery as always.

Max gets really excited seeing Melly. He should. He was part of Melly’s litter. They sniff each other and the puppy tendencies come stampeding to the surface. Steve holds the leash tighter and keeps Max from plowing Sam over. “Hi.”

Sam knows him too well. Sometimes Steve thinks he has ESP or something. They met at the VA here in Brooklyn right after Steve returned from DC two years ago. Sam’s a VA counselor, though not Steve’s, not strictly. He was part of the Air Force, but after serving two tours in Iraq and losing his wingman in a pararescue mission gone wrong, he retired and picked up his current job instead. He leads support groups and therapy sessions and does one on one with vets having trouble coming back in civilian life. He’s ridiculously good at what he does. Perceptive. Compassionate. Loyal and supportive but with a zero tolerance policy for bullshit. He’s a really good guy, a really good friend, and Steve knows he’s lucky they found each other.

But damn he sees everything. Hears everything. Can hear Steve’s sad state from one word and see it from his posture. “Shit, dude,” he says. “Did you sleep last night?”
Steve doesn’t bother lying. “No.”

Sam gets that look he gets. It’s a frown, a mixture of frustration and disapproval all tied up with concern. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

The furrow of worry gets even deeper. “When do you see Banner again?”

“Tuesday.” Tuesdays and Thursdays, five to six o’clock. Twice a week until he was “cured”. That was bitter bullshit he made up himself a while ago, that this is all working toward a cure. It’s a direct contradiction to what Doctor Banner himself said their first session at the VA. “You’ll never be cured, Captain Rogers, because there is no cure. And there doesn’t need to be. Accepting that goes a long way to accepting life as it is now. I’m here to help you learn to live that life in a different way.”

All he said to that was a terse, tight, “Call me Steve.”

Sam wants to press him, though Steve can’t imagine why. It’s the same sorry stuff over and over again. Every night. And he’s never interested in talking about it. It’s not perfunctory that Sam asks, and you’d think he’d get the picture by now. He can practically feel Sam’s concern like it’s a tangible force pushing. “You gotta wise up,” he finally says. “Bottling it up’s–”

“–not healthy,” Steve finishes. Yeah, same old song and dance. He pinches the bridge of his nose, unable to tell if his mounting headache is from the light or not sleeping or being irritated at Sam. Whatever the cause, he hopes it stops. Being laid up with another migraine isn’t his idea of a good day, and a good day is what he wants now that he’s tasted it. “Look, I know, alright? I’ll talk to Banner. Can we go?” That comes off harsher than he means for it to, but Sam doesn’t seem to take offense. Instead there’s that damn scrutinizing stare again, and Steve’s flesh crawls under like it always does. He feels like shit for not being strong enough to deal with his problems on his own. He feels exposed and inadequate and different. Like his issues are anchoring him back in the war. He knows he has difficulty (serious difficulty) talking about it, but for God’s sake, how the hell does rehashing it all make it better? It can’t change the past. Nothing can. Living a different way. He just wants to let it go. He sighs. “I’m fine. I’ll work it out.”

Sam concedes somewhat, sliding his own sunglasses on and tightening his grip on Melly’s leash. They start down the sidewalk toward Prospect Park, Max and Melly leading the way down well-trodden paths. They’re quiet for all of a second before Sam finally does press. “You don’t suppose this has to do with Phil Coulson?”

Steve closes his eyes. “What do you think?”

“You don’t have to do it.”

“I already told him no.”

“But it might make you feel better to talk–”

“Sam, Christ. Stop. Please?” His voice sounds hoarse and desperate. Sam regards him worriedly, apology bright in his eyes. No, he’s not Steve’s counselor. Or Steve’s therapist. He’s Steve’s friend, his closest now, and that means not preaching all the time about healthy approaches to handling his PTSD. There’s a time and place for that, but right now it feels like nagging.

Sam recognizes that, so he backs off. “Sorry. I didn’t mean–”
“It’s fine,” Steve says quickly. “Just… can we talk about something else? Anything?”

That turns out to be a mistake, an open invitation for Sam to do what Sam always does: try to hook Steve up. Sam’s not obnoxious about it by any means. It’s always phrased in such a way that’s noninvasive, simply that Steve should come out with him and a few of his friends (he’s met Sam’s friends – most of them are vets, too, and they’re all nice if not a little rough around the edges. Military life in a combat zone tends to do that). Sam always has an invitation. Steve should join them for drinks at this bar or for dinner at that restaurant or come see the Yankees or shoot some hoops or something. And then there’s always a girl attached, someone from the VA (the girl at the front desk is a popular choice, and Steve has to admit she’s a beauty. Long legs and dark skin and gorgeous eyes. Truth be told, he thinks Sam’s sweet on her) or someone from Sam’s building or someone from any number of shops and offices around Brooklyn. It’s hard to keep coming up with ways to say no. Steve knows he’s not ready for anything like that, not yet. Not now. Maybe not ever again.

So Sam goes on as they walk, this time about a woman named Lillian who’s an accountant for some small tech start-up and who’s related to one of his Air Force buddies. Steve somewhat tunes him out as he talks about her, though not just because going out with her is never happening. He’s thinking about Phil Coulson. The guy’s damn persistent, Steve has to give him that. Over a dozen emails, texts, and calls over the last two weeks. He’s over-eager and maybe a tactless because of it. However, he seems like genuinely good person. Mostly. He’s a journalist working on a documentary about Captain America, the ridiculous moniker with which Steve was branded by his company and the media during his first tour. *Captain America.* Hero of the troops, hero to the peoples of Afghanistan and the United States. Somehow all that doesn’t amount to much now. Steve’s not interested in talking about it, not about how he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in Afghanistan before he was wounded, not about the time he spent there. Coulson’s equally invested in exploring the bravery of the Afghan citizens who saved his life; truth be told, Steve thinks he’s almost more interested in that, and the thought he may use Steve’s story for some sort of political purpose isn’t helping him relax about contributing. It’s pretty obvious Coulson feels he doesn’t have a film without Steve’s participation. He’s not harassing, per se, but it’s enough that Steve is considering blocking his number.

Of course, it’d probably help in putting a stop to this if he actually said no. Like a real, hard and fast, firm refusal. He wasn’t being honest with Sam about it. He told Coulson a bunch of things, mostly noncommittal *maybes* and *let me think about it.* That was a few weeks ago, and he’s not actively considering Coulson’s project (or even thinking about it), but his therapist keeps telling him his brain will attempt to process his grief and trauma with or without his consent. He supposes it makes sense, that Coulson’s mere entrance into his life with all of his “your story should be told, Captain” and “you’re a hero who deserves so much recognition” and “there’s something the world needs to understand, and your words can help us understand it”… All of that probably did trigger this recent bout of nightmares and insomnia. He feels like a moron for not realizing it before.

“So she’s coming tonight, too. She’s just the kind of girl you’d like. Smart. Pretty. She’s got her shit together.”

Steve returns to the conversation, shoving his thoughts aside. His head throbs. “Thus implying she’s a good match for someone who doesn’t?” He means that to tease, but it doesn’t come out that way.

Sam doesn’t take the bait. “You’re in, right?”

“What?”
Tonight. Pizza at my place. Lillian’s coming. Are you in?” Steve doesn’t answer, and Sam smiles enthusiastically. “Come on, man. You need to get out more. It’s not smart, holing yourself up all the time. And we’re not even talking about a real date here. It’s just a bunch of us having some food and drinking.”

“Can’t drink.” He’s been told that by every doctor he’s ever seen since the coma.

Sam’s grin falls a bit, seeing the excuse for what it is. “I do have soda and water and whatever else you’d want.” Steve still doesn’t answer. Max licks his hand as they stop at a cross-walk. “Come on. You can hang out, talk with her, check her out… No commitments. No nothing.” Sam’s not above cajoling or begging. “It’d be really good for you.”

The ache gets worse. The park’s ahead, green and glowing with the bright sun, alive and flush with people. For a moment as they pause there at the street, he thinks about going home. Sam won’t stop him. The migraine he feels coming on is excuse enough.

But he doesn’t. There’s nothing at home, just an empty apartment and work and nightmares. Maybe Sam’s right. Maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe he shouldn’t try to get out of this one. Maybe… Wise up. “Alright.”

The dog park’s fine. It always is. Max and Melly run around off their leashes in the wide, open field with the other pooches out for some weekend fun. Sam and Steve watch, Sam throwing a pair of balls he has stashed in his bag, and they thankfully talk about other stuff. It’s nice hearing Sam chatter. And he’s something of a hypocrite, though that word is so much meaner than Steve likes. Sam has all the same problems Steve has. The same problems that a lot of vets do. Sam lost his best friend, Riley, in Iraq. He suffers from nightmares and hypervigilance and flashbacks and all that wonderful shit, too. He’s just better about handling it. Working with other vets isn’t just a good gig for him; it’s therapeutic in a sense (and Steve thinks it’s a good way to divert attention from his own issues. At least it’s a noble and helpful way rather than pounding punching bags to hell in an empty gym). There are things Sam doesn’t talk about either, not easily at any rate. And there are boundaries they silently and easily established a few weeks into their friendship, Sam losing Riley being one and what happened to Steve another. Not that Sam won’t talk to him if he wants to or that he won’t listen if Steve ever needs to talk. It’s just easier this way. Sam will push Steve to get out, to live more, to try and find new interests and a new love of things, but he never pushes Steve into processing the past any more than a gentle nudge or two.

So the conversation keeps to the baseball season, the Yankees and the Mets and the Dodgers (Steve’s a little old school about it – his grandfather was a big Dodgers fan when they still played at Ebbet’s Field, and he complained about the evil events in 1957 when the Dodgers moved to LA until his dying day, so Steve was well-versed in Yankees hate and Dodgers love). After that, they talk about the upcoming football season, but all the New York teams suck, so neither of them have much hope for it. Honestly, Steve’s not up on the recent trades and picks and maneuvering in either league (this is yet another thing he’s just not all that interested in anymore), but Sam simply fills him in as they go and so easily makes it seem like Steve’s an equal partner in their conversation. Sam’s great like that.

After the dogs have run themselves out, they head back to Sam’s place. It’s getting close enough to lunch time that they stop at a little deli not far from his apartment building and buy a couple of sandwiches. At Sam’s apartment, which is nice and very clean, they eat and water the dogs before leaving them behind to run some errands. Sam doesn’t need to do this, to keep him company, but Steve’s learned after two years that there’s no sense in trying to dissuade him sometimes. Besides, it’s not all bad. Sam’s keeping him distracted from the migraine he feels brewing and the little bit
of queasiness he’s got going on (he’s not sure if it’s the antiepileptic drugs he takes, or AEDs as is the parlance of his flock of doctors, or the antidepressants that bother his stomach, but it’s not like figuring out matters. It’s not like he can stop taking the AEDs especially). Thus he doesn’t even bother with a protest as Sam tags along with him to the ad agency. That’s further away, so they take the subway to Avenue M. Fury’s not there, but Jasper Sitwell, his administrative assistant, is holding down the fort, so to speak. He’s been waiting for Steve to arrive with his work. Jasper’s alright, a bit of a stuck-up prick sometimes, but he’s glad Steve’s there on time so he’s in a good mood. It doesn’t take long for him to transfer the files over and gather the hard copy Steve’s made. He’s brusque and clipped and very eager to get done and go home, which is fine by Steve. Small talk is just a pain.

With that done, Sam and Steve head back north. They stop at the store right outside of Sam’s building, and Steve buys the few things he needs for himself. Sam’s talking more about Lillian, and Steve’s not paying attention. He should have made a list, because he can’t remember things like this for shit anymore. Does he need milk? He knows he had some when he poured his cereal, but he can’t recall for the life of him how much was left. Milk… yes? Butter? Eggs? He knows he started the laundry, but was there detergent left when he started the washer? Trying to think seems to make his head ache more, and he can feel himself getting frustrated as he stands in front of the dairy section. He’ll have to go home, go see what he needs, because he can’t remember a fucking simple list of things from a few hours ago…

“Steve,” Sam says. He grabs a half-gallon of a milk and a small carton of eggs and a half-pound of butter. “Easy. Don’t get worked up. Just buy a little. Chances are what you need is stuck up in your head somewhere, so your instincts are probably right. And if it ends up that you don’t need it, it’s fine. Don’t stress.”

His mother was austere. If there’s one thing Sarah Rogers hated, it was wasting food. He has the money now, though, so he bites the fleshy part of his cheek hard as Sam loads his basket. God, he feels like a fucking invalid sometimes. A failure. Permanent brain damage. “Thanks,” he manages.

Sam nods. They gather a few more things, some chips and soda for Sam’s get-together that night. Then it’s paying, which takes longer than it should because Steve stares at the bills in his wallet and the change in his pocket for more than a second or two before figuring out how to count it with the clerk watching him impatiently all the while. Then it’s over to the pharmacy, where Steve picks up his prescription refills (at Sam’s prompting – he would’ve forgotten otherwise). The pharmacist recognizes him but it’s always with detachment. And he asks again: “Do you have any questions?”

Steve has some. Oh, he has a lot. How? When? Why? But this guy doesn’t have the answers, and he’s just doing his job. He’s probably required by law to make sure Steve understands this massive bag of different pills coming his way. Steve understands enough. He’s stopped staying on top of the side effects, to be honest. He simply goes with it because there doesn’t seem to be much choice. His neurologist just switched his AEDs again in an attempt to get his seizure activity completely under control, but he’s learning more and more that it’s not so simple as taking a pill to overcome the damage that bullet did to his brain. Environment factors in, stress in particular, and with his raging case of PTSD and repressed memories and physical issues, he’s at a huge risk for never getting it managed to a point where everything is at a happy equilibrium. It’s a multi-pronged approach, his therapist keeps telling him. Treat the physical conditions and the psychological problems concomitantly, because at the moment, they are back-feeding on each other. The brain damage aggravates his mood issues and depression, and the PTSD flares up and compounds the brain damage. He’s become really well acquainted with the concept of a vicious cycle.
And he’s not sure there’s a way to stop it, no matter what his doctors think. So, yes, he has questions. No one can answer them.

That bitter thought plagues him when they go back to Sam’s place, where Max is waiting for him. Steve leashes him back up, loads his meds into his bookbag, and grabs his groceries. “So see you tonight?” Sam says expectantly, petting Melly’s head where she sits at his side. “Seven-ish?”

“Sure.”

Then he heads home. It’s afternoon now, much warmer and muggier than it was earlier, and his jeans are uncomfortably hot and his shirt is clinging a little with sweat. Max is friendlier with people, but Steve doesn’t really notice. He’s not thinking, trying not to feel. The ache in his head is getting worse as he’s becoming more tired. The pressure of doing things gets to be too much sometimes; that’s another reason why his job is so good for him. He works from home a lot, doesn’t need to bother with noise and crowds and distractions. Too much stimulation. His skin feels wet and crawling with discomfort by the time he reaches his building. Breathing a sigh of relief, he climbs the stoop.

“Steve!”

Max yanks hard, and Steve lets go of the leash in the lobby. The dog is running at full tilt toward Thor, and Thor laughs as he jumps on him. Max is a big dog, but Thor is a big guy, tall and muscular, so it’s all good. And Thor’s not his real name. He’s Donald Thorston Blake III. Using his middle name as a nickname (which he’s done since childhood, to Steve’s understanding) is more than appropriate considering Thor doesn’t get along with his father and namesake exactly. Or his brother. He’s from New South Wales, though he wasn’t born there (Norway, he claims, which maybe explains the odd accent he has). His father is a powerful man, a real estate mogul or something of the like. Their family owns properties the world over, from Oslo to Reykjavik to Rio to Sydney to Manhattan, and Thor’s father wanted Thor to take over their family business. To Steve’s understanding, there was some sort of massive falling out between Thor, who ended up not wanting anything to do with the wealth and the legacy, and his brother, who was jealous and vindictive and pretty much coveted said wealth and legacy. After years among the world’s posh elite, Thor washed his hands of it all and came here to the States for school, attending Columbia before settling in the city. He lives in 4C now, loud and gregarious and this weird mixture of regal importance and beach-bum, frat-bro laziness. He has this mane of thick, blond hair, for example, and he dresses one step above hobo, but he also has this deep voice and diction that is as far from blue-collar as imaginable.

And he’s been nothing but Steve’s friend since Steve moved in. The fact of the matter is, despite his impressive stature (and impressive birthright), Thor wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s got a huge heart, and he immediately realized Steve needs help and companionship without knowing hardly more than the basics of his story. So Steve smiles now despite how tired he is because the thought of burdening another person with his issues was decidedly unappealing. “Hey. Sorry.”

“No bother,” Thor proclaims, petting Max enthusiastically. “Quite a beautiful day.”

“Yep.”

Thor spots the bags. “Errands?”

“Yeah, a few.”

“Ah. Oh, Jane wanted me to tell you that you are welcome to join us tonight if you want. We’re seeing a concert in Soho. One of her students is part of a jazz group, it seems. It’s outdoors, and it
promises to be a lovely evening.”

His friends mean well. Scott and Sam and Thor. He knows they do. He winces for show. “Sam already invited me to his place.” He starts climbing the steps, picking up Max’s leash as he passes Thor. “Thanks, though.”

Thor doesn’t hide his disappointment well. Or his concern. Thankfully the latter seems appeased by the mention of Steve’s plans. “Well, you’re always welcome. Next time, yes?”

“Sure.”

Thor continues down the steps as Steve goes up. The taller man stops on the landing in the lobby. “Oh, I meant to mention that Tony got the parts in for your bike. He told me yesterday.” Steve immediately feels his spirits lift. Thor smiles. “He said you’re welcome to come anytime, but he’s completely free tomorrow.”

Steve smiles, too. It’s the most genuine thing he feels he’s done all day. “Great.”

Now Thor beams like Steve’s little, excited grin was a prize hard won. Steve doesn’t like to think that it is, and it makes him self-conscious. Thor waves. “I’ll see you later. Jane’s waiting for me.”

“Later.”

Steve feels better climbing the steps the rest of the way to the fourth floor. Max walks beside him as they make their way around the wide open landing to the other side where his apartment is. Noticing the quiet, he glances down the way, but the door to 4B is securely shut. Fumbling for his keys, he gets his own door open and heads inside.

His apartment is hot, stuffy, and quiet. Max wags his tail happily while Steve gets him off the leash before going to his bowls for food and water. Steve’s on automatic pilot again as he puts his few groceries away, relieved that Sam was right: he did need milk and eggs and butter. Stored up in my brain somehow. Something this stupid and mundane shouldn’t make him so happy, but there he was, grinning sadly at his newly stocked fridge. Small victories. It probably goes without saying, but his therapist is big on that shit, too.

Laundry. He goes to do that, getting his wet sheets into the dryer with some dryer sheets and reloading the washer with a load of dirty clothes from his bedroom. Then he opens the windows in search of a breath of fresh air. He’s got a decent view of the street below from his bedroom, and the man from before is there. The one who was in the doorway of 4B, moving boxes and keeping watch like a hawk. Now he stands on the sidewalk, regarding their apartment building with a worried scowl. That seems weird, but before Steve can even really consider it, the guy is walking away.

Max is whining for dinner. It’s five o’clock. Two hours until he needs to head back to Sam’s. That’s all it takes for his anxiety to start ramping up. Anxiety and depression sometimes go hand in hand, he’s discovered, and the more uncomfortable he feels about going out, the less he cares about doing it. He does manage to shower again, and it’s there the first wave of dizziness bothers him. Usually that’s a sign he’s doing too much, taking things too far. A particularly rough day or hard workout sometimes leaves him with vertigo, but other times it just comes and goes of its own accord. The migraine that’s been threatening for hours thankfully stays away, although as he washes the sweat off he starts wondering if maybe it won’t be better for it to just attack already. It’ll give him a decent excuse not to go.

Drying off and feeling increasingly exhausted, he goes to his dresser to find some boxers. Bending
down makes his side spasm, and he grimaces, grabbing the tender area. He feels the huge scar there at which he refuses to look, the one from when they cut him open in an Afghan hospital to try and deal with the damage (or so he was told – he can’t remember since his brain was hemorrhaging at the time). This injury is more minor in some ways, affecting his right hip a little. It did kill his spleen, so that kind of sucks. But, to him, it’s a wound he hates more than the head injury in some ways. This was the one that knocked him down, made him fall, caused everything that came after. Caused…

Don’t. He’s not going to think about it. There are memories there, but for whatever reason, subconscious or not, they’re seemingly behind a veil of shadows in his head. It’s a fucking relief. And he’s not going to look. Ever. If that makes him a coward, then so be it. He thinks the people he loves and who loved him would be pretty ashamed that he’s like this now when before he was nothing but unwavering determination and steely courage and steadfast desires to do the right thing. But he can’t help it. The young man they loved died in that Afghan hospital and someone else was shipped back to the US.

At any rate, he grabs his boxers and gets them on. Max is whining louder and louder. He starts barking impatiently. “Alright,” Steve grumbles, finding an A-shirt in his underwear drawer and pulling that on, too. “Alright. I’m coming. I’m…”

The dog’s not at the door to his bedroom but rather near the vent beside his bed. He’s very pointedly barking at the shared wall. Curious, Steve heads over there. “Okay, what? Back up. Back up.” He gets a fistful of Max’s collar and pulls him back so he can squeeze closer to the vent. Is there something in there? He crouches, Max slobbering into his ear, and peers inside the shadows. Doesn’t look like it.

He’s about to rise and tell Max to give it a rest when he hears something. A quiet, little mewl. A meow. “What the hell?” Looking again, he sees nothing but black for a while, despite the meowing coming now in a fairly constant stream. Then he glimpses a flash of yellow eyes.

There’s a cat in his vent.

Steve stares dumbly. Confusion leaves him rather frozen for a second. What’s a cat doing there? Max whines and whines more, excited about what they’ve found. “A friend, huh,” he comments, watching the cat through the grating. He thinks a moment before deciding he really should get it out. It can’t stay there. How did it even get inside…

And then it occurs to him. This cat must be from next door. New neighbors.

Sighing a little in irritation, he plods to the laundry room where he has a toolbox and fishes out a Phillips screwdriver. He returns, pushing Max out of the way again, and sets to loosening the vent cover. It comes off with a clank, and he puts it aside against the wall. The cat is right there, staring at him with eyes that aren’t just yellow but green too. It’s black and not very big. “Here, kitty,” he calls softly, reaching his hand out. “Here, kitty, kitty.” God, that’s lame. He’s never been a cat person; hell, he’s never even had a pet before Max. He really has no idea what he’s doing, and surely this animal will be intimidated by a strange place and strange people and the huge dog panting and prancing around in excitement. But he keeps trying to coax it closer to him. “Come on, kitty. C’mere.”

Surprisingly enough, the cat does come, slinking right to the end of the vent and sniffing his fingers before rubbing its cheek against them. Steve moves fast, gently snatching it about the neck and pulling it out. It squeals in unhappiness but doesn’t scratch him too bad as he stands and walks away with it in his arms. He holds it tightly so that it can’t escape (wow, this thing has sharp claws) and tries to calm it with a few pets, even with Max bouncing around like a wild thing in an
attempt to see. “Stop, Max,” Steve chides, keeping his voice low so as not to upset the cat. “Stop. Sit.”

Max gets control of himself and obeys, and Steve looks down at the cat. It’s not too skinny and its fur is sleek and it looks well cared for. Steve sighs, petting it a few more times, and it calms against his chest, not purring but not fighting, either. The cat’s little enough that it practically fits on his forearm. “Alright,” he says on a long breath. “Let’s get you home.”

It takes some doing, but he fishes a pair of workout shorts from his drawer and gets them on. The cat is not pleased with the jostling, digging in deeper again. Steve briskly walks to the front of his apartment, stuffing his bare feet into a pair of sandals near the door, before going out and down the hall.

4B is still shut. He holds the cat tight; the poor thing is pretty scared now and he doesn’t want it to struggle and bolt as he knocks on the door. There’s no answer at first, so he tries again, impatient and trying to keep his catch from escaping again and irritated about the trouble (and the stinging spots on his arms). Finally, the door opens a bit.

There’s a young woman there. She’s beautiful. She’s petite, slender, shapely, dressed in tan capri pants, a black tank top over a white camisole beneath it, and plain black flip flops. Her hair is brown with hints of red, a scarlet hue when the light from the apartment behind her catches it, and it tumbles down her shoulders in thick, loose waves. Her face is striking but in a pleasant way; a pert nose, full, lush lips that are pink and inviting, strong, unique features that carry a hint of vintage glamor.

But it’s her eyes that Steve can’t stop looking at. They’re blue and green, a shimmering mixture of both that reminds him of the ocean. They’re deep, powerful, mysterious in a sense, drawing him in only to hide their secrets. She gazes back at him, lips parted slightly, confused or surprised but not looking away. They stare at each other.

Then the cat meows loudly, annoyed at his tight grip, and digs its claws in enough that it snaps him from his seeming trance. “I, um…” His brain seems to be failing him, though not for the normal reasons. This is the first time in forever – since Peggy – that a woman has made him feel… something. He can’t put a name to it, but his heart’s beating faster and his stomach feels tied up. He stumbles into talking. “I live in 4A. Next door. Is, uh… He snuck into my apartment. I assume he’s yours?” He offers up the cat.

The girl’s eyes widen, and her fair cheeks color instantly in a blush. She opens the door more, and he can see boxes and new furniture beyond. “Oh, God,” she moans. Her voice is deeper, sweet, lulling. There’s a bit of an accent to it that he can’t place. It’s very subtle, but it only adds to its richness. “I am so sorry. God, Liho.” She shakes her head in embarrassment and disgust as she takes the cat from Steve. She looks stunning with just that touch of rose on her face. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” he assures.

“I have no idea how she—”

It’s a girl cat apparently. Steve fidgets a little, jabbing his hands into the pockets of his shorts. “She was in the vent between the bedrooms. The guy who used to live here? He always complained that it was too cold, so you might want to check if he did something to the vent.”

She nods, clearly horrified at the inconvenience she’s caused. There’s something entrancing about the way she moves, shifting her weight and petting Liho in her arms. There’s something graceful to her voice. But there’s something more in her eyes that he can’t place, can’t understand. He’s
never been terribly proficient at reading people, but there’s something about her that’s… “I’m Steve,” he says, holding out his hand. “Steve Rogers.”

She hesitates for a second, and that strikes him hard, as stupid as that is. But she breaks out of it, smiling a dazzling smile. “Natalie,” she says. She doesn’t say her last name, but she does take his hand. Her grip is firm, warm, though her fingers are small in his palm.

He feels self-conscious again as they shake. It’s odd, how it feels like it’s too much but not enough at the same time, and the air feels dense between them, thick with tension that’s almost electric. Suddenly he’s having a hard time breathing. He’s staring in her eyes again, and she’s staring back.

Too much. Not enough.

She lets go first. Her smile isn’t quite comfortable, and he wonders if he’s coming on too strong. Or worse. Can she see in his face that he’s different? Damaged? Her eyes are so sharp, and she seems so bright. Maybe she’s picked up on it already, that he’s not right. He’s never made much of an attempt to hide it, but for the first time he feels exposed. And ashamed. It’s paranoid and goddamn stupid and he’s reading too much into it. The corner of her mouth curls into something more genuine. “Thanks. It was nice of you to bring her back.”

So that’s that. He can’t help but feel himself tumble, like he was high on something, an inexplicable rush of some sort, and he’s crashing now. He forces himself to keep smiling, forces himself to say, “Sure. It was no problem.”

She backs into her apartment. “Thanks again. Really.”

He nods uselessly. Just as the door’s about to shut, he says, “Hey, welcome to the building.”

The door pauses in its motion, and she peers at him. For a second, he can almost imagine it. “You want to go out sometime? You want to come inside for coffee? You want to talk? What are you doing tonight?” But she doesn’t say any of it, and why would she? He doesn’t say it, either, because he can’t.

She bobs her head and smiles sweetly. “Thanks.” That’s soft, genuine, but it’s all there is. The door closes, and this little moment is over.

He doesn’t know why it hurts so much. It doesn’t make any sense, but nothing does anymore. Before he even knows it, he’s back in his apartment, shaking, angry and not knowing why. Max greets him, clearly disappointed that he came back alone. He’s not the only one. “What the hell is wrong with me?” Steve hisses, shaking his head and leaning back into the door behind him. He feels a tingle in his head – dizziness, the migraine, what she made him feel, fucking sensory mayhem – and focuses on catching his breath. Depression and anxiety. PTSD. AEDs and PTE. His life, an alphabet soup of diagnoses and conditions and treatments. Permanent brain damage.

He’s so damn tired. Vicious cycle.

Why would anyone want that?

His heart stops pounding. He gets control of his breathing. He opens eyes he’s squeezed shut. Then he’s on automatic pilot once more, the last time for the day, locking everything up and killing the lights and shutting the windows. He grabs his phone from the kitchen counter and texts Sam without thinking. “Not feeling well. Can’t come. Sorry.” He doesn’t wait for what will surely be a worried, frustrated response, tossing the phone back to the counter and limping to his bedroom.

The vent’s still open, but the room is utterly silent now. He flops on the bed, wincing against the
pain banging against his skull, and buries his face into the pillows. *No sheets. No pillow cases.* They’re in the dryer. He’s not getting them, not getting up. Laying there and hoping it all stays away is the only thing he’s capable of. Max jumps up and lays down close to him, snuggling and nosing at his cheek, but he can’t move, can’t hug back, can’t do anything.

Nothing other than breathe and close his eyes and let himself sink.

Chapter End Notes

Some lovely chapter artwork by [faith2nyc](https://faith2nyc.com).

“No, it’s not going to stop Till you wise up. No, it’s not going to stop. So just give up.”
— Aimee Mann, “Wise Up”
— *Stay*, Chapter 1
Happy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So what if it hurts me? So what if I break down?
So what if this world just throws me off the edge?
My feet run out of ground.
I gotta find my place. I wanna hear my sound.
Don’t care about all the pain in front of me.
I just want to be happy.”
- Leona Lewis, “Happy”

Nat can’t stop thinking about his eyes.

Steve’s eyes.

They’re beautiful.

They are like the sky to her. Vast and depthless, so deeply blue. Open. She feels like she could have lost herself in them completely, like they were calling to her they were that powerful. It’s been so long since she’s let herself really see anyone else, at least anything beyond a cursory examination to mark the person as friendly or dangerous. That’s what her life is like now. Friend or danger.

He’s not either of those things. She doesn’t know what he is. That frightens her but not quite as much as it intrigues her. And she can’t stop thinking about that, not that or the shape of his face with his strong, commanding jawline and his plush lower lip and long eyelashes or the muscles beneath the shirt he was wearing or the perfect proportion of his broad shoulders to his tapered waist or the light layer of his beard with its golden highlights. She can’t get her mind off it. It’s not just his eyes that are beautiful. He’s beautiful, although she’s always been pretty good at reading people (well, she has to admit now that that’s not entirely true. She’s failed before, and she’s failed big time). There’s something… She doesn’t want to say off about him because “off” implies wrong, and that’s not fair. But there’s definitely something more to him. The way he carries himself seems weird to her, like calm purpose and confidence and poise but it’s all distorted. He limps. He hides it well, but she saw it. And there are scars on that perfect body. Again, they were pretty well covered, but she spotted them, hints of discolored and marred skin on his arms and shoulders under his shirt. On his thighs, peeking out from under his shorts. Damage he’s clearly ashamed of. Damage all over him.

And damage in his eyes. They’re beautiful but broken. She’s realizing that more and more as she thinks about it, about them, about him. She’s a good liar, a great actress. She’s got a talent for it. He doesn’t. It was all over his body language, a war between tension and desperation, between dread and over-eagerness. Like he wanted something but had no idea how to get it and ended up convincing himself it’s for the best that it didn’t come to fruition anyway. It’s… flattering. And, again, kind of frightening. She has no cause to think that his behavior was because of her; for all she knows of him, which is the sum total of a minute or two during which she spent more time than she should have drinking in the sights, he’s normally that awkward and stressed. She lets herself think it’s because of her anyway. She does and permits herself a smug smile over it, lets herself indulge in daydreaming about him and his gorgeous eyes and perfect body just a little, because her
new neighbor Steve Rogers is ridiculously hot and she hasn’t felt anything like this in what seems like a lifetime.

It is, really. A whole lifetime ago.

Liho’s watching her from the window by the dinette as she unpacks her dishes. The cat’s basking in the evening light, squinting yellow eyes lazily but not without what Nat thinks is a touch of admonishment. “What?” she says, pausing halfway between the counter and the cupboard to glare. “You’re bad. So bad.” Liho blinks like she knows and doesn’t care and can’t be bothered to even keep her eyes open. “What were you thinking? Huh? You ought to know better.”

They both ought to know better.

But Liho just closes her eyes all the way and stretches in her warm sunbeam. Nat shakes her head and goes back to unpacking. The plates could stand to be replaced. They’re old, some of them chipped. Some of the glasses she’s lined up on the counter don’t match either, lonely members of different sets that have been forced together into a weird amalgamation. She thinks for a moment that maybe it’d be nice to go with Daisy like the other girl suggested earlier. Daisy was perpetually sunny, endlessly optimistic, and always trying to get Nat to do things like that. Buy new dishes. Get a new lamp. Find some different clothes. Nat never feels quite right doing it, like settling into her life as it is now to the point where buying new things is just too comfortable. Comfort isn’t something she knows how to handle anymore.

So she stacks the plates and lets her mind drift. Maybe it’s not smart to do that, but… Well, when you’re alone as much as she is, you get very well acquainted with your own thoughts. And her thoughts right now keep stubbornly going to her new neighbor. It’s so damn stupid to even wonder about him. Really. And she should be better than this, should have better control because she knows just how much she needs that. Control and distance.

She can’t stop herself, though. Who is he? What’s his story? Most importantly, what happened to him? Something obviously must have to give him that little limp and the haunted look in his eyes. Something probably pretty bad. There wasn’t a wedding ring on his finger, so he probably isn’t married, not that that or anything else is her business. She has the impression from the way he was looking at her that he doesn’t have anyone. That… saddens her more than it should. She wonders at that, that he could be as alone as she is. Part of her thinks it’s silly to even be doing this. Maybe he left her door, went back to his place and got dressed and went out. It’s Saturday night after all, and he’s a good-looking guy no matter what else. That’s probably what happened. He’s out with friends, with a girl that he probably does have no matter what she wants to think because she’s damn well projecting her own emotional issues on a complete stranger. All he wanted to do was return her cat, and he did that and she needs to stop.

She sighs, loads the cabinet, closes the door, and heads to her bedroom. It’s stuffy but quiet at least with the windows shut, and she makes no move to open any of them. The pile of boxes isn’t huge; she doesn’t have that much. It’s large enough, though, to make her feel tired at the prospect of unpacking everything. Again. This is the third place in as many years, and she’s not thrilled with settling only to wait for the inevitable move to uproot everything she’s put into place. She’ll do it, though. It scars more every time, but she always does what she needs to.

Like finding the open vent cover. She gets down on her hands and knees near her bed, glancing under it, but she can’t see or reach anything. So she pushes the whole thing over with a rumble and a thud until she remembers what Steve said before. Shared wall. She looks up at it, alarmed at the noise she made, and listens. It’s absolutely silent. She’s going to have to be careful with this. It’s so unsettling, like a breach of her privacy even though there’s a solid barrier between her and her
neighbor. For a moment she considers moving her bed to the spare bedroom but there’s really no way she can do that by herself and it would be weird. She’s always concerned with that, with appearances, with how she looks and acts because looking normal and acting fine are all she has in terms of defense. She watches the wall and wishes she’d known this about the apartment before agreeing to come here, but it wouldn’t have mattered even if she had. That’s another thing about the life she leads. You rarely ever get what you want or, if you do, you can’t get it how or when you want it. She covets what she can control and makes do with everything else, and that means being quiet.

She thinks about her guitar in its case and frowns. Another thing she’ll lose, she supposes, at least for now. Dropping lower and gritting her teeth, she shoves the bed a little further until she can get between the old, wrought iron headboard and the wall. The cover for the vent is definitely pried loose on the bottom, forced open by the previous tenant a good two or three inches. She crouches in front of it. A couple quick pulls on the little lever reveals the vent itself is stuck shut, so the old guy used a chunk of wood to keep the whole thing away from the wall. The gap is just barely big enough for Liho to squeeze through.

Nat grunts unhappily and stands. She goes to the pile of boxes, moving a couple until she finds the one with her towels. These, too, are all old and worn and mismatched. She takes the oldest and rattiest of the bunch and heads back to the vent. It doesn’t take much to stuff it in there, though she’s careful because the cover is dented and has sharp edges. Admiring her handiwork, she decides that’s good enough for now to keep Liho from adventuring again.

She pushes the bed back, wincing all the way from the racket. Then, seeing as how she’s already partially unpacked a couple of boxes looking for the towels, she gets to work on the rest. She’s better about maintaining control of her thoughts as she works now, getting hangers out and putting her clothes away in the little walk-in closet. It really is a nice place, she thinks. Nicer than anything she’s had recently. It’s big and clean and airy. She doesn’t always like big, but this apartment feels good to her. A new start. Fresh hopes. Again it can all up and vanish and she’ll be moving, moving fast in all likelihood, but for now she lets herself entertain the idea that it can become home.

With the closet fully stocked with her clothes, she lines up her shoes and boots and sandals up on the floor beneath the rack. Then she sets to filling the linen closets with her towels and spare sheet sets and blankets. She finds her bedding, the one thing she has bought recently and even splurged on. It’s a pretty pink floral print with white sheets. She dresses the bed, unable to stand the sight of the naked mattress anymore, and when she finishes, she puts her hands on her hips and likes the way it looks. Then she goes on, emptying the rest of her boxes. Really it’s not much. A few books on music, ones with which she can’t stand to part. A history of Russian ballet and Russian opera. Her composition books, filled with her own songs and ideas. Her scrapbooks, teeming with her memories, both good and bad. Those she could never lose. She carefully puts them on the little bookshelf, almost obsessive about their order. She gets out the little pot with the fake flowers Clint’s kids got her when she was in the hospital and that goes on the bedside table with her clock and her phone charger and laptop.

The pictures are the last things she takes out. She doesn’t have many. A double frame of Wanda and Pietro. They were smiling at the time, one of the few occasions they did. She lets her gaze linger on them for a moment, on Wanda’s pretty hazel eyes and long dark hair, on Pietro’s mischievous grin. The other photograph is old, nearly forty years in fact, and it shows it. It’s weathered, torn at the edges and bent. She sweeps her thumb over the glass of the frame that protects it. The image brings many memories, though she wasn’t there for this particular moment. It’s a picture of her mother and father outside the church where they were married. It’s the only picture she has of them now. Her mother’s eyes are bright, green, and beautiful, and her hair was a
stunning blonde that was gathered up into a loose bun. Her father is standing tall, his red hair and beard striking despite the faded colors. They both smile and smile, exuberant and excited for their new life together.

That life had ended up very difficult. They never had much beside her. No money. Few possessions. No, she was their true pride and joy, and she thinks back on it now, how they nurtured her talent and selflessly set everything they wanted in life aside for her sake to give her opportunities they never had. To see her become something special, something incredible. To permit her talents to grow and flourish and bring her wealth and success that seemed impossible given their tough existence in Volgograd. To allow her to sing, to write, to dance. To fly. *Ptichka.* Her father called her that. His little bird.

Letting her pursue her dreams wasn’t a popular choice in their poor neighborhood; her mother was a simple seamstress and her father worked for the government as an accountant, so there was no place in that for artistic endeavors no matter how their daughter dreamed of it and no matter how good she was. Still, they made room, made difficult choices and so many sacrifices, and Nat learned and lived and became a rising star. And back then, everything was beautiful and happy.

Then her mother died from cancer when she was eighteen, and her father became so desperately ill himself only a few short years later. She made her own tough choices, her own difficult sacrifices, to save him. She came to the States. She trusted. And she tried to bring her father with her. It didn’t work. Those choices… She closes her eyes. Every day she dreams about unmaking the past, but it can’t be done.

For a moment, she turns the frame over, thinks about undoing the back piece of the cardboard and looking where she put… No. She slowly sets the picture to the bedside table and stares sadly. Her father always told her that mistakes teach you mettle, that the best you can do when you fall is stand and keep going. She is trying to live by that, trying *every day.* And she’s not sure what she’s learned from it all save that the things that hurt you hurt far more when they’re done by people you trust.

The conclusion from all that is pretty obvious. There was just no sense in trust. It only leads to loss.

Sighing, she murmurs what she always does to her father. “*Ya budu letat’.*” Then she’s moving because staying still never feels particularly good. She looks at her guitar, which in its case and propped against the far wall. She considers opening it. It’s still so quiet, and maybe it wouldn’t be if she played a little. It’s always a comfort, the only constant source of it. The feel of the strings beneath her fingers, the song in her heart. She always has a song to sing.

But the quiet is nice, and she doesn’t know who’s listening. If he’s listening. *Steve.* Steve with the pretty eyes and the nice muscles and the timid smile. That makes her stomach flutter, and she rolls her eyes at herself. It doesn’t matter anyway because her phone dings with an incoming text message. It’s from Maria. “*Bringing up dinner. There in ten.*”

That’s just like Maria. She can be cold and humorless, but she truly has a big heart when it matters. Like finding a new place for Nat to stay after she was forced out of her old one. Like getting her into this nice building in this nice neighborhood. Nat smiles and puts her phone back into the pocket of her capris and heads out to the kitchen.

She sets the table. Then there’s the knock at the door. Liho picks up her head tiredly and yawns before setting it back down on her paws. Nat glances at her, her heart rate picking up even though she knows it’s just Maria. It’s engrained into her now, this subconscious response. She swallows down the pounding in her throat and heads to the door. Peering through the keyhole, she sees it’s
just another moment of utter nonsense. It is Maria. Nat unlocks the door.

Maria offers up a smile. “Hungry?” She lifts a brown paper bag. “Chinese.”

Nat smiles back. It’s a good one, she knows, the one that always has people convinced that all is well. “Sounds great. You didn’t have to—”

“Sure I did.” Maria lets herself in, and Nat closes the door behind her. She locks it up automatically, even though Maria’s probably armed (somewhere – she’s exceedingly good at hiding weapons, Nat’s found. Not that she needs them when it really comes down to it. She’s lethal). She’s a cop, a detective with 67th precinct of the NYPD and Clint’s partner, and she’s strict and no-nonsense. Her shoulder-length dark hair is sleek and neat in a ponytail, and her makeup is light. She’s already changed from her work clothes into lounge clothes, a pair of track pants and a tank top, but even her lounge clothes are pristine. “Your first night here. You shouldn’t be eating alone.”

“Clint sent you, didn’t he?”

Maria’s smile softens and she shakes her head as she goes to the table. She sets her messenger back down there. “What, can’t I do something nice for you?”

Nat flushes a little. She doesn’t know Maria quite as well as she knows Clint. Clint was there from the beginning; he and his family are the closest thing Nat has now to her own family. But Maria’s been nothing but helpful to her this last year. She’s got her own issues, things Nat has learned over time from Clint because Maria herself is about the least open person she knows. This isn’t to say Clint’s been spilling secrets, but Nat’s smart; there’s a reason he laid the groundwork for their friendship. Maria’s had a difficult life, though she’s the first to tell anyone that she’s become stronger for it. She’d likely consider it all trivial and mundane, too. A father who left when she was little. A mother who remarried. A stepfather who abused her in the worst ways imaginable. Her mother probably never listened to her daughter’s cries, although Nat can only guess that from the fact that Maria ran away as soon as she was able. She scrambled to survive for some time, living on the streets and eventually foster care before pulling herself up and pushing her way through school. From there she funneled her strength and stoicism into becoming a police officer, and she’s exceedingly good at what she does. She’s tough as nails, and there’s a reason Clint trusts her enough to be involved with Nat’s situation.

Nat trusts her, too, though it doesn’t always come easy. Moments like these make it happen. Maria doesn’t know her whole story, either, the dark things Nat won’t say and hardly even thinks about herself. Not even Clint knows it all. But they care, and that’s enough. So she smiles genuinely. “Thanks.”

Maria starts unpacking their meal, pulling out cartons of rice and noodles and egg rolls. “Place looks nice,” she comments, glancing around. “Got a lot unpacked. Skye help?”

Skye is Daisy’s somewhat self-assigned moniker. Until recently, she didn’t know what her true name is. She was orphaned as a baby and raised in foster homes and as part of social services. Unlike Maria, Daisy’s eager to talk about her history, at least what she knows of it. Her mother was Chinese and her father was a doctor serving in the Hunan Province in China. Her father apparently was something of a bad man before he was killed, and her mother sacrificed everything to ensure her daughter was brought to the United States. She died giving birth to Daisy here in New York City and left nothing, not even a name for her infant daughter. Daisy discovered all this with Maria and Clint’s help (and by hacking a few not quite legal sources, hence meeting Clint and Maria. Daisy was an expert with computers, an expert hacker, and that wasn’t her first brush with
the law although it thankfully ended up being her last). This was a few years before Nat met either of them. The trail ran pretty cold after Daisy learned her parents’ names and general histories in China. Her interest in her past drives her; she’s been saving money for forever to be able to travel to China and hunt down more information on her parents, her mother in particular. In the meantime, she’s become Nat’s self-appointed protector, at least ever since Clint put the two of them in touch and hooked Nat up with a job where Daisy works at a vintage music store.

She’s a good friend. Maybe a little loud and over-bearing but very sweet and very smart. She was there first thing that morning, helping Nat move her things up the four flights of stairs, helping her take the first tentative steps of getting settled in her new place. It’s nice having someone there for her, someone who was there to make the morning and afternoon feel easy and not so monumentally changing. These people, Daisy and Maria and Clint and his family… She’s not alone. So she smiles genuinely. “Yeah, she did. All morning. Clint, too.” She sits and starts spooning rice onto a plate for Maria and one for her. “We moved most of everything in just a few hours.”

Maria pulls the top off her bottle of beer and looks around again. “It’s nice. Gets more light than mine.” Maria lives down a floor. She knows the building manager, one Alexander Pierce of HYDRA Properties. He’s a distant relation, as Nat understands it, an uncle through Maria’s biological father. He’s a decent man because he was quick to help Maria get Nat qualified for this place. There were no questions asked, no references needed, no nothing. Nat’s very grateful for that. “You like it?” Maria asks as she turns back to her and sips her beer.

Nat sighs gently and looks around. She smiles. It is light. And airy. Open. “Yeah… Yeah, I do. Thank you again.”

“Of course,” Maria says with a smile of her own. “Everything should be okay.”

Nat nods. Everything’s okay here. It seems that way. Like she noted before, this place feels right. She can’t say what it is exactly. For the first time in a long time, she has hope, not just that she’s safe but that this can be something good. It can be more than simply struggling with each day, alone and constantly looking over her shoulder and constantly fearing this day would be the one everything came crashing down. Her life was an endless parade of that, never relaxing, never feeling whole, not feeling at all most of the time because if she stopped or even slowed down to process anything everything would catch up with her. She still feels that way. It’s way too soon to let down those defenses that have become so integral in her life. But maybe someday… Sooner rather than later? She wants to hope. “I feel…” It’s hard to admit it, and it’s silly, but it’s the truth and it’s okay to be honest sometimes. “I feel like I can be happy here.”

Maria’s smile turns soft. The days that came before, the details of their pasts… It’s all irrelevant sometimes. She knows enough to understand.

They settle into their meal. It’s silent for a while but comfortably so. Maria’s not one for small talk. Nat’s always been good at it, and in the last few years, she’s become even better because it’s an awesome way to direct attention away from oneself. She learned that quickly, and she can put on a smile and chat about the weather or sports or politics or anything – make stuff up for all intents and purposes and lie with the best of them – to keep someone at arm’s length. She doesn’t need to do that with Maria, so the relief is always welcome. And the food is good, delicious really. Nat didn’t realize quite how famished she was until now, and she starts eating with gusto. “It’s from the place right around the corner,” Maria explains. “They deliver, too.”

Nat uses chopsticks to get another round of rice and spicy chicken into her mouth. “Convenient.”

Maria grins surprisingly cheekily. “Consider it one of the amenities. That and the gorgeous blond beefcake in 4C.” Steve? Nat cocks an eyebrow but doesn’t say anything, plays dumb, because it’s
not too often Maria talks like that. Maria chews and swallows before wiping her mouth with a napkin. “A little eye candy is always nice.”

“The guy with the limp?”

“No.” Nat can’t help that her spirits dip a little, as dumb as that is. “Don Blake. Goes by Thor or something stupid like that. Lives in 4C.”

“Oh.”

“You’re thinking about Steve Rogers. 4A. And the Langs live in 4D. They’re loud, so it’s good you’re not backed up to them.” Maria goes on. Of course she knows the entire building and all its residents inside and out. “Other than that, the place’s pretty quiet. In 3C there’s Leo Fitz. He’s some sort of engineer at NYU. And Jemma Simmons is across from him. She’s a microbiologist at Columbia. I think they’re seeing each other or on the verge of starting something. And–”

She’s asking without thinking, and it sounds pathetically overeager. “Do you know anything about him?”

Maria finishes her beer with a last sip. “Who?”

God, Nat feels like a fool. It’s so dumb, but she’s curious and she wants to know. “Steve Rogers. 4A.” Maria cocks an eyebrow, and Nat nearly wants to wipe the smug expression from her face. Nearly. “What? He came by before. Liho got into his place through the vent in my bedroom, so I was just wondering if you know anything about him so I can thank him. Send him a card or something. Or a bottle of wine.” Smooth. She hides her interest behind that excuse. Really mature. “And I need to get the vent fixed. The guy who lived here before me pried it open and it’s all bent to hell.”

“I’ll talk to Pierce.”

“No, Maria, I can just go through the super, like anyone else.”

“Wait. Rogers came by? Really?” Nat bobs her head, not sure how to take that. Maria cocks an eyebrow again, this time pretty incredulously, and reloads her plate with food. She shrugs. “I don’t know much. He was in the army. He’s disabled somehow, but I’m not aware of the specifics. I don’t think it’s the limp. He really keeps to himself. Moved in a couple years ago. I don’t think I’ve ever talked to him.” If Steve’s the sort to be a recluse and Maria’s much the same, there isn’t likely much information to be learned from her. Nat can’t deny she’s disappointed, because now she’s even more intrigued. He was in the army. A soldier. She doesn’t know why that makes the story more compelling, what little she knows of it, but it does. She’s never known a soldier, let alone a war vet (which she assumes he is – maybe that explains the stricken look he has), and it’s new and different and– “What’s that look?”

Nat shakes herself loose of her thoughts and immediately goes nonchalant, digging into her meal anew. “What look?”

Maria’s smile is soft and a little sad. “Trust me, Nat. He’s… He’s screwed up. You can tell by looking at him. And you don’t need the added baggage,” she comments. “No offense.” Nat glares at her, trying to keep that light and unbothered, but truth is she is a little bothered by it. By the thought that he’s too broken to deserve her interest and by the implication she has too many problems of her own to have friendships outside what she has (or any sort of relationship for that matter). Even if that’s true, well, she doesn’t want it to stay true. And if she’s going to be living here and trying to build a new life, she’ll need to change, too. She’s not now nor will she ever be
anyone’s victim.

But she’s damn proficient at pretending to be less hurt than she is. So she quirks a grin. “None taken. I was just curious. He seems like a nice guy.”

Maria frowns hard. “I don’t need to tell you about what ‘nice guys’ can do when they’re not so nice anymore.” And she doesn’t need to give the advice Nat knows is coming, but she goes through it dutifully anyway. She goes over the same things Nat knows very well. Keeping her identity secret. Staying away from strangers. Not offering information about herself. Not letting anyone get too close. Staying prepared in case the worst happens. Not venturing far from the building. Not forming relationships. Essentially turning her new home and new life into a cage. This isn’t the first time she’s heard it all. Like lying and pretending, it’s engrained into her. She knows Maria means well. It’s not just out of concern that she’s here. It’s her job, and she’s excellent at her job. It’s also what Clint asked her to do. Nat should really let all of it serve as a reminder of what’s really important here. She can’t get ahead of herself. Yes, this is a new neighborhood, a new building, and new people. Yes, this could be a new opportunity, but she can’t let her guard down and expose herself unnecessarily to danger.

And she shouldn’t get comfortable. Not right away. “I’ll be careful,” she promises as the other woman finishes her talk.

Maria’s eyes narrow, though not in consternation. It’s more concern than anything else. This life Nat lives… It’s draining. Emotionally and physically. The vigilance required in every aspect of it is more than a simple burden. She supposes she’s become accustomed to it these last few years. When the fear was incredibly sharp and driving in the beginning, it was easier to stay acutely focused on reducing vulnerability and protecting herself. Now… it’s not so much. And this isn’t to say she feels she’s ready for much beyond a simple acquaintanceship with someone else. For the first time in quite a while, though, she can’t deny the whispers of interest in her heart. That’s probably why she’s been thinking about her neighbor all afternoon. It’s her, not her neighbor (yeah, that’s bullshit, but whatever). The truth is she’s afraid this – running and hiding and fearing every noise and every shadow and every dark figure on the street at night – will amount to the sum total of her existence. It’s stupid to be concerned about that now when the threat is still very real. Hell, the whole reason she’s here in this new place with its new people is because she had to run again. But...

“Stay strong,” Maria comforts. “Something’ll give, and when it does, we’ll have enough to bring him in.”

They’ve promised her that, Clint in particular, like a mantra for three years now, ever since everything fell apart. She’s not sure she believes it. She wants to, but the things she’s done and the nightmares she’s lived… Well, those tend to temper expectations with harsh realities. As much as she doesn’t trust people, she doesn’t trust life even more. Life has fucked her over more times than she cares to count. She likes to dream and imagine and fantasize from time to time, whether it’s strumming her guitar or checking out her new neighbor, but it’s all within reason. She’s not even that upset anymore. It is what it is.

They clean up their meal quietly. Maria brings their plates to the kitchen and puts the leftovers in Nat’s empty fridge. Liho comes over, rubbing against Nat’s legs in the kitchen while she scrapes the uneaten food into the disposal in the sink, rinses off the plates, and sticks them in the dishwasher. She’s mentally constructing a list of things she needs to buy yet. Dishwasher detergent. New sponges. Paper towels. Food to fill that empty fridge. She’s got a sharp memory; you need one when you essentially live a double life. Because of that, though, the fact that her
mental list is pretty full isn’t a problem. She’ll hit the store on the way home from work tomorrow.

She’s putting some cat chow in Liho’s bowl once the dishes are done. Maria’s standing near the door. Nat knows her well enough to see from her expression that she’s not going to like whatever Maria’s waiting to say. Maria’s got her messenger bag. “You know I’m keeping an eye on you,” she says, and Nat feels entirely uncomfortable with the attention and effort, like she always does. “But I can’t be here all the time. Clint’s having a couple uniforms check the building once a day over the next couple of days.” No. Nat opens her mouth to object, but Maria is already waving her off. “Don’t bother. It’s already been arranged. And it’s fine.”

Nat doesn’t know what’s more upsetting, the fact that they set this up without telling her or the fact that they think it’s necessary. Her disquiet pales in comparison to her outright horror at what comes next, though. Maria reaches into her bag and pulls out a gun. “This is yours.”

“No,” she says now, more emphatically, angrily even. She can’t remember the last time she got angry, actually angry, but she is now. “No way. No.”

Maria was adamant. “You’re taking it. I’m not leaving here until you do.”

Holy shit. Nat stares at the gun in Maria’s hand. It’s in a leather holster. She knows enough about guns from her previous life to know this is a powerful one, a semiautomatic. It’s sleek and gray, deceptively small. She can’t look away. “He’s still looking for you,” Maria softly reminds her. “He didn’t get close last time because we got lucky, but we can’t count on that. And I can’t be with you all the time. Clint can’t. So take it.”

Nat hesitates a moment more, and not for the first time an errant, desperate how did I get here? flits across her brain. She should be better than this, more hardened, but she’s not. Taking that gun feels akin to another acceptance that she doesn’t want to make. Another moment of surrender. This is her life, and her life is in danger no matter how many times she moves or changes her name or cuts and colors her hair, and she needs to do this. Accept it. Take it.

So she takes the gun. It’s heavier than she expects as she curls her finger around it. She feels uncertain holding it. Wrong. For all the violence she’s seen and experienced, this is the first time she’s ever touched one. She’s shaking and a cold sweat breaks out on her lower back and her stomach is twisting uncomfortably. “You okay?” Maria asks.

She dons a smile that she knows looks forced and nods. “Sure. Just never done this before.”

“I figured that,” Maria says. “The gun’s mostly legal. Mostly.” She’s unhappy about that. She’s more of a stickler for the rules than Clint is, that’s for sure. Clint’s always willing to bend them to their limit to do what’s right. “The license is tucked up in the holster there. It’s under Natalie Rushman. The fingerprints are legit. Clint’s got the serial number tagged in the system so if anything ever happens, we’ll be able to handle it.”

No, that doesn’t sound entirely legal. Maria watches her a moment, clearly studying her, probably trying to discern whether or not she can handle this. Nat knows she can, so she swallows thickly and tells herself to get her shit together. She meets the other woman’s gaze firmly. “Okay. Show me.”

“It’s not loaded. I want to take you down to the range and teach you everything inside and out, but for now…” Maria takes the gun back. Her fingers are quick, expertly accurate, as she ejects the magazine. Then she runs through gun safety 101. How to tell if it’s loaded. How to load it. She’s got a loaded magazine in the bag, and she slides it in before letting Nat try ejecting it and sliding it
in herself. She shows her the safety once the magazine is out again. Then it’s some basics on aiming, on sighting, on shooting. On where to shoot to wound and where to kill. The impromptu educational session goes on for maybe thirty minutes, and by the end, Nat feels a little better about it, even if her head is spinning.

“Okay?” Maria asks.

Nat holds the gun and lifts it anew, sighting down the barrel like Maria showed her. “Yeah. Okay. But I’m not gonna need it.” She lowers her arms and glances at her friend. She refuses to think otherwise. “I won’t.”

“Better to be safe,” Maria responds with a small smile. It’s another fact of her life as it stands now. _Don’t trust. Don’t get too comfortable. Don’t let it touch you. Better to be safe than sorry._

*Keep running.*

Maria’s phone rings. She gets it out of the pocket of her track pants. “Detective Hill,” she answers, turning away from Nat. Nat looks at the gun in her hand again and feels disgusted, so she makes sure anew that it’s unloaded and puts it back in the holster. Maria’s tone gets more and more stern. “Alright. Alright, I’ll be right there.” She hangs up with whoever called and clenches her jaw unhappily. “I have to run.”

“I figured. Everything okay?”

There’s a flash of something in Maria’s eyes, the sort that Nat knows too well now. The anger and the pain and the pity. She woke to that look, after all, a few years ago. It’s stayed with her in ways she’s never imagined. “It’s fine. Just need to go help with something. A call.” Yeah, that look. Someone hurt somewhere. Some crime that’s been committed. Someone suffering, someone bleeding, someone struggling to survive. The horrors in this city. _Victims._ She knows all of that, too. Knows it very intimately. Maria sees her come to the understanding, so she smiles as comfortingly as she can. Maria’s not very good at providing solace, but that’s okay. Nat doesn’t need it. She never does. “I’ll check in tomorrow morning. Get some sleep. Lock up.”

Nat knows to lock up of course, but she just nods and gives Maria a grateful smile. Maria pulls her into a quick hug, the sort that could be construed as uncaring and maybe even condescending by someone who doesn’t know her as well. Nat embraces her back and she leaves.

So now she’s alone again. She feels weird, different, with the gun on the table. Jittery and nervous with too much stuff creeping in her head. She goes to lock the door right away with the chain and the deadbolt. At least that’s done, but the uncomfortable clench of her stomach and the shallow thrumming of her heart don’t get better. She needs to find something to do.

Hiding the gun is a good start. She hesitates in touching it again – _get a goddamn grip_ – before grabbing it and the extra magazine that’s loaded with bullets. Then she’s in her bedroom, up in her closet where she stuffed her emergency bag earlier. It’s just a simple black backpack. She brings it out and unzips it. Inside there are clothes, toiletries, a few wads of cash. A few fake IDs she’s amassed. Somehow it’s never occurred to her that she may need a weapon, which is pretty stupid when she thinks about it. Still, she feels sick and discouraged as she holds the gun in her hands another minute before wrapping it up in one of her thicker sweaters and stuffing it inside the backpack. Then she puts the bag back and tries not to think about it.

It’s dark now. The quiet gets to her. That’s the worst part about being alone. The silence. It’s not only a stark reminder that there’s no one else there. It’s an invitation to the past sometimes, and memories come seeping out of the empty minutes like blood from a wound. If you don’t take care
of it, it can just start hemorrhaging all on its own. So she takes care of it. There isn’t much more
to unpack, but she does it. Mundane stuff like cleaning supplies and shower things go in their
proper places. Coats are hung in the entryway closet. She puts a throw on the couch and some
magazines Daisy gave her on the nicked, wooden coffee table. The flowers Daisy brought as a
house-warming gift at there too, cheery summer blooms that add color to a room that’s too white.
She stands and looks around, Liho rubbing at her shins. “Think we need to buy some things,” she
comments. “It’s too plain.”

Liho meows. She’s a loud and chatty cat despite her size. Nat leans down and scoops her up, and
she immediately starts purring enthusiastically, standing on Nat’s forearm and butting her chin for
attention. She pets her, feeling even more grounded for the contact. “Not tonight, though. Think
it’s bedtime.” It’s Saturday night and not even that late, the beginning of the evening in fact, but
she’s long past the stage of feeling sad or stupid for spending her weekends as a hermit. Par for the
course, really. Besides, she’s tired from the early morning and moving all her junk up four flights
of stairs and unpacking. So bed doesn’t sound like that bad an idea at all.

It’s rote memorization, her nightly routine. She double checks and then triple checks the locks,
even though it wasn’t all that long ago she secured them in the first place. She leaves some lights
on, particularly in the guest room and the kitchen. She puts down her alarm system, stupid as it is.
It’s a mason jar full of marbles that she props right against the front door by the jamb. There’s no
way anyone can open the door without knocking it over. Then she checks the windows to make
sure they’re locked, too, and it’s getting stuffier and stuffier in the apartment but she can’t chance
having them open. There’s no air conditioning; it’s pretty obvious from the building’s exterior that
most the apartments have window units. She’s going to have to get one and have Clint help her
install it because it’s becoming stiflingly hot. For a second she considers opening the bedroom
window but the fire escape is right there, and that immediately quashes the thought. She’ll suffer
with the heat for tonight.

Setting Liho on her bed, she goes to take a shower. With the water on the cooler side, it doesn’t do
a whole lot to ease the stress of the day, but it does feel pleasant, washing away sweat and dust
from moving. When she’s through, she stands in front of the vanity and brushes out her hair. She
stares at her reflection in the mirror as she works out the snarls. She’ll need to dye it again fairly
soon; she can see the first hints of warm red at the roots. She braids the damp, brown strands; even
with the cool shower, it’s too sticky to think about using the hairdryer. Then she dresses in old
pajamas, worn boy shorts and a cami, brushes her teeth, dims the lights to a faint, golden hue, and
heads to bed.

The silence is pressing again. She swallows, uncomfortable and just a little nervous. Suddenly her
new place is daunting, scary, with unfamiliar shadows and sounds. She hears creaks, muffled
voices though those are from the street below. 4A is quiet. There’s a pattering sound, she realizes
after a second spent listening carefully. It’s like an animal walking. A dog? That actually makes
her feel better. A dog would hear anyone trying to break in, wouldn’t it?

Sighing, she climbs into her bed, pulling her new covers back and getting under the top sheet
alone. She’s fairly tired but not ready (or at ease enough) to go to sleep yet, so she grabs her phone
and opens her Kindle app and goes to continue reading where she left off. She’s reading the
Twilight series, which Daisy recommended. It’s godawful, but it’s so bad that it’s distracting at
least. Numbing in a way. She’s done a lot of reading over the last few years, more than she ever
has in her life before. It’s entertaining enough, keeps her mind busy. Liho hops right up and settles
next to her, purring happily, and Nat pets her and tries to lose herself in the book.

Needless to say, she falls asleep.
There’s so many people out there. So many. And they’re cheering, clapping, calling her name, so excited for her to come out. The air is positively electrified with anticipation, and her heart’s pounding. From behind the curtain, she can’t see much. The lights are on above, flooding the stage with illumination so bright that it’s an envelope of sorts, one whose edge she can’t see beyond. That makes her anxiety go through the roof, knowing how many fans are out there in that audience, waiting for her to come out, waiting for her to...

She can’t do this.

She turns to run, only there’s nowhere to go because someone’s there. There’s a tall body, a warm, broad chest. Big hands that cup her face, rough, callused thumbs that trace her cheeks. She looks and knows she can see a face, but she can’t make out the features. Eyes. Nose and lips. Hair. It’s familiar, but it’s like pieces of a puzzle that she can’t put together. She should know who this is, but she doesn’t. It’s not frightening, though. It’s not anything but sweet and comforting. She’s safe here. She’s always been safe here.

“Where are you going?” a voice asks. Again, she recognizes it, but she doesn’t know who. It’s a man’s voice, so deep to her ears.

She shakes her head, and the roar of the crowd gets louder and louder. She’s holding her guitar, but all the confidence she normally feels is miles away. “I’m not ready. I’m not. I can’t sing. I can’t do this. I can’t.” It’s a chant in her head, a chant that echoes the crowd shouting for her. Can’t can’t can’t can’t–

“You can.” There are fingers brushing back her hair and lips on her forehead. “You can. I know you can. You know why?” She shakes her head against his grasp, but he doesn’t let her go. “Because you were made for this, Nat. You were made to sing. You were made to fly.”

Her heart soars. She’s warm, safe. Cherished.

And she looks up, sees blue, and–

A ragged scream cuts through her dream, and Nat jolts awake. Her heart lurches painfully in her chest, the bliss of the dream vanishing like it had never been there at all. It’s darker now, so dark she can’t see for a horrific moment, and she can’t remember where she is or what’s happened and she’s back in a bed, back with hands holding her down, back with screams in her head–

But another one rents this air, this one very real and with words attached. “Bucky! No! No, oh, fuck – Bucky!” Nat winces and fights not to scramble away. It’s close by. God, she’s sure of it. And she needs to run, to get out now because she’s not going to let him hurt her again!

Rational thought prevails, though, and she recognizes her surroundings after the terror abates a bit. Her new apartment. Her bedroom. She struggles to think, to hear above the booming of her heart and her labored breaths. The man screaming… It’s not coming from inside her room. It’s coming from the room adjacent to hers. The shared wall.

“Bucky, not gonna leave you. N-no. No. Christ, why you always gotta…”

Her new neighbor – Steve – is having a nightmare.

It’s loud and violent. His voice is muffled by the wall, but she can still hear the strained pleas, the quick, miserable breaths. “Don’t do this! Please, God, don’t… Don’t do this…” Nat winces, her own eyes wet, and fumbles for the lamp beside her bed to turn it on brighter. Liho bolted when she woke up, and the cat is nowhere to be found. Because of that, Nat feels even more shaken and
alone. She pulls her knees up to her chest, fighting not to cover her ears as another hoarse cry batters the silence. It feels like the shared wall is shaking behind her. There’s that pattering again, and beneath the desperate begging and shouting, something’s whining plaintively. It has to be the dog. “Bucky, Bucky… Please…”

It goes on another few moments, whimpers she can barely hear and screams she can’t ignore, before the muted hysteria goes abruptly quiet. The silence is stiff, and her heart aches. She’s wincing, listening still, and for a while there’s nothing to be heard other than her own heart thudding heavily in her chest. She feels tense, wrong, unable to move. Did he wake up? Is he okay? Who’s Bucky? She doesn’t know, doesn’t know what to do, feels like she should do something but she’s scared, too, and it’s not her place and she doesn’t know him at all and…

Then she hears it. A hitched breath followed by a tremulous moan. He’s awake. He’s sobbing. He’s crying.

Nat closes her eyes. It’s not loud, but in the complete stillness, it’s all she can hear. The soft, shaking breaths. Muffled whimpers. This is hardly the first time she’s lived in a place where she could hear her neighbors. In New York, it’s practically a given unless you can spend the money to get a really nice, big place (and, in New York, that’s more money than she’ll ever have now). She’s heard her fair share of arguments and dogs barking and music and people talking too loud. This, though… This is awful, and she feels sick and completely helpless.

That’s never a feeling that sits well with her, even when she had every right to feel it. So before she thinks twice, she’s sliding out of bed. The room is very hot now, and she’s bathed in sweat that was cold from fear but is now warm and sticky. She doesn’t let it stop her, though, as she gets her feet beneath her and goes to get her guitar. It’s where it was before, but this time she doesn’t hesitate to open the case and pull it out. It’s a classic acoustic. It’s old and weathered, but it was a gift from her father when she left Russia, the best he could afford at the time. Given everything she’s lost, this is another thing she can’t bear to be without. The neck is weathered, and the wood is a tad nicked and scratched, but to her, these things are memories. She grabs a pick from the case and heads back to her bed and sits cross-legged there. With the guitar across her lap, she takes a deep breath and starts to play.

Her fingers are light, agile, precise but graceful. Soon the warm, rich sound of the guitar fills the bedroom and banishes the silence. It’s no song in particular; she has so many that she’s performed, but they’re not hers, and the ones that are she doesn’t feel comfortable or brave enough to sing. So it’s just a simple melody that she’s making up as she goes, simple but slow and peaceful. She hums along with it, and in her heard she hears the harmonies of sweet strings and quiet horns and maybe the swish of cymbals. Her voice picks up as she loses herself in it, like a release after the difficulty of the move, and breath by breath and beat by beat, she lets it get louder. Music is always such a comfort to her. Perhaps it will be to him, too.

She thinks that, at least, believes it, because by the time she’s done with her song, his crying has stopped and it’s silent again. She smiles a little, turning to look at the shadows along the wall behind her bed. She can almost picture him. Lying down on his bed, calm now despite the nightmare, calm and taking slow, deep, measured breaths. He’s pliant and relaxed and staring into the shadows of his ceiling, which probably look just the same as hers. He’s letting the music soothe him. He’s so close, despite the wall between them. Steve with the beautiful eyes. She suddenly realizes that she can’t stand the thought of them full of tears.

She moves after it’s clear that it’s over. Setting her guitar gently against the wall, she slides back beneath her sheets and lets herself sink into the bed. The quiet is back, but she doesn’t feel so alone. Not anymore. “Goodnight,” she whispers to him.
Chapter End Notes

_Ya budu letat’._ - I will fly.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: I don't pretend to be a motorcycle mechanic (or that I actually know anything about them). Enjoy!

“And you can’t fight the tears that ain’t coming
   Or the moment of truth in your lies.
   When everything feels like the movies
   Yeah, you bleed just to know you’re alive.
   And I don’t want the world to see me
   ’Cause I don’t think that they’d understand.
   When everything’s made to be broken,
   I just want you to know who I am.”
   – The Goo Goo Dolls, “Iris”

The Iron Mechanic is a fairly nice place, even if its proprietor’s a little on the eccentric side. It isn’t far from Empire Boulevard, so Steve takes the B train to get there. As he exits the subway, he winces, fumbles for his sunglasses, puts them on, and pulls the visor of his Dodgers cap down lower. It’s once again a glorious summer day, ridiculously bright and cheery, but he’s still feeling like shit. Another sleepless night. Another nightmare. This time, though, he’s pretty sure someone – the girl in 4B – was playing some music. Guitar. And singing or humming. He isn’t able to tell which because her voice was muffled by the shared wall between their bedrooms, but whatever it was… Her voice is beautiful, as beautiful as she is. Sweet and soft and lyrical. Magical, even if that’s stupid and lame. Natalie. She got him calm, at least, thwarted the fast plummet into hell and helped him keep his head above water so to speak. He wonders if she did it on purpose, if she heard him. That’s a horrifying prospect. Old Phillips was partially deaf, and he routinely took his hearing aids out before bed (and forgot to put them back in – that was how Steve discovered his hearing loss). So Steve didn’t have to worry before about anyone discovering how screwed up he was. Now… Last night he never got back to sleep, stressing and wondering if she noticed his nightmare, but thinking about her and the memory of her song kept his other memories – a cell that’s as dark as night and full of dirt and filth and Bucky’s screaming and he’s screaming too and God he’s hungry and thirsty and it hurts and no one’s coming for them they have to get out somehow – at bay.

So even though he’s tired and the bright sun hurts his eyes and his head, he supposes it could be worse.

It’s not a long walk from the subway terminal to Tony’s shop, so that’s good. He’s gotten so used to going pretty much everywhere with Max so it’s weird to be without him now. Tony told him months ago he could bring the dog down to the shop if he wanted, but the thought of Max laying in all that dirt and mess in there… Steve’s not as much of a clean freak as he used to be, not by far, but no thank you to having to get engine grease out of Max’s fur.

As he approaches the building, heading around the back to where the garage bays are, his phone
beeps in his shorts pocket, so he pulls it out. *Goddamn it.* Coulson again. It’s an email this time. “Captain Rogers, I’d really appreciate if we could maybe meet for lunch sometime this week. You don’t need to do anything other than show up and enjoy a free meal and listen to what I want to say. I’ve got a bunch of documents from the hospital where you recovered outside Kandahar. I was wondering if you’d help me understand better what went on. None of it has to go on record. I’m still trying to track down the farmers that got you to safety. I know you were not conscious at the time most of these reports were made, but I could still use your help. The docs make some mention of wanting to contact the Army, particularly when they found Lieutenant Barnes’ dog tags in your—” He hits the delete button before he can read the rest.

“What’s with the frown?”

Tony Stark’s voice thankfully rescues Steve from his memories again, and he pulls himself back from what feels like the verge of a panic attack. When he gets his breathing under control and manages to focus, he finds the self-proclaimed Iron Mechanic is hunched over the engine of what looks like an old Pontiac Firebird. Tony leans up and frowns himself when he gets a decent look at Steve, and Steve knows he probably looks like hell, even in the shadows of the garage bay. “Holy fuck, Cap. You okay?”

Jesus, he has to get a better handle on how he reacts to stuff. He shuts his phone off and slides it back into his pocket. “Yeah,” he manages. “I’m fine. And I told you to stop calling me that.”

Tony grins. It’s a good one, very much like him. A bit arrogant and shit-eating, but Steve likes it. Steve likes Tony a lot, actually. Tony was something of a celebrity once upon a time. He was the only son of Howard Stark, a rich and famous weapons contractor who owned and ran Stark Industries. The extremely successful company profited a great deal through the years of government defense contracts and the like. Stark Senior was notoriously obsessive, cold and driven and very ambitious. Tony’s about as far from that as possible. He and his father did not see eye to eye, never did to Steve’s understanding. Tony’s a certifiable genius. Steve’s never met anyone quite like him. He graduated high school something like three years early. Excelled at MIT to the point where they, too, graduated him early so he’d stop embarrassing their top engineering and physics professors during lectures. He’s smart beyond the pale, picks up things like a sponge, dissects them down to their fundamentals without even trying. He can figure out anything, from quantum mechanics to complex computer programming to rebuilding a carburetor to how to create clean energy (a project on which Tony’s actually working in the back room of his mechanic’s shop here. Steve’s seen it. Something called an arc reactor? It’ll change the world, Tony claims, “if I ever get off my ass and finish working out the bugs”). The man’s an absolute marvel, a powerhouse in terms of smarts.

But he’s also lazy and somewhat crass and a touch arrogant and completely stubborn. He and Howard had some sort of massive falling out not long after Tony finished up at MIT, and Tony pretty much walked away from his legacy. As Tony tells it, he ardently wanted to take the company in a new way, away from designing and building weapons, and Howard wasn’t too keen on deconstructing what he spent a lifetime building (or on Tony’s flighty inventions and ideas). So (in retaliation, Steve suspects) Tony dumped it all like it meant nothing. He stopped working at his father’s side, moved from Malibu to New York City, and set up this run-of-the-mill mechanics shop, as low and common as imaginable to spite Howard and all of his power, prestige, and wealth. And, in return, Howard cut him off. Their relationship had always been strained, but this was the last straw. Thus here Tony is, in Brooklyn of all places and “pissing my talents away just to piss off dear old Dad” (again, as he put it). He and his father haven’t talked for a long time, and now they can’t. Both of Tony’s parents died in a car crash a few years back, and for now Stark Industries is under the care of its Board of Directors. Tony said once or twice he can get the company back if he wanted; he’s apparently a majority shareholder thanks to his parents’ will. He
has no interest in doing it because he’s angry and bitter and still not doing so well with processing his grief. He’s hiding here in effect, which doesn’t make any kind of sense to Steve.

But Steve doesn’t judge. Tony’s a great guy, a bit much to handle sometimes, but a decent man with a huge heart he likes to hide under all his swagger and flair. Tony’s maybe five years older than Steve, but he acts like a drunk teenager half the time. Steve doesn’t know how Pepper, Tony’s wife who’s his absolute and complete opposite in personality, puts up with him. Pepper owns a coffee shop not far from the Iron Mechanic, which is nice for the free coffee and pastries. The shop does extremely well, which is great because Tony doesn’t spend half the time he should actually working on clients’ cars. He’s a walking disaster area when it comes to deadlines and managing finances (which he never had to do when he was rich, so he doesn’t do it now) and daily logistics of running a company. If not for Pepper, Tony would be out of business and out on his ass.

Tony’s grin slips a little as he wipes his hands on a rag and comes around the front of the car. “Everything came in. You wanna do some work?”

Steve hesitates. He can see that same goddamn worry on Tony’s face as he’s found on the faces of all of his friends of late. One of the nice things about Tony, though, is the fact that he doesn’t press. They’ve known each other about a year. During Steve’s time at Walter Reed down in Bethesda, he ran into a Lieutenant Colonel James “Rhodey” Rhodes, an Air Force pilot whose chopper was shot down ironically not far from where Steve’s unit was attacked outside Kandahar. Of course, Rhodey was hurt months and months after Steve was captured; that was how they’d ended up at Walter Reed at the same time. Rhodey suffered a fairly bad spinal injury, not bad enough to paralyze him but enough that he spent quite a few weeks in PT with Steve, relearning how to walk right along with him. And Rhodey was the sort who liked small talk to fill difficult periods in his life, and the psychiatrist with whom Steve was dealing at the VA told him to talk more, so they talked. Sports and politics and food and cars. Rhodey talked a lot about cars and bikes. Being a pilot, he liked machines. Steve admitted he likes bikes himself and always wanted to ride one. So Rhodey told him to do it and hooked him up with Tony, who he knew from their school days apparently. Rhodey also served as an Air Force correspondent to Stark Industries, so he and Tony were close. All it took was a call and Steve was in Tony’s good graces.

And good graces meant rebuilding a bike for him. Not that Steve can drive it. Oh, no, that’s impossible for the time being, at least until his neurologist clears him for it, which isn’t soon in coming. That hasn’t stopped Tony, though. He’s made a hell of a project out it, which is silly. Steve has the money. He could have bought himself a bike, a Harley maybe (he’s always wanted a Harley), but it’s a waste to pay a premium on something he can’t ride. So Tony found an older Harley Softail from 2011 that needs a ton of work, and then he steadily convinced Steve to help him rebuild it. Steve looks back on it now, these last six months or so that he’s been coming to the Iron Mechanic once or twice a week and spending hours laboring on the motorcycle, and he sees the point. It’s not about driving the bike (or even if he’ll ever be able to drive it). It’s about doing something, something distracting. Something constructive (literally). Tony never made any sort of production out of it, just asking Steve for tools now and again while he was working, then asking Steve to hold this or that, then blabbering on about what he was doing. Before the war, Steve was interested in engines and mechanics (mostly because of wanting to own a bike). Again, he abandoned that and went off to become a soldier, but here he is in the end, an artist and a mechanic’s helper. It’s funny, he supposes, to leave these things behind only to lose everything and have nothing but them now.

And Coulson, that asshole, wants him to relive how that happened.

He clears his throat. He comes here not to deal so much with his problems. It’s like going to the
Tony grins. He reaches for a can of Red Bull on the cart near the Firebird and drains it before tossing it toward the trash near where Steve’s standing. It hits the rim and bounces off. “Ugh.”

Steve crouches, wincing at the pull in his side, and picks up the can. “You need to work on your aim.”

Tony grunts, coming over and snatching the can before making the shot into the can at this much closer distance. He makes it this time. “And you need to work on smiling.”

“Go to hell, Stark,” Steve says, but it’s without energy. “What came?”


Steve nods. “Okay.”

Now Tony is practically beaming. “Come on. I moved us to the bigger bay. Thor’s already back there. Hopefully he’s not drunk.”

It’s a little early for that, but then it’s Thor. Steve’s never seen a bottle of beer Thor doesn’t like (and he’s never known Tony not to have a fully stocked fridge for that matter). Tony clasps Steve on the shoulder and directs him back through the shop. Most of the bays are empty, which isn’t a surprise. Steve spots Thor down the way in one of Tony’s chairs, spinning idly. “There you are!” he bellows when he spots Steve. “When you rebuked my offer for breakfast, I half assumed that meant you would find some excuse not to come.”

Steve scowled lightly. Apparently his bad habits are yet again getting him more trouble than they’re worth. “I just didn’t want breakfast.” That was mostly because of his damn AEDs again. God, he could do without the nausea. There mere thought of eating sent him right back to the bathroom, where he thankfully managed to keep himself from puking. That was almost enough to have him write this day off as a lost cause, but the thought of being able to work on his bike was too alluring, and he toughed it out. “Kinda hungry now, though.” Particularly considering he skipped dinner last night, too.

Thor’s bearded face twists into a concerned frown, and Steve almost rolls his eyes and says something. Fucking hell. Sometimes he really wishes to exist as a person, not a collection of problems and meds and conditions that somehow everyone sees. Bless Tony for just accepting without so much goddamn worry. “Think there’s some leftover pizza in the mini fridge. Help yourself.”

The idea of cold pizza doesn’t sit too well with him, but he’s desperate so he heads over there and checks inside as Tony and Thor start lugging their delivery over to the platform where the Harley rests (in pieces). Steve finds the pizza box, a small one, and pulls it out. Some sort of thick crusted slice covered in everything imaginable, and he’s too tired and famished to care that he doesn’t really like half of it. He plunks down in the chair that Thor just vacated and starts eating.

Tony unpacks their haul at the workbench beside the platform and sets to getting it organized. For all his slobby tendencies, Tony’s surprisingly precise and conscientious when it comes to tinkering. Of course, the only one who completely understands the method to his madness is himself. Steve chews and watches them look over the parts. Tony picks up a camshaft and eyes it critically. “We’re in business.”
Thor just stares. For being so learned in so many things, he knows next to nothing about engines or mechanics or engineering. Steve’s paltry knowledge passes for expertise in Thor’s presence. He tries, though. The whole thing is one of those “it’s a small world” sort of coincidences. Thor’s girl, Jane, is friends with Pepper from college. A few weeks into Steve coming here, Thor found out about Tony’s little project and not so subtly invited himself along. At the time he knew Tony only by name and reputation, so he was interested in meeting him. Plus, this was around when Thor had really started taking an interest in Steve’s situation, so along he came almost as a self-appointed guardian. As it turns out, Thor and Tony have a decent amount in common. It’s not on the surface at all, what with Tony’s dark hair and smaller stature and sharp tongue versus Thor’s massive build, mussy blond locks, and hugely outgoing nature. But they bond over their “daddy issues”, and Steve watches from the sideline. It’s nice, he supposes. Keeps their attention from him sometimes.

Not today, though. “You missed a fine concert last night, Steve,” Thor comments as he putters around the work bench.

_Concert? _Oh, right. He almost forgot that Thor invited him to that. “Yeah?” He chews and finds a rather huge chunk of mushroom in his bite of pizza. He hates mushrooms.

“Yes. It was a beautiful evening, and the music was excellent. Afterward we enjoyed coffee and desserts at a café. The whole outing was quite enjoyable.”

Tony winces. “Do you listen to the way you talk? Seriously. Wouldest thou handest me the screwdriver that lieth to your right?”

Thor scowls but does as Tony asked. He turns back to Steve. “How was your evening at Sam’s?”

“My what?” Thor’s frown turns distinctly knowing and disapproving at once, and Steve’s tired enough that he doesn’t get why for a second. _Shit_. He blanches, chews, swallows down another gross, slimy slice of mushroom, and scrambles to think. As usual, his brain fantastically fails him. He can’t for the life of him come up with a decent lie to cover the fact that he didn’t go to Sam’s last night. Can’t come up with what he would have done if he did. And the seconds he spends uselessly trying to think prove costly because now both Tony and Thor are staring and he can’t even muster up a word.

Thor heaves a sigh. “You didn’t go, did you.” It’s not a question.

Suddenly Steve’s appetite fails him. He stands, ignoring the jolt of pain up his side, and dumps the rest of his cold slice of pizza in the trash. He kicks out his right leg to get it cooperating better and firmly walks right to the work bench. “It’s fine.”

Evasion rarely if ever works with Thor. It’s truly a minor miracle Steve actually managed to escape the invitation last night to begin with. “Why didn’t you go?” the other man asks, eyeing Steve doubtfully.

Steve flushes. He’s thankful for the fairly poor light in the garage because Thor can’t see it. He still can’t think, not usefully at any rate. Stress does this to him, turns his brain into absolute shit. Thankfully, it’s Tony to the rescue again. “He was busy. With his girlfriend maybe.” Steve stiffens before he can stop himself. His mind immediately goes to Natalie in 4B with her gorgeous face and alluring eyes and lulling voice, and he feels that blush burn hotter. Tony’s joking, of course, but Steve’s too addled to catch onto that right away. “Imaginary or no. A man’s got urges. I assume you still get ’em. A hermit probably gets more than most.”

Tony can be entirely tactless, too. “I’m not a hermit,” Steve snaps. At least defensiveness whips
his brain back into gear. He blushes harder, though this time in anger. “And I didn’t sit at home… jerking off all night. You asshole.” Tony grins that shit-eating one again, completely unapologetic, and starts working on some piece of the engine that rests on a ratty towel on the workbench. Steve sighs. “I just didn’t feel good, alright? In case you guys haven’t heard, my brain’s all fucked up, and it’s chronic, so it’s not gonna get better. You’ve heard that, right? Seems like it’s all anyone cares about!”

That sours the mood instantly, and all hints of jovialness evaporate. Thor and Tony share a look, and Steve feels even more like shit for killing the good mood. “Sorry,” he mutters, pressing a hand to his aching head. He turns away from the table, but when he does he spies his bike again. In pieces. Still, it’s a beauty. It’s a dull blood red, and though it needs new paint, Steve can picture how bright it’ll be. The chrome will be shiny and unblemished. The seat perfect black leather.

He’s ridden before quite a few times. His uncle out in California loved bikes, loved to restore them. The distance (and his mom’s limited means) prevented Steve from seeing him too often, but every time they went out there, he was so excited, even as a little scrawny stick of a kid. He stares at this bike, imagines the engine humming and purring beneath him, wonders what it would feel like to go really fast, fast enough that the wind is ripping at his hair and tearing tears from his eyes, fast enough that he could fly…

It’s never going to happen.

“Maybe that is the answer,” Thor eventually offers, and his voice is thunderous in the uncomfortable quiet. With difficulty Steve pulls his gaze from the bike and directs it to his friend, who looks concerned still. Desperately so. Thor shrugs. “Perhaps a girl would—”

“No.” He doesn’t want to go down this goddamn road again. He’s so fucking sick and tired of it. Tired of feeling fucking sorry for himself. Nobody lets it go, lets him go, so he’s continually faced with dealing with their concern and his grief and his trauma and his fucking broken body… Steve struggles to hang onto his temper. He can’t even remember the last time he let himself get angry, really angry. Not since al-Qaeda had their hands on him. He learned there that getting angry was useless. It didn’t save him, didn’t save Bucky, didn’t get them out. Didn’t do anything but make everything hurt worse. So he reels in his anger anew, doesn’t let it free, because what’s the point? What’s the point? “No.”

“Cap—”

“Shut up. Don’t call me that,” Steve says, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “It’s stupid.” Captain America. What a load of bullshit. He didn’t want that name when the press gave it to him, when the rest of the Howling Commandos branded him and laughed and teased him about it but in that good-natured way brothers did when they were really proud. He didn’t want it then, and he sure as shit doesn’t want it now. “Stupid and not true. I’m not Captain America if I ever was.” Another concerned glance. He can write a book on reading people’s worry from their frowns and glances. Still, he goes on. “I don’t want a girlfriend, okay?” Not after what happened with Peggy. “Sam keeps harassing me about it. I don’t need it from you, too.”

Tony grimaces. “Steve—”

“Come on, guys! No one’s gonna wanna deal with this,” Steve says simply. And it’s true. “I can’t stand it myself most days, so who’d be willing to take it on with me? No one. And no one should. I can’t ask anyone to do that.”

“Nor should you punish yourself for things beyond your control. You were wounded. You were a victim, Steve—”
Steve’s eyes flash. “Now you really need to shut up. Don’t call me that. Don’t ever call me that.”

The room goes starkly silent. The sound of the street beyond the workshop’s lot seems very loud, the swish of cars and the hum of the world outside. Steve’s heart is suddenly pounding, and that rush of memories is too close. *Victim.* Doctor Banner keeps telling him that, too, that he needs to accept that he had no options, that what he endured isn’t his choice. What happened is *not his fault.* Fuck that. The worst part of the alphabet soup of his life? *MIA.* *POW.*

Nobody’s going to want to take that on.

He sighs and tries to calm down. He doesn’t know what’s been with him lately, why everything feels so tenuous and looming. It’s Coulson and his needling persistence. It’s the fact that his seizures are on the upswing again after a few months of relative stability. It’s the fact that there’s no end in sight. Maybe they’re right. Finding someone else – a girlfriend or whatever – will help. He’s selling himself short, making an assumption that may not be true. And maybe Sam’s right. Maybe telling his story – what he can remember of it – to Coulson or to *anyone* will help, too. Maybe freeing himself from the chains of it all will show others do the same. Maybe if he can see himself differently, everyone else will, too. See what’s beneath all of his problems and his scars. Maybe trying to look into the darkness in his head for answers to the things he doesn’t know and can’t (won’t) remember–

*No.*

He just wants someone to know who he is.

Another breath and he’s managed to gather himself. He’s always on the edge it seems. One good push… *Not today.* Today needs to be a good day. “Let’s just work on the bike,” he says to his friends. It takes a lot, but he smiles. And it’s not the least bit convincing, but he’s trying. That’s the best he can do sometimes. Try. “Sorry, okay? I’m alright. Just going through a rough patch.”

Tony looks like he wants to make a crack about that. It’s an obvious one. A rough patch? This isn’t a patch. This is his life now. These two guys – *everyone* he knows now – never knew him before this, never knew the person he was. They only know what he’s become, and he’s pretty sure that’s not who he’s meant to be. *Captain America.* God, was he ever that foolishly deluded? Captain America died in an Afghan hospital outside of Kandahar with a bullet in his body and his best friend’s dog tags clenched in his hand.

*Jesus.* *Stop.*

Tony’s hand on his shoulder jerks him out of his thoughts, and thank God for it. Tony’s fingers smear grease on his shirt, but his grip is firm and grounding. “Take it from someone who’s gone through a few rough patches in his time,” he says, holding Steve’s gaze. “You don’t need to go it alone.” Tony’s a recovering alcoholic. He drank years ago, when he and his father weren’t getting along. It was an escape for him, like inventing and tinkering and fixing things are now. He traded in the booze for those addictions instead because when his parents died, he went on a hell of a bender, as he puts it, a trip through grief and anger and resentment and all other sorts of unresolved emotions, a trip that ended with his car wrapped around a telephone pole out in Malibu. A couple of large pieces of the windshield pierced Tony’s chest and permanently damaged his heart. He’s okay now, but he almost died. Steve’s seen the scars. They aren’t pretty. Tony sobered up pretty quickly when he realized how lucky he was that he wasn’t killed (and that he didn’t kill anyone else). “We all have our demons.”

Steve fakes a smile. “I know.”
Tony gets bolder, slings his arm over Steve’s shoulder. Steve doesn’t flinch, even if he’s not entirely comfortable with it. “Shit like this is easier to face as a team. You should know. You’re a company man. And you don’t have to talk about it.” Tony skewers Thor with a look. “Right?”

Thor’s not pleased, but then he has things he doesn’t talk about, either. His jealous, spiteful, borderline evil brother. His own relationship with his father, which is in shambles. All the responsibilities from which he’s running. The three of them are more alike than they realize. So Thor nods. “Of course.”

Satisfied that the workshop is yet again a haven away from their myriad issues, Tony grasps Thor’s shoulder and tugs him a tad closer so that he can put his arm around him, too. It probably looks pretty stupid, Tony who is lean and wiry and shorter sandwiched between Steve and Thor, who are both blond and broad and, well, big. But it feels good. They stare at the bike a moment, and Steve notices the tension finally ebb from his muscles and the pain in his head getting quieter. “So let’s build a motorcycle. With any luck, this beautiful baby will be purring her heart out in a couple months.”

There’s no more preamble. They go to it, talking about other things, getting good and filthy with engine dirt and grease, laughing and enjoying each other’s company, and for a while, Steve can almost forget that he’s working on a bike he won’t ever be able to ride.

For how bad the day started, it ends up being a nice time. They spend most the afternoon working on the bike. Tony doesn’t act it, but he’s surprisingly perceptive when he wants to be. He keeps everything light, both the conversation and the mood. He orders fresh pizza from the place down the street for lunch, and it tastes much better and satisfying hot. He gets music playing, Nirvana and Guns N’ Roses and Soundgarden, and it’s a few years too old for Steve’s taste but he likes it enough. And he notices when Steve’s energy wanes or when his various maladies start giving him trouble. He never makes a show of it; smoothly stepping in when Steve loses his concentration and stepping right back out the second Steve’s recovered enough to keep at it. Tony really is a good guy, despite all his foibles. The hours slip away without any of them really noticing, and by the time they emerge to wipe their filthy hands, it’s almost dinnertime.

And the bike is coming along. Of course that’s mostly Tony’s doing. Steve is competent enough around a wrench, and Thor’s getting better, but neither of them have the expertise and experience to do much more than tighten some bolts at Tony’s instructions. Still, they share their pride over it as they stand together and look at their progress (which isn’t easy to see) and the mess (which is). Tony has a tablet computer, and he’s making notes of what they’ve done, of the things that still need doing, and promises they’re kicking ass and making good strides, even if it’s not terribly obvious.

Thor and Steve go home after saying their goodbyes and making promises to be back next weekend. They ride the subway in silence. Steve’s glad for that. He feels good, and there’s no need to muck that up with stupid small talk. He’s pensive but not really about anything in particular. Thinking about the bike, how rewarding it is to do something. To build something. He can see why Tony’s addicted to it. It’s the same when he finishes a drawing, even one for work that’s not something he would’ve done otherwise. Again, it’s being proud of himself. Satisfaction. Progress.

It’s not something he experiences too often nowadays.

They make it back to their building. The day’s uncomfortably hot now, a late, lazy Sunday afternoon, so Flatbush is quiet. He and Thor plod tiredly into the lobby and up the steps. Steve aches, his hip and his head and his feet, but it’s not so bad. “Do you have plans for dinner?” Thor
asks as they reach their floor.

Steve sighs slowly. Feeling good only takes him so far most of the time. “Not really.”

It’s pretty obvious that that moment this morning where Steve snapped about being called a victim has sobered Thor some. That’s probably why he’s been so quiet. Steve feels rotten about it; Thor’s great, and he didn’t deserve that reaction. But Steve hasn’t been able to bring himself to apologize because his own feelings about the whole thing, about people seeing him only for his problems and being a victim or not being to blame for what happened and the fact that no one knows his story… His feelings are, as they always are, so messed up. If he apologizes, does it mean Thor’s right? Does being a victim absolve him from how things went down? Is all this – the brain damage and the PTSD and the hell his life is sometimes – a punishment for surviving? He doesn’t fucking know. He thinks Doctor Banner is trying to get to this point in therapy, where he can figure it out. Where he comes to terms with everything. With losing Bucky.

He doesn’t want to come to terms with that ever.

At any rate, Thor looks honestly lost. And he doesn’t do what he’d normally do, which is boldly and amiably offer Steve a meal with him. “Well, I will be home.”

That’s all he says. It’s barely an invitation. Steve feels like an asshole. Thor turns, fishing in his shorts for his keys, and the guilt gets to be too much. “Hey,” Steve calls. The other man turns, and Steve manages to look him straight in the eye. “Thanks. For what you said this morning.” It gets harder and harder to fake it, but he keeps going. “I know you don’t… You don’t know everything about me. You don’t know what happened. I’m not ready to talk… I’m not ready yet. But I appreciate you trying no matter how much of an asshole I am.”

Thor stares. “You’re not an asshole, Steve.” Then he grins, and it’s just a bit devious. “Not usually.”

Steve laughs before he can stop himself, and suddenly the sullen, tense air is gone between them. “Sorry.”

“You have earned the right to be an asshole when it suits you, though,” Thor says, and it’s said lightly but seriously.

Steve shakes his head. “Don’t think so, but thanks.” When he smiles, it comes easier. For just a second, he feels like who he used to be. He used to do anything for anyone, to protect people, to make other people feel good and better about themselves. For just a second, he remembers what that was like. Being someone who cares, who fights, who puts himself last. Captain America. No, just Steve Rogers. That’s who he was before the war. And when it comes down it, he’s terrified that that’s who died in that Afghan hospital.

Thor clasps his shoulder. “See you tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

They go their separate ways. Steve’s relieved to be home; the fatigue is rapidly worsening, and he wants a shower like no one’s business. He can’t right away, though. Max has been alone for quite a while, so he needs to get him out. Oddly enough, though, the dog’s not waiting for him at the door the way he’s done every other day since, well, forever. “Max?” Steve calls as he steps inside his apartment. Max isn’t even in the kitchen or living room. His favorite spot on the couch is vacant as is his dog bed by the windows. Curious, Steve calls louder. “Max!”
There’s the telltale sound of pattering feet, and Max comes running from his bedroom. He doesn’t go right to Steve, though. He stands in the hallway, whining. Steve shakes his head. “What’s the matter?” Max just whines louder, jittering with excitement. Steve’s too tired for whatever’s gotten him all worked up. “Come on. Let’s get you outside.” More whining. More prancing around, like he’s realizing Steve isn’t going to do what he wants. “Come on. Let’s go. I’m hot and tired.” Max seems to shake his head, and Steve loses his patience. He grabs the leash from its hook by the door, plods over there, and secures it to his collar. “Now. Outside.”

It’s a lot of tugging and sighing on Steve’s part, but he gets Max out of the door and down the steps. He walks him quickly; his hip’s really starting to bother him from all the crouching and standing he’s done at Tony’s, plus all the walking today and the day before. Thankfully, Max doesn’t make a production out of doing his business and in short order they’re back in their building, wearily climbing the steps. Steve’s really struggling by the time he gets to the top, miserably hot and sweaty and head spinning a little from lack of sleep and hip pretty spectacularly failing him.

But all of that goes away in a blink and a breath when he sees her at his door.

She’s obviously waiting for him. She’s wearing jean shorts that cut fairly high on her thigh, high enough to show all of her shapely, gorgeous legs but not so high to be obscene. Her t-shirt is plain red and looks well-worn and washed many times. Her brown hair is gathered up in a sloppy pony tail, and he can see sweat lightly coating her skin, but all it does is make her glow. She’s unguarded and open and stunning.

And she looks horrified when he approaches. “Oh, God, it gets worse,” she moans to herself, shaking her head. “This is a bad time, isn’t it? I’m so, so sorry! I, um…”

Steve is so shocked that she’s there and so beautiful that all he does is murmur a profoundly embarrassing “hi”.

Natalie winces. She gestures to Steve’s closed apartment door. For a second, she seems like she’s trying to find a way to say something. Eventually she just closes her eyes and goes for it. “I think she’s in your apartment again.”

That doesn’t make sense for a second. Then Steve’s brain kicks into gear. “Your cat? Lilo?” Max is going nuts now that they’re closer, bouncing around Natalie and licking at her. She winces again, and Steve’s not sure if it’s from fear or disgust, so he hauls Max back. “Enough, Max.” The dog probably smells the cat on her. And this explains why he was so uppity before.

“Liho,” Natalie corrects with a flustered smile. She reaches over to pat Max’s head after a beat. Steve can see she’s not entirely comfortable. Max is a big dog. “I know. Weird name, right?” Her eyes quickly flick up and down his body. “And you’re… You’re busy. I’m so sorry.”

Yet again it takes Steve a second to figure out why she’s looking at him like that. Christ, he’s a mess. His shirt is wet with perspiration and filthy from the dirt from Tony’s garage. Grime is smeared on his hands and arms and caked around his fingernails. He’s rumpled and flushed and probably smells. “It’s okay,” he says, although now that he’s noticed how he must look to her, he feels itchy with it. “Max, come on!” He pulls the dog away by his collar. “Sorry.”

Natalie smiles uncertainly. “This is really untoward of me to ask, but do you mind if I come in?” Now she flushes, like she really does think that’s inappropriate. Steve’s heart leaps. “Or you can get her, too. I don’t want to invite myself in – God, I’m screwing this up.” She huffs, blowing a curled lock of hair from her brow where it’s gotten stuck in the sweat there. “I just want to get her out and then I’ll get out of your hair and…” She grimaces one more time. “…board up the hole in
my room and drown myself in my embarrassment!”

He can’t stand to see her this ashamed. “Oh, no. Don’t do that. You’re not bothering me.” She cocks a playful eyebrow, smirking a little at his messy clothes. “Just… uh. Yeah. Come on in? If you want.”

She tries not to hesitate, but for some reason, he can see it anyway. “Sure.”

He gets his keys out and opens the door. His heart’s thundering and he feels lightheaded, like his ears are ringing, and he’s dizzy but not because of his medical issues. It’s stupid and silly, but it’s because of her. He fumbles to get Max in but pauses in taking off his leash. “You want me to put him in his crate? He’s Max, by the way. In case you didn’t catch that.”

Natalie’s trying to seem confident as she follows him inside, and she pulls it off very well, all smooth movements and calm breaths. But it doesn’t seem right to him. Her eyes dart to Max and then back to Steve’s face. “That’s not fair to him. It’s his home. And he’s been dealing with an uninvited guest all afternoon.”

Steve shrugs to that but doesn’t argue. He just wants her to be comfortable. She lets Max sniff her a few more times, lets him lick her hands, lets them get used to each other. Steve takes off the leash, and Max plods happily into the living room. Steve hangs the leash up again and closes the door. Then he turns to watch Natalie, wondering for a second if he’s dreaming. He can’t remember the last time anyone came into his apartment, let alone someone like her. There’s no one like her. He doesn’t know why he thinks that; he doesn’t know anything about her. But he knows that, that she’s… different. He feels like an eighteen year-old kid again. He feels like he felt when he first saw Peggy, only it’s more, more than that even and that ruled his world for years. Natalie… She’s amazing.

And she’s looking around his apartment. For the first time in a long time, he’s embarrassed about his place, not so much that it’s messy (although it is) but because it’s so bare. She’s checking it out, and he winces from behind her, worried about what she’s thinking of him. But her eyes are bright and curious. “This is nice. Bigger than mine. Been here long?”

That was exactly the question he was expecting (and dreading). “Yeah,” he stammers. “Couple years.”

She shakes her head. “Sorry. That was mean.” She sounds nothing but genuine. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he flounders. “I, uh… I suck at interior decorating.”

She laughs, and it’s musical. Something inside him eases just a bit. “Me, too.” Her gaze drifts more before landing on the wall of the living room, and she goes over there. “Wow. These are really cool.” She’s inspecting some of his drawings, the ones he’s framed. They’re nothing special. Some still-life pictures, mostly of the buildings in the area and people around them. A couple are from his old neighborhood, his old apartment building and school. “This isn’t far from here, right?” she asks, pointing at his high school.

“A few blocks.”

“They’re so life-like,” she comments in awe. She moves to the next one, and her brow furrows. “This is our building, isn’t it?” He nods. She smiles, shaking her head a little. “How’d you get someone to draw our… Oh.” She’s smart, peering at the corner of the drawings where SGR is written. Turning back to him, it seems like she’s seeing him in a new light, and her smile turns
“You’re really good. *Really* good.”

He tries not to beam and probably fails. “Thanks. Hope so. I do it for a living.”

Her face fractures in a tiny hint of confusion. “Oh, I thought you’re a–” She stops herself, a rosy flush painting her cheeks, and she turns away from the drawings. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be so nosy.”

For the first time since waking up in the VA hospital in DC, he doesn’t care. “No, it’s okay. You thought I’m what?”

She hesitates again, and that probably should have been a sign that he doesn’t want to hear the answer. “A soldier.”

Steve feels cold, betrayed in a way. He doesn’t know why (yes, he does, because he knows nothing about her and somehow she knows the one thing about him that’s central to all his issues). Thankfully, that sense of violation doesn’t last too long, because she’s overstepped her bounds and she knows it and he doesn’t like the sincere regret shining in her eyes. “I – I’m sorry. It’s not my business. I just… Well, I know Maria Hill. She lives downstairs?” Steve doesn’t know Maria, not much more than her name at any rate. “She told me you’re in the army.”

“I was,” he says. His voice is colder than he wants, but he’s still reeling a little. “Not anymore.”

She’s perceptive, he’ll give her that. Really perceptive. She backs off of that really quick, instead turning back to the drawings. “Your high school?” she asks, and it’s clearly an attempt to change the subject.

He goes with it, ignoring how rattled and raw he feels. “Yeah.”

“You grew up here?”

“Yeah. Brooklyn born and raised. You?”

It only seems fair to ask since he’s ventured some information about himself. Besides, he’s curious about her accent. It’s very slight, like she’s spent a great deal of time, effort, and probably money working on hiding it, and all that’s left are these lingering, mysterious traces. She shakes her head and says, “I moved from Staten Island. Wanted to be closer to where I work.”

“Where’s that?”

“Rising Tide Records. You heard of it?”

He nods. “Yeah, it’s not far from where I work actually.” A record store. Huh. He’s walked by it quite a few times on his way to Fury’s and never thought about going in. It looks like mostly vintage stuff; he can’t imagine a place selling actual CDs would survive in the age of digital download. He likes music, but it doesn’t much interest him beyond just enjoying it. He supposes her interest in it could explain her singing last night, her playing the guitar. She’s a musician. Despite how curious he is (and how much he wants to hear her sing again), he can’t bring himself to ask. Not when his nightmare was the cause of it. That’s too mortifying and frightening to think about.

She smiles uncertainly, almost as if she can read his mind. “The cat?” she prompts.

He was staring like a moron, and he jerks out of it. “Oh, right. Um…” He blushes again with hot embarrassment. “She’s probably in my bedroom.” Somehow it doesn’t seem very appropriate to let this girl into his bedroom, but that’s not the worst of it. The worst of it is that his bedroom is a
mess, with laundry on the floor and drawings scattered and his bed unmade yet again. At least he managed very early this morning to put the sheets back on it. Still, he doesn’t want her in there if he can avoid it. “If you don’t mind waiting, I’ll see if I can get her out.”

Natalie takes the hint. Her smile is soft and disarming. “Sure.”

He feels like a stupid idiot as he heads back into his apartment with pretty stunning speed considering how tired and stiff he is. Once he’s in his room, he does his level best to clean like the wind, scooping up the laundry and tossing it into the hamper, getting the comforter back onto the bed (even though he never managed to actually wash it), straightening up his books and papers and things, and tossing garbage into the trash. Sometimes it surprises him, how easily the military precision drilled into him at West Point comes back. When the room looks partially decent, he goes to the grate that he didn’t bother to replace last night.

Yep. Yellow eyes are watching him again. The cat’s in there. Steve tries to reach for her, but she darts deeper in the vent, meowing unhappily. He wonders how many hours Max spent barking his head off at her. He calls a couple times, trying to coax Liho closer, but she’s stubbornly not coming. Leaning back on his heels, Steve sighs. So much for avoiding bringing Natalie in here.

He heads back to the living room to find her still examining his drawings with Max watching from his usual spot on the couch. She seems lost in thought, staring at the buildings and the trees and all the little details. She’s a million miles away, and there’s sadness in her eyes. He clears his throat so as not to startle her. “Hey, um, I can’t get her out. So maybe you should try?”

Again she’s hesitating like she too thinks it’s pretty inappropriate for her to be in his bedroom, and there’s maybe a flash of fear that disturbs him, but her wariness is gone in a blink. It bothers him despite its brevity, and for a second he considers telling her he’ll try some more (since he doesn’t really want her in there anyway). But she’s coming toward him. “Lead the way. I’m so sorry about all this again. Really.”

He gives her the best grin he can manage, considering she’s about to enter into a place no one but he and Max go. He’s building it up in his brain more than it is, but it’s hard not to considering how many long hours he’s spent sleepless or suffering in here. A glorified torture chamber. He can try to be a little cooler and more nonchalant about it, though. “It’s no problem.”

Max lopes behind them and then runs ahead to jump on Steve’s bed. To her credit, Natalie doesn’t spend much time appraising the room. Steve’s grateful. Even with his quick clean-up job, it’s still a mess. She follows him over to the wall where the grate is. He doesn’t miss the furtive glances she keeps giving his bed of all things. That bothers him a lot, that and the fact she’s trying really hard not to seem as wound tight as she is. He’s wound tight, too. All he can think about is last night, the awful nightmare he had and her singing. He’s sticky with a sudden cold sweat, and he clears his throat again. “She’s in there,” he says.

Natalie drags her gaze once more from the rumpled blue comforter. And once more she’s wary a second before donning an easy smile and dropping smoothly to a crouch near the open vent. “Liho?” she calls. Immediately a cacophony of meows answers. Steve stands back, snapping Max who’s going nuts at the cat’s presence. “Liho, you sneak. Get over here.” Natalie coos and coaxes the cat for a second or two before Steve spots sleek black fur near the entrance of the vent. Then she snatches her.

Steve grins in relief. Natalie stands, Liho tight in her arms and purring. “I’m really sorry,” she says again. “I stuffed a bunch of towels in the one in my room, but I guess that wasn’t enough. I’ll call the super first thing tomorrow morning.”
He doesn’t know why he offers. It’s not like he’s all that handy. “I can come and take a look at it if you want.”

Her smile is disarming, but he can tell it’s a refusal and not just because she doesn’t want to inconvenience him. “No, no. It’s fine. Really. I’ve bothered you enough.”

Silence kills the conversation, and it’s turning tense and awkward. Steve stands there, petting Max, and she’s on the other side of his bed, petting Liho, and everything feels… right but wrong, too. Too much and not enough again. Steve needs her gone but wants her close, too. He doesn’t know which anymore. There’s something about her that he can’t explain, something mysterious and exciting but dangerous, too. Something for him. It gets his heart beating faster again, gets him smiling like a stupid, love struck, hopeless teenager, and he doesn’t know what to think, let alone what to say.

She finally breaks the terrible quiet, glancing over his shoulder to his dresser. “Is that an old record player?”

Huh? Taken aback, he turns around clumsily. “Oh, that? Yeah. It was my mom’s. I found it in her stuff after she passed away. Ended up in storage while I was overseas, and when I moved here… I don’t know.” Memories prod at him, good memories, ones of his mom and her old record player. His thinks it was his grandmother’s at one point, because he can hear her old voice, humming as she sits in her chair by the window. Songs from way back play in his head, and suddenly he’s in their old apartment, and he’s sitting at the dinette table, doing his math homework while the afternoon sun is shining on the linoleum. His mom’s cooking and singing to old tunes from the 1940s and 50s, old tunes coming from the record player. There’s the smell of cooking stew and the sound of music filling the room. She’s still in her scrubs. He remembers that, how she proud and strong she looked in her scrubs despite her small stature, how pretty she was with her silvery blonde hair done up in a bun. And he remembers a cold glass of milk in his hand and his mom’s warm smile and algebra. “What’d you do in school today, Stevie sweetheart?”

“Nothing much, Mom.”

“Math?”

“Yeah. Test tomorrow.”

“You’ll do fine, darling. You always do.”

He remembers closing his books, standing, coming over and kissing her cheek. He was nearly as tall as her. “Can Buck come for dinner?”

Natalie’s voice pulls him from his thoughts. The room is hazy, but he feels warm and at home. She’s walked over to the record player to get a better look, and he follows. “It’s a nice one,” she comments. “You don’t see too many in this good of a condition anymore. Did your mom have any records?”

Steve comes to stand at her side and looks down at the turntable. Honestly it’s been there since he moved in. He put it there for decoration, because he knows nothing about these things. “I couldn’t find any. She didn’t use it much toward the end. She died when I was in high school.”

“I’m sorry,” Natalie says.

Of all the things in his life he’s lost, this is one of the few with which he’s made his peace. Sarah Rogers was a strong, beautiful, courageous woman, and though she died young, she died

“Cancer took my mother, too, and my father. Just… one right after the other.” There’s understanding but a great deal of pain in Natalie’s voice, and Steve can tell this isn’t something with which she’s made her peace. She smiles sadly, sweeping her hand across the dusty glass top of the turntable. “She went first, and he died a few years later. It was almost like he didn’t want to be alive without her.”

Steve frowns. “That must have been rough.”

“Is what it is, right?”

“My dad’s gone, too. He died in the Gulf War. I was just a baby.”

Sympathy fills her eyes, even though she’s staring at the top of the turntable. “Guess we have that in common then. Orphaned.” He hasn’t labeled himself like that ever because he was almost eighteen when his mom passed, but he supposes it’s true. And it doesn’t matter how old you are when you lose your parents. It still hurts. Natalie glances at him. Sympathy turns into curiosity. “Is that why you became a soldier? Because of your dad?”

The question surprises him. Shrugging, he says, “Yeah, part of it. I didn’t think much about it when I was real little. Then 9/11 happened. A lot of my friends lost their folks or knew people that did. It was… horrifying. Like this awful nightmare we were all in together.” She nods. “That was when I started thinking about it. I wanted to go to art school. My teachers thought I had a decent shot of getting into Parsons or MIT’s art program. But I went to West Point instead. That was what right around when Mom died.” He thinks about it now, and where there’s usually a lot of bitterness surrounding his decisions, telling Natalie inexplicably makes it feel better. She makes it all feel like something he can be proud of. He shrugs again. “I don’t know. For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right.” He thinks about saying that he doesn’t know what that is anymore, but he decides against it.

Her expression is soft, appreciative. “You should come down to the shop,” she says after a beat, lightening her tone. “We have tons of records there. I’m sure I could help you find some things you like.”

He can hardly believe this. And it’s not like he doesn’t get asked to do stuff. He gets asked all the time. But it’s always because the asker is worried about him, wants him to get out and live a little, wants to make sure he’s okay. She’s… She’s just asking. “Really?”

“Sure,” she says with a smile, petting Liho more as she turns to him. “I like my job a lot, but, you know, it gets a little boring sometimes. Not exactly a flood of customers.”

Don’t read into this. He’s trying not to, but damn if his heart isn’t flying. He smiles, too. “Okay.”

“Ohay.” Now she’s downright grinning, and he thinks he can watch her do that forever. The silence comes back, and it’s still tense but for different reasons. She’s staring at him. He’s staring at her. They’re close, just a few inches between them, her with her cat and him with Max right on his feet. And there’s no denying the… something that’s there between them. The hot, stuffy air feels alive with it, like the oxygen molecules are charged and moving and fizzy and free all the sudden as they breathe them in. She breaks her gaze first with a small shake of her head. “I should go. Let you get back to your evening.”

He’s tempted to ask her to stay. He really is. But now that she’s moving away from him, he can’t find the words, and the world is abruptly off-kilter. Just like yesterday, he feels useless and
inadequate. “Oh. Okay.”

He walks her back to the door of his apartment. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t get in here again,” she promises. “Again, I’m really sorry.”

“It’s really okay.” He doesn’t want her to be sorry. “I don’t mind, Miss… I don’t think I caught your last name?”

“Rushman,” she offers, “but you can call me Nat.”

Steve nods. Nat. He likes that. He likes it a lot.

She’s moving faster, though, like she’s embarrassed, and she opens his door and is out in the hall in a blink. “Thanks,” she says, a tad breathless. She’s still smiling, despite running away. “See you around?”

“Yeah.”

And then she’s gone.

Steve sighs and closes his door slowly. He locks it in almost a daze, the sound of her voice echoing in his head, the sight of her smile seemingly imprinted in his brain. Her smile and her smart, glittering eyes and slender body and lush hair and pink lips. All the secrets she has that he wants to learn. He leans into the door a second, letting himself just enjoy that. God, she’s beautiful.

Max whines. He cracks open his eyes to find him sitting right behind him, wagging his tail with a knowing look in his eyes. “What?” Steve says. The dog just stares at him, pausing in panting a second and raising his ears like he’s amused. Steve blushes despite himself, rolls his eyes at himself, and pushes off the door. “Shut up.”

He goes through the rest of his evening untroubled. Takes his long overdue shower. Actually finishes cleaning up his room, which includes getting more laundry done. Takes his meds. Makes himself some dinner and then settles in front of his laptop to work a little on his next project for Mr. Fury. Max rests his head in Steve’s lap and lets him mindlessly scratch his ears. After his eyes and brain stop cooperating, he saves everything, shuts it all down, and decides to go to bed. He’s too tired for much else.

Yet as he lays there, staring at the long, gray shadows on his ceiling with Max pressed right against his side and his fingers lightly tangled in the dog’s fur, he doesn’t sleep. He can’t because he’s listening. Listening for her.

Waiting for her to sing.

She doesn’t, but he can hear her moving around through the shared wall. The soft swish of it, tiny creaks and cracks of the floor. He imagines her, bathed in the golden glow of a lamp, ethereal like an angel. And he realizes, for the first time in a very long time, that he told her things about himself. About his parents. About his past. About why he made the choices he did. He told her, told someone, and it wasn’t painful or bitter or difficult. It was surprisingly… comfortable. He wants to tell her more. It’s a novel feeling, terrifying really, and he almost shuts it down the second he has it. But he doesn’t.

He doesn’t because he realizes something else. He doesn’t just want someone to know who he is. He wants her to.
You and Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“'Cause it’s you and me and all of the people
With nothing to do, nothing to lose.
And it’s you and me and all of the people
And I don’t know why I can’t keep my eyes off of you.”
– Lifehouse, “You and Me”

It’s Friday before she sees Steve again.

Not that she’s counting the days. Not at all. And not that she’s looking for him. Their paths simply never cross. She leaves for work every morning that week and glances down the hallway of their building, but he’s never there. The others are. The Langs in 4D, who introduced themselves a couple days ago. They seem very nice, and their daughter’s precocious and adorable. And the blond beefcake in 4C. Nat can see right away why Maria called him that. Steve clearly works out; he’s very muscular and fit despite his limp (and whatever other issues he’s hiding). But compared to Thor? Even he’s small. And Thor’s a really weird name, even for a nickname. Still, the guy is sweet and charming, even if he dresses a bit like a bum.

So Nat sees them all every day, exchanging pleasantries and small talk when they pass each other before and after work. She never sees Steve, though. The door to 4A is always firmly shut, no matter how many times she surreptitiously looks there to check. Is he home? Is he there? It seems almost forbidden, and she has to quell the inclination to find out.

And it’s not just that. Liho has been surprisingly well behaved. She hasn’t escaped again, though Nat secretly arrives home every evening hoping to find her missing just to have an excuse to knock on 4A. The super hasn’t come by to fix the vent, but Liho is apparently exercising an annoying amount of restraint despite the fact Nat’s only stuffed more towels in to block it. Cats never do what you want them to.

It’s also been very quiet. She hasn’t heard Steve, and she’s been listening. Every night she’s listened. She feels bad about it; it’s eavesdropping at the very least, snooping and invading his privacy in a sense at the worst. She justifies it to herself. It’s not like she can not hear anything that’s happening with the shared wall and the vent practically acting as a conduit from his bedroom to hers. Furthermore, and this is really getting ahead of herself, she feels like it’s her responsibility to listen. She still doesn’t know anything much about him, not what happened to him or why he’s such a recluse, but it’s pretty obvious something really bad did. And it’s pretty obvious he’s alone. There was no sign of anyone else living with him, not a girlfriend or otherwise. She hasn’t seen anyone other than Thor and a handsome African American guy occasionally coming around his apartment, but they always have this look on their faces that’s close to unabashed worry and complete reluctance to walk away. It may very well be that she’s closest to Steve there is right now, and she’s really getting ahead of herself with that, but if he’s alone and he’s suffering… That means she’s responsible for him.

For Steve. For this… beautiful, broken guy she just can’t stop thinking about.

He’s been alright, though. If he’s had more nightmares, they’ve been very quiet, not like that first
one at all. She can’t deny she’s curious, and it’s so wrong on so many levels. She knows she needs to be focused on her own issues. She’s still queasy about having a gun in her apartment. She’s still worried about every creak in this new place (though not quite so much as she was). She’s still checking over her shoulder every time she’s walking down the street. Thinking about him is a nice distraction. Worrying about him is an escape, one which she’s unwittingly and eagerly taken. She wants to know more about him, why he had that violent dream, why he’s got that little limp, what those scars are from. It feels inappropriate to be wondering about it even in the privacy of her own thoughts, but she’s never met anyone like him before.

And she wants to sing for him again. Though they never acknowledged it during that brief moment last week, she knows he heard her. She knows he was thinking about it. He’s easy to read, a little flustered and desperate but so earnest in a way. Somehow, despite whatever hell he’s lived and is still struggling to overcome, he seems innocent and sweet to her. Strong but cracked. Independent but vulnerable, too. She’s almost positive after being in his apartment that the attraction goes both ways. And it’s stupid – so goddamn stupid – but she’s excited by that. Maria was right; she can’t deal with a relationship now. The one she’s coming from? Even a couple years removed isn’t enough to quiet her memories. It was traumatic to say the least, and she knows she’s not ready to be with anyone. Secretly she’s afraid she never will be again.

But she wants to be with him.

“Stupid,” she mutters to herself for what feels to be the millionth time as she gets ready for work. She’s running a late, having overslept. She was too worried to shut her mind off last night. Too worried and frustrated. That happens sometimes when she lets her thoughts and memories get the better of her. It didn’t help that Liho was restless, wandering around the apartment and meowing unhappily, whining really, like she was suddenly realizing they were in a new place and not going back to the old one.

“Liho, hush up,” Nat finally snapped. “I get it. You don’t like it here. You think I’m happy about it?” The cat came up onto the bed and sat at her side, staring. Jittery and anxious, Nat snatched her and tucked her under her sheet. It was still so damn hot in the room, even with a fan and the air conditioner going. And then she laid awake for quite some time, keeping Liho still, wanting to use the quilt because she felt afraid and exposed under only the sheet but it was insufferable, listening for cracks and creaks. Then listening for her neighbor in case he needed her, because that made her feel better. There was nothing to hear, though. It was quiet. Quiet isn’t always a comfort. And quiet sometimes can be a damn nuisance. Sometimes it’s miserable and suffocating. Sometimes it lets too much stuff out of the darkness of her heart, stuff that’s hard to put back.

Yeah, sleep was elusive last night, so she didn’t get up on time, which means rushing through getting ready. Which means shoveling in a quick bowl of oatmeal and making her coffee to go. Which means rushing out the door. And the second she opens the door, Liho tries to bolt. Nat swore in Russian, hissing as she tries to catch the cat. Her coffee goes down, the thermos toppling out of her hands as she scrambles. She scoops Liho up, angry now, and sets her lightly back down on the floor in the apartment before firmly closing the door. Damn it, she thinks, angrily staring at the puddle of brown.

“Need a hand?”

Nat turns at the voice, heart jumping in hope, but it’s not Steve. It’s Scott, and he’s unshaven and dressed like faded shorts and a stained t-shirt. He’s sadly appraising the mess of coffee on the floor outside Nat’s door. “Lame. That smelled awesome. Some kind of hazelnut?”

“Yeah,” she murmurs, trying to hide her disappointment. Not over the spilled coffee, though, even
though it is a nice blend that Daisy bought her. She glances down at 4A, but the door is firmly shut. “I need to get some–”

Scott’s already crouching, picking up her thermos before it can leak any more onto the floor and mopping up the light brown liquid with a bunch of napkins from a bag on his arm. “Got it, sweetheart.” He put the sopping mess into the bag and pulled out a bagel. “Want one? Cinnamon raisin. Hope’s favorite. I have extra.”

Nat smiles, taking one more look down the hallway at 4A as she opens her apartment again. Nothing. And luckily Liho’s taken off, so it’s easy to set the mostly empty thermos down and lock up. “No, no. Thank you, though. I’m really late for work.”

Scott frowned a little before taking a monstrous bite out of the bagel. He barely chews before asking, “You sure?”

Nat nods, donning a better smile. “Yeah. And thanks for cleaning up.”

Scott swallows. “Alright. Hey, you know, you should come over some night. Cassie wants to have dinner with you. She’s convinced you’re a rock star.”

Cassie caught sight of Nat’s guitar when she moved in, it seemed, and she’s been enamored since. Nat’s smile turns softer and more genuine. “Not quite,” she responds. Not even close. Probably not ever.

Scott grinned. “Maybe this weekend?”

“Maybe.” Her phone beeps in her pocket, and she pulls it out to see a text from Daisy. Where are you? “I have to run. See you later?”

“Sure.”

So she runs. It’s warm and humid and kind of rainy as she does. She races down the sidewalks toward the subway to go south. It’s a blur of people. She’s still getting her bearings around Brooklyn, and Flatbush has been ridiculously busy every day this week. She tries not to feel intimidated by the crowds of people going about their daily activities. It’s hard because she feels different. She always imagines that she stands out, though she knows that’s not true and only her paranoia getting the better of her. There’s no way these strangers could know her or what she’s been through, no way they could see the truth just by passing her by. It’s a stupid fear, but for some reason, she can’t ever shake it. It’s her life now. She’s never going to get to the point where she can walk down the street and not be afraid that someone’s watching her, that someone’s seeing her.

There’s no time for that today, though. She’s a sweaty, flustered mess when she pulls open the door to Rising Tide Records. The old-fashioned bell on it jingles, heralding her arrival (not like it’s necessary – not with the dearth of customers of late that has had everyone watching the door all the time). Nat wipes the sweat and raindrops from her forehead to see everyone – Daisy and May Parker and her nephew, Peter – all staring at her.

And Clint. He’s leaning on the counter, dressed in a nice blue suit, hair gelled so it’s spikey and eyes narrowed unhappily. God, she doesn’t want to deal with this this morning. Clint’s the best thing that’s ever happened to her, hands down. He saved her, got her help, got her out. He was there every step of the way after she was hurt, staying with her at the hospital, using his power in the police department to protect her and his own time and effort when that failed, helping her escape, helping her find a new place to live and get back on her feet. Guarding her like she’s flesh
and blood to him when she was only another domestic violence call. If not for him and his generous heart and sharp mind, she’s sure she would have died.

But that generous heart and sharp mind come with side effects. Like being ridiculously overprotective and more than a little controlling. This isn’t the first time Clint’s stopped by, both at the apartment and here, over the last week. No, it’s about every day that he’s shown up to check on her. It’s like a sacred duty to him, and he goes out of his way to do it. He and his wife Laura, a sweet, wonderful woman who allowed Nat to stay with them after she was released from the hospital, live outside the city on Long Island. They have two nice kids, and Clint and Laura moved to the suburbs from Brooklyn when Lila and Cooper were little to find a bigger place for their growing family. They’re really good people. Still, Clint keeping an eye on her is an inconvenience for him, and she knows it so that makes her feel bad. And Clint being so vigilant wears on her sometimes. She knows it’s necessary and she feels awful resenting it, but it’s like a constant reminder that she’s being hunted. There’s no escape.

And there’s no escape the tongue-lashing she sees coming. “Where were you?” Clint asks.

“I overslept,” she responds grumpily. She heads to the counter to set her bag down and find something to dry off. Peter hands her some paper towels.

“You didn’t answer your phone,” Clint returns sharply. She can see he’s tense, and she immediately feels rotten for it. Wiping her forehead, she reaches into her pocket only to find her phone shut itself off. Damn it. It’s been doing that. She really needs a new one.” Died again?” She sighs and tosses it a little harder than necessary onto the counter. It slides to Peter where he sits at the cash register. Clint sighs, expression softening. “I’ll get you a new one.”

“You don’t need to,” Nat replies.

“Nope,” Peter replies. His brown hair is neatly combed into place, and he wears an old shirt that says ATARI. He’s a sixteen, a clean-cut, nice kid, a little nerdy but a whiz with science and math. Some sort of child prodigy. His parents were killed when he was a baby, and May raised him in Queens with her husband for most his life. After Ben Parker was mugged and murdered, she relocated with Peter to Brooklyn and bought this shop. That was five years ago, to Nat’s understanding. Peter’s handled it all very well, all things considering, but he always seems like he’s itching to do something. He spends his afternoons at the shop after school, helping with stocking and ringing people out and fixing his aunt’s perpetually uncooperative computer system. During the summer, he hangs around full time, hangs around and fiddles with outdated electronics and surfs the internet. He’s already popped the back off of Nat’s phone and is looking at the insides. “It probably just needs a new battery. I can raid my stash, see if I have one.” His stash, otherwise known as the shop’s back room that has been transformed into a workshop so cluttered with junk that no one can squeeze in there besides Peter.

Daisy shares a knowing look with May. Though they’re not related, Nat always finds it remarkable how similar they look. And act. Daisy’s very pretty, slender and athletic. Her long brown hair is up in a few barrettes. Thanks to her Chinese heritage, her skin is bit darker, a stunning tan that’s natural and Nat’s envy whenever she notices her own pale coloration. Daisy dresses like a hipster, lots of prints and leggings and that effortful laziness. She’s always got stuff written on her hands, notes and things, and she wears clean make-up and a lot of jewelry. May does, too, though hers is a tad less flashy and hipster is not at all her style. She’s in her forties, and she’s simple but elegant. She’s also wearing her abundant, brown hair (though streaked with silver in a few places, particularly around her temples) in barrettes. And they both smile the same sweet smile, the sort that lights up their eyes with nothing but genuine happiness. “I thought you promised me you were going to fix the security cameras in the back, Pete,” May says lightly.
Peter’s already taking the phone apart. “I will! I will. Got all summer, Aunt May.”

“Sure, you do,” May says. She turns to Nat. “Assuming things stay slow…”

“They won’t,” Daisy interjects, ever the optimist.

May rolls her eyes a little. “Daisy’s got some ideas for the Block Fest. Maybe you can throw in your two cents, Nat? We need fliers and things designed.” The Block Fest is Daisy’s idea, and Nat has to admit it’s a great one. The shop’s been struggling financially (obviously – the news keeps saying the recession’s over, but it’s not. And running a vintage music store, even in a lively place like Flatbush? Hard in good times). Daisy recommended getting the local businesses to band together, since their shop is not the only one languishing, and throwing a local music festival in the fall. Rising Tide Records will coordinate it and bring in area bands. A couple of the restaurants have already agreed to cater, which gets their food out there for cheap. A few more establishments are interested in setting up booths and the like to showcase their wares and services and bring in business from the attendees. It’s really beneficial to everyone, all the area companies working together to create a fun evening and drum up interest, interest in the bands performing and the businesses supporting them. If they’re lucky, maybe they can hundreds of people coming. Maybe more.

Of course, it’s a massive undertaking. They need permits and marketing and lots of planning and funding. Spreading the bill over many participants will help ease the burden, but it’s still a significant chunk of change. Getting the other companies around them involved is essential, plus bringing in bands and singers. Daisy wants Nat’s help with that in particular. She knows enough about who Nat is – was – to know her insight will be helpful. Daisy’s amazing with information, with networking and logistics, but Nat knows the industry. And it’s not like this is the industry. It’s just the local music scene. Still… It makes her so excited and so uncomfortable all at once.

But she dons a good smile and nods. “Sure.”

May smiles back. “How are we doing on getting things in the database?”

“It’s going,” Daisy responds brightly. “We’ll finish off the CDs today. Once we do that, I’ll be able to get the entire inventory on the website.” She ruffled Peter’s hair. “If the hard drive this one found for us doesn’t go down again.”

Peter grumbles. “Yeah, yeah. Go away.”

“You gonna be able to fix this thing, Spiderman?” That’s what Clint calls Peter. His little workshop is loaded with webs, and he doesn’t seem to care at all. That’s pretty remarkable to Nat. She’s never liked spiders. Especially not since she… Not worth thinking about. Clint’s voice drags her out of the sucking hell of her memories. “Because if it’s shot, I’ll stop on the way home and get her a new one.”

That pisses her off. She can’t help it. She’s so damn raw today. “No, you’re not.”

Clint’s unwavering. She knows there’s no convincing him when he’s made up his mind about something, and her safety is always his top priority. “Yes, I am, because you can’t be without a cell phone.” Nat frowns and looks to May for support. There’s none there. May, too, knows enough of the situation to be something of a mother hen.

Frustrated, Nat turns to Daisy, but she only gives a small shrug and a sympathetic wince. “Don’t look at me.”
Clint shakes his head, firm. “You need a cell phone.” God, I’m not a child. She doesn’t need to be coddled. And once, just once, it would be nice to fucking forget all the shit behind her. “So how about it, Parker?”

“Yeah,” Peter answers. “Piece of cake.”

The bell jingles suddenly, and their small group turns. Oh, God. Nat’s heart actually leaps in her chest, and she can’t believe what she’s feeling. What she’s seeing. It’s like the whole world’s fallen away, all her troubles and fears and frustrations melting, just because he’s here.

He’s here.

Steve stands in the door, looking like a deer in headlights. That probably makes sense, given that everyone in the shop is staring at him. Nat immediately notices that he’s dressed nicer in a good pair of jeans and a polo shirt that beautifully brings out the blue in his eyes. She can’t be sure, but it also seems like he trimmed up his beard a little, maybe even also trimmed his hair. It’s brushed nicely, parted on the side and she sees more hints of gold in the brown locks. Even as damp as it is, the color is bright, and suddenly she wonders if it’s as soft as it looks.

For a second it seems like he’s about to bolt. May comes closer, smiling brightly. “Hi! Can I help you find something?”

Steve is going to run. Nat can see it. His posture is rigid, and fear flashes in his eyes. God, what happened to him? She’s moving before she thinks to, pushing away from the counter to get to him because she doesn’t want him to leave before she even gets a chance to talk to him. “Steve, hi. Hi.” Her heart’s absolutely pounding. She smiles in spite of it. “Hi.”

“So,” he says. His eyes widen at seeing her, and she can see a touch of the tension in his body ease. “Um…” He lifts his hand and in it is a cardboard drink tray. “Coffee?” He blushes. Again, it’s so damn earnest, in direct contrast to everything she’s learned about him. Something so innocent and sweet is stark against the darkness in his eyes and circles of sleeplessness around them and scars and the limp. “I saw what happened this morning.”

What? Oh. Her coffee that she spilled in the hallway. She completely forgot about it. The fact that he didn’t, that he saw or asked someone or figured it out somehow, that he cares… “Oh, you didn’t have to–”

“It’s fine,” he quickly insists, “but I didn’t know what you liked so I, um…” He hands her the drink tray. “I got a bunch of choices. Some have cream and sugar. One’s hazelnut.” He fumbles through another smile. “So you can have your pick.”

The mere fact that he did this is enough to make her heart fly. And she loses herself in his eyes. She can’t help it. The coffee’s meaningless, but having him there after waiting days for him to take her up on her silly offer, hoping beyond hope because she can’t make herself take the first step… It’s incredible.

“Do you two know each other?” That’s Clint, barging in on this moment she shouldn’t be enjoying so much.

Steve turns to him, and she can instantly see the tautness returning to his muscles. She doesn’t like the hard look in his eyes, but it’s warranted. Clint’s not being terribly subtle about his wariness. Hackles raised and all that. He’s glaring and guarding her like an attack dog (maybe that’s an overstatement, but not by much). “Yeah,” Nat says quickly. “He lives next to me.”
For some reason, it surprises her that Steve sticks out his hand. His entire form radiates distrust and discomfort. “Steve Rogers,” he says. It’s probably a big deal for him, coming here and facing something like this and going forward despite not knowing any of them or her all that well. That makes her all the more touched and grateful because he’s here for her.

Or records. She’s getting ahead of herself again.

“Clint Barton,” Clint says after a beat, shaking Steve’s hand and very obviously sizing Steve up and trying to judge him as friend or foe. Trying to discern if he’s a threat to her. He’s not a threat. She may not know anything about him really, but she knows that. He won’t ever hurt her.

“Steve Rogers? Captain Steve Rogers?” Nat turns and sees Daisy staring at Steve with unfettered awe on her face. Steve hesitates like he’s been caught doing something bad before stiffly nodding. Daisy glances among the others when no one reacts. Her voice and expression are incredulous. “You guys don’t know who he is? He got the Medal of Honor a few years back! It was all over the news. He’s Captain America.”

Captain America? The name didn’t mean anything in particular to Nat, but shock courses over her all the same. He’s not just a soldier. He’s a hero.

That’s immediately dampened because Steve stiffens and pulls his hand away from Clint. Nat notices the minute shiver bunching up his shoulders right away. “I’m not–”

“Oh, yeah,” May adds, eyes widening with dawning realization. Don’t say anything, Nat silently implores. They do, of course. They’re all practically vibrating with mounting excitement. “I remember now. Big hometown hero thing. You saved your unit in Afghanistan from an ambush or something? The Howling Commandos?”

Steve nods. He looks positively brittle with the recognition and attention. He looks like he’s being tortured. “Yeah, that was me.”

Just like that, Peter’s got the biggest case of hero worship imaginable. He’s out of his chair, vaulting his lanky body over the counter (May hates it when he does that, but even she’s too excited to have an apparent war hero and legend in her shop to notice), and going up to Steve. “Wow, dude. Dude. Dude! That’s awesome. It was outside Kabul, right? Four years ago? You guys got trapped in a bombed out village trying to get civilians out and the Taliban attacked, right? Right?” He’s grabbing Steve’s hand and shaking it. “I had a project in US History and Government on current events.”

Steve swallows stiffly. “Right.”

“This is amazing,” Peter says, fanboying as he pumps Steve’s hand hard. “I just gotta say – anything you want in the store? It’s yours. On the house. I’m Peter Parker, by the way. This is my Aunt May’s store.”

“Hi,” May says, waving a little and smiling.

Daisy grins. She’s sizing Steve up, too, but for a completely different reason. “I’m Daisy Johnson,” she says. “But you can call me Skye. Or whatever you want, really. I’m not fussy.”

God. Nat needs to get them to lay off like yesterday. “Guys,” she warns, pulling Peter back. She shoves the drink tray at the teenager. “Here. Drink this and go calm down.” It’s caffeine, so that’s not likely. Peter lives on soda, coffee, and Red Bull.

At least May takes the hint. She gives Nat a knowing look and pushes her nephew to the counter.
“Back to work, everyone,” she orders in a light tone.

Clint’s phone beeps, and he pulls it out of his suit pocket and glances at it. “I have to run,” he announces. Nat can barely restrain her relief. On his way out the door, he skewers Steve with a wary glare (though learning about Steve’s war hero status has apparently tempered his distrust some) before pointing at Nat. “I’m calling your phone at five o’clock. If you don’t answer, I’m swinging by your place with a new one. Got it?”

“It’ll be fixed!” Peter promises from the counter anew, having already picked a coffee from the tray. “This is awesome.”

Nat can’t help but roll her eyes, because Clint’s not satisfied, and he’s waiting at the door to make sure she understands. She’s so damn embarrassed at the treatment. “Yes, Clint. I got it.”

Clint gives Steve a final appraisal before convincing himself Nat’s safe there – of course she’s safe there with her friends and she’s not alone she’s at work for crying out loud he’s not going to come here – and stepping outside. Steve watches him go, distrustful himself. Then he turns back.

Daisy’s there all the sudden, handing Nat a coffee cup from the tray with a sly smile. Nat rolls her eyes again, trying to hide it and the blush still burning her cheeks. She hasn’t said a thing to Daisy about Steve all week, but apparently she hasn’t needed to. Daisy goes off, blowing on her cup and glancing over her shoulder once or twice before settling near the CD rack with her laptop, just close enough to eavesdrop.

“Is he your boyfriend or something?”

The question comes out of nowhere. Nat turns from needling her friend with a mock glare to see Steve watching her with worried eyes. It’s kind of tactless, what he asked, but she can’t care. All she can think about is dispelling that idea like yesterday. “What? Oh, no.” That sounds a little too desperate so she goes on, trying to be cooler. “No, no. He’s just… He’s a good friend, is all.”

Now Steve flushes again. “Sorry. I just thought… I saw him when you moved in, too, and he seems… really protective of you.”

Christ, he can’t find out about her. She pours everything into seeming calm and collected and lies smoothly. “He’s not. Like I said, just a friend. I don’t have a…” The smell of the coffee gets to her, and exhilaration unlike anything she’s felt recently sparks across her nerves. She luxuriates in the warm rush of it, looking up at him and grinning. “You really came all this way just to bring me coffee?”

“No.” He grimaces. “I mean, yeah, kinda. Well, I was already coming down here to drop some work off at the ad agency where I work. I think I mentioned it’s right around the corner? Anyway, I thought I’d come in and… You know, take you up on your offer?” Her brain is failing magnificently because she can’t remember what her offer was, even though she’s thought about it a lot over the last week. “To get some records? For the player I have. I was hoping you could help me find some.” He smiles. It’s gorgeous. She’s seen it before, but this time it’s flustered and flirty. He almost seems like a gentleman out of time. Who acts this wholesome and chivalrous anymore? “If you want. And I thought I’d bring the coffee since yours spilled.”

“That’s really sweet of you,” she says, smiling herself. “Thanks. And I’d be happy to help you. You’re our first and only customer today, actually.”

“That a good thing?”

She laughs and decides to give into her heart and flirt a little herself. “Normally, no. But it means
I can take my time with you.”

His cheeks redden again. She’s quickly deciding she likes the look on him, so far from the pallor and the pain he’s not hiding so well every other time she’s seen him. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. Come on.”

She leads him deeper into the shop, hyper aware of every movement he makes beside her. The store is a scene out of the 90s, the height of CDs and lingering influence of vinyl. It’s what May grew up with, what was popular when she was Nat’s age. Bead drapes block the way into the back, and there are rugs all over and lava lamps and instruments, too. Guitars and violins and drums and keyboards. Loads of different things, all second hand and sold for a good, fair price. Posters are framed on the walls of bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam and No Doubt. Along with those, there are more, older images including Heart and Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead and Carly Simon and Janis Joplin. An amalgamation of rock, folk, pop, and jazz all piled into one eclectic place. There are racks and racks of CDs, a shocking number, in fact, considering how the medium is dying. There are also shelves loaded with records, some really obscure. Nat considers herself fairly well-versed in most types of music, but she has to admit a few of these bands and groups she’s never heard of. She leads Steve there, trying to ignore Daisy and May watching. They’re keeping their distance, but they’re not doing much to hide their interest. Nosy busybodies. “What sort of music do you like? We have a pretty big selection.”

“I see that,” Steve comments as they stop in front of the shelves. “And I don’t know.”

What kind of person doesn’t know what music he likes? She doesn’t know, but she’s getting the impression that he’s not just saying it because he doesn’t care or because he’s not particular. He honestly doesn’t know because he doesn’t know what makes him happy or he can’t remember what he used to like. She understands how that is. “Well,” she says, “it’s not impossible to get new albums on vinyl, but we’d have to order–”

“Nothing new,” Steve says with a grimace. “I’m just not up with it.”

She thinks a moment, staring at the heaps of records and trying not to feel his eyes on her (or the pressure – she promised to help him, after all, and it’s pretty pathetic if she can’t). Then she remembers how calm and… happy seems too strong a word, but it’s close enough. How happy he was when he talked about his mother and the record player in his room. “What did your mom used to listen to?”

He startles a second, and she can almost see the walls come up. His defenses. So she softens her smile and hopes that’s enough to convince him she genuinely means no harm. It is. “She loved big band songs. She got them from my grandmother. And Irish folk songs.”

“She was Irish?”

“Yeah.”

She’s not sure they have any records that have Gaelic hymns or whatever, but vintage big band? She leads him over to a shelf. “Here’s Gershwin. We have a lot for him and Glenn Miller. Duke Ellington.” She starts picking through the records. “Here’s a nice compilation.” She hands that to him.

He’s looking at something else. It’s a Louis Armstrong record. And another one that’s Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. “‘Blue Skies,’” he murmurs. “She loved this one. They both did. Grandma
and mom. Mom said Grandma used to play it every night when she was making dinner.” Nat gets
the impression his mom did something similar. He smiles, and it’s beautiful. His eyes look just
like that, just like she’s been imagining. _Blue skies._

She realizes she’s staring, so she looks away, embarrassed. She clears her throat. “We have a lot
more like that. Here.” She shows him a bunch more records, a lot of them used but all in stellar
condition. “All sorts of music from that era.” Vintage 1930s and 1940s remastered. She’s sad to
admit she’s not very familiar with that period, with jazz and swing and big band from way back,
and she should be. He’s gathering up a few more records, and she watches the emotions play
across his face. More memories, she thinks. And good ones. She gets the impression his
memories of late aren’t that way so much.

They chat a few more minutes about the music. She shows him more jazz compilations, more
classics. By the end of it, he has a handful of records, and they’re heading to the counter. Peter’s
still there, watching with saucers for eyes and sipping his coffee with a straw. She shoos him out.
The store is so silent, and she knows all three of her friends are watching her with Steve as she
rings up his purchase. She’s getting antsy, because this feels like it’s ending so soon. Too soon.
He’s going to pay his $70.20, and then he’s going to leave, and then she’ll be back to watching his
closed door down the hallway and listening for his nightmares.

But maybe not. He’s fumbling for his wallet. And he’s very visibly flustered, though it looks like
he’s trying to hide it. Building up to something maybe? “I, um…” He gets the wallet out, gets it
open, stares at it like he can’t think. He shakes his head. “Um… I mean, if you want…” _If I
want?_ She watches, not liking how he seems more than just nervous now. He’s picking through
the bills in his wallet and she can see four twenties right there. It’s like he doesn’t realize it. “I just
wanted to ask you if you’d like to… like… like…” He looks up, and he’s terrified. She can see
it. She doesn’t know what’s wrong, if it’s because he’s trying to ask her out? Because he’s
definitely trying. But, again, it’s more than just nerves. His hands are actually shaking, and like
with the money, it’s almost as if he can’t find what he needs. Can’t find the words. “If you… If…” He’s falling apart more, so he shakes his head almost to himself and stops altogether.

She’s unsettled and curious but sympathetic more than either of those. “If I’d like to… go out?”

He nods. All the sudden, it’s like something unwinds inside him. She can practically see it, the
tension easing from his form, his hands not shaking quite so badly anymore, the desperation and
frustration fading in his eyes. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s what I wanted to say. If you wanted to go out.
With me.”

She smiles, soft yet coy. “On a date?”

Again he nods. “I, um… Well… yeah. Get dinner or something?” He gives an adorable grin,
blushing now more with the sort of embarrassment typical of this sort of situation. “The coffee and
the records… They were just excuses. I came down here to ask you that.” His grin loosens, gets
tsweeter. “Wanted to all week. Took me this long to get up the…” He falters again and looks
down. “You know.”

She knows she should be flattered, and she is (she _really_ is), but she’s more concerned than
anything else. “You don’t need to be nervous.” Before she’s thinking better of it, she’s blurtig
out, “Because my answer’s yes.”

His eyes fill with relief and excitement, and she can’t describe how that makes her feel. “Yeah?”

Hiding her enthusiasm is pretty impossible. “Yeah.”
He doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself. He’s looking down at his wallet again, and she catches sight of a Uniformed Services ID card. No driver’s license, but some other sort of card with a bunch of small lettering on it and a medical symbol. She can’t read it. “Great,” he gasps, and he’s pulling out a wad of cash. “Great. Um, I can do tonight? Or tomorrow? Or anytime, really, anytime–”

“Tonight,” she offers, a bit breathless with the enormity of what’s happening. “Tonight’s good. Tonight’ll be fine.”

“O-okay,” he says, practically beaming. Obviously he didn’t think this would work, but it has, and Nat can hardly breathe for how high she feels. High and scared and excited and nervous and she can’t stop staring in his eyes. “Okay. Um, I’ll come by your place at seven? That alright?”

“Seven’s good,” she’s quick to say. She can’t stand still, can’t think. “Seven’s great.”

“Great! Okay. Okay.” He seems to gather himself. “Um… I owe you…”

“Oh! Right.” She’s forgotten what they were doing. “$70.20.”

He’s looking through the money again, nearly vibrating with energy. “Alright. Okay.” He hands her the bills and then grabs the plastic bag into which she’s loaded his records. “Alright. So I’ll see you later?”

She smiles, trembling a little herself. “Okay.”

“Bye!”

“Bye.”

She watches him practically bolt, still in disbelief that he asked, that she said yes, that this is happening. The bell jingles as he opens the door. She glances down at the money he gave her. “Steve!” she calls, going around the counter as fast as she can. “You forgot your–”

It’s too late because he’s gone, and Nat’s left staring at the door. Daisy comes up right away, grinning like a fool as she nudges her with her hip. “Hot, Nat,” she comments. “Like hot damn hot.” Nat winces, blushes, rolls her eyes and goes back to the cash register. She supposes she can give him his change tonight.

Peter emerges from where he went to hide in the rows of CDs, and even he looks proud. “You’re going out with Captain America,” he says approvingly. “That’s cool.”

“God, you guys, shut up,” Nat hisses, trying hard not to smile. She feels so good all the sudden that she can’t hide her smile, her blush, can’t do more than feel her heart pound and her stomach knot up for the best reasons imaginable.

“I’m coming over tonight,” Daisy says, leaning on the counter so that her bracelets jingle and clatter against the glass. “This is an event. I’m getting you ready.”

Already the butterflies are setting in. It’s going to be a long day, and she can’t fathom how many hours there are between now and seven o’clock. Work. She’s got to focus on that. So she punches $80.00 into the register. “No, you are not.”

“I so am. Deal with it.” Daisy beams and leans back. “I’ll bring my black dress.”

“No! I don’t need–”
“Done. Dude, you’ll look better in it than I do.” She pushes off the counter and saunters back
towards her laptop on the floor by the CD racks. “And you go, girl, bagging something that fine.
God bless America.”

Nat shakes her head, about ready to remind Daisy that it’s one date, but she’s absently counting the
money Steve gave her when she realizes she owes him more than just change. He overpaid. He
way overpaid. And this is not the occasional miscounting type of mistake.

She’s holding four fifty dollar bills, not four twenties.

The day drags by slower than she can stand. She sits down with Daisy to go over the stuff for
Block Fest. She helps to finish logging the CD inventory in the database and looks over the
website with Daisy, Peter, and May. She straightens up the back a bit and sweeps the store. She
organizes and reorganizes again the front counter. She tends to the few customers with a bright
smile and enthusiasm even though her mind drifts here and there. She’s keeping busy, glancing at
her watch and the clock at the counter way too often, but she can’t help it. And she’s trying not to
think, not to let it really sink in. What she’s done. What she’s going to do.

Go out with a guy.

She hasn’t done anything remotely close to this since… She’s not going to think about that. No,
not tonight. If she’s doing this, she’s doing it, and all that bad shit that’s scarred her and ruined her
and made it so damn difficult to even think about getting close to someone else… That’s not going
to factor in. It’s not going to wreck this evening.

The thing is, though, it wrecks everything. It’s not so easy to detach from the truth. She can ignore
it sometimes, pretend it’s not right there chasing her, but that doesn’t make it go away. That
doesn’t change it. So by the time she’s walking home in the awful humidity, the air so thick with
heat and moisture that it’s like sucking in a lungful of steam every time she inhales, she’s already
thinking twice about this. For so many reasons she is. He’ll hurt her. He’ll betray her. He’ll want
things she can’t give him. Or, on the other side of it all, he’ll be someone she’ll like, someone
she’ll want even more as she gets closer to him. Someone she can see herself with. And then he’ll
find out the truth because that’s inevitable, and he’ll run. He’ll hurt her. Physically, emotionally,
mentally and down to her very soul… Abuse is what she knows. She’s too damaged to rise above
it and too damaged to know how to function in a relationship without it.

She’s getting ahead of herself. God, is she ever. But she just can’t stop.

Thus, as she opens the door to her place, her mind’s racing and her breath’s short and shallow and
her stomach is in knots. Her heart’s a fast pace flutter against her sternum. And Daisy has noticed,
of course. They swung by her apartment to pick up her black dress. It’s nothing special, just a
babydoll cocktail dress with a wider skirt that flows sweetly. Since then, though, as Nat’s sunk
deeper and deeper into doubt, Daisy’s incessant chatter has gone quiet. Now they’re tense, and
Daisy’s watching her set down her bag and her newly repaired cellphone (Clint called, of course, at
five right on the dot, and she definitely did not tell him what she’s doing tonight) with worry on her
face. Daisy’s not one to beat around the bush. “Having second thoughts?”

Liho’s right there, rubbing Nat’s shins, and even though Nat feels like she’s swimming in sweat,
she bends down to lift the cat up. Liho’s fur sticks to the perspiration on her arms as she pets her
almost frantically. “I don’t know,” she admits. “I just…”

All the big talk about nailing Captain America and going out for a good time is gone now. Daisy
smiles sadly, setting the garment bag over the back of the dinette chair, and she comes closer. “If
it’s too much, it’s too much,” she says. “That’s okay.” She holds Nat’s gaze, grasping Nat’s arms even as she tries to look away. The fucking shame feels like acid. “Hey, you’ve only been here a week. And you’ve only been away from him for, what, three years? That’s not long at all, considering what you went through. You don’t need to do this.”

*I want to be happy.* The thought stokes the fires of her courage. “Yes, I do.” Nat sighs, letting Liho jump down, and pulls away from Daisy. “I want to.” *It’s only a first date. He’s not going to touch me.* She’s been saying that to herself over and over again, chanting it in time with her steps, with her heart. *He’s not going to touch me.*

Daisy frowns. “You don’t need to prove anything—”

“Yeah, I do, Daisy,” Nat retorts, and it comes out sharper than she wants but she can’t help it. “Every time I run away, I’m letting him win. And he’s not even here this time. He’s still controlling me, don’t you see?” Daisy frowns and Nat bites her lower lip until it hurts. “I want…” *I want a normal life. I want to be a normal woman. I want to go out on a normal date with a good-looking guy and do normal date things and drink and eat and laugh and let him take me home. It’s more than just being happy. I want to be normal. I want that.* “I want to go out with Steve.” Nat offers up a little smile, focusing on that fading feeling of elation when Steve showed up with the coffee. “He seems… He’s a nice guy.”

Nodding, Daisy goes over to the dress. She lifts it up, arching her eyebrows with it. “Then you should take a shower and get dressed, because it’s past six, and army guys are probably punctual.”

She’s been so caught up in her head she hasn’t noticed the time. “Shit,” she whispers, and she bolts for her bedroom. Daisy laughs lightly and follows.

The shower feels good, and she spends more time in there than she should, letting a lukewarm spray cool her and wash away the sweat that’s all over her. She emerges in her robe, her hair up in a bun and mostly dry, and Daisy’s sitting on the end of her bed, waiting. She has to admit she’s not entirely comfortable with this; she wasn’t lying before she told Daisy she didn’t need her to be there. Truth be told, she doesn’t want her there. This is nerve-wracking enough as it is.

But sometimes she still surprises herself with how good she is at lying. “Hair up or down?” Daisy asks. She stands. She’s got a brush and pins and curling iron.

Nat smiles. “Up, I think. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, I definitely think,” Daisy says, and she gestures to the chair in front of the desk.

They work on her hair in silence for a while. It’s hot even with the air conditioner again, and Nat feels sweat beading on her forehead as Daisy curls her hair and pins it and fixes it into place. It’s so humid Nat’s not sure it’ll hold at first, but the other girl puts about a gallon of hairspray on it, so there’s hope at least. It’s a pretty style, she decides as she looks in the mirror, simple, loose, and wavy where it’s gathered in a bun. She made time to dye her hair during the week, so the hints of lighter red are much more muted than they were. She starts to do her own make-up, but her nerves are getting the better of her again. It’s been so long, a lifetime it seems, since she’s done anything like this. Made herself look good for a man. That makes her stomach twist, and she’s scared all over again, one short breath from puking probably.

Thankfully Daisy takes over without making any sort of issue of it. She does her make-up, chattering about inane things just to ease the tension. Nat catches her reflection in the mirror. She’s looking more and more decent by the second. After that, she slips into the dress. She has to admit it’s nice, flattering on her figure. *She has* to admit she’s excited anew now, the exhilaration
beating out her distress the more she checks her reflection. She feels… normal, just like she wanted.

“You look beautiful, Nat,” Daisy says from her bed, smiling happily.

She spreads her palms over the dress, smoothing it down a bit, and glances over her shoulder at Daisy. “Think so?”

“Yes.” Daisy slides off the bed. “Perfume?” Nat has some. It’s old; she hasn’t worn it since before the hospital. Before she can get it, though, Daisy’s phone beeps. She checks it and scowls at the caller. “Just a sec. It’s one of the bands for the Fest.” As she steel herself to answer, she tips her head to Nat’s guitar. “Don’t suppose you’d be interested in playing?” Her voice is a frustrated grumble.

God, one step at a time. Daisy’s gone anyway to answer her call. Nat’s alone now. She goes to her bathroom to pick up the perfume, and suddenly, with just a thought of that – the perfume she wore before, before the hospital, before – she’s losing herself. The floral, fruity fragrance is light and enticing, and it immediately takes her back, back to before when she was waiting at the penthouse for him to get home from the club, all dressed up and wearing the perfume and waiting and knowing he was finishing up with the man she’s lured to him for the evening, the music guy from the club she flirted with and teased and brought into his lair. She was waiting for him, and he came in drunk and stinking of a fight. He cupped her face with rough hands. “You know what they call you now, malyska? Black Widow.” She closed her eyes against tears, hating him and herself and wanting to run. “My Black Widow.”

“Sam, come on.”

The sound of Steve’s voice tears her from her thoughts. It’s muffled, coming through the vent in the shared wall. She opens eyes that have slipped shut and turns to face the wall. Another voice answers, this one a little deeper. She really has to listen hard to hear what they’re saying. “I just… I want to make sure you’re thinking this through.” Is that Sam?

Seems so. Steve answers. “God, you’ve been riding me for two years to go out with someone–”

“Yeah, someone we know. One of the dozens of girls I’ve suggested would have been good.” There’s an irritated grunt, and Sam sounds apologetic. “Not that there’s anything wrong with… what’s her name again?”

“Natalie. Nat.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with her. I’m sure she’s great. But you don’t know her, and she doesn’t know you, and–”

“I don’t care.” There’s rustling. “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Steve–”

“This just feels right, okay?” Nat sinks on the edge of her bed, letting the words soothe her. Her heart’s been pounding, and she hasn’t even realized it. “She… She feels right. There’s something about her. It’s stupid. I know that. It’s stupid and you’re right. I don’t know her and she doesn’t know me. But she and I… I feel like we’re the same. Somehow. I know that’s fucking stupid! I know. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Steve–”
“I just feel like I don’t need to know her to know her, you know?”

“Come on. Take it easy.”

Steve’s tone is irritated. “I just… I need to take a chance. I want to. You told me to wise up, so I’m wising up.”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“She’s not going to hurt me. And she’s the only girl who’s made me feel anything since Peggy. That’s gotta mean something. It’s gotta mean something that of all the people who could have, she’s the one who moved in.”

“It means you’re crazy, dude. Since when do you believe in shit like that?”

“I… I don’t. But you’re the one who keeps telling me stuff happens for a reason, right? And it’s one date, Sam. One. Okay? It’s nothing. Just stop making me nervous and tell me I look halfway decent.”

There’s a pause, a sigh. “You look good, Steve.”

Their voices get muffled like they’re leaving his bedroom. Nat draws a deep breath. She glances at the clock next to her bed. It’s almost seven.

“Well, Haven just canceled on us. This Block Fest is turning into more trouble than it’s worth.” Daisy is walking back into the bedroom, and she looks irritated. “You okay?”

Nat gathers herself. She feels better. More grounded. Hearing Steve like that… You and me. We’re the same. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Daisy doesn’t seem convinced, but Nat gets up and slides her sandals on, black, strappy ones with a heel. Screw the perfume. She doesn’t need it. And she can handle this. It’s alright. “You should probably go.”

Daisy seems surprised. She glances at the time. For a second, Nat thinks she’s going to try to come up with an excuse to stay, but she doesn’t. “Yeah, probably should.” She comes over and hugs Nat, and Nat tries to relax into it. “Call me, huh? Let me know how it goes.”

“Sure,” she says, and she takes a deep breath to calm her nerves further. “Thanks for everything.”

“Of course,” Daisy replies, pulling back. They walk back to the main room. Liho is sitting on the back of the couch. Daisy grins and pets her. “And don’t worry. It’ll be awesome.”

“I know.”

“Call me,” she implores again, and then she’s gone.

Alone again. Waiting again. She paces a moment. Tries not to think. Feeds Liho. Paces some more. Checks her phone obsessively, counting down the minutes until seven o’clock. When the phone vibrates, she practically jumps, but it’s just a text from Daisy. “Captain Hotmerica is at his door. A+++.” Nat can’t help but smile. “Good looking guy with him, too, so I guess he’s got a friend for me.” That was followed with a winking emoji. Nat giggles. “On his way. Be good.”

There’s a knock at the door. She nearly drops her phone in shock, but she recovers. Takes a deep breath. Puts her phone in her handbag and grabs her keys and heads to the door. Grasps the knob. I can do this. It's fine. Take a chance. It’ll be okay.
He won't hurt me.

She opens the door. He’s there. He looks incredible, dressed in khaki slacks and a button down white shirt. “Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” she answers.

He smiles. She does, too. “Ready?” he asks.

Yeah, I am.

Chapter End Notes

malyska - baby
“When the pain cuts you deep, and when the night keeps you from sleeping
Just look and you will see that I will be your remedy.
When the world seems so cruel and your heart makes you feel like a fool
I promise you will see that I will be your remedy.”
– Adele, “Remedy”

He takes her to Amendola’s, a little Italian eatery tucked into the bottom of a brownstone not far from their apartment building. Of course she hasn’t been there, but she gets the impression he hasn’t much either, if at all. The place has a nice patio out front, and they sit out there while they wait for their table. They don’t say much. They’re both watching the street, watching the people passing by and the traffic. It’s Friday night, so Flatbush is alive despite the ungodly humidity and darkening, stormy sky. A little inclement weather is clearly not going to deter people from enjoying a summer evening after a long work week. Steve’s glancing around, wringing his hands a little bit between his knees, jittery and nervous and very clearly struggling with his anxiety. She’s watching everyone else, too, out of habit, but she’s also watching him. She’s gotten good at doing that, at pretending to be cool and nonchalant while keeping an eye out for danger (what danger? You’re safe here) and while studying someone more intently. She doesn’t like the fact that he seems so on edge, so uncomfortable. She gets the feeling that, as long as it’s been since she’s been out with someone else, it’s been even longer for him. He’s stiff, eyes ahead for the most part but she catches them glancing her way more than once. And he winces sometimes, squeezing his eyes shut for the briefest second like he’s in pain before he manages to overcome it. She doesn’t like that most of all. His extra money feels like it’s burning a hole through her handbag.

She wants to say something, thinks she should since he doesn’t seem capable of it, but she doesn’t know what. She doesn’t know him. In terms of awkward moments, this is quickly becoming a bad one. He asked her out, but now that he has her out, he doesn’t seem to know what to do with her. It seems to her he should be leading the conversation; that’s probably the polite thing to do. But he’s silent. That only makes her more worried and more curious. She’s heard that soldiers who come back from war can have a lot of problems reintegrating into normal life. What they’ve seen and done sticks with them, changes them, and it’s difficult to turn off mindsets needed for battle. Considering how poor his social skills seem to be, it’s likely he’s got a pretty serious case of that. There’s more to it, though. More than once she notices him tense up when something particularly loud happens, a car horn going off down the street, for example, or someone squealing in what turns out to be laughter. The crowd’s got him on edge, and she doesn’t exactly understand why.

This isn’t going to work. What did Maria say? He’s screwed up. For some reason, it didn’t occur to her until now just what that may mean. All the tidbits and pieces of information she has on him start to fall into place, and the picture it’s making is one of a sad and broken soldier. As the uncomfortable silence between them drags on, she knows she should go. Make an excuse. Call this off, because she’s already ill at ease enough without the added difficulty of his problems. Maria said that, too. You don’t need the added baggage. All her excitement and composure is bleeding out into the hot, wet night, seeping right out of her as they both get tenser and tenser. She doesn’t think she can coax him through a date and build up his confidence when she herself has no confidence. They can’t both be this damaged.

The maître d’ comes to take them to their table, though, and it’s too late to back out. Nat takes a
deep breath and follows behind Steve as they’re led through the restaurant. It’s a nice place, small but cozy and warmly lit, not swanky by any means but not poorly kept either. And it’s packed with people, couples having dinner mostly. Young couples their age, starting their evening with a nice meal. Older folks who’ve known each other most their lives. A couple men together in a corner, flirting their way through tiramisu. Louder groups of friends. The wait staff is busy, bearing trays full of pasta and salad and bottles of wine. The atmosphere is fun and lively and happy. She can’t remember the last time she’s been somewhere like this, and she feels better, like the good mood is catching.

They sit at a table by the restaurant’s window. Secretly she’s relieved that she can see the street. They settle into their chairs, and the waiter comes by. He’s about their age, overly nice, and pours water into their glasses while going over the specials. She can’t concentrate on that, though she tries to act like she is. Out of the corner of her eye, she’s watching Steve stare at the menu he’s been handed like it’s written in gibberish. “Take a minute to look that over and I’ll be right back,” their waiter says, and he’s off to tend to another table.

Nat feels so out of her depth that she reads over the dinner choices three or four times without any of it sinking in. Maybe it is written in gibberish, because none of the words make sense or seem to link up with the words around them. Sweat tickles her brow, gathering uncomfortably on her temples and on the back of her neck and the small of her back. More and more she wonders if this was a bad idea.

“I, uh…” The sound of his voice pulls her from her thoughts, and she looks up at him. He offers a timid smile, looking about as rattled as she feels. “Sorry. I haven’t done this in a while.”

By this it’s pretty obvious he means dating, which is what she suspected. “Me neither.”

“Sorry,” he says again, and now she knows he’s talking about her past relationship.

The corner of her mouth lifts into a little smile. “It’s alright.”

He grimaces, turning back to his menu. “Kinda can’t remember what to do,” he admits. “Pretty rude of me to invite you out and make you do the talking.”

At least he recognizes that, but it immediately makes her ashamed for even thinking it. This guy’s a veteran, a war hero, and he shouldn’t have to feel bad about being a little socially inept. Besides, she wonders if the “while” between this date and his last one has to do with whatever happened to him. “It’s alright,” she lamely offers again.

“How long for you?” he asks softly.

The question should be intrusive, but it’s not really. “Couple of years. You?”

“Not since I came home between tours.”

She feels for him, battling her curiosity. “That sounds kind of rough.” Being dumped when you came home. Or being dumped while you were away. She doesn’t know which is worse because both are awful. Of course, she’s assuming he’s the one who was dumped, not the one who did the dumping.

That turns out to be true. He frowns, and there’s a lot of pain there. “She moved on. She’s married now. It wasn’t her fault. I was… Well, I don’t blame her for not waiting. Peggy’s amazing, but that’s a tall order.”

He doesn’t blame her for not waiting for him? Nat can’t quite wrap her head around that. It
sounds like Peggy, whoever she is, basically dumped him while he was overseas. She left him while he was laying his life on the line to serve their country. Nat supposes that maybe makes sense; the strain of a long distance relationship can be terrible, particularly when one half doesn’t know if the other half is alright much less faithful. Still, she feels like it’s cowardice, betrayal, selfishness, and either he’s blinded himself to that or come to terms with it. “Were you married?” She shouldn’t be asking that. It’s too personal. But she wants to know, because as stupid as it sounds, she’s angry at this Peggy for hurting him, which she very clearly did, and she wants to know how bad the damage is.

“No,” he says quickly with a little flushed smile. “No, no. You?”

And this is another reason why she shouldn’t be asking. “No,” she lies. “It just didn’t work out. You know how it is.”

“Someone from Staten Island? Didn’t you say you lived there before?”

Shit. She has cover stories. A lot of them. Clint has coached her on them enough, and she’s used them in the past. The best ones are those that have a shred of truth to them. They’re easier to tell, more congruent with who she is to mask any mistakes she’s made. Those stories have the core of her life but without the details. The bad break-up. Her music. The fact that she’s Russian (although Steve hasn’t seemed to notice that yet). Point is: she’s rehearsed what to say. She can’t remember any of it now, though, not with open earnestness of his eyes on her. “Yeah. He’s kind of a big name there.” He’s surprised and intrigued by that, so she’s quick to stop him. “No one you’d know.” God, I hope not. “Anyway, I moved here for a fresh start.”

That’s true enough, and he takes it at face value. He even smiles a little awkwardly. “That I understand.”

Change the subject. “Were you in the army a long time?”

He has his water glass halfway to his mouth when he stops and grimaces again ever so slightly. “Eight years if you count the Academy.”

“You said you went to West Point?”

“Yeah. My buddy Bucky and I…” There’s something in his eyes, a flicker of harsher grief, but he gets himself through that too, and he’s smiling. “Bucky and I grew up together. Lived next door to each other. He pulled me out of a fight in one of the alleys by our old place one day after school. I was five, I think? Or six? I don’t remember. I used to get into a lot of fights.”

That really surprises her considering how quiet and unobtrusive he is. “You did?”

“Don’t like bullies,” he says by way of an explanation, and she has to admit it’s a good one. Simple but sincere. Very him. “Anyway, Buck took care of me a lot when we were kids. I was something of a late bloomer in the growth department.” She can’t picture that, can’t imagine this big, muscular, strong guy as a scrawny, gangly boy, all nock knees and bony elbows. “I got picked on a lot, and I didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut, I guess. Bucky always told me my mouth was way bigger and smarter than my head. When I decided to go to West Point, well… He just came with. Said he couldn’t let me get into another stupid ass fight without him there to get me out of it.” She smiles. “So we served together. Two tours.”

Right away, she likes this Bucky guy, likes how Steve speaks very fondly of him, likes the light in his eyes and the freer tone of his voice. It’s obvious that Bucky means a great deal to him, that
there’s a lot of brotherly love there. That’s not something she understands much, but she smiles as if she appreciates it. For him, she does. “Is he the guy who’s been to your apartment a few times this week?”

His smile fractures, and his eyes fill with pain he doesn’t (or can’t) hide. “Oh. No, no. That’s Sam. Bucky’s…” He doesn’t finish, and she watches him struggle with it a second, simultaneously feeling terrible for asking and wanting to know more. “Do you mind if we talk about something else?”

She flushes, put off. No matter how curious she is, she shouldn’t push him. It’s rude first and foremost, but more than that it’ll only spell disaster if he starts pushing back. “Sure. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to–”

“I have a hard time talking about it,” he declares, and it’s so open and simply said that it takes her aback a moment. “What happened. I don’t like to. I don’t remember it all, either.”

Even though her mind is racing with that (he doesn’t remember?), she skitters to assure him. “That’s okay. You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

He seems simultaneously grateful and disappointed, and that also rubs her a bit wrong. She’s having a hard time reading him. That’s unusual for her. It’s not helping that he seems to be all over the place, and again he recognizes it, frowning harder and staring at the menu. He sighs, rubbing at his forehead a second, and she catches a glimpse of something – a scar – under the thickness of his hair on his left temple. It’s hardly noticeable, seemingly nothing but somehow she knows it’s not. And she knows she should back away from this, just as Maria said, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t want to. Like when he was having the nightmare the other night… She can’t just let it go.

The waiter returns, and that eases the tension for a moment at least. Nat draws a breath collect herself and quickly looks over the menu, feeling more centered now than she did before. She orders the pasta primavera. “I’ll have that, too,” Steve says and he hands his menu back to the waiter. Nat doesn’t think he ever read it.

“Great choice,” the waiter comments after writing down the ticket. “Would you like some wine with your meal? I can suggest a nice Chardonnay.”

“No, no thanks,” Steve replies. “I can’t drink.” I can’t drink. Not I won’t. Not I don’t like it. That seems weird to her, too. Does he have a problem with drinking? She heard once or twice that war vets sometimes have a higher incidence of drug abuse and alcoholism, but she’s never thought about it until now. The idea of him drinking stirs so many awful memories, the smell of booze, the taste of it on a kiss, the sight of shot glasses in clubs, and she feels sick and dizzy before she even realizes what’s happening. Before she notices that he’s asking her something. “Unless you want some, Nat? Sorry, I didn’t mean to speak for you.” She’s struggling to push it all down, the noise of the restaurant abruptly thunderous and crushing, and she feels like everything’s closing in.

“Nat?”

A hand falls over hers, and she jolts. Her knee hits the bottom of the table, and the rattle is so loud that it seems like everyone turns. Hauling herself away from the rise of panic inside is hard, so fucking hard, and she feels like she’s shaking. She blinks and blinks and sees blue eyes – Steve’s blue eyes – watching her in worry. “Hey,” he says. “Are you okay?”

Nat glances around. No one is watching, not really. But she feels exposed, vulnerable. Naked. She feels like she’s falling, but she’s not, and Steve’s hand is warm on hers. His touch is gentle
and respectful and caring. There are calluses on his fingers, but they’re not rough. There’s nothing rough about it, about him.

And she’s speaking before she thinks to. “You want to go?”

His brow crinkles in confusion. “Go?”

She nods emphatically, swallowing down the aching knot in her throat. She can’t stand sitting there another second. “Yeah. Get out of here.”

He doesn’t seem to understand, and for a second she fears he’ll say no. But he doesn’t. He stands instead, fumbling for his wallet in his pocket. He drops a twenty on the table. “For the water,” he says, “and your time. Guess we won’t be ordering anything.” Then his hand is back on her arm, on her wrist, as he leads her from their table. She stiffens before she can stop herself, but he doesn’t seem to notice, and his hand slides down to fold into hers. Their fingers weave together, fit together perfectly, and the touch that seconds before sent shivers down her spine does again but for entirely different reasons.

A few seconds later they’re outside, back in the muggy night air. It’s darker now than it was before, deep with a gray twilight. Nat instantly feels better, that sudden, inexplicable sensation of confinement vanishing. Clearly confused and bordering on worried, Steve stares at her. He’s probably afraid that she’s ending their date already, already made up her mind that this is no good. That he’s not right. She’s embarrassed and frantic to tell him otherwise. Her emotions feel all over the damn place, and it’s probably more than a little hypocritical to have judged him at all for that before. She’s about as sure of herself as he is, and all the anticipation and excitement and tension and fear… That’s what’s not right.

“I just… didn’t want Italian,” she finally says with a goofy smile.

He keeps staring at her, only now he’s gobsmacked like she’s grown an additional head or something. “Okay?”

“Do you want to get pizza?”

Now he grins incredulously. “Pizza is Italian.”

“Pizza is pizza,” she corrects, and he laughs and shakes his head. They’re still holding hands. His feels strong, warm, big, but his grip is loose and tentative. Electrifying. She glances at their fingers clasped together, wondering if it’s okay for him, wondering if it’s okay for her. But his smile turns softer, sweeter. More comfortable. For the first time since they left their apartment building, that’s how he seems. Comfortable.

Finally, he says, “Well, okay. I know a place not too far from here.”

“Sounds great.”

They walk. They don’t let go of each other. It’s weird and terrifying but amazing at the same time. Once more they’re quiet, but all the pressures from before have melted away, and even the silence is nice. All of her senses are trained on him, on the feel of his fingers between her own, on his body every time it brushes against hers, on his face as he walks. He’s relaxed as he guides them through the crowds, and she can’t even explain how good it feels to let someone else show her the way.

It doesn’t take long at all to get to the pizzeria. It’s not much more than a counter facing the street, and it’s bustling with people stopping by for a quick slice or picking up a pie or two. Despite the
raucous atmosphere, this feels better. Safer. More of what she can handle. He looks over the scene a moment, finally dropping her hand. Her skin’s tingling with the loss. “What do you want?”

She thinks about it. “I don’t know. What do you want?”

He shrugs. “I’ll eat anything.”

“Pepperoni? Sausage? Mushrooms?”

He makes a face at that last one before he can stop himself. “Sure. Sounds good.” He turns to go place their order.

She reaches out and grabs his hand again and not just because she’s missing the contact already. “Steve.”

He rips around, and she can see the flustered disquiet in his eyes building once more. He’s even a little breathless. “What?”

Disarmingly she smiles. “You don’t have to eat what I’m eating just because I want it. It’s sweet, but you get what you want. That’s why there are two halves of a pizza, right?”

He chuckles a little. “Spose that’s true. Alright.”

“And here.” She reaches into her handbag and pulls out the money.

He’s confused then a little affronted. Just a little. “I’m not letting you buy us dinner. I might be a little rusty at this whole dating thing, but that I know.”

“Actually, it’s yours,” she explains, giving him back his cash. “You overpaid at the store earlier.”

He doesn’t seem to follow that for a second, staring at the two fifty dollar bills and the rest of his change. Then he swallows hard enough that she can see his Adam’s apple jerk, and that grimace comes back to his face. “Sorry. I didn’t – I mean…” He’s blushing hard, mortified and embarrassed. There’s definitely something off about him. She’s realizing it more and more.

Disabled. That’s another thing Maria said. Aside from that little limp, she doesn’t see any outward signs of what’s wrong with him, though there has to be something. She wants to ask, but, God, that’s so wrong, especially when it’s bothering him this much. “I, um… It’s…”

“It’s alright,” she says. “Don’t worry about it.” She doesn’t want him to worry about anything.

The soft tone of her voice soothes him, and he nods, gathering himself and pocketing the money. “I’ll be right back.”

He goes into the little place to order their food, and she sits on a bench outside. Not much has changed really, and their first moments out together nearly descended into disaster, and she’s more certain than ever that he’s pretty screwed up. The thing is, though, so is she. Normal. She’s not normal. Normal people don’t almost fall apart like she did. Who nearly has a panic attack at the mere mention of wine over dinner? Nobody normal. And he probably noticed. They’re both screwed up, but it eases her own spirit to see that. It’s like she doesn’t have to hide, and she knows she’s really getting ahead of herself there, but it’s like… It’s like what he said. I feel like we’re the same somehow.

He comes back not long after bearing a box of pizza and a bag full of bottles of soda. “Didn’t
know what you liked,” he says, “so I got one of everything.”

She takes the bag. “Thanks.”

He smiles. He looks happier, too, and more at ease. “Where do you want to have this feast? My place? Yours?”

As comfortable as she’s feeling, that’s too much. “Is there anywhere else we can go? My apartment’s kind of a mess.”

He ponders a moment, seeming a bit concerned, but then he nods. “Okay. I know. Come on.”

Much to her surprise, he leads them back to their building. She wonders if he’s taking her to his apartment, and that doesn’t exactly make her feel comfortable either even though she’s been in it. He does lead her right to his front door, and her anxiety is ramping up a bit again. He fumbles for his keys in his pocket and gets the door open. He doesn’t invite her in, though. “Mind holding everything for a second?”

She takes the pizza box from him, and he goes inside. He leaves the door cracked open, and she can hear the clatter of the dog’s paws on the hardwoods and hear him mumble a soft “hello”. A moment later Max’s nose is at the door, his tail wagging and tongue lolling with his big brown eyes right on her, and she stares at back, unsettled.

“Nat?”

Surprised, she whirls only to see Scott behind her. Hope’s with him, and Cassie is between them. “Oh, hi,” Nat says.

Hope is a beautiful woman. She has sleek brown hair, cut into a pristine bob, and hazel eyes. Nat knows very little about her, but she seems an odd match with Scott. She’s a businesswoman of some sort; her father owns a small but successful tech company in Manhattan, and she does the accounting, the marketing, and the logistics of running the business. Nat doesn’t know for sure, but she thinks Cassie is from Scott’s previous marriage, though it’s clear to anyone that Hope loves the little girl to death. Just from the few times Nat’s met her, she sees Hope is graceful, elegant, professional, very well put together, and Scott’s not. But they seem to make it work. Hope smiles sweetly. “You okay? You look a little spooked.”

“Oh, yeah,” Nat says. She shakes her head, trying not to seem frazzled. “Yeah. I just–”

“Here,” Steve says suddenly, coming back out and closing his door behind him. He’s got a plastic bag on his arm, and there are paper plates, silverware, napkins, and something blue inside. Seeing the Langs gives him pause, and he looks as uncomfortable as Nat feels. “Hey.”

Cassie’s eyes go really wide, and she makes the connection before either of her parents do. “Are you guys on a date?”

Nat feels her cheeks color, and Steve seems absolutely lost. It’s Hope who steps in, since neither of them seem capable of speaking. “Cass, come on. It’s not nice to pry.”

Scott’s about as mature as his daughter, though. He’s appraising Steve with what Nat can only describe as bro-pride or some such. “Cool. That’s neat, that that worked out that way. You know, since she moved in and you need to get out more.” They chance a look at each other. It’s hard to tell which one of them is blushing harder. “So dinner and a movie or something?”

“Or something,” Steve answers. He takes the pizza box back from Nat. “You guys going out?”
Clearly it’s a ploy to remind them that they were on their way somewhere. Scott nods. “Getting dinner ourselves. Hey, so is this a thing?” He steps a little closer to Steve, and the partial grimace that’s been affixed to Steve’s features for the last few seconds screws itself up tighter. “You know, like a thing, a thing? ’Cause if it is, a, that’s awesome, and, b, you guys should both come over for dinner.”

“Teach me how to play guitar, Nat?” Cassie asks with big brown eyes with a ridiculously heaping pile of innocence gleaming in them. Nat completely forgot about her conversation with Scott this morning. “I wanna be a rock star, too!”

Nat flushes anew, looking at Steve before she can stop herself. But Steve’s smiling and looking down at Cassie. “She sings really nice, right?”

Cassie’s eyes go wide. “You heard her sing?”

“Uh-huh.” And suddenly – out of nowhere – this poor, broken soldier who seems like a shell of the man he was is being utterly charming. The corner of his mouth twists upward in a playful smile and he glances knowingly at her. “Perk of being her neighbor.”

Nat’s so struck by that, the flirty gleam in his eye and the beauty of his smile, that she’s staring now. And she vaguely realizes that Scott’s staring too, and Hope, and then they’re sharing something of a surprised smile that turns into relief. “Apparently,” Scott says, and he smirks. Hope smacks him on the arm. “Alright, let’s go,” she says, herding her family away. “Have a good night.” Scott lingers like he wants to say something more to Steve about it, rib him or who knows what, but Hope grabs his arm, rolls her eyes, and hauls him off. Cassie beams at Nat in awe, and Nat smiles back reflexively because her brain is solidly stuck back a few seconds ago when Steve looked at her like he did and told her she sang beautifully. She’s been told that many, many times by far more important people, people whose experience and influence in the industry is vast. Hearing him say it, though… It’s never been so meaningful.

They’re gone a moment later, and Steve’s watching her. She snaps out of her pleasant haze, still reeling a bit. “Come with me?” he says, and she does.

He carries their food and their supplies. She has the bag with the soda. He leads her up to the fifth floor and then the sixth. She doesn’t know where they’re going, so her heart’s beating quick and hard, but she realizes she’s dumb to be confused. He’s taking her to the roof. They climb up the last flight of stairs. There’s a locked door at the end. Steve pulls out his keys again and drops them. Suddenly he’s wincing, leaning against the wall, and she immediately crouches to get them. “Sorry,” he gasps. “It’s my hip.”

“Yeah?” She feels stupid asking like that.

“Got shot,” he answers, and that seems to come surprisingly easily. She pauses on her way back up to him, not sure how to feel about that. But he shrugs when she meets his gaze. “Never got all the way better. It comes and goes.”

She nods to that and hands him his keys. He takes one and unlocks the door. “How’d you get a key to the roof?” she asks, changing the subject.

He shrugs again and smirks a little. “Kind of a long story. Scott used to be a thief.”

That’s pretty surprising. “Scott?”

“Yeah. Not sure how he came by a key to up here exactly, but I think he must have picked
Schmidt’s pocket.”

“Schmidt?”

“The super.” The super who isn’t exactly fixing the vent in her room. “Older German guy. I don’t know him too well. He’s not very friendly. He and his assistant Mr. Zola do all the maintenance. Anyway, Scott comes up here to hang out with his buddies. Hope’s not big on friends he’s got from his old life. I mean, I think she tolerates it okay, but they can make a mess up here and she doesn’t care. And I helped Scott get access to some design software for something for his job, so he traded me the key. Said it’s a nice, quiet place to draw.” He gets the door open, revealing the roof. “And it is. Max and I come up here a lot.”

She can see why. The roof is surprisingly clean and well-lit. Metal chimneys and air ducts are spread about for the building’s ventilation system, and there’s an older water tower on the left. There aren’t any plants or the like, which she finds disappointing, but it’s spacious and open with nothing but the sky above. The hum of the city is distant and pleasant, and even with the warm, soupy air, breathing feels free and easy. “Wow,” she comments, heading out a bit.

“Yeah. Nice, right?” He props the door open with a cinder block and limps after her. She ventures further, walking the edge of the building a bit with her hands tracing the smooth cement of the side. She stands on her toes to look over. It’s the side facing the street, the side with their apartments. The fire escapes line the way down, black metal steps descending the bricks to the sidewalk below. She didn’t realize it before (she should have) but her apartment shares a fire escape with his.

“Here.” His voice calls her back, and he’s pulling a blanket out from his bag.

She takes one end and helps him spread it. “You’re taking me on a picnic?” she lightly teases.

He frowns a little. “That okay?”

Truth be told, she’s tingling with excitement. There’s no one else here, no one to watch them or bother them or threaten them. Even though the clouds are heavy and the air is muggy, it’s really nice. Quiet and cozy. Intimate. “It’s perfect,” she says with a smile.

He grins, practically glows with the compliment, and that makes her feel so good that she can’t help her own wide smile. She settles down on the blanket; it’s not entirely comfortable but mostly because of the dress. She ends up taking off her shoes and folding her legs beneath her. Steve gets their dinner out, handing her a plate and a napkin. She’s got her choice of soda, and she takes a Diet Coke. He opens the pizza box. Half of it is pepperoni, sausage, and mushrooms, and the other half is plain cheese. She cocks an eyebrow. “That’s simple.”

“Simple kind of guy,” he responds, lifting a slice of her side and handing it to her.

“I see that,” she says appreciatively. He grabs a bottle of water and settles down on the roof with half a wince. Then he gets himself a slice. She watches as he folds it and starts eating. It’s weird. She’s never really seen anyone eat pizza that way. Well, she has, now that she thinks about it. Just not up close like this.

“What?” he asks when he catches her staring.

Sometimes the fact that she doesn’t understand everything about this country and the people in it blind-sides her. “Nothing.” Her cheeks are burning again. She’s never blushed so much in her life as she has on this date.
“No, what? What’s the matter?”

She takes a bite of her pizza the normal way. It’s really good. Hot and spicy tomato sauce and gooey cheese and not too greasy. She chews and tries to figure out what to say. “Just… It’s a weird way to eat pizza is all.”

Frowning, he shakes his head and sets his pizza back to his plate. “Thought you said you were from around here.”

She knows she shouldn’t. But she does. “Not originally.”

He wipes his hands on a napkin. “Where then?”

Telling him more seems too daunting and dangerous. Thankfully part of her brain is still working. “Tell you what. Why don’t we just go over the basics?”

“The basics?”

“Yeah,” she says, reaching for her can of soda. “You know, birthdays and siblings and favorite colors and pets and things.” Innocuous things. Simple, normal things. “That way you don’t have to be the only one to talk and you don’t have to talk about things you don’t want to.” That’s good. Spin it around so she’s doing him a favor.

He’s none the wiser. “Okay, I’m game,” he says with a hesitant grin. “What’s your favorite color then?”

She thinks a second. “Red.”

“Blue. But I try not to play favorites.” At her confused look, he grins facetiously. “Artist.”

Giggling a little, she goes on. “Favorite ice cream?”

“Chocolate,” he responds without a second thought.

“Coffee.”

He makes a face. “When’s your birthday?”

“November 22nd. What about you?”

He pauses a moment. “You gotta promise not to laugh.”

“Why would I laugh?”

He sighs, hesitates some more, and then evenly declares, “It’s July 4th.” She doesn’t get it, shaking her head at him. He shakes his head back. “Captain America? Born on the 4th of July?”

It still takes her a moment to make the connection. Not being a natural citizen of the US will do that. And he’s staring, getting confused himself, so she laughs quickly before he gets more suspicious. “Cute.”

“How old are you then?”

She arches an eyebrow. “You know, it’s not polite to ask a woman her age.” He blushes, and she answers anyway. “Twenty-six. You?”
“Twenty-eight.”

“How’d you get Max?”

He startles at the question, and for a second she wonders if she’s treaded into territory into which he doesn’t want to go. “Sam gave him to me. His dog had a litter. Thought he would help me acclimate after coming home.”

“Is Sam a doctor?”

“No,” Steve says. “He’s a VA counselor. He’s probably the best thing that’s happened to me since getting back to the States. What about Liho?”

“Found her in an alley.” That’s true enough. She doesn’t mention that the reason she was in the alley in the first place is that she was hiding from the men following her, scared out of her mind and praying they didn’t find her and take her back. She spotted them on her way home from work, and they kept on her block after block, practically stalking her. After darting into the alley, she spotted Liho there behind a dumpster. The cat started meowing pathetically, almost as pathetically as Nat was as she sat in the shadows and filth, shivering and crying. The cat stayed with her through all that, though, coming to sit beside her like they were kindred spirits, and when Clint came to rescue her and take her back home, she took Liho with her.

He doesn’t think twice about her reverie. “Brothers or sisters?”

Nat takes a deep breath, shaking her head. “None.”

“Me neither.”

“You said your dad was a soldier. What did your mom do?”

“She was a nurse. How about your folks?”

“My dad was an accountant. My mother made clothes.”

He nods to that. The conversation dies. They eat in silence for a few minutes, and the quiet that comes is alright. Not entirely comfortable, but exactly tense, either. She’s trying not to watch him, and she thinks he’s doing the same but stealing glances as he digs into his second slice. He’s nearly finished with that when he asks something else. “So are you really a rock star?”

That completely takes her aback, and she nearly drops her pizza. “What?”

He grins sheepishly. “Just wondering. It’d be kinda cool to be neighbors with one.” His tone is overly light, suggesting that he doesn’t really think that. His nerves are getting the better of him again.

So are hers. “No. No, I’m not. I’m not anything like that.”

“Oh. How come?”

“How come what?”

“How come you’re not singing? I…” He takes a short breath and shifts the way he’s sitting with a wince. “I don’t know much about music, but I meant what I said before. You really have a beautiful voice.”

Her heart soars. It’s pathetic and silly, but she can’t stop it or the bashful blush returning to her
face or the feeling of euphoria rushing over her in a warm wave. “Thank you.” Now he looks away, like he’s embarrassed at having his compliment mean something to her. “You didn’t even really hear me sing, you know.”

His eyes darken, and she thinks back to that night, to his terrible dream and the feeling of her guitar in her hands and the way her voice had calmly filled her room. “It was enough,” he declares. He quickly goes on. “You’re really good. Really. Not everyone can sing like that. You should try to—”

“It’s not that simple,” she interrupts, and it’s not. It hasn’t been simple since she left Russia. Sometimes she wishes she never did.

“Why not?”

This is getting too personal. She can’t tell him why. “It’s just… It’s frightening.”

That’s true but not just for the obvious reasons like finding the courage to get up in front of people and put your music and your talent and yourself out there. Plus, complaining about something being scary to a war veteran seems pretty ridiculous, but then she’s lived her own hell, too. She knows a thing or two about fear. “You could be great,” he says.

“You don’t even know me,” she replies, breathless with surprise and sharper than she wants. It feels to wrong to wonder if he’s shining her on, but she does anyway.

He shrugs. “Feel like I don’t need to to know some things.”

That sounds just like what he said earlier to Sam, about not needing to know her to know her. They stare at each other a moment. Thankfully, he doesn’t say anything more about it, and the quiet comes back. Overhead the sky rumbles with thunder, a little ominous but distant yet. They’re nearly done eating. He’s finishing off another slice. She closes up the box, noticing for the first time the pink paper taped to the top of it. “Huh.”

He chews the last of the crust before swallowing and saying, “Yeah, I saw that. Meant to ask you about it.”

She pulls the paper free. It’s a flier for Block Fest, and it looks godawful. She knows nothing about graphic design and even she knows that. The font is Comic Sans or something like it. Nothing is centered. The pertinent information is too small. It’s an unattractive mess. “Daisy needs help,” she comments, frowning at it.

“What’s this about? Says your store is sponsoring it.”

“Yeah… It’s supposed to help May’s business. Well, all the businesses on the street. You know, one of those local arts and music festivals? Where all the area businesses pitch in and sponsor it for a chance to advertise? I take it Daisy hasn’t gotten to harassing the guy you work for yet.”

“Not that I know of,” Steve answers. “Nick Fury doesn’t take kindly to harassment.”

Nat sighs. “Might be good for his company to participate. Daisy’s hoping to bring hundreds of people in. Drum up interest.” And suddenly it occurs to her. “Hey, you know, maybe you could help us?”

It’s almost automatic, how quickly his defenses come up. She can see them, the way his muscles get rigid and his jaw clenches, the way his eyes seem to lose their light. “Help?”
“Yeah.” Just that afternoon she and Daisy talked about how hard this was going to be without someone with some artistic talent. Not one of them has any, and no one is going to take them seriously with fliers, posters, and artwork that looks like a ten year-old did it. “You’re really good with art, Steve. Those drawings you have in your apartment are incredible.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And you make ads for a living, right? So you could really do a good job. Much better than anything we can manage. Daisy’s great with information and logistics, but her art skills suck hard.” Nat hands him the flier. “You can do so much better than this. I know you can. Plus, it’ll give you a chance to showcase some of your other works. That’s what the Block Fest is all about. You know, get your name out there.”

She’s pushing too hard. He’s getting nervous and unsure of himself again. He seems to have a hard time with decisions, with pressured situations, so she tempers her excitement. God, this would really help them if he’ll do it. “I’m not trying to pressure you,” she murmurs, and she means that whole-heartedly. “Really. You’d be doing me a huge favor if you pitched in, though.”

“No, no, it’s – um…” He sighs, looking down at the flier. Despite how uncertain he seems, he nods. “Sure. I’ll help.”

Nat feels like a million dollars. For the first time in a long time, she feels like she’s accomplished something. And it’s not just that Steve’s help will be invaluable in getting them some decent graphics and artwork for the Fest. It’s that he’s smiling, too, smiling more and more, like he’s experiencing that same sense of pride in himself. That same feeling of empowerment.

The thunder abruptly gets louder. The sky to the west is very black now, and lightning spreads through the clouds. It looks like it’s finally going to storm after a day of idle threats. A big, fat raindrop splatters on Daisy’s awful flier and another one lands in Nat’s hair. Steve looks up. “We’re gonna get rained out.”

“No, no, it’s – um…” He sighs, looking down at the flier. Despite how uncertain he seems, he nods. “Sure. I’ll help.”

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“No, no, it’s – um…” she comments, “as nice as this was.”

He gets up. It’s a struggle for him with his bad hip, but he barrels through it and reaches down to help her. Once again, their hands seem to fit together, and she’s entranced by that even as it starts to rain. He pulls away to gather up their stuff, and she puts her shoes back on and rushes to join him.

They’re only moderately soaked (and she has to admit that the sight of him with his shirt clinging to his well-defined chest and arms is way more alluring than it should be) by the time they get their stuff together and get back inside. They barely get through the door before running into someone, a small man with beady eyes and old-fashioned glasses. His hands are dirty like he’s been working with something sooty. He’s balding, and his face is round but harsh. “What are you doing up here?” he demands in a heavily accented voice. He glowers at them. “This area is prohibited! How did you get out there?”

Steve stands in front of her in the doorway, eyes a little wide. “Um… It was open?”

“What were you doing?”

“Stargazing,” Nat supplies.

The little man snorts, his gaze settling on her. She doesn’t like it. He huffs. “There are no stars! It’s raining!”
“Really?” she sputters incredulously, throwing it all into the act. “No way. You should go check.”

The little man turns red and grabs at the door, and the second he goes to glance outside, the two of them take off. Down the stairs they go, Steve moving with shocking alacrity considering his injury, and they burst out onto the building’s top floor with the guy yelling after them.

They go down another floor to theirs before stopping. They’re both a little winded, carrying wet trash and the wet blanket and the wet pizza box, and they lean against the railing on their side of the hallway, smiling and staring at each other. “That’s Mr. Schmidt?” she asks once her heart stops pounding.

“Mr. Zola, I think,” Steve answers.

“Probably not going to fix my vent now, is he.”

He laughs. “Probably not.”

“Oh, well,” she says, smiling broadly and not at all ashamed of the flirty insinuation about keeping their rooms connected. He stares back, water dripping from his hair. There’s no one around. Outside thunder booms, muted by the building, but she can still feel it vibrate the railing beneath her hand and the tiles beneath her feet and her heart in her chest. That latter thing’s more likely to be from him, from the way he’s looking at her like he wants more but has no idea how to get it. There’s a touch of hunger there, not the awful, cruel sort she’s known before, but an innocent, flustered desire. It still scares her, scares her a great deal because she feels the same, so she starts walking to her apartment.

He sets their stuff down outside his door and follows. Disappointment is radiating from him. He clearly takes this to mean their date is over, which is a bit silly; it’s not even nine o’clock on a Friday night. She’s not sure what she wants, though, and she feels too weightless and anchorless to think. “I, um… I had a really good time,” she says, and God if that isn’t the most clichéd bullshit imaginable.

They’re at her door. His smile is nothing but regretful and forlorn. “Yeah, me too. Sorry if it wasn’t what you expected.”

“No, no,” she says, waving her hand to dismiss his fears. “It was really nice.”

“I, uh… Like I said, I’m really out of practice.” He grins and grimaces at the same time. “Goes with the territory, I guess.”

She doesn’t know what he means by that exactly. “You shouldn’t worry, Steve. You… You’re a great guy.” That sounds even more pathetic and even more like she’s shining him on.

He obviously reads that wrong (or reads it the way she feared he would). All the sudden they’re back to the beginning, awkward and unable to figure each other out. “Thanks,” he finally says. “Thanks for putting up with it. It’s just… It’s not easy to find someone, you know? After what happened… to me…” She frowns. “It’s not easy to find anyone with shared life experiences.”

She’s not exactly sure what he means by that either, but she has some idea. It’s not easy to open up. Not easy for others to understand. Not easy to move on. She knows how that is. Knows how that feels. Knows all too well. “It’s not easy,” she agrees, “but it’s not meant to be.”

He watches her, touched and searching for more, she thinks. She’s not sure she’s not doing the same. She’s not sure what she wants. She wants him to come in. She wants him gone. She wants him closer. She wants to kiss him. The hallway feels like it’s spinning, shrinking, her door behind
her back. He’s still searching her eyes, taking another step, looming over her, and her heart is pounding, her breath coming fast. She looks at his lips, his eyes, his lips again, and this is okay. Right? She wants it and he’s there and he’s beautiful no matter what happened to him and he’s not going to hurt her. _He won’t hurt me._

His hands cup her face. They feel huge, as warm and rough as before, but so tender and gentle. A shiver works its way down her back, and she fights it. It’s not fear. It’s not. She wants this. _It’s okay._ She sets her hands to his chest, the fabric of his shirt damp and warm, the muscles below firm and strong. She stares at a button there, timid and unsure about looking up, but she does, and she slides her fingers up, too. His face is _right there_, above hers, and if she lifts her a little further…

Their lips brush and she almost pulls away. Almost. She doesn’t because he’s slow and tentative. Unsure, as unsure as she is. There’s nothing forced about it, nothing demanding, nothing harsh. Nothing but his lips, soft and a little wet, against hers, and his warmth and his tall body and his thumbs lightly brushing her cheeks—

—_and grabbing hard and she can’t get away and she wants to scream but she can’t because he’s kissing her like he owns her and he’s ripping at her and taking and taking—_

—and she yanks away. “I can’t,” she gasps, backing into the door again. She fumbles for her keys in her handbag. Her fingers are shaking so bad she can’t manage it. Get away get away get away _run run run_! That’s thundering inside her, a chant bursting through her brain, and every nerve has been shocked with panic. She finally gets the key in the lock and gets her door open. She can’t turn around. She can’t stand to see him, not the monster she imagined or the good, decent guy she’s hurting, so she _can’t_ turn around. “It’s not – it’s not you, but I just can’t do this right now.”

“Natalie—”

“Goodnight!”

And she slams the door in his face.

Silence. She stands there in the darkness. Lightning flashes. There are demons in the shadows, the things she can’t escape no matter how hard she tries. Her fingers are still shaking like mad as she locks up, the deadbolt and chain, and she leans back into the door. He can’t come in. She can’t let him in. She’s stiff with fear, listening intently. For another few seconds, there’s nothing. Then she hears him stagger, heavy footsteps that echo and hurt as they do, and he’s gone.

She bites her lip hard, tears flooding her eyes. The ghost of the kiss, the _almost_ kiss, is tantalizing and terrifying all at once. _I can’t_, she keeps thinking. _I can’t. I can’t!_ A sob breaks out of her before she can stop it. She ruined it. She ruined everything. But she can’t let herself care. Defenses. Lies. _It’s better this way._ She knows that’s right. It’s better that this not go any further. It’s better that she maintains her distance. Getting close to him or anyone else is too risky, too dangerous, and she can’t be that vulnerable. She can’t _let_ herself be that vulnerable. It’s better that this ends now.

It takes a lot of effort, but she pushes herself off her door. _It’s better like this. It’s better._

No, it’s not.

She’s shutting herself down to it more and more. By the time she turns in for the night (which isn’t that long after she unceremoniously left Steve in the hallway), she’s totally numb. Numb is good.
Numb means she won’t have to deal with the pain, the disappointment, the shame and anger and everything else. Numb means the memories will stay mostly at bay. Numb means she won’t hate herself quite so much for being so fucked up, for shooting him down and leaving him hurt. Numb is all she has.

She’s put her traps out. Locks up obsessively. Leaves the lights on in the other room. The bathroom light is on in her bedroom too, and its meager glow seems to be the only comfort there is. It’s thundering like crazy now, lightning lashing the city, and she’s scared. She’s got that under control, though. When you’ve lived through what she has, a little storm doesn’t rattle you as much as it could. Still, she thinks about the gun in the closet. It’s there. She can use it.

Liho’s not purring. She’s curled up next to her on her bed, staring at her. Nat wants to pet her but can’t bring herself to do it. In the shadows she sees the outline of her guitar, of her music books, and it’s too distressing to think about. “Are you really a rock star? You have a beautiful voice.” She closes her eyes and tries to forget everything. What he said. The way he looked. The way he smelled, like clean sweat and Old Spice. Alexei never smelled like that, always drowning in cologne like that could hide the stench of what he was. And Steve’s sweet smile, sweet eyes, sweet kiss. Alexei never smiled like that, never kissed like that. Even before, before everything went so wrong… He never was that good.

Steve wouldn’t have hurt you.

But it doesn’t matter. It’s over. Even if she could be with Steve, he won’t want her now.

She’s so alone. So alone. And she tries to make herself sleep. It takes a while, with the storm booming and the world breaking around her, but she does eventually doze off.

It doesn’t last long. A ragged scream wakes her up. She lurches upward, heart battering her sternum, eyes wide as she frantically looks around. For a terrible moment, the shadows in her bedroom are men, men crowding her, coming at her, coming to hurt her. But they’re only shadows, and the screaming is coming from next door.

Steve.

Nat gasps, sweat prickling all over her from the scare, and climbs out of bed. She gets her breathing mostly under control, gathers what she can of her composure, and clammers around to the other side of the mattress where the vent is. “Steve?” she calls. Over the rush of blood in her ears, she tries to listen for him. There’s mumbling, distorted and desperate. Then he screams more, ragged and wordless. Wincing, she shakes her head. “Steve? Are you okay?”

He doesn’t answer. It’s another nightmare. For the first time since that night, he’s having one. Helplessly she scoots closer to the vent, as close as she can without moving her bed, and aches with grief for him. He cries out again. Over the rain and the thunder, she can hear his fast, labored breathing, the sounds of him struggling and suffering. It’s too much to wonder what horrors he’s dreaming about, too much to even consider it, so she leans helplessly into the shared wall and squeezes hers eyes shut and hurts for him. She doesn’t know what else to do. “Steve! Can you hear me? Steve!”

He screams again, but this one chokes off into silence. Thunder rumbles. Nat is breathing in shivery, little pants, listening hard. There’s a heavy thud. Something breaks, shatters. What’s happening? She braces her palms to the wall, shaking her head, stiff with fear. Is he okay? Is he? “Steve?” she calls again, trying to keep her voice level. “Are you okay?”

A ragged, heavy sob answers, and she can’t take it anymore. To hell with standing there uselessly
while he’s suffering like this. Before she’s even thinking better of it, she heads to the other window in her bedroom, the one that doesn’t have the AC in it. The one with the fire escape. There won’t be any other way into his place, assuming he locked up. Maybe he’d answer his door, but she doesn’t know, and there’s no time to think about it. No, this is better. Crazy, but better. She can get to him.

She opens the window without any trouble. The lightning makes everything seem twisted and surreal, but she doesn’t let that or the teeming rain stop her. She slips outside, crosses that few yards with the metal fire escape rattling under her weight, and arrives at his window.

Rain is pouring down her face, slipping into her eyes, and she blinks frantically to clear them as she stares into his apartment. There are no lights on, and she can’t see a thing. Then a bright flash dashes the darkness, and he’s there, huddled on the floor beside his bed, curled into himself. God. She knocks on the window loudly, desperate to get in there to help him, and Max immediately starts barking. The next flash of lightning reveals the dog is skittering around his fallen master, tense with panic, but Steve himself isn’t moving.

Panicked herself, Nat grabs the bottom of the window. It’s a minor miracle, but it’s not locked. It’s even cracked at the bottom a good half an inch; he must have left it open before he fell asleep. She pulls it up and slips inside. For the first time since this stupid, desperate idea popped into her head, she realizes this is downright dangerous. She has no idea what sort of mindset he’s in, if he’s lost up in something from his past. Something from the war. But he looks up when she drops into his room, and his eyes focus. They’re very lost and very wet and steeped in pain, but they focus.

She comes over, dripping rainwater left and right. Max is prancing around her, thrilled to have her there like he knows she’ll help. She crouches in front of Steve. She can see already that he’s not with it. His cheeks are glistening with tears, his hair mussed, his breathing fast and ragged. He’s on the verge of hyperventilating. “Easy,” she says softly. “Easy.”

“Don’t…” He doesn’t finish, and she reaches for the light, noticing that everything is knocked off his bedside table. His phone and a couple of books are on the floor, as well as a broken glass right by where he’s sitting. The instant the light comes on, he recoils, pushing back against his bed and fumbling away.

“No, no,” she hushes, but she doesn’t touch him. “I’m not going to hurt you. It’s alright.” There’s a smear of red she can see now, and it’s across the white t-shirt he’s wearing. He’s got his right hand cradled to his chest. That’s where the blood’s coming from. He must have cut it on the glass. She’s slow, telegraphing every moment, as she moves the sharp mess away. “It’s alright,” she promises. “Deep breaths.”

He gasps a sob. “Fuck. Don’t touch me!”

“It’s okay. Can I…”

There’s a flash of a warning in his eyes when she reaches for him. “I said don’t touch me!”

“Oh,” she whispers. “Okay. It’s alright.” She backs off. She’s not afraid, though. Not enough to stop. Thunder rumbles, and she sits across from him on the floor, a respectful few feet between them, and waits patiently. Slowly, excruciatingly slowly, he calms down. He does it in fits and spurts, squeezing his eyes shut in pain before opening them again widely in fear. When he’s breathing a bit easier, focusing again on her face, she reaches for a discarded t-shirt on the floor.

“Steve, I’m not going to hurt you. I promise. But you’re bleeding. Your hand.” He looks down, and horror splays all over his features as if in sudden realization. He moans, a deep, twisted thing that shakes her. She takes a deep breath. “Can I take care of it?”
It seems as if he’s not going to let her for a second. Now he’s watching her like he doesn’t entirely recognize her, like he can’t reconcile her with whatever he’d been dreaming. But he nods, and she carefully moves forward, crossing those few feet before setting her hand on his knee. He jerks and almost pulls away, but he doesn’t. Every muscle in his body is wound tight, coiled in a vicious fight-or-flight response, and letting go of that is making him shake wildly. She breathes slowly, keeping an air of peace. “It’s alright,” she says again and again. She’ll say it as many times as she needs to. “It’s alright, Steve. Do you know where you are?”


That’s an immense relief, even if his voice is hoarse and wrecked. He’s got a hold of reality at least. Slowly she reaches for his hand, checking his face to make sure he’s okay with it. When she takes it, he flinches and seems about to move away, but he doesn’t. She wraps the shirt around the bleeding mess as tightly as she dares. He grimaces anew, this time from pain. “Sorry. Is there anyone you want me to call?” She’s not sure why she’s asking. She already knows he’s alone. And he gives a jerky shake of his head. He visibly deflates, falls down and falls hard. “No. There’s no one. I don’t have anyone.”

Her heart aches miserably in her chest. As she stares at him, though, sees his eyes close and his head bow and his body shake and tears stream down his face… She doesn’t care if it’s not smart, if she needs to protect herself, if she’s afraid. She doesn’t care, and she’s not afraid anymore. Maybe things happen for a reason. She came here, moved next to him, for a reason. Like Steve, she’s never believed in things like that before, but with her heart filling with purpose and strength and determination for the first time in what feels like forever, she knows it’s true. And the words come unbidden. “You’re not alone.”

He opens his eyes. His beautiful eyes. She still can’t stand them full of tears. So she smiles reassuringly, even though she’s sopping wet and he’s shaking and covered in blood. “Come on. Let me get you cleaned up.”

She helps him to his feet. He’s limp now, weak, wobbly, and still disorientated, but despite all that and the weight he’s putting on her, she gets him out of his bedroom and into the living room. She flips the lights on and helps him to the couch. Once he’s sitting there, Max jumps up and stays close. She’s glad for that; the dog seems to comfort him a great deal. “Let me see, okay?” He doesn’t move a moment, weeping silently, so she crouches beside him and takes his hand from where he’s pressed it protectively to his chest. She doesn’t force, coaxing not demanding until he’s letting her pull the reddened shirt away from the wound for a better look. The gash on his palm isn’t deep enough to require stitches. At least, she doesn’t think it is. She’s hardly an expert. Even still, she needs to take care of it. “First aid kit?”

He’s bleary, shivering like mad. “Bathroom,” he manages.

“I’ll be right back.” She gets up and heads quickly back to his bedroom. Lightning flashes, and for a second she stumbles before she makes it into his bathroom. It’s just the same as hers, the same size and same layout, but she fumbles a second, reeling with what’s happening. There’s a towel on a rack, and she takes that, drying herself quickly so she’s not getting water everywhere quite so much. Frantically, she looks under the sink in the vanity. Nothing but spray bottles of cleaner. Then she opens the medicine cabinet over the sink.

No first aid kit, but there are band-aids of various sizes and gauze and a tube of antibiotic salve. And pill bottles. A lot of pill bottles. She feels the blood drain from her face as she takes in the sheer number of them. And she knows she shouldn’t look, that it’s invading his privacy… But she can’t stop herself. A horrific though recurs, the one where she wonders if he’s maybe addicted to
something, but all the bottles are his. Rogers, Steven Grant. And there are a ton of different prescribing doctors, but two names show up the most. Banner. Erskine. “God, what’s wrong with him…” she whispers as she looks them over. She doesn’t recognize most of the medications, but some she does. They’re antidepressants. Medicines for migraines and pain. He’s sick. He’s really sick.

And he’s out there waiting for her. She grabs the bandages and the salve and closes the cabinet. She takes the towel, too, and runs back out to him. He’s where she left him, limply holding the shirt around his bleeding hand, staring vacantly at his coffee table. All the frantic energy from before has utterly vanished, leaving him pale and disheveled and small. Max watches her and whines desperately. She rushes over, sets her supplies down on the table, and goes to the kitchen to wet a few paper towels. Then she returns and pushes the table away a bit to make more room. “Steve?”

He’s inside his head. She’s heard of the thousand-yard stare, but she’s never really seen it before. Not like this. She takes a deep breath, unsure of what to do at first, but then she lets instinct guide her. She gently cups his face, her fingers light as she slides them against his cheek. His beard is softer than she thought it would be. “Steve…”

He blinks and he’s back. His eyes sharpen, focus anew, focus on her. Just then there’s a horrific flash of lightning followed almost instantly by a particularly loud crack of thunder, and he winces, quaking anew. “It’s okay,” she soothes. “It’s okay. Just the storm. It’s alright.”

“It’s not,” he whispers, and his eyes are welling again. “I’m so fucked up, Nat! So fucked up.”

“It’s okay. And no, you’re not.” She smiles. “I’m going to take care of you, alright?”

He doesn’t seem to understand, to process that at all, but she goes at it nonetheless. Sometimes actions speak louder than words. Pulling the bloody shirt off, she sees the bleeding has mostly stopped. That’s good. Putting the bath towel beneath them to catch any mess, she wipes the remainder of the blood away with the paper towels, cleaning the slash carefully so as not to disrupt things or hurt him. He’s watching blankly as she works in silence. It thunders again, though not as violently, and he doesn’t recoil this time. She hopes that means something good as she starts bandaging the cut.

The silence is crushing. He’s breathing shallowly, and she feels him tremble each time he inhales. He doesn’t react at all as she carefully applies the salve. She takes the largest band-aid she can find and undoes the wrapper. Before she can put it on there, though, he sighs shakily. “You asked before…” His voice is still rough, thick with a sob. “You asked before how long it’s been?” She looks up at him. Exhaustion is pushing him down, heavy in his eyes. “Five years.”

She stops fixing the band-aid over his palm and looks up. Her heart is still in her chest. She can’t make her lungs breathe, her lips speak, her mind work. Oh, God. He swallows again. “Spent another in a hospital over there in a coma. Can’t tell you much about that. They saved my life. Got the bullet out of me but not before it took out my spleen and screwed up my hip. And they

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stopped my brain from bleeding, but not before there was a whole load of damage. By the time the army finally found me, it was too late to do much more than wait and pray I woke up.” He looks away, disgusted now. “Spent another year after that wishing I hadn’t.”

Oh, God… “Steve…”

“Came home. Nowhere else to go. Trying to make something of it. Trying hard. But what’s the point?” He closes his eyes. “Never getting better.”

She doesn’t know what to say. She’s not sure there’s anything she can say. She finishes with his hand, rolling the gauze around and around it to protect it. This is just the surface, she knows. She can see that. There are things there – the things he can’t talk about – lurking beneath his tears and trembling sighs and shaking hands. He looks sick just letting this much out. And he’s breaking apart. “Feels like… Feels like I slept decades sometimes. Nothing’s the same. Sometimes I don’t think I ever woke up at all… I can’t – I—“ He chokes on another sob, and she can’t stand it anymore. She leans up and wraps her arms around him, tugging him close. He’s unyielding for a second but only that, submitting and melting and then grasping her like a lifeline.

“Shh,” she breathes into his hair, tucking his face into her shoulder. He cries into it, crumbling in her arms, so she only holds him tighter. Her fingers weave into his hair, her other hand sliding up and down his shuddering back in a gentle sweep. She wonders how long it’s been since he cried, really cried like this. How long he’s been carrying this all inside, alone and suffering. She doesn’t want to think about it, about him languishing in this sparse and empty apartment. Instead she closes her own eyes and lets him let it all go.

He’s quiet after a while. She is, too. She pulls away, cradling his face again. He isn’t so lost anymore. The pain’s still there. The anger and the shame and the grief. But he’s not falling into it. She’s keeping him above it. “Look at me,” she whispers, and he does. She sweeps the last of his tears away. “I promise you. It’ll get better.”

He doesn’t argue. She can see he’s spent, physically and emotionally. And his face is close, so close that she can feel his breath on her lips. She stares into his eyes as they blink in fatigue. That hunger is back, though, but now she sees it for what it is.

He wants her. Not just her voice. Not just her body. He wants her.

So she kisses him. It’s not at all like she feared. It’s soft, timid at first. His lips are wet this time, too, wet and pliant and uncertain beneath hers, but as the second slips away, he gains some confidence. His hand goes to the back of her head, slipping into her hair, and she closes her eyes and lets herself melt into this. She opens her mouth to him, and he takes but only after he knows it’s okay. It feels good, right, pure though neither of them are that. It feels safe.

When they finally pull away, she’s staring into his eyes again. They’re deeply blue, calm and grounded again. The corner of his mouth twists into that little grin she’s starting to adore. “I guess this means I can ask you for a second date?” he whispers. She giggles a little, tipping her forehead to his. “Even though this one was… weird and wet and ended in disaster.”

“It didn’t end in disaster,” she argues, smiling herself. That sense of purpose emboldens her, and she sweeps her thumb over his lower lip.

He kisses her again, bolder too, and she pulls him close. He’s still shaking, still suffering with it all, and his hands are scrabbling clumsily at her shoulders like he’s trying to find purchase. Trying to anchor himself. His eyes fill anew with tears after he lets her go. “I’m sorry, Nat. I’m so sorry!”
“It’s alright. It really is.”


I want you.

She kisses his forehead, stands, and there’s a flash of fear in his eyes. “Lie down.” He hesitates but does. His body is tense as he curls on his side on the couch. Max rearranges himself to tuck his face near Steve’s hip, keeping his master warm and protected, and Nat leaves them like that for a moment in order to collect his blanket and pillow from his bed. She puts the pillow under his head and drapes the quilt over him. Then she settles back on the floor beside him.

He’s watching her hazily. She smiles because it’s okay. Everything is okay. “Thank you,” he murmurs.

She nods, and it comes naturally. Over the last of the thunder, she hums a soft melody, the same one she sang to him the other night. Bit by bit, the last of his pain ebbs and disappears. His eyes close. His breathing evens out. He falls asleep.

She watches him go down, peaceful and safe, and that sense of accomplishment… It sings, too. She knows that she’s where she’s supposed to be.

It’s alright. I’ll stay.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Just a warning on this chapter... it's rough. Also I'm not a doctor or a medical expert, so there may be mistakes (and some things I flubbed on purpose to create more drama). Enjoy, guys, and thanks so much for the support!

“Everywhere I’m looking now, I’m surrounded by your embrace.
Baby, I can see your halo.
You know you’re my saving grace.
You’re everything I need and more. It’s written all over your face.
Baby, I can feel your halo.
Pray it won’t fade away.”
– Beyoncé, “Halo”

Flatbush is positively alive. It’s Saturday night and July 4th, and the neighborhood is swept up with the occasion. There are people everywhere despite how hot it is. Food carts line the street, vendors taking advantage of the activity to get a good night’s business done. Children run about with sparklers, and there is music playing from restaurants and storefronts and street corners. It promises to be a pretty glorious evening, the sky clear without so much as the threat of rain, and everyone is outside enjoying it.

Including Nat. Not that she’s really partaking in the festivities but she’s certainly appreciating them. She’s walking home from work; the store was actually busy that afternoon (maybe because of the holiday), so May called her in even though it was a day off. She didn’t mind too much. It afforded her the opportunity to get some things ready for tonight on her break. At any rate, she’s heading home now, and it’s so nice out that her mood (which was already pretty damn good) veritably soars. She’s walking on cloud nine. That’s what it feels like anyway, what it has been feeling like for the last few weeks. She feels good, comfortable, content in a way she can’t ever remember feeling. Excited for the first time in forever, like the anticipation of the evening and fireworks and good times is thrumming in her veins and tingling along her nerves, and it’s not just now. It’s all the time. All the sudden the fear that’s been her constant companion for years seems distant and removed. Which is not to say she’s gotten sloppy about protecting herself. She knows better than that. She’s simply… redefined who she needs to protect herself from.

And that list does not include Steve Rogers.

Nat’s most of the way back to their building when her phone beeps. Speak of the devil. It’s a text from Steve. “Where are you?”

She smiles, avoiding a crowd of young guys gathered around the stoop of an apartment building and talking loudly. She doesn’t pick up her pace or even notice when they stare at her as she passes, too intent on texting back. “Almost there.”

“Door’s open,” comes the response a second later. “Come on in.” Like he needs to say that. She grins again and shakes her head before pocketing her phone and heading on her way just a little bit faster. It’s remarkable how much has changed in her life. It’s been almost a month since their first
date, and in that time, the two of them – Steve and me and she still can’t quite process that sometimes – have really fallen in together. It’s natural, easy, perfect. The very next day after their date, after she rescued him from his nightmare, he showed up at her place asking if she’d like to come over and watch a movie with him. That turned into a whole evening spent in his apartment, laughing their way through Bridesmaids over some Thai food he went to get from down the street. That turned into every night going this way. Dinner. TV. Talking. Exploring who they are within reason – it’s more observation than exposition because Steve hasn’t said a thing about what happened to him since his nightmare (and he was ashamed about that night for quite a while, but he’s been much better about it recently). Nat’s wondered about it of course, about what it must have been like to be a prisoner of war for months and months (years, and she feels sick just thinking about it). She doesn’t dream of asking, though. And she hasn’t ventured anything about her life. She has no plans to. There’s an unspoken rule between them not to pry, not to push, not to ever ask. Certain things are strictly off-limits, and they are both absolutely okay with this.

But kissing isn’t. And cuddling. And laughing. She hasn’t laughed so much in years, not since coming to the States. Steve has a wry, clever sense of humor that’s pretty surprising considering his normally serious, withdrawn demeanor. She almost feels like everything she discovers about him now is a little secret, something only she knows because he’s only this open and sweet and unguarded with her. His eyes sparkle when he smiles. He actually has a beautiful smile, when it’s natural and freely given and not forced. He’s got scars beyond those she saw before, up and down his back, a mass of them on his hip where he was shot, but she thinks they’re beautiful, too. He knows a lot about art and art history, and one night they went over some of his books and he just came to life explaining things to her, different styles and eras and techniques. He likes space. More than once they watch specials on the Science Channel, and she couldn’t care less about it, but she enjoys him enjoying it. He’s really kind and generous. She knew that before, but she hates to admit that she wondered a little if it was a front to appease strangers (she knows an awful lot about those sort of defenses). It’s not. He always goes out of his way for her. Bringing her (and everyone else at Rising Tide) coffee has become a nearly daily event. He pays for everything. He helps her with her groceries and things (even though it’s not always so easy for him to manage it with his limp). He holds open doors and defers to what she wants when they go out (which they have once or twice, but mostly they like his apartment and take-out and an endless supply of Netflix. Apparently he’s as disconnected with recent movies and TV as he is with modern music, and she hasn’t exactly kept up with it either, so there’s a lot they can watch). He’s a gentleman, through and through.

And he’s surprisingly perceptive. She’s said absolutely nothing about what happened to her, but he’s seemingly figured out that something did and he completely respects it. She doesn’t let him into her place; that’s a boundary she’s not ready to cross, but he hasn’t asked so it seems okay. She feels a tad ashamed for that, for letting her past seep out of her like it has, but he doesn’t act at all put off by it. They stay where it’s familiar and with what’s familiar. They kiss a lot. That seems to be safe for him, and she’s shocked at how safe it feels for her. The awful moment of their first kiss has never returned, and she’s secretly proud of herself for that. Kissing Steve now feels like comfort and safety and thrills all wrapped into one, and she hasn’t doubted it once since. And they touch, but nothing beyond gentle caresses that are tame and innocent. That seems good for both of them. His fingers in her hair, lightly so, and her head on his chest. Their hands clasped together. Laying on his sofa, her practically on top of him with his arms around her, basking in the warmth and security of it and dozing. It’s been so long – so long – since anyone has held her like Steve does. Every time it’s like nerves are coming alive after being beaten into submission or hibernation, and there’s nothing like it. She stops caring about the past, about the future, lets herself live in the moment. It’s nothing short of incredible.

So they’ve been doing this almost every night for a month, two lost and lonely souls finding solace
in each other. That’s clichéd, but Nat doesn’t care because it’s utterly true. He hasn’t had another nightmare since that one, and he seems happy and relaxed. And she’s felt… comfortable. Like a new person, really. Protected, even if nothing has really changed about her situation. Maybe it’s an illusion, but she feels now like she’s truly not alone.

At any rate, tonight’s going to be something different. It’s the 4th of July, but it’s also Steve’s birthday, and she has the task of getting him to Sam’s for his surprise party. She met Sam formally a few weeks ago, not long after Steve and she started together. Sam showed up at Steve’s place unannounced one night, obviously anticipating he would need to drag Steve out into the world to socialize, only to find her there and the two of them deep into a movie. Sam’s a really sweet guy. She likes him a lot. She can tell he’s really good for Steve, that he’s every bit the sturdy support that Steve has needed in the aftermath of what happened to him in Afghanistan. He’s cool and calm and comforting, and he clearly doesn’t tolerate bullshit, although Steve didn’t have much to offer up with her there. The slightly embarrassed smile on Steve’s face and the light in his eyes when he introduced her made her feel self-conscious, but Sam’s easy grin quickly wiped that out. In fact, Sam’s extremely accepting and really happy things are going well for Steve and for them both. They’ve been out with Sam once or twice to get dinner, and it’s been fun and pleasant. So when he called her a couple days ago to set up Steve’s party, she immediately agreed before she thought better of it.

Now she’s pretty sure it’s going to be hard to get Steve to said party. He’s definitely more comfortable at home. Over the last few weeks, she hasn’t gotten much closer to figuring out what’s wrong with him. Brain damage. It’s not too obvious, at least not to her. Of course she does notice some things. He’s obviously making an effort to be cleaner and less disorganized, but she doesn’t think it’s wholly depression that inhibits him. He seems dazed and lost sometimes, like he’s checked out from what he’s doing or honestly can’t remember the task at hand. His issue with his money that first date is a recurring one, and it’s not just money. He sometimes can’t read a clock or a menu or recall what he’s supposed to order or what they decided to watch. Also sometimes he can’t seem to find a word or two and gets caught up in his sentences. It’s all there, whatever cognitive disabilities he has, but they’re generally subtle. Additionally, he struggles with his meds. She sees that right away, that the side effects are awful at times. Those are the nights they don’t see each other because he cancels even though she’s willing to sit with him through whatever troubles he’s having. He admits it’s nausea or exhaustion or a migraine, but he always refuses her help. She can hardly stand that, to think he’s suffering through something by himself, and she doesn’t know if it’s pride or embarrassment or what that keeps him from having her close. She just knows it hurts, and she worries a lot.

He already said he doesn’t want to do anything for his birthday when she prodded him about it a few days ago, so this will be tough. But she’s tough, too, and once upon a time, she never shied away from a challenge. Besides, she has to agree with Sam. It’ll be good for Steve to get out, to have people do something special for him. She’s also noticed these last few weeks that he’s very hard on himself. Whatever happened to him during the war killed his self-esteem, and there’s pain that runs very deep there, pain that cripples him and riddles him with guilt. He constantly seems bent under some kind of burden, like suffering is some sort of ritual penance, and she doesn’t understand it. It’s almost as if he thinks he deserves what happened to him. Sam recognizes that as well, hence wanting to throw the party. It’s not going to be overly big; mostly just Steve’s small group of friends. Thor and his girlfriend. Steve’s buddy Tony and his wife. Sam. Maybe a few more of their acquaintances from the VA. Good food and good cheer. Enough to be special but not enough to overwhelm him. He’ll have a good time, she thinks, if she can just get him out of his apartment.

And she’s got his birthday present in the bag she’s carrying. She hopes she did well with it (but
she’s pretty sure she did. And she’s super excited to give it to him). So she quickly climbs up the steps in their building, feeling great and excited and plotting how she’s going to convince him to go out, wondering if she’s going to give him his present now or later with everyone else. A new feeling of anticipation coils in her belly; it does every time she’s seeing him. Again it’s almost alien because it’s been so long, so long since she’s been involved in anything that’s this good and pure. She relishes it, smiling as she reaches his apartment.

The door is unlocked, and she lets herself in. Max immediately comes plodding out of the second bedroom that Steve uses for his work room, and his tail starts enthusiastically wagging when he sees it’s her. Max has come to adore her in no time at all. She lets herself think it’s because he knows she’s good for his master. “Hey, boy,” she says as he comes over and licks her hands and waits not so patiently for her to set her stuff down and greet him more properly. She crouches and pets him and rubs his ears, letting him nose at her face, before rising again and heading to the other room.

Steve’s sitting at his desk. He’s working at the big, gleaming digital tablet he has, stylus in his fingers, hunched over it a little. “Hi,” he calls, not looking away from his work.

She comes over and slides a hand across his broad shoulders. She always keeps her touch light at first, makes sure it’s welcomed and that it never takes him by surprise. He doesn’t flinch or even react at all, concentrating on his work. She takes one look and realizes it isn’t work at all. He’s sliding the stylus over a drawing of a fictitious musician, complete with microphone and guitar. Below that sketch he’s rouged out lettering for Block Fest. It’s a really good drawing, easy in its style which matches the casual feeling Daisy wants for the Fest. “That’s awesome,” she comments, leaning over his shoulder a little more.

“Thanks,” he answers. He’s been working pretty hard on fliers and posters and such. Daisy came up with the idea that he could draw the storefronts of the businesses signing up, and he has, and all of them look amazing. Printouts of them are spread over his desk, mixed in with work for his boss and a couple other sketches. He’s been pretty prolific of late. He glances up at her. “Not sure I have the hands right.”

Nat narrows her eyes as she takes a look. “Seems right to me,” she says.

“Might help to have a live example,” he replies, and it’s a little sly. So’s the look he gives her. She hasn’t quite been brave enough to bring her guitar over and play, and he keeps gently coaxing.

She turns and catches his mouth in a sweet kiss. It goes on a little long. It’s still so new, so pleasurable for such a simple act, that she can’t help but indulge. Steve kisses like every time is the first time, a little uncertain in the beginning before he finds confidence and gets bolder. He does pull away after a second, smiling somewhat hazily.

She smiles, too. “Happy birthday,” she says.

“Thanks.”

“Sure you don’t want to go out?”

He stares at her suspiciously, and she realizes, for all her prowess at acting (once upon a time), that was a little obvious. “Yeah. Kinda want to just spend the evening with you. That okay?”

She plays it like she doesn’t care (and like she’s touched, because she really is touched and maybe she should call Sam and cancel this – no, it’s his birthday and he deserves it). “Of course.”
He pushes away from his desk and gently pulls her to him. She goes, straddling his legs just a little. “All I want for my birthday is you,” he says, his eyes dark as he runs his hands up her arms.

She can’t help a shiver. Part of that is excitement for sure. A large part of it. She’s thought about more. God, they’ve spent so much time together these last few weeks alone that she’s really thought about it. Dreamed about it. Fantasized about it. It’s been a long time for him, it seems, and she knows it’s been ages for her. He’s as out of practice with all of this as she is, fumbling through it and uncertain and tentative, but he’s had the same desires. It’s obvious in the way he looks at her sometimes. Like now. And the thought of him naked is more than intoxicating, touching her, taking care of her, making her feel good… She knows he would, that he’d do anything for her.

But she doesn’t really know that. It’s her heart talking again (which it usually does with him) and not her head. She’s not ready for anything more than what they have. This slow, steady pace of things is what she needs, and she knows it. Every time she imagines his hands on her, his kiss more ravenous and demanding, his bed… There’s fear there she can’t deny.

And there’s hunger in his eyes now, but she doesn’t think he actually means what he implied, that he wants sex or anything like that for his birthday. She feels dirty for even thinking it herself. And she flirts to hide her discomfort. “What do you want me to give you?”

He backs off, too, and the air suddenly feels a tad awkward. “Nothing,” he says, kissing her again but more chastely. “Just be with me.”

She tries not to wince (why does she feel like by getting him to his party she’s leading a cow to the slaughter?). And she’s desperate to change the subject a bit, so she pulls away and looks around his desk at the rest of the fliers he’s done. They’re all great. Daisy’s going to be thrilled. The Fest is still more than a month away, but they’ll have plenty of time to advertise and get the word out. “You really are saving our collective butts with all this. Thanks.”

Steve blushes a little. “Ah, it’s nothing. Work’s slow, so it’s keeping me busy.”

She rifles through a few of the pages, glancing at the storefronts he’s sketched in exquisite detail, when something catches her eye. More specifically, her eye catches her eye. “What’s this?” she asks, grabbing for the paper.

Now he really blushes. “No, that’s nothing.”

It’s definitely not nothing. He’s grabbing for it, but she’s faster, pushing away from him and taking the drawing with her. It’s a picture of her. She’s leaning over a book on Steve’s couch, sitting cross-legged, and she recognizes the book as her songbook. A couple of days ago she brought it over one night when he had to work. It was the first time in a really long time that she had the inclination to write anything. Melodies filled her head, the beginnings of lyrics, and she jotted it all down, thinking of him while she did. Apparently he was thinking of her, too, drawing this instead of doing his work. It’s beautiful. It’s not digital art but an actual sketch on paper, dark charcoal lines and sooty details that add a certain rawness to it that’s sultry and powerful. She’s staring at her own eyes as they gaze into the distance, book in her lap, hair in a sloppy ponytail, pencil idle in her hands. There’s light around her like an aura, and she looks like she’s untouchable, ethereal. Dreaming.

Is this how he sees me?

“Wait. Wait, don’t look – no, Nat, give it back,” he gasps, but she’s already stumbling out of his office and into the living room.
She wants to look more than that cursory glance, and she’s laughing, high with how it’s making her feel. She staggers to the couch, him chasing after her, and sits down as far away as she can to get a chance to study it. He makes a few half-hearted attempts to grab the paper, but he gives up when he realizes she’s not letting it go. She grins in triumph, nudging him away and fully appreciating her prize. God, it’s beautiful. And it’s so touching she can’t stand it, can’t deal with what it’s doing to her. “This is…”

Sighing in submission a little, he smiles and grimaces at once. He seems embarrassed, but he’s got absolutely no reason to be. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s amazing,” she corrects, staring at the picture. “It’s…” She doesn’t know how to describe it. Not what it is. Not what it means to her. She looks like an angel. “It’s perfect.”

He flushes with the compliment. “Well, not really. It’s not done. See?” He points to the corner where he typically signs all his work, and there’s nothing there. She sweeps her thumb over the vacant spot. “I was gonna work on it more, fill out the shading some. Still don’t think I’ve got your nose entirely right.” He makes a show of studying her and then his work and scrutinizing until she’s blushing and shoving him back again. “Maybe I’ll give it to you eventually.” He cocks and eyebrow and quirks a smile. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“No… Maybe I want it for myself,” he coyly responds, and she can melt when he gets like this. It’s really rare, a fire inside him that seems snuffed out most of the time, but when it burns freely, it’s glorious. In those seconds, he’s smart, sassy, full of life, a hint of the man he probably was before the war and Afghanistan. “Maybe I drew it for me.”

She flirts right back. “You didn’t.”

“Think so?”

It comes so easy, so wonderfully easy. “Know so.”

He hums, pulling the drawing carefully from her fingers and setting it on the coffee table. Then he’s kissing her again, this time deeper and more passionately. She melts with this, too, moaning quietly as he pushes her gently down on his couch. He prods her mouth open and she happily submits to it, and when his tongue teases inside, a jolt of longing goes straight through her. She’s twining a hand in his hair, grasping it hard, closing her eyes and swept up in the war inside her. They’ve done this before, made out on his couch, but not like this. Not with her beneath him. It’s electrifying and exhilarating and terrifying all at once, and an automatic fearful reaction speeds her heart as much as desire does. She forces that down, even as he lays his weight even more on top of her. He’s careful, bracing an elbow on the arm rest, pinning her lightly as he kisses her breathless. He’s so much bigger than her, stronger, in control. And he’s moving down, trailing his lips softly along her jaw. She moans again, tipping her head back without thought, baring her neck to him. The vulnerability makes her shiver, but it feels so good as he kisses and nibbles there. His hand boldly skirts up her clothed hip and under her t-shirt, caressing the bare skin of her lower belly, and goose pimples prickle in the wake of his touch. His fingers are callused but far from rough, tentative and reverent and careful. She can’t help another shudder, though. This is more than they’ve ever done.

No. It feels right and good, and she’s not going to worry about what happens from here. She’s not going to let her past control her. Not anymore. Not with him. She hooks her knees around his hips and reaches behind to pull his shirt up his back. Her fingers dance up his skin, and muscles ripple beneath her touch. She can feel the scars now, a lot of them, long lines of corded flesh. He
shivers, too, as she traces them but doesn’t stop kissing her. She holds him close, forcing herself to relax, soothing him to do the same, letting him taste and touch while she does the same because everything is okay.

His phone vibrates on the coffee table, and that destroys the fragile sense of peace. Steve grunts and leans up, reaching over for it clumsily, and Nat flounders. She’s simultaneously relieved and achingly disappointed that he’s stopped. Her nerves are getting the better of her. She takes a deep breath to gather herself as he checks who’s calling. Displeased, he tosses his phone back to the table and lets the call go unanswered. “You okay?” he asks, looking down on her in worry. For all he seems to understand, it’s clear right then and there that he hasn’t figured out the truth.

She swallows and dons what she hopes is a convincing smile. “Sure. Are you okay?” Deflecting. That’s always good.

He manages an expression that’s more confused than comforting. “Yeah. Think so.”

“So?”

His hand is still on the bare skin of her stomach, dangerous and powerful. “Yeah.” Leaning down again, he captures her mouth anew, and she pushes up into the kiss, grabbing at him mostly to steady herself. God, he’s big, and he’s all muscle, and she can’t escape. The strength she had to accept that before is fleeting now, but she can’t push him off even if she wanted to. And she’s not sure she wants to. She is certain she doesn’t want to let him see she’s terrified, and she under no circumstances wants to hurt him or make him think he’s the problem. He’s not. She is. Her brain is buzzing with all that, drowning her in doubt, and she doesn’t even realize that she stops kissing him back. He leans away, brow furrowed in concern. “Nat?”

She doesn’t know what to say, and he’s looking down on her, waiting for an explanation as to why this moment all but fell apart. Thankfully, she doesn’t have to answer because his cellphone vibrates again. Frustrated, he gets up off her completely and reaches for it. Then he frowns hard, sitting down beside her, and this time he answers. “Hello?”

Nat pulls her t-shirt down where it’s ridden up her midriff. She sits up, tucking her legs under herself, and she’s so damn disgusted because she’s glad it’s over. She doesn’t hold onto that long though, because Steve looks really troubled. He’s tense with it, jaw clenched and posture stiff despite what they’d just been doing. “Mr. Coulson, hi. What…” His eyes narrow further. Nat can hear a man on the other end of the phone, and he’s speaking quickly. He goes on for a bit before Steve interrupts him. “Mr. Coulson, I already told you. I’m not interested in – no, no. No. I’m not…” They’re both getting more agitated, and Steve rakes a hand through his already mussed hair before standing and pacing a bit. He listens more, shaking his head emphatically. “I don’t want to. I keep telling you that. I’m not interested in participating.” Participating in what? “No. No. I want you to stop calling. It’s not really my problem that you can’t do it without me. No – Mr. Coulson, I’m hanging up. Stop calling.” He drops his hand and thumbs the screen of his phone to end the call.

She probably shouldn’t ask, but she does anyway. He’s too distressed to let it slide. “What was that?”

He sighs, staring at his phone in his hands for a moment and deflating. Thankfully the tension leaks out of him, and he sits beside her again. “Nothing. Just…” For a second it seems like he’s not going to tell her, but he does. “There’s a guy interested in what happened to me in Afghanistan. He’s making a documentary on the war and he wants Captain America’s take on what happened.” He says that with such vitriol. She doesn’t know exactly what any of that means, but it’s obviously upsetting him, so she reaches over and squeezes his shoulder. He lets loose
another long breath, setting his hand to her thigh. “It’s alright. I just… I can’t talk about it.”

“I know,” she says.

He shakes his head, more to himself than anything else. “Not like that. Not with someone… filming it and making a big deal about it.”

“You don’t have to.” Even as she says that, though, she knows it’s not true. She’s not aware of the details, but no matter what, bottling it all up inside like he’s been doing isn’t healthy. That’s led him to the long nights alone in his bedroom, suffering with nightmares and flashbacks. That’s led him to where he was, lonely and hurting, and she doesn’t want that anymore. So she’s quiet and gentle when she adds, “But it might help.”

He jerks and turns to her, and for a second, she’s certain she’s overstepped those unspoken boundaries. But she hasn’t. He smiles faintly, nods, drops his head a bit. His fingers press lightly into her thigh, a grateful grasp, before he lets her go. Deciding she can’t stand anything despondent on his birthday (and that she has a mission she’s yet to complete with the clock ticking down), she stands up. “Come on. I need to go out.”

He looks up at her quizzically. “Out?”

“Sam texted me earlier. He said I need to come by his place to get your birthday present.”

Steve frowned. “Right now?”

“Yeah.” She smiles disarmingly. She can pull off a little white lie. “He has plans tonight, so we better hurry. Come on. We can stop at that Thai place you like on the way home and pick up dinner. And ice cream.”

He doesn’t look convinced, eyeing her somewhat suspiciously. “I don’t like fireworks.”

“No fireworks,” she promises. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

He’s going to argue, she thinks, but he doesn’t. “Alright.”

“Yeah?” she says, trying to hide her relief.

“Yeah.”

Easier than I thought.

“Surprise!”

Steve cries out and jumps back even though the surprise itself is pretty tame by most standards. He grabs Nat’s hand suddenly and tightly, squeezing hard, and she worries instantly that this is a mistake. But he smiles, pale and a little shaky, as his friends cheer and converge on him where they’ve stepped into Sam’s apartment.

Sam gets there first, laughing and throwing his arm around Steve’s shoulders. “Got you good, dude.”

Steve shakes his head, embarrassed but grinning, shock still fading from his eyes. “I hate you. Asshole.”

Sam just beams, so ridiculously proud of himself. “You didn’t think I was honestly gonna ignore
“Suppose I should’ve known,” Steve laments. He turns to Nat. “Didn’t think you’d be in on it, though.” Nat can’t tell if he’s annoyed, and she’s feeling increasingly guilty for this whole thing. The whole walk over, Steve was in really good spirits, sunglasses and Dodgers hat and backpack on and chatting happily, his troubling phone call seemingly forgotten. Despite his happiness, she kept wincing and thinking about him like some unsuspecting victim, and carrying his birthday present in her own bag was like carrying the weight of the world. Maybe he hates surprise parties. Maybe this is a really bad idea. Maybe, maybe, maybe…

But Steve just loops an arm around her to pull her to his side. “I’m gonna get you back for this,” he teases, and just like that, all her misgivings fade.

And not a moment too soon, either. When Sam first suggested this, she knew she was going to have to play the part. Lie like a pro, basically, in front of all of Steve’s friends she hasn’t met (though, to be fair, there aren’t that many). That’s going to require more confidence and aplomb than she normally musters, but for Steve she’s willing. Thor is there, pulling Steve into a backslapping one-armed hug, and with him is a petite woman with brown hair and hazel eyes and a pretty face who Thor introduces as Jane. There’s another man there too, with dark hair that’s messy and a neatly trimmed goatee. He’s dressed in ripped jeans and a faded ACDC shirt. That has to be Tony, the guy who’s helping Steve fix a motorcycle (Steve’s gone off once or twice to work on that on the weekend or the occasional evening). There’s a woman with him too, taller and leggier with auburn hair and an aura of unflappable poise. Probably Tony’s wife.

“Nice to see you out of your hermit hole,” Tony jokes, and Steve immediately frowns at him. Once the smaller man sees her, his eyes widen a little. “Well, well, well. You must be Natalie. These two morons—” He gestures at Steve and Thor. “—mention you all the time down at my shop, but they both failed to mention that you’re hot.”

“Christ, Tony,” Steve moans, and he pushes him back.

Not that that’s necessary with his wife glaring daggers before smacking him on the arm. “Ow! What?” Tony rubs his bicep. “I call ’em like I see ’em.”

“You’re impossible,” the woman says. She smiles sweetly, extending her hand to Nat. “I’m Pepper, Tony’s wife. Unfortunately.”

Nat laughs. “I’m Natalie Rushman, Steve’s… girlfriend.” Saying that feels good, real, permanent. She glances at Steve, and Steve’s smiling, so she figures that’s okay, being forward with it. And she can see from the not-so-subtle relief on the faces around her that she’s already being welcomed into the group. With arms open, in fact. A warm rush of euphoria leaves her a little breathless as she’s introduced to the others. A big barrel of a guy named Dum Dum (Timothy, she later learns) and his friend Gabe. They were both part of Steve’s unit, the Howling Commandos, and they came to the city for the weekend and for Steve’s party. Nat worries for a second that seeing them will upset Steve, that it’ll stir bad memories. On the contrary, Steve looks thrilled they’re there, and he greets both of them with huge hugs and massive smiles. They have hugs for her too even though they don’t know her at all. Anyone making Steve happy is clearly a friend of theirs.

And Scott and Hope are there, too. They got a sitter for Cassie. Nat didn’t know they were coming, and Scott has a bottle of beer in his hand and is already babbling a mile a minute. “Wow, this is so cool. War heroes all over. You guys all make us look bad, you know, though I guess it’s cool on the 4th of July. Patriots being patriotic. You two served with Cap?”

Dum Dum grinned, holding his own beer. He’s got a thick mess of ginger hair on his head and a
mustache that looks about seventy years outdated. “Sure did,” he proudly announces. “Haven’t had the honor of working with anyone as good since, gotta say. Right, Jones?”

Gabe nods. The group is moving towards the food, loading plates up. Sam’s got it all on the dining room table, and the place is nicely decorated with red, white, and blue stars and streamers. Of course. “Yep. Best of the best.”

Steve flushes. “They’re exaggerating,” he says to Nat.

“Somehow I doubt that,” Scott says after a swig of beer.

“Tell us some good war stories.” Tony winks at Steve, downing his own drink (which is a can of Pepsi). He fishes another one out of the cooler by the table and hands it to Steve, and Steve hands it to Nat before going to get one from himself. “Known this joker for a while now and he never has anything cool to say about anything. It’s so, so sad. So tell us some good ones.”

Dum Dum and Gabe share a look that screams hesitancy to Nat, but as their group gathers around Sam’s living room with their dinners, they both settle into it. She realizes right away that they’re being really careful about what they’re saying, but they’re doing a fantastic job of hiding it. They’re sticking to a bunch of stories from the Commandos’ first tour, the one that apparently christened Steve as Captain America, the one that made the news and won him accolades and the Medal of Honor. Steve looks wary at first, picking at the deli sandwich on his plate from between her and Sam and seeming like he wants to shrink his huge body into the sofa, but as it goes on, he relaxes. Dum Dum and Gabe keep it light, focusing on pranks and missions that went crazy, and they don’t mention anything about the attack in Kandahar. Or about Bucky, and Nat’s pretty sure Bucky would have been part of their stories. It’s become pretty obvious to her that Bucky is gone. Dead, maybe. For Steve speaking so fondly of him, he never calls him, never says anything about him beyond childhood memories, never mentions plans to see him or even get in touch with him. He seems like a ghost more than a person, and the others pointedly ignoring him only heightens that. Still, Steve comes out of his shell a little and gets more involved in the conversation as it goes on, mostly to correct the others when they embellish. “That’s not how it happened, Dugan. You’re full of crap.”

Dum Dum laughs. “Am not, Cap, and you know it.” He takes a bite of his sandwich and chews with a ridiculous grin on his face.

“As much as it pains me to say it, Dum Dum’s right. That mission in Kabul is only one of many times you dragged us onto the shit list. How you managed to piss off everybody up the chain of command and not get your butt kicked out of the army I’ll never quite understand.” Gabe shakes his head, grinning at Steve’s flustered expression. “Surprised the brass didn’t go straight to President Ellis to find a reason to ship you home. See, America’s number one hero? He has a real problem with following orders.”

“Only the bad ones,” Steve mutters before shoveling in some pasta salad. Sam’s brought in a whole collection of classic American party foods, like they’re having a real picnic for the 4th only in-doors, and it all tastes really good. “Never had a problem with anything else.”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” Gabe replies in disbelief. “Imagine if the press ever finds out what a pain in the ass you are.”

Scott snorts on his drink. “This is – this is great. Wow. I feel like a million dollars knowing that Captain America has no respect for authority. My life suddenly makes a lot more sense.” Hope gives him a wan look.
Steve sighs. “That’s not how it was,” he insists again. Everyone laughs, and Nat hides her smile in her sandwich. “It wasn’t! I have plenty respect for authority.”

“Not really,” Dum Dum jokes. “Not in Kabul. Or on the way to Ghazni. Or what was that village? Where Captain Brandt wanted us out but Captain Rogers here insisted we clear out the civilians first before backup got there. The one with the field of a thousand cow pies.”

Tony guffaws. “That its actual name?”

“It gave manure a whole new meaning. Especially when you need to haul ass across it.”

Gabe shakes his head, laughing too. “It was outside Taloqan. Or something. It’s all a blur of trying to keep him from getting us all killed. It’s amazing we all didn’t get the boot just for being associated with you.”

Dum Dum laughs, too. “Yeah, trouble is like the common cold with you. No matter how much you try to avoid it, inevitably you get into it. It’s a damn good thing your heroics are about as catching.”

Steve groans. “Sam, why’d you invite these assholes?”

“Aw, we love you, Cap,” Sam says, nudging Steve. “I didn’t just throw you this party to embarrass you, although that was one of the principal reasons.”

The others laugh more, and Steve flushes. Sam wraps an arm around his neck good-naturedly, and thankfully Steve relaxes and smiles again. Thor stands up from his place, raising his beer bottle. “To Steve!” he toasts, glancing around the group. He grins. “Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.”

Everyone raises his or her glass to Steve, and Steve blushes again. Nat takes a moment to gather her bravery, but again it feels pretty right and good to weave her hand through his. A good man.

That sums Steve up pretty well. Not perfect but so good.

The party goes on. It’s not much, simple and sweet and just what she hoped Steve would like. And he does like it. He’s smiling, talking, even throwing his head back a little with it as he claps an arm across Sam’s chest as he laughs. He’s more relaxed and at ease than she’s seen him be in a social setting before. That worried (maybe even protective?) knot that’s been lodged in her stomach since they left Steve’s apartment finally loosens, and she lets herself enjoy everything, too. What’s even better is no one is really pressing her for information about herself, at least nothing more than the cursory facts. She’s a musician from Staten Island who works down the street from Steve at a record store and has a cat. She and Steve have been seeing each other for about a month. He’s such a sweetheart, brings me coffee every day, lets me choose what we watch and where we go. We spend a lot of time at his place. It just kinda happened. Funny how things work out, right? He’s amazing. Simple and easy. She doesn’t even have to lie.

Actually she ends up spending most of her time talking to Jane, which works out just fine. Jane’s a little scatter-brained but extremely smart, and she’s deeply interested in talking about her research. Nat can’t hardly follow along with the science babble, and she suspects she wouldn’t be able to even if Jane wasn’t bouncing from topic to topic like she has a serious case of ADHD. Hope’s speaking with Pepper; it’s pretty obvious they have a lot in common, at least in disposition (and possibly in husbands – both Scott and Tony seem to be on the lazy, “if I ever have to grow up it’s too soon” side of things). Sam and Steve are chatting with the other soldiers, still swapping war stories, and Steve’s a lot more into it now. It’s nice seeing him not so burdened and ashamed about the war. Tony, Scott, and Thor are on the other couch, playing Sam’s Xbox (or whatever it
is – Nat knows absolutely zilch about video games). The three of them are competitive, loud, and rowdy, but that’s alright. It’s fun.

After the food’s been mostly devoured (Thor eats like a horse), Nat goes with Sam to the kitchen. She gets the cake out of his refrigerator. It’s chocolate with chocolate icing (Steve said that was his favorite ice cream flavor, so she’s willing to bet he won’t mind chocolate cake), and blue and red and white fireworks explode around where “Happy birthday, Steve!” is written in its center. This was one of the things she took care of during lunch at work, picking up his cake from the bakery near their apartment and delivering to Sam’s.

Sam comes over with candles. “Seems like it’s going well,” he comments after a particularly loud peel of laughter resounds from the room behind them.

Nat glances over her shoulder to see that Steve has joined with Tony and Thor in playing the Xbox. “Yeah,” she agrees.

“And he hasn’t found a way to weasel out of it yet.”

“Yeah. This was a good idea.”

“Couldn’t have pulled it off without you,” Sam says. He’s sticking a few candles into the cake before getting matches from the drawer by the stove. “Seriously.”

Nat blushes, dipping her head to hide it. “Thanks.”

Sam finishes up. He pauses a moment, nodding a little. “I’m glad you’re here. He would’ve never done this for me.” She’s about to say that she didn’t do anything, but he’s already going on. “You’re really good for him.”

There’s no way that Sam could know that she heard him say otherwise. All too clearly she recalls the doubts Sam had the night of Steve’s and her first date. That makes this all the more poignant. “Thanks.” He smiles, and so does she. “He’s good for me, too.”

Sam doesn’t question her about that at all, even though it invites it. Instead he gets the matches and starts lighting the candles. She’s grateful for that, grateful that he can accept she’s there without grilling her as to why or what she wants. Sam’s obviously got a protective streak about Steve, too. So does Thor. She suspects Tony might as well, and it’s comforting to see Steve does have support. And it’s comforting that they all sort of bond over this. She knows Sam well enough but not all that well when it really comes to it. She doesn’t know any of them really. Still, they’re just people. Good people, not perfect. They all have their problems and issues, and there’s respect for that. No one here is judged on what’s happened to him or her, and she finds that extremely comforting.

With the candles lit, Sam takes the cake and she grabs a knife and some fresh plastic plates. Out they go into the living and dining rooms, and Sam starts singing “Happy Birthday”. Steve immediately flushes red again, uncomfortable with the attention anew, and he glares weakly at everyone in exasperation as they all join in. Nat catches his eyes, and he shakes his head, smiling and as red as a tomato, and she grins and waggles her eyebrows at him. The song ends, and Sam lowers the cake in front of Steve where he’s sitting on the couch to blow out the candles. “Make a wish, Rogers.”

Steve stares at the candles with a funny look on his face, like he’s honestly thinking about it. Then he blows them all out on one breath, and everyone claps and whoops anew. “Whaddya wish for? Huh? Huh?” Tony asks, punching Steve on the shoulder. “Something good?”
Steve’s gaze is firm on Nat a moment, just long enough for her to feel the strength of it, the gratitude in it, before he turns to his friend. “Yeah, for you to be less of a pain in the butt. Get offa me.” Tony puckers up and blows Steve a kiss and Steve shoves him away firmer. “I told you guys I didn’t want anything for my birthday! The food was enough. You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Guess that means he doesn’t want his presents,” Sam says as he sets the cake on the table. Nat helps him start slicing it and serving it. Steve hangs his head a little, shaking it, but she can tell he’s excited. She wonders how many years it’s been since he’s had a decent birthday. Five. More maybe. “Which, I gotta say, is a shame, dude. I got you something extra awesome.”

The chatter resumes as she serves the cake. Thor and Jane get the few presents and bring them over. Nat has to admit she’s a little nervous about her gift. She wants it to be something nice and special, but she and Steve have only known each other a month. How special can it be?

After she’s done, she sits next to Steve. The cake is really good, thick and moist and chocolatey, and Steve’s very much enjoying it. He has a blob of icing on his lower lip, and she can’t help herself, grinning giddily as she stares. “What?” he mumbles around a mouthful, and she reaches over and rubs her thumb along his lip. It comes away covered in icing, and he flushes, and she thinks about what it would feel like for him to lick it off. God. She averts her eyes.

Thankfully no one else notices the little exchange, busy with the cake and getting the gifts ready, so they don’t see the heat on her cheeks. “It’s delicious,” she comments to cover up.

“Yeah, it is,” he says. “Your idea?”

“Yep.”

He grins. “You know just what I like.”

That makes her feel like she’s flying. She’s being stupid. He’ll love her gift.


Steve barely catches the gift before it hits the floor. He sets his empty plate on the table. Everyone gathers closer as he starts opening. It’s an old Amazon box repurposed, and Steve pops open the scotch tape. Inside there’s some bubble wrap, and he fishes out an American flag keychain. “For your bike,” Tony explains like it makes perfect sense. “You know, the one we’re fixing up? The one that’ll be ready in a week if you can get your ass down to the Mechanic to finish it up?”

“You’re really rebuilding a motorcycle?” Dum Dum asks. “That’s badass, Cap. What kind?”

Tony starts excitedly describing the project, and the others are listening to the details (Thor chiming in every now and then), but Steve’s staring somewhat morosely at the naked keychain. There’s no keys on it. Not yet. Nat doesn’t like the sad expression on his face. It’s bordering on a wince. She doesn’t understand exactly what’s bothering him, so she moves things along. “What’s next?”

Thor and Jane hand over their gift. It’s just a card, and Steve fumbles a little to open it. The card is something goofy – a dog and a funny and crude joke – and inside there are a bunch of gift cards. Steve stares at them a second like he can’t make sense of them – what’s wrong? – before he smiles and looks at the couple. “Thanks, guys. Dinners for a whole week, huh?”

“Well, a start,” Jane says. “And we didn’t know exactly what you like so we got a bunch of
Nat looks over the assortment. It is a nice array of choices. “This is great,” she says, like she has any right to.

Apparently she does. Steve swallows and hands the little pile to her. “You can figure out the order,” he says. “You know… What order you want to…” He smiles but it seems feebler. And he blinks a few times, staring at her. Staring in confusion. Nat leans back a little, uncertain of what’s going on. It seems like his eyes are intense, heavy on her, but it only lasts a second or two before he’s turning away. “You can pick, Nat.”

The others don’t seem to notice, but that little knot in her belly twists tighter. Something weird is going on all the sudden, but she can’t figure out. It doesn’t seem like much, like he’s flustered and a little oddly disoriented, maybe like he was when he got worked up buying the records weeks ago. *It’s nothing.*

Sam comes over, bearing another card. Steve seems to gather himself a little as he takes the card and starts opening. He pulls out what’s inside. It’s another joke birthday card, and tucked in it is a pair of tickets. “You were complaining about the Yankees dominating, so those are two really nice tickets for when the Dodgers come to town in a few weeks.” Sam is seriously proud of himself. “You know, hopefully they can kick some ass and you can gloat about… Steve?”

The tickets slip from Steve’s fingers. He’s standing all the sudden, looking terrified. Helpless. And he’s blinking almost spasmodically. His hands are twitching at his sides. Fingers curling and uncurling. Small, convulsive movements. Nat stands, too. She doesn’t understand what’s happening, but it’s definitely not nothing. “Steve?” she asks, reaching for him. “You okay?”

Steve starts breathing faster, quick shallow pants, and the shaking’s getting worse. *What is this? What?* “Steve? Steve?” He turns, looks at her, but he doesn’t focus. Doesn’t see. Horror and fear prickle through Nat, and she’s too shocked to even touch him.

Not that it would matter. Steve goes rigid, stiff as a board for a second, and then he’s suddenly falling. He hits the coffee table as he does. Everyone lurches back, and the table jolts as Steve flails. Dirty plates are knocked to the carpet, and drinks spill everywhere. “Jesus,” Tony gasps, pushing closer. “Jesus!”

*Oh, God.* Steve’s half on the couch, half on the floor, and he’s shaking uncontrollably. It’s like lightning is jolting down his limbs, sending them into a fit of violent, uncoordinated flailing. Like he’s struggling against some invisible, awful force, writhing and fighting against the torture. Nat stands and stares. She can’t believe what she’s seeing, can’t make sense of it, can’t process it at all. Steve’s head whips to the side. He’s grunting in a way that chills her to her core, these rhythmic little cries that are desperate and strained. His hands are clenching and unclenching and his legs are straightening and curling in graceless, rapid quakes. His eyes are open but glazed, empty. *Oh, God!*

“What’s happening?” Jane gasps, a hand over her mouth as Thor pushes her back.

“He’s having a seizure,” Sam answers tautly. “Everyone, get back.”

Nat gets back. Her legs move somehow, stumbling to comply. Her brain seems to have shut down completely. She can’t comprehend what’s happening. *Seizure.* She hears that, *sees* that, but it doesn’t make sense. Steve gurgles, chokes a little, sliding more onto the floor. The coffee table rattles violently again when he kicks it a few times. Sam kneels next to him. “Thor, get the table out of here. I need a pillow!”
Immediately Thor comes to move the furniture, and Tony’s leaving Pepper’s side where she stands pale and frightened. He grabs one of the pillows from the couch and, undaunted, kneels right next to Sam. “Help me get him on his side,” Sam instructs. Tony does, moving the pillow under Steve’s head. Steve chokes again, and gloppy chocolate dribbles from his mouth. “Come on. Easy now.” The two men roll Steve gently, light in their touches, doing nothing to restrain him or otherwise inhibit his movements. “Easy, Steve. We’ve got you.” Steve’s convulsions only get more violent, and more liquid drains from his mouth.

With the table pushed to the other side of the area, Thor has room to return. He’s a tad breathless as he kneels beside the others, face pinched in worry and concern, but none of them are really panicking. They’ve seen this before. “Should we call an ambulance?” Thor asks.

Sam shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“Steve? Buddy, we’re right here,” Tony says in a low, tender voice. Other than holding Steve steady on his side, he’s not really touching him. “Come on.”

“Work through it, okay, Steve? Steve?” Sam rubs Steve’s arm tenderly once or twice, but besides that, he’s not really touching Steve either. They’re letting him go, letting him have the seizure. Letting him suffer through it. Do something. “Come on, dude. You got this. It’s alright.” Do something!

Steve gurgles and grunts more, twisting and twitching. Between Sam, Thor, and Tony, he’s safe, not hurting himself with his movements, but what’s happening is so disturbing and almost inhuman. Nat swallows the burn of bile in the back of her throat, watching with wide eyes that are stinging with tears. Seconds escape, long awful seconds, and for all her silent, desperate pleas that someone stop this, she just stands there and watches like they are. Watches Steve shudder and jitter hard enough that it seems like his bones are breaking. It’s like a waking nightmare. Something that can’t be real. He was fine only a few minutes ago! He was fine! Now…

She can’t stand it. A sob crawls up her throat, and she barely breathes around it. Help him.

“How long has it been?” Gabe asks. He and Dum Dum stand back a bit with Pepper and Jane, and they both look tormented by worry.

Thor glances at his watch. “Two minutes.” Steve doesn’t show any signs of getting better. He’s still in the grips of the attack. “We should call someone.”

“He’ll come out of it,” Sam says with certainty that no one else seems to have. “It’s just a really bad one. He’ll come out of it.”

Scott shakes his head. “Sam—”

“Just hang on, alright? I know it’s frightening. But hang on. Stay calm.” Sam’s voice is nothing but level, tense maybe but not because he’s scared. “Just give us some space and a few minutes.” The others have crept closer, and now they step away again at Sam’s raised hand. Pepper and Jane look positively horrified. Hope isn’t much better despite her stoicism, clinging to Scott’s arm, and Scott’s face is still screwed up tight in a grimace. Dum Dum and Gabe just look sick with regret and guilt. “It’s alright. He’s going to be fine.”

Nat tries to think that that, tries to believe it, but her mind goes blank and her body’s as still and useless as a statue. She just watches, watches this man – her boyfriend – suffer through this torture without doing a damn thing to help him. Part of her knows she can’t do anything, but that doesn’t ease her shame and shock. Those seconds keep draining away, long and tedious and awful, and
finally, Steve starts to relax.

“There you go,” Sam murmurs compassionately, and now he’s touching Steve more regularly. He’s got one hand on Steve’s chest and another brushing the hair back from his forehead. “You got it now. You got it.” The horrific jerking of Steve’s arms and legs slows. The grunting sounds he’s making turn quiet, and his breathing evens out a little. He stops clenching his fists. One moment at a time, the seizure fades until the final shakes and shudders are gone and Steve’s limp.

Nat takes a step without realizing it, angling around to see Steve’s face better. His neck is craned back on the pillow, flushed with hectic color, and she can still see veins and tendons stiff beneath the skin. That relaxes, though, and his head lolls a bit when it does. His eyes are still open. Still not seeing. “Is he okay?” she whispers.

Sam lifts his gaze. “He’s going to be fine,” he assures. “How long was it?”

“A little more than four minutes,” Thor responds.

Someone – Pepper or Jane maybe – hands Tony a towel, and with surprising care and compassion Tony mops up the traces of vomit on Steve’s cheek and chin. “You’re alright,” Tony promises. “You’re alright. It’s all good. You’re alright.”

“He’s going to be alright,” Thor repeats, regarding the others with a tenuous smile. “It’s over.”

It’s not, though. Nat can see that right away. The seizure’s finished, but Steve’s not there. Not awake. Not conscious. “Steve? Can you look at me?” Sam’s careful about leaning over Steve, not getting too close as to crowd him but trying to place himself directly in Steve’s line of sight. “Can you hear me?”

Steve doesn’t respond. He’s swallowing again, though, and Nat can see his eyes moving a bit. Roving in fact. They’re still not focusing on Sam even though he’s right there. It’s no less frightening now than it was minutes ago. Sam takes Steve’s hand where it’s draped over his belly and holds tight. “Steve, I know you’re scared, but we’re right here. I’m right here. Can you look at me?”

“He’s trying,” Tony declares, and he takes Steve’s other hand. “Hey, pal. It’s Tony. You with us?”

“Nat, go in Steve’s bag.” It takes Nat’s beleaguered mind a moment to register the fact that Sam is talking to her. He’s looking at her over his shoulder. She jerks, sucking a breath into a chest that feels squeezed tight. Her heart’s suddenly pounding (or maybe it always was – she can’t remember). “There’s a little kit in there. Should say Midazolam.”

She jolts into a stilted sprint to where they left their things near Sam’s door. She can hear the others talking. “Let’s give him the meds. Last time he had one this bad it started a whole cluster of ‘em.”

“Fuck.”

“He’s alright right now. Let’s just get the meds into him and then get him into my bed.”

“Should we at least call his doctor?”

“I can take him to the hospital.”

“No, he’ll be okay if we can just--”
“He’s coming around a bit.”

“Steve? You back now?”

“Easy. Don’t crowd him.”

Nat fishes through Steve’s backpack. The conversation pounds into her, and she’s trying not to cry. Her hands are shaking and her knees feel like rubber and she can’t read the pill bottles. Finally, she finds the little gray kit, and she rushes back to Sam.

Between Tony and Sam, Steve’s breathing easier. They’re holding both his hands and murmuring solace. Steve looks tired now, blinking more languidly, but his eyes still aren’t focused. He tries to lean up. “Nope,” Sam says, gently pushing him back down. “Nuh-uh. You lie still, dude. We’re gonna give you some meds.” Nat hands Sam the case. She’s really afraid to look at Steve, but her eyes go there nonetheless. Steve’s… okay, she thinks. Uncomfortable and restless. Squirming. He’s not all there; that’s pretty obvious. Once more he’s trying to lift himself onto his elbows. “Stay down, Steve.”


“He’s not awake yet,” Thor comments.

“Look, guys, maybe we should call 911,” Scott suggests anew. He looks deeply shaken. “That was some pretty intense stuff.”

“You know what? Why don’t we go,” Hope offers, darting a sympathetic glance at her husband and then looking anew at the scene before them. It’s pretty obvious the party is over. And this sudden hell is far from finished. “Give you some peace and quiet.”

Sam’s loading a syringe with medicine from a vial in the kit. He nods. “That’s probably for the best. Sorry, guys.” Dum Dum and Gabe slowly move away with a promise to call later. Thor stays, though. He gives a sad nod to Jane, and Pepper walks out with her, sharing an equally worried glance with Tony.

Sam’s got the medication ready, and he’s leaning closer to Steve, his guests forgotten. Nat can’t pay much attention to the others leaving either, not when Steve’s squirming more and more. She’s terrified it’s the start of another seizure. But nothing escalates, and she tries to breathe through her fear. “Easy, pal,” Sam hushes. “Tony.” Tony comes closer, gently steadying Steve’s head. Thor helps as well, and Nat loses her vantage. She moves again just in time to see Sam get the medicine in Steve’s mouth, between his gums and his cheek. Steve grunts and chokes a little. “It’s alright. You’re okay.”

“Sam…” Steve rasps once the syringe is away.

Sam absolutely beams with relief. “Yeah, dude. There you go. You’re starting to come back now.”

Steve murmurs something else, but it’s so garbled that Nat can’t understand what. Sam seems to get it though. He brushes Steve’s hair back comfortably. “Don’t worry about it. You just lay still for a bit, okay? We’re all right here. We’re all with you.”

Nat doesn’t feel like she is, though. The world’s spinning, falling apart. She sits on the couch and buries her face in her hands and tries not to fall with it.
It takes Steve a while to regain even a modest sense of awareness. The medication stops any further seizures, but it makes him even sleepier and more disconnected. Once it seems the threat is completely over, Thor, Tony, and Sam carry him to Sam’s bedroom. Sam’s dog is there; she hops down off the bed in concern the second they come in but obediently stays out of the way. Steve gives a slurred, token protest about taking Sam’s bed as the guys lay him on it, claiming he can get home and not be trouble, but no one believes him and no one is standing for that nonsense. They get his shoes and shorts off and a clean shirt on him. Nat stands in the doorway and watches as they do that, as the scars on his back and chest are laid bare. The scars she barely felt before on his couch, just a couple hours ago when everything seemed right and sure. She can’t bear to look at them.

“This was a really bad one,” Tony says softly, “worse than any I’ve seen before.”

Sam nods despondently as he gets his comforter drawn up and over Steve. Steve’s still dazed, eyes open but half-lidded and not tracking quite right. He’s barely functioning, but he’s breathing nice and slowly, and he seems comfortable. “Yeah. Yeah, I’ll put a call into his doc. See if he wants us to bring him into the hospital.” Tony doesn’t look happy about that. No one does. All the sudden, this pleasant, happy evening has turned into a nightmare. She had no idea this could happen. No idea. “The meds they have him on aren’t getting everything under control enough.”

Tony swears softly, raking a hand through his hair, and Thor shakes his head. His eyes are forlorn as he stares at Steve. “I’ll get him some water.” He squeezes past Nat on the way out, pausing a moment to give her a weak smile.

“Steve? Are you in any pain?” Sam’s got a hand on Steve’s sternum, rubbing compassionately. Steve just blinks. It’s like he still can’t see Sam, can’t hear him. Nat frowns, trying to hold back an onslaught of tears. “Can you answer me, pal?”

Steve’s eyes slip shut. “I’m okay.”

“Course you are,” Sam responds with a smile. “But does anything hurt bad?”

Steve doesn’t answer right away, licking his lips a little and drifting. Then he gave a small shake of his head. “He’s still really out of it,” Tony remarks. “And really weak.”

Sam already did a quick check of Steve before, but he does it again, counting his pulse and watching him breathe and pulling open his eyelids to check his responses to light. “Someone needs to stay with him at all times while he’s working through the benzo.”

“Not a problem,” Tony replies without a second thought. “Just let me call Pepper.” He leaves to do that.

And Thor comes back with a bottle of water and a straw. “Here.” Together he and Sam get Steve propped a little and the straw in his mouth. Steve drinks slowly. They lay him back after a few sips. “What else can I do, Sam?”

Now Sam looks out of it. The strong, calm front he’s had through all of this cracks. Nat can’t help but wonder how many times this has happened. Everything’s going normally and just like that his best friend is suffering and ends up like this. It twists her stomach. “I don’t know. Nothing. It’s alright.”

Thor sets a firm hand on Sam’s shoulder and pats once. “No. I will go clean up the mess and get the rest of the food put away.”
“Thanks, Don.”

Off he goes again, momentarily blocking Nat’s view. When she can see Steve, he’s turned his head, and he’s looking toward her. Not just toward her. *At her.* He blinks lethargically a few more times, breathing loudly through his nose. Then he reaches out a hand at her. *He wants her.*

It’s goddamn pathetic, and she knows she should be better, but she’s scared to go to him. After what he just went through, he wants her and she needs to be strong. But she’s not. This came so out of left-field that she’s rattled to her core, terrified still, and she doesn’t know if she can handle it. That’s so awful and selfish, but she can’t help feeling that way. Still, she crosses the bedroom to the side of the bed and takes his reaching hand. *His skin is clammy with cold sweat, and his grip is nothing like it normally is.* Like Tony said, he’s weak. “Steve,” she murmurs. Her eyes burn. “I’m… I’m so sorry.”

He actually smiles. It’s a real one, a wide one. “Saw you,” he whispers. “Like… angel.” It’s the first thing he’s said in a while, and it doesn’t make sense. “Lots of light. All around you.” His smile turns softer, sweeter, and his eyes close again. “Heard you sing. Brilliant. Beautiful.”

She doesn’t understand. “What’s he talking about?” she asks Sam.

Sam’s more alert again. He sits on the other side of the bed, concern furrowing his brow. “Steve, what do you mean? You saw light? Before or now?” Steve doesn’t answer, slipping back down, so Sam knuckles his sternum a little more pointedly. “Hey, Steve, before or now?”

“’fore…”

Nat still doesn’t get it. “What?”

Sam sighs, and it’s clearly with relief. “It’s a halo,” he explains.

“Halo?”

“An aura. A lot of times people with epilepsy experience them before seizures. Sounds or vision disturbances or weird sensations. Like their senses going haywire. It’s a warning. Steve usually sees things. It doesn’t mean anything, other than it’s coming.”

Somehow that makes it worse. Like… like nothing really has any meaning. It’s not real, this fantasy, *this dream,* they’ve lived. She’s been deluding herself, ignoring the obvious. *Brain damage. Disability.* All those medications, all his little quirks and problems… Even his nightmares. She thought those were bad, but she can handle them. They’re something she can make better. This?

She had no idea. *No idea.* “He has epilepsy,” she murmurs, breathless and aching.

Sam frowns. “He didn’t tell you?”

Numbly she shakes her head. “He said he got shot. Said he was in a coma.”

“He got clipped bad in the head when he was escaping… In Afghanistan. The bullet shattered part of his skull and screwed up his left temporal lobe, but the damage to his brain is pretty widespread from the trauma. Hence the epilepsy. The doctors keep trying to get it under control, but… Well, he has bad spells with it. It might be intractable.”

*Intractable.* That means no cure. She squeezes her eyes shut. “God,” she whispers.
“But he’s alright. And he’s talking about the aura before, so it’s okay. Right, Steve? No more seizures now. You doing okay?” Sam asks, drawing Nat from her thoughts. Sam’s back to rubbing Steve’s ribs more tenderly. “Steve?”

Steve squirms a little more uncomfortably. “Max…”

“Don’t worry about Max. We’ll take care of him. If the doc thinks it’s okay, you’re spending the night right here.” Sam squeezes his hand. “Tony’s gonna stay, too. But someone will go and get Max out. Nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll deal with Max.” The words are out of Nat’s mouth before she even thinks to say them. She doesn’t know why she’s offering. She feels sick with horror, and the room is stifling. Suffocating. She wants to get out, get some air. *Get away.*

Sam doesn’t notice. “Hear that? Nat’ll take care of him.” He smiles. “You’re alright.” Steve relaxes into the bed. “You’ll be better tomorrow, man. I promise you.” She’s not sure Steve heard Sam or really understood what he was saying. “Some birthday, huh?” That Steve did seem to hear. His lips pull into an exhausted smile, and Sam chuckles. “Okay, I’m gonna get on the horn with Doctor Erskine. Sit tight.” Sam stands and gets his phone. He’s got Steve’s phone, too, and he’s thumbing for the contacts, probably looking for his doctor’s number.

Nat stares. Swallows down the ache in her dry throat. Behind her Sam’s talking to someone, probably this Doctor Erskine’s answering service, but she can’t focus on the words. Steve’s blinking more and more slowly, breathing deeply. He’s staring, too, staring right at her. His beautiful blue eyes, so hazy and lost. She still can’t stand the sight of that, so she moves again without really thinking to, leaning over him and kissing his forehead firmly. She cups his face, thumbs stroking over the softness of his beard as she tilts his jaw upward. “I’ll be back,” she promises. She presses her lips to his, briefly and chastely, before rushing from the room.

She gets out of Sam’s place after gathering up Steve’s gifts and his keys. Outside it’s a deeply gray twilight, a warm one, and people are gearing up for the evening’s festivities. She doesn’t see them, doesn’t hear them or feel anything. The happy atmosphere doesn’t permeate her thoughts.

Nothing does. She’s shaken, scared, *really scared.* Why didn’t he tell her about this? How could she have been so fucking *blind?* She feels betrayed and a traitor all at once, angry and angry at him and ashamed of being angry at him. All these days and she never realized just how damaged he is. Just how sick he is. He’s sick and damaged and he’s not going to get better.

She’s still reeling with the enormity of that when she gets back to their building. And she’s on autopilot as she climbs the steps. She goes into Steve’s apartment, and Max is right there waiting. He seems a little dismayed that Steve’s not there, his tail not wagging quite so hard, but he’s happy enough to see her. She wishes she could be so oblivious. Setting down the bag of gifts (some, like hers, still wrapped), she clips on the dog’s leash and takes him down and out for a little walk.

That feels good. It’s simple, easy, and she manages it. It clears her head even, and she feels a little better. She’s still not sure she can handle this. Maria’s words haunt her. “He’s screwed up. You don’t need the added baggage.” But she’s not quite as lost in her horror. She’s more composed, at least. Max does his business, but she can tell he’s looking around for Steve. It’s almost dark now. The fireworks will start soon. She probably won’t be able to see or hear them from here. And it doesn’t matter because she’s going back. Steve needs her, wants her, and she’s strong enough to handle this. *So she’s going back.*

By the time she’s back in Steve’s silent apartment, though, she’s losing her faith in herself. Her certainty that this will be okay. She feeds Max like a robot, and before she even realizes it, she’s on Steve’s couch where they made out mere hours before. Apparently in her daze a few minutes
ago, she set the bag with the gifts there on the coffee table. She leans forward and pulls out hers. It's wrapped in colorful paper, different colored stripes, and inside there's a new sketchbook. It's a really nice one: high quality paper, spiral bound, leather cover. She doesn't know when he’ll open it now. Tomorrow. It'll be okay. He’ll be better tomorrow.

Won’t he?

Outside the fireworks are starting. Distant booms and bangs. It’s getting late. She should go, but she can’t bring herself to move. Her phone vibrates in her pocket, and she pulls it out. It’s a text from Clint. A jolt of fear shoots through her. She’s reading it before she can stop herself. “He’s on the move. Nothing to worry about so far but be careful. Call me.”

She leans back and the gift slides from her lap to the floor. She cries.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Okay, so a couple warnings on this chapter. Big warning for scenes of torture and graphic violence. Also warnings for some heavy material in this chapter concerning Steve's state of mind. Enjoy, and thanks for all the wonderful support!

“And when I get close, you turn away.
There’s nothing that I can do or say.
So now I need you to tell me the truth.
You know I’d do that for you.
So why are you running away?
Why are you running away?”
– Hoobastank, “Running Away”

There are times when Steve can hardly stand himself. It’s not as bad as it used to be. When he first woke up down in DC at Walter Reed, he had a serious bout of depression. He was angry that he lived through it all, angry that he survived, angry that he came out on the other side unable to walk and with a brain that’s going to be dead set on ruining him for the rest of his life. At the time, he hated himself, plain and simple, and it was hard because he never used to be that way. He used to be optimistic, bright-eyed, light and hopeful. All the sudden he wasn’t anymore. Still, he got over the worst of the depression and applied himself to getting back what he could of his life. He got himself back on his feet. Made new friends and moved back home. Dealt with it. That was what his mother always told him before she died. “No matter what, Steven, you get back up.”

He’s so fucking tired. And angry. Doctor Banner can always tell. There’s no hiding anything from him. Steve supposes that’s Banner’s job, figuring out what his patients don’t want to tell him and then devising a way to make them tell him as if the act of confessing emotions is enough to soothe those emotions away. Like healing can be so easy. Nothing’s easy.

This is their usual Thursday session, and they’re sitting in Banner’s office. It’s a nice one, attached to the VA Hospital in Brooklyn. Steve’s spent a lot of time here, so he knows what it looks like in his sleep. It’s down in the lower part of the building, walls made of nicely and brightly painted cinder blocks. You can see through a window at the top of the room to the outdoor walkways outside, and it’s a very nice summer day. Against that wall there’s a couch, but Steve doesn’t usually sit there no matter how many times Banner says it’s okay. In front of the couch there’s a coffee table that always has flowers on it, flowers and a box of tissues. Then there are the two chairs, comfortable leather ones that scream Ethan Allen. He’s pretty sure they’re missionary style? He doesn’t know a thing about furniture. Anyway, this is where they always sit, where he’s sitting now. Doctor Banner’s right across from him dressed in olive green slacks, a lighter green dress shirt, and a yellowish tie. He wears a lot of green. His glasses catch the fluorescent light as he stares at Steve with his pad and folders on lap and his legs crossed. His salt and pepper hair’s always a little unruly, but he’s clean shaven and well-groomed otherwise.

Unlike Steve. Steve who threw on yesterday’s jeans and a wrinkled gray t-shirt and hardly managed a shower that morning, let alone trimming up his beard and making himself look less like
complete shit. The seizure did a fucking number on him. He’s still feeling it days later. It was a really bad one, the worst he’s had in months, and even though Doctor Erskine and his team of neurologists keep trying to avoid using the term “setback” every time they talk to him, Steve knows what it is. A massive setback. They’re switching his meds again, trying to come up with a new magic potion to make this problem go away. It’s not going away.

And Banner wonders why he’s upset. “You seem very frustrated today, Steve,” he says, staring at Steve with those cool, perceptive eyes of his. They’re ten minutes into this session, and so far Steve hasn’t said a thing. He’s being difficult and he knows it and he probably should have felt bad about it but he doesn’t. He’s never been the easiest patient for Banner, and he knows that, too. It took a couple weeks of sessions for him even to accept that this was happening, that he needed to do more than sit there and not talk. That he couldn’t just ignore the doctor or wait it out. That this is as much a part of his recovery as learning to walk again and working out because his PT says it’s best or taking his medications. It took him a while to get to the point where he felt comfortable enough to speak about anything more than generics. Right now it feels like they’re back at the beginning, not two years into a working relationship.

Banner sighs gently. He’s probably thinking the same thing. “You want to talk about what’s bothering you?”

“You really gotta ask?”

“If you want to talk about it?”

“No, what’s bothering me.” Or if he wants to talk about it. Does Banner know him at all? “I’m sure Doctor Erskine sent over the reports.” Steve rubs his palms roughly on his jeans. “So you know.” Banner and Erskine and all his other doctors are constantly chatting about him.

“I know what happened,” Banner replies. He looks down at folder on his lap, opening it. “You were admitted here early Sunday morning after a serious seizure that left you extremely weak and disoriented. Doctor Erskine was concerned about the stress the seizure put on your body and your lingering altered mental state. He was also quite worried about the threat of cluster activity, but the rescue medications did their job. No further seizures were noted. He did an EEG, an MRI…” He flips through the pages. “They kept you twenty-four hours for observation. You were sent home Monday afternoon with instructions to rest and see Doctor Erskine as soon as possible for reassessment of treatment, which you did yesterday according to this.”

Steve remains impassive, but inside he’s screaming. “Sounds about right.”

Banner lifts the file and closes it. He frowns. “Doesn’t say anything in there about how you’re feeling.”

Steve glares. “You really gotta ask?” he says again, his voice taut with ire. Banner doesn’t rise to the bait. He never does. The guy is as cool as a cucumber. Steve heard that once upon a time the man had a serious anger management problem to the point where he was actually labeled a rage monster by some colleagues. He was some sort of prominent researcher at the time. After a lab accident, he quit that field and took up psychiatry instead to learn better ways to control his emotions and deal with their underlying causes. He’s pretty Zen with things and impossible to rile now. You’d never know he was once prone to flipping out and losing his temper. So Banner simply watches him with that unassuming stare that always drives Steve into cooperation. “Fine. I’m what you said. Frustrated.”

“You just read why!” He despises the fucking circular way therapy goes sometimes.

“I just read what and when and who. Now tell me why.”

Steve stays stiff in his chair. For a second or two he considers carrying on with being difficult, but what’s the point? Bucky always said he was a stubborn asshole, but it used to be for good reasons. Nowadays… “Because everything good I have turns to shit.”

It sounds pathetic and needlessly self-deprecating, so damn bitter it almost makes him ashamed, but he knows it’s true. Banner stares at him evenly, not judgmental at all. He has that pensive look he always has whenever Steve says something like this, which admittedly isn’t all that often and rarely with such emotion behind it. Steve ventures nothing further. His throat feels thick, and he doesn’t know what to say. This storm of depression that’s been building inside him since coming home Monday to his empty apartment and his shattered hopes is roiling inside him, and he’s afraid to address it at all like admitting it’s there will make it worse. “I know you know about this,” Banner eventually starts once the moment of uncomfortable silence goes on too long. “Seizures can be random but not always. Is there anything that you can think of that might have triggered this one?”

“No.” That’s what made it so fucking awful.

“You didn’t drink?” Steve shakes his head. “Been sleeping okay?” He nods. He actually has been recently. “You took your medications as prescribed.”

“Yes,” Steve snaps.

“Then stress.” Banner watches him, carefully gauging his reaction. He often does that, too, and it drives Steve crazy. “Something bothering you that we haven’t talked about? The documentary crew still pressing you?” Steve shakes his head, looking down at his hands where they’re folded on his lap. Erskine insisted he wear the bracelet, so it’s there, loose on his right wrist. Seizure disorder, it proclaims in red lettering on the silver surface. It feels like more of a handcuff than the ones he actually wore in that hell in Afghanistan. “Steve,” Banner prompts.

“No. No, I…” He digs his teeth into his lower lip until it hurts. “For the first time in forever, I was feeling…” He works his fingers together, fighting harder against his emotions that are knotting his stomach and constricting his throat. “I was feeling good. Really good. Everything was good. And then this had to happen. Just… Just like that, it happened. And everything vanishes like it was never there at all.” He shakes his head again. “I told you. Everything I have…” He can’t finish.

The silence comes back. Steve uses the moments to breathe deeper, to try and get control of himself. His migraines have kicked back into the high gear since the seizure, and Erskine took him off the meds for that temporarily until they can better determine what to do at this point. Practically that means he feels awful, the emotional upheaval notwithstanding. The headache isn’t too bad right now, but it was crippling enough that afternoon that he almost blew off this visit. Now he’s wishing he did. His bed wouldn’t be so distressing and demanding.

Banner sets his pad down on the table on top of the folders. He sighs, leaning forward. “Why do you think everything’s gone to shit?”

Steve shifts in his seat. He tries for another breath, a deeper one to calm his rattled nerves. “Everyone…” He stops, fidgets again, rubs his fingers together harder. “Everyone saw.”

“Saw your seizure.” Steve is too rattled to put much effort into glaring. Isn’t that obvious?
Banner shakes his head. “Who was at the party?” Steve doesn’t answer. He’s regretting saying anything at all. Stonewalling would have been better. Waiting out the damn clock until it’s six and he’s free. “Your friends, I’m sure. It was your birthday, wasn’t it?” Stiffly he nods. “So some of your friends were… What? Shocked? Upset? Embarrassed?” Banner is fishing, and Steve’s not about to make it easier. The quiet comes back again, and the doctor sighs gently. “Steve, I haven’t met your friends, at least no one beyond Sam. But from what you’ve told me about them, I can’t imagine they’d be disgusted by what happened.” Steve looks away, the pain getting worse and worse inside like a vise tightening around his heart. And, again, the silence comes. It’s awful, suffocating, and he can hardly stand it. Banner’s eyes are on him, studying and analyzing, and it’s all he can do not to squirm more. “Are they?” the doctor prompts again.

“It was degrading,” Steve grits out. “Humiliating.” It was all that and more. He shudders to imagine what the others think of him now. Sure, Tony and Sam have seen him have seizures before. Thor, too. But not his army buddies. Not the Langs and not Tony’s wife and Thor’s girlfriend. They all saw him at his weakest and most vulnerable. And no one said a thing, of course, not that he’s seen all of them since. But he’s run into Scott and Hope. They both put so much effort into acting like nothing’s different that it only made it more apparent that everything was. He wonders what Pepper says to Tony, what Jane says to Thor. What his friends think. Poor Steve. Look at how broken he is. How goddamn sad. He feels sick and low. “Everyone saw. Everyone knows what it’s like.”

“You need to stop blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong. It’s not your job to save people anymore. It’s not your job to fight. It’s your job to heal and be healed by others.” For a second Steve worries he’s going to mention more about Afghanistan, that that wasn’t his fault, either, but thankfully he doesn’t. “So you’re upset they saw you have a bad seizure. You’re upset that they’re thinking differently about you, that they could be worried, maybe, or angry. Or disgusted. You didn’t answer my question before. Are they disgusted?”

He says it before he can stop himself. “Nat is.”

To his credit, Banner’s expression is surprised before he manages to return it to its placid state. “She is?”

That storm of emotion inside Steve is humming malignantly. He’s told Banner about Nat of course. She changed his life so much so fast that there’s no way he could have hidden it from him even if he wanted to. Just last week he was in here, practically walking on cloud nine because of Nat, and that isn’t even the first time he’s been so euphoric. Not that he turned into a giddy chatterbox or anything like that, but Banner noticed the change in his mood, of course. Everyone has. Sam and people at work and practically everyone he knows. He noticed it. Nat came into his life, swept everything into this state of fizzy excitement and warm, sweet comfort. Suddenly there was something wonderful in his world, someone who cared about him beyond his problems.
Someone who understood him without having to know anything. Suddenly there was light around him, her light, and he found himself thriving in it. Talking and laughing and feeling happy for the first time in years. Connecting with someone else for the first time in years. He felt like there was meaning, purpose, a reason to deal with his issues and struggle through his day. At the end of it, she was there, coming to his apartment, watching TV with him, sharing dinner, laughing with him and kissing him and holding him when his dreams turned ugly. He wasn’t afraid to sleep because he knew she was right on the other side of his bedroom, right beyond that shared wall. If he fell down deep, she would come and save him. She was a soothing balm, a breath of fresh air that filled his lungs. She was energy and strength and tenderness. She changed everything about him.

And that makes this hurt so much more. He’s nodding without realizing it.

Banner considers that small jerk of his head a moment before sitting back. He’s contemplating Steve’s unspoken implication. “She didn’t know about your condition?”

There’s a rush of regret and shame, but it’s not enough to cool that fiery tempest twisting inside him. “Not everything.”

Again Banner’s not judgmental as he appraises Steve. “You didn’t tell her about your epilepsy,” he declares quietly. He’s not looking for confirmation, but Steve nods anyway. “Why?”

The anger surges. “It’s not obvious?” Steve knows it is, it fucking well is, but Banner doesn’t react one way or another, so Steve leans forward, jittery with frustration. “Because it’s a scar I want to hide! Because I didn’t want this to happen! Because if I told her–” He cuts himself off, hotly averting his gaze.

“What happened?” Banner questions calmly.

Steve shakes his head. That restless energy building inside him is almost unbearable, and he wants to stand and pace and rake his hands through his hair. He wants to run and fight and do something to settle his soul. He stays planted in his seat, though, and jitters. “Everything’s different. She’s different.”

“How?”

“She…” The pain gets worse just trying to put his feelings into words, trying to condense the last few days into something he can explain. He can’t find what he wants to say, and it’s not just his broken brain betraying him again. He rubs his forehead. “Ever since I got home from the hospital, she’s not coming around like she was. She was with me all the time before, and now she’s not. And when we do see each other, she’s not the same. She doesn’t… talk like she did.” That’s the least of it. Yeah, Nat really isn’t spending time with him like she was just a few days ago. Steve’s hardly seen her. And, yeah, when they do talk, she’s glancing around like she’s looking for a way to get away from him. But there’s more. She hasn’t touched him, hasn’t held him, hasn’t kissed him, hasn’t gotten close since before. She’s hesitant and overly conscious of everything he does. And he’s so damn aware of it, just as she is of him. It’s strained and awkward and awful. She seems scared, and he’s sure it’s because of him. Why wouldn’t it be? She had to sit there and watch him turn into a drooling, senseless, useless mockery of himself, and she had no idea that it could happen at all because he was a coward. He never told her. He had a thousand chances, a million opportunities. Hell, she practically asked once or twice, tentatively prodding because of course she noticed there were things wrong with him. She noticed from the start. But he ignored it and pretended his epilepsy wasn’t the fucking eight hundred-pound gorilla in the room. His epilepsy and his scars and his meds and his troubles. It’s his goddamn fault, no matter what Banner says, but it hurts so much that he can’t make himself accept it. “I scared her off with all this. I didn’t want to tell her because I knew she wouldn’t want to be with me when she found out.
I knew it. I mean, Christ, who would?"

Bruce ignores his self-despairing comment. “Did she actually tell you that? That she doesn’t want to be your girlfriend now because of your epilepsy?”

“No. But she doesn’t have to. I can feel it. It’s not what it was. Nothing is the same. Everything that felt right about it… It’s all gone.” Just saying that makes it seem final. Real. “She’s probably trying to find a way to break it off.”

“How does that make you feel?”

Steve’s eyes flash and he clenches the arms of the chair hard enough that the wooden edges dig into his palms. “How the hell do you think it makes me feel?”

Banner cocks an eyebrow, frowning. “If it was my girlfriend and she was dumping me because of my medical issues, I think I’d be pretty angry.”

He is. He’s so fucking furious. He’s mad at Nat for doing this, for pulling away from him just like he feared she would. He’s mad at himself for letting it happen, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Maybe if he told her about his epilepsy, she wouldn’t have been blind-sided by it and wouldn’t be so rattled now. But you know why you didn’t tell her.

And it’s not just that he’s afraid she’ll leave him if she knows just how sick and damaged he is. She wants him, who he is now and not what he was before. It was the one thing in his life where his stupid seizures and cognitive issues and physical problems didn’t seem to touch. With her, he isn’t Captain America or a POW or an epilepsy patient or a veteran or anything. She doesn’t know his story, doesn’t know everything he’s done and everything that’s happened to him. With her, he’s just Steve. That felt so good that he doesn’t know what to do without it. Even after the simple few weeks they had before this, he feels like he’s addicted to her, to the quiet haven they have in his place where he can just be himself and not someone defined by who he was and what his injuries have made him become.

That’s what’s gone now. The way she saw him. The way she treated him. Before he could see respect for him in her eyes, hear it in her voice, sense it in her fingers and lips. Before it was so easy and simple between them, nothing but feeling good and safe and comfortable. Now when he looks at her he sees fear and uncertainty. Pity. The one thing he never wants from her. His seizure scorched his brain, twisted his body, and like a firestorm it burned everything away. He feels like he’s holding the ashes, grasping them desperately because if he opens his hands, the very last part of the connection he has with her will blow away.

He doesn’t know what to do. So he’s angry. And he’s hurt and frustrated and scared out of his mind. He’s desperate to make this right, because now that he’s known her and had her and all of her beauty and compassion and spirit making his life worth something, losing her is unfathomable.

The problem is he has no idea what to do. He knows he needs to apologize for not revealing his medical issues, but honestly? The anger is making it damn hard. What if that’s not hesitancy or pity in her eyes now? What if she really is disgusted by him? What if she honestly doesn’t want to deal with his problems? He feels like an asshole for thinking so lowly of her, and that sort of selfishness doesn’t match at all with everything he knows about her, but he doesn’t really know anything about her when he’s honest with himself. He doesn’t know who she is or where she came from. So how can he be sure she’s not that way, that she wouldn’t walk out on him because he has problems?

And walk out on what, comes the inevitable thought. They’ve been dating just a few weeks, a month maybe. Sure, they’ve been seeing each other a lot during those few weeks, but it’s not like they are together. Not with any permanence. Maybe it can become something (he can’t hardly deal with how much he aches for that), but it’s not now. So she’s under no obligation to carry his
“Are you angry at her, Steve?” Banner asks. “It’s okay if you are. Anger in and of itself is not bad. It’s how we handle it, the outcome, that can be good or bad.”

He doesn’t want to be placated. He knows he has difficulties dealing with his anger. He internalizes it like he internalizes everything, puts up his damn walls and hides away to keep everything in check. He knows he needs to face this. “I’m angry,” he confesses. “The way she looks at me now…” He shakes his head again. “She doesn’t want me anymore.” And that’s not fair. It feels like betrayal. He doesn’t remember the seizure much (he never does), and he doesn’t remember the night after. His first clear recollection is Sam waking him up to tell him that Erskine wanted him admitted to the hospital. But he thinks he saw Nat somewhere in all that, thinks she kissed him and promised him she’d come back.

She never did. Not at Sam’s. Not at the hospital. Not at his apartment. The first time he saw her was the day after he came home, and she barely spent a moment with him before conjuring up some excuse about having to run to work. She came over that night, but she was treading lightly, trying to figure out what to do, trying to figure out if things were the same. She gave him his birthday present and left in a hurry. It killed him then, and it kills him now. “Yeah, I’m angry,” he says again.

“Okay,” Banner says, like he just tentatively scored a point in a competition. He sits forward again a bit excitedly. “You’re angry and you’re frustrated and hurt. That’s only natural. Maybe it would help to talk with her. Have you?”

He grits his teeth again, forcing himself to relax and admit the truth. “No.” They don’t talk about this stuff. Not his problems. Not hers.

“You’re making a lot of assumptions here, Steve. You don’t know what she’s thinking or how she’s feeling. Maybe she has a good reason for pulling away a bit. I don’t think you were necessarily wrong for not telling her the truth about your epilepsy, but it was probably something of a shock for her to see it like that. She has a right to be angry, too, and she could be scared for other reasons, perhaps that she’s not strong enough to handle this.”

Steve hasn’t thought about it like that. The anger inside fades, the frustration abating, as he considers it. Could that be why she’s pulling away from him? He’s not blind. He knows she’s got her own issues, things she’s keeping close to her chest. She obviously had some sort of past relationship, and whatever it was, it damaged her self-confidence. She’s really good at hiding that, but he can see. He doesn’t want her to think she’s not enough for him. He doesn’t want her to be afraid of him. And he doesn’t need her to take care of him.

Yeah, that’s bullshit.

“Listen,” Banner begins as he leans forward and braces his elbows on his knees. He clasps his hands together. “People react to traumatic experiences in a lot of different ways. She may need time to process this or maybe it upset her more than she knows how to handle. She could be looking for a way out of your relationship. I have to concede that. But she could also be scared for you or scared of what this means. She could be scared of losing you as much as you are of losing her. I can’t begin to venture an opinion on her state of mind, but I can offer one on yours.” He stares at Steve squarely. “Your epilepsy is not well controlled, and anything – stress or fatigue or pain – could serve as a trigger. You need stability, and if Natalie is helping you feel good, then tell her how you feel. Be honest with her. I know that’s difficult for you, but sitting here, brooding
and frustrated and angry, is not going to solve anything. You need to talk, Steve.” Banner smiles. “You’re always welcome to here. You know that. But if she makes you feel safe, open up to her, at least about this. And if you feel like your epilepsy is controlling your life, don’t let it.”

Steve exhales slowly. He thinks about that, about how much power his disorder holds over him. How it’s made him silent and afraid. It’s taken his strength, his confidence, his autonomy. His freedom.

He doesn’t want it to take her, too.

He needs to talk to her.

Their cell is nothing more than a corner of a cave with a steel door between them and freedom. It’s been that way for months now, eighteen of them if Steve’s counted right. He used to be pretty good at math, so he figures that’s probably accurate even if some of it’s passed like no time at all and other moments have stretched on infinitely, even if some of it’s been spent unconscious, knocked out from a beating or worse. He wonders time and again if this cell, this dark, shadowy nook with its rocky floors and walls and steel door, isn’t Hell. But he figures Hell would be hotter and smell less awful (though he can’t reason why on the last part – this isn’t the sort of thing Sister Eunice covered in Sunday School). It also seems to him that time wouldn’t exist in Hell, that you’re there to burn for all eternity, so there’d be no way to keep track of eighteen months. Aside from those theoretical considerations, he’s not sure what the difference is.

A scuffle of cloth on rock beside him is almost deafening. In the darkness, it’s always hard to see anything. There’s never any light this deep into the cave. Never. Nonetheless, Steve tries to get his eyes open, but they hurt and they’re gummy with dried tears and blood. “Bucky?”

“Steve?”

“You there?”

Of course he is. There’s nowhere else he could be. In the beginning of this, they both were so afraid to wake up and find the other gone, taken and tortured or worse. Bucky reaches out his hand and his fingers fumble for the ratty remains of Steve’s undershirt. After eighteen months, there’s not much left of it. Bucky’s isn’t much better. Neither of them can remember what it feels like to be warm. Or clean. “Yeah, ’m here.” Bucky’s voice sounds like he swallowed gravel. “Course I am. You okay? You were out a long time.”

Steve closes his eyes. For a while, he thought it was over. The interrogations. The torture. They really went at the both of them, him in particular. Steve said over and over again that Bucky doesn’t know anything, that Steve’s the captain of their unit, that he’s the one they need to question. It worked for the most part. For weeks and weeks, every day their captors brutalized them, whipping and beating and waterboarding and worse things his brain just won’t let him remember. Sometimes it was both of them at once, but more often than not it was just Steve. Every time Steve managed to keep their attention on him, it felt like some modicum of control, like a small victory. He kept promising Bucky it was better this way, even though his lungs were full of water and he couldn’t see straight thanks to concussions piled on top of concussions and his back was so raw that every movement was torture in and of itself. Bucky cried for him, furious that Steve was taking the brunt of it, but Steve swore he could take it. Bucky doesn’t believe him, just like he never believed him when they were kids and Steve planted himself in the way of every asshole on their block. “Why you gotta take it on yourself? Why do you always do this? You don’t need to fight so hard! Fuck, Steve, don’t do this for me!”
To Steve, there wasn’t a choice then and there isn’t one now. He isn’t going to let them hurt Bucky.

Thankfully that stopped weeks ago. All the sudden they were mostly left alone. Aside from a paltry amount of food and water delivered every day, no one came for them. Steve hopes that means these assholes just got tired of it and neither he nor Bucky cracked and gave them any useful intel. At this point, he’s so hurt and hungry and exhausted that he can’t remember what he might have said.

Unfortunately, the reprieve ended. Yesterday, they dragged Steve out of their cell with Bucky screaming behind them and took him out into the rocky hell of the mountains outside Kandahar. It was the first time he saw the sun in months, but any pleasure or relief he might have felt at that was pretty well crushed as they forced him down onto the ground. He knelt there at gun point, the terrorists screaming at him in Farsi, their translator struggling to keep up with it. Steve kept his eyes down, kept silent, kept still and submissive despite their rage. He didn’t struggle even as they hit him. Not anymore. Spitting fire and fighting was beaten out of him long ago. He still doesn’t know what they wanted this time. Something about another terrorist cell in the area and the US army’s latest attempts to destroy it. He has no information about that. They’re here and have been for eighteen months; there’s nothing he can tell these guys about recent operations. They beat him again, shoved a gun in his temple and screamed at him, and for a second there, under the grueling sun with blood in his eyes and hopelessness surging like a wave, Steve wished they’d pull the trigger.

But he can’t leave Bucky. “I’m okay.”

Bucky’s not going to believe him, but it seems pretty moot. “You’re shit at lying. Always have been.” Steve hears more rustling cloth on the rocks, and Bucky’s sliding over as best he can with old injuries and his own starved and beaten body hindering him. Those fingers curling into his shirt tug harder, and Bucky’s pulling him close. Steve’s too tired and hurt to do anything but succumb with a sob. He tried to be so much stronger in the beginning. Tried not to cry, not to panic or waste energy on despair. That was eighteen months ago, and he’s not so strong anymore.

“Hey. Gonna be alright,” Bucky promises. He’s wrapping Steve in his arms, holding him tight, but his body heat doesn’t do much to ward off the cold. Nothing does. Steve closes wet, aching eyes, shivering with the chill and the pain that never seems to abate. “I know it.”

All Steve’s life, Bucky’s always been there to promise that. When the bigger kids on their block came after him. When money was tight. When his mother got sick and died. It’ll be alright, Steve. You’ll be okay. I’m with you. It’s going to be fine. So he closes his eyes and lets himself believe that, not because he thinks it’s true but because it’s a touch of home in this hellish nightmare. Bucky’s tucking him close to his chest and rubbing his arms, which are thin now because muscle has faded away with injury and lack of food. Bucky’s aren’t any better. “We’re gonna go home, Stevie. I’m gonna get us home. I swear to you, I will. Gonna get you back to Peggy, huh? And I’m gonna ask out that girl. The leggy one with the great ass and brown hair and those amazing eyes. Dylan’s little sister. What’s her name?”

Steve can barely get his eyes open they’re so swollen. “Darcy.”

“Yeah, her. She’s got a thing for me, I think.”

Maybe. A lot of girls have a thing for Bucky. Bucky’s a smooth talker, a sweet charmer, a hell of an athlete and student and really a great guy if not a little cocky. He’s got that bad boy aura to him that girls like, not like Steve who’s always been nothing but wholesome, as his grandmother used to put it. Darcy is kind of carrying a torch for Bucky and had been since she was in eighth grade
And they were all in tenth. “Yeah,” Steve manages.

“And fuck doing another tour,” Bucky says, his breath warm at Steve’s ear, his beard scratchy as he buries his face there. “Fuck the army. Fuck doing anything other than eating my ma’s tacos and playing X-Box. And getting laid.” Steve quirks a half-hearted grin. “Going down to McGinty’s for a burger and onion rings and a beer and dumping a hundred bucks into the arcade. Or we can go to Yankee Stadium and boo those assholes for a while, huh?” Steve nods. He tries to breathe more evenly but it’s hard with his ribs all screwed up and sore. “Or go to Coney Island. Haven’t been there in ages.”

“Rollercoasters make me puke,” Steve whispers.

“Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve blown chow on me,” Bucky answers. “And being puked on’s better than this shithole.” Anything’s better than this. “Come on. It’ll be fun. Go home and sleep. Sleep as long as we fucking want. Howzzat sound, Stevie?”

Steve can’t think about it. He gives up on opening his eyes. Bucky does this every time the pain gets to be too much. They don’t talk as much as they used to in this dark, dank cell. It’s too much energy, too hard, and it brings everything into undeniable sharpness. Still, Bucky’s always been quick to offer up comfort any way he can, and that means pretending there’s hope. They both know there isn’t any, and they’ve both come to terms with it. This isn’t about escape anymore. It isn’t even about enduring the unspeakable. It’s just survival, plain and simple. The lowest common denominator. In the beginning they fought, tried to get away, tried to do anything to save themselves and protect their unit. Now they’re too weak and hurt to do anything. A rescue would have come already if it’s coming at all. They don’t even know if the Commandos know they’re still alive. The army may well have written them off as KIA. There’s really no hope no matter how they twist it around and pry it apart and desperately want to believe, so imagining how wonderful it’ll be to go home is too awful.

But Bucky’s insistent. “It’ll be fun,” he insists. “You can sleep over on the floor in my bedroom just like you used to, at least until we get our own place.”

“Ain’t living with you,” Steve says with a tiny smirk. He knows Bucky can’t see it, but it feels good to smile, even just a little and even if it pulls on his split, chapped lips. He can’t remember the last time he smiled. “You reek, ya mook.”

Bucky chuckled. “Pot calling kettle.” His embrace tightens, and Steve reaches up to slide his hand along Bucky’s forearm. “You’re gonna marry Peggy anyway.” That hurts too much to think about, and Bucky knows. Bucky always knows what hurts him and does everything he can to make it go away. “I promise, Steve. We’re gonna get out of this. These fuckers aren’t gonna end us. They’re just fucking bullies, Steve. The same fucking bullies we fought back home, yeah? They won’t end us.”

“How’d the hell we get here?” Steve whispers. His eyes are burning. He hasn’t cried in what feels like forever, but there’s no denying how lost they are. The two of them, thousands of miles from where they started, gone and forgotten and battered beyond recognition… “We’re not gettin’ out of this, Buck.”

Bucky’s silent a moment. His breath hitches by Steve’s ear. Steve has always known what hurts him, too. Bucky’s such an optimist, a heart bigger than anything anywhere. He’s never let anything hold him down. Being kept here as a prisoner, covered in his own blood and filth like a caged animal… He should be shattered.

But he’s not. “Maybe not,” he concedes. His voice quivers with sob, and Steve shivers hearing it.
“Maybe not. But we’re together no matter what, Steve. I’m with you. You’re not alone. You and me, just like always. If we die here—” Steve chokes on his breath, squeezing Bucky’s arm with all the strength he has left. Bucky squeezes him back. “If we die here, we die together. I’m with you till the end of the line.”

*The end of the line.*

Suddenly the door to the cell bangs open. They jolt away, but they’re both too weak and ruined to do anything as guards swarm the room. Steve moans as they haul him up. He can’t even get his feet beneath him. Bucky’s yelling, screaming, spitting curses and squirming and making a pain in the ass of himself, but there’s no point. They can’t get away, can’t stop them.

The shadowy hallways spin as they carry Steve away, and he can hardly keep himself from throwing up. His throat’s burning with bile, and everything is a blurry smear of brown. He thinks he blacks out as they drag him, and when he comes to, he’s on his knees again in the room where he and Bucky have been tortured before.

Bucky’s fighting hard as they yank and pull him in next. “Leave him alone!” he’s screaming. “Don’t touch him! You fucking assholes, don’t you fucking touch him! You–” The men smack him across the face with the butt of an AK-47, and Bucky slumps with a spurt of red from his nose. Steve winces as they carry him to a rusty steal table. They stretch his left arm out over the surface, holding his wrist tight. Two more thugs pin him against the table’s edge. Bucky’s eyes are wide with panic, his filthy face covered in sweat and blood. He’s completely terrified.

Steve is, too. He can’t see anything more, though, because the lead terrorist – Steve still doesn’t know what his name is even after all this time and fear and hate – comes over and blocks his view of Bucky. The guy’s eyes are dark and menacing, his arms folded over his barrel of chest. He looms over his captive and starts talking. The translator is tall and reedy and struggling to keep up the same way he always is. And it’s the same thing, questions about this other terrorist cell, questions Steve can’t answer. He shakes his head helplessly. “I don’t know,” he says. His voice is hoarse and alien to him. “I don’t know! I can’t tell you! I don’t know! I don’t know!”

The man roars, and one of the others jabs the barrel of his handgun into Steve’s forehead. There’s a thunder of chaotic noises, the terrorists shouting and the interpreter yelling to be heard above them and Bucky screaming defiance, and Steve shivers and shivers. There again, he hopes they just pull the fucking trigger. That miserable wish is fleeting, though, because Bucky’s screaming at them, and if they shoot him, Bucky’s alone. He can’t let them hurt Bucky. Therefore, he needs to say something. He needs to lie. He needs to come up *something*. His brain doesn’t work, though, and he can’t make himself think. “I don’t know!” he cries. “I don’t know! I don’t know!”

“Speak,” hisses the leader, towering like a monster.

“I don’t know!”

The man roars, shifts, and Steve can see the table again. He can see Bucky shaking, struggling, and the men holding him tighter. The one who has his wrist pushes it down harder, and the veins and tendons under Bucky’s sallow skin twist and bulge as he tries to wrench away. He’s not going anywhere, and he’s not yelling anymore. A different guard comes over, and he’s got a rusty hacksaw with ragged, hideous teeth on the blade. He’s coming over to Bucky’s arm, held there for him. He’s going to…

*No!* Steve shakes his head frantically, lurching against the men restraining him with sudden fiery energy. “No! No! Let him go! Don’t do it to him! Do it to me! Please! *Do it to me!*”
But they don’t. “This what happens when you fight,” the leader says in broken English. “See what you make us do.” Bucky’s howling, wailing in agony, as they cut and cut and there’s so much blood. He goes limp against the table.

Steve can’t watch. *He can’t watch.* He’s a fucking coward. He hates himself, hates that he let this happen, and he can’t breathe or move or think or see anything. “Open your eyes,” demands the man. The gun digs deeper into his skin. “Open your eyes!”

He does. Only it’s not to Bucky screaming. There are no shadows, no blood, no hands holding him back or monsters around him. There’s just the white of the ceiling of his apartment and the softness of his couch beneath his back and Max’s cold, wet nose pressing into his neck. Steve gasps a sob, sitting up with a wince, just that simple touches *too fucking much.* His heart’s racing and he feels sick. Nothing makes sense for a second while the adrenaline fades and his brain tries to mash together the discordant sensations of memory with reality. Eventually things start to differentiate, and the nightmare fades enough that he realizes he’s not back there. He’s home. He’s safe.

He cries. Burying his face in his shaking, sweaty hands, he sucks in a wet breath and practically keens. He hasn’t thought about… Not about that. Not about Bucky’s arm. It’s one of those things he *knows* happened, but the memory attached to the fact has been trapped up in his head, repressed as Doctor Banner puts it. It was all cloudy and safely distant. Until now, anyway. Until that goddamn seizure. It’s as if that jostled all sorts of awful shit loose from inside him. He can’t stand it. “Fuck. God fucking *damn it!*”

His voice echoes in the silence. There’s nobody there to answer. It’s starkly apparent then, how quiet and empty his apartment is all over again. His ragged breaths follow, one after another after another, each mixed with a hysterical sob. He’s on the verge of a panic attack. He can feel it, and he’s terrified, helpless. For a parade of long, awful minutes, he can’t get a hold of himself. He feels like he’s walking an edge, a really narrow one, and he looks down and there’s nothing but a drop infinitely long and down. He’s teetering with no one to pull him back. No one.

*Nat.*

God, he needs her, and for a second, he lets himself think she’s coming.

But she doesn’t. She’s not there to rescue him.

Still, thinking of her, her soothing touch, her smile and her eyes and her voice, her *singing*… It calms his racing heart. Eases the tension in his body. Pushes the hell back. He focuses on her, on that peaceful place inside that she always helps him find. Safety and warmth and security. Comfort. Somehow that’s enough. Without him even realizing it, he’s breathing easier, his sobs quieter and his pain lessened. It’s alright. It really is.

When he opens his eyes, he’ll see her. He imagines it, wants it down to the core of him. When he opens his eyes, she’ll be there to kiss away his tears and promise him he’s okay. So he opens his eyes.

She’s still not there. *She’s not there.*

He sighs shakily, breathing through the vestiges of the attack. Now that he’s thinking of her, he can’t stop, and a different sort of distress comes over him. He hasn’t tried to contact her since his session with Doctor Banner yesterday afternoon. It’s Friday, well past six o’clock he sees when he glances at his phone on the coffee table. She’ll be home from work now. There aren’t any notifications on his phone. Not from her. Not one text to say she’s coming over or to ask what he
wants for dinner or anything. It’s like this last month they spent together never happened at all.

Furious anew, Steve wipes his cheeks. Max sits at his feet, watching with concern in his eyes. He lays his head on Steve’s thigh, looking for a comforting pet or a rub of his ears. Steve’s too upset and stricken to manage it for a couple more minutes, but eventually he does, rubbing his fingers through Max’s fur. The dog inches closer, licking at his palm, and the touch isn’t so unwelcome now. Steve pets him, feels himself relax in pieces as the nightmare recedes. That’s one of the reasons Max is there, after all. To be a comfort. A distraction. Tactile therapy, as Doctor Banner put it months ago. Something to help his senses realign to here and now after flashbacks and nightmares and whatever the hell else his damaged brain decides to throw at him. It’s calming, soothing, and Max just snuggles closer and lets him pet him.

But the comfort doesn’t last, because Max isn’t the same and sadly isn’t enough. Also, it’s his left hand on the dog’s head, his left arm around Max’s back. Bucky’s arm. Steve shudders, pulling his hand away and trying to forget the smell of blood, and gets up because sitting is suddenly impossible. His apartment is a mess; he hasn’t done much to clean anything up since coming home. The coffee table is cluttered with half-drunk bottles of water and papers, mail and his artwork and assignments from work that he needs to do but can’t find the energy to face. His birthday things are there, too, piled up and untouched. There are documents from the hospital and his new meds, still in the bag from the pharmacy. He hasn’t taken them yet. That’s another thing he’s not ready to deal with. New meds mean new side effects and everything changing all around again. He’s not sure he has the energy to face it.

And he doesn’t have the energy or motivation to clean. He feels itchy with restless energy, positively vibrating with it. He shouldn’t have fallen asleep because he knows it’ll make it harder to get himself to bed tonight. Even though it’s almost been a week since the seizure, he’s still not feeling as decent as he had before it and his fatigue sneaks up on him. Right now he’s positively weird, lonely and jittery and anxious, and he’s staring at his phone again. This is stupid – so goddamn stupid – and he needs to do better.

Maybe… Maybe she backed off to give him space. Maybe she’s worried he’s embarrassed (which isn’t far from the truth at all) or maybe she’s affording him some time to pull himself together. There are dozens of reasons that she’s not coming around. Banner’s absolutely right; he’s making assumptions, and that does no one any favors. Christ, he’s a coward and pathetic. It’s not her job to make sure he’s okay or to take care of him. He needs to show her he’s ready, that he can take care of himself.

He’s going to. It’s not gone, all the good feelings and comfort and confidence she gave him, and he can get it back. He takes a deep breath, gets his shoes on, straightens his shorts and polo shirt, and brushes a hand through his hair to straighten it. Then he’s out the door of his apartment, feeling like this will all be fine. He gets to the door of hers before wondering if he should text her first, but that’s dumb; he’s right there and she’s probably home. So with a deep breath to calm his electrified nerves, he knocks on her door.

A moment later, Nat answers it. She’s… She’s still beautiful, just as beautiful as she was when they went out to his party a week ago, when he saw her a couple days past. She’s got her hair up in a ponytail and a green shirt on that makes the hue of her eyes more emerald than sapphire. Jean capris hug her hips, and he can almost imagine how it feels to hold her and pull her closer, how her slight body against his makes him forget the world outside of her touch. The shock of want is so strong that he’s lost in his head a second, but he’s not blind enough not to notice that she’s not exactly happy to see him. Her eyes dart about like they have been doing, and her jaw tightens, and she seems…
Scared.

He doesn’t let that dishearten him, though. Talk to her. “I, uh… Hi.”

She tries to smile. “Hi.”

His brain stops working. It never takes much for that to happen nowadays, and it’s not helping that he suddenly feels as inept as he did before they started dating. He stuffs his hands in shorts pockets and rolls back on his heels to try to give his fidgety muscles an outlet. “I was wondering if you want to come over. Have dinner me with me.” He tries for a smile this time and thinks he succeeds. “We can watch whatever you want. I won’t even mention any space shows.”

She blushes a little, but it’s forced. Everything about her seems forced. “Um… I…” She sighs, glancing over his shoulder again. Confusion prickles through Steve, confusion married with a mounting sense of dismay, and he looks, too. Is she waiting for someone? No, the hallway is quiet and vacant behind them. She seems completely on edge, though. It’s becoming undeniable. He’s been trying to convince himself that it’s not true, but it is. She wants to run from him. “I can’t tonight. Sorry.”

He was high with the idea of this being so simple, out of his goddamn mind with hope, because now that it’s not, he crashes hard. Hard. She’s going to close the door on him. He can tell, and he’s not about to let it happen. She owes him more than that. His anger returns, harsh and hot, and he stops her with a hand on the frame. “Are you busy tonight?”

She looks flustered. “What?”

“Tonight. Are you busy?”

She’s caught off guard. She’s always so breezy and light and almost magically airy with how she acts and talks, and right now she’s clunky and unprepared, so much so that he knows she’s lying before she even speaks. “I have things to do,” she says quickly. “With Daisy. For Block Fest.”

Christ, even having expected it that hurts. He’s too stunned by that to function for a second, but then he gets a breath into his lungs. “Can I come in?” Her expression is more than flustered now. He prays it’s not disgust like he thought before, but he honest to God can’t tell. She doesn’t seem capable of answering, so he goes on. This is what Banner told him to do, so he’s going to throw caution to the wind and just do it. “I want to talk, and I don’t want to do it in the hallway. Please?”

Despite all the afternoons and evenings they spent together, he’s never been in her apartment. She never offered, and he never asked. He’s been completely content to have her in his. Now she stares at him, trying to keep her expression serene, but she’s failing and he can see her discomfort. She doesn’t want him there. That only furthers the growing sense of betrayal poisoning his heart and souring everything he feels for her.

She doesn’t turn him away, though. She simply opens the door wider, just wide enough that he can slip inside. Once he does, he spends a second looking around. It’s lighter than his place, perhaps not as big but airier and more open. There’s more color, too, splashes of it all over, and a fairly nice set of mismatched furniture in the living room. She has same kitchen layout with a little dinette that’s clean with happy flowers in a vase in its center. Everything is clean and well-organized, but it seems tense, like that’s done for some other reason than her being a neat freak or liking things orderly. Liho is on the back of the couch, and she’s regarding Steve like an intruder with narrowed yellow eyes. He feels like one, to be honest. There’s also a couple mason jars full of marbles on the floor by the door. That’s weird.
But he doesn’t really have much time to think about it. Nat not wanting him there is like a palpable force slamming into him, and he simultaneously wants to run to get away and stand his ground because this is not fucking fair. He doesn’t know what to say for a couple of hellish seconds of her staring at him expectantly. He still can’t read her expression. She’s definitely not happy, but he doesn’t know why, can’t figure out if it’s anger or fear or discomfort or what. *Disgust.* No. He should be direct, right? That was what Banner said. Be honest. “Are you avoiding me?”

She’s doing a really poor job at keeping her emotions under control. “No.”

“Then how come–”

“Steve, I’ve been busy. I told you.”

He can’t stop his frustration. “That’s not true,” he says tautly, trying to keep his temper under control, trying not to accuse her of the worst. She flinches all the same. It’s not well hidden. “You’ve been free every night until now. Is it because of what happened at the party?”

The color drains from her face, and if that’s not an answer, Steve doesn’t know what is. “No, it’s… It’s not that.”

She’s lying. He sighs, feeling shivery with anxiety. “I’m sorry that you had to see that.” *Why am I apologizing?* He doesn’t even know. Banner said it’s not his fault, not that he had that seizure, not the way he is, so why the hell is he saying he’s sorry? But he goes on. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I just…” He shakes his head, struggling for words. She’s watching him with pained eyes, and he feels himself losing his nerve.

“Don’t. Be honest. “I know I should have. I was scared. I was scared that if you knew the truth about how sick I am you wouldn’t want to be with me.”

“That’s not fair,” she whispers, and he can tell that hurt her. “That’s not what happened, either.”

“I know. I know it was wrong, okay? I’m really sorry. It was stupid. You would have found out eventually, and if I’d told you, everything would have been easier on both of us. So I screwed up, and I’m sorry.” He feels like a broken record. She’s not looking at him, not meeting his gaze, and he still can’t figure out what she’s thinking. He decides to be strong about this, to *tell* her what he wants. “Please come over? I… I miss you, Nat. I miss seeing you every day. I miss everything wonderful you brought into my life. You make me feel…” He fumbles for the right words. There don’t seem to be any, at least none that are good enough. “You make me feel like there’s a reason I woke up, a reason I came back.” Her lips twitch into a tiny smile, and for a second, he can see everything they had in her eyes. “I’m not trying to dump more on you or make you uncomfortable, but it’s true. These last few weeks… Having you with me has changed everything. I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to lose you, and I don’t want this to ruin us. Please.” Her eyes glitter, and he wonders if there are tears there. He steps closer into her space, setting his hands to her shoulders. “Please, Nat. I want you in my life. I want you close to me. I want you.” His thumbs brush over bare skin there, and it’s smooth and warm. After a week of barely seeing her, let alone touching her, the contact feels amazing, like sweet affirmation.

At least it does until she turns away. Then it just aches like a part of him has been torn apart and wrenched from him, and the fleeting thoughts he just had about kissing her are dashed. “I can’t,” she whispers.

And he can’t help it. He really can’t. It hurts too much. “So you don’t want me. You saw how fucked up I really am, and you don’t want me now.”

“No, Steve, that’s not–”
“Then what is it?” he cries, stepping back. “What? I know how broken I am. If you don’t want to deal with that, then just say it.” She bites her lip, and now there definitely are tears in her eyes. Helplessly she shakes her head. He doesn’t know what that means, and he feels so fucking low he can’t think. His throat’s closing up and he can’t breathe. His heart’s pounding against his sternum, and every beat of it throbs. “Just say it!”

She flashes a miserable glare at him. “I can’t deal with that.”

It’s like being hit, being punched or kicked, being beaten when he’s down. “Why?”

She shakes her head, turning away, folding her arms over her chest like she’s trying to protect herself. She looks as low and shaken as he feels. “It’s just… It’s better for both of us if I don’t. You can’t want me. Not like that.”

“That’s bullshit, Natalie,” he hisses, losing the meager remains of his control. “What, am I not allowed?” She doesn’t answer. Her shoulders are trembling. “Tell me the truth. I deserve that much! Why? Why are you running from me?”

She doesn’t turn around again. “I… I can’t tell you.”

It’s obvious what this is. Starkly, miserably, painfully obvious. But he’s too shocked that it’s actually happening, that she’s breaking up with him right here and now, that he can’t process it. “Why can’t you?” He wants to touch her, but he doesn’t dare. “Why can’t you tell me the truth? Why can’t you trust me?”

“I just can’t, Steve. I can’t!” Her voice breaks, and she turns a little. Her cheeks glisten, and her voice is hardly anything. “Please… Try to understand. I’m not trying to hurt you. That’s not what I want! That’s the last thing I want, Steve, and I know how terrible this seems. I know. And I wanted to find a better way to do it, but we have to… It has to stop. It’s better this way.”

“For you?” He can’t hide his bitterness.

“For both of us,” she whimpers, wiping frantically at her face. “I can’t do this. I can’t hurt you. I – I shouldn’t have led you on. I never should have let you think—”

“What, that we had a chance? That this meant something?”

“That I could be with you.” That bites like a knife in his gut. “Please. It’s not—”

“Yeah, I know,” he says harshly, tears flooding his eyes. “I get it. It’s not me, it’s you, right?” She draws a deep breath, hanging her head, and it kills him that she’s upset. But he’s upset, too. More than upset. She’s rejecting him. Leaving him. Breaking everything off and sending him back to his life alone. Ending their relationship. And giving him some bullshit clichéd line that her problems with him are her problems and he shouldn’t feel bad. Feeling bad doesn’t cover it.

It takes a moment for him to start thinking again, to realize he’s still standing in her apartment. She still has her back to him, her arms wrapped around herself, but she’s not looking at him anymore. Her shoulders are really shaking. She’s crying, soft, hitched breaths that sound ragged and desperate. Everything’s blurry, upside down, blood rushing in his ears, and he doesn’t know what to do. What to say. Eventually he feels his hands and his legs again. His body is rubbery and useless, and his head’s pounding. “Sorry,” he murmurs. There’s nothing more he can say. Nothing else he can do. “Sorry.”

He doesn’t look at her again. Doesn’t want to see her tears. Doesn’t think he can stand it. So he turns and leaves, closing the door behind him. He runs back to his apartment. Unlocks the door.
Gets inside and locks it behind him. Max is there on the couch, and he gets up and hops down and comes over. Steve doesn’t notice him lick at his hands as he pushes off the door and wanders into the living room. He’s pacing, mind racing but without any traction. He’s shaking. He’s throbbing. Old wounds. New. That storm inside him is raging, thunder and lightning and gale force winds, and it’s tearing everything apart. Battering him. As his control erodes, more memories push to the surface.

“I’m with you.”

He squeezes his eyes shut, rakes his hands through his hair and pulls.

“You and me, just like always. I’m with you till the end of the line.”

Breathes hard through his teeth. Hurt and hurts and hurts.

“You’re not alone.”

The anger explodes. Steve screams harshly, sweeping everything off his coffee table. Papers fly. Bottles spill. Things clatter and flutter to the floor. Water spreads all over everything, dripping from the table. He stops raging, breathing heavily, watching the puddle grow, soak into his papers. His sketches.

The drawing of Nat is there, right in the water. The crisp pencil lines immediately turn hazy and indistinct as the liquid permeates the paper. It creeps across her body where she sits on the couch, crawls up her torso and across her songbook, reaches up to her face and drowns it.

Steve stares. He never got around to finishing it, signing it. Now it’s ruined, too.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have to put a huge warning on this chapter, so here it is. 

WARNING: Steve is in a very dark place. I wouldn't say he goes so far as to want to kill himself, but he's definitely not caring too much if he lives or dies. This is in addition to more warnings for violence and descriptions of torture. So please read at your own discretion.

I promise I will fix everything. :-)

“I've put my trust in you.  
Pushed as far as I can go.  
For all this, there's only one thing you should know.  
I tried so hard and got so far but in the end it doesn't even matter.  
I had to fall to lose it all but in the end it doesn't even matter.”  
– Linkin Park, “In the End”

They’re back in their cell.  Steve’s drifted a lot over the last day or so (he thinks it’s a day – it’s so hard to tell).  After they… He can’t even think it, but he makes himself.  After they cut Bucky’s arm off, they beat the hell of out Steve, beat him until he lost consciousness.  Awareness hasn’t exactly come back since then.  Part of it is the concussion he thinks he has (again).  Part of it is shock, fatigue, starvation and blood loss and the million and one spots in and on his body that hurt.

But the biggest part of it is that he’s a coward.  He can’t wake up and face what happened.  It’s his fault, and he fucking knows it, and he can’t make himself look.

Eventually he does, though.  He has to.  That’s how he realizes they’re in their cell again.  That’s how he knows he’s alive, that Bucky’s still alive, too.  Bucky’s right next to him.  They’re lying side by side on the cold, hard floor, bleeding out into the dirt.  Steve blinks into the shadows overhead, blinks and tries to clear his vision, tries to focus on the fact that they’re there and this is going to be it.  He’s not going to see the rest of the Commandos again.  Never going to hang out with the rest of his friends back in Brooklyn.  Never going to go home.

Never going to see Peggy again.

Peggy.

He can’t even think about her.  He was going to marry her, wanted to right before he shipped out again.  He almost bought an engagement ring, but then he thought that it wasn’t fair, to make her wait another tour before they had a wedding.  Better to propose when he gets back, right?  Make it special.  Take her dancing.  She’s old-fashioned, kind of like he is, and she loves ballroom.  There’s a place in Manhattan that does lessons.  He’s hopeless, for how good he is athletically.  Two left feet and all that.  She keeps telling him that she wants to teach him, her British accent an absolute purr in his ear as they kiss and caress each other in the dark of her apartment.  They make love, and she promises, and he dreams about going dancing with her.  She’ll wear that red dress she
was wearing when he first met her at the White House, when he was awarded the Medal of Honor last year. It’ll be perfect.

Only it’s never happening, because he’s going to die here in this hell. Eighteen months after he kissed her goodbye, and he’s never going to see her again.

There’s a rustle beside him. “Stevie?” Bucky’s voice sounds absolutely wrecked, dry and weak and broken. A hand grabs Steve’s and squeezes. There’s hardly any strength behind the grasp. “Steve…”

“Yeah, Buck?” He doesn’t sound much better.

“Still there?”

It takes too much effort, but Steve weaves their fingers together. “Yeah, Buck.”

Bucky heaves a sob. Even that sounds dry and dehydrated. “My arm hurts.”

Steve closes his eyes. He can’t bring himself to move, to even raise his head, because he’s a fucking coward, this time and every other time he’s woken up since they were brought back here. Fucking Captain America. He feels sick with shame, his empty stomach clenching and roiling, and it’s only through sheer revulsion with himself that he props his damaged body up on his elbow to look down on Bucky. Despite the paltry light, he can see the blood. There’s so much of it even days later. So much. It’s all over Bucky’s chest, covering the remains of his undershirt and uniform. His dog tags are glistening red where they poke through a hole by his pec. Steve stares at them, at the glint of silvery metal, breathing through his nose to try and center himself to look further. The stench of their cell is worse now, worse with the smell of dying flesh. Infection. He glances at where Bucky’s left arm should have been without meaning to, and he’s unprepared for how horrible it is. His brain doesn’t process it, not that or the horror of how it happened that’s been replaying in his mind, and he’s looking away and nearly throwing up before he can stop himself. Bone and pus and God help me.

Bucky’s eyes are open, roving and not seeing. He’s so pale despite the burning misery of his fever. His tongue is more white than pink as he licks his dried, cracked lips. “Hurts bad, Steve.”

Steve’s chest is so broken up at this point that moving is excruciating, but he forces himself to turn closer, to lay a hand on Bucky’s forehead. He’s burning hot to the touch. “I know,” Steve hushes. He doesn’t think Bucky’s truly aware of how bad it is, that his arm’s gone. The shock of it is confusing him, his brain lost up delirium on top of the agony of the wound and his shoulder falling to infection. He’s dying, no doubt about it. It’s a minor miracle he didn’t bleed out. Not a miracle. A goddamn curse. It would have been better if they’d just put a bullet in Bucky’s brain. In Steve’s, too. Now they’re going to rot here, agonizingly slowly.

No. “I know, Buck,” Steve whispers again. Tears burn his eyes, but they don’t fall. There’s not enough of them to cry. His body can’t spare even that little amount of moisture. “I know. It’s going to be okay.”

Bucky can’t cry, either. His face is locked up in a weak grimace. “’s not,” he whimpers. “’s not!”

Christ, this is the worst part of it. They’ve both been barely conscious since being locked in here again, but there have been moments of awareness, moments where Bucky has finally lost hope. This is one of them, and it’s terrible. Bucky’s never lost hope, not for one second. When their captors were torturing Steve within an inch of his life, Bucky stayed strong, stayed positive, believed for both of them. Believed that things are alright, even when they’re not. Bucky has such
fire, such strength and courage and determination, and all of that’s bleeding out of him. Now he’s weak and trembling, and he has no strength or courage or determination. He has nothing, and he’s dying, and he’s scared.

And Steve can’t stand it. “Yes, it is. I swear to you it is.” He scooches closer, as close as he can despite the smell and the blood and his own injuries. “It’s alright. I’m gonna get you out of here, Bucky. I swear on my life, I will.” It doesn’t matter that Bucky promised him that dozens of times, every day, it seemed, since they were captured. It doesn’t matter that he can’t keep that promise any more than Bucky could. It doesn’t matter. He needs to be strong and courageous and determined now. Steve holds Bucky’s hand tighter, clasping it between his own. Their fingers are so black with grime and blood that they’re nearly indistinguishable. He doesn’t care, though, kissing Bucky’s knuckles despite the muck and laying their hands over Bucky’s chest and squeezing as hard as he can. “You’re not dying like this, you hear me? Not like this.”

“Steve…”

“Gonna get you home so you can have your ma’s tacos and we can get drunk and piss off the Yankees fans and you can make a move on Dylan’s little sister,” Steve breathes, closing his eyes against the agony in his chest. He tastes blood almost continually. He doesn’t let that dissuade him from the fantasy. He can’t. “Gonna get you home. You can go to the NYPD like you wanted. Or take over your Dad’s business. I think you like imports more than you let on. And I’ll go to art school. We can go back to what we had. Your Dad wanted us to help him fix his Mustang, didn’t he? Bet that engine’ll sing when we’re done.”

Bucky blinks lethargically. “Ain’t going home,” he whispered.

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Bucky blinks lethargically. “Ain’t going home,” he whispered.

“Yes, you are. You are. And they can fix you up. Get you a new arm, huh?” Steve swallows down bile and struggles to stay awake. He’s pretty sure Bucky doesn’t even realize what he’s saying, but he keeps talking. “A fancy metal one. Cybernetic or somethin’. Like Robocop. Terminator. That’d be pretty cool.”


“Buck–”

“Why won’t they fucking kill us?”

Steve doesn’t know. He can’t admit that he’s been wondering the same, that he wants to die more than he wants to live like this any longer. *Eighteen months.* They’re dead already. The lives they lived are gone, no matter how much longer they’re left to suffer in this hell. There’s no going home. Steve clenches Bucky tighter, weeping too, burying his face into Bucky’s side. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers desperately. Bucky doesn’t answer. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault. It’s my fault! Should have been me. Should have fucking been me!”

Bucky doesn’t answer. Steve stops crying to look up only to find his friend is unconscious again. His skin is so waxy and he’s so white that Steve fears for a moment that he actually is dead, but he’s not, breathing still though very shallowly. There’s not much time. He knows it and he hates it. Bucky’s mom, Winnie, practically took Steve in after his own mother passed. Of course, Steve was old enough at the time that he didn’t need a parent, but he welcomed her care all the same. She made Steve promise to look out for Bucky when they shipped out. Of course, Steve was old enough at the time that he didn’t need a parent, but he welcomed her care all the same. She made Steve promise to look out for Bucky when they shipped out. He knows he failed, now more than ever before. There’s not much more he can do, so he lays his head down and clutches Bucky as tightly as he can. “Not gonna let them hurt you again. And I’m not gonna let you die,” he swears softly. “Not alone. Whatever happens, it happens to both of us.” Just like Bucky said.
“Together.”

*Till the end of the line.*

He’s barely awake when he hears a ruckus outside their cell door. There’s running, shouting in Farsi, angry voices tinged with panic. With great effort he cracks open an eye, and it’s just in time to see their captors charge inside. “Get up!” snaps the leader, his eyes flashing in fury and something else. Panic. “*Get up!*”

He can’t get up. He’s too weak, and he’s not leaving Bucky. He can’t do anything to stop them, though, as they grab his arms and haul him to his feet. They take Bucky, too, jostling him from the bliss of unconsciousness. Bucky whimpers as they yank him along by his remaining arm and his hair. Steve jolts with fear, but he can’t fight as the two of them are rushed and dragged through the cave. *What? What is this?* He can’t bring himself even to speak as they’re brought outside. All the sudden the glaring sunlight of the Afghan desert is blasting them, and Steve winces at the sudden change in illumination. He staggers and stumbles. All around him the terrorists are screaming, shaking guns at them, very angry and very clearly riled. Steve doesn’t know why. Both he and Bucky are shoved down onto the rocks, onto their knees. Steve cringes, too hurt and terrified to even glance at Bucky where he slouches to his left. *Please…  Please…*

“They’re coming,” snaps the leader, looming over his two captives. “They’re coming! Tell me how they know! Tell me!”

Steve’s throat is tight with panic. He can hardly piece together that this must be about the other terrorist group. The one they questioned him about before. “I – I don’t know! I don’t know! Please just…” A gun comes to rest at his forehead, and Steve squeezes his eyes shut. His fists ball into the ripped and ruin fabric of his faded combat fatigues on his thighs. He’s not afraid. Not anymore. “Please…”

*Please kill us.*

*Please let this end.*

It ends. There’s a loud crack and a bang and a spray of wet warmth across his face, and Steve wakes up with a gasp. He’s back in his bedroom again, emerging from the throes of yet another nightmare. It’s like this every night. *Every fucking night.* He moans a sob, burying his face in his hands, and works on getting control of his breathing. Over and over again he’s been dreaming the same things, all these moments coming at him. All this awful stuff is just seeping out of his head, like water pushing through cracks in a dam. He pushes back. He doesn’t want to remember it. He’s gone *two years* without remembering it, without thinking about what happened when they escaped, without acknowledging anything more than the gross details and obvious facts. He’s not going to submit now. His brain is maybe trying to lead him somewhere (that’s what Banner thinks, anyway), but he’s not at all interested in going there. He’s digging his heels in the ground and *refusing.* So he sits there in his bed, shoving everything back down into the shadows. Max snuggles up close and licks his hand as he calms down and clears his mind. And listens. He keeps expecting to hear her voice, to hear her sing. To have her come to him. She never does.

Steve grits his teeth and sighs heavily. Max stops slobbering all over his hand and watches him expectantly. “*What?*” he asks. Max cocks his head a little, and Steve can hear the unspoken question. He’s not going to acknowledge that, either. Instead he shoves his comforter off. His sheets are wet with sweat again, so he rips them off, too. Max hops down at his prodding, and the dog plants himself beside the bed and watches Steve with concern steeped in his eyes. He’s
noticed that Nat’s not coming over anymore. She was such a constant fixture in their home for
almost a month that her absence is just as striking to Max as it is to Steve. And he’s not accusing
of course; that’s just Steve’s shame, anger, and paranoia getting the best of him. It’s hard to shake
the feeling, though. It’s hard to shake anything right now. It’s been almost a week since Nat broke
it off with him, and one day has bled into the next which has bled into the next and nothing makes
sense anymore. Nothing feels good anymore.

Some part of his brain is shocked and alarmed at just how quickly everything’s gone back to the
way it was before. Before Nat and her light and her power came into his life. All over again it’s a
struggle to get up, to get showered and dressed, to get himself looking halfway decent. It’s a
struggle to eat (these new meds are better with the nausea, at least, but not by much), a struggle to
do simple things like walk Max and work and go out. His apartment is rapidly returning to its
messy, disorganized state. He doesn’t have the energy or interest to clean or stick to any routines
anymore. He’s pulling away, retreating back, and he’s hardly seen or spoken with anyone outside
of his doctors for the last few days. He recognizes depression, of course, and he knows he’s falling
back into it, fast and hard and deep. He can’t make himself care.

That storm of emotions plagues him, too. Everything he’s worked so hard to keep at bay these last
couple years feels very present, and it’s not just his resurfacing memories and recurring dreams.
It’s everything he can’t stand face. He’s angry, so goddamn angry. Angry at her. Angry at
himself. He’s scared to be alone, even though he’s been alone every month since he came home
from overseas aside from this last one. He’s so sad, so sad. Lonely. Heartbroken. Bitter and
spiteful and desperate to heal the part of his soul that feels torn ragged and bleeding. He’s grieving
for what they had; he doesn’t even need Banner’s analysis to know that. Not that Banner’s aware
of what happened. Steve hasn’t told him. Steve hasn’t told anyone. It’s stupid and childish, but
part of him is terribly upset that he had something that good and lost it. He’s even more upset that
she dumped him, that she did it over his epilepsy. That he let himself be hurt like that. He doesn’t
care that she cried. Treating him like she did? Bullshit. He hasn’t seen her since then, made a
point not to come and go from his apartment (on the rare occasions that he does) when he knows
she’s going to and from work. He’s avoiding her now, and he has to, because he doesn’t know
what to say, what to do, how to act. He doesn’t know how he feels about her.

Also bullshit. He knows exactly how he feels. He knows how much he still feels. He still wants
her. And he does care that she cried, that she seemed so scared of him. That makes it worse, that
he did that to her. Banner told him he couldn’t venture an opinion on her state of mind, and Steve
can’t, either. Maybe there’s more that he doesn’t know and doesn’t understand. Like she said, she
couldn’t tell him.

But he doesn’t want to let that assuage his pain. He doesn’t want to let it let her off the hook,
either. It doesn’t excuse the fact that she did this to him when he needed her the most. It doesn’t
excuse the fact that she couldn’t trust him enough to be honest, to be that vulnerable after seeing
him at his most vulnerable. He feels exposed and ripped open in front of her, and she still has the
comfort of distance. It hurts. He wants to know why. He doesn’t want to think she’s that shallow
and selfish, so he wants to understand.

Not that it matters now. Nothing does. She’s not coming now or ever again. She doesn’t want
him.

Steve shakes himself from his thoughts. It’s been so easy for him to fall into this, into thinking
about her. He’s been dreaming about her, too, her kiss and her touch and I don’t need this right
now. It’s either hell or heaven, and there’s nothing in between, and heaven is completely out of
reach now. Gritting his teeth, he stops staring at Max and gathers up his bedding. He plods to the
washing machine, loads it up, and sees he again needs more laundry detergent. There’s enough left
to run his load. Then it’s off to the shower, where he washes up thoroughly but only because the
phantom smell of stale sweat and blood and rot is tormenting him (not to mention the lingering feel
of grime, of violence, of panic. It’s been a while since he’s felt he’ll never be clean again, but right
now it all comes back). He finishes up, brushes his teeth, combs his hair. Finds a clean pair of
jeans and a blue t-shirt. Dresses. He feels better for getting himself going. He doesn’t feel great
by any means, even with his headache and his soreness aside, but it’s alright. He’s up and moving,
so like it always used to be, today’s already a victory.

He goes to make himself some breakfast. Golden Grahams and milk. Then he sits there, eats, and
checks his phone. There are a couple of texts. He gets a little nervous seeing that, but it’s nothing
from Nat. That’s both a disappointment and a relief. There’s a message from his boss. “Need
Star Liquor’s graphic today. No later than four o’clock.” That’s fine. He’s ready to head over to
the ad agency and drop it off. He barely finished the assignment yesterday, having struggled to
find the energy lately to keep up with his work. At least that’s something useful he can do today,
go drop off some work and then stop at the pharmacy to pick up his meds again. That’s all he’s
been doing the last couple weeks, it seems. Going to the doctors and going to the pharmacy.

At any rate, there’s also a text from Tony and a bunch of missed calls. Some of those are from
yesterday and the day before. He turned the ringer off on his phone a while ago, so he didn’t
notice (or care to even look until now honestly). He brings up Tony’s message. “Bike’s done.
Crawl out of your hermit hole and come check it out.” Steve smiles a little at that. He was there
at the Iron Mechanic last weekend for a little bit; Thor dragged him out to have lunch and see Tony’s
progress (although Steve suspects it was mostly to make sure he was okay. He thought he faked it
pretty good, and they never asked about Nat or his epilepsy). He has to admit the bike is gorgeous,
shining red and polished chrome, just like he pictured. Tony did a phenomenal job with it. Of
course, that only heightens the fact that Steve can’t ride it, now more than ever. Now with his
seizures even more out of control. He decides not to think about that, not that he’s had another
couple seizures since the party (very mild ones, thank God), not this new combination of AEDs
clearly isn’t helping, not that Erskine frowns at him more and more helplessly at every
appointment. There’s nothing to be done for it, and it’s better to ignore it than process it.
Detachment. It’s still not doing anything to help him.

There are other texts from Tony, too. And from Thor. “Are you alright?”

“Where the hell are you?”

“Can you please answer so that I know you’re alive?”

Steve sighs and drops his phone on the table, not caring to read more. Despite the futility of it, he
finds himself getting up and dumping the rest of his cereal in the sink. Then he dutifully takes his
new rounds of medications, praying today doesn’t herald any additional side effects. Even though
he’s been lucky the first couple days on them, he knows the unpleasantness is probably coming;
these are stronger drugs, so he figures it’s inevitable.

He’s so, so tired.

He’s swallowing down the last of the pills when there’s a knock at his door. Max immediately
rushes over, tail wagging happily as he prances. Steve’s irrationally scared for a moment. His
nightmares have engrained this fight or flight response into him all over again, and it takes him a
breath or two to get it under control. Then he’s heading over and checking through the peep hole.

It’s Sam, and he looks worried. He knocks again. “Come on, Rogers,” he says, his voice muffled
by the door. “Open up. I know you’re in there.”
Steve sighs. He’s managed to avoid Sam most of all these last few days because he knows Sam is going to be the hardest to face. Sam won’t stand for his bullshit, which is definitely why he’s here now. All Steve’s nonsense texts claiming he’s fine or too busy or not feeling up to it are too obvious. They never used to work on Sam, so it shouldn’t be surprising they don’t work now. “Come on!”

“Yeah,” Steve unlocks his door and opens it.

Sam’s inside not a second later and eyeing him critically. Steve can never fool him. “What the hell, dude? Ever heard of answering your phone? Some of us worry about you!”

“Sorry.” That’s weak, but he really does feel bad. Somewhat.

Sam shakes his head in admonishment. “And you look like shit.” Steve’s not feeling up to arguing about the obvious. He just moves aside so Sam can step further into his place. Sam closes the door behind him and drops his hand to pet Max, but his perceptive eyes never leave Steve as Steve goes over to sit on his couch. “Are you okay?” His voice is quieter, losing its sharp edge. He asks that like he already knows the answer and it’s just all part of a routine.

“Oh-huh.”

“You don’t seem okay.”

“I’m fine.”

Sam comes closer, still analyzing Steve like he can stare the truth out of him. “Are you sleeping?”

“Yep.”

“Nice. You’re back to bullshit, bare minimum answers.” Steve closes his eyes and leans back, sinking into his couch cushions. He doesn’t want to deal with this, but he’s too damn tired and depressed to tell Sam off. Sam folds his arms across his chest and stands in front of Steve and stares down on him like a cross parent. “No one’s seen you since Saturday. Tony called me. He thought something was wrong. Said you looked like death warmed over, and I gotta agree. Why aren’t you talking to anyone?”

Apparently he’s not as good an actor as he thinks. And that was four days ago, so maybe it is pretty alarming. “Been working.” He drops an arm over his forehead and eyes. His headache’s coming back.

“Steve, don’t lie to me. Come on.” Sam sighs, shaking his head, and his anger is almost gone, replaced with something even worse: concern. “Part of me was really hoping you and Nat were holed up in here, ignoring the world, screwing each other’s brains out. Literally. I literally went so far as to think some really good sex might fix your broken brain.” That’s meant as a joke, but Steve’s eyes burn with tears under his arm. “But I guess that was as far-fetched as it sounds.” Sam looks around once as if to confirm something he’s already figured out. “What happened?”

There’s no point in lying. Steve stubbornly blinks back his tears, waiting until he’s done that before dropping his arm. He breathes slowly, using a long exhale to steady his voice. “She broke up with me.”

Sam has to have been expecting that. It’s fucking obvious, isn’t it? Even still, his face goes lax with surprise before settling into a forlorn frown. He comes around the coffee table to sit next to Steve. “Shit, man.” His voice is soft, weak. Maybe he, too, is shocked that she did something like this. “I’m sorry.”
Steve doesn’t answer. *I’m sorry.* That doesn’t mean a goddamn thing.

An uncomfortable stretch of silence settles over them. Steve doesn’t venture anything further. He stares blankly at his coffee table, thinks about her picture that was ruined. How he picked it up and threw it away. It’s not that easy. She got through his walls, got into his heart and soul. He can’t just let her go, toss her out. He’s so caught up in a numb stasis that he doesn’t notice Sam stiffening with new and different anger beside him. “She broke it off because of what’s going on?”

That’s where Sam’s brain immediately goes. That’s where anyone’s brain goes, because that’s logical and an easy explanation. Steve’s not sure it’s not right, too. “She said that wasn’t why,” he finally offers, but it’s not a defense, but it’s not a defense.

And Sam doesn’t believe it, even if it was. “Ah, goddamn it, Steve,” he says, shaking his head. “Christ, that’s fucking cruel.”

Steve winces. Now he feels like he should defend her, because if he doesn’t know for sure what’s going on with her, Sam certainly knows even less. But he doesn’t. He can’t get past the hurt. “Probably had it coming,” he murmurs.

“What?” He doesn’t elaborate, knows how self-deprecating it’ll sound and hating it too much to actually say it even though he thinks it’s true. Sam’s eyes narrow, and he looks sharply at Steve. “You don’t think that. You hear me? It’s not your fault. If she can’t see past your problems, well, that’s her fucking loss.”

Steve shakes his head. “You were right, back before I started seeing her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t know her. I still don’t. All that stuff I said about us being the same and not needing to know her to know her… It was stupid bullshit.” *She ended up hurting me anyway.* He closes eyes again and sinks. His cheeks burn in shame. He feels like a fucking fool. “I should have listened to you.”

Sam’s quiet for a bit. Then he heaves another long breath. “No, you needed to do this. You gotta live, dude, and it hurts sometimes. But it is what it is. It hurts, but you can get past it. If it was meant to be, she wouldn’t have run from it. Like I said, her loss, not yours. And it’s not your fault that she wasn’t strong enough to be there for you. It’s not your fault, Steve.”

God, people tell him that a lot. It’s not true. Banner’s said once or twice that he blames himself because internalizing his anger, pain, and grief is easier for him than actually expressing it. Faulting himself is a convenient way to bottle it up. He wasn’t raised to let those sorts of emotions show, to ever let himself be a burden on others. He has to say that’s true. That’s one of the reason why being the way he is now bothers him so damn much (like he needs a reason. He’s a fucking fool *and* an invalid). But even now, when he’s so angry he wants to scream and curse Nat off and so upset he wants to cry, he doesn’t. He holds it all back and goes on, like a good little soldier.

And Sam’s not buying it. “It’s not your fault,” he says again. “Tell me you understand that.”

“Christ, Sam…”

“Come on, dude. I gotta say you’re scaring me a little here. It feels like you took, like, two giant steps back since your birthday. You don’t need this. *At all.* You don’t need the stress, not physically or mentally. Doctor Erskine told you to take it easy.”

“I know,” Steve hisses. “You think I don’t?”
“He told you you shouldn’t be living alone, either.”

Sam was right there in the hospital when Erskine said that, that while Steve’s seizures were back on the upswing, he should always have someone nearby. The seizures themselves aren’t the problem necessarily; it’s the danger Steve can be in if there’s no one around to make sure he’s safe. Sam immediately offered to let Steve stay with him, but at the time, the thought of Nat actually leaving him didn’t really register. It may have been because his brain was still totally addled from the shock of the seizure heard ’round Brooklyn (as he’s bitterly taken to calling it in his own head). And when he got home and she left him, he didn’t want to admit he needed the help.

That’s stupid and reckless, but he can’t bring himself to care. At this point, he already feels so low that the idea of depending on someone else 24/7 to make sure he doesn’t have a seizure in the shower or cooking or to be there to call 911 if one should drop him down the stairs… That beats his already battered ego nearly into submission. It’s moot, anyway. He doesn’t have anyone to babysit him. I don’t need anyone.

Sam just looks sad and desperate. “Look, she’s gone, and you shouldn’t be by yourself. If she’s not going to accept you the way you are, then you don’t need her. She doesn’t deserve you.” Steve grimaces before he can stop himself, and Sam notices. Of course, he does. “What? Did you fall in love with her?”

Hearing that makes it worse. Before Steve even realizes it, he’s standing, desperate to escape, desperate to go. “Listen, I have to go. I have to deliver some stuff to Fury.”

Sam immediately realizes he overstepped, so he backs off. “Let me go with you.”

“I don’t need – Christ, stop babying me!” Sam frowns, and hurt flashes across his eyes. Steve groans and fidgets. “Sorry,” he blurs, rubbing his forehead. “Sorry. I know you’re trying to help. I know.”

It’s quiet again. Steve can’t bring himself to look at Sam. That godawful shitty feeling of fucking up clings to him, and he can’t shake it. All over again, he can’t hardly stand himself.

“Come with me to the VA.”

Sam’s offer is so soft that Steve barely hears it. He looks sharply at his friend. “What?”

“Come with me to the VA.” Sam’s expression is placid and gentle. Nonthreatening. He raises his hands like he’s dealing with a cornered animal. A kicked dog. “I’m not trying to pressure you into anything.” He’s saying that because the last couple times Steve tagged along with him to the VA, Sam tried to sucker him into sitting in on his support group for veterans. Sam’s always trying to nudge him into that. There are a couple other POWs from Iraq in the group, and he thinks Steve would benefit from hearing what they have to say. “You don’t need to talk right away,” he always said. “Start by listening. Talk when you’re ready.”

He’s never going to be ready.

“I’m going out of town tonight for a couple of days. Heading up to Albany to help push for more funding for the VA’s rehab center. So I am not trying to trick you into anything. I just want you to get out and come with me while I pick up some papers and talk to a few people about the trip. That’s it.” Sam smiles, nudging his shoulder in a brotherly show of affection. “And I’ll buy you lunch. Whatever you want.”
Steve winces. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to do that because you’re my friend and you damn well deserve it. You’re worth it.” Sam’s overcompensating. What he’s saying is supposed to feel good. Any other time it would have, but it doesn’t now. To Steve it just sounds forced and false. He doesn’t want to go. “And I’m checking in on your sorry butt while I’m gone. You better answer me this time and with more than your obligatory fine or good or okay or whatever. That’s not convincing. Do better or I’m coming back and you can explain to all the other vets why their rehab program didn’t get funded.” It’s a facetious pile of nonsense, and Steve knows it because Sam is still grinning. Sam’s smile slides, though, and he lightly knocks Steve in the arm again. There’s nothing but worry in his eyes. “Come on. I need to know you’re okay.”

“I am okay,” Steve insists, but that’s a lie and even he doesn’t believe it.

The trip to the VA goes alright. Steve never feels quite comfortable there. The people are nothing but nice, sweet and sincere, but no matter what the sense of clinical detachment never quite fades away. He associates it with Erskine, with Banner, with Sam sometimes and with the counselors and therapists and everyone on staff there who takes care of him and everyone else who served and now struggles in the aftermath. He knows that’s not fair; the volunteers and doctors and staff are trying to help, and they do help. But he can’t fully relax, knowing they see him as a sum total of his problems. His epilepsy and depression and PTSD. His scars. Who the fuck am I kidding? Everyone sees him that way.

Especially the one person he never wanted to.

Whatever. It’s fine. He plants himself in a chair outside Sam’s office and waits. He can see one of the meeting rooms just across and down the hall. Folding chairs are lined up, and people are sitting in them. He recognizes some of them. Other vets. Might be intentional, where Sam told him to wait. There’s a woman’s voice. “I can’t figure it out sometimes. It’s like… I know it’s over. I know I’m home. But my body doesn’t believe it. And all it takes… Car door slamming. People shouting. Thunder. Goddamn fireworks.” She grunts a laugh. “That’s ironic, isn’t it?”

A man’s voice answers. “Some things you leave there. Some you bring back. It’s our job to figure out how to carry it, in a big suitcase or in a little man purse.” Steve knows that line. It’s one of Sam’s favorites. Obviously this counselor is borrowing from the best.

“I don’t think I can stuff everything into something that small,” the woman answers. She pauses, and Steve can hear her struggling. “When you see your friends die… It haunts you. And if you move on, try to get it into that man purse… It feels like betrayal to me.”

“You lose someone?”

“Haven’t we all?” She pauses again. Steve looks down to the denim of his jeans, to the scars he knows are on his thighs. He pictures them with such clarity, even though he never lets himself look at them. The marks on his legs and the mass on his hip and the lines that trace his chest and back. Things he brought back. “It’s the guilt and the regret. I can deal with the flashbacks and the anger and the rough days and thinking there’s a sniper on the top of the building where I work or an IED in the street when a car backfires. I can deal with the PTSD. But it’s the regret that I can’t handle.”

“Don’t regret living, Stevie.”

“Steve?”
Steve opens eyes he’s let slip shut. Sam is there, his backpack on. He appraises Steve in renewed concern. “You okay?”

He’s not sure if he drifted or dozed or what, but the meeting room is quiet and empty now, and Sam’s ready to go. “Yeah, yeah,” he says, a little breathlessly. He stands up with a twinge in his hip and a wince. “I’m fine.”

Sam’s not sold but he doesn’t question further. The two of them head out, and where before Sam filled the quiet between them with chatter about their usual topics, football and baseball and the dogs and gossip from around the VA, he’s pointedly quiet now. Steve feels even more exposed. He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him, what he’s doing, why he feels so low and shaken. It’s going to be okay. They’ll find meds that work. It’ll get better.

You’ll find someone else.

He can’t make himself believe any of that.

They go have burgers at a diner close to the VA. Steve’s hungry, so he wolfs down his lunch. He doesn’t feel much better for being out. Back before the last seizure, that always seemed like such a good accomplishment, getting out and going about his day and functioning. Now everything is dull and muted, and even though the food tastes delicious, eating holds no joy. Neither does being around people. Not even spending time with Sam lifts his mood. He can’t bring himself to want to feel good. He’s so fucked up, now more than ever before.

After lunch, they stand on the sidewalk. Steve watches the people pass him by. He feels empty, more different than even a few weeks ago. He feels pushed too far. Weightless. It’s going to be okay. It is. They’ll find a way to fix you. They will. They have to. You always stand up, Steven. You always do.

No. You’ll never be cured.

“I don’t have to go.” Sam’s soft voice draws Steve’s attention, and he turns and forces himself to focus on his friend. Sam’s expression is nothing but sincere. He’s really worried. “I don’t have to. I’ll stay with you. You need someone.”

I don’t have anyone. “No,” Steve says after a beat, after his brain puts together that Sam is offering to cancel his trip just to keep him company. He tries for a smile, and even he knows he fails. “No, no. You don’t need to do that.”

“Seriously. You can crash at my place. Or I’ll stay at yours. You don’t need to be alone.”

“I’m fine.”

“Steve.”

“Sam, I’m fine. Really.” He tries harder now, tries to show he’s as good as he keeps claiming, to put up a brave, untroubled front. He thinks he used to be a better liar before Nat tore down his walls. “I’m fine. I’m gonna rest. Take Max for walks and get some work done. I’ll spend some time with Tony. The bike’s done, so I’ll go see it.”

Sam stares at him. He’s not buying a damn thing. Still, the last thing Steve needs is for Sam to be hovering over him for days on end. He doesn’t think he can stand the scrutiny, so he makes himself seem stronger, smiling a bit more (even though it feels physically painful. He can’t remember the last time he smiled easy. Right before the seizure probably). “Alright,” Sam concedes. He grabs Steve’s shoulders and pulls him into a strong hug. “Alright, man. You gonna
take care of yourself?”

“‘Course.”

“I am calling. Calling and texting. And you better respond.” That’s not an idle threat.

“Alright.”

Sam’s still not convinced, but he lets Steve go. “See you in a couple days.” After that, Sam’s walking down the street toward the subway, and Steve exhales slowly. He adjusts his bag a little on his shoulder, feels the weight of it, his legs beneath him, the heat of the day. That grounds him in the here and now, and he walks away, too.

He takes a longer path to work to avoid walking in front of the Rising Tide. Muscle memory seems to want to take him there like he went there almost every morning the last month, bearing coffee and a smile. Now he has to make his legs go a different way and make his heart stop spewing desire and hope. He forces himself to quit thinking about her and picks up the pace.

SHIELD has always seemed to him to be a security company fronting as an ad agency. First and foremost, the name is totally wrong. No one can figure out why an advertising company is called that. And that’s not the end of the weirdness. Steve’s worked freelance for a couple other places, and he’s generally found advertising people to be… well, not like Nick Fury. The guy’s very intimidating, very serious, very no-nonsense, but not without a wry sense of humor. He always seems to know everything going on in Brooklyn, in the whole city maybe. He knew who Steve was before Steve even introduced himself on his first day. Fury was aware of exactly what happened to Steve in Afghanistan. That was pretty disconcerting then and it still is, but Fury’s good people. He’s fair, impartial, maybe a little ruthless at times when negotiating but never cruel. Also he’s always wearing black, which only adds to the image that he’s a spy. Ex-law enforcement maybe. Ex-FBI. Ex-CIA? He doesn’t read ex-military to Steve, but there’s definitely something about him. Steve’s always wondered about it, about what led someone like him to this business of all things, and about how he lost his eye. The eye in particular is really curious. The black patch Fury wears is striking and very distinct, and Steve knows the office staff at SHIELD have a bunch of completely crazy theories about it and who Fury really is. But they don’t dare ask.

At the moment, Fury looks over the latest stuff Steve’s done for him from behind his desk. Steve stands and awaits his judgment. This is a routine with them. Steve comes, hands in his work, Fury coolly appraises it with that emotionless, stoic mask of his, and declares that it’s “decent” or “good enough”. Despite that, Steve always figures Fury likes it, likes him. After all, he hired Steve almost exclusively a few weeks into their working relationship.

Right now, Fury sighs and sets the drawings down on his desk. He doesn’t look happy, and Steve feels his anxiety twist up inside a little. This is all he freaking needs. He’s not particularly proud of the liquor store drawings. They’re not his best work, and he knows it. “Looks good,” Fury says instead, and Steve relaxes a bit. Fury leans forward, clasping his hands in front of him on his desk. He watches Steve, and that one eye of his is so damn critical. It’s like he can see all Steve’s secrets. He shakes his head. “But you don’t. You look more like hell, Rogers.”

Of course it’s not about his work. It’s about him. He’s fallen a little behind this last week, and he knows Fury knows why. He’s pretty sure Sam called him while Steve was in the hospital. All sorts of shit goes through his head, that Fury’s going to fire him because of his problems. Dump him, just like Nat did. “I’m fine,” he quickly assures.

“Where are you with the Block Fest material?” Fury was, surprisingly, behind that project whole-
heartedly. He figured the more local businesses worked together, the better it’d be for them. Most of the ad agency’s revenue came from local stores and restaurants and mom and pop’s. “Done with it?”

No. Steve hasn’t worked on it. He can’t bring himself to. “Not yet. I’ll get on it next.”

Fury gives him that look that’s so frustrating, like he can see through everything Steve’s saying no matter how good Steve thinks he is at hiding behind his words. Steve struggles not to squirm. “I can give the job to someone else,” he offers, and his tone is unreadable.

Steve bristles. “No need. I got it.”

Still with that look. “You need some time off?”

That makes him even angrier. He doesn’t know how much Fury knows of his situation, but being treated like he can’t do his job doesn’t sit well with him. It’s back to that same damn thing. Everyone sees his condition, his PTSD and his fucking epilepsy, and not him. He expects that from Sam, from his friends, from Nat. Not from Fury, Fury who’s never treated him like anything other than an artist, an employee. An asset to his operation. Not until now, anyway. “I don’t need anything,” he harshly declares. Fury cocks an eyebrow. It takes some effort, but Steve unclenches his jaw and his fists where they’re clasped behind his back. “Sir.” He’s not sure why he’s saying that or why he’s practically standing at parade rest or why he feels like a soldier who can’t be trusted to fight anymore. Fury sure as shit isn’t his CO.

“Listen, kid, it’s not wrong to accept help.” Fury leans back in his chair, and the leather jacket he’s always wearing creaks as he does. “Don’t hurt yourself. The world’s short on good people. On heroes. There’s no sense in helping it lose another.”

He doesn’t want to hear anymore, so he leaves. He’s probably pretty cold about it, but he can’t stand one more second under Fury’s scrutiny or anyone else’s. He’s been ostracized enough from being normal. He doesn’t need any more reminders about how he needs to take it easy or be careful or not stress himself or not live alone. He doesn’t need that.

The trip home is a blur. He walks in a haze. He forgets to go buy laundry detergent. Doesn’t care to go to the pharmacy to pick up his meds. Doesn’t give a shit about anything. It’s early afternoon, nearly unbearably hot, and he’s not thinking. Not feeling. There’s nothing useful to think, and nothing good to feel. Memories stir in his head, memories of the cell, of how damn hot it got in the summer, how it smelled, how stripped down life became in there. Memories of his mother, the way she always had a smile for him no matter how tired she was. Memories of lazy summer days, Coney Island, baseball diamonds and chocolate ice cream and their group of friends from school at their old stomping grounds around Brooklyn. None of it’s the same.

There’s no going back.

He’s sweaty and exhausted by the time he’s climbing up the stairs to his apartment. He knows he needs to get Max out, but other than that… He glances at Nat’s door as he reaches the top of the steps, but it’s closed. And he’s staring before he can stop himself, staring as he pulls out his keys and walks slowly toward his own door, wondering if she’s there, wondering if she’ll talk to him if he knocks. Wanting so badly to talk to her because he doesn’t want to be like this…

“Steve?”

Steve turns around in sharp surprise at the familiar voice. He nearly drops his keys as he does. His eyes go wide, and for a second he can’t make sense of who’s waiting for him outside his door.
“Becca?”

Rebecca Barnes – *no, now it’s Proctor* – is standing there. The second Steve sees her, his mind goes to an image of a little girl with messy brown hair and a mouth full of braces and pink leggings who tagged along with Bucky and him to the mall or the movies or basically everywhere. Rebecca’s the oldest of Bucky’s three sisters, the closest in age to him and the closest in looks, too. Her thick brown hair isn’t ever messy anymore. Today it’s done up in a bun. She’s got Bucky’s blueish gray eyes, the shape of Bucky’s face, Bucky’s smile. That comes from their dad. She has his sweet disposition, too, where Bucky had more of their mom’s fiery temperament. Becca was always so nice in their youth, nice and caring but stubborn, always swinging as far into girl territory imaginable to offset Buck’s love of sports and cars and “boy stuff”. She got married a few years back, one of the many things that happened while Steve and Bucky been MIA. Now she was a beautiful young woman, a successful teacher, and obviously really pregnant.

She smiles sadly at him, taking in his appearance. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he manages. He’s totally flabbergasted that she’s here. He hasn’t seen her in years. He has vague memories of her down in DC after he woke up. Everything around that is really cloudy, but he’s pretty sure Bucky’s family was there to be with him, to support him of course, but to find out the truth, too. At the time, he was too out of it to tell them anything. Now… “What’re you doing here?”

“Can I come in?” she asks, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

He feels like an asshole. “Yeah. Yeah, sure. Sorry.” He gets control of his hands and gets the key into the lock. Then he lets her inside. Max is right there, of course, and Steve snatches his collar and drags him back. “Let me get him in my bedroom. Hold on.” He leads and pulls Max there, and Max is none too happy about it. Steve hushes him and pushes him inside, though, and shuts the door.

Then he’s tingling in terror. She’s standing by his door, looking around. That feeling of shame and exposure gets even worse. Becca always looked up to him when they were kids. Bucky used to tease her about having a crush on Steve, and Steve has to admit that he thought so, too. Having her see him like this… Scruffy beard and wrinkled clothes and sweaty and disheveled. Nothing like the prim and proper young man who’d graduated top of his class from West Point, where Becca blushed and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

He remembers his manners after a beat. “You want to sit down? Or have something to drink?” Steve regrets that the second he offers, because he honestly doesn’t think he has much of anything to serve her. No coffee or soda or juice, anyway. Maybe some Gatorade.

Thankfully, she shakes her head. “No, no. That’s fine. And I can’t stay too long.” She’s trying to smile, but she’s watching him with that look that people always have when they realize he’s not doing so hot. He’s seen it way too fucking much of late. “How have you been?” She asks that like she’s afraid of the answer.

He’s afraid to answer, so he flounders for what feels like forever before finally and awkwardly saying, “Fine. You?”

“I’m good.” She brightens up a little and touches her stomach again. “Pregnant, as you can see.”


Now she beams, and he feels better for it. “Thanks. It’s a boy.”
“That’s great, Becks.” The old nickname comes back easy, and so does the easy affection. “Really
great.”

“Yeah, just another couple months. He’s due in September. Feel like it’s so far away, though!
Can’t wait.” Both she and Bucky always had such trouble with patience.

Steve nods. “Mike has to be thrilled.” Mike Proctor was one of their classmates. He’s a real
stand-up guy. He went to NYU and became some sort of computer engineer before marrying
Becca and heading off to start their own lives. Last Steve heard, the entire Barnes family (well,
what was left of it in the city – Bucky’s other two sisters are long gone, one to California and the
other to Texas) relocated from Brooklyn to further upstate, somewhere in the Hudson Valley. That
was after Buck’s mom died three years ago. Becca called Steve to tell him Mrs. Barnes passed
away, but he was still in the early stages of his recovery at Walter Reed, unable to walk and thus
unable to go to the funeral. The cancer took Winnie quickly, but everyone thinks she also just gave
up in the wake of what happened during the war.

Becca smiles again. “Yeah, he is. We just bought a bigger place in Vails Gate. You should come
visit sometime. Get out of the city for a bit.”

Steve doesn’t say anything to that. Of all Bucky’s family, Becca’s the one who put the most effort
into staying in touch after he came home from Afghanistan. For how close they all used to be,
playing together and sleep-overs and Steve nearly a fixture at the Barnes family dinner table every
night, those relationships withered and died after the war. He feels like a jerk for never
reciprocating much, but it’s so hard given what happened, and he knows he’s not the only one
who’s struggled with it.

Their conversation devolves into awkward silence. She clearly wants to say something, came to
say something, but she’s hesitating. He can’t stand the quiet, but he can’t bring himself to break it,
either. Finally, she continues. “I just… Um…” She struggles with her emotions a moment. “I
just stopped by to tell you something.” She sighs slowly, gathering herself more. “And give you
something.”

That doesn’t make any sense. “What?”

“The army contacted Dad a few days back,” she says. She’s reaching into her purse, and Steve’s
heart picks up into a nervous race. There’s grief in her eyes, but it’s not fresh. It’s processed,
digested, dulled. “They wanted to let us know that it’s official. They, um… They finally found
him.”

Steve doesn’t understand. His heart is not letting him understand. “Found him?”

Becca comes closer. Her eyes are damp now. “They found Bucky’s body.”

The world closes in on him. He can’t speak, can’t think, can’t breathe. Idly there’s something
sticking in his brain, that it’s all kinds of fucked up that Bucky’s sister is the one who’s telling him
this when he was there with Bucky when Bucky died, that it’s Bucky’s sister who’s watching him
with worried eyes when he’s technically not family, when she’s the one comforting him. It’s
backwards and insane and the room is spinning more and more. Steve hears his own voice over
the rushing of blood in his ears. “What?”

Becca frowns and reaches out to touch his shoulder. “A special ops convoy coming into Kandahar
found his remains near a gorge in the mountains. It’s not far from where they think the two of you
were kept. There’s not…” Her voice breaks. “There’s not much left, but they’re sending him
back so we can finally bury him.”
No. No, no, no.

“We always knew he was dead. There wasn’t any hope. What you told the army after you woke up, what you could remember… There couldn’t any hope, Steve. But this…” She sighs, trying again to smile. “This makes it real. We can finally get some closure.”

No. He doesn’t want closure. He doesn’t want–

“I wanted to give you these.” Her hand comes out of her purse, and she lifts it toward him. There’s a chain dangling from her palm. Even though it’s been three years, he recognizes what it is before she even shows him. Bucky’s dog tags. She sighs, eyes glimmering with tears, but there’s so much strength in her smile. “Buck’d want you to have them. He gave them to you.”

Steve can’t. He can’t take them. He won’t take them.

“Bucky, I’m not taking these. I’m not doing it! And I’m not going to leave you! No! Christ, why do you always gotta do this?”

But she’s lifting his hand and putting the dog tags there, the dog tags they’d found on him when the farmers rescued him and took him to the hospital, the dog tags they gave Bucky’s family when they transported Steve’s comatose body back to the States. They feel foreign, wrong, heavier than the world, and Steve sputters on his breath. “Ma hung onto them when she got sick, like she was clinging onto Buck. But I think she’d want you to have them, too. She never blamed you, Steve. None of us ever has or ever will.”

It’s not your fault.

It is, though. He stares at his palm where the dog tags rest. Barnes, James B. 32557038. O Pos. Catholic. The words on them blur as his eyes fill with tears. These things he hasn’t let himself see, hasn’t let himself feel, hasn’t let himself accept… They’re right there in his hand. Bucky’s dead. Bucky’s dead. They finally found his body. They’re shipping it back to the States so he can be buried. Bucky’s dead. Bucky’s dead.

He died for me.

Becca’s hugging him, kissing his cheek, squeezing him tight. “It’s going to be okay now. You know? Like I said, it’s closure, and we all need it. You need it, too. It’s like… We’ve all lived in this limbo, holding onto this dream that he survived somehow when we know he didn’t. But he died a hero.” Steve quakes. “Will you come to his funeral? Dad’s… Dad’s going to put everything together once… Once we get his remains.”

Steve’s not capable of processing that. He feels himself nodding, but it’s meaningless. The memories so recently freed from the shadows are pushing hard now, and he feels dizzy and sick with them. Becca kisses his cheek again. “We really need you there. Bucky would’ve wanted that, too. For you to be there.”

He died for me.

She’s gone not long after that. He really doesn’t notice her leaving. She probably said something, told him again it wasn’t his fault. He doesn’t listen. She’s gone, and his apartment is quiet, and he’s standing there alone, holding Bucky’s dog tags. He’s sweating. He’s breathing. His heart’s beating. It’s beating faster and faster. His head fucking hurts because he’s alive to feel pain. He’s alive and Bucky’s dead.

“Take ‘em, Stevie. Please. Take ‘em home.”
Steve closes his fingers around the tags, squeezing and squeezing until the metal is digging into his palm and his whole arm is shaking. Adrenaline is pumping through his arteries like acid. He feels it now. *All* of it. For so long he’s fought, fought so fucking hard, to be strong. To take the pain and keep going. To live despite everything.

“You live. You hear me? You run and you live. Make sure this isn’t for nothing.”

What’s the point? What’s the point?

“*Tell my folks I love ’em.*”

He didn’t want to do it. He didn’t want to be the one who survived.

“*It’s alright. This is the end of the line.*”

In the end, no matter how hard they fought, no matter how much they tried, they lost everything. There’s no going back to who they were before. Bucky’s dead, and he’s barely alive, and *nothing matters.*

Captain America. The great hero. He’s never hated himself so much.

Then comes his penance, of course. He feels the seizure building in his brain. Feels it and sees it. The halo. There’s no angel now, though. It’s just light, weird, grotesque splotches of it that dance across his vision. It’s just his nervous system gearing up for a firestorm. No matter how many times it happens, the aura always terrifies him, and he’s stumbling to his bedroom as he’s assailed by that godawful feeling of his stomach dropping into his toes and his nerves all tingling at once and his head swimming in dizziness. Max jitters about as Steve staggers to the bed. *Get down.* Those are his last coherent thoughts. *Get down. Get down so you don’t fall.*

It’s too late, and he doesn’t know what difference it makes anyway. The seizure’s coming hard and fast, and he’s tumbling onto his naked mattress, consumed and burning alive. The dog tags slip from his fingers and clatter to the floor. His phone is vibrating in his pocket. Max is barking.

When he opens his eyes again, it’s dark, so dark that he doesn’t know where he is. The cell, maybe. Even as muddled as his senses are, though, he knows that’s not right. He’s not back there. He’s not with Bucky. That’s over and done with, and he’s in his bedroom, in his apartment, in Brooklyn, just like he is every time he wakes up now. A thousand miles and a lifetime away from Afghanistan. He got so far because they escaped, and he ran. He survived. Bucky died so that he could.

But he’s never escaped, not really. Everything that made him who he was died right alongside Bucky. And he’s lost everything. *Everything.*

He must have fallen asleep after the seizure (or lost consciousness; he’s not sure which). He vaguely recalls the drunken feeling of emerging from its throes, like nothing’s wired right between his head and his body and everything’s in a disarray. Now Max is right up next to him, and his apartment is as hot as an oven. He blinks the gunk of tears from his eyes, struggling to wake up all the way. His mouth tastes like blood and vomit, and he knows he bit his tongue hard. He knows he lost hours and hours. He knows he needs help. He needs to call someone. He needs *someone.*

But there’s no one there with him, no one in the dark and the silence. Not his mother. Not Sam or Tony or Thor. Not Peggy. Not Nat. Not Bucky.

*Bucky’s dead.*
How could he have let himself ignore that? The memories are right there in the shadows, monsters beneath the surface. They’re on top of him now, hitting and hurting and holding him down. The torture never ended. He has to get away from them. That’s what Bucky told him to do. Bucky’s trying to protect him, to save him. To make sure he lives.

“Fight, Stevie. Run.”

He’s up. He’s pushing Max away. He can’t stay here any longer.

“I – I’ll get them away. I’ll hold ’em off. You need to get home.”

He’s out his door. Staggering down the hallway. Down the steps and out into the street. The night sky is bright, teeming with the peaceful love of a full moon and a million stars. They light his way. It’s very late, so there’s no one around. The buildings look like mountains, and it’s still so hot, even with the sun long gone. He has to keep walking, though. It’s hot and he’s tired and everything hurts. It’s pretty far. He can make it. Bucky told him to make it.


It takes a long time. His hip aches badly, but he’s not going to fall again. He thinks he’s outrun them, but he can’t tell and he’s too scared to look behind him. If they catch him, they’ll kill him, and Bucky’ll have died for nothing. So they can’t catch him. He keeps going no matter how much it hurts, no matter how lost he is, staggering on in the darkness.

“Go, Steve! After I lead ’em off, run. Run!”

A loud crash echoes, a deep bang that makes him flinch, and he reaches up to touch his temple, expecting to feel blood. There isn’t any. There’s nothing but the scar on his head, and the bang was him putting his elbow through glass. He looks around and realizes where he is. “Christ,” he whispers.

It’s the Iron Mechanic, and he just smashed in the back door. His brain’s broken. Reality is blending with nightmare, nightmare with memory, and everything’s tilted and off-kilter. Nothing makes sense, not that it did before, but suddenly he can’t stand it. He can’t stand himself.

He laughs a little, ignoring the blood on his hand, ignoring how his medical bracelet snags as he reaches through the hole he made to unlock the door. Wounds and chains. He’s not letting them stop him. Not now.

He pushes the door open and goes inside. He’s not sure why he came here. He doesn’t understand at first. Then it makes sense.

“You gotta run, Steve. You gotta run.”

He runs into the garage, finds the bike. It’s sitting there in the shadows right where they left it last weekend, restored and beautiful as if the damage and misuse once done to it never happened at all. As if its past has disappeared. It’s cured, fixed like he never can be. He comes closer, laboring for every breath, eyes blurred with fresh tears and sweat and memories. He sweeps his fingers along the gleaming handlebars, over the handclutch, the speedometer, the polished red of the gas tank, the smooth leather of the seat. The engine is silent and idle. So much power. So much promise.

Captain America. The key is on the keychain Tony gave him for his birthday, the silly little flag dangling from the ignition. He sees it and stares. Wants.

He wants to ride. That’s why he came here. To get away.
It takes nothing to turn the key. The motorcycle roars to life. It takes nothing to unlock the garage doors. They rattle and moan as they open. And he doesn’t think twice about getting on the bike. He revs the engine, and it roars in response, throbbing, purring beneath him. It feels so damn good. He closes his eyes, breathes deep. His heart’s beating. His lungs are breathing. His head hurts and he’s hot and sweaty and thrumming with desire. He’s alive. He wants to go. He wants to escape it all, what he left behind and everything he brought back with him.

“Run, Steve.”

Now he finally will. He’s speeding out of the garage, shrieking onto the empty street with only the moon and those millions of stars watching. It’s amazing and exciting and dangerous. Freedom. He knows what that is, knows what it feels like to go fast, so fast that the wind is tearing at his hair and ripping tears from his eyes. He’s going fast enough…

He wants to fly, so he will. He will. And he doesn’t care if he falls.

At least he’ll be free, one way or another.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Thank you so much for all your wonderful support! The attention this story gets just blows me away. I'm so very grateful :-)!

Alright, we are nearing the end of the Steve's section of the story (not that he's not in the rest of it by any means, but this is heading to the conclusion of his arc). More warnings for talk of suicide, depression, PTSD, and unhealthy coping mechanisms. I'm not a mental health expert by any means, and I don't want to upset anyone, so read at your own discretion.

“I’m falling apart. I’m barely breathing
With a broken heart that’s still beating.
In the pain, there is healing.
In your name, I find meaning.
So I’m holding on, I’m holding on, I’m holding on…
I’m barely holding onto you.”
– Lifehouse, “Broken”

The sound of her phone vibrating wakes Nat. She jolts out of a dreamless, restless sleep, rolling over and nearly crushing Liho as she fumbles for the device on her bedside table. Blearily she reads the time. 4:03 am. And the caller ID.

Steve.

Worry immediately jolts her, and she snaps away from the last vestiges of sleep, sitting up and staring wide-eyed at her phone. Why would he be calling now? It’s the dead of night. She listens a moment, the phone vibrating in her hands, and tries to hear if he’s okay, if he’s there through the shared wall. If he had another nightmare or something. He’s been quiet since they broke up, and she’s tried not to let that bother her. She knows she hurt him. She knows it, but she’s too scared to make it right. Start by answering the phone.

She hesitates, though, haunted by the shadows of her bedroom and the fear that’s plagued her almost continually since Clint’s text a couple weeks ago. On top of that, she’s utterly terrified of what Steve wants to say to her. A few long seconds drag away, and the call goes to voicemail.

Closing her eyes, she drops her phone in her lap to bury her face in her hands. You’re such a fucking coward. She keeps telling herself she did what she did to keep Steve safe. He needs to be safe, safe from her past, from the hell that’s chasing her. And it’s not just that. She’s not strong enough to deal with his issues on top of her own. She keeps rationalizing it that way, twisting the situation around until she’s certain breaking up with him was the only choice. The best choice. For his own good. But that’s a lie, and she knows it, and she’s still so frightened. She’s frightened of how sick he is, of how much she wants him despite that, of what being with someone that broken means. She’s terrified of what he would have thought if he got closer her and found out the truth. He won’t now. It was self-defense as well as protecting him. No. Selfish. These last
couple weeks since his birthday, she’s hated herself more and more for not being better than her fears and insecurities. Maybe he’s calling her to finally tell her off. She deserves it. She deserves every bit of his hate.

But she’s not strong enough to face it. So she shudders through her relief that she didn’t answer. The disappointment is almost as strong. She should have. She should have the guts to own up to what she did to him. Instead she’s been ignoring it, ignoring him, ignoring everything. Going through the last few days with complete detachment, operating on goddamn autopilot. And people have noticed because she can’t seem to manage her normal poise, not by a longshot. They’ve asked. Daisy and May and Peter. She finally told Clint she broke up with Steve a couple days ago, and he was the only one who was happy about it. “You need to be ready to run, and you can’t with be with a complication like that. It’s better that it happens now.”

Bullshit.

She’s barely holding back her tears when the phone jolts to life again in her lap. Anxiety is like a knot in her abdomen. It’s Steve again. Calling to yell at her, to call her the terrible things she deserves to be called, to vent his anger and frustration that she threw him out like he meant nothing to her. That’s why he’s calling.

Maybe, though… She doesn’t hesitate this time – I owe him this – before swiping her thumb across the screen and raising the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Natalie?”

She doesn’t recognize the voice, and suddenly all her trepidation and hesitation is gone, replaced by sharp, sharp fear. “Who is this?”

“It’s Tony Stark.”

It takes her addled mind a moment to remember who that is. “Tony?”

“Steve’s friend Tony,” Tony says shortly, though she’s put that together. He sounds extremely rattled, and that only heightens her dread. Something’s wrong. Something’s really wrong for him to be calling her at four in the morning on Steve’s phone. Her heart’s jackhammering in her chest, and a cold sweat breaks out all over her. “Steve’s been in an accident.”

Her room closes in, the shadows pressing close and spinning. She can’t process, can’t think, can’t feel. “What?” Her voice is weak and soft. “An accident?”

“He’s at New York Methodist,” Tony breathlessly declares. “Can you meet me there?”

There are a ton of questions suddenly racing through her head, fast and troublesome and dizzying. Why does Tony have Steve’s phone? Why is Tony calling her? Doesn’t he know she and Steve aren’t together anymore? Didn’t Steve tell him? And what kind of accident? What happened what happened what happened–

Is he okay?

But she can’t make her mouth actually work well enough to form the words. Instead she manages, “Ye-yeah. Yeah, of course. I’ll be right there.”


Nat sits there a moment, tingling with shock, staring at the red flashing screen of her phone
indicating the terminated call, still not thinking or processing or feeling.

Then she’s running.

She stumbles to the bathroom, grabbing her yoga pants and a t-shirt from her drawers. After splashing some cold water on her face, she dresses in record time, brushing her teeth and hair almost at once. She pulls her hair into a loose ponytail just to get it out of her face; it’s hot and muggy enough that it’s sticking to her forehead. When she’s finished, she rushes to find her sneakers, gets them on, grabs her bag and phone, and stops at the door. Stops and breathes, hand holding still in the middle of reaching for the knob. She almost kicked the jar of marbles, and that gives her pause. It’s practically the middle of the night, and she needs to go all the way north to Prospect Park and then over to 6th Street. It may be hard to find a cab, and the subways don’t scream of safety right now. Her heart pounds, and she can barely swallow the knot in her throat. For a second, she considers not going. Or going back to get the gun in her closet.

No.

She moves the marble jar to the counter, undoes the deadbolt and the lock, and goes outside before she loses her nerve. She’s barely out of her door when she spots Thor down the hallway. “Nat!” he calls, quickly locking his own door and rushing over to her. His blue eyes are teeming with concern and apprehension, but there’s not a speck of anger or spite in them. She’s totally perplexed by that more than the fact that he’s awake and sprinting toward her, and then she realizes. Steve didn’t tell his friends that she ended their relationship.

That should make it weird and awkward as Thor grasps her arm, and she should have been repulsed by the sudden, uninvited touch, but neither of those things happens. Thor is huge, his beard bordering on unkempt, his disheveled mane of blond locks sloppily pulled back with a tie. His shirt has holes in it, and his shorts are one step above a complete loss. “We need to go,” he says breathlessly. “I will take you.”

Nat knows she should say something, like the truth. She broke up with Steve, dropped him when he needed her. He may not want her there. If he’s okay. God, please let him be okay. Please! She hasn’t felt this rattled and panicked in a while, not since Clint got her out of her previous life, and she hasn’t felt it for someone else in what feels like forever. Maybe it has been forever. Not since Wanda and Pietro. Not since her father. The fear is there now though, fast and strong and undeniable, pulsing in her blood. I have to get to him. So she says nothing about their damaged (severed) relationship with Steve as Thor tugs her insistently to the steps. “Do you know anything?” she gasps as they race down them. “Is he okay?”

Thor shakes his head. “I know nothing. Tony didn’t explain.” His voice sounds rougher and less refined when he’s this bothered. “All he told me was that Steve took the bike.”

They burst out onto the street. “The bike?” Thor looks at her with confusion in his gaze, like she should know. She does put it together but probably slower than she would have if she was still with Steve. “The bike. Oh, God. He can’t–”

“No, he can’t!” Thor agreed angrily. “It was stupid and reckless!”

She doesn’t know what to say. The fear inside is boiling, hot and violent, and she can’t stop the flood of unwanted worries. He can’t drive. Not with the seizures. It’s too dangerous. He took the bike. Drove the bike.

He crashed.
This is her fault. She knows it. She did this to him by pulling away when he needed her, by leaving him alone after promising he wouldn’t be. By running, just like she always runs. Her eyes burn and her breath hitches in her throat with a sob she can’t cry and her heart pounds and pounds in time with their quick-paced steps down the street. It’s awful, the guilt and the grief, like a spinning black hole inside her, sucking everything in and compressing it to one throbbing point that’s radiating terror. To one irrefutable fact. As they walk toward the subway, the night humid and hot all around them, all she can think is this: I never should have left him.

The emergency room at New York Methodist is thankfully quiet when they get there. Of course, it’s still disturbingly early, nearly five in the morning, and for the entire journey from their apartment building to the hospital they hardly saw anyone. That was fine with Nat, because she doesn’t think she can tolerate the added fear of being followed or worse. Having Thor with her for the trip made it infinitely better just for his huge, protective presence. They didn’t speak much, sitting close in a tense, worried silence all along the subway route and all through the walk after it. She hardly knows him, and she’s feeling more and more out of place on top of everything else. What if he doesn’t want me here? What if he’s too hurt to know? What if he’s...

God, she can’t even think it. She feels sick and small and lost as she scans the emergency room, the bland white walls and the ugly gray chairs and the TV monitors situated around the nearly vacant waiting area. There’s no one there except for Tony, and he’s sitting in one of the uncomfortable looking seats underneath a poster about patient rights. He’s dressed in a rumpled and grease-stained white t-shirt and a ratty pair of jeans and flip flops. His hair is a mess, and he seems frazzled, fretting, on the verge of panicking. “Thank fuck you guys are here,” he calls as they approach, rising and coming to meet them.

Thor takes Tony’s shoulder. “What happened?”

Tony rakes a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “I still don’t know! The cops called maybe an hour ago. Woke Pepper and me. They found Steve over on the west side of Prospect Park, on East Drive. He wrapped the bike around a tree.”

Nat gasps. The breath feels almost punched from her lungs. Just the image of that, of Steve crashing his bike into a tree, of him on the pavement bleeding and broken in the dark… It’s too terrible to imagine, and she feels sick and weightless. “Is he okay?” she asks. Her voice breaks and her eyes burn and she gets desperate, stepping closer and demanding. “Is he?”

“I don’t know!” Tony sharply replies. He’s absolutely torqued up with worry. “I guess someone luckily drove by and called the accident in. The bike’s totally trashed.” God. “The cops traced the registration back to me. I haven’t transferred it to Steve yet. I was gonna do it next week…” He looks on the verge of tears for a moment. Nat doesn’t know hardly anything about Tony, but how much he cares for Steve is downright striking. Tony jerks himself out of it. “Anyway, I checked the shop after they called. Someone broke in. Smashed in the back door and opened the garage and took off. It had to be him.”

“Fuck,” Thor breathes. Nat’s never heard him swear like that before. “And you don’t know if he’s alright?”

Tony gets utterly exasperated. “I just fucking said I don’t! Jesus!” He twists away, brimming with nervous energy, and starts pacing and jittering with his hands like he’s trying to fix something only there’s nothing he can do. “I got here and they won’t let me see him. I just know he’s alive.” That was something at least. A tiny bit of the knot of misery inside Nat loosened. He’s alive. “They found his phone on him, so I called Sam and you guys and everyone I could think of.” Tony hands her Steve’s phone. She recognizes it of course, even with the screen scraped and cracked.
Taking it is harder than it should be, and she feels wrong doing it, wrong because this is wrong and she doesn’t belong here. Tony’s giving her this because he thinks she’s still Steve’s girlfriend.

She wishes more than anything that she is.

“What was he thinking? Why would he…” Thor’s voice is quiet, horrified, as he stares at the battered phone. “His seizures—”

Tony’s not so quiet or restrained. “He knew how fucking dangerous it was! How could he be so stupid?” He shakes his head, battling his emotions. He looks caught between wanting to break apart and wanting to break something. “I knew he wasn’t okay. I knew it. He looked really bad on Saturday, Thor. You saw it!”

Thor is pale and uncertain. Guilt is bright in his eyes. He bites his lip hard a moment, like he doesn’t want to admit that Tony’s right even though he knows he is. “Are you saying he tried to kill himself?”

No. Nat can’t stand to hear that. She can’t stand it. Everything she felt when she met Steve, the protectiveness, the urge to help him, to make him better… It comes back sharply, so strong and forceful she almost cries out. She witnessed the depression and PTSD tear Steve down. She listened to him cry, saw his eyes full of tears, felt him tremble in her arms as he suffered with dreams from the war… It’s too terrible to contemplate but she knows she has to. They have to.

This could have been a suicide attempt.

“I don’t know,” Tony eventually whispers, and he’s biting his lip again, trying to hold on. “I don’t know! Maybe he wasn’t trying, not literally, but it sure as shit seems like he didn’t care if he…” He loses his nerve and turns to Nat. “Why did he do this?”

It takes her a second to realize he’s asking her. Like she should know. And she would know if she wasn’t such a godawful liar and fucking coward. Maybe he wouldn’t have done this if she was there. Maybe he wouldn’t have fallen so low. He stole the bike and crashed it. He knew he couldn’t drive and he did it anyway. He hurt himself. He could have killed himself. Why did he do this? Why? She knows the answer. God, she knows.

He did it because of me.

She sobs before she can stop herself. Thor mistakes the reason for her grief, of course, because why would he even think she could be so awful as to break up with a disabled war vet who has chronic seizures and debilitating PTSD when he needed her the most? No one would fathom that, and they should. They fucking well should. “It’s alright,” he hushes into the crown of her head, pulling her close and wrapping her securely into his massive embrace. She heaves another cry into his shoulder, one that’s muffled and wet. He holds her tighter. “Truly. He will be okay. This is a rough patch, but he has you. He has us. We will make sure he knows that.”

She wants to scream.

Thankfully the doctor comes before she completely loses her control. She pulls away from Thor the second she sees him. He’s a middle-aged man, dressed in green scrubs and balding with a stern visage, and he seems cross and irritated before he even starts to speak. “You’re here for Mr. Rogers?”

Nat wipes her eyes and tries to don some sort of façade of composure. She’s supposed to be good at that, at keeping her emotions under control, but she’s not anymore. She can’t lie to herself. Steve makes her feel too much. “Is he okay? Is he?”
The doctor glances at his clipboard after pushing his glasses up a bit on his nose. He has admonishment plastered all over his face, from his taut frown to his narrowed eyes. “He’s extremely lucky. Considering how fast he was going and the fact he wasn’t wearing a helmet, it could have been worse. A lot worse.”

Nat’s eyes close, and she feels faint. Her heart’s positively pounding, beating hot blood through her body, driving relief like a spike through her mind. He’s okay. He’s alive. He’s okay.

“As it stands, most of his left side took the impact of the collision. He’s got a fractured sternum, a couple of bruised ribs on that side, and a fractured ulna. And a rather serious case of road rash. We’re cleaning and suturing some of the worst areas.” The doctor lowers his clipboard. “But other than that, he’s alright. Somebody somewhere was looking out for him. He’ll walk away from this.”

He’s alright.

Tony seems too shocked and relieved to function at first, but then he asks, “What about any neurologic complications? You know he has epilepsy, right? And a bunch of other stuff. I tried to tell the nurses but no one–”

“We’re aware of Mr. Rogers’ condition,” the doctor replies, none too pleased with Tony’s harried implication that they haven’t done their due diligence. “He was wearing a med-alert bracelet, and we were able to get the name of his neurologist from him in the ambulance. There’s no sign of outward trauma to his head. A CT scan revealed no signs of hematoma or closed head injury. Like I said, he was unbelievably lucky in that regard. But he’s been fairly out of it since the EMTs assessed him at the scene, able to demonstrate basic knowledge of who he is and what happened but slow to respond to us. It’s quite possible he had a seizure at the scene or immediately before.” As in a seizure caused him to crash. Nat bit her lip, wincing and glancing at Thor who’s darkly staring a hole through the white tiles of the floor. “He should be evaluated. Doctor Erskine, I believe?” The doctor checks his notes again. “He’s on his way here. I’m sure he’ll do a more comprehensive workup.”

Nat doesn’t know if she should be relieved or frightened. She’s both. And she blurts out the only thing that occurs to her. “When can I see him?”

The doctor sighs. “The nurses are finishing up with dressing his injuries, so it’ll be a little longer. Once they get him settled into a room, they’ll call you.” He looks irritated again. “Are there any other questions?”

There may be. Nat checks out of the conversation, though, so she doesn’t ask and she doesn’t hear if the others do. She’s staring blankly at the closed, glass, sliding doors of the ER, aching to go through them, to get to Steve and be with him. Be at his side now like she wasn’t before. Tony wants to talk about stupid? She’s the one who’s stupid. So fucking stupid. God, this last week… No matter how hard she’s tried to forget him, forget his smile and his laugh and his blue eyes and strong hands and gentle spirit… The sound of his voice. His kiss, always so tentative and respectful. She tried so hard to forget, to get him out of her head and out of her heart, but she can’t. He’s haunted her thoughts every waking moment, haunted her dreams because he’s in her soul, and she knows she can’t let him go. She can’t run from him. She can’t. Now more than ever before she has to admit to herself that she made a terrible, terrible mistake.

This is my fault.

The tears trickle down her cheeks. Somehow she made it over to one of the chairs to sit, and now there’s a box of tissues in front of her face. Tony’s offering them. Thor’s gone, and she has some
vague memory of a few moments ago, that he went to find some coffee for them. She glances between the tissues to Tony’s face. He looks so lost and worried. Even if Steve’s okay, he’s not. And even though she expects the question, she’s not ready for it. “Didn’t you notice?”

It’s not an accusation, not spoken with heat or sharpness, but she can’t hear it any other way. He’s watching her expectantly, trying to understand how things got this bad, and she knows she has to be truthful. She has to be. She used to be so good at lying, at hiding behind a thousand falsehoods and façades. She’s used that to keep herself safe, but she can’t now. Steve got past everything she has to protect herself, and she’s compromised, disarmed, stripped bare. She can’t lie. “I broke up with him.”

Tony’s face fractures in confusion. “Huh?”

She can’t speak for a moment, her mouth limply open, her eyes welled with tears. “Last week… I – I…” God, this is hard. She shakes her head uselessly, struggling for the words. “I got scared.”

“Of what?” Tony’s angrier now that it’s sinking in. He slams the box of tissues onto the chair beside her, and she jerks. “Of him? Of this?”

She can’t deny that. Once again she wants to rationalize it, but she’s not strong enough anymore. “I was scared. I didn’t think I could handle it. I told him we couldn’t see each other anymore.”

Tony looks away hotly. “Fucking hell… Well, that explains a whole fucking lot. You know what he went through, don’t you? He was fucking tortured.”

Nat looks away. The urge to defend herself spikes inside her. As bad as she feels, though, she’s not going to be trampled by someone who doesn’t know everything, by someone who’s judging her without all the facts. And she’s not about to tell him – my ex-husband is hunting me – things she can’t tell anyone, not even to protect herself. “I know. I screwed up.”

“You turned your back on him. Christ, he was fucking head over heels for you!”

“I know. And I’m here now,” she hisses. “I’m here because I know it was wrong. I’m here.” She can’t say anymore, not what she knows in her heart.

“Do you care about him?”

She clenches her teeth, fighting for control. “Yes.”

Tony glowers a moment more, but now his anger’s not fading. He deflates with a long sigh, shaking his head. “Then you make sure he knows it.”

Nat doesn’t have it in her to say anything more, let alone argue, and there’s no time anyway. Tony’s phone rings, and he steps away, fishing in the pocket of his jeans. “Hello?” he gruffly says when he answers. “Sam. Yeah, yeah, the doctor came. He’s alright. He’s… No. We don’t know yet.” He walks away, and the conversation gets too quiet for Nat to hear. The second he’s gone, her anger wells up inside her, and she snatches a tissue from the box to wipe at her eyes, breathing through the pain in her chest and staring at those sealed doors. She feels torn open, raw and ragged, bleeding. And she knows what just occurred was inevitable. The second she answered that call and walked out her door… She’s been running for so long, running from everything, that she’s not sure she knows how to face things anymore. That’s what led her here in the first place. Running, because turning around and fighting the things that scare her, that hurt her… That sort of strength has been beaten out of her. She decided years ago that she’s barely worth fighting for.

But Steve is. She knows that. And now it’s time to decide if she’s stronger than her fears.
She’s not sure how long she sits there, watching the doors, staring at the array of missed calls from Sam on Steve’s phone, wondering and wishing and hating herself. When the emergency room doors finally open, she sprins from her seat even though her legs have fallen asleep and even though she’s never felt so uncertain. A nurse comes over to her, a pretty girl with very dark skin and kind eyes. “Doctor Miller said you’re waiting to go back?”

There’s no doubt, no hesitation. Not anymore. “Yes. Is Steve alright?”

The nurse smiles at her, no doubt taking in her disheveled appearance and red eyes and pallor. “He’s fine. They just got him settled upstairs. You can go see him now, if you like.” She gives some directions and a little admitting note with Steve’s room number on it.

Nat’s so flustered she can hardly follow along, but she thinks she gets it. “My friends were just here… Can you let them know?” She’s not sure how she’s feeling about them right now, but this is about Steve, not her, and Steve needs to have them with him. Particularly if he doesn’t want me. She can’t think about that.

The nurse nods. “Sure. It’s not a problem,” she says, and Nat tries for a smile and fails, looking down at Steve’s smashed phone that’s still in her hand and the note with his room number. Her emotions keep getting the better of her. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. You’re Nat, right?”

Nat’s eyes shoot up. “How did you…”

The nurse can’t possibly be aware of what’s happened, not that they had it all and lost it because Nat was too weak to be there for him. But she sure seems like she knows. “He was asking for you.” Nat’s heart pounds again, this time in renewed hope. “He’s a little out of it between the trauma and the pain meds and the doc thinks he might have had a seizure sometime before the crash, but he said your name a couple times.”

He asked for me.

Warmth rushes over her, chasing the chilly pain from her bones, and she’s battling tears of relief again. “Th-thanks,” she stammers, and the nurse smiles and nods once more, and Nat heads down the hallway to the left to find her way to Steve’s room. She walks quickly, not letting herself slow down, not letting herself be afraid. Running toward what she needs, not away. The hospital corridors are white and beige and overly bright, floor tiles polished and gleaming under the lights, and she miraculously makes it through the maze to the bank of elevators. Then it’s a quick ride up. Her heart is pounding like crazy every second she has to wait, and she fights the urge to pace or fidget until she reaches Steve’s floor. Once she does, out she goes again, finding the placard on the wall that says “Comprehensive Epilepsy Center”. Beneath that there are directions to the different sections of rooms. Right. She goes that way, again practically running down the hall, until she’s at the nurses’ desk. She signs in there, her hand shaking all the while, and someone takes her to Steve’s room.

The lights are dimmed inside, so she can’t really see him. There’s someone by the door, blocking her view further and talking to the same doctor (Doctor Miller, she supposes) that they met in the emergency room. The other man spots her coming closer, and he immediately excuses himself from the conversation. Nat’s blood goes a little cold, afraid of who he is and what he wants. She doesn’t recognize him, and even though he looks banal and nonthreatening with his casual clothes and messy mop of curly hair, she can’t trust anything. She forces herself to be calm, even as he draws closer to her. “Are you Natalie?”

This is her chance to lie, to flee, to get out before she gets in deeper. Escape entices her again, but again she doesn’t submit. “Natalie Rushman, yes.”
The man nods and extends his hand. “I’m Doctor Bruce Banner. I’m Steve’s psychiatrist.”

Oh. Of course. Steve mentioned he’s seeing one, so it made sense he would be here, particularly since it’s pretty obvious this was some sort of self-destructive move on Steve’s part. She doesn’t want to consider that this Doctor Banner may want to talk to her, that maybe Steve didn’t tell him either that they broke up (or that he did, and if he did, will Doctor Banner blame her for dumping a disabled, emotionally unstable war vet?). It doesn’t matter, because it’s too late to back out now. “Hi,” she offers lamely as he shakes her hand.

“I was wondering if we could speak a moment?” Doctor Banner asks, and he’s gently touching her elbow and leading her away from Steve’s room. Nat nearly flinches at the uninvited contact, but she pushes down the shudder and follows him to a little lounge. The lights are dimmed, and the area looks cozy. Banner gestures for her to sit in one of the chairs, and she can’t help but hesitating a moment before doing it. Banner settles himself adjacent to her, and he sighs as he does. “I just wanted to ask you if you have any insight into what led to this. Steve’s…” Banner gives a weak smile. “I’ve been treating him for two years now, and without divulging too much of his medical or personal information, I can tell you I’ve never once been concerned about him taking his own life.”

“He didn’t try,” she blurts. She doesn’t know why she does that. She doesn’t know for sure, and, God, if Steve did try, he needs help. And she’s not going to admit that her leaving him could have been the thing that finally pushed him to suicide.

Banner nods his agreement. “I don’t think he did, either. Not directly. His seizures leave him confused and disoriented sometimes, which could have definitely hindered his ability to make good decisions. Plus… Well, Steve’s stubborn. He’s had to be to make it as far as he has since being injured. I’ve had a lot of people try to fight therapy, but Steve’s kind of in a league of his own. He could outlast Mount Everest if he had to.” For some reason, that makes her smile, and she ducks her head a bit. Banner reaches across the distance between them to grasp her forearm. His touch is warm, his fingers callused, and this time she doesn’t so sharply feel the urge to pull away. “You’ve probably noticed, but Steve’s extremely private. He builds things up inside. He thinks that’s the best way to deal with his pain, to bottle it up and ignore it and keep going. To his credit, it’s helped him in the past.”

“In Afghanistan,” she offers.

“Yes. Detachment. It’s not terribly uncommon in victims of torture. If I don’t let myself really accept that it’s happening, it’s not really happening. He believes distance the best thing for him, the best way to reclaim the life he had before he was hurt. Did he speak with you about his condition?” Not really. Not everything. But she thinks she knows enough from what she saw and what Sam told her at the party, so she nods. “I firmly believe his epilepsy is exacerbated by stress, and his PTSD and mood issues are about as poorly controlled as his seizures are. It’s turning into a vicious circle, and trying to push through his problems without really facing him isn’t a healthy approach. Part of him hasn’t truly digested what happened in Afghanistan, I can say that much with certainty.” She knew that, too. “I can’t talk about it.” Steve says that every time the subject of his time spent as a POW comes up. It’s a defense mechanism. She knew it when they were together, knows it now, knows it because she does the same. I can never talk about it.

Doctor Banner sighs. “We can all read the reports that the army made and the ones he gave after he recovered from the coma, but no one aside from him really knows what he went through or what happened. He lost his best friend, James Barnes.”

“Bucky,” she whispers.
“Yes. Steve’s repressed that, convinced himself he can ignore it. And until he faces it in a meaningful way, I don’t see his situation improving.”

That hurt to hear. The promise of getting better… She threw that around like it’s easy and simple, and she didn’t know the first thing about it. Doctor Banner went on. “At any rate, Steve tends to put blinders up and stay the course, so I don’t see this sort of behavior spontaneously happening. Something triggered it.” Banner looks worried. “Like I said, I don’t think this was a suicide attempt. I think there’s more to it than that. He’s been frustrated and angry lately, and the bike… Well, maybe this was about getting away.”

Running.

“He was particularly tight-lipped during our session Tuesday, so I’m just wondering if perhaps you noticed something. Or maybe he spoke with you. He never directly admitted to it, but I got the impression he trusts you. He wants to talk to you. He’s trying to build himself up to it. I think he’s holding onto that, to you.”

She can’t deal with that. She knows Steve wanted her, wanted her body and her voice. She knows he felt something for her, but hearing this? That he trusts her? That he would have confided in her maybe if she hadn’t broken his heart? That he’s holding onto her? She’s not sure what she can say. It’s the same question again, the same one Thor and Tony asked. Why didn’t you help him?

It doesn’t matter why. Suddenly she thinks of her father, of his big hands and kind smile. “Mistakes teach you mettle, Natalia. The best you can do when you fall is stand and keep going.” She’s here, and there’s a reason she is, a reason she moved in next to him, that Liho snuck into his apartment through that broken vent, that she heard his nightmare and that he came to her job to clumsily ask her out. A reason for those perfect days where they had each other and not a care in the world, even though they’re both so broken. A reason that, despite what she did and how she ran, Tony still called her this night. Fate or destiny or whatever it is. She’s not sure she believes in coincidences, but she knows why they found each other. She knows she can make this better, that she can help him heal. She’s really where she’s meant to be, and that’s more important than anything else.

She never wants to see him cry again. That hasn’t changed. That will never change. “I don’t know what happened,” she says, gathering strength as her heart beats and her lungs breathe and her spirit grows stronger again. “I don’t know, but I’ll find out. I’m here for him. And I won’t leave him.”

Banner looks mildly surprised, and she can’t tell if it’s because of what she’s saying or how she’s saying it. There’s conviction in her tone, conviction in her heart, and she holds his gaze evenly. This isn’t one of her endless masks or countless lies. This is her, who she is. “Okay,” he eventually says on a breath, more relieved at this point than anything else. “Okay, that’s good. He needs that, needs someone to help him. Both Doctor Erskine and I believe it’s best that he not be living alone at this point, particularly after an incident as reckless and alarming as this one is.”

“I know. I’m right next door to him. I can stay for a while.” If he lets me. She still doesn’t want to think about that, now even more than before.

“Good. I can’t stress enough that he needs steady support right now. And we need to get to the bottom of whatever set him off. He has to keep every appointment with me, has to stay on his medication regimen. This might not have directly been a suicide attempt, but it was definitely self-destructive.”

“Do you know how long he has to stay here?”
“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Banner calms. “Doctor Miller wants him here for observation and to run some additional tests, just to be sure the sternal fracture isn’t heralding damage to his heart. And I’m sure Doctor Erskine will want to reassess the frequency and severity of his seizures. Steve told me on Tuesday that he’s been having more of them.” God, he was having seizures alone. She swallows down her guilt and nausea. “We definitely should rule out any additional neurological injury from the accident. It doesn’t seem like there was any at the moment, but we need to be sure. No matter what, he was very lucky he didn’t hurt himself more seriously or hurt anyone else.”

She nods. “Can I see him now?”

Doctor Banner smiles. “Of course.” He squeezes her arm, though, which stops her from standing. “Listen, Natalie, Steve’s… Well, he’s not going to just get better. Recovery is a process, a long one. It’s two steps forward, one step back. It seems trite, but it’s true. And it’s not about forgetting your past or ignoring it or simply getting over it. It’s about learning to let it be a part of you. That takes time and patience. If you’re determined to help him, make sure you understand that.”

She knows that. She’s living it. “I do,” she affirms.

He seems pleased with that. He lets go of her arm and stands himself. “Alright. I’ll be here if you have any questions. Thanks.”

“Thank you.”

He leaves the lounge. She doesn’t, not for a moment anyway. She sits there, centering herself, breathing deeply and trying not to let the enormity of what’s before her frighten her away. Again, she’s faced with the choice. She can walk. She can run. She knows how, knows better than anyone. Run and hide and leave all this behind and not entangle herself any further with Steve and his problems.

But she’s up before she even realizes it, walking out of the lounge and right back to his room. There are a couple nurses outside his door now, going over his chart, and they don’t think twice about stepping aside to let her in. Her steps slow as she does, and her heart hammers. She’s scared. Scared of him. Scared for him. But not scared enough to stop.

Inside the lights are on low. The first hints of dawn are painting the sky through the window, but it’s still dark enough to seem like nighttime, like everything is eerie and not quite real. Steve’s in the hospital bed, and it’s reclined. He looks… Her eyes burn. His left arm’s badly swollen and in a brace. An IV port is taped to his right wrist, pumping fluids and what she supposes are pain medicines into his body. He’s pretty badly scraped up. There are bruises and bandages dotted with red all over him, around his left thigh and calf, up and under the hospital gown he has on. A light blanket is covering the other side of him up to his chest, the side that’s not so injured. He doesn’t notice her come in, and for a second she thinks he’s sleeping. But his eyes are opened to slits. He’s vacantly staring out the window, the thousand-yard stare into the darkness. He’s pale as a ghost under the cuts on his face, pale and lost and so, so broken.

A hundred horrible doubts stampede through her head. He’s not going to want her here. She left him, abandoned him, hurt him after she promised to be there for him. She’s so goddamn broken herself; how the hell can she possibly hope to help him? And she’s so damaged. If he wanted her before… He won’t now.

All of that is dashed, though, scattering back into the dark corners of her heart, the second he hears her take another step inside. He turns from the window and sees her. For a moment, neither of
them move or speak. She’s staring, and he is, too, staring like he doesn’t recognize her. *No.* Staring like he had the night after his birthday party, hazy and distant and with dawning relief. *Angel.* That’s what he called her. She’s not that, not even close, but to him… *Maybe I can be.* “Steve?”

His eyes fill with tears, and she sees the cracks building and building. Before she even thinks to, she flies across the little room. Her arms go around him, and he leans forward with a cry, clutches at her with his good hand, grips her shirt hard and chokes a sob into her breasts. “Oh, God,” he moans. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! I didn’t want – I don’t… ’m sorry!”

“Oh,” she whispers into his hair, holding him tight, as tight as she can. “It’s alright. It’s okay.”

“Nat–”

She hushes him again. “No, it’s alright. I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry!” He cries harder, wet warmth soaking into her shirt. She closes her eyes against her own tears. “I’m here now. I’m here. And I’m staying.”

Steve’s in the hospital for two days. Nat spends almost every minute of those two days with him. It’s alright, and for the most part, things come easily. For all the awkwardness and doubt there could be, taking care of him has kept her focused and fairly immune to her shame. He’s desperate to have her close, to have physical contact with her as if she’s an anchor to him now more than ever before. As if Banner’s words are as literal as they are figurative. He’s holding onto her, hard and fast. He gets anxious when she leaves, like he’s afraid she’ll up and disappear or that she won’t come back. She sees that, so she always does return right away, barely leaving to get herself a shower and change of clothes at home both days and a cup of coffee or a quick bite. She calls into work to let them know what happened. Thankfully May understands and lets her take some time off, but even if she didn’t, there’s no way Nat’s leaving Steve again. He’s holding onto her, and she’s not letting him go.

He doesn’t talk much at all, though. What happened between them is the eight-hundred pound gorilla in the room. Well, it is to her. He doesn’t seem to care at all that she’s here uninvited, that she broke up with him and apparently left him to wither by himself. He doesn’t mention it. Tony and Thor are tense about it, but they don’t dare say a thing, so everything is relatively stable. Frankly, she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it doesn’t. Part of that may be because he’s in some pain, and he can’t move around much because of his injuries, so he sleeps a lot. Part of it is also that he’s generally so quiet and embarrassed. Taciturn. That’s not like Steve, not the real Steve beneath all the damage, the one who loves space shows and draws like he was born to and smiles brighter than the sun. He doesn’t say a thing about what he did and why he did it, not even when Tony comes in later the day after the accident and rails on him for being so stupid. Steve sits there, repeatedly mumbling that he’s sorry, that he’ll pay for the bike and anything else he destroyed. Tony in turn gets more upset because this *isn’t* about the goddamn bike. This whole thing obviously bothers the older man a great deal, how scared he was that Steve could have died, and he doesn’t know how to communicate that feeling other than with anger. It’s Thor who eventually gets Tony to calm down, who takes him away to find something to eat so he can cool off. When they’re alone, Nat watches the emotions work their way across Steve’s face despite how stony he’s trying to be. “It’s my fault.” That’s all he offers before going back to staring out the window, this time at the trees and parking lot of the hospital, at the cheery, sunny day, and Nat holds his hand tighter to remind him that he’s not alone.

The doctors come and run their tests. As Steve’s attending, Doctor Miller is in charge of his care principally, and he calls in a cardiologist to make doubly sure the blunt force to Steve’s chest from
the crash didn’t damage his heart or lungs. He’s fine, thank God. He has a little trouble breathing thanks to the bruised ribs and cracked sternum, and laying down is pretty impossible, but with time and rest he’ll make a full recovery. That’s amazing to her, and sometimes she feels like she can’t fully accept it or it’ll up and vanish like a fantasy. Doctor Erskine also comes and does an MRI scan as well as some EEGs. The Epilepsy Center has quite a few really nice suites designed to maximize patient comfort while doing these tests, which is good because Erskine orders more than a couple of them. Nat catches the discussion he has with his assistants once. He’s convinced Steve had a seizure while driving, maybe had another one earlier that day, that he’s having a cluster of them these last weeks since his birthday. The neurologist is trying to localize the source of them in Steve’s brain. He’s worried he can’t, but he never shows it in front of Steve. He’s a nice, older man, German with curly salt and pepper hair, round glasses, and a gentle bedside manner. He looks a little like a mad scientist to Nat, but he’s about as far from that in actuality as possible. She likes him instantly.

She also likes Doctor Banner. He’s soft-spoken, gentle though not without a fierce streak. She thinks right away that he’s good for Steve, not the sort who will give up or put up with bullshit. He comes a few times over the couple days, each time asking to speak to Steve alone, and even though she’s curious, she always leaves and never asks Steve what they talk about. It’s not her business. There are still those boundaries, and though she knows now that she needs to help him bring down his walls, there’s time. She won’t pry, not when he’s pensive and still so tenderly broken. The doctors can fix his fractured bones and heal his scraped skin, but the damage done to his soul… Doctor Banner’s completely right about that. That’s going to take time. Time and patience and determination and hope. She prays the man who survived everything, who smiles at her and laughs at her lame jokes and buys her coffee and blushes when she compliments his art, that that man is still surviving.

She’s worried, though. She can’t lie. Today Steve’s going home, and she’s scared of what that will mean. Doctor Erskine is content that there’s no further neurological complications from the crash. Doctor Miller is satisfied that there’s no cardiovascular or pulmonary damage from the blow to his chest. And Doctor Banner thinks he’s ready, provided he has someone to stay with him (which Nat assures she can do, and she’s making those promises again, but she knows this time that they’re not easy and she knows the depth of the commitment she’s making, what she’s committing to, so it’s okay). Thus, there’s no reason he needs to stay at the hospital since there’s nothing further they can do for him. He’s being discharged with a set of rules to which he needs to adhere, a strict outline of follow-up care he needs to have, and a list of meds he needs to take, including an adjustment to his seizure treatment and analgesics for his injuries. His left arm’s in a plaster cast from his fingers to his elbow for six weeks, and he’s got strict orders to refrain from physical activity and stressful situations. He needs to sleep reclined to help with the fracture to his sternum and tender ribs. He’s got a rough time ahead of him.

And she’ll be at his side, but again she can’t lie: she’s scared, particularly as she goes back to his place to get him some clothes. He’s going home later and has nothing to wear, so she took on the task of fetching him something so she could feed Liho. After checking on her, she unlocks the door to Steve’s apartment, hesitating just a second to go back in. Everything else fell apart after his birthday, so she expects ruin. She finds it, though not as obviously as she feared. There’s mess, disorganization all over. Books and papers and things clutter the coffee table. Laundry scattered all over his bedroom. Dishes in the sink and empty water bottles left and right. Medication containers strewn on the counters. It looks like someone’s tidied up a little bit, probably Thor since Thor’s been taking care of Max these last couple days. The poor dog is desperate for attention, and as she looks around, he’s licking at her hands and wagging his tail and whining. He’s missing Steve something fierce. “He’ll be home soon,” she promises as she kneels to pet him. Max licks her face, and she hugs him. It’s amazing how much she’s missed even this, Max’s
warm, sturdiness against her body.

Then she sighs and walks to Steve’s bedroom, appraising the mess there. First thing she’ll do this afternoon when they get home is clean. His bed is bare, no sheets or comforter. Maybe he left it in the wash? She gathers up some of his laundry and takes it to the little alcove with his washing machine and dryer. Sure enough, the washer is full of his bedding and smells a little like mildew after sitting in there a few days. There’s hardly any laundry detergent left, but she adds some water to the container to get enough of it to get started. She’ll have to buy more (and a quick glance into his fridge earlier revealed he needs a ton of groceries, too). Making a mental note of it all, she grabs the basket she finds in the laundry area and heads back to his bedroom to pick up the rest of the clothes.

As she does that, though, she spots something on the floor next to his bed. It’s laying atop a rumpled t-shirt. Crouching, she fishes the item from the fabric and sits on the edge of his bed. It’s a set of dog tags, the little metal cards dangling from the chain as she holds it in front of her eyes. His? Confused, she takes them and reads the name. They’re not Steve’s. James Barnes. They’re Bucky’s.

Nat lowers the dog tags, feeling sick in the pit of her stomach. There’s really no evidence to suggest what she’s thinking, because she’s never been in his bedroom before. These could have been sitting on the floor in his shirt for forever for all she knew. Still, she doesn’t believe so. There’s no dust on them, and from what she knows of how Steve feels about Bucky, she can’t imagine he could treat anything this important like trash. No, they look like they were dropped recently, like they were a part of whatever set Steve off. Whatever drove him to steal the motorcycle. She sighs, holding the dog tags in her palm, sweeping her thumb over Bucky’s name. He needs to talk. That’s what Banner keeps impressing upon her. He needs to talk about what happened. He’s repressed it, in denial about it, pretending he can just keep living. But he’s not living at all.

She looks up and catches sight of herself in Steve’s mirror. It gives her pause, the things she sees and what she chooses to ignore herself. But she keeps going, standing and putting the dog tags on the bedside table. Then she goes to get what she came for, finding a gym bag in Steve’s closet and stuffing it with a pair of boxers and socks from his drawers as well as a pair of loose shorts and a larger button-down shirt, which will be easier for him to get on with his arm in a cast. With her haul secure and another few pets to Max’s head, she heads out.

The walk back to the hospital she spends not thinking. A lot has happened in a couple days, in the last couple months, and she’s not ready to let it catch up to her yet. She went to get Steve’s things, and she has them. Tony’s coming with a car. Thor’s there to help Steve walk. They’ll get him home, get him in bed, and everything will be fine. One step at a time.

She gets about as far as the lounge outside Steve’s room before she realizes nothing’s ever that simple. “Nat.” The voice makes her slow from her determined, brisk pace down the hallway, and she glances sharply to the right to see Clint emerging from the lounge. He’s dressed in a suit for work, and he looks irate and worried.

Inwardly she bristles because she can practically hear what he’s going to say before he says it. The tense frown on his lips is a tell-tale sign. The urge to just keep going and get back to Steve is really strong, but she can’t. Not with Clint watching. “What’re you doing here?” she whispers as she backtracks to him.

“I should ask you the same thing,” he replies quietly, taking her arm firmly and not quite dragging her into the privacy of the lounge. His eyes are teeming with anxious ire. “You can’t be doing
this. You can’t be running around Brooklyn like this! I can’t keep an eye on you.”

He always makes her feel like a fucking child when he gets like this. She knows he doesn’t mean to, that he’s scared for her, but she doesn’t need this right now. “I told you when I called. Steve’s hurt. I have to be here for him.”

Clint was none too pleased at the time, repeatedly reminding her to stay out of it, that she broke up with Steve for a reason. She didn’t listen then and won’t listen now. “I’ve got Maria watching the building. That’s why we moved you there, so she could watch the building. If you’re not there, she can’t keep an eye on you. Do you understand that? All of the times you’ve gone back and forth from here to home, you’ve been unprotected.” She winces. He’s really exasperated, really worried. Something’s wrong. “Nat, I know you care for this guy, but—”

“What happened?”

Clint searches her eyes like he’s weighing on whether or not to tell her something. Eventually he sighs and reaches into his suit pocket. He pulls out a folded piece of white paper. “You know these two?”

Nat looks at the pictures he hands her. They’re print-outs of mug shots, marked and labeled by the NYPD. And she knows them. She recognizes them instantly. The world closes in again, and she feels sick just seeing them. “Brock Rumlow,” she whispers, staring at the one man who has spiky brown hair and a dark five o’clock shadow on a gaunt face that could be handsome if it wasn’t so damn menacing. She hears his voice hissed in her ear before she can quell the memory. “Boss man won’t mind if we sample the merchandise, will he?” She shivers at the feel of his breath on her neck, of his hand on her back. Forcing herself to look at the other guy doesn’t make her feel any better. He’s bigger, thicker, with a receding hairline and dull, angry, brown eyes. “And Jack Rollins.” She swallows down her pounding heart. Her throat’s gone dry and tight so her voice is hardly anything at all. “Alexei used them as muscle.”

Seeing how she’s distressed, Clint takes the pictures away quickly. “We picked them up a couple nights ago outside a convenience store in Greenwood. Seems they were trying to convince the owner to rethink his suppliers for cigarettes. The guy was Chinese and didn’t speak much English, but his daughter claimed they roughed him up a little, threatened to make his life a living hell if he didn’t comply.”

“So they’re in jail?” Nat asks, trying not to sound as afraid as she is.

Clint shakes his head tautly. “No. The storeowner refused to press charges, so we had to let them go. Without a formal complaint, there’s no evidence of anything.” Nat looks away, terror pulsing in her heart. “But it’s not a coincidence. These guys are here for a reason.”

“No me,” she whispers. It’s more a plea than anything else.

“We can’t know that. You said he wanted you back, that he threatened to find you and kill you if you didn’t come home.” She can’t speak. Her voice is lost, her thoughts scattered, everything in jeopardy again. Clint sighs sharply. “Look, even if he’s not directly looking for you, he’s here. He’s obviously branching his business prospects out from Staten Island if he has these two asshole thugs out testing the waters and pushing into local business. I have a call into the organized crime unit out there, but they’re so fucking swamped it might be a while before they get back to me.” This isn’t happening. It’s not happening. “Point is: you need to be somewhere I can keep an eye on you. In fact, we should think about moving you again altogether.”

“Clint—”
“It’s not worth the risk.”

She shakes her head. *This isn’t happening!* “I – I can’t leave right now. Not now.”

Clint’s getting more agitated. He takes both her hands. “Nat, I *know* you think you feel something for this guy,” he says again. “Okay? There’s nothing wrong with that. But you don’t need this! You need to think about yourself right now. If he comes after you, if he *finds* you–”

“I can’t leave,” she says. Clint squints like he doesn’t recognize her. “I can’t. Steve’s… He needs me, Clint. I didn’t mean to get so close to him, but I did, and if I leave him now… I just can’t. I can’t leave him.” *He’s broken and he needs me.*

She’s never said no to him before. She never thinks it’s right, not with all he did and does for her and because he’s a cop and a damn good one. Clint knows what he’s talking about. This is more than just the hint of danger now, than a whisper that her past is moving closer to catching her. This is *real.* She has no cause to refuse any advice Clint has to give her.

She has to, though. She ran before, let her fears get the better of her, and Steve paid the price. For better or for worse, her life is tangled together with his, and there’s no ripping them apart. Not anymore. *And he* doesn’t own her anymore. For so long she’s felt his power over her like it’s a tangible thing, this force from afar driving her places she doesn’t want to go, controlling her and forcing her like he always did. Like he’s still got her tied to him. *Every time I run away, I’m letting him win.* She gets a deeper breath into her lungs, exhales the poison of the breath she was holding. “I know it’s dangerous. But I can’t go. I’m sorry, Clint, sorry to make this harder for you, but…”

*I have to stay.*

Clint stares at her, working his teeth together if the shifting of his jaw is any indication. His hazel eyes are steeped in frustration, but he does finally nod. “Jesus. Alright. You sure this guy is worth it? That he’s good?”

She’s never been so sure of anything. “Yes.”

“God, I can’t believe this. Alright.” He closes his eyes again. “I want a list of everyone he knows, *everyone* you’re dealing with. No argument. Maria and I will run them.” She wants to debate that, that it’s overly paranoid and maybe not entirely legal and Steve’s friends are good people, but she knows she shouldn’t. Clint’s right. “He’s going home today? I pressed the nurses.” Of course he did. She winces at the thought of Clint interrogating the nice people working in the ward here, but she just nods. “Stay inside as much as possible until I get a handle on what Rumlow and Rollins are doing in Brooklyn. Got it? Lay low. I have a couple squad cars driving your apartment by a few times during the day, so between that and Maria, it should be safe. But you *lay low,* you understand me? Until I tell you otherwise.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” she returns, more comforted by that than she should be. Staying inside should be simple enough.

Clint’s not pleased. She can tell. There’s nothing to be done for it, though. She’s moved from place to place, ran and hid herself only to run again the second there’s a breath of trouble… That’s not sustainable. He takes her face, tips it upward so that she’s looking into his eyes. “Just remember: nothing is more important than keeping yourself safe. Tell me you know that. Tell me, Nat.”

She can’t feel that, can’t believe it anymore, and definitely can’t make the words come, so she
nods. Clint nods, too, and tells her to be careful once more before hugging her firmly and heading out. Nat stands alone in the shadowy, quiet lounge, breathing slowly and evenly. This is the path she’s on now, for better or worse, for the first time in forever, she’s going forward, going where she wants to go.

So she goes to Steve’s room. Thor’s there, and so is Sam. The latter stands from beside Steve’s bed, frowning warily, and Nat’s heart jolts again but for an entirely different reason. Sam must have just gotten here. She knows Tony’s been in contact with him while he’s been out of town. The second her eyes meet his, she feels that shame again, sharp and sour. Sam’s gaze narrows and it’s obvious right away that he knows, that he knew before this. He knows she broke up with Steve, left him alone, maybe helped drive him toward what he did. He knows because Steve told him.

But Steve’s face immediately brightens at seeing her, and the abrupt tension in the room is tempered by that. He smiles weakly. It’s not much but it’s still something, something true and encouraging. “Nat,” he says, trying to push himself up just a bit in the hospital bed. “You were gone a while.”

She smiles, too, even though she’s terrified of what Clint told her and even though Sam is watching her like a hawk. “Brought you some stuff,” she announces brightly, nonchalantly, setting the bag down on the bed. She leans over to kiss his head. “You wanna get out of here?”

Steve’s already swinging his legs out of the bed with more energy than she’s seen from him in days. “Yeah. Yeah, come on. Let’s go,” he gasps, pulling his broken arm closer to his chest.

“Whoa, whoa,” Sam says, grasping Steve’s shoulder to stop him. “Easy. Don’t push it. You let Thor help you get dressed. Nat and I’ll go and see where we are with getting you sprung.”

That’s a way for Sam to get her away from everyone else. Steve glances between Sam and Nat, clearly noticing and clearly worried. Just like that his brief moment of meager excitement is gone like it never happened at all. He doesn’t say anything, though, face falling and lowering his eyes, and as much as Nat wants him to do something to make this better, she knows she needs to handle this herself. She watches a moment more until Thor comes over and rumbles something about helping him to the bathroom. Steve groans and gets onto his feet, a little unsteady and breathing shallowly, and Thor wraps an arm around him before making some crack about how good he looks in a gown. Nat can’t hear anything more as she follows Sam from the room.

The second they are in the hallway, Sam immediately rounds on her. His lips are pressed into a thin, angry line, and his shoulders are tense. His eyes are hard. He’s radiating his displeasure. This is what she expected from Tony, from Thor, from Sam especially. They’re so protective of Steve, and she violated their trust in a way. Blame and anger and dismissal. Of course that’s what’s coming. This is where they hate her for hurting their friend like she did and close ranks between her and Steve. She braces herself for it.

It doesn’t come. “I was gonna rush back once I heard,” Sam softly declares, “but I didn’t. I didn’t because Tony told me you were here, that you have this under control. That Steve’s okay because you were with him.”

Surprise leaves Nat reeling, that Tony would vouch for her, that Sam believed him and so finished his trip before returning. She searches his eyes, finds them still hard and unyielding but not condemning. She doesn’t know what to say, so she doesn’t say anything, unyielding, too, because even if Sam or the others try to throw her out, she doesn’t think she can go now.

Thankfully Sam doesn’t try. “I see shit like this happen all the time, the significant other bowing
out because stuff gets too heavy. It’s never ends well.”

“Look, Sam–”

“You did it. It’s done. You’re here now, and if you’re here, you need to promise me something.” Sam steps closer. His stance isn’t confrontational or threatening, just firm. Firm as a wall. “Don’t ever hurt him again.”

Maybe she should be insulted at the implication that she would, but she’s not. Sam’s Steve’s friend above all else. If he wants her promise, she’ll give it. “Never.”

Sam appraises her a moment more, maybe judging her. Maybe. He ends up nodding, though. “I’m gonna call Tony and make sure he’s coming.” She watches him head down the hall to the nurse’s station, fishing in his pocket for his phone. Then she draws a deep breath and waits a moment more, gathering herself, trying not to think about proving herself to Steve’s friends or Rumlow in Brooklyn or Clint freaking out or any of it. At least her hesitating affords Steve a moment of privacy in case he’s not dressed yet. When she’s well and truly anxious and incapable of standing still a second more, she knocks on the closed door, listens for Thor to tell her to come in, and goes back inside.

Steve’s sitting on the edge of the hospital bed. He’s dressed in his shorts, and Thor’s gotten his socks and shoes on. She can see all the injuries now, old and new, that cover his back and chest. Aged scars and fresh cuts and bruises. This isn’t the first time she’s seen him shirtless, particularly in the hospital, but every time it takes her breath away, how his body tells the story he’s trying so hard to hide. And how beautiful he still is, even with the scars and the bloody road burn and the angry welts heralding the internal injuries. The line of his broad shoulders, the swells of muscles, the light smattering of hair across his chest that runs down his belly, pale skin that’s smooth where it’s not marred. That’s part of his story, too. Broken but beautiful. He doesn’t see that, she knows. He will.

Thor’s trying getting the sling off Steve’s arm and shoulder, the button-down shirt on the bed beside them. He smiles at Nat as she comes closer. “You are fortunate, Steve,” he says. “You have a beautiful woman to play nursemaid for you.”

“Hardy har,” Nat quips, intensely happy for the levity. She grins at Thor. It’s an exaggerated show of confidence and comfort.

He doesn’t seem to notice that. “You likely could have achieved getting her to do that without trashing the bike we spent months laboring to resurrect,” he jokes, but his tone is not without admonishment.

Steve gives a weak jerk of his lips. It could have been a smile. “Asshole, remember?”

Thor grunts an agreement. “A dramatic one, too,” he chides. “And this damn thing is almost as much of a pain in the ass as you are.” He gives up with the sling.

Nat steps closer. “I can handle this.”

“You are sure?”

“Yep.”

Thor looks to Steve, like Tony has the days before and like Sam just did. Searching for confirmation that Steve’s okay with her being there. Steve doesn’t really answer. He’s sinking again as he has so often since the night he crashed. Thor takes his lack of response as an
affirmation. “I will find out what is keeping the nurses.” He leaves.

Nat immediately pulls a chair over to sit in front of the bed. Her capable fingers go to the buckles of the sling, lengthening the straps so she can get it off. Then she reaches for the shirt. Steve’s staring at her lap, barely breathing, perpetually wincing. Some of that’s probably physical discomfort; she knows he’s in more pain than he’s letting on. But she thinks most of it is his crushed spirit. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

She pauses in trying to work the sleeve of the shirt over the thick cast. Steve’s apologized so many times over the last couple days that it’s become a blur. He really does blame himself for everything. “What are you sorry for?” she quietly asks.

“Was Sam mean to you?”

Nat gets the shirt up, pulling the other side around his back. His right arm is okay, but his chest is so tender that he’s having a hard time moving it all the same. She takes his wrist, helping him guide the shaking limb into the opposite sleeve. “Not really.” She tries to sound casual.

Steve’s breathing faster in shivery gasps. “I told him you…” He doesn’t finish, shamefully dropping his gaze.

She can’t stand it. “Told him what? That I was a stupid coward and broke up with you? You’re allowed to tell people how you feel, you know. I was… What I did was pretty bitchy.”

“No,” he says, emphatically shaking his head. It’s the most certain about anything he’s been since the accident. “No. You don’t want this, Nat.”

She pulls the shirt shut, her fingertips brushing over the smooth skin of his chest so carefully. The bruising down the center of his ribcage is fierce, so she’s tender and gentle as she starts to button his shirt. “You’re not a this.” When she’s done, she stands between his legs. She tips his face up, slipping her fingers through the beard that lines his jaw. “I want you. I want you to feel better, to get better. I want you never to feel alone again. I want you to know you’re going to be okay.”

His eyes still have that glassy quality to them, like he’s not quite focusing. They’re so deeply blue, so vulnerable. He’s raw and broken open, scraped down to his core, and it makes her ache to see him like this, that same ache from the first night she heard his nightmare all those weeks ago. She sweeps her thumbs along his cheeks in a comforting swirl. Then she smiles, and for how scared she still is, how damaged she is herself, for how much she hurts and how much she doubts that she could ever feel something so pure again… It comes easy.

*Make sure he knows why.*

“Most of all I want you to know that I love you.”

She kisses him, the feeling of his chapped lips against hers sweet and perfect. It’s been days and days, days since his birthday and the last time they did this, and it feels so right and true. He’s trembling, falling apart, holding her as tightly as he can with his fingers twisted in her shirt and his body flush to hers. The kiss lasts, getting deeper but not desperate. It’s calm and peaceful. It’s *them.*

Finally, she pulls away, and she brushes the tears from his cheeks. “Let’s go home.”
Angel

“In the arms of the angel fly away from here.
From this dark, cold hotel room
And the endlessness that you fear.
You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie.
You’re in the arms of the angel.
May you find some comfort here.”
– Sarah McLachlan, “Angel”

Every step is agony.

“Come on, Steve. You’re almost there.”

He’s not. It’s so far away, and he’s so goddamn tired, and he just wants to quit.

Nat’s right there to help him, though, and give him a little smile. “Almost there,” she encourages again, and he can’t let himself fall because she’s sweetly imploring him with those greenish eyes of hers that are like the sea and grinning and she loves me. He’s still not letting that sink in, not really. Everything’s so hazy with pain and drugs and memories pushing to the surface that he can’t think, can’t feel beyond this blurry numbness, but he knows one thing. I have to keep going.

It’s hard. Thor’s got his good arm around him and he’s bearing most of Steve’s weight. The pain in his chest is crippling. He’s had worse injuries than this, walked with worse injuries than this, but this hurts like fucking hell. The nurses told him a damaged sternum can be slow to heal and really painful, so that’ll be fun. Another thing to cause him pain. You’d think by now pain wouldn’t matter so much to him, that he’d just stop feeling it or something, but that never happens. Pain still hurts, and he’s drowning in it. Everything is sore, his ribs and chest and the load of scratches and road rash covering his body. His arm is throbbing, and he’s soaked with sweat and shaking with exhaustion. Keep going. You have to keep going.

Thor tightens his grip on Steve’s waist, uncaring about the perspiration dampening his shirt. “Only another floor,” he comments, and though time is a bit cloudy in Steve’s head, he knows it’s taken at least twenty minutes for them to get up three floors. Frustrated doesn’t begin to cover how that makes him feel. Or embarrassed. Or ashamed. Thor doesn’t seem to notice that, either. “Consider it akin to climbing great heights as part of a conquest! Like overcoming Everest.”

That’s not making him feel better, that climbing the stairs between their building’s lobby and his apartment is akin to surmounting the world’s highest peak, but Thor has a penchant for hyperbole. Tony grunts. “Or your super could install an elevator. Like seriously? Cheap as hell much?”

Steve gasps, gathering his composure for a moment more. God, it hurt to breathe. “Schmidt will not ask,” Thor replies, “and Pierce will not offer. My father often spoke of corruption within HYDRA Properties. Corporate greed and such.”

“Yeah, I think the Feds were looking into them for tax evasion and bribery? Something like that. Pierce seems like he’s one of the good ones of the lot, but that still doesn’t get you an elevator,” Sam comments. His voice is light and his touch is patient and tender, but he’s watching Steve so carefully. Steve knows he’s furious. Sam always does a good job keeping his cool and hiding how he’s feeling. Not right now. It’s bleeding out of him with every stern glance, and if Steve was
with it more, he might have shriveled under his scrutiny. As it stands, he can’t make himself care.
“You ready to go the rest of the way, Steve?”

It’s not like there’s a choice. He can’t stay in the stairwell. Thor grasps him firmly to keep him steady, and up they climb the last of the steps. Steve pants, laboring for every breath, and it feels like he’s sucking fire into his mouth and lungs. Their little group goes silent as they help him, as he struggles so pathetically, and that only makes it harder to stay grounded as the pain swarms him and his own sweat drowns him and the memories creep closer and closer. He closes his eyes, and he can almost taste blood, the hot desert air, the salt of sweat and tears. He’s walking, dragging his leg because there’s a bullet in his hip. His hand’s cupping his side because he’s bleeding so badly, a futile attempt to staunch the flow. He’s not going to make it. The moon’s bright overhead and the ground’s so uneven and he’s lost. He wants to die.

“Keep going, Steve.”

“Steve?”

He blinks stinging moisture from his eyes, blinks and blinks until he can focus. Nat’s staring at him, concern splayed all over her pretty face. She’s got a hand on his good arm; Thor’s let it go, and she’s taking his hand and squeezing carefully. Steve jerks his head a little, shaking himself free, and the others are there, too, Sam watching him still so intensely concerned and Tony wincing like he thinks Steve may just shatter in front of them and Thor smiling in a way that can only be described as over-compensating. It bothers Steve immensely that they’re all so worried for him, that they have a good cause to be worried for him. His memories of the drive and the crash are a big blur, mushed together and indistinct, but he’s pretty certain he had a seizure. He knows he drifted, drifted then as he is now. The past is so close to the surface that nothing makes sense.

No. Nothing except Nat and the fact that she loves him. She comes close, reaches up to cup his face. She looks pale and tired but achingly beautiful. “Steve, you with us?”

Steve doesn’t know what to say, because he’s not. He’s not okay. He’s not with it. Not with them. He knows he doesn’t want them to see just right they are to watch him like they do. He doesn’t want them to be afraid for him. He doesn’t want them to realize howucked up he’s become. He doesn’t want any of that, but he doesn’t know how to hide it anymore. God, he’s so fucking ashamed of himself. He totaled the bike. He could have hurt someone. He did hurt Tony, hurt Thor, hurt Sam. Hurt Nat. There’s really no masking how low he is, and he hates that it’s bleeding out of him like this, that he’s not strong enough to put up a brave front and get his shit together. He hates himself because he’s so goddamned damaged, and that’s his fault.

So he lies. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “Yeah. ‘m tired.” At least that’s not a lie. He’s trembling with weariness.

She smiles faintly. “I know. We’ll get you into bed and you can sleep as long as you want.”

That sounds nice, he has to admit. Every time he’s fallen asleep the last couple days, he wakes up dazed and disoriented. He’s been drugged and dreaming, waking in the cell, in the army recovery center in DC, in his apartment, in his mom’s old place and Bucky’s bedroom, in reality now and then. That blur of shadows and lights and tears from when he was driving the bike, speeding, flying down the dark road in the park… He’s still trapped in it, and he can’t find his way out. Everything seems so endless.

“Crack open the door, Wilson.” Tony’s grunted words get his attention, and he makes himself focus again. “Thor looks like he’s about to collapse.”
“Hardly,” Thor retorts, though he does seem a little fatigued by hauling Steve’s heavy, useless body up four flights of steps. “The strength of mere mortals like you utterly pales in comparison to mine!”

Despite the ridiculous joke (spoken with even more bombastic flair than Thor normally has), Sam rushes to get the apartment open, jabbing the key into Steve’s lock and pushing the door wide. Max is right there, of course. Max. Seeing his dog makes irrational tears spring to Steve’s eyes, and he’s blinking like a madman again, trying to force the emotions down. Thor helps him inside but then drops his good arm so Max can lick it, and Max does, whining and desperately excited. “Easy,” Sam chides gently, pushing Max back a little. “Easy, buddy. Let him in. Let him in.”

“Bedroom?” Thor asks, getting a firmer grip on Steve again.

“Yeah. Gonna get his meds put together here. Tony, you want to order some pizza?”

“Sure.” Tony gets his phone out and Nat moves closer. For a horrific second, Steve fears Nat’s not coming with him, that she’s leaving, but she’s not. She’s just giving Tony a little wad of cash from the pocket of her jeans. “Errands?”

“Shopping list,” she replies, handing him a slip of paper, too, “if you don’t mind.”

“Nope. I’ll bring the pizza on my way back.”

Steve’s still staring at the little exchange, the cold waves of terror slow to recede inside him. It was fucking pathetic and ridiculous, but he knows he can’t lose her again. He can’t. She smiles brightly like she realizes he’s upset, carefully taking his weight from Thor. Thor seems reluctant, but he doesn’t stop her, stepping aside. “Come on. You’ll feel better in a bit.”

He puts more effort to keep from leaning on her slight frame so much as he limps at her side. When he finally makes it to his bedroom, he blinks blearily, hazily noticing that it’s a little cleaner than it was. The laundry’s been picked up, things generally less messy, and there’s a quilt on his bed that’s definitely not his. It’s pink and covered in swirls of flowers. “Sorry,” Nat says, appraising it with a touch of a wry smile. “When you leave all your bedding in the wash and don’t buy detergent, you get to sleep with whatever I can find.”

Her quilt. That’s surprisingly comforting, thinking he’ll have something of hers in bed with him. She squeezes his good hand. “I’ll let you get undressed. You want some water? Some painkillers?”

He doesn’t want her to go. That he knows for sure, so he doesn’t release her hand, even as she tries to move away a little. Embarrassment washes over him again, as uncomfortable and itchy as stale sweat, but she only slips their fingers together and gives a gentle smile. Thor seems to realize what’s not spoken. “I’ll get the medicines.” He offers a knowing glance of his own and closes the bedroom door on the way out.

Steve’s heart is pounding, a shallow thunder in his battered chest, and he feels lightheaded with it. They’re alone now, and she’s so close, and he needs to tell her. He needs to tell her how he feels, what he should have told her before his birthday, before everything fell apart. He needs to tell her, because she told him, and she deserves to know, now more than ever, that he wants her, that he needs her. He loves her, too. But the room spins and he can’t get the air into his lungs and everything hurts. The blur of memories and pain tightens its hold on him, and he can’t.

But she doesn’t seem to notice that he’s failing. She smiles tenderly. “Can I help?” A small, halting nod is all he can manage, and she goes to work. She crouches and unties his sneakers,
pulling them off one at a time. After that, she takes his socks off. She leaves him standing a
moment to search his drawers for something, and he stares with teary, deadened eyes at pretty
floral pattern of her quilt as she rummages. She comes back with light cotton sleep pants and an A-
shirt. Off goes the sling, and the sudden weight of the cast makes his arm throb even more
miserably. And off go his shorts. She hesitates a moment before pulling them down, and he closes
his eyes, confused by the stirrings of desire warring with the crushing torment of depression. Her
touch is feather-light but electrifying on his hips, and images crash through his head, tantalizing
flashes of her mouth and her fingers and their skin sliding together. He feels sick and gasps a sob
before he can stop himself. “Steve?”

He’s wavering. She stands up to get her hands on his shoulders. “What is it? Seizure?” He
doubted he could tell her if it was. He never can when they come on, but she doesn’t know that
yet. She doesn’t know how to deal with them, and she looks scared, ready to bolt and get Sam
probably. He shakes his head because he doesn’t want her to leave or be afraid of him. With that
she slowly relaxes, running her hands up the sides of his neck to grasp his face. “What’s the
matter? Talk to me.”

He can’t. The words won’t come, not any of them. She holds his gaze a moment more, steadying
him with just that and her slow breathing and gentle touch of her thumbs across his cheeks. He
leans into her, and she tips his forehead down to brace it against hers. “Talk to me,” she begs
softly, her breath brushing against his lips. “I can listen. I won’t judge. I won’t leave. There’s
nothing to be afraid of. I promise. You can talk to me.”

He can’t.

They stand like that a moment, faces together, and he knows she’s waiting for him to speak. To be
stronger than he is. He’s not. He’s not strong at all. Sure, he keeps working himself, keeps
struggling on, keeps searching for hope, keeps going until his muscles burn and his bones ache.
But it’s gotten him nothing, and he doesn’t think he can go anymore. Not like this.

Endlessness. It terrifies him. I’m never going to get better. There’s no cure. There’s no way
back.

The brush of her lips to his pulls him from the blur again. It’s light, tender, and he kisses back if
only to chase the small touch of warmth and pleasure. Then she’s pulling away to get his pajama
pants up his legs. She has him sit on the bed while she unbuttons the shirt he’s wearing and works
it off. The A-shirt comes on. His arm really throbs and his chest feels shattered, like bones are
grinding together every time he moves, every time he takes more than the shallowest breath. He’s
crying without realizing it.

She wipes his tears away. “Hurts?” He manages a nod. She tries for a sympathetic grin as she
piles up some pillows (more than he has, so she must have taken those from her apartment, too) at
the head of his bed. “You did a real number on yourself. Have to sleep sitting up as much as
possible. That’ll help.” Vaguely he remembers the nurses telling him that, that there’s nothing he
can do for his fractured breastbone and ribs other than trying not to aggravate the situation and
sleeping inclined to keep pressure off. He really did do a fucking number on himself. So fucking
stupid.

There’s a knock at the door, and Nat goes to get it. Sam comes in bearing a bottle of water with a
straw, a little paper cup that probably has the pills, and a few ice packs. “How you doing, Steve?”

Again, the words won’t come. He knows he should care, but he can’t. That blur is between him
and the world, like a dull, unbreakable wall, and he can’t get through it. He doesn’t want to. So he
doesn’t speak, and Sam and Nat share a worried look that should make him furious if he could
muster the energy. He can’t. All he can feel is the exhaustion and the pain. That’s all there is on his side of the blur.

“Here,” Sam says with a sigh. “Pain meds, seizure meds, and antibiotics. Practically had to buy out the pharmacy.”

The joke falls flat. Together the two of them get him moved back against the pillows, reclined as much as possible, and adjust the blankets over him. It’s comfortable enough. Max immediately hops up on the bed, and they don’t shoo him down. He curls around Steve’s legs in his usual place, watching his master with huge, sad eyes. Steve can’t lean forward, can’t reach him to pet him. Instead he downs the medications like a robot, noticing the familiar pills of his antidepressants mixed in with the batch that Sam neglected to mention. He drinks the entire bottle of water at Sam’s prodding. Shakes his head when they ask him if he wants something to eat. That helpless look Sam always has whenever he’s worried Steve’s slipping too far is permanently affixed to his face. “Try to sleep then, huh? That’s what you need most. Sleep.” He rubs Steve’s leg affectionately. “I’ll be right outside.”

Nat doesn’t leave. Once the door is closed again, she takes one of the ice packs. “You want to try this? They said at the hospital it could help.”

He’s never been overly fond of the cold, to be honest. He doesn’t answer, tipping his head back and blinking back sudden wetness again as she sets the ice pack on his chest. The weight of it alone hurts, and he’s whimpering and the tears break free, but she’s there hushing him, sitting on his good side and gently moving the ice pack around until she finds a place where he’s not so tense with discomfort. “It’s alright,” she murmurs again, brushing her hand through his hair. “It’s going to be alright. We’ll get you through this.”

“I’m gonna get you home, Steve.”

He whines through his teeth, a weak, keening, pathetic thing that’s strained with fear. He can’t dream. He can’t. The memories are seeping out like this, bleeding out of him, and he can’t face them. He can’t!

“Shh,” Nat whispers. She snuggles close, as close as she can, holding his good hand tightly. “I’m here. You don’t have to do this alone. I’m right here with you.” She kisses his cheek, his neck, the ball of his shoulder, weaving their fingers together tightly. “Just breathe, Steve. It’s alright.”

He listens to her. He breathes. Slowly and steadily and calmly until it doesn’t hurt so much. The ice becomes numbing, almost pleasantly so, and the drugs work their magic. The pain and fear are pushed back bit by bit, beat by beat, breath by breath to the other side of that blur, and eventually, with her humming into his neck and holding him tight, he falls asleep.

He sleeps. He drifts.

He dreams.

There’s hard rock beneath his knees, hot desert air around him that singes his lungs and dries out his mouth. There’s the taste of blood in the back of his throat and sweat rolling down his face. There’s someone shouting. There’s a gun jabbed into his forehead. There’s a thundering crack and blood sprays onto his face.

For a second, he thinks he’s dead. He almost welcomes it.

But he’s not. There are more men shouting, a flurry of frantic activity around him, and he hears
the rumble of trucks and the racket of gunfire. Above him the terrorist leader topples, his gun sliding from Steve’s face, a hole ripped into his chest by a sniper rifle. Steve watches him fall, shock rippling over him. The thunder of battle blasts closer, and the terrorists scatter to deal with whoever’s attacking them. Steve twists, looks over his shoulder, sees battered jeeps and trucks coming over the hill toward the caves. An RPG explodes just to their left, and men scream. It’s not the army charging; these men look like more of the Taliban, one terrorist cell exterminating another in a mad scramble for power. It doesn’t matter.

The gun that was his head a few seconds ago is now in the dirt right in front of him.

Steve grabs it. He moves for the first time in forever, lifting it and pointing it right at their captors. And he doesn’t hesitate, pulling the trigger even though his arm’s shaking fiercely. The shot strikes true, though, and the guys closest to them go down. Steve scrambles up to his feet, ducking as bullets whiz overhead. He whirs, terrified Bucky’s been hit, but he’s not. He’s crumpled completely, hiding under his good arm. “Buck!” Steve gasps, grabbing for him. “We gotta go! We gotta go now!”

Bucky doesn’t move, too frightened and hurt to do anything other than cower. Engines roar, and the battle rages around them as more terrorists flood from the safety of the cave to combat the assaulting force. Another RPG detonates somewhere to their right, throwing both of them dozens of feet in a spray of dirt, rock, and sand. Steve lands hard on his back, sliding down a little hill, fighting to hang onto the gun. Rocks tear at his skin. There’s nothing he can do to stop himself, and he suffers through the dizzying nightmare until he finally settles limply. For a second there’s no air to breathe and nothing to feel other than pain. His ears are ringing, and everything hurts too much to move. But he blinks his sight clear and rolls over.

Bucky’s right there beside him, covered in filth and shaking. Steve coughs, trying to inhale deeper despite his injuries, and curls his bloody fingers in Bucky’s shirt. “Bucky… We gotta…” Another explosion makes him squeeze his eyes shut, and he flings himself as much as he can over Bucky’s body. The ground vibrates like hell’s ripping up through the surface, and bullets punch into the ground all around them. Steve waits until it feels like the worst of that’s over, keeping Bucky trapped completely beneath him and the gun clenched in his fingers, and then he glances over his shoulder again and up the hill.

They’re smoking them out of the cave. Executing the men who are running out for their lives, the men who’ve held the two of them captive for eighteen months like it means nothing. It’s pure carnage, and Steve feels nothing watching it. Not fear. Not satisfaction. Not the sadistic comfort of vengeance. He feels nothing but a cold, dawning realization.

This is their chance. They have to run.

“All right, come on,” he moans, getting off his friend and pulling at him. Bucky is trembling, whimpering, eyes tightly sealed and gasping for breath. “Bucky, Bucky, come on!” Steve gets more and more frantic, listening to the angry shouts in Farsi, knowing that if these people spot the two of them, they’re dead. “Bucky, please… Come on! Get up! Get up!”

“Steve…”

“We have to go.” Though there’s no time, Steve grabs Bucky’s face and makes him look at him. Bucky’s beard his coarse and filthy against his hands, and Bucky’s eyes are steeped in panic. There’s so little left of his friend in them that Steve’s scared it’s already too late. He tries not to be daunted. “We have to go home, right? Ma’s tacos and Darcy and beer and – come on, Bucky. Please. Please. You gotta get up. You gotta run!”
Bucky blinks, and Steve can see a hint of him in his eyes again. With a cry, he pushes himself up with his good hand. Steve takes his arm, pulling with all the strength he has left. It’s hardly anything, but it’s enough to get Bucky up, to get them both on their feet. He pulls Bucky’s right arm over his shoulder and wraps the hand with the gun around his friend’s waist, getting as good a grip as he can manage. “Hang onto me,” he implores breathlessly. Christ, he doesn’t know if he can do this. Bucky’s heavy, hardly putting any effort into keeping himself upright, and Steve so weak from starvation and abuse that the world’s spinning and he’s staggering already. He doesn’t let any of that show. The taste of freedom fills his mouth every time he breathes, and energy is pouring from somewhere inside him, a geyser of it washing all over him. He’s not going to fall. He’s not! “Hang on. Gonna get you out of here, Buck.”

Bucky doesn’t answer. Steve holds him tighter as he hobbles away, limping and leaving a trail of fresh blood in the dirt.

Every step is agony. Steve burns, his whole body ablaze with pain from the exertion of it, of carrying Bucky and carrying himself. He’s wrecked, broken, barely capable of taking this step or the next, but he takes them all the same. This is where he makes good on his promise to his mother, to Bucky’s mother, too. To Bucky and to himself. “Just hang on, Buck. We’re going now. See?” Bucky doesn’t see. His eyes are half-lidded, his head lolling against Steve’s shoulder. Steve doesn’t look at him, doesn’t stop. He just keeps moving, keeps breathing, keeps believing, like now that he’s tasted freedom and seen the sun and found some hope, he can’t possibly let it go. Minutes disappear as they stumble away from the cave, minutes marked by his pounding heart and heavy steps. Ahead there are rocky hills jutting up into the sky, ugly daggers of brown against yellow, and if they can just get there… They can hide. “Gonna get out. Finally. Hear me, Buck? We’re gonna go home.”

This is the end.

They barely make it to the rocks when there’s another crack. And they fall when the bullet tears its way into Steve’s side.

Steve’s eyes snap open. He’s breathing hard, eyes roving the shadows. His bedroom. His bed. Nat’s quilt. She’s not there, though, even though he can smell faint traces of her shampoo, her perfume, clinging to the fabric. He tries to latch onto that, blinking the memory away, but it’s stubborn and he can still taste blood and his hip is throbbing. He lays there, panting in terror, lost in between wakefulness and sleep, between reality and nightmare. He lays there wanting to scream. Wanting her.

Then he hears her. “He’s doing okay. Sleeping.” Her voice is muffled. He sees his bedroom door is cracked open. His friends are out in his living room. He can smell pizza, and that makes his stomach clench in nausea, but he breathes through that and listens.

“He say anything about why he took the bike?” Tony sounds scared and troubled.

“He’s not saying much of anything.” That’s Sam. “He’s holding it all back. You can tell just by looking at him. Doing what he always does. Christ, I have told him over and over again that he needs to talk to someone…”

“Well, we cannot let him hide this time. He must speak of what troubles him. Steve carries too much inside.” Thor’s tone is tense. “His fear of becoming a burden is crushing him.”

“Doctor Banner told me he’s never explained what happened in Afghanistan.”

“Not to me he hasn’t,” Sam says. “You think something about that set him off?”
“It’s pretty damn obvious. What else would?”

There’s a pause, an awkward one. “I found Bucky’s dog tags in his room.”

“Bucky’s?” Sam sounds pained. “Steve has them?”

“He shouldn’t?”

“I don’t know. I thought… I know he had them when the army finally found him in the hospital outside Kandahar. When they brought him back to the States, he gave them to Bucky’s family. That’s what he told me.”

“Why’d Steve have them to begin with?”

“I – I don’t know.”

He doesn’t listen anymore. He can’t. The blur slips back between him and the world, and the taste of blood gets worse and the pain flares like lightning. Sleep swallows him, and he struggles in vain, struggles to get away. Struggles to push himself up. Struggles so hard.

“Stevie? Fuck, you’re bleeding bad. Wake up… Please wake up. Oh, Christ. Christ, somebody help us… Please, God, somebody… Steve, wake up!”

He opens his eyes and sees Bucky’s battered face. Bucky’s battered face and teary, fevered eyes. The ugly rocks and the yellow sky. The sun’s setting. The Afghan desert’s all around them. Endless.

Bucky is panting, barely more awake than he is. His right hand is covered in fresh blood. His only hand. “Here, Steve… Pressure here.” He’s fumbling for Steve’s fingers, pulling his hand over his side. It’s wet and hot and sticky. There’s a hole in his flesh, and it hurts, pulsing in time with his heart. “We’re not gonna make it. Jesus, please…”

There’s a choked sob. Steve groans. He has to get himself up. Bucky can’t. Bucky can’t carry him. He doesn’t have both his arms, and he’s sick and weak. So Steve has to get up. He has to get them home. He slams his other hand into the hard, dirty ground, smearing blood everywhere, and pushes. He can’t even breathe the pain is so bad. He thinks he can feel the bullet burning against his insides, cutting and ripping and tearing him open with every movement. He doesn’t care. He curls his fist in Bucky’s shirt and pulls. “Up,” he gasps. His voice is nothing more than a strangled gasp. “Up!”

Somehow he hauls Bucky up. Somehow he gets Bucky’s good arm around his neck again. Somehow he finds the strength to start walking, dragging his bad leg, stumbling and staggering into the rocks. Somehow he keeps going.

Every step is agony.

“Easy, Steve,” whispers a voice to his left. He opens his eyes to slits and sees shadows. There’s a touch of warm light to his right. His bedside lamp. He’s cold now, a chilly misery spreading across his chest and down his torso, and he can’t help a shiver and a wince. “Easy. Is the ice too much?”

Nat’s voice.

She’s with him again, a cool, sweet balm in the hell sucking him down. Her fingers are tender against his face, and she’s wiping a damp cloth over his sweaty forehead. “You’re alright,” she
promises, a murmur in the darkness. “Here.”

A straw is stuck between his lips, and he drinks, sucking down icy, delicious water. It tastes so good. His throat is parched and tight. “Easy,” she chides again, pulling the straw away a little. “Sam’s coming with more pain meds.”

He groans again, so sick and disoriented. He can’t focus, too deep in delirium to think. How much time has passed? He has no idea. It’s late. The night’s going on forever. There are vague memories of light, restless sleep, of shards of reality slashing through the blur. Memories of different voices and Max pressing close and Nat singing. She’s been there with him the whole time, whispering solace, helping him shiver through the pain. Sam’s come and gone. Maybe Tony and Thor have, too. She hasn’t. She’s been right at his side. He’s not sure of anything anymore, but he knows that, and he wants to hold onto her, because she’s light. She’s safety and security. She’s love.

“You’re alright. Just stay awake a moment, okay? I’m right here.”

But he can’t. His eyes slip shut, and he falls again.

The rocks are unforgiving to his knees. He hits hard, and the jolt pries unconsciousness from his brain. Bucky falls with him, landing on his bad side, and his mouth opens in a soundless scream. He lays there in the dirt, face sallow under the grime and fresh blood, and stares at the darkening sky with deadened eyes. With his last bit of strength, Steve pulls them both to some boulders that are high enough to hide them. Then he gathers Bucky in his arms and clenches his eyes shut and cries. There’s nothing left. They can’t keep going, not like this. He has nothing more to give.

The desert stretches vast and vicious all around them. There’s no chance they’ll find their way to safety. We’re going to die here. We’re going to die.

He can hear their enemies coming.

He cracks open his eyes and sees that it’s morning now. There’s dull sunlight streaming through the window of his bedroom, illuminating a gloomy new day. The night’s over. He’s tired, worn through, and everything is cloudy, fuzzy around the edges. Max is there, and he picks his head up off his paws, tail swishing against the pink blanket as he scoots closer. Steve drops his good hand to Max’s head, weaving his fingers through thick fur absently. Things shift into focus a bit as his senses realign themselves. Water bottles and pills on his bedside table. Tissues and towels. Ice packs. Nat’s phone. A glint of silver. There’s another pillow and blanket on the floor, and Nat’s shoes right next to it. She slept on the floor last night.

He feels sick with shame and guilt.

There are more voices. Nat’s again. “He’s doing okay, I guess. Last night was really rough. He was in a lot of pain and really out of it. Nightmares. Yeah. Yeah, Tony.” She must be on the phone because Steve can’t hear Tony answer. “Yeah. Sam’s going to work, but then he’ll be back. And Don’s right across the hall. I should be fine. Alright. I’ll call if I need you.”

He shouldn’t be doing this to her. He shouldn’t be tormenting her like this, dragging her into his hell. But he can’t stop himself. Stripped of his strength and endurance, he can’t fight as exhaustion swoops up with arms wide open. He drifts in it again. Drifts in a blessedly dreamless sleep. Distantly he hears more people talking.

“Brought you some coffee. The good stuff from the café down the street from the store. How’s it going?” He’s not sure he recognizes that voice. He knows he’s heard it before.

“Alright. Hanging in there. Thanks, Daisy. This was really nice of you.”
“Hey, what’re friends for? Also brought you some Block Fest stuff to do. Just in case you get bored. May said you’re on vacation until you decide you’re not, but I know waiting around can drive you mad sometimes.”

“Thanks. I… I don’t know when I can come back. If she needs to let me go–”

“Are you crazy? She’d never.”

“That’s kind of her, but she shouldn’t have to keep my job open for me. I don’t know how long it’s going to be. Steve needs me right now.”

“She understands. We all do. Hell, I think it’s good. You deserve something to make you feel good about yourself, Nat.”

There’s a little, sad laugh. “Not sure this qualifies.”

“It does. When you two were together, you were flying. We all saw it. And when you weren’t? It was like you were a ghost. Dead inside. Maybe that’s overly dramatic, but it’s true. There wasn’t any light in your eyes, no life in your heart.” There’s a gusty sigh. “Admit it, Nat. You need him, and he needs you. So I’m not saying I’m happy this happened or anything but–”

“You’re happy this happened,” Nat finishes. Steve can hear her smile. “I get it.”

He can’t hold onto the conversation anymore. He’s too tired to fight, too tired to dream. Yet again he drifts and drifts in the blur. It’s a comfort, the emptiness. He doesn’t have to feel or fight. He doesn’t have to remember. He doesn’t have to keep going.

“I don’t like this, Nat.”

“Clint, God, you’ve said that! I get it.”

“Rumlow and his guys were spotted in Greenwood again last night.” Once more he vaguely recognizes the voice. He’s sure he’s heard it before. Someone from the building? “Clint and I both think it’d be better if we got you out now. I thought we’d have more time, but–”

“We already talked about this, and I already said no. I can’t go right now, Maria.”

“You’re making this harder than it needs to be.”

Nat’s flustered. “I know.”

“He took everything from you. He took your–”

“I know.”

“You need to be smart.” That’s said harshly.

“I need to do what’s right,” Nat replies, “and that’s not turning my back. I can’t run anymore.”

He can’t run anymore, either. Not anymore. He sinks into the memories, the pillows behind his back transforming to rock, the pain twisting and turning, the daylight fading into sunset. Long shadows drip from the rocks rising around them. The echo of trucks rumbles through the mountains around them. He’s barely caught his breath, barely had a moment to think, and now their enemies are on them. If they find them… Steve closes his eyes and holds Bucky tighter. He raises the gun he’s managed to keep and checks the magazine. Just three more rounds. They can’t get away, can’t fight.
“They’re coming,” Bucky whispers against him. Where the two of them are, there are two ways to go: left or right. Left goes down towards where their enemies are coming for them. Right goes deeper into the rocks and out in the desert. It doesn’t matter what goes where, though. Steve can’t run. He can’t. He’s woozy with blood loss, and his hip is a mess. He closes his eyes and waits.

“They’re coming.” Bucky’s shivering restlessly in Steve’s arms. “They’re coming.”

“Kill ’em,” Steve slurs. He grips the gun tighter. “Won’t let ’em hurt you.” He’ll kill all of them. Somehow he will. He’ll die before they hurt Bucky again.

Bucky leans up, blinks hazily in the fading light. There’s nothing but ruin all over him, months of blood and damage, the stink of infection and the shine of fever. He’s so thin; Steve can see his ribs through the holes in his shirt. The stump of his arm is bleeding again, festering. Nothing left but death.

And Bucky’s got this wild glint in his eyes. It’s him. Who he was before all this. Steve would know it anywhere. He knows it and it terrifies him. No. No, no, no–

In a matter of minutes, it’s all going to be over. And Steve knows what’s coming. He can’t stop it, can’t fight it. Can’t move because there’s a bullet in his hip, and Bucky’s reaching into his shirt, reaching for his dog tags, and he can’t do this. He can’t do this–

Steve wakes up with a gasp. There’s no one there. It’s his bedroom, and it’s completely empty. The door’s ajar. Everything is quiet. Streams of evening sunlight push inside, casting those long shadows, but there’s no hell of rock and sand. It’s just home, and he’s alone. Max is gone. Sam is gone. Bucky’s gone.

He twists in bed, bathed in sweat and tingling with panic, flailing with his good hand. Excruciating pain bursts up and down his torso when he moves so suddenly, but he can’t stop. The clutter on the nightstand crashes to the floor as he flounders for Bucky’s dog tags. Water spills. A glass breaks. Prescription bottles clatter down. But he gets the dog tags and gets his legs out of bed. He’s half-tangled in Nat’s quilt and the sheets but he breaks free and stands.

He has to run.

But he doesn’t get more than a step before his bedroom door opens all the way. Nat’s there, and her eyes are wide. She looks pale, exhausted, her unbound hair mussed and her clothes rumpled. Clearly she was sleeping. “What happened?” she gasps. “Steve? You shouldn’t be out of bed!”

He stares at her. He can’t make sense of what’s happening for a second, that blur scattering his senses. She’s frightened, watching him with desperate eyes. Her mouth is limply open, and her gaze darts to the dog tags he has clutched in his good hand. “Steve…”

“I have to get these home.”

She shakes her head. “What?”

“I – I…” He still can’t make himself think. “I gotta get out. Gotta get these back…”

“Steve, you don’t need to go anywhere,” Nat says, “except back to bed. You shouldn’t be up.”
Some part of him knows where he is. That part knows Bucky’s gone already, that Becca came and
gave the dog tags to him, knows that it’s all over and has been over for three years. That part
knows it. His brain knows it.

But his body and heart can’t accept it. Logic is such a poor weapon against the onslaught of
memories and nightmares, and he doesn’t try to use it. He just wants to do what Bucky told him to
do. Therefore, he tries to take a step past her, only his arm hurts like hell with the weight of the
cast on it and his mind is back in the desert so his hip is throbbing and buckling. Every step is still
agony. He’s going down before he can stop himself.

“Steve!”

The jolt is brutal again, knocking a sob loose from his chest. He struggles to hold it in, one last
attempt to keep himself together, but he can’t. She’s got her arms around him. “Steve, God, are
you okay?” She sweeps her arms down her back, and he can feel that she’s stiff with fear. He’s
shaking with fear of his own. Shaking and shivering and cracking. She breathes into his hair.
“Steve… Answer me, please…”

He can’t.

“Steve, please. Please tell me what happened. Please!”

He can’t.

She pulls back, cups his jaw, forces him to look at her with gentle insistence. Her eyes glow in the
dying sunlight, as beautiful as a calm, rolling sea, and she’s strong and sure. “I love you. You
hear that? You’re not alone now. You’re not alone. And you need to let it out.” He squeezes his
eyes shut, squeezes Bucky’s dog tags in his hand, and tries to lean back from her because it’s too
much. She’s too bright and too pure and he can’t spread all this darkness inside him onto her. He
just can’t.

But she jostles him a little, and his eyes flutter back open. “Talk to me, Steve.”

And it just comes. It burst through that blur, and he’s powerless to stop it.

“We – we were sent to stop an enemy offensive outside Kandahar. The Taliban was making a
move there, so command dispatched our unit to provide support and help evacuate civilians. They
were better entrenched in the neighborhood than intel said, and things went to hell. Bucky and I
got cut off from everyone else. We managed to push them back out of the city, but damn IEDs
leveled half the street we were on and blocked our escape. I tried to get Bucky to run, but he
wouldn’t leave me, wouldn’t listen to me even though I gave him an order, and they caught us
both.”

His words cut off. He’s not strong enough to do this. His breath comes in shallow pants, and
Bucky’s dog tags are digging into his palm. It hurts too much. If he keeps going, keeps talking…
It’ll all be out there, and he’ll have to see it.

She’s there, though. She holds his face, sweeping her thumbs across his cheekbones and down his
jaw like she has been. It’s a touch he’s quickly coming to associate with comfort. With her.
“Keep talking,” she whispers. “It’s okay.”

“They kept us in a cell in a cave in the mountains.” His eyes burn, and the shadows press near.
The world blurs again. The stench. How cold it was in the winter. How hot in the summer. The
sharp rocks beneath them. The darkness. “No way to keep track of time. No way out. We stayed
close, tried to protect each other... I was Buck’s CO. It was my job to make sure he was alright. So I kept their focus on me. Had to. Had to do it.”

“Why you gotta take it on yourself? Why do you always do this? You don’t need to fight so hard! Fuck, Steve, don’t do this for me!”

He stares into her eyes. She stares back, calm and purposeful. “What did they do to you?”

Again it just comes. “Tortured me. Wanted information I couldn’t tell them.”

She hesitates, but she doesn’t lose her nerve. “How?”

“Beat me up.” He can feel fists and boots slamming into his body. “Whipped me.” He can feel the chains biting into his back. “Waterboarded me.” The taste of rank water nearly makes him gag. “Other things I can’t remember. I... I don’t think I told them anything, but I can’t remember. Can’t remember.”

“Hang on, Steve. God Almighty, you gotta hang on...”

“Kept them off Buck at least. ’s all I really wanted. Had to keep him safe. He always kept me safe.” He swallows down the pain. “Couldn’t do anything less.”

That’s not the end of it, and they both know it. The silence that comes is confining, though, heavy and smothering, and Steve feels the power of everything inside slamming against the wall. Nothing can protect him now. Everything is furious where it was quiet and numb before. Furious and demanding its due. He bows his head, cowering before its might.

She doesn’t let him surrender, shifting and letting go of his face to wrap her arms around him instead. “Go on,” she coaxes. Keep going.

“Was a year and a half.” His voice sounds alien and detached. “They kinda stopped coming after me. I figured they realized I had nothing useful to tell them, not after all those months. They wouldn’t let us go, though, and wouldn’t let us out of the cave. We wondered if they were trying to ransom us, but nobody ever came. Bucky kept promising me someone would. He was always promising me it’d be okay, that we’d go home.”

“We’re gonna go home, Stevie. I’m gonna get us home. I swear to you, I will.”

“But he didn’t believe that. There was no believing anything. We knew we were going to die. After – after a while, we just wanted it over.” He chokes on a sob. The freshest memories are right there, banging at the breach.

“Let it out, Steve.”

“Something happened... I don’t know what. Another faction in the Taliban was threatening the guys who had us. They went at me again, looking for intel, and I woulda told them what I knew, but I didn’t know anything! Not after so long... And – and I couldn’t... They were so fucking angry... And they – God – they cut Buck’s arm off right in front of me...” Tears are streaming from his eyes, and the world is so violently twisted that he doesn’t see her flinch. “He was screaming... I couldn’t stop it. I couldn’t do anything!”

“No! No! Let him go! Don’t do it to him! Do it to me! Please! Do it to me!”

“They just let him bleed. They threw us back in the cell and let him bleed.”
“Let me die, Steve.”

“He was bleeding and bleeding. Delirious. He got sick. I knew he was dying, but I was too fucking hurt and weak and there was nothing I could do. Nothing other than watch.”

“Open your eyes! See what you make us do? Open your eyes!”

“Thought that’d be it, that he’d die right in the cell, but they came for us again. Dragged us outside. They were gonna execute us if I didn’t talk, and I couldn’t, so that was gonna be it, and I was relieved. So goddamn relieved like a coward, only – only there was an attack. The other group attacking the ones who had us. I never – never learned who or why. I just grabbed Buck, tried to get us away…”

“We have to go. We have to go home, right? Come on, Bucky. Please. Please. You gotta get up.”

“But I got shot.” He feels it again, the bullet tearing into his side, ripping through his hip and up into his body. “I got shot and I couldn’t carry him anymore. I tried. I tried to get him out. I tried so fucking hard…”

Every step is agony.

The memories are coming fast now. Everything he hasn’t let himself see. Everything he hasn’t let himself feel. Everything he can’t let himself know. The wall’s gaping, blown wide open, and it’s a flood. An endless, endless flood. His voice is nothing more than a whisper. “I got us behind these rocks in the mountains, and I blacked out. It wasn’t for long, but it was long enough for them to figure out where we were. There was no way I could run. Not anymore. And they were coming.”

“They’re coming. Christ, somebody help us… Please, God, somebody…”

“Kill ’em. Won’t let ’em hurt you.”

Steve sobs. “And we lay there. And Bucky’s got this look in his eye. I know what it is, because he always had it when we were kids, when he pulled me out of a fight or took a hit meant for me. Whenever he did what he had to to keep me safe. He’s got that look, and I know what it means, and – and I can’t stop him. He knows he’s dying. He knows, and I can’t–”

“Give me the gun, Steve.”

“No. No, no, no. You’re not–”

“It’s the only way. I – I’ll get them away. I’ll hold ’em off. You need to get home.”

“No! No, Buck! Not without you!”

“Fight, Stevie. Run.”

“And he reaches into his shirt and pulls off his dog tags.” They’re cutting into his palm, hot and harsh. “He makes me take them.”

“Bucky, I’m not taking these. I’m not doing it! And I’m not going to leave you! No! Christ, why you always gotta do this?”

“You’d do it for me. Been doin’ it for me since they took us. ’s my turn.”

“No, no. You promised we’d be together. Whatever happens, right? It’ll happen to us together!”
You can’t do this! You goddamn fucking bastard! You can’t do this!"

“Take ‘em, Stevie. Please. Take ‘em home.”

“And he grabs me and he hugs me.”

“You live. You hear me? You run and you live. Don’t regret living, Stevie. Make sure this isn’t for nothing.”

“He’s crying.”

“Tell my folks I love ’em. Tell my sisters. Make sure they know.”

“I keep telling him no, but he’s not listening. He never listens. He just... He’s got his arm around me, and he’s being strong for me, so much stronger than I ever was for him, and I – I –”


“Bucky, please…”

“It’s alright. This is the end of the line.”

Steve sobs again and pulls away from her. He looks down into his hand where Bucky’s dog tags are, and he can almost feel Bucky’s arm around his shoulder, their foreheads together, the smell of blood and sweat and terror so strong. He can almost see Bucky now like he saw him then, pale and filthy and covered with red in the bloody sunset, only he’s safe and Bucky’s dead. “I can’t stop it.”

“Go, Steve! After I lead ‘em off, run. Run!”

“He leaves me there, runs down, distracts them to give me a chance.”

“Go! Please. Please! Keep going!”

“And I run, because that’s what he told me to do. I don’t stop.” He could barely stand, barely walk, but he didn’t fall. He didn’t slow down. Bucky went left to fight, to use their few bullets in a futile stand against their captors, and Steve went right to escape. “I don’t stop. I keep going. I keep going.”

I lived.

“And then I... I hear the guns go off.” Three shots from the handgun. Knowing Bucky, they landed, because Bucky was a phenomenal marksman and a phenomenal soldier. Those three loud, sharp bangs, echoing through the rocks around him.

Then more shots. Deeper, from a larger caliber gun. Like cracks of thunder. He remembers stopping, turning, staring into those long shadows, but there was no one there. No one behind him. He was alone, and night was falling. Everything hurts. Every step. Every breath. Every moment of his life that Bucky bought with his own. There’s nothing else he can do.

“I keep going. I have to. I have to keep going. Can’t stop.”

Keep going, Steve.

“I walked for hours. I was lost. No idea where I was going. I just knew I couldn’t give up. But it didn’t matter. They found me anyway. Sniper sighted me. Shot me. I never knew what hit me. I just fell. I should’ve died, but I didn’t. Somebody found me, I guess, got me out of the desert.
“Took me to the hospital. You…” He looks up, focuses on Nat. “You know the rest.”

Her eyes are wet and her face is open and offering. “Yeah,” she murmurs.

There’s silence after that. It’s deep and feels unbreakable. The shadows in the bedroom get bigger as the sun disappears. Nothing looks quite real under their hazy touch. Steve sniffs, swallowing again, but the pain won’t go back down. It’s out now, and it’s hungry. He breathes. Stares at the dog tags again. “They found Bucky’s body.” His voice is soft, strained. “Whatever’s left of him… They found him finally. They’re shipping him home. His sister came… The day I… She came to tell me.”

Nat’s eyes fill with understanding. She takes his hand, linking her fingers through his and pressing the dog tags between their palms. Somewhere during all that he must have pulled away, because she’s not holding him anymore. There’s distance between them, simple, respectful distance. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so very sorry.” She scoots a little closer, the cotton of her pants swishing across the hardwoods. It’s quiet a moment. Her gaze is on him, and he doesn’t have the courage to meet it. Inexplicably he knows what’s coming, what she’s going to say. “But you need to forgive yourself.”

The rage stampedes through the breach, blasting its way over him, and he’s shoving away, scrambling to his feet. “No! No, you don’t understand! It’s my fault! It’s all my fucking fault!” She doesn’t follow him. She’s keeping her distance, but she’s not afraid, watching with serene eyes as he shakes apart. “It was my job to keep him safe! I was his captain! I was in command! And I was his best friend – our whole lives I was his best friend – and he took care of me. He always did. No matter what, he took care of me, and when it mattered most, when it fucking mattered, I couldn’t do the same for him. I couldn’t. He was there because of me, because I wanted to join, because I wanted to fight, and I let him die, don’t you see? I let them cut his fucking arm off. I let them torture him. I let him – I let him go, let him fucking sacrifice himself for me, and, fuck, it wasn’t worth it. I should’ve – I didn’t – God, oh, God, he died and I didn’t save him. I didn’t stop him! I didn’t even try. I let him go.”

Now she moves. She stands and comes closer, grabbing his shoulders and making him cease his quaking and pacing and teetering. “Yeah, you let him go. You let him make a choice. It wasn’t selfish of you. It wasn’t wrong. He made a choice, the only one he could. He made it after months of watching you make that same choice, the only one you could. Steve, you’re not to blame for what happened. Not at all.” He shakes his head. “Please. Listen to me. It’s not your fault. You need to forgive yourself.”

“I can’t. What the hell am I anymore? I’ve fucked everything up. Everything.”

“No. No, you haven’t. No. Listen.” She guides him down to the bed and kneels in front of him. “Listen to me. Do you love Bucky?”

Steve shakes his head, too overwhelmed to follow. “What?”

“Do you love him? Like he was your brother? Like family?”

That takes him aback. “Sure. Sure, I did.”

“Then he loved you, too. Respected you as much as you respect him, so you need to give him the dignity of the choice he made. He must have thought you were worth it.” She took his face again. “And he wanted you to live. You need to respect that. Honor it. Honor him.”

Suddenly everything quiets inside him. He stares at her, but there’s nothing but openness in her
eyes. Sincerity. Faith. Love. And he feels again, escapes the cell, the desert, the nightmare and the endlessness. He’s hollowed out, empty in a way, weightless. She takes the dog tags from his hand and sets them back to the nightstand. Then she smiles and kisses him tenderly, kisses away tears he doesn’t realize he’s crying. “You need to forgive yourself,” she says again. “You’re alive. You survived. You got out, and you deserved to, Steve. You deserved to.”

I’m alive.

He’s still reeling with that, trying to make sense of the scatter of his emotions, and she just waits and watches him. Finally she smiles. “Thank you for telling me,” she whispers. She wraps her arms around him, rising up to tuck his head to her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay. I know it will be. I know it.”

He doesn’t answer, collapsing again, shuddering through silent sobs. She holds him as he lets it out. Lets it all go. Three years of guilt, of grief, of pain and anger and denial... It’s spilling out of him with every shivery breath, with every tear, and for the first time in his life, he doesn’t try to hold it back. It’s freeing, to allow himself to feel without the dread of falling too deep, of being judged, of getting lost. She’s right. He’s not alone.

Eventually the tears stop. His trembling body quiets itself. His heart ceases pounding, and he can breathe easier. That feeling of weightlessness carries him, like he’s floating out of his body, like nothing hurts anymore.

Like he’s flying.

Distantly he realizes the strange sensation isn’t just from crying himself out or admitting the truth. It’s the aura. As he leans back, his senses shift, and the blur of memory and reality glides over him again. He blinks, trying to focus, but he can’t really. Everything’s glowing. She’s glowing. The deep brown of her hair is shining, her eyes full of green light, her skin shimmering with the halo. She’s like an angel.

His angel.

And she’s saving him.

“Steve?” She’s frowning now. “Steve, are you okay?”

He can’t answer her. The seizure’s coming, but this time he’s not afraid. She’s there. She won’t let him fall.

Every step is agony.

But the stars are bright, and even though he’s lost, they’re lighting his way. Even though he’s barely conscious, he thinks he’s not alone, not entirely. The stars and the moon are up there. He can keep going. Bucky told him to, so he will.

He scrambles up a small precipice in the rocks, holding the hole in his side that’s long since been caked with dried blood and grit. His leg’s not working right, not anymore, and he has to drag himself to the top. Maybe it’s not wise, bringing himself out into the open, but he has to see. He has to.

So he does. And it hurts. He has nothing left, no strength, no courage, no hope in his heart, no thoughts in his head save for Bucky’s final words, nothing in his hands except Bucky’s dog tags which rattle and clink as he crawls and climbs. At the top, though, there’s light not far away.
Across the black endlessness of the desert, he spots faint blobs of illumination. They’re soft, inviting, beckoning him closer. He breathes, grabs the stone and holds on tight, squeezes the dog tags in his hands. He’s no cause to think they’re marking somewhere safe, but he does. He does.

And he can make it there. So he keeps walking, no matter how hard it is. No matter how much it hurts.

He keeps going.

“You’re almost there, Steve.”

Steve’s been drifting again, but Nat’s voice grounds him. She’s holding his good arm, leading him into his bathroom. After the seizure abated, he woke to see her leaning over him, her fingers in his hair, her voice in his mind. “You’re alright, Steve. It’s over. Can you hear me? Open your eyes. Wake up. Wake up.” She was cool and sweet, calming him as he came back to himself. She took care of it, took care of him. Got him through it. And she seemed a little rattled, but everything was alright. She was alright, too. “It’s okay. I’m with you. I’m right here.”

And she’s still right beside him. She’s patient and kind, helping him walk despite his broken arm and damaged chest. She gets him inside the bathroom and guides him to the side of the tub. “Here,” she murmurs, easing him down. He goes with a wince, unsteady at best and reeling with everything. She reaches behind him to run the water, getting some washcloths and his shampoo and soap. She’s careful not to get his cast wet or aggravate his wounds. “Let me take care of you. You’ll feel better, okay? Let me.”

He lets her. He lets his eyes slip shut, lets the world outside fade away, lets himself go lax and pliant, lulled by the beat of his own heart and her breath against him as she eases him out of his shirt and pants, as she washes away the stale sweat and dried tears and pain. It’s not hard at all to focus on her, on the feel of her hands and the warm swish of water, on the spicy smell of shampoo and the slippery slide of soap on his skin. It feels good. He feels good.

“You with me?” she whispers after a bit, after she’s got a towel around him. She’s gently rubbing and patting him dry. “Steve?”

He stares in her eyes. “Yeah.”

“Tired?”

“Yeah.”

She reaches for the clean set of pajamas she brought with her. “Then let’s get you back into bed so you can sleep. And when you wake up, it’ll be better. Tomorrow’s going to be better. And the day after that.” She grins as she helps him with a fresh undershirt. “And the day after that. One step at a time, right?”

“Nat?”

“What?” She stops fussing with his clothes, raising her eyes to his.

He pushes the fingers of his good hand through her hair, tugging her gently closer to him. He should have said this before, but he was too lost, trapped behind the wall, swept up in the blur. Now he can see again, and it’s clear and simple. There’s so much he wants to tell her – I’d be dead without you you make me better you give me meaning thank you – but those words don’t come. All he can manage is this. “I love you, too.” His smile is feeble, and he hopes she understands everything else, everything he’s not capable of speaking. “Thank you.” You saved my life.
She does. She leans up and captures his mouth in a deep kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck. He cups the back of her head and melts into the moment. She’s here. There’s comfort to be had because of that. And she’ll help him walk the rest of the way.

They finish in the bathroom. He brushes his teeth with some help from her before hobbling back to bed. Max is there, waiting with his eyes bright in the shadows and his tail wagging. Steve is settled against the pile of pillows, and the dog nuzzles close, giving sloppy kisses that make him smile. Nat presses her lips to his mussed, damp hair after she straightens the blanket over him. “I’m going to get your meds. I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Yeah.”

He doesn’t think while she’s gone, staring at the night coming in his bedroom window. The day’s gone. Another day. He pets Max and doesn’t let that bother him. She’s right. Tomorrow will be better.

She comes back with a bottle of water and his array of pills. He dutifully takes them all. Then she turns down the light and climbs into bed beside him, slips under the covers and cuddles close. Max shifts to lay lower down between them without being told, and very quickly the room goes quiet. She’s on his good side, grasping his hand and holding it atop his belly. Her thumb sweeps over his knuckles. For a moment, he’s scared again, scared of sleep and the dreams he’ll have.

But she’s humming, singing, that sweet, low melody soft against his neck, and he slips back down. And every step is still agony, but he keeps going. Keeps fighting. He’s crossing the desert, winding his way through rocky hills and barren earth. The stars are bright and the moon is solemn but unyielding. He clutches Bucky’s dog tags close to his chest and stares, fixating on those lights. Salvation. Freedom. He’s near to them now – not much further – and he knows he can make it.

He can do what Bucky told him to do.

A little more time passes before he’s close enough to see the lights more clearly. The land’s not so dry here, soil softer with moisture, and there are plants about. Crops through which he’s trudging. Ahead there’s a house where the lights are, and there are people inside it. Shadows in the windows. Farmers. A family. He stops and watches and lets himself think it’s over. Lets himself smile because he made it.

There’s a thunderous crack behind him – sniper rifle – and pain explodes along his temple. He falls. He hurts. He hears voices speak that same rough language he doesn’t know, but they’re kind voices, kind hands on his body. Kind people getting him to safety. He closes his eyes. He drifts. He loses time.

“Captain Rogers? Can you hear me? You’re in the hospital at Walter Reed. Captain Rogers? Open your eyes, son.”

He lives. He wakes up.

His bedroom’s quiet. Still. He blinks back the memories from the hospital, the hazy first moments when he emerged from the coma and realized he’d been saved, when he realized that he was alive. He blinks the last of his tears away and sees. The pale light of the moon and stars streams through his window, turning everything soft and ethereal. The pink floral quilt covers him. Max is at his feet, watching over him with warm eyes, and beside him…
Nat’s head is pillowed on his good shoulder, her body spooned around his, his thigh tucked between her legs. Her hand is curled in his shirt. She’s soundly asleep, breathing slowly and evenly through parted pink lips, and when the moonlight hits her skin, she glows. She’s beautiful. Peaceful.

*She’s here with me.*

Steve watches her, quietly amazed, sweetly comforted. The blur of everything that hurt him is behind him, these lost days, the lost life he was living. She’s brought him here. And he knows this isn’t the end of it. He’s scarred, broken, damaged, disabled. There’s no cure. No answer. No simple fix. The road he’s walking won’t get easier, and it may well be endless. He’s never going to just get better. He’ll never be who he was, never go back to what he had. But he has to keep walking toward what’s ahead, keep fighting for himself, keep surviving. Every step may hurt, some worse than others. That’s what it means to be alive. That’s what Bucky gave him. The chance to keep *living*.

And he is. He’s here with her, too. He’s here and he’s surrounded by his friends, by people who love him.

He knows he’ll be okay.
See You Again

“So let the light guide your way.  
Hold every memory as you go,  
And every road you take will always lead you home…”

The alarm goes off.

Steve groans and makes a pretty pathetic attempt to reach for it, but someone else shuts it off before he can get to it. The same someone – Nat – leans down and kisses his forehead. “Come on,” she coaxes. “Time to get up.”

Another moan escapes his lips before he can quell it, and he cracks open his eyes with a wince. The morning sunlight bursts inside his bedroom, and he turns his head away with a huff. “Wha time izzit?” he slurs, putting more effort into getting his brain disentangled from a deep, dreamless sleep. He blinks a couple times and focuses better.

Nat grins, sitting on the edge of his bed. She’s already showered, lush locks damp against her shirt. “Little after seven. You slept like the dead last night.”

He feels it. He’s groggy from being well-rested, not from insomnia or worse, and that’s a feeling he’s just started getting used to again. Being comfortable and well-rested. He grunts, pushing himself up a little to get a better look at her. She looks well-rested, too. In the past week or so, she’s hardly left his side. It hasn’t always been easy, but since he opened up there’s new air between them, all around him in fact. New hope. The pain’s not gone, but he’s been better able to control it, to overcome it and get past it, to live through it. With her support, he’s starting to feel like he can do anything.

Like face today.

The realization of what lies ahead tempers that good feeling. The pain and grief inside him isn’t gone, nor is the depression and survivor’s guilt. He’s starting to understand that they won’t ever be gone, not entirely. They’re simply more scars that he needs to learn to live with, marks on his heart and soul rather than his body, and he’s seeing now that he doesn’t need to hide them. He doesn’t need to be ashamed of them. He needs help, and it’s not weakness to accept that fact or accept the help itself. And today especially he’s going to want support, because he needs to do this and he’s not sure he can do it alone.

She seems to realize that. Over the past week as they’ve grown closer and closer, as his walls have come down and she’s learned more and more about his time as a captive, she’s gotten incredibly good at reading his mind. It feels like that, anyway. She knows his tells, can guess what he’s about to say before he even says it, has figured him so well that he can’t hide anything from her anymore. When the nightmares come now, he talks. She’s patient with him. She never pushes, never demands, hardly even coaxes. She lets him determine what to say and when, lets him discover that talking is best, that talking feels good. That bottling up all that misery and anguish like he has for years isn’t the best approach. Detachment doesn’t help, never has helped, and he sees that now that he has the opposite with which he can compare. She’s learning him, and she’s teaching him how to be strong.

She smiles, leaning closer to kiss him firmly despite the fact he hasn’t brushed his teeth yet. Her
fingers scratch lightly through his beard as she tilts his face into it. When she pulls away, she stares into his eyes. “Hey, you can do this. You know you can, right?”

He’s still not so sure, but he knows he can try. Sometimes that’s all you know, and that’s fine. “Yeah,” he whispers.

She grins, leans back, pulling the blankets away from his legs. “Then get up. Take a shower. Tony’s coming with breakfast.”

He groans. “Not sure I can take Tony this morning.”

“No choice if you want Pepper’s coffee, and that stuff’s like liquid gold.” Steve can’t argue with that. “So up, soldier.” She says that with a flirty smile, like she knows she needs to ease him into the idea of today. He sees through her ploy but feels good about it anyway. “You need help?”

After groaning his way out of bed, he shakes his head. “No, I’m okay.”

“Okay. I’ll be right outside.” She leaves the bedroom door ajar like she has been every time she’s left, and he gives a little smile before grimacing and stretching as much as he can. His joints pop and complain. His arm’s really itchy now as healing starts, and the cast and sling are really a pain in the ass, but there’s not much he can do about it other than deal with it. The pain’s much better at least. And the pain in his chest from his fractured sternum and ribs is improving, too, though it’s more stubborn and bothersome. Still, the agonizing ache has been reduced to a dull throb, and he can move more freely with that. He can live with it. His seizures aren’t better per se, but even that’s not bothering him as much as they were a couple weeks ago. The emotional upheaval he always associates with them has diminished to the point where he’s not scared anymore, not upset to be so weak and vulnerable. Not with Nat. She knows what to do, and she never makes him feel anything less than protected and safe.

Like leaving the door cracked. Making sure he knows she’s there and that she can hear him. The water’s running in the kitchen, probably as she does up whatever dishes that were left from dinner last night, and Max is whining at the door. He wants to go out on his walk, and she’s probably waiting for Tony to get here before doing it. Though Steve’s been alone once or twice since the accident, all his friends are making an effort to keep those times to a minimum, and Nat’s been bearing the brunt of that. He doesn’t like it, but every time he so much as hints that this isn’t necessary, they pretty sternly remind him that it is, that even if he hadn’t plowed his bike into that tree like a stupid, reckless moron, his doctors don’t want him living alone anymore. He doesn’t feel ready to accept that, but it is what it is. He was back to see Banner and Erskine last week, and they both were pleased with the progress he’s made since the accident, physically and emotionally. Banner actually seemed downright shocked, trying (and not too successfully) to hide how happy he was that Steve’s doing so well. He was particularly happy when Steve told him what he’s doing today. Given that things are going well, he wants Steve to stay the course as much as possible.

Erskine also wants to stay the course on this round of AEDs for another few weeks, give this combination of drugs a chance to help him. Steve can tell he’s not optimistic. Steve’s not optimistic himself, but, again, it is what it is. If these meds fail, he’ll cross that bridge when he gets to it.

Right now his biggest job is getting himself washed up and ready for the day. It’s still a hefty task but not quite so monumental and daunting as it used to be. He brushes his teeth, catching sight of his reflection as he does. He’s still pretty pale, and aged cuts and bruises mar his face, faint lines and yellowing splotches. He doesn’t look as drawn and haggard as he did before, though, so that’s an improvement. His beard’s in desperate need of a trim, and he knows he should, but he loses
energy before he even really considers doing it. Instead he clumsily gets his clothes off and the plastic cast cover around his arm. The shower feels good even though he has to hold his arm out of the spray, and he lets himself indulge in a longer one.

When he’s through, he dries off and gets dressed in a pair of shorts and a blue t-shirt. He combs down his hair and heads out through the bedroom. Nat dressed the bed while he was in the bathroom and tidied up (that’s another thing that’s been bothering him, her cleaning up after him, but she won’t stop no matter how many times he tells her to. He thinks she likes feeling useful for sure, but there’s more to it than that, like a behavior ingrained into her out of fear of being caught or blind-sided, like she relies on the comfort of knowing where things are if she needs them). Sighing, he plods out into the rest of the apartment.

Tony and Thor are both already there, gathered around his table. There’s a tray of coffee from Pepper’s shop, complete with the pastries she makes that are out-of-this world delicious. Donuts and turnovers and Danishes. “Hey,” Tony greets in the midst of stuffing his face with something that’s practically oozing syrupy sugar. “Come eat something.”

Steve makes his way past them to the kitchen and gets himself a glass of milk and his meds instead. “You two are gonna give yourselves heart attacks,” he comments, watching them going back to devouring the sweets. “Or diabetes. Or both.”

“Meh,” Tony says.

“It’s maple pecan, Steve,” Thor declares, savoring another gooey bite. “Quite possibly the food of the gods.”

Steve smiles and shakes his head at the ridiculousness. That doesn’t stop him from coming over, though, and pulling out the chair next to Tony. Max is under the table, and he gets to his feet to come over and reposition himself closer to Steve. “We saved you the boring plain donut,” Tony says, nudging the box closer. “Have at it.”

Steve takes a glazed one instead. “Where’s Nat?” he asks, trying not to seem anxious about the fact she’s not there.

“Getting ready at her place,” Tony answers. Steve nods. She’s been doing that. Even though she’s been sleeping with him (not sleeping with him, but sleeping in his bed) every night since the night he cracked completely, she’s still living out of her apartment. He mentioned to her once a few days ago that she’s free to use his bathroom, to move some of her things into his bedroom if she wants, and she smiled uncomfortably and said she didn’t want to. It didn’t occur to him until later that he basically asked her if she wanted to move in with him. No wonder she looked put-off. He didn’t mean for anything beyond as long as it takes himself to get better, but when he considers it now? He wouldn’t mind having her with him for much, much longer.

Still, that was a little awkward, the first awkward moment they’ve had in a while. And this is becoming uncomfortable, too. It gets quiet between the three of them, solemn and not just because of the occasion. As Steve eats and drinks the rest of his milk, he takes a moment to appraise his friends. He’s never seen either of them in a suit before, every night since the night he cracked completely, she’s still living out of her apartment. He mentioned to her once that she’s free to use his bathroom, to move some of her things into his bedroom if she wants, and she smiled uncomfortably and said she didn’t want to. It didn’t occur to him until later that he basically asked her if she wanted to move in with him. No wonder she looked put-off. He didn’t mean for anything beyond as long as it takes himself to get better, but when he considers it now? He wouldn’t mind having her with him for much, much longer.

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Steve forgets that sometimes considering how they normally dress. And thank God they did. There’s no way today would be happening without that. He feels out of place with his old shorts and t-shirt.

And that feeling will only get worse when he gets dressed.

“Thanks for doing this,” he suddenly says, breaking the heavy silence. They both turn to him, each having gotten lost in his own thoughts. Steve falters under their scrutiny, and he shakes a little as he reaches for one of the coffees, but he doesn’t lose his nerve completely. “I appreciate it.” Guilt makes his stomach clench. “And it’s not just today. Not just for flying all of us down to Arlington. Thanks for everything. I would have… I don’t know what I would have done.” That’s the truth. If not for them, for Sam, for Nat…

“Hey.” Tony wipes his hand on a napkin and reaches over to grasp his shoulder. “You don’t need to thank us. You know… You needed it, Steve. You needed to hit bottom.”

Steve laughs shortly into his coffee cup. “Is that what that was?”

Thor grins but it’s not entirely joyous. “It was. I saw my brother fall, saw him let his emotions consume him. Granted his were not as… *noble* as yours are. He was beset with jealousy and rage, but truly he spent his youth fearing he was neither loved nor favored by our father. He was adopted, you see.” This is the most Steve’s ever heard Thor talk about his life before coming to New York. He looks pensive and rueful. “Once he learned of that, learned that our father would never bequeath the family’s legacy to him, he felt he had no one to save him. No one to understand him or help him. If I… If I had tried harder to prove to him that I would have stood by him, perhaps he wouldn’t have become so vindictive and cruel. As it was, I was too hurt and bitter that he’d choose money over our relationship to do what I should have.” Thor’s eyes grew even more distant with memory during that. Now he blinks and looks squarely at Steve. “The crash was the moment *you* finally asked for help, and I was not about to let you suffer without support.”

The flush of embarrassment heats Steve’s cheeks as he sips his coffee. Here and now when things are clearer and the hell of it all is mostly behind him, he knows exactly what it was, how far he fell. This too isn’t gone, and it’s not ever going to be. He fucked up. He let it all run him down, wash over him violently like a tidal wave, sweep him into something brash and stupid. Even more than a week removed from the accident, he knows if he looks more carefully inside he can find those feelings, the anger and sorrow and gut-wrenching guilt, the sense of hopelessness and endlessness. It’s all still there and probably always will be. Even more scars. He knows how lucky he was to walk away from that crash, how fortunate that he didn’t hurt anyone else. How grateful he is that his friends rallied around him and carried him through the tenuous days after when he could have slipped and lost himself completely. He knows how close he came to giving up.

But he didn’t, and Thor and Tony helped make certain of that. “I don’t know if I can ever make it up to you guys.”

The two of them share a glance. Then Tony smiles and knocks his shoulder again. “I told you. Shit like this is easier to face as a team. And we’re a team. All of us with all of our fucked up pasts and broken bodies and whatever else. Protecting each other. Making stuff right.”

“Avenging,” Thor adds, and he cocks an eyebrow. “Avenging what we’ve lost by standing up to our demons. Together.” He lifts his coffee in a toast of sorts. “It’s quite a noble cause.”

Tony laughs, raising his cup, too. “What he said.”
Steve looks at the two of them, the two guys who couldn’t be more opposite from each other and from him. They all fit together, though, and where it counts – the three of them with their issues and damaged pasts they don’t talk about – they’re the same. All of them trying to live and be good men. Sam, too. More and more he realizes Doctor Banner is right: there’s no reason to be ashamed of who he’s become and what he needs.

“I, uh…” Tony cocks his head as he wipes his hands on a napkin. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but you seem remarkably with it for a guy who basically had a mental breakdown a week ago.” Steve glared at him. “What? I call it like I see it. Anyway, since you’re doing okay, I’ll tell you. I found another bike.”

Steve blinks. He wasn’t expecting that. “Another bike?”

“Yes, another Softail. A buddy of mine wants to offload his. It’s not nearly in such shitty shape as the last one, so it won’t be as much fun to rebuild, but I’m sure I can do at least a little to put my stamp on it. Since you, you know, trashed my last masterpiece. Anyway, this guy’s looking to sell. He’s asking a decent price, too.” Tony smirked a little. “If you’re interested.”

It takes Steve another second to put together what Tony’s saying. Another motorcycle. He has the money put away, so he could buy another one. They could work on it again. Despite all the pain it caused, he enjoyed that a lot, the days in Tony’s garage with him and Thor at his side, following Tony’s lead while they put the engine back together and rebuilt the chassis and restored leather and chrome and steel. While they turned a pile of junk into a thing of beauty. He can’t deny, too, that it’s alluring, not just the bike but what it symbolizes.

But that’s the problem, isn’t it? What it symbolizes. Him, trying to hang onto something he can’t have anymore. “No,” he says after a moment. “No, it’s okay. I’m okay.”

Tony seems surprised and a little disappointed. “You sure, man? I was just breaking your balls. I really don’t mind—”

“No, it’s not that,” Steve replies. He sighs a little, leaning back in his seat. Max lays his head on Steve’s thigh, and Steve scratches his ears. “I just… I don’t need it. You know?”

Apparently Tony does know. Despite his mounting disappointment, he grins and leans back in his chair, too. “Yeah. Okay, that’s fine. You’re still gonna come and hang with us, though, right?”

“We would miss you, Steve,” Thor adds.

“And what?” Steve grins, feeling warm and appreciated. “We can find something else to rebuild, can’t we?” Now he nudges Tony. “Huh, genius?”

Once more Tony smirks, this time in full, snarky flourish. “Don’t you know me at all?”

The conversation dies after that. They sit and eat in silence for a few minutes more, and the quiet isn’t at all distressing now. Steve watches them, drinks his coffee, feels calm. At ease. It’s okay. It really is. It’s not the bike that’s important. Not anymore. Today’s about accepting the truth and letting go. About saying goodbye. This feels like the first step.

And now it’s time to take another. Nat comes back inside. She looks stunning even in a simple, demure black dress. She has her hair up in a twist bun, and dark reddish brown tendrils hang around her face. Her make-up’s light, clean, pretty, and she smiles. “You guys better get going. It’s time to get ready, Steve.”

Thor stuffs the last bit of donut into his mouth and chews before washing it down with a gulp of
coffee and standing. “Indeed. I’ll call Sam and have him bring the car. And I’ll take Max over to Scott’s.”

“Yeah.” Tony stands too, straightening his suit. “See you at the airport, Cap.”

Steve nods and the two of them head out. Nat comes closer. “You ready?”

Faced with it now, he’s not sure. But, again, he knows he needs to try. “Yeah. But, um…” He thinks about what’s hanging in his closet, about the image he needs to uphold. It still means something to him, despite it all, despite what he sacrificed wearing that image, being that image. He looked up to it so much once, when his father died in the Gulf War, when he graduated from West Point, when he stood at the White House while the President placed the Medal of Honor around his neck and the room applauded him… He rubs a hand across his jaw, the beard bristly against his fingertips. “Would you mind helping me?”

Not too long after that, they’re back in his bathroom. To his credit, he does most of it himself, trimming his beard before trying to shave it. Yet again he thinks it’s fortunate his right arm wasn’t the one he broke. Nat takes over more because she wants to, having him sit on the toilet while she runs his razor over his jaw. She wipes him clean of shaving cream. Then he stands up and looks in the mirror. He almost doesn’t recognize himself, rubbing his smooth skin. Nat kisses his shoulder. “I’ll get your uniform.”

He stares a moment more, his blue eyes and his hair’s that a little too long compared to how he wore it in service. His face. Not the same as he was when he shipped out for his second tour. Not the same as it was when he woke up from the coma and limped his way into the bathroom down at Walter Reed under his own power for the first time in forever. Not even the same as it was a few days ago. No going back. Have to go forward.

“And Nat’s a little daunted, too, but for different reasons. Steve can tell as she stares at his jacket, at his awards and distinctions for valorous service. This is making it real for her, too. Real in a way everything he’s told her hasn’t. He feels the need to comfort her, taking her hand with his good one and squeezing. “You don’t have to…” A feeble smile twists his lips. “I’m still me. Even wearing this.”

She turns her gaze from his uniform to him. “I know. That’s why it’s so…” She searches for the right word, searches his eyes. “Amazing. You’re a hero.”

Captain America. For once, he doesn’t let himself argue. He doesn’t even do what he usually does, add a bitter not anymore or not like this. He just lets himself breathe, and she kisses him, and together they help him get dressed.

It feels alien but strikingly familiar at the same time. Awkward but uncomfortable. Monumental yet not. He’s not who he was, never can be again, but who he is isn’t a stranger, if that makes sense. It’s okay for it not to. Doctor Banner always tells him this, too, that feelings are messy and crazy and nonsensical and chaotic. That they don’t have to be easy or even meaningful. They’re just feelings. And as he stands there, staring at himself in his mirror in his neatly pressed uniform, his arm in a sling and faded bruises and cuts on his face, the scar on his temple and the scars in his
He’s proud to be what he is. A war veteran. A hero. A survivor.

Nat hands him Bucky’s dog tags. He slips them into a little pouch and then puts them into his pants pocket. Then she gives him his hat. She stands in front of him as he tucks the hat under his good arm. “You look…” She doesn’t finish, but he can see what she means to say. That warm flush of peace and contentment wards away his lingering doubts, and he manages a small smile. She smiles, too, that sweet encouraging one she has. “Ready?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“Oh. Let’s go. Sam’s waiting.”

Steve’s never flown on a private jet before, let alone a private jet owned by a real estate mogul. Thor pulled some strings to have Asgard Enterprises offer up this one. It’s something, he has to admit. Expensive leather seats and shining mahogany and anything he could possibly want to drink and their own flight attendants. That feeling of being out of place returns, but it’s not quite as sharp as it was. It helps that Nat seems about as astounded and uncomfortable as he is, not jittery, per se, but definitely restless. Sam seems content to “milk it”, as he puts it, sitting in his crisp Air Force uniform on Steve’s other side and enjoying a glass of sparkling soda. Tony and Thor argue about whose father is wealthier (or was, in Tony’s case), comparing fortunes and yachts and jets and mansions. Steve’s listening half-heartedly to their antics, and by the time the jet sets down at IAD about an hour after leaving Newark, he’s decided it’s a toss-up.

They rent a spacious SUV (this time on Tony’s dime) to drive to Arlington. It’s a warm summer day, not quite hot yet, with bright blue skies and a friendly sun. They make it to the church where the funeral’s being held with time to spare. Bucky’s family’s already there. His sisters and their husbands. His father. Cousins and aunts and uncles that Steve doesn’t know all that well but has maybe met before during holidays and family celebrations. Steve sees them and immediately fears the worst, particularly from Bucky’s father. George Barnes was always a nice guy, a little quiet and reserved. He’s always been nice to Steve, but Steve hasn’t seen him – not really – since Bucky was lost. He’s not sure what he’s expecting.

A warm hug and a gentle greeting aren’t it. “I’m glad you came,” George says, embracing Steve with one of those rare, open hugs he used to give Bucky. He pulls back to smile. “James would’ve wanted that.”

Steve nods. Becca comes next. If she knows about what happened after she left that night (and she certainly notices the cast and the bruises), she doesn’t say. Instead she wraps her arms around him, too, and kisses his cheek. He spends a moment introducing his friends to Bucky’s family, and warm greetings are exchanged despite the solemn day. They go inside the church.

It’s a beautiful place. Pretty soon more attendees arrive. Members of the army. Friends from Brooklyn, from West Point, people Steve hasn’t seen in years. Darcy Lewis, who’s on the arm of an intern named Ian, who grins through her tears and wise-cracks about Steve’s cast to cover up how much she misses Bucky. She jokes with him like they used to back in high school. Everyone acts normal, and no one thinks twice about him being there. No one regards him with accusation or pity. In fact, most of the people greet him with a handshake, hug, or a salute, with nothing but respect or even reverence in their eyes. The rest of the Commandos show up. Gabe and Dum Dum. Monty and Jim Morita and Jacques Dernier, who flew all the way in from France where he returned after serving his last tour. It’s really good to see them all again, to see everyone with whom he served in Afghanistan. He spent the whole of the plane trip down with butterflies in his eyes…
stomach, afraid of what people would say or think seeing him there. It turns out he needn’t have been anxious at all. They do nothing but swap war stories while his friends listen in and talk about how great a soldier he was. About what a great soldier Bucky was. It’s comforting.

The funeral service is nothing short of surreal. Steve sits in the front, Nat on his left and Sam on his right and Bucky’s family just down the pew from them. It’s a Catholic mass, traditional like Buck’s mom would have wanted, like George probably requested. The casket is draped in the American flag, carried into the church by the Commandos. It remains closed, and instead there are pictures of Bucky spread around it. Bucky smiling on family vacations, Bucky at his high school graduation, Bucky at West Point. Bucky on the front lines. He looks young and handsome, with that sly, charming smile of his and his light gray eyes. Full of life and love. The way they all want to remember him. Steve stares at the photos – he’s in a couple of them, one from Coney Island in the summer of 2005 and at graduation from West Point in 2010 and right before they went missing in 2012 – and lets himself drift a little again. There’s a memory tied up in every one of those, and he smiles as they dance through his head.

In lieu of a lengthy homily, friends and family gather to speak about Bucky. Eventually it gets to be his turn. It’s a little hard to get up, with his chest still tender and his hip stiff, but Sam gives him a little help and Nat squeezes his hand. He limps up to the podium, terrified out of his mind. This is the moment of which he’s been the most afraid, the one he’s been dreading. When Becca called a few days ago and asked him if he’d speak, it honestly took him aback that they’d want him to do that. That they cared what he thought, he who was the one to come home when their son and brother didn’t. He agreed before he thought twice about it and lost his nerve.

Now he’s here. He looks out over the congregation, at Nat and Sam and Tony and Thor, at his childhood friends and army buddies and old commanders, at Bucky’s family. This is where he makes good on his promise to his mother, to Bucky’s mother, too. To Bucky and to himself. Honor him. Honor his choice. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes for a moment, and then he starts. “Bucky and I met when I was five and he was six. It was our first day of kindergarten. I was scrawny and little, and on my way home I got myself into a fight with three or four or more…” There’s a little, knowing chuckle that goes through the church. “…bullies who were picking on a girl. Bucky didn’t know me at all; he and his family had just moved to Brooklyn from Indiana a couple weeks before. They lived in our building, but we really hadn’t met until then. And it didn’t matter that he didn’t know me. I see another big kid coming down the street, and I think I’m in even bigger trouble, but I’m not. The kid comes over and pulls the bullies off me, plants himself right between me and them, and tells them, I know it sounds corny and cliché, to pick on someone their own size.”

That earns another little laugh. Steve smiles. “And then he smiles at me with this look in his eyes and pulls me up and tells me we should be friends. From then on, we were. We were best friends. Closer than brothers. Inseparable, our moms used to say. Family. Bucky was always there to take care of me. He did it without asking, like this was his job or his duty, his role to assume. When I was sick, he stayed in just so I wouldn’t be alone. If someone picked on me, he was always there with a smile to make me feel better. If I needed help or got myself into something too big, he was right at my side to get me back out. When my mother passed away…” He loses his nerve a little, but another deep breath calms him, and he keeps going. “Bucky was right there, letting me know I wasn’t alone. The whole Barnes family took me in without question. They’re the nicest folks you’ll ever meet, sweet and generous and so loving.” He hears a sob from where Bucky’s sisters are sitting. Becca’s hugging her younger sibling, and Bucky’s dad is caught between smiling and weeping and trying to do neither.

Another deep breath helps Steve along. “Bucky went with me everywhere. And I went with him. Inseparable. When I wanted to go to West Point and follow in my dad’s footsteps, he came along...
without question. I tried to tell him he didn’t need to, but he wouldn’t hear it. Nope. He told me that that he needed to make sure that I didn’t do anything stupid. So we go off to Afghanistan. I could tell you all the times Bucky…” He swallows the knot in his throat. “That Bucky saved my life over there. Or the times he saved our unit. Or saved innocents caught in the line of fire. I could go into that, but we’d be here a while. So I’m just going to tell you about one time.”

God, this is hard. He bites his lower lip and looks down. His eyes well with tears. Suddenly he’s not sure he can’t do this. The doubt binds him up all over again. He can’t be open or honest, not about what happened, not in front of hundreds of people and at Bucky’s funeral. He just can’t.

But he raises his eyes again, and immediately they seek out one person in the crowd. Nat’s watching him. There’s nothing pressing in her gaze, nothing demanding. Just unwavering, gentle faith. She gives him a little nod and a little smile, and that ball of tension in his stomach loosens and he can breathe again. The tears don’t go away, but he doesn’t care when they wet his cheeks or that his voice trembles. “We were prisoners of war together for more than a year. For more than a year, he promised me that he’d find a way to get us out, to get me home. Even – even when things were at their darkest, he had a smile, that same smile he always had, and even when… When we were trying to get away, when it was obvious we weren’t going to make it, not both of us… He looked at me and smiled that smile, had that look in his eyes…”

He can see it now, that look. It’s the same one Nat has, that Sam has, that the people who love him have. Faith. Strength and courage. Purpose. “He just… He did what he always does. Smiled and put himself between me and whatever was trying to hurt me.” He sees it again in mind’s eye, Bucky’s knowing smile and that look in his eyes. It seems so real, like Bucky’s right there with him…

But he’s not. “Bucky died so that I could live. He gave his life so that I could escape, so that I could be here today.”

There’s quiet in the church. It’s not shock or anger or disgust. It’s simply peaceful respect. Steve feels like the proverbial weight is off his shoulders. He spends a second gathering himself. “People call me a hero for what I did over there. It’s been hard for me to accept that after coming home, but I see more and more that it’s not a medal that makes you a hero. It’s not commendations or accolades or any of that. It’s doing the right thing, making the best choice you can in an impossible situation. And it’s the faith of the people who love you and doing right by the people you love. Bucky saved me so many times, from that first fight on the street outside school all the way to the desert of Afghanistan when we had no chance and no choice… He was a hero of the highest caliber, a symbol to which we all should aspire. I’ll spend the rest of my life, the life he sacrificed himself to make sure I have… I’ll spend the rest of my life doing everything I can to be as good a man as he was.”

Everything I can. This… This is what he’s meant to do.

After the service, Bucky is carried out of the church. Steve walks with him, even though he can’t bear the casket with the rest of his unit. Outside, everyone is mournfully silent as the body is placed in the hearse. Not a word is spoken. Not a whisper is heard. The air is still with grief as the Commandos bear their fallen friend. With the casket inside, the hearse’s doors are gently closed.

Steve stands on the church steps. His friends join him there. Sam looks different in his Air Force service dress. He puts his hat on and grasps Steve’s shoulder. “You okay?” he asks.

Steve watches as the funeral procession begins to form. Nat takes his hand and squeezes it gently.
Steve squeezes it back. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You did good,” Tony says with a brotherly smile and a gentle nudge to Steve’s arm. He slides his sunglasses on. “I’ll go get the car.” He pulls the car keys from his suit pants and continues down the steps.

Thor says nothing but joins him, offering Steve an encouraging smile as he passes. The two of them head off in a brisk pace toward the parking lot. The rest of the church is emptying now, streams of people coming out to head to the cemetery. The quiet hum of conversation resumes. People pass, some stopping to shake Steve’s hand, to express how lovely Steve’s eulogy was, to thank him for coming and for so bravely serving their country. Nat stays close during it all, silent but steadfast behind him. There if he needs her. She’s looking at him, her eyes bright in the sun. When the crowd begins to thin, she steps closer and takes his hand again, and she and Sam start walking with him down the rest of the steps.

“Steve?”

Steve’s heart jolts a little with the sound of a familiar voice. He twists around. “Peggy?”

Peggy has a soft, awkward smile on her face where she stands a few steps behind them. She’s dressed in a black dress, her brown hair pulled into a sleek pony tail. She’s beautiful, still so beautiful, with her lips lushly red and her milky skin flawless and smooth. Her eyes are deeply brown, molten like chocolate he always thinks, but now they’re filled with grief. “Hello, Steve.”

Steve can’t believe it. Peggy’s husband, Dan Sousa, stands next to her, leaning on a wooden cane. He offers a smile of his own. Steve doesn’t know him at all, other than he’s a nice guy from the Midwest who lost a leg in Iraq. He works with the Pentagon, corresponding with MI6. At least that’s what Steve thinks is the case. He hasn’t exactly kept in touch with Peggy since he was rescued. Steve pulls away from Sam and Nat, and both of them watch him with a mixture of concern and apprehension. “You guys go ahead,” he says softly. “It’s okay.” They linger a second or two more, especially Nat, who watches Peggy with suspicion in her eyes. She does go, though, and Steve turns back. He shakes his head. “What’re you doing here?”

“Falsworth called me,” she says. “Of course I couldn’t miss this. James was… He was a remarkable man.”

Peggy worked on and off with army intelligence during the war, and as a special ops squad, the Commandos often corresponded with her. And, of course, she was close to Bucky through Steve, Bucky’s friend through Steve. Steve nods. “Yeah, he was.”

“What you said was truly inspiring.”

“Thanks.”

Peggy’s smile slips. She looks worried for a moment before turning and grasping Daniel’s hand. “Oh, lord, my brain. I don’t think you two have ever formally met. Dan, this is Captain Steve Rogers. Steve, Agent Daniel Sousa.”

Steve reaches out his good hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Sousa grins, clasping it firmly and shaking it. “No, it’s an honor,” he says. “What you did in Kabul… Stuff of legends.”

Steve flushes. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to people talking about him like that. “Heard some pretty good things about you, too. In Iraq.”
Sousa taps his cane against his leg, and there’s a very distinctive metal clank. “Did my job. Left a leg. What can you do?”

The way he speaks about that, his scars and losses, feels good and right. The way it is. “Not much,” Steve agrees.

“It’s been alright,” Sousa adds. “You know, things happen for a reason. If I hadn’t come back, hadn’t been transferred to intel… Well.” He slips an arm around Peggy’s slender waist.

She doesn’t look entirely comfortable, not because of his touch at all but because Steve’s seeing it. There’s guilt in her eyes, and Steve knows what she’s after before she even turns to her husband. “Darling, do you mind giving us a moment?”

“Of course not,” Dan replies, and he shakes Steve’s hand again before grasping his arm. “Really. It’s an honor. Next time you come down to DC, we’ll take you to dinner. It’s the least we can do.”

“Sure.”

Sousa steps away, limping down the steps with some difficulty and heading to the sidewalk. Steve watches him go a moment before turning back to Peggy. She’s rattled. In all the time they dated, almost a year overseas (not that the brass approved, but who was going to say no to Captain America?) and on leave at home, he’s never seen her be anything less than perfectly composed. She’s tough as nails, born a military brat with her father in the British special services, and she’s fought hard to attain the status she has as one of MI6’s top agents and military consultants. She’s a powerhouse, incredibly gifted with tactical analysis and logistics, and strong and fiery, a stubborn beauty through and through. And if things hadn’t happened the way they did…

Even anticipating what she wants to say, it hurts hearing it. “Steve, I’m… I’m so sorry. Not just for James, though that’s reason enough. In truth…” She falters, and her eyes well with tears. “I was a coward. I should have come more when they brought you home, should have done more than just tell you what happened, but I – I was afraid you would…”

He didn’t. He never has and never will. Despite everything, how much it hurt, he couldn’t. “I could never hate you, Peg. I couldn’t blame you. I was gone for more than two years. The army told you I was dead.”

“I know,” she says, battling tears more. “That hardly relieves my guilt. I – I should have stayed with you, should have written more at least…”

“I wouldn’t have answered if you had.” He knows that. “You’re not the only one who was scared.”

Weakly she smiles. “I never… When they told me you were missing, I struggled, Steve. I struggled terribly. It was like… I couldn’t accept it. I threw myself into work. I lost myself. If I hadn’t met Daniel…”

“How?” He steps closer, taking her hand in his own. It feels so familiar, like the hint of a something bittersweet. “You can’t help what happened. You can’t help that you fell in love with someone else when I was gone. You moved on. It’s not your fault. I… I wouldn’t want you to live that way, wondering if I was alive or dead, never knowing. If I hadn’t been found, if I hadn’t woken up… That’s not something I would have ever wanted for you.” It’s striking to him that he can say this, that it’s so simple and easy. He’s come so far. He can see that now.

So can she. “I know,” she whispers, her voice failing her. She reaches up with her free hand to
wipe her tears away. “I know. It’s not fair to you, though.” She caresses his cheek. “I still love you, Steve. A part of me always will.” He opens his mouth to speak, to tell her the same, but she doesn’t let him. “And a part of me is terrified that I’m living my life and you won’t get to live yours.”

He pulls Peggy against his chest, kissing her forehead and wrapping his arm around her. “You don’t need to worry about that,” he promises into the crown of her head. Down the way a bit he catches Nat’s eyes, and she’s still wary like she knows who Peggy is and what this means, but Steve smiles and she relaxes into a smile of her own. “I’m fine.” Peggy shivers in his arms a bit, and he swirls the flat of his hand on her back. “Really. I am. Things happen for a reason. It works out the way it’s supposed to.” In another life, in another time, had things gone differently… He would have married Peggy. And he knows he would’ve been happy, that they both would have been. This is where they are, though, torn apart and set on different paths. He doesn’t regret it. Not anymore.

Still, he lingers a moment, holding her tightly and letting that bittersweet sense of what might have been tease him. He knows she’s doing the same. It feels like another wound inside him is starting to mend itself, another truth that he hasn’t been able to accept coming to light. “As long as you’re happy,” he whispers finally, leaning back and looking down on her. “If you’re happy, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

She nods, dabbing at her eyes again. They stare at each other a moment more until it feels a bit awkward, like those paths are pulling them away from each other again, Peggy to the man she married and Steve onward in his own life. The funeral procession is leaving as well, so it’s time to go. Peggy holds Steve’s hand, sweeping her thumb over his knuckles. “Take care,” she finally says. “If you ever need anything…”

“I know who to call,” he finishes. He smiles. “Bye, Peg.”

She leans up to kiss his cheek. “Goodbye, Steve.”

A couple moments later, Steve’s walking with Sam and Nat along the sidewalk outside the church. Just ahead Tony and Thor are pulling up. Sam eyes Steve in concern. “You okay?”

Steve takes Nat’s hand, weaving their fingers together, and glances back over his shoulder at the church. He can see Peggy at the foot of the steps, Sousa holding her tightly, his eyes bright with love and protectiveness. They look good together, he realizes. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just had to say goodbye.” He squeezes Nat’s fingers.

Sam opens the back door of the SUV for them. “Seems to be the day for it,” he comments gently. They climb into the car, and off they drive with the procession to Arlington. The ride is silent, but the emptiness isn’t troubling. Steve looks out the window as they go, at the verdant green trees and pretty blue sky, at the bright summer day and the people enjoying it. Beside him, Nat is still. She holds his good hand between her own, quietly comforting. No pressure. No questions about what happened with Peggy. She’s calm and still sweetly encouraging. He grips her hand tighter as they reach the cemetery.

Bucky’s being buried with full military honors. The honor guard escorts the casket to the site, with the family and other attendees in tow. Steve walks with Nat on his arm and his friends on his other side. The Howling Commandos follow as well, heads bowed in respect. They gather around the location, and the family, Bucky’s father and sisters, sit right in front. The military chaplain conducts the ceremony, and it’s short but full of power and meaning. The guns go off in their salute. The flag is carefully lifted from the casket, folded, and reverently handed to Bucky’s father.
on behalf of the President, the army, and a grateful nation. It’s beautiful and perfect, but it’s mostly a blur to Steve. He stands with his hands clasped before him, the brim of his hat blocking the brightness of the sun as he stares at the American flag. It hurts, and it’s hard, and for a second he feels weak and uncertain all over again because this is it. This is really it.

But Nat’s still right beside him. The Howling Commandos flank them, and Sam and Tony and Thor are right behind him. He knows he can do this, what he came to do. A lone bugler plays *Taps*, and he and all of the other armed services personnel salute their fallen peer. That’s the hardest part in a way, to narrow the scope of what he’s feeling into a single, formal gesture. He breathes through it, holding himself together with dignity because Bucky deserves this. He deserves *every honor* that can be bestowed.

With the funeral completed, people begin to walk away and continue on with their lives. Some stop at the casket to pay their final respects, a few quiet words and tears, a hand on smooth wood and hearts straining for final peace of mind. Steve patiently waits until the family has their last moments. This is the culmination of almost five years of wondering, of worrying, of fear and grief and anger. It’s closure, and they spend it gathered around their son and brother, George holding the flag tight as they all stare and breathe. Eventually they turn to leave, but not without embracing Steve first. George again. Becca. She kisses his cheek and tells him goodbye.

After that, it’s just him, standing with Bucky’s casket. Nat and the others have given him some privacy, standing down near the road under a few trees and trying not to watch him. It’s alright if they do. It makes him feel better, knowing they’re there. It takes him a moment or two to drum up the courage to finally come closer, to touch the smooth, polished wood as so many others have. It takes him longer still to manage to speak. “Hey, Buck.” His voice sounds rough and a little weak, so he clears it and forces himself to keep going. “Crazy that we’re here, huh? It’s really far from where we were. And I, um… I just wanted to tell you that I made it. I made it home, just like you promised I would. And I wanted to thank you. I never got the – the chance back there, when… Well, you know when.”

The breeze picks up, blowing warm air and rustling the flowers atop the casket. Steve closes his eyes. “Mostly I just wanted to let you know that you don’t have to take care of me anymore. I think… I think you were there that night, when I was walking alone across the desert. And the night I took the bike. Like you were in the stars, watching over me… You were with me, looking out for me like you always did, and you don’t have to now. I’ve got Sam and Don and Tony. You’d like ’em. And I’ve got Nat. She’s…” He smiles. “She’s what I need. So you can just rest. Wherever you are, you can rest easy. I… I know you’re in a better place. I can see that. And one day, I know I’ll be together again. You know? We’ll be together. We’ll play Xbox, have your mom’s tacos, sleep in as long as we want, do all the things we were gonna do after the war…” His voice fails him. “Share a beer. I’ll tell you about the life I led. The life you gave me. When we’re together again, I’ll you all about it. There’s no end of the line. Not back there. Not here.” Not ever.

He takes a breath and reaches into his pocket. Pulls out the dog tags from the little pouch. “I was… I was gonna give you back these.” Looking down, he reads the cards yet again, like he has hundreds of times since Becca gave them to him. “I was gonna leave them here to be buried with you, or give them back to your dad and Becca, but you know what? That’s what I wanted. You wanted me to give them to your family, and they wanted me to have them back, so if keeping them safe’s one thing I can do for you now after everything you’ve done for me…” He closes his hand around them, them and everything they symbolize. “You don’t need to watch over me. Not anymore. You hear me? I’m gonna be okay.”

There’s no answer but the breeze. “We’re both home now,” he murmurs, laying his palm on the
casket one last time. The dog tags glint in the bright sunlight, and the flowers dance sweetly in the
gentle wind, and Steve feels it. The moment where he pays his final respects, where he finds his
closure, where he walks away from his past to live his life. Another moment where he keeps his
promise. He pictures Bucky’s smile again, his smile and the light in his eyes, and he smiles, too,
letting his hand slide off the casket. “See you, Buck.”

He makes it down to the road before it really catches up to him, that he did it. And the pain comes,
the pain and the sorrow and the regret, and his eyes flood with tears he can’t hold in. But it’s okay
to cry. It really is. And Nat’s right there, waiting for him.

She takes his hand. “You okay?”

A long, heavy sigh escapes him, and he wipes at the wetness on his cheeks. “Yeah.”

There’s a beat of silence, their little group pressing close in support. Hugs are shared. Hearts are
together. That sense of pride and accomplishment, things he hasn’t felt in years… Dignity. Self-
respect. He’s not a perfect soldier, not a perfect person.

But he’s a good man. He’s still that, no matter his scars, no matter the damage done to his body
and mind and heart. No matter what they did to him, they couldn’t change that. He’s still a good
man.

Tony flings an arm over his shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get something to eat. Burgers and fries
on me.”

“And beer,” Thor adds, draping his suit jacket over his shoulder. “A drink in honor of Bucky, of
you, of fallen warriors and glory and the new adventures before us!”

“Something like that,” Sam says with a laugh, sliding his sunglasses on. “How’s that sound, Cap?”

Steve grins, blinking away the last of his tears. “Sounds great.”

As they head to the car, Nat squeezes his hand one more time and leans her head on his shoulder.
“I’m really proud of you,” she murmurs. The others are walking ahead, talking, filling the day with
newly happy chatter, and Steve takes a deep breath. He stops and looks down at her, and she’s
smiling that knowing smile at him. He feels lighter, freer. What he has now... It’s more than
enough. It really is. What he just did was another step. One more step on the road he’s walking.
It hurts, but he’s not taking it alone.

Nat leans up to kiss him.

Not alone.

And this is another step.

Nat walks at his side as they head down the bustling sidewalk. Vesey Street was absolutely alive
with activity, and the two of them wove through the crowds of people heading to work and going
about the morning’s business. The two of them are quiet, mostly because Steve’s trying hard to
keep his anxiety in check. The tension in his belly is making him lightheaded and almost dizzy,
but he’s hanging on. Working through it. Going despite how scared and nervous he is. Nat’s got
his hand tightly, though, anchoring him here just as she did after the accident, at Bucky’s funeral,
for every moment since. She’s dressed in capris and a black tank with her bag over her shoulder
and her hair in a braid. She’s beautiful, amazing and vibrant and encouraging, and he’s stronger
for having her there with him. He always is now. All her light and fire in his life… He knows
more than ever before that he can do anything with her.

Including this.

They reach the building. It’s a nice one, gray and sleek and towering, not far from the financial
district. That alone makes this even more daunting. Standing at the bottom of it looking up,
Steve’s heart races. Even Nat looks a little intimidated, but she blows out a long breath and quirks
a little grin. “Come on.”

Steve winces, and his feet feel glued to the sidewalk despite the throng of people moving around
them. “I…” He swallows through a dry throat, trying to push down his pounding pulse. “I don’t
know if I can do this.”

She turns to him, laying a hand over his cast (which, over the last few weeks, has been completely
covered in Tony’s doodles and Cassie Lang’s art and Thor’s signatures – a veritable mosaic of
affection, as Tony put it while Steve vehemently tried to stop him from drawing anything too lewd
on there) and going on her toes to kiss his lips lightly. “You can. I know you can. So come on.”
Grinning at his tortured grimace, she pulls him into the building.

The lobby is very nice, elegantly and sleekly decorated, and that only heightens his apprehension.
They stroll hand in hand to the directory on the wall beside the elevator bank and scan the list for
where they need to go. Fourth floor. They spend the elevator ride up in silence. Steve rolls back
and forth on his heels, fidgety and jittery and so damn anxious, and she simply lets him. Never
once does she let go of his hand, not even when the doors open. They go down the hallway,
 footsteps soft on gray carpet, until they find the suite in question. There’s a young woman at the
desk outside with shiny dark hair. Steve tries to moisten his mouth enough to speak once he gets
up the nerve to actually go up there. “Um, Steve Rogers? For Mr. Coulson.”

The young woman brightens up. “Oh, he’s been expecting you! I’ll take you right back.”

He hesitates again. This is really going to be it. It’s been two days since he called Coulson and let
him know he’d participate in the documentary, two weeks since Bucky’s funeral, almost a month
since his accident and confiding in Nat, and he’s still not sure. He’s not sure he has it in him to be
this candid and open. Telling Nat was one thing; that was more about emotion than facts. Same
thing with telling Banner. Even speaking at Bucky’s funeral was different. This is exposing his
memories to a filmmaker, to a camera, to the world, in a way. This is about details, about the
story, about broader impact and implications. He’s not certain he’s ready for that.

But Nat is, of course. “I’ll be right here waiting for you,” she promises, gesturing to the chairs just
beyond the front desk in a small, comfortable lounge. “Right here. The whole time. Okay?”

The thought of leaving her, even for only a moment, is distressing, but her faith in him is powerful
enough that the thought of failing that is so much worse. So he nods and lets go of her hand.
“Okay.”

She nods, too, leans up to kiss him lightly again even though the receptionist is watching. It’s soft
and chaste, nothing but love and respect and confidence. She grins, and it’s dazzling, as bright and
beautiful as the sunniest day. Then she goes to sit in one of the chairs, pulling her bag to her lap.
He holds her gaze a moment more, drawing strength from her, knowing in his core that without her
none of this would be possible. He’d still be who he was before. He’s still be in his apartment,
alone and suffering in a vicious cycle of depression and anxiety and nightmares and insomnia, lost
and barely living, treading water in an inky, endless ocean. Roaming the desert with no hope of
finding his way home. Without her…
He’s following the assistant to the hallway before he even thinks to move. She leads him down a bit, finding a conference room towards the end of it. There a man there with a receding hairline and a banal face. He’s dressed in a nice suit, and his face lights up the second he sees Steve with a ridiculously huge smile. “Captain Rogers! Wow. What an honor to finally meet you!” He’s out of his chair and across the room to vigorously pump Steve’s hand a few times. “Wow. I can’t even. This is – Wow. Thank you for doing this, Captain.”

“Steve,” Steve corrects nervously. “Should I come in?”

“Oh! Oh, yeah. Here. Have a seat.” Coulson pulls a chair out. Steve sees now there are a few other people in the room, Coulson’s crew, mostly likely. There are also a couple cameras already set up on tripods, and Coulson has a whole stack of papers and folders on the table. They’re ready for the interview. That gives him pause, makes this not just real but imminent, and Steve hesitates all over again. “Would you like something to drink? We have anything you want. Water, juice, soda, coffee…”

He’s tempted to say no, because he always says no, but he doesn’t. “Water’s fine. Thanks.” The young girl who brought him here skitters off to get his drink, and other people are introducing themselves. They’re all in awe of him, shaking his hand and thanking him for coming. Pretty soon Steve’s sitting, trying not to jitter anew, and watching the crew fiddle with the cameras. It makes him nervous, and it’s hard to stay put, but he does. The girl brings him his water, which he sips, and Coulson sits at the table. The cameras and lights are switched on, and all the sudden, this is happening.

“Thanks again, Captain Rogers – Steve. Your story, what happened to you and how you were saved and brought to the hospital… Without that, my film really falls flat, so the help you’re providing with this interview is immeasurable. And the world really should know what you went through, what it means to be a hero.” Coulson flips through his papers. Then he looks up, eyes gentle but excited. He shakes his head. “You were so adamantly against doing this. If you don’t mind me asking, what changed your mind?”

That gives Steve pause, and he honestly thinks about it. He sets his glass down on the table, taking a deeper breath and forcing himself to relax. He feels the weight of Bucky’s dog tags around his neck. It’s a comfort now, as it should be. “I just… I finally want to talk about it. I think I can now. I… I think I should. For the people who saved me. And for me.”  

Coulson’s lips turn in a relieved smile. “Then we’re ready whenever you are.”

This is it.

Steve inhales deeply and lets it out slowly. Again. And again. His heart’s beating. His lungs are breathing. He’s alive. It’s a long road, a long day, a long way, but he can make it. Another step. I can do it, Bucky. I’ll keep going. I know I can. “Where do you want me to start?”

“It’s been a long day without you, my friend,  
And I’ll tell you all about it when I see you again.  
We’ve come a long way from where we began  
And I’ll tell you all about it when I see you again.  
When I see you again…”
Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: So here we begin Nat’s arc. I know a lot of you are waiting for it. I need to put up front some blanket warnings: this is where the story starts to earn its E rating for sex. There will be mentions/descriptions of rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence. I'll make note of any chapters where it's more prominent. There's good, happy sex coming, too, starting here. So please read at your own discretion.

Enjoy, everyone! A chapter of fluff? Or mostly fluff??? What is this story coming to? :-P

“We got all the memories,
So much more we can see.
Better than our first kiss.
Snow falling at Christmas.
Like sleeping in on Sunday,
Laughter we never faked.
Bob Marley in summer.
One love for each other.”
– Natasha Bedingfield, “Neon Lights”

Music fills Brooklyn. It’s coming from the area right around the south side of Prospect Park. There’s a band on a stage, a young guy with an emo haircut but an amazing voice belting out a rock song. He’s flanked by his band, other young guys with guitars and a bass. The crowd is really into the performance, cheering and clapping and dancing. Around the park, the streets are filled with tents and booths and tons of people. The smell of food is heavy in the air, heralding a motley assortment of offerings. Fried chicken and hamburgers and grilled vegetables, Indian food and Thai meat skewers and all sorts of other fare from the local restaurants and eateries. There’s beer and soda, cups of it being enjoyed in earnest. And there’s good cheer that’s positively infectious. Below the song spreading over the park and surrounding streets, happy conversation hums along, people laughing and chatting and shouting to friends. There’s light everywhere from storefronts eagerly showing off their wares, from streetlights, from colorful bulbs strung up and hung. From neon lights in windows, in booths, everywhere, bright, lively hues that buzz and shine. It’s a gorgeous night in late August, just the first touch of autumn in the air, and everyone’s happy.

Block Fest is a tremendous success.

“Wow,” Peter breathes from Nat’s side. The two of them are standing inside the Rising Tide’s tent, looking out over the party. The kid shakes his head, his mussed hair falling over his brow and sticking to the light sheen of perspiration covering his face. “This is pretty amazing.”

Nat has to agree. There are a dozen people at any time perusing the tables they set out that afternoon, rifling through the boxes of records and CDs. So far the store has already made thousands of dollars and offloaded a chunk of inventory, which is significantly more than they can
bring in during a normal business day, and the night’s still young. May’s out there, talking to the customers with a breezy confidence to her. With her working the group, they’re sure to bring in even more profit and success, which is the point of it all. In fact, all the surrounding tents and booths seem to be thriving.

Daisy comes over, bearing another few boxes of records. She sets those to the table beside their register. Beaming, she drops her hands to her hips. “I did good, didn’t I? Huh?”

Being the smart ass he is, Peter grins cheekily. “Well. You did well.” Daisy smacks him lightly upside the head. “Ow!”

“Go restock,” she orders, pushing the boxes to him.

His mock glare isn’t very convincing. “Fine. But then I’m getting food. There are, like, insane choices out there. Do we get ours for free? Since we did all the work.”

She rolls her eyes. “We didn’t do all the work. And no.” Peter scoffs, hefting the boxes one on top of the other and heading to one of the tables that was getting to be empty of records. “But if you do a good job, I might give you an in with the nice guy who’s making the sausage over there.” She gestures at a booth a little further down from them. It belongs to the grill a block away from Rising Tide. Nat’s not big into that kind of food, burgers and brats and deep fried things, but even she has to admit that it smells delicious. “He’ll give you a discount since you know me.”

Peter grins and heads off to do his job, the boxes tipping and almost spilling more than once. Both Nat and Daisy wince and shake their heads, but he does make it over there without dumping everything to the street. They watch him a moment more as he starts unpacking the inventory, and there’s a young, pretty girl there – Peter’s age – with red hair and a sweet smile who’s already coming over to pick through the new selection. She asks something. Nat can’t hear what, but Peter leaps to show her, and that finally causes the records he’s holding to end up on the street. The girl instantly kneels to help him clean up, and they bump heads. It gets more awkward, Peter fumbling like a dork and apologizing without a shred of composure, but she just laughs and introduces herself as Mary Jane.

“Cute,” Daisy remarks. She sighs dramatically, looking around Block Fest with nothing but appreciation in her eyes. “There’s magic in the air tonight.”

That’s lame, but Nat has to admit not it’s not entirely untrue. It does feel like there’s something in the air, something sweet and exciting and wonderful. She feels good, really good. “You sound like a Disney movie.”

“Fairy Godmother at your service,” Daisy quips, rearranging a couple of piles of CDs in front of her. “I guess that makes you Cinderella, since you would have never done this without me waving my magic wand. Plus you’re wearing blue.”

Nat looks down at the light blue cotton sundress Daisy lent her. It’s not exactly a ball gown, but it’s airy, light, and flowing, which is good because it’s hot on the street with so many people there and the last kiss of the dog days of summer. “Ha ha.”

“Where’s your Prince Charming?”

With that question, Nat can’t help scanning the crowd again, like she has been off and on for almost an hour now. There’s still no sign of Steve. “He’s coming. Said he was going to help his friend set up his booth.” That would be Tony, who decided at the last second to participate in Block Fest even though the Iron Mechanic’s not exactly part of their area of businesses. Tony
knows Steve, though, and Steve knows Nat, and Nat knows Daisy, so the right connections made it happen. However, he had nothing ready, so Steve and Thor offered to help him get some things put together, advertising and such for the work Tony does on cars and motorcycles (or on anything that needs fixing). Pepper supposedly added herself in as well, using this as a chance to market her coffee shop. Nat’s praying Steve brings something good to eat from her once he does get there.

It seems like it’s been a while since he was supposed to come, though, which makes her worry. She worries a lot about Steve. The closer they’ve become (and they’re close now. Very close), the harder it is for her to stifle her concerns. It’s not so much about his PTSD anymore. He’s made such remarkable strides dealing with his memories from the war. Truthfully, it’s amazing how much progress he’s made. He’s much more open now, smiling more, talking more, more at ease with himself. That shadow that always clung to his eyes before, even when things were good right before his birthday, is gone. That’s not to say he doesn’t have his moments. He still closes off sometimes. He still battles his depression and anxiety when he gets overwhelmed by his disabilities. He still has nightmares. She’s sleeping with him (more correctly, in his bed) every night, so she knows how they continue to torment them. They’re not as bad as they were, though, and it never takes much coaxing or prodding on her part to get him to talk about them. Actually, it never takes much more than a little patience and perseverance to get him to do anything now. The mere fact that he confides in her is incredible for them both, that he’s found someone he trusts to bear his burdens with him and that she can feel what it’s like to be trusted. Everything between them is great, and it shows.

So it’s not his mood that worries her. And his injuries from the crash are almost healed. He got the cast off his arm just a couple days ago after more than a month of it being an itchy, clunky nuisance, so that was nice. His chest still hurts sometimes, but it’s much, much improved from how it was. He’s back to working out at a reasonable rate. All of his recovery has been overseen by his physical therapist. Her name’s Melinda May, and she’s very no-nonsense, tough as nails and a little frightening, but Nat can see how this lady helped him learn to walk and run and be himself again. She’s cold but not harsh, determined but not demanding, and she doesn’t let him give up. It’s been good for him, to have Melinda and Doctor Banner and Doctor Erskine taking care of him. To have friends surrounding him. To have her at his side. It makes her feel so good, so proud of him and proud of herself, so wanted and needed and loved. Since Bucky’s funeral, everything has settled into such a pleasant, happy state of normalcy that she can’t even believe it sometimes.

Added to all that is the fact that Rumlow and his thugs have seemingly vanished, retreated to Staten Island maybe. Clint and Maria have been scouring Brooklyn, keeping their eyes and ears open everywhere, tapping into other precincts and tracking down every lead concerning their activity, and they’ve found nothing. Rumlow’s gone completely silent. If he was here for Nat, he’s gone now. She can’t believe that, either. It seems impossible that they’d just give up, unless their presence in Brooklyn was a coincidence. She knows better than anyone not to put her faith in stupid things like that, but she can’t help it sometimes. A whole month has gone by with not so much as a peep. Even Clint is hesitantly and reluctantly starting to accept that it all may have been a false alarm, just a meaningless scare. Nat gets the impression that he’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. She’s trying not to, because everything in her world is great otherwise. Steve’s better. She’s better. They’re happy, as crazy as it seems, and what they have is wonderful. It’s incredible. It’s amazing and strong and beautiful and perfect, and she wants to live without fear for once.

And she is. Except for Steve’s epilepsy. That’s not any better. Whatever caused the upswing in his seizures at his birthday a couple months back hasn’t improved. The latest round of medications they have him on aren’t working, at least not obviously, and there’s not much more to try. After two years of attempting to control his seizure activity with limited success, Doctor Erskine appears to be running out of options. So far Steve has seemed surprisingly okay with it, but she gets the
impression that he’s not processing it fully, that the finality maybe hasn’t sunk in that he’s having seizures two or three times a week, sometimes two or three times a day, and it’s not going to get better. That frightens Nat, even if it’s not frightening him. She loves him so much, so much more than she ever thought she could feel again after the hell that happened to her, and she’s absolutely terrified that he’s going to spend the rest of his life chained to his brain injury. He doesn’t deserve that. He doesn’t deserve having to constantly worry if a seizure is going to leave him helpless in some place dangerous, if one will cause him to fall, to hurt himself or other people by proximity… That’s a horrible situation, and she doesn’t want that for him. So she worries a lot.

Like this. He’s not here, and he’s late, and she’s sure he’s with Tony and Thor who know exactly what to do if he has a seizure, but that’s not enough to ease her. What if something bad has happened? What if they’re not right with him and he has a seizure? What if–

“Did you try texting him?” Daisy’s watching her with worried eyes, and that makes her realize she drifted in her thoughts for a couple moments.

Nat flushes and picks up her phone from the table beside the register. She checks again, but there’s nothing. “I think he left his phone at home.” A couple weeks back Steve bought a new phone since his old one was smashed up in the accident, but he’s really bad about taking it with him. She needs to work on that with him, particularly considering how his health’s been lately. The thing is she doesn’t like nagging or being pushy, and she knows he appreciates that about her, so it’s always a delicate balancing act of getting him to do what he needs to to take care of himself while not being overbearing and controlling. Like with him talking about his memories and nightmares. Gentle prodding, not hovering and smothering.

Hovering and smothering would be easier and less nerve-wracking, though. Daisy gives an understanding smile. She’s gotten ridiculously good at reading Nat’s moods without Nat saying a thing. “I’m sure he’s fine. Men never think.”

“I resent that.”

Nat looks up at the familiar voice. Clint’s there, setting a Pink Floyd record down at the cash register. She smiles at him. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

Clint’s got on jeans and a flannel shirt over a black tee. One would think he’d be miserable in that considering how warm it is, but that’s his preferred non-work attire. She’s never seen him in shorts. “Thought I’d stop by and check out your party,” he says with a smile.

Daisy starts ringing him up. “You mean stop by and check on us,” she corrects.

Despite all this time and all the things that happened to her, Nat’s still not entirely comfortable with how Clint goes out of his way for her. “I resent that, too,” he replies with fake indignation in his voice. He fishes for his wallet in his jeans. “I can switch off. I do it all the time, like right now.” That’s a load of crap, not so much that he can’t disconnect from his job but that he’s not here to make sure they’re okay. It hasn’t escaped Nat’s attention that she’s immersed in a huge crowd tonight, and anyone could be around. There are hundreds and hundreds of people in the park and on the streets, so if Rumlow is here, she’ll have a hard time spotting him. Of course, the opposite is true, too, that there’s safety in numbers, but it’s a fear she can’t ever quite shake.

Neither can Clint, but he (like she) is making an attempt to do just that. “I just wanted to buy some vinyl. Sounds better the old way, and no one’s going to change my mind about that.”

Daisy takes the ten dollar bill he hands her and works on getting his change. “Sure, Detective Barton.”
“Daddy!” cries a young girl, and Nat catches sight of a little body weaving through the throng of patrons to get to their tent with a woman behind her yelling at her to stop. That woman’s Laura, and she’s exasperated, chasing after Lila. Clint snatches Lila up right as she gets to him, hefting her onto his hip. Lila’s a sweet little thing with honeyed brown hair and wide hazel eyes and a stubborn streak a mile wide. “Daddy, where’d you go?”

“To say hi to Nat,” Clint says, gesturing to Nat and Daisy. “You remember her, don’t you? From when she stayed with us?”

Lila doesn’t look so sure at first. In her defense, it was a couple years ago, and two years to a six year old is huge. She stares at Nat uncertainly, but Nat smiles and then she smiles back. “Yeah, I remember.”

That wasn’t a particularly good time in Nat’s life, the months she spent with Clint after her release from the hospital. Well, some of it was. Clint’s family was nothing but open and supporting of her as she recovered, providing far more than just a safe place for her to stay. Their home was a haven, somewhere she could get better not just physically but emotionally. Lila colored with her and played dolls with her and made her feel right at home with absolutely no understanding of what happened or why she was there. Cooper, Clint’s son, was more reticent and wary about it, but he’s a quieter type to begin with. Even still, he welcomed her, too, giving up his bedroom for weeks so Nat could have a place of her own. They all welcomed her.

Especially Laura. She rushes up now, flushed and stern, Cooper’s arm clenched in her fingers. “Lila, I told you you need to hold Mommy’s hand here! There are too many people around!”

Lila doesn’t miss a beat despite the admonishment. She points at Nat. “Look, Mommy! It’s Nat!”

Laura rolls her eyes a little and sets her hand on Cooper’s head. Just like that, she switches from frustrated mother-run-ragged to sisterly friend. She smiles brightly. “Nat, it’s been so long. How are you?”

Nat smiles back. Truth be told, as nice as Laura always has been to her (and she has been among the nicest people Nat has ever known), Nat’s never felt entirely comfortable around her. She’s so put together: nice husband, beautiful kids, wonderful house. Everything perfect. Nat didn’t realize how much she’s lacking in life until she spent those months at the Barton house. Laura’s a force to be reckoned with, calm and smart and an amazing wife and mother on top of being a beloved teacher at a local elementary school. She seems to have it all.

Nat can’t ever imagine being that good. She sees in Laura things she’s lost, intangible things she wants back but knows she can’t have now, stolen hopes and broken dreams, and that makes her uncomfortable. She hides it well. “Doing fine, actually. Thanks. You?”

“Eh, you know. School starts next week, so I’m swamped with that. Getting Lila and Cooper ready is a full-time job in and of itself.” Laura smooths down Cooper’s unruly hair, and the boy grimaces, long-suffering. It’s more than obvious he doesn’t want to be here, his face buried in his PSP. “Clint says you’re seeing someone?”

She’s never been sure how much Clint tells Laura about her situation. Clint’s not the type to lie, but he would withhold information to protect someone’s peace of mind. She decides it’s okay to be open about Steve, though, open and happy. “Yeah. He’s–”

“Right here!”

Nat looks around the Barton family and spots Steve, Tony, and Thor coming up. Tony’s got some
sort of burger in an aluminum foil wrap, and it smells spicy. It’s positively dripping grease and sauce as he eats it. He’s dressed in shorts and an old Def Leppard t-shirt that has so many stains on it and holes in it that it’s embarrassing. Thor doesn’t look much better in run-down plaid shorts and a faded gray shirt that’s about two sizes too small for his huge, muscular frame. His hair’s in its normal sloppy pony tail. Compared to the two of them, Steve looks like a regular prep-school rich boy in nice shorts and a plaid button-down. And he appears absolutely fine, a little sweaty and tired but grinning easily. She needs to get a grip.

Tony butts his way into the conversation. That’s a thing with him. “Tony Stark,” he says, jutting a mostly clean hand out at Clint. “Nice to meet you.”

Clint doesn’t look particularly thrilled with the impromptu introduction, but he shifts Lila to his other hip to shake Tony’s hand all the same. “Clint,” he offers. He doesn’t say his last name.

Tony doesn’t seem to care. He takes another bite of his burger. “Finally we get to meet some friends of Miss Rushman. I was starting to think you guys didn’t exist.”

Nat colors a little bit with that, but thankfully the light’s so low she doesn’t think anyone notices. More introductions are made, Laura rushing in where Clint’s more reluctant, smiling and shaking Thor’s hand and then Steve’s. Clint’s watching them all like a hawk, eyes sharp and piercing. Nat knows he vetted every single one of Steve’s friends after the accident, and she still feels a little guilty about that, about giving Clint their names so he could run them through the system. It had to be done and she knows that, but the closer she gets to Steve and his friends, the harder it becomes to feel okay about lying anymore. They still don’t know anything about her. Steve doesn’t know anything about her.

As much as she hates who she was, that’s starting to bother her.

Steve catches her eyes and smiles a soft smile, almost like he can understand how uncomfortable she’s feeling even without being aware of the truth. She smiles back. The hum of conversation shifts when she hears her name. “This is really cool, Nat.” That’s Tony, and he’s grinning at her. She knows him well enough now to tell that he’s being genuine rather than a wise-ass. “You did an amazing job.”

She blushes again, this time with pride. “Well, it wasn’t all me. This one here is really responsible.” She nudges Daisy.

And Daisy, being Daisy, is never shy about anything. She raises her hand. “Guilty as charged. But it helps when your bestie is dating a graphic artist.”

Now it’s Steve’s turn to look uncomfortable. “No, no. It’s nothing. It was nothing.”

Tony picks up one of the fliers for Rising Tide on the table beside the register. Steve drew it weeks ago. Steve drew amazing art for free for almost every business participating in Block Fest. Well, almost everyone. “How come I didn’t get a pretty picture?” the mechanic whines, pouting almost pathetically.

Steve snatched the flier from Tony’s hands. “Because you’re a lazy jerk.”

“There’s Steve doesn’t know anything about her. Steve rolls his eyes. She knows what he’s thinking, too, that he doesn’t need anyone holding his hand. For all he’s gone through, Steve’s still pretty fiercely independent. Realizing that he needs to accept help, now more than ever, is a big deal for him. He sets the flier back and the med-alert
bracelet on his wrist twinkles in the lights a bit, drawing her attention. He keeps trying to “forget” to wear that, too. “Shouldn’t you be heading back to your booth? You promised Pepper you would.”

“Meh,” Tony says, polishing off his meal before tossing the rolled-up foil into the trash bin. It bounces off the side and lands on the street, and Tony frowns. Cooper’s more of a little gentleman than anyone gives him credit for, though, pulling away from Laura’s side to scoop it up and throw it out. “Thanks, bro. And Pep can handle it.”

Thor shakes his head. “This is the reason you’re terrible at business, Tony.”

“Meh. And you should talk.”

“Are you guys working or chatting?” May says as she comes closer, and for a split-second Nat worries she’s actually mad. She’s not, though, grinning jovially as she enters their group. “You’re Steve’s friend Tony, right?”

“Indeed I am.”

May extends her hand to Tony. “I’m May Parker. I suppose you’re the one I have to thank for all the wonderful coffee constantly coming into my shop?”

Tony shakes it. “That’d be my wife, but I’ll take all the credit.”

May shakes her head. “No. I’ll have to thank her, then.”

“Hey, guys!” That’s Scott. He’s spotted them. Cassie’s holding Hope’s hand, dragging her across the street to the Rising Tide’s tent. Scott ambles closer, taking a sip of his beer as he does, and introductions are made anew. Nat can’t help but be surprised at it all, at the huge group of them. The Barton family and the Langs and her friends and Steve’s friends. It’s pretty remarkable how everyone has come together tonight. The good mood, the warm hum of happiness in the air, the energy between them and around them. She can’t believe it, that she’s there. She comes around the table, reaching Steve’s side and grasping his arm because she feels weightless, like it’s all too much, too good to be true. He slips his arm around her gingerly and pulls her close.


Cassie looks up at Lila, bouncing with excitement. “Daddy! Daddy! Can we play?”

Clint doesn’t look sure at all, and Nat can’t help but wonder if ex-con Scott is aware he’s talking to a police officer. “Gotta ask her dad, sweetie.”

Cassie looks up at Clint, imploring. “Please! Oh, please, please, please…” Clint sets Lila down, and she clings to his legs a second. Cassie practically explodes in glee. “I’m Cassie! Do you like My Little Ponies?”

That eases Lila, who’s wearing a My Little Pony t-shirt, and in short order they’re chatting excitedly with their parents talking above them. In the park, the band finishes up, and there’s loud applause throughout the street. There’s no music for the moment, and the sound of conversation, between May and Hope, among Tony, Thor, Steve, and Scott, between Daisy and Clint and Laura and the girls, is loud but comforting. Nat listens, and again the sense of purpose fills her. She feels like she belongs here, whole-heartedly and without reserve. She feels right at Steve’s side, surrounded by their friends. So many good things are wrapped up in the moment. Memories of the last few months. Their first kiss and all the kisses since. Little things like sleeping in and
sharing a laugh and holding each other. The smell of his shampoo and fabric softener, the feeling of Max’s fur, the light in his eyes when he smiles, the taste of the good food she cooks at his place… All of that is what it means to be happy.

Another song starts. This time it’s different, a slower number sung by a woman. Her voice is light, popping through the night, and underneath it is the melody of an electric piano she’s probably playing. It’s a heartfelt tune, one that reminds Nat of Norah Jones. Soothing and simple.

“Are you gonna sing, Nat?”

She pulls herself from her thoughts and looks down. Cassie and Lila were running around, but now they’re right there, staring up at her with those big eyes of theirs. Wistful and in awe and somewhat imploring. That expression is enough to make her forget to process the question, let alone answer it. Then she snaps to. “No. No, sweetie. I’m not singing.”

“Why not?” Cassie asks, and Nat inwardly cringes.

Daisy only makes it worse. “Yeah, why not?” she parrots with a devious glint in her eyes. She leans over the table, regarding Nat like the little sneak she is. She knows damn well why not. Nat glares, but she keeps going. “It’s not too late to get you up there, you know. There’s a break in the bands in about thirty minutes. You could fill the gap.”

“Wait,” Tony interrupts. He squints and shakes his head. “You sing?”

Nat opens her mouth to deny, burning with a blush now, but Daisy answers before she can. “Uh-huh. She’s really good, too.”

“I’m not!” Nat insists. Everyone stares at her, Thor and Tony in surprise, the others in a mixture of amusement and interest, Daisy sly and Clint disapprovingly. Steve knowingly. She gathers herself, trying not to seem as flustered as she feels. “I’m not. It’s just a hobby.”

It’s not. It never has been, and she feels a bit disappointed in herself for lying about it. She knows she needs to, but she doesn’t want to. Not to them. Not to Steve, who tugs her closer into his side as the others start chatting about music and asking what instruments she plays and how long she has and if she writes her own music. She downplays and fibs and distorts reality. Steve watches her as she does, and it’s almost like he can see past it all, and that makes her feel dirtier for doing it. They can’t know the truth about her, and Natalie Rushman the struggling musician is the role she has to continue to play.

God, what she wouldn’t give to let go.

“Well, we’re going to head off,” Scott eventually says. It pulls Nat from her thoughts again, and she feels like a moron for getting caught up in her head so much. Quite a few minutes have gone by, enough that she vaguely knows a few songs have come and gone. Block Fest is buzzing all around her, and she’s completely checking out. Scott grins at Clint. “Nice meeting you guys. Come on, Cass.”

“Wonderful meeting you,” Hope adds as they walk away.

“Probably should be going, too,” Tony declares. “We did our duty in escorting lover boy back to you.” Steve frowns that disapproving frown of his; he really needs to stop reacting when Tony teases him. “Now I really need to represent and all that. Get some business for my business. See you guys.”

“Yes, later,” Thor agrees. “There is amazing cuisine here I have yet to sample and beer I have yet
to drink. That’s a sad, sad crime.”

“We’ll correct said crime on the way back, big guy. I saw a place selling cheese curds.”

Thor booms a happy whoop as he and Tony disappear into the crowd. After watching them go, Nat pulls away from Steve’s side. This sudden break has lasted way, way longer than it should have. “I should get back to work.”

Steve looks chagrined at that, and May is quick to intercede. She assumes Nat’s place behind the table by the register before Nat can even take a step in that direction. “Go on,” she implores. She grins sweetly. “We can handle this.”

The crowd’s huge, and if she goes that leaves only May and Daisy taking care of *everything*, and up until recently Daisy’s been on the phone or dealing with other Block Fest issues the whole night. Nat glances at Peter, who’s still sweet-talking Mary Jane and gazing into her eyes all lovey-dovey as they flirt and continue to pick through the records at a glacial pace. “Are you sure?”

May looks at her nephew, too, and rolls her eyes a little. She’s smiling all the same. “Yeah. You guys are here together, and it’s a wonderful night, and I’d be the world’s worst friend if I didn’t see that you both deserve to relax a little. So go.”

Nat can’t believe how lucky she is sometimes. May (and Peter and Daisy, for that matter) only knows the bare minimum about her past, only what Clint told them when he secured the job for her. That she was in an abusive relationship and is looking for a fresh start. Somehow that was all they needed to embrace her completely. Throughout everything that happened this summer, Steve’s accident and the help he needed and still needs, they’ve all been nothing but supportive, working harder to cover for her, going out of their way to get her jobs done when necessary, and not a complaint has been uttered. And now this. Nat will never know how to thank them. Sure, it’s a struggling vintage record store in Flatbush that’ll probably never be more than what it is, but what it is on a personal level, who the people are *inside it*, is amazing.

Nat takes Steve’s hand anew, thrilled. “Thanks. If you need me—”

“We won’t,” May and Daisy say together.

She laughs. “Okay, okay. We’re going.”

So they go. Clint’s family walks with them down the street. Nat doesn’t care for the tension in Clint. She knows he knows Steve’s good, that he’s exactly who she says he is. Even though Clint’s never said anything, she knows him, too, so she knows that he investigated Steve the most (God, that makes her feel so ashamed sometimes, that Clint used the NYPD to pry into the affairs of *Captain America* like a common criminal, but she can’t confide that to anyone). Despite not finding a thing, Clint doesn’t trust Steve. This is the first time they’ve seen each other since meeting, and Clint’s not doing much to hide his disdain for the whole thing, jaw clenched and eyes still narrowed and practically scowling. He hasn’t tried to dissuade her from being with Steve since the accident, but that’s only because nothing bad happened with Rumlow (or with Steve himself, though Clint nearly threw a fit about her going down to Virginia for Bucky’s funeral. It probably didn’t help that she didn’t let him know she was going until she was on the plane, but she knew he’d be pissed, so why open that can of worms?). No matter how great a guy Steve is, he’ll never be anything but a threat to Clint, and Nat *knows* why that is. Of course she does. But it hurts. It’s almost like her vastly overprotective older brother hates her new boyfriend.

It only gets worse. Laura probably notices the silent tension, too, and she’s glancing at Nat. She is probably going to attempt to smooth things over, but before she can, Cooper spots a tent with
arcade machines and comic books. “Mom, come on! I’ve been good all night. Please? Please?” He’s dragging her away before she even says yes, and Lila is running after them, yelling that she needs quarters.

That just leaves the three of them. Nat’s stiff with worry. She doesn’t know what Clint might say or do, if he’ll try to push Steve away or make a big deal about who she is or try to get her to end their relationship again or what. Her stomach clenches in dismay.

But Clint just sighs unhappily and turns to Steve. “I have to go. Watch out for her.” He holds Steve’s gaze unwaveringly. “You hear me?”

A brief expression of confusion passes over Steve’s face, but he just nods. “Yeah.”

Clint stares a second more, threatening as hell, before he walks (well, it’s more like stalks) away. Nat watches him rejoin his family, watches Laura lean close to ask him something and take the bag with his new record, but he shakes his head and dons a pretty convincing smile and joins Cooper at an old Terminator pinball machine. He’s leaning over and showing him how to play, seemingly at ease again, and Nat breathes a sigh of relief. She clenches Steve’s hand.

Steve shakes his head. “Is he okay?”

She doesn’t want to think about it right now honestly. “Fine. Come on.”

They make their way to the park, and the good mood immediately comes back like a warm rush. It washes away all her disquiet from before. Steve stops and buys them each a falafel from one of the street vendors. She’s never had it before. In fact, there are a lot of things she’s never had before, despite being in this country for more than five years now. The wide variety of cuisines always amazes her, and while she longs for her mother’s cooking and the flavors of home sometimes, she has to admit a lot of what she has had in the US is delicious, this included. They walk and eat in a companionable silence. She watches Steve a bit, and he seems relaxed and happy. No signs of distress. Even though these new AEDs (as she’s learned the anti-epilepsy medications are called. She’s learning a lot she never imagined she’d know) aren’t doing much to control his seizures, the side effects seem better at least, particularly the nausea. He’s been eating like a horse the last few weeks in fact, and he’s put on a little weight that’s so nicely reduced the gauntness of his face. She didn’t realize at the time how thin and pale he was before, even before his birthday. Now seeing him like this with more color in his cheeks and vigor in his eyes…

“Quit starin’,” he admonishes gently after chewing another mouthful of falafel. “Makes me nervous.”

“Sorry.” She goes back to her own pita. “Sorry. Just… You look really good.”

“You trying to butter me up?” He grins and waggles his eyebrows in the most pathetic innuendo imaginable.

She really likes his new flirty side, and flirting right back is the best. It also covers her nervousness every time there’s any mention of sex. That’s really damn pathetic, but she can’t help it. Thankfully all the flirting never usually gets beyond kissing, and he seems content with that. “Do I need to?” she asks slyly.

He snorts and takes another bite. “Probably not.”

They get to the park. The mood on the street is lively, but here it’s positively exhilarating. The singer is doing a lighter, up-tempo number now. She’s young, a mane of messy blonde hair
tumbling down her shoulders, and she’s dressed in leggings and a floral top for a look that’s part stylish and part hipster. Nat and Steve finish their meal by a tree where people are sitting in folding chairs or on the ground on blankets, lounging and eating and drinking and enjoying the music. She does the same, quietly watching the crowd without a sense of fear or doubt, enjoying the mish-mash of smells and the hearty taste of chickpeas and the spicy heat of the sauce contrasted with the cool crispness of the veggies inside the bread. Steve offers her the other half of a bottle of water he purchased, and she drinks the rest.

After tossing their wrappers, they head closer to the stage. It’s not impressive by any means, small and simple, but Daisy did manage to convince a couple guys she knows to do the sound mixing and lights, so there’s something of a show to it. The singer is crooning her way through another song, something about good times and love and embracing things as they are. Running with life as it is. The crowd’s really into it, swaying and listening more than chatting. Nat watches the girl’s long fingers dance over her electronic keyboard, watches her eyes slip shut in euphoria as she sings, watches the expressions work across her face. She’s really into it, lost in that way you can get when you’re absorbed in what you love. Nat knows that feeling well. She misses it terribly, misses it more than she has since running.

“You okay?” Steve murmurs in her ear. He’s right behind her.

“Yeah,” she replies a little loudly to be heard over the music and the crowd. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“It really is amazing,” he says, “what you guys put together.” It is, but suddenly it feels more bittersweet than anything else. “’C’mere.” He wraps his arms around her, and she goes willingly into his embrace, leaning back into his chest. His left arm still feels a little weird to her as she runs her hand up and down it, skin that’s rough from being in the cast for weeks. He kisses her temple, and again it’s almost like he can read her mind. He knows nothing about her, nothing, and he can do that. “There’s always next year.”

Next year. She wants to think that, but she knows it’s not possible. She can’t be exposed like that. Not ever. Giving up that dream, though… She can’t do that either. “Someday,” she whispers, and she leans back into him, closes her eyes, and loses herself in the moment. In the feeling in the air and the excitement of the crowd and the warm rush of contentment simmering in her body. In the impossible dream of standing on that stage, playing her guitar and singing her own songs and seeing Steve’s eyes out in the crowd watching her.

They get home after midnight. After sharing a few lazy kisses outside his door, she goes to her own place to shower and find some pajamas. Liho is there waiting the second she steps inside, and she spends a moment petting her before going to feed her and change her water. Nat’s gotten much more comfortable with having Steve over to her place (with some forewarning and restrictions that she’s imposed without him really noticing). He never goes into her bedroom. She keeps some things, her pictures in particular, well hidden. Still they eat there and watch TV there and he sketches while she writes in her songbook. It keeps Liho company so she’s not alone all the time.

She’s still alone enough that Nat always feels bad. Steve offered a few weeks ago to put a litter box in his laundry room so Nat could bring her over. Max could be in his kennel for a while. Truth be told, that would make Nat’s life easier, but that seems so…

Yeah, she’s not ready for that.

After spending a few minutes with the cat, she goes to take a shower. It feels good to wash off the sweat from the night, the smells of food and other people, so she takes a moment to luxuriate and work her body wash over herself. She lathers up her hair, and the scent of vanilla fills the
bathroom. While she rinses off, she drifts in the heat, feeling relaxed and happy. She doesn’t spend too long, though, turning the water off and reaching for her towel. Once she’s dry, she dresses in a pair of sleep pants and a cami. She brushes her damp hair and her teeth. Then it’s back to Steve’s.

She lets herself in. He obviously took Max down already because Max’s leash is on the kitchen counter rather than where it normally hangs by the door. Max leaves his bowl of kibble to come over and greet her, licking at her hands until she crouches to pet him. Then she takes a bottle of water from the fridge and goes to the bedroom.

The lights are dimmed. The bathroom door’s cracked. The shower’s running. Nat heads over to the bed and turns it down (now that it’s actually dressed, and it has been every morning since she’s been there). She takes her spot on what’s become her side – her side! She still can’t get over that – and settles down against the pillows with a long, contented sigh. Max jumps up and lays at her feet, watching her with warm eyes before laying his head on her shin. She smiles and pulls out her phone, not doing anything in particular other than keeping herself busy. She hears the shower turn off in the bathroom and Steve moving. There’s the rustling of a towel and then water running in the sink as he probably brushes his teeth. She plays through a level of Candy Crush Saga (God, she needs to find some new mobile games) and wonders idly when exactly everything became so domestic, so normal and real and comfortable.

She’s doesn’t know and doesn’t care.

He’s out a couple minutes later in pajama pants and an A-shirt. The muscles of his arms twist and ripple as he dumps his towel on the floor next to the bathroom only to pick it up and hang it on the door knob at Nat’s slightly chastising look. Then he’s padding out to the front door to lock up, limping a little which he tends to do after a long day. When he’s through with that and shutting off the lights, he’s sliding into bed beside her. Again, it’s mundane, powerful for being that, for being what they just have now.

He leans over and kisses her, all warm skin and damp lips and smelling like Irish Spring. “Have fun?”

“Yeah.” She snuggles closer, kissing the cotton over his sternum. “Yeah, it was really nice. Daisy hit it out of the park.”

“Mmm.”

“What about you?”

He rubs a hand up and down her back. Just in the last couple weeks she forgets that he still gets anxious about crowds and socializing and, well, functioning outside his apartment. He’s much better than he was, has been since Bucky’s funeral, but his nervousness and aversion, like his PTSD and everything else, is not going away overnight. But he smiles against the crown of her head. “Yeah.” That’s a relief. She’s pretty quickly learned that he’ll lie about being unhappy or uncomfortable to spare someone else’s feelings, particularly hers. He sounds pretty sincere. “I don’t think your friend Clint likes me, though. Not sure what I did to piss him off.”

She frowns against his chest. “Nothing. It’s one of those ‘no one will ever be good enough’ kind of things.” That’s true, even if Steve doesn’t know why. “He needs to get over it.”

Steve grunts. “And one more thing would have made it better.”

“What’s that?”
“Like Daisy and Cassie said,” he murmurs, twisting to look into her face. “You up there.” Nat doesn’t know what to say. His eyes are so open, innocent in a way and wanting to understand. Wanting to see her happy. Even if he knows nothing about her, he knows she loves her music. She’s getting comfortable enough now in the few months since moving here that she can admit it to him and to herself. She misses it. She misses singing, misses performing, and tonight has inexplicably become a pretty stark reminder of that. Steve slips his thumb down her cheek, light and tender. “You told me once, on our first date maybe? I think. A lot’s happened since then.” She smiles, but she’s ill at ease because she knows where this is going. “You told me you were scared of it. You never told me why.”

Her mouth opens to deny, to turn the conversation away to another topic or deflect somehow, but no words come out. She’s still staring in his eyes, at the unassuming trust there. The trust he has for her, that he’s had for her since his accident. God, she’s pathetic, and she’s unworthy of that because she’s not strong enough to give the same to him. “Nat?”

She’s so caught up in that uneasy feeling in her chest that talking feels impossible, even if she could will herself to do it at all. Thankfully his phone beeps from his bedside table where he left it on the charger that afternoon. He turns over with a grimace and grabs it. Nat’s left disquieted, mind racing without traction, as he thumbs through some things on the screen before getting his voicemail. He listens for a second, sitting up straighter with an even more pronounced wince, eyes blankly roving over the end of the bed. She gets concerned at his expression, her own problems quickly forgotten, but she waits until he’s done with the voicemail before touching his shoulder. “Steve?”

He drops his hands into his lap with a heavy sigh. “That was Doctor Erskine. He wants to see me first thing Monday morning.”

A chilly burst of fear works over her. “First thing Monday?”

Steve glances at her. She can see he’s rattled. “Yeah. He said to just come at eight. He’ll get me in right away. He said… He said it’s important.”

The room goes quiet. Nat’s heart is thumping heavily against her ribs. Steve had a bunch of tests done recently, a CT scan and an MRI and an EEG. They’ve been spread out over a few appointments over the last couple weeks. “Your results?”

He gives a half-hearted shrug that does nothing to hide how worried he is. “Don’t know. Probably.”

The silence becomes suffocating. Like all the good cheer of the night is abruptly evaporating, the air is left heavy and stuffy. Nat can hardly breathe in it, feeling lost and dizzy like things are spinning out of control again, and Steve’s still staring at the end of the bed. Christ, how much more can he take? She can’t stand the pinched expression of grief on his face, of acceptance more than fear even, so she takes his hand. “Hey, hey. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything. He just wants to see you. That’s all. Right? Doesn’t mean it’s bad.”

He’s not convinced. Truth be told, neither is she. The other shoe. Angry at her own thoughts, she crawls forward, going around to kneel in front of him. She takes his phone from his hands and sets it on the table. “Steve, don’t assume the worst. There’s no reason to. Worrying isn’t going to do anything other than make this weekend last forever and make it miserable, so don’t.”

He meets her gaze, his blue eyes teeming with the broken look she hates, the one that’s been all but gone since the first nights after his accident. “Will you go with me?”
God. That scares her. She doesn’t let it show, though. No, she leans forward and cups his face and looks firmly into his eyes. “Of course I will. I’m supposed to work but—”

“No, no.” Steve shakes his head. “No, it’s fine. I’m being stupid. It’s—”

“It’s not a big deal,” she assures gently. Taking care of him does what it always does for her: calms her and grounds her and gives her purpose. “Really. I’m covering for Daisy on Friday, and I covered for her last Tuesday, too. She owes me.” Not entirely. Those two times don’t begin to make up for all the times Daisy’s helped her out since Steve was hurt, but she doesn’t think it’ll be a problem. Steve’s not so sure, wincing anew with the thought of causing trouble. She creeps closer until she’s nearly in his lap. “Don’t. It’s really alright. I’ll come with you. It’s going to be fine.”

He takes a deep breath, searching her eyes. She nods, not looking away, not even for a second. Then he’s closing the small gap between them, his hands coming to brush through her hair and tug her face close to his. He kisses her, tentative at first, always that way even after hundreds of kisses, but the second she opens her mouth to him, he delves deeper, hungering like he needs the connection. Excitement jolts through Nat as his tongue darts between her lips, pressing against hers in a sensuous roll. She whimpers into his mouth, stealing a breath amidst his ravenous attention before kissing back just as passionately. Seconds fade, her heart pounding faster during each one, and thoughts vanish from her head. A dizzy sense of ecstasy only gets more consuming and just a tad frightening when he touches her. His hands slip from her hair to run down her back, the slide of his palms on the cotton of her cami like lightning shooting over her skin. They settle on her hips, fingers curling into her pants insistently and pulling her completely into his lap so that she’s straddling his thighs. Her breasts rub against his chest, and she can’t help a little gasp of surprise and sudden pleasure. Her hips are just atop his now, and she can feel how much he wants her, how hard he suddenly is against his pajama pants just from kissing her, and—holy shit—this is moving quickly.

She’s terrified.

It’s almost like she’s outside her body. It’s almost like she’s watching from afar, detached and safe, but somehow she’s feeling and experiencing everything with vivid, surreal clarity. His mouth working over hers, his tongue drifting along her lower lip, his hands firm on her waist to hold her in place. She’s lost in his grip, drowning in the way he tastes, sweet and minty from toothpaste, in how his smooth, warm skin feels and that crisp scent of soap she’s smelling with every quick breath. The strength of his muscles against her is unbelievable. Every time they do this, she’s always both frightened and incredibly aroused by how strong he is, by how much bigger he is than her. And even though he’s holding her still, he remains tentative, gentle and hesitant, hands staying on her hips, bucking against his body’s need to roll his hips into her. She can feel that, too, how he’s struggling with his own desires and fears maybe. All of this, his breath and his deep kiss and his hands vacillating between gripping her firmly and letting her go… It’s like a blur of perception in her brain, sharp and undeniable, but it’s not happening to her.

Eventually he gets a little bolder. They haven’t done much of this, not since his birthday, and she supposes that factors into why he’s so timid. But he reaches up, running his hands up her flanks to press his palms to the sides of her breasts. She jolts in his lap, and he stops, and she gets embarrassed so she throws her arms around his neck and pushes herself up to get more control over the kiss. That serves the dual purpose of getting her off his erection, which simultaneously feels like a tremendous relief and an unbearable loss. He whines with it, his soft moan captured into her lips, and she pulls away to kiss down from the side of his mouth to his jaw. She can’t bring herself to rock back down onto him no matter how much she wants to. It doesn’t feel right, not to her mind anyway, so she kisses her way along the bottom of his face. He’s gone back to not shaving
consistently, so he almost always has a few days’ worth of stubble coating his chin. It’s prickly against her lips, pleasantly so, and she works her way down his throat. She can feel him swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing with it, and he shudders as she scrapes her teeth across it lightly. “Nat,” he whispers, and she doesn’t even think he realizes when he rubs his thumbs right over her nipples. God, it feels good. No one’s touched her like this, not since… She squeezes her eyes shut against a barrage of unwanted memories, cries out from them, and he takes that to mean something else, so he does it again. And again. And again, swirling in circles, and his hands feel huge when they cup her breasts entirely. His caresses rapidly turn more insistent, his thumbs pressing harder, rubbing around the now crested peaks and the pebbled flesh encircling them, and she shivers. She can’t stand it. It’s a war inside her, fear and panic coming unbidden and slamming against desire, and she wants to sob for how miserably torn she feels.

_Shut up_, she bids her thoughts. It’s so stupid. _He’s not going to hurt you_. She knows that, has known it for weeks and weeks. _He’s not the same_. _He’d never hurt you_. _Never, never, never_. _So stop_. _Shut up_. _Shut up shut up shut up–_

“Nat,” he whispers. “Please… Can we…”

She can’t stop herself, instinct and desire winning out over her irrational fears, and she’s grinding down onto him hard. He gasps, groans, nearly comes apart in her arms. She can feel the hard length of him poking into her folds right through his pajama pants and boxers and her pants and underwear and it’s maddening. The mere rub of cloth between her legs is too much, rough but not enough, not _nearly_ enough. _God_. There’s a persistent throbbing inside her that she can’t deny, doesn’t want to deny, that she hasn’t felt in _years_, and she wants nothing more than to give it to him.

His fingers are pinching now, squeezing her nipples through the fabric of her shirt, teasing and twisting lightly, and it’s such a delicious combination of the right amount of pain and sweet pleasure. She tips her head back with a whimper, and he noses her chin up further before planting hot, open-mouthed kisses on her neck. He makes his way to her collarbones, drifting across the top of her chest, pulling her cami down to expose more skin that he can worship. Every touch of his lips and tongue and fingers is electrifying. She wants this. She wants him. She wants his mouth on her breasts. She wants his hands all over her body. She wants him above her, below her, all around her, _inside her_. She wants _him_ inside her.

She needs to run.

The sound of her charged breathing is almost as loud as her booming heart. He suckles over the pounding of her pulse, his hands stopping in their sweet torture, leaving her aching with wanting and then jerking upward as he pulls aside the bottom of her shirt to caress her stomach. His touch goes up higher and higher, the pads of his callused fingers rough on her skin. She’s stiff with fear and doubt, not knowing what to do. All she knows is she _can’t_ do this. She can’t let him touch her like this, let him have her. She can’t let him make love to her. She may _want_ to give that to him, to give him herself. She may want that more than anything, but she can’t do it. He doesn’t know, and she’s not ready, and this is _right_ but wrong and she – _she can’t_.

She’s such a fucking coward.

And she needs this to be over.

So she takes control. She wriggles out of his grasp just as his fingers brush the bare skin of her breasts. He’s can stop her, but he doesn’t. His eyes fly open, though, and he’s shaking his head and staring at her with shocked, desperate eyes. “What? What’s…”
She doesn’t answer. Instead she slinks down his body, pulling her shirt down surreptitiously and pushing his up as she does and pushing him back into the pillows. His scarred chest is revealed, and she kisses hotly and quickly down his sternum, down his belly, ignoring the cords of raised, silvery flesh that mark his injuries. Seeing them makes her think too much, and she has to stay focused now. She swirls her tongue over the dips and planes of his abs and then lower to where his pajama pants cross the top of his hips. The tip of his erection is right there, wet through the fabric and brushing against her cheek as she moves further away until she’s practically laying between his legs. He looks down on her, panting, eyes filled some confusion but far more desire. His pupils are blown so wide they look practically black. “Nat? What’re you—”

She doesn’t waste a second. She knows exactly what she’s doing now. She’s done it many times before. So many times. It was wrong then, felt wrong, wasn’t what she wanted, hurt so much, and now it hurts for an entirely different reason because he deserves better than what she’s planning. She’s a good actress though, smiling seductively as she hooks her thumbs into his pants and boxers and pulls them both down together. He gasps, the hard length of him springing up as it’s bared to the air. She’s too scared to even look at it or his face, not really. And it’s easier to do this on autopilot, to simply fall into what she learned to do, so she does that, and she takes him into her mouth with no warning.

He cries out in shock, scrabbling to grip the headboard of his bed. “No, you don’t hafta… Oh, God. Nat – wait, stop – Nat!” She doesn’t wait. She doesn’t stop. She detaches, or tries to anyway, but it’s hard because she loves him and he deserves better than her running away like this. She can’t let him stop her, so she wrests even more control from him. She traces her tongue along the head of his manhood, forcing down a shudder at the bitter taste she’s almost forgotten and never much liked, gripping the base of his erection firmly with one hand and using the other to push his uninjured hip down. Getting him properly positioned, she goes at it feverishly. She sucks and nips and kisses, tracing her tongue up and down the thick vein on the underside, kissing the tip, squeezing and stroking with her fingers, before taking him deeper into her mouth again. All the while he’s too overwhelmed by what she’s doing to him to do much more than moan and tremble with the effort of staying still. He’s not brave enough to grab her head at first, stiff and coiled as tightly as a spring beneath her, but as he gets closer and harder and thicker and wetter in her mouth, he weaves his fingers through her hair. He doesn’t pull, but it’s tight, and that brings more memories too close to the surface, memories she fights to ignore. “Nat, no… Nat, you gotta – stop… I’m… I’m gonna…”

She’s knows, maybe not his particular tells, but the full-body shudder wracking over him and the way his eyes are squeezed shut and how he’s breathing like he’s running a marathon and how desperately he’s trying to stay still are pretty good indications he’s close. She supposes that it makes sense it’d be so quick, since this is probably the first time for him in a while, too. And she also knows how to get a guy off this way; that’s why she did this. She knows when to tease and when to be methodical about it, so she hollows her cheeks and sucks hard and laves with her tongue to bring him right to the edge before pulling off completely.

He practically keens in disappointment. She wonders if anyone’s ever done this for him before, if Peggy did or if he’s ever been with anyone else (she doesn’t think so). She wonders if Peggy or anyone else ever took this farther, took him farther, and that makes her feel even worse because she can’t. She can’t let him… Not in her mouth. She’s not comfortable with that, either. But he’s slick with spit enough that she can easily glide her hand over him in a couple tighter, firmer strokes, root to tip, twisting once or twice, and that’s all it takes. His orgasm hits him hard, and he cries out, the big muscles of his thighs bunching up and his abs contracting as he thrusts up into her hand. She closes her eyes as warm wetness coats her fingers, and she feels a little dead inside as she strokes him through it, automatically gentling and slowing her touch until seconds later he’s moaning and shivering with the beginnings of oversensitivity.
It’s quiet. He’s breathing hard. Her heart’s thundering, and she feels weird, like she’s done something wrong. Like she’s done something to be ashamed of. Like she’s filthy. Her panties are uncomfortably soaked, and that unsatisfied hollowness between her legs hurts it’s so strong. She finally opens her eyes and musters the courage to look up at him, and what she sees gives her pause. The shame can’t really last with him like this. He’s sweating against his pillows, long lashes pressed against his cheeks as he slowly comes back to himself. He’s quivering, sighing in long gusts, hands clenching in the rumpled bedding before loosening and lying flat. Maybe it wasn’t what he wanted. Maybe it was a chicken shit thing for her to do, substituting a blowjob for sex. But he looks beautiful like this, consumed by a haze of pleasure. Acres of warm, glistening skin, of pliant, relaxed muscles. She’s never seen him so free, so unbothered.

And she did that for him.

Smiling, she wipes her hand on his pants before crawling back up the length of his body to settle at his side. He hums appreciatively the second she does, grasping her forearm when she lays it across his still heaving stomach as he catches his breath. “Holy shit,” he finally whispers. He licks his lips, and she can’t help but kiss them, finding them drier from panting through his mouth so hard. He kisses back lazily, spent and unchallenging to her tasting him anew. When she pulls back, his eyes are open to slits. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to,” she purrs with a smile. The lie tastes bitter, far worse than anything else. “Wanted you to feel good.”

“You…” He licks his lips again, eyes hooded and filled with rekindling desire. “You want me to–”

Yes. God, yes. “No.”

He frowns. “Not fair,” he murmurs. “That’s not fair to you.”

“I’m okay,” she promises. She’s not. Well, she is, but she isn’t. She’s frustrated and wanting and hating herself for being so fuckked up, but she’s also so pleased that she brought him such pleasure, took him to this blissed out state. What started out as something selfish and disgusting turned into something selfless, sweet, and fulfilling. It’s the same thing as before. Taking care of him makes her feel whole. And maybe it’s not as good, but it’s good enough. Maybe…

Someday.

Thankfully he doesn’t put up more of a protest. On the tails of release, he’s sinking fast into exhaustion. That’s both a relief and a bit of a disappointment. Her feelings are getting all muddled inside her again as he takes another kiss with a groan. That groan turns more pained and weary when he pushes himself out of her arms and up off the bed, kicking his boxers and pants away as he stumbles to his dresser. He peels his shirt off, and for a second he’s standing there, completely naked. Despite all the time they’ve been together, she’s never seen him like this before. Not like this. Not completely unguarded, body and soul, all of him exposed. His broad shoulders and slender waist and muscled arms and thick thighs. No matter how many times she sees his scars, they never matter. She can only find him beautiful, lithe and slender with smooth skin that’s perfect no matter how marred it may be. He doesn’t seem to notice her watching as he stumbles to put on another pair of boxers, which is good because now she looks at what she didn’t let herself see before, his ass and his now limp manhood that she can still taste and almost feel. It doesn’t disgust her at all. It doesn’t scare her.

She feels stupid for being afraid, but even that’s not enough to make her ask him to please her or fuck her or anything. It’s not enough to get past her walls. She’s not that strong.
He comes back to bed none the wiser to any of it and collapses with a huff. She pulls the blankets loose. Somewhere during all that Max jumped down, and now he hesitantly comes back, laying on their feet. Steve rolls under the quilt and top sheet, which are thankfully dry, and tugs her close. His eyes are closed already. His lips are kiss-swollen, soft and pink as he mouths against her bare shoulder. “Love you,” he mumbles into her skin.

She smiles, pulling his arm around her midsection. The heat of unspent desire is cooling, slowly but surely, and she feels like she can forget it and be happy with this. “Love you, too.”

“Thank you.” She feels weird that he’s thanking her for what she did, especially when she herself doesn’t feel all that great about it. But the fact that he is tempers what remains of her disquiet. “Thank you.”

She runs her hand down his arm in a gentle, comforting sweep. “You don’t need to thank me.”

“Make it up to you.” He’s slurring his words with exhaustion. “Promise. Promise, Nat.”

“You don’t—”

“Stay with me forever.”

That takes her aback, and she twists her neck to look at him better. Shadows cover his face where he’s nuzzled it between her back and the pillows, but she can see he’s already asleep, breathing hot and slow against her. She lays back down with a long sigh. Everything they have shared, the memories and the sweet comfort and this perfect moment like millions before it… She was wrong before. None of it’s real. It’s a dream, like the dream of singing on that stage with possibilities and freedom stretched wide before her, like the fantasy of having friends and family surround her without her past haunting her, like the wish burning in the bottom of her heart that she could have trusted him to make love to her, to make her feel good and special and complete… Those things may never be real, and that’s because of her. More than anything else, she’s starting to hate it. She hates the fear, the frustration, the bad dreams and memories of his harsh hands and his vicious sneer, the emotions that force her down now as much he ever forced her down before. She hates him for hurting her still, even this far away. Even this far removed. Even here, in Steve’s bed and in Steve’s arms with him big and warm and strong behind her, with Steve offering her everything she wants and needs. Even here, she’s not safe.

But she doesn’t want to run. She doesn’t want to. She wants those dreams. She can’t go back. Steve’s peeling away her defenses whether he knows it or not, whether she wants it or not. Every kiss. Every touch. Every day and every night. This night, with all of its happiness and joy and the tease of what they could have. He’s inside her already. That’s the thing. He’s inside her mind, inside her soul, and he’s ripping through all her lies. She stares into the shadows and wonders how much longer she’ll be able to hide from him. It’s really only a matter of time.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am by no means a doctor or a medical specialist or anyone who knows anything about any of this. I did a fair bit of research about Steve’s condition, but that has its limits. And I also made up some stuff for the story, including some clinical research protocols and the like (which I do know more about and I’m pretty sure it wouldn't go down like this), so take it all with a grain of salt.

Thanks so much for the support, guys! Lots going on here...

“I can’t keep up with your turning tables. 
Under your thumb, I can’t breathe.
So I won’t let you close enough to hurt me.
No, I won’t ask you, you to just desert me.
I can’t give you what you think you gave me.
It’s time to say goodbye to turning tables.”
– Adele, “Turning Tables”

The weekend crawls by. It’s almost torture, how slow things go. Steve’s appointment Monday morning looms like an ominous thunderhead in the distance, casting its huge shadow over everything. Nat can’t concentrate on anything, and she can’t stop worrying. Everything feels strained, not between them so much though all her disquiet from the night of Block Fest persists. Thankfully Steve’s so consumed with his own worries that he never presses her to let him follow up on his promise, and they aren’t intimate again anytime Saturday or Sunday. It also helps (and God she feels selfish for thinking about it that way) that he has a bad seizure at the gym with Sam Saturday afternoon, bad enough that Sam ends up calling her and Tony to help get Steve home. This one, like the one he had at his birthday, leaves him pretty weak and disoriented for most of Saturday evening. Sam spends the night at Steve’s apartment to help out, bunking out on the couch, but nothing more happens. Still, for all of Sunday Steve’s withdrawn, sedate and quiet and obviously sore, and that lets her bury the whole mess she’s feeling about him and sex and everything else down deep and stay quiet herself. It’s a blessing, she tells herself, and for the best. What it really is is an excuse, and she’s feeling like a chicken shit coward all over again as they settle into bed Sunday night with nothing more than a few lingering kisses and her telling him not to worry about anything.

Now it’s finally Monday morning. She goes back to her place to shower and change and feed Liho. He walks Max and gets ready, too. They don’t talk much through a quick breakfast she makes. He’s tense, disconnected, shoveling in eggs and eating like he’s not tasting a thing, jittering his left leg under the table constantly. She drinks her coffee and obsessively checks her phone for the time. The silence is rife with fear and uncertainty, his latest seizure only compounding the worries about which neither of them can actually talk. Max watches them both with helpless eyes.

At 7:30 promptly, Nat reaches over, takes Steve’s hand where he’s fidgeting with his napkin, and softly says, “Time to go.”
They get to the VA hospital in record time. Doctor Erskine’s practice is affiliated with the VA but not strictly part of it, so it’s located in an affluent medical park connected to the back of the hospital. Of course Steve’s been there tons of times, but this is Nat’s first visit, and she’s nervous as hell as they walk through the hospital campus to get to the neurology suite. It’s really nice inside, and a cheery, older nurse behind the front desk recognizes Steve immediately. “I’ll let the doctor know you’re here, Captain.”

Steve nods like he can’t speak. He’s hardly strung two words together the entire morning. Before they even really settle into seats in the mostly empty waiting room, another nurse comes to retrieve them. She leads them back through a couple hallways filled with exam rooms and offices until they reach an office larger than the others. Doctor Erskine’s name is on a placard on his door, and the nurse knocks there. A voice calls for them to enter.

Erskine’s office is as nicely decorated as the rest of the place. Large windows to the left let in the pretty morning sunlight. A couple big bookcases filled with medical journals and other books line the wall opposite from his desk. Everything is rich mahogany, and the carpet is a deep green. Plants rest atop pedestals in the corners, and there’s nice artwork framed and hung on the walls. A long leather couch is adjacent to the door, and in front of the desk there are two chairs. Doctor Erskine rises from his seat, turning his computer monitor off as he does. “Come in. Steven, Miss Rushman, come in. Sit down.”

They do that, settling side by side in the pair of chairs. The nurse closes the door behind them. Nat’s uncomfortable, surprised that Erskine remembers her from their brief meeting in the hospital, still so worried about this whole nightmare, and it’s all she can do to stay still. Steve isn’t so composed, jittering again, unable to contain his nervous energy, and he wipes his palms down his jeans. There’s maybe a foot between them, a little too far for her to touch him without drawing attention, so she does her best to sit calmly. Doctor Erskine sits again as well, closing up some files on his desk and setting them aside before folding his hands together. He looks between Nat and Steve for a couple long moments before settling his gaze on Steve. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.” His accent makes his words seem gentler and more welcoming, but Nat can’t bring herself to relax.

Neither can Steve. “Sure,” he says stiffly.

“How are you?”

Steve’s quick to answer. “I’m alright.” Not the truth, of course, particularly since his seizure on Saturday, but she doesn’t trounce on whatever comfort he’s getting from denial. Erskine knows how many seizures he’s having, how frequent and how severe they are. One more means nothing other than Steve having to admit all over again how sick he is. “Is it okay if Nat stays? I should’ve asked.”

Erskine nods warmly. “Of course.”

“Did my test results come in?”

Now the doctor frowns, and Nat’s heart plummets before she can compose herself. “Yes. There was no change from your scans a few months back, not on the CT or the MRI.” That… sounds okay? She lets herself breathe. “I was hoping we might glean some indication of what may have caused this recent round of seizure activity from them, as you know, so the fact that there’s nothing there – no tumors, no masses or clots, no lesions, no evidence of any further neurological damage – is… Well, I’ll say it’s disappointing.”

She’s not sure how to take that. “What does that mean?”
Steve looks away, clenching his hands into fists in his lap. “It means they don’t know what’s wrong, so they can’t figure out how to stop it.”

“In not so many words, yes.” Erskine’s eyes are filled with compassion. “A clot or a tumor, as terrible as those sound, is something we can at least attempt to treat. Those are definitely situations that can exacerbate your epilepsy, so shrinking or removing them through medication or surgery… That would have been a nice, tidy outcome.” He smiles sadly. “Though that wouldn’t be befitting of your case, would it.”

There’s something shared between them with that, like two weary soldiers commiserating in a long, protracted war. Steve grunts, the corner of his mouth curled in a rueful smile. “No.”

“And I assume you’re still experiencing seizures similar to what you were before I switched your medications last.” Steve nods. Erskine leans back in his chair. “Then I have to admit at this point that your epilepsy is non-reactive to pharmacologic intervention. After two years of trying with limited success, I just don’t see any advantage to continuing to subject you to the medication rollercoaster you’ve been on.” Steve says nothing. His posture is looking increasingly defeated. “I could attempt a few more combinations of AEDs that we haven’t tried yet, prescribe the last couple that I’ve been holding off on because of the side effects—”

“No,” Steve says curtly. “Being sick all the time’s no kind of life. I’d rather deal with seizures.”

“Would they work?” Nat asks, inwardly cringing with the thought of choosing between horrendous side effects or living in fear of the next seizure.

Erskine shakes his head. “I doubt it. Some drugs fared better at controlling the disorder, but none of them have done so to my standards or on a permanent basis. Looking back since we began aggressively trying to treat you, there have been quite a few ups and downs like this, but the ups have been smaller, shorter, and have been far outweighed in frequency by the downs.”

This is just what they feared when that got that phone call Friday night, that there is nothing else to try, nothing else to do. That Doctor Erskine is essentially throwing in the towel and Steve’s case is completely intractable. That’s the word Steve used once. Intractable. She feels stupid and a little out of control, but she can’t help her emotions, and she’s desperate to find some hope for both their sakes. “So that’s it?”

“No entirely,” Erskine says. “I asked you to come this morning to discuss an alternative treatment option.”

Steve sits up a little. He glances at Nat, but she’s swept up in a flood of images that flash through instantly through her head. They’re not entirely comforting (or at all welcome). The night Steve was out of it from the seizure she took to the internet to research epilepsy more, and she regrets it now. “Surgery.” There are multiple types to treat uncontrollable seizure activity, from removing sections of the brain to lobotomy to cutting the connective fibers between the left and right hemispheres to prevent seizures from propagating, and they all sound heinous. She read some of them can have minimal lasting effects depending on what brain areas will be removed and they can greatly improve seizure activity, but, God, the thought of it is upsetting.

Erskine probably assumes she looked it up because he looks at her knowingly and with chastisement in his eyes. “Yes, though Steve is not a candidate for epilepsy surgery in the traditional sense.”

As awful as she felt before about him having to go through a procedure like that seconds ago, now she’s angry that it’s not a choice. “Why not?”
“The damage to his left temporal lobe is extremely diffuse. Whether that’s from the impact of the bullet or ischemic events afterward—”

“You mean strokes?” The word alone is upsetting. She needs to shut up.

“Yes. There was a great deal of internal hemorrhaging that the Afghan doctors treated as best they could with what they had and what they knew. It’s impossible for me to say here and now whether the bullet or delay in treatment or how they treated it caused the damage or made it worse. It’s likely a combination of the three, and it doesn’t matter. The widespread nature of the injury caused the epilepsy, as well as the other cognitive issues.”

She glances to Steve, but he’s rather intently studying the denim on the left knee of his jeans. He’s told her about his other problems, too. Not being able to remember what he’s supposed to be doing all the time and not being able to find the words he needs and so on. Those things aren’t major, and she gets the impression he worked hard after waking up from the coma to make it that way. But no amount of determination can overcome his epilepsy. “They saved my life,” he says but it’s not without pain.

“Yes, they did,” Erskine solemnly agrees. He sighs gently. “Regardless, because we can’t localize a focal point for your seizures, resection is not an option, which is what I told you when I began treating you.” Erskine stares evenly at Steve. “And to remove the areas we know are affected is too significant and debilitating a loss.”

Steve’s face is pinched with frustration and grief he’s trying to keep under control. “I’m not willing to do that. I said it back then. I don’t want to…” He swallows. “I don’t want to not be me.”

That sounds terrifying, that *that* could be the type of outcome from removing that much brain tissue. Steve’s already gone through that once in his life, losing a part of himself like that. “I know, which is what took us down the road we went.” A *dead-end road.* “And I agree that the risk of causing more damage by resecting the affected areas of your temporal lobe or by cutting the fiber pathways isn’t worth the minimal chance of success.”

Steve shakes his head, a tad exasperated. “So what are we doing here then?”

Erskine smiles a little. “Have you ever heard of a responsive neurostimulation device?”

Looking even more flummoxed, Steve shakes his head again. Nat has but only through reading those articles on the internet the other night. She’d rather have the doctor explain it, so she stays silent. “In RNS, a neurosurgeon implants electrodes in your brain, typically in the brain areas where your seizures begin or on the surface of the brain but in close proximity. The electrodes connect to a small device also implanted just beneath your skull or scalp. The device detects abnormal electrical activity – a seizure starting to form – and sends out a current to counteract it before it can propagate. The current is regulated by the device, which can be fine-tuned to your specific seizure patterns and monitored by your doctor so that you hardly feel it working.” Erskine hands Steve a pamphlet that details the procedure. Nat looks over it, noting the neurostimulator and the leads and the graphic of those implanted on a wireframe of a head. “RNS is relatively new, but it’s very exciting. It seems to work well for people whose seizures can’t be controlled otherwise.”

Steve looks over the information, but the confusion stays firmly on his face. “Doesn’t this require being able to figure out where my seizures are coming from? Just the same as the other surgery?”

“Traditionally, yes, which is why I haven’t mentioned it before.” Erskine clasps his hands together
on his desk again, and there’s calm light in his eyes. Nat sees it for what it is: excitement. 
*Tempered* excitement, but excitement nonetheless. “I have a colleague, Doctor Helen Cho, who is 
running a clinical trial for an experimental version of RNS. Rather than a single neurostimulation 
device hooked to a minimal number of electrodes, she’s developed a network of smaller devices 
that work with an array of electrodes.” That doesn’t make sense for a moment, and Steve shares a 
perplexed look with Nat. Erskine continues. “She’s calling it NeuralNet. It’s a system specifically 
designed to deal with intractable epilepsy cases like yours, the cases where the brain damage is 
widely spread and isn’t easy to localize. Whatever regulates the electrical impulses in your brain is 
broken, Steve, causing this... *firestorm* of aberrant, violent activity. This system has a chance to 
attack that firestorm and dissipate it as it forms, *before* the seizures can spread no matter where 
they’re occurring. The NeuralNet is cutting edge biomedical tech. It’s adaptive to location, 
timing, and intensity, and the stimulators work together to protect a large swath of neural tissue 
from aberrant impulses. It’s a chance for you and for people like you to live normal lives.”

Just like that, everything changes. The pain churning in their guts dissipates, the tension 
disappearing from their hearts, their fears shifting wildly into hopes. Nat can hardly believe what 
she’s hearing. *A chance to be normal.* It seems too good to be true, a gift really, an opportunity 
Steve can’t afford to miss. Her heart starts beating faster in exhilaration, and she looks at Steve in 
time to see him lean forward and set the sheet back to Erskine’s desk. He’s jittering now for an 
entirely different reason. “What do I have to... I mean, it’s a trial, right? So how do I–”

Erskine smiles gently. “Helen contacted me last week to ask if I had any patients I might 
recommend, and I immediately suggested you to her. Assuming that’s okay with you.”

Steve practically jolts forward in his seat. “Yeah. Definitely!” He glances at Nat again, 
practically vibrating with excitement, smiling sloppily. “What–”

Raising a hand to still him, Erskine says, “Before you get too worked up, I need to explain some 
things to you so that you understand what you’re choosing. This is a clinical trial, the first time the 
NeuralNet has been tried on a human patient. It’s not yet FDA-approved; that’s the purpose of the 
trial. All of that means there are going to be significant risks involved.”

That cools Nat’s excitement. The fear and uncertainty comes back all too quickly, chilly in her 
heart, and she finally loses her control and reaches across the way to grab Steve’s hand. “What sort 
of risks?”

“It’s major surgery,” Erskine explains, “with all of the dangers associated with that. A certain 
portion of that surgery could be exploratory as they find the best locations to implant the 
stimulators and electrodes. They will attempt to minimize that portion, but any sort of prolonged 
surgery is more likely to cause complications. Additionally, like I said, the Net has never been 
used on a patient before. The technology and procedures aren’t strictly new, but the number and 
complexity of the devices being employed is. There could be serious side effects we don’t know 
about and can’t anticipate.”

She doesn’t like the sound of any of that, but it’s pretty obvious Steve isn’t put off at all. “Okay,” 
he says.

“On top of that, you need to be aware that this is an experiment,” Erskine explains. “There’s no 
guarantee it will work. Even if it does work, it will not be a cure. Patients who have successfully 
used RNS have reported up to 66% reduction in seizure activity after three years. With the new 
microprocessors Doctor Cho is using, she believes she may be able to push that success rate to 75 
or even 80%.” *Eighty percent.* Nat can’t breathe just thinking about that. The two or three 
seizures Steve’s been having a week could go down to one every couple of weeks, and if his
epilepsy slips back into a more manageable state by itself or if he continues to take the few AEDs that did offer some relief… Maybe a seizure a month. Maybe better than that. That’s life-changing. “Those are only estimates, though, projections based on animal models and simulations. There is a great deal of unknowns here.”

Steve’s eyes are hazy with thought a moment, but then he focuses on Erskine. “The chance is worth it. Living with this… It’s a burden, to me and everyone around me. It’s not fair to everyone around me.” Nat opens her mouth to object, to remind him that everyone around him doesn’t feel the same, but he quiets her with a look. “It’s not. And that’s not my fault, but it’s true.” He sighs and turns back to Erskine. “A part of me feels like I never got out at all, you know? It’s like this is holding me back, tying me to… To what happened over there.” Erskine nods sadly in understanding. Steve shakes his head against his doubts, grabbing Bucky’s dog tags under his shirt. He almost never takes them off now. “A lot of people sacrificed so much to get me here, and this… this thing in my head keeps dragging me back. If there’s a way to put an end to that, then I gotta try. It’s the right thing to do.”

Erskine appraises him at that, and Nat doesn’t know what she wants. Him to agree. Him to take this whole meeting back like it never happened. She wants Steve better, to have control over his body and control over his brain and control over his life. She wants that so badly she can taste it; these last couple months have taught her so much about caring deeply for someone else, more than she ever learned from loving anyone before, even her father. But she’s afraid. Unknowns, things she can’t predict or control, frighten her so much.

“Oh, Erskine eventually says. “I figured you would say that, Steve. That’s one of the reasons I strongly recommended you for the study.”

Steve grins, relieved, and squeezes Nat’s hand. “What’s next?”

“Well, it’s not as simple as that,” Erskine says. He opens a folder on his desk, looking over some paperwork. “There’s going to be an intensive screening process. They only have approval and funding to attempt the procedure on a few patients, so they’re going to want to make certain you’re as ideal a candidate as possible. There will be numerous tests performed by the research team here at Columbia, blood work and additional MRIs, EEGs, and CT scans and whatever else their experimental protocol requires. The procedure itself will be done at Massachusetts General. Doctor Cho’s collaborating with a neurosurgery team at Harvard. You’ll need to be prepared to stay there for a few weeks or maybe even a month if and when they perform the surgery.”

“And when would that be?”

“I don’t know for certain. I know they’re eager to get started. Given the seriousness of your seizures, and if everything goes well with the screening and the study itself, I’d guess in the next three to six months.” Three to six months. God, all the sudden there isn’t just hope or light at the end of the tunnel. There’s a timetable, and it’s a short one. This winter. Early next year. Steve can have this done, have something to help him. It’s incredible. “Here. This is all the information Doctor Cho sent me a few days ago. The research team is meeting this afternoon at New York Presbyterian, so if you want to do this, I’ll call over and let them know you’re coming today.”

Today. Nat’s dizzy with how quickly things have transformed. Steve lets go of her hand to take the folder. He, too, seems overwhelmed and at a little bit of a loss. “Yeah,” he eventually stammers, looking at the papers but obviously not really reading anything. He doesn’t need to. He’s made his decision, and in his eyes, it’s the only one he can make. “Yeah, I want to do this. Please.”

Erskine nods. “Good. I was hoping you would. This is only a chance, but…” Well, it pains me to
admit it, but there’s nothing more I can do for you, Steve, other than offer you this chance.”

“You got me this far,” Steve says, closing the folder and turning his gaze back to Erskine. He’s almost breathless with shock and joy and hope. “And you did everything you could.”

Erskine grins and stands. “No need to inflate my ego,” he chides lightly. He extends his hand. “You’re a good man. Throughout everything you’ve been through, you’ve stayed that. A good man. You deserve a chance to get your life back.”

They shake hands. Then Erskine’s shaking Nat’s hand, only Nat’s still lost in the fact that this is happening and happening right away. She’s not processing much, not Erskine getting on the phone to this Doctor Cho to alert her that Steve is coming, not that the meeting’s at three o’clock, not that Steve should review the information in the packet before then. Not that they’re walking out of the office and back down to the streets outside the VA hospital where the day is bright and warm and sweet.

Not even Steve grasping her and laughing into her mouth as he kisses her in absolute euphoria. “Didya hear that? Huh, Nat? They can – holy shit – they can – I’m shaking…”

He really is, trembling with surprise and gratitude, smiling broader than she’s ever seen. She’s never thought he was capable of this much open exuberance, but here it is, bold and amazing and she’s scared out of her mind. “Steve–”

He sucks in a deep breath, pulling away but not letting go of her hands. “I know, I know. I can’t let myself get so excited. Can’t get ahead of myself, right? Nothing’s for sure yet.” He digests that for a second, gaze almost hyper as he looks around and tries to ground himself. He doesn’t succeed very well. “I gotta stay calm. I know. But, God, if this works… If they can get my seizures under control… I don’t even know what to say about it! Jesus. It’ll be like…” He finally settles on her eyes, and his are aglow with hope. “Freedom.”

She can’t hang onto her worry like this, not with him like this, so suddenly bright and beautiful. She grasps his face, pulling him closer into a long, sweet kiss. Then she hugs him tight, burying her face in his shoulder and inhaling deeply. The chance to let go of his past, to chase away his demons for good, to live a normal life… “I’m so happy for you,” she murmurs.

He stills, and his heart stops beating quite so hard and fast under her cheek. “Something wrong?”

She shakes her head, locking her arms around him and refusing to let go. “No.”

“Nat?”

She closes her eyes against tears. “I’m fine. Just…” She doesn’t know what she is. She’s happy. Really, she is. But she’s lost, too, and filled with doubt and trying so hard to hope and overwhelmed and so, so scared. She’s just… “Hold me?”

He’s confused, the one who’s worried now, but he doesn’t say anything more, embracing her with all his strength and warmth. They stand in the sun for quite a while just like that, the only two people who’re silent and still in a world that keeps spinning like crazy.

Is it terrible that she’s happy to go to work that afternoon? She’s pretty fucking sure it is. She could tell when she left that Steve wanted her to come with him to the meeting at Columbia. He’s been vacillating between walking on cloud nine and plummeting into a mire of worry and shaky nerves since they got back to his apartment. He didn’t ask her to come with him, though, probably out of respect for the fact she needs to work (and he probably noticed her mood’s off – no matter
how hard she tries, she can’t bring herself back into a better frame of mind). Instead he called Sam, explaining everything with more excitement in his voice than she ever heard before, and of course Sam instantly agreed to drop everything and come with him that afternoon. That’s good; she’s so glad he won’t have to go alone. Still, she’s out of the apartment with as close to a genuine smile as she can muster before Sam gets there.

She takes the subway to work, which she normally never does unless the weather is awful. The whole ride there she spends wondering what the hell’s the matter with her. She’s still wondering that when she gets to the store. The bell on the door proclaims her entrance (like anyone would miss her coming in – they aren’t exactly overwhelmed by customers Monday morning), and she strolls quickly to the counter to set her bag down.

May’s away today with Block Fest business at the Municipal Building, and this was supposed to be Daisy’s morning off, so it’s going to be just Nat running things for a few hours. School starts today, before Labor Day this year because Labor Day is so late, so Peter won’t be in until later that afternoon. She never likes working by herself.

Daisy comes out of the back room, laptop precariously balanced on her open palm and somehow typing on it as she walks. “Hey!” she greets brightly. “I gotta run. How’d it go, though? Everything okay?”

In addition to it being pretty shitty that she’d rather be here than with Steve right now, she’s pretty sure it’ll be rude to just ignore the question. Her hesitation is enough of an answer, though, that and her not even making eye contact. Daisy stops, frowns, sets her computer down. “Oh, no,” she murmurs. “What happened? Is it bad?”

She needs to get her shit together. “No. No, it was fine.”

That answer is about as unsatisfying and meaningless as possible. Daisy pauses a moment, like she’s trying to figure Nat out, and the weight of her gaze feels crushing as Nat gets her stuff ready and signs in to the computer system. “It was just fine,” Daisy finally says. There’s doubt and concern in her voice. “This doc of his called him in first thing this morning all special-like just to tell him he’s fine?”

Nat sighs. This is stupid. “He called because he wants to get Steve into a highly risky, highly experimental study to surgically implant a bunch of computer chips in his brain to try and treat his seizures because there are sadly no other options left at this point.” That comes out so fast, so bitter, but she can’t stop despite the burn of shame on her cheeks. “Because it’s this or invasive brain surgery to remove a large chunk of his temporal lobe or sever all the pathways between the two hemispheres or–”

“Whoa, whoa.” Daisy’s hand finds her shoulder, stilling her. She looks a little horrified, but she stays calm. “Slow down. How risky is it?”

Nat’s silent a second. That folder of information was sitting right on Steve’s dinette table, and she could have read it while he was on the phone with Sam, but she didn’t. “I don’t know exactly. It’s brain surgery. That’s risky no matter what. And no one’s ever had this done before, so there’s that. And it might not work.”

“Well, that’s true of anything,” Daisy reminds, and Nat can’t help a glare. Unperturbed, she smiles. “What? Nat, isn’t this a good thing? His meds don’t work, right, so isn’t some other long-term solution the best you can hope for?” Nat doesn’t answer. Her father fondly used to tell her she was as stubborn as an ox when she wanted to be. She doesn’t think she is anymore, at least not over anything worth fighting for. Daisy lets loose a long breath, her gaze slightly disapproving of
Nat’s behavior. “What did he decide?”

“What do you think?”

“He’s doing it.”

“Of course he is. He has to. And he should.”

“And you’re scared shitless.” Hearing that makes it impossible to deny. “Of course you are.”

There’s no sense in hiding or trying to dress up her ugly emotions in any sort of nobility. She swears softly in Russian. “Of course I am. I’m scared for him. I’m scared about what could happen. I’m scared this’ll make things worse, or that it won’t do anything at all, and I don’t think I can stand to see him fall like that. I’m scared of seeing him crushed if he goes through all this and ends up with nothing fixed.” But that’s not all of it. That’s the logical part, the part that has some integrity. The part she should feel because she loves Steve and she wants to see him thrive. The more she thinks and chews on her emotions, though, the more they feel like gristle in her throat. “So, yeah, I’m scared. But… But that’s not it. That’s not everything.”

Admitting that feels like a big step. Daisy appraises her evenly, not judgmental at all. She never is. “Okay. So what else is there?”

Frustration prickles through her. She can deal well with other people’s emotions, help them with them, see past them. Her own are so much harder to process. So it’s difficult to get this out, so fucking difficult, so she hesitates, fidgets, tries to find the courage to go on. Eventually her disgust with her own weakness beats out her fear, and she blurs it all out in a huff. “God, I don’t know. Since Block Fest, these last few days… I feel so… trapped, I guess. Like I can’t breathe. Like nothing I think I have is really real?” Daisy shakes her head in confusion. “Back when Steve and I first started seeing each other, there were these… boundaries between us. These things we didn’t talk about.”

“He knows enough about you to realize that?”

Daisy seems surprised, and that rubs Nat wrong, makes it all worse. “He knows enough to respect me,” she responds more sharply than she means to. Daisy frowns but doesn’t say anything. “So we didn’t talk about any of it, and that was safe and comfortable. It was what I needed. It was what he needed, too. And then everything happened, and his boundaries just disappeared. Maybe that wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t break up—” She still feels guilty about that, and it’s bullshit to phrase it that way, but that’s a misery for another time. “—and if he hadn’t crashed his bike. Maybe we’d still be like that. But he did. And he’s let it all out. Daisy, I know everything about him. I know what he went through, how bad it was. I know.” She looks away. “He was strong enough to tell me that. He trusted me to tell me that, to be open and honest… He still does. And he’s better now, so much better for it, and if this procedure works? He said it himself. It’ll be like finally moving on from what happened to him in Afghanistan. It’ll be like getting away at last.” Freedom. “He’s healing, and I’m… I’m not. I’m stuck in this stupid limbo. I can’t get past anything. I feel like shit, like such a coward.”

“Nat—”

“We had sex.”

This isn’t something they should be talking about, not here and not now. This isn’t something she ever talks about. No one knows what happened to her, what Alexei did to her. No one, not even Clint. Not how long it went on. Not how it damaged her body and her heart and her soul. So
Daisy won’t understand, not really, but she can only lie to herself so much that she’s okay with what went on a couple nights ago, with how she ruined something that should have been sweet and beautiful and wonderful for both of them. And she can’t hold it in. “Well, not really. Having sex implies that I let him touch me. That I trust him enough to touch me. I didn’t. I don’t. I can’t. It was…” She closes her eyes against the burn of tears. “I keep telling myself over and over again that he won’t hurt me, that he’s not the same, that he loves me and all he wants is for me to feel good and – and – and I couldn’t make myself believe it! I can’t even trust myself.”

People always make it seem like getting something off your chest has this instant effect of making you feel better, like removing the weight of it causes immediate relief. Yeah, that’s bullshit. Even this little thing has haunted her for days, that she got Steve off instead of letting him inside, that she ran from him and hid herself instead of letting him see her. She can’t get past it. She sighs, deflating on the long breath, and shakes her head. “I feel like I’m suffocating. I’m still trapped under his thumb, and he’s strangling me. No matter how far I go, how long I run… I can’t outrun him. He’s inside me. I can’t let Steve in because he’s already there.” She feels sick admitting that, and Daisy looks sick. “And he ruined me. So maybe I don’t deserve these things I thought I have. Maybe I can’t feel good, not anymore.”

Daisy’s eyes flash, and she shakes her head firmly. “Nat, you know that’s not true.”

“So I? Steve’s kind and sweet and he’s better, and I’m not. I can’t give him what he needs, not like that.” That’s exactly the problem. She sees it now, why what happened that night between them bothers her so much. Steve is ready to go further, to take what they are to the next level, and she’s not. He’s ready to heal, to move on, to become someone beyond his past and his pain, and she’s not. “I can’t be that open or honest. I can’t. And I know I need to protect myself—”

“Do you?” Daisy turns the question around. She turns Nat around, too, grabbing her shoulders and making her look at her. Nat feels so ashamed that she can hardly bear it. Stripped naked and exposed, just as exposed and helpless as Alexei ever made her feel. Just as awful. “Is that you or Detective Barton talking?” Nat winces. “I get it, Nat. I really do. You have trust issues. You’re entitled to that, believe me. I don’t know half of what you went through, and I can see that. But you know what? So will Steve.” Daisy tries for a smile. “And it’s been three years since you got away from that prick, hasn’t it been? He’s gone. He’s not inside you. No one is except for you.”

She’s not sure she can ever believe that.

Daisy hugs her. Nat’s stiff in her arms, unable to relax. They spend a moment like that. “It’s gonna be okay, alright? This study or whatever the doctors wants, your broken sex life…” That’s said like it’s supposed to be a joke. It’s not funny. “And everything else going on in your head… No sense in worrying. It’ll work out.”

She’s just not sure. She’s said that over and over again to Steve, not just since the call Friday night but since the crash. Since she came back to him. It’ll be okay. You’re alright. Everything’s fine. She knows better than anyone that it’s trite bullshit, something you say to make someone else feel better even though you don’t know any more than they do if anything will work out. You don’t know.

“And I want to talk more about it, if you’re willing,” Daisy says after pulling back, “but I can’t right now. I have to go. I have an appointment at noon. But I’ll be right back after I’m done. Alright? You and I need to go out. Have a girls’ night.” Nat doesn’t think she’s ever done that. “And we’ll talk. You just need to talk, Nat. This is good. It’s good, okay?” She says it again, shakes Nat a little like she’s trying to shake some sense into her. Like she’s trying to force being okay onto her. “It is. Okay? Hang in there. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”
Before Nat even realizes what’s happening, Daisy is grabbing her things and rushing out. The bell rings again as the door closes, jerking Nat out of her stupor, and she turns and sees she’s alone. The store is silent, huge and empty but somehow tight and confining all at once, and she sighs, looking down and wiping her eyes.

It’s going to be a long day.

Not a single person comes into the store the whole four hours she’s running things by herself. That’s just as well; she’s not sure she can handle actually having to deal with other people right now. Instead she cleans and restocks and aimlessly reorganizes and works on entering the inventory into the database for the website. It’s monotonous busywork, but it lets her check out, float in a sense, because settling into her head is pretty much unbearable. There’s too much darkness there, too much doubt. Steve, and how much she feels for him. How much she wants to give him. How little she can. How deeply that frightens her. Their… aborted intimacy. And not just that. Her abandoned music. That clinical study; Steve’s in the meeting with Doctor Cho and her team right now, and she can’t stop worrying. All these memories that keep pressing closer and closer. Everything that’s all the sudden been twisted around with seemingly no provocation. She doesn’t want to lose herself in it. She feels like she’ll drown if she stops moving, so she drifts and flitters and tries to be useful.

It works, for the most part. She calms down. Distances herself. That’s how she used to survive. Detachment. Like that moment in Steve’s bedroom, she’s outside her body, so nothing and no one can touch her, and the minutes slip away without thought, without feeling, without anything but rearranging the jazz records for the third time that afternoon and Windexing the windows yet again because she missed a tiny smudge the first couple times and straightening the counter area. It works. She gets herself through it on autopilot.

It’s a little after four o’clock when the door finally opens. She’s been quiet for so long, not even singing to herself as she worked, that the sound jars her from where she’s leaning onto the counter and staring at nothing. She straightens with a jerk as a couple young guys come in the store. They’re tall, college types maybe, and fairly nice-looking. She doesn’t recognize them, but that probably makes sense if they’re students. They amble inside, talking loudly about football preseason. She knows she should greet them, but the fact that they’re here – two of them – and she’s alone immediately sets her on edge, so she doesn’t say anything, and they disappear in the racks of records and CDs.

Her heart’s absolutely pounding, and a cold sweat breaks out all over her. Her mouth is drier than a desert, and she’s trying not to shake as she sits back down on the stool in front of the register. This is stupid. They’re just two guys, and they’re not doing anything but browsing the store’s stuff. She’s watching from the counter, trying to be surreptitious about it, glancing between where they are and the tiny security monitors on the old computer which sits on the little table next to the register. The men are laughing, joking around by a rack of old rock CDs, one of them pawing through the rows of discs and the other mocking him. They look like two friends. Just because they’re men doesn’t mean anything. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Really.

Until she sees one of them slip a CD into the big pocket of his baggy shorts. For a second, she’s not sure it actually happened. The resolution on these security monitors is pretty poor (Peter’s working on getting better equipment), and she just catches the movement from the corner of her eye. She darts her gaze over the counter, but the two of them aren’t looking at her. They’re still laughing and swearing and horsing around, so she takes a deep breath and turns back to the security feed, watching more carefully. This time it’s undeniable. The bigger guy takes another CD from the rack and is not at all cautious about stuffing it into his other pocket.
A tingle of panic works its way up her spine, spreading over her in an uncomfortable wave. She swallows a knot in her throat and stares at the security monitors longer, trying to figure out what to do. She has to handle this. There’s no one else here, so no matter how afraid she may be, she has to. Immediately she crosses calling the cops off her list of choices, at least not right away. She doesn’t want the attention, can’t allow herself to be a part of anything like that. Clint can probably take care of it, but that feels like running again, running to someone else for help because she’s weak. No, she can take care of this. She just has to be smart and stay calm. They’ll probably immediately apologize and run if she confronts them to avoid trouble, right? Right. So she just needs to do that politely and firmly and it’ll be okay.

She gets her phone out of her pocket, though, and sends a group text to May and Daisy. “Shoplifters. Come ASAP.” Then she hesitates, thumb hovering over the phone icon. A loud peel of laughter distracts her a moment, and her heart thunders even harder and heavier. Stay calm. They’re coming back towards the counter. They have to pass by her to get out of the store, so if she’s going to stop them, it’s got to be now. Second thoughts leave her dizzy and knotted up inside. She presses the phone icon and dials in 911, but she doesn’t call. She should. She should let them go, report this to the police and not confront them...

But, fuck, she’s angry and tired of being afraid.

And they know that she knows what they did. Either that or they’re out to screw around with her. That makes her even angrier, and all thoughts of letting them go dissipate. The guy sneers at her the second he makes eye contact. “People actually pay for this old shit? Seriously?”

She narrows her eyes. The anger makes her stronger, bolder. “Yes, they do. And that includes you.”

The kid laughs, not at all threatened, betraying nothing. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Up close now, she can see these guys are much bigger than her. Most people are because she’s so slight, but these assholes tower over her, tower like Steve and Thor do only without any of their gentleness and kindness. They frightened her before, but now they scare the living hell out of her because there’s only the counter between her and them as they swagger closer. She’s not going to back down, though. She can’t keep doing that. She’s been doing it for years, backing down and fleeing rather than fighting. Letting her fears control her. She can’t let that continue. “You two stole CDs,” she proclaims coolly, trying to keep her voice level. “I saw it on the cameras. Now give them back and you can walk out of here with no trouble. Do it, or I call the cops.”

The two of them laugh. Bullies, through and through. She’s suddenly reminded of what Steve said when they first started dating, about how he didn’t like bullies, about how he got into fights stopping them and protecting other kids from them. That image of Steve standing up to guys like this fuels that fire inside her, irrationally so, and she can’t back down, not even as one leans over the counter. “That’s fucking hilarious, babe,” he hisses, almost in her face. “What’s a tiny thing like you gonna do to make us?”

It takes everything Nat has not to run. It’s stupid and foolhardy, but somehow this has turned into much more than some asshole shoplifters picking the wrong store at the wrong time. Down below the counter, her thumb’s still hovering over the call button for 911, but she still holds off. “Put the CDs back,” she warns again, “and walk away. Don’t make this worse.”
The man reaches across the counter in a flash and snatches her wrist. He’s squeezing hard, and the jolt of pain and fear is almost unbearable. The touch of his fingers to her skin is like poison. Nat winces and tries to pull away, and all her anger dissolves like it’s completely impotent. The shoplifter grins at her reaction and looms even closer, dragging her to lean uncomfortably over the counter so he can get right in her face. “You’re the only one this’ll get worse for,” he hisses. His nice face is hideously twisted in a hungry, lascivious smirk, and she knows that look so well. It’s haunted her. “You want us to put it back? Huh?”

“Please,” she whimpers.

“Make us, bitch.”

His breath blasts over her. She goes stiff, trembling, turning her face away and squeezing her eyes shut. Oh God oh God oh God please don’t–

The bell jingles. “Hey! What the hell? Let her go!”

The sound of Peter’s voice is like a siren cutting through the haze of horror in her head. Nat’s eyes pop open just in time to see him rushing over. He shoves the guy holding her wrist. “What’re you doing? What–” The man growls and lets her go only to whirl and sock Peter right in the face. Peter stumbles back in shock, tripping over his own feet, and crashes into one of the racks behind them. He goes down with a cry, scrambling to right himself. The two shoplifters round on him. They’re bigger than he is, too, but he doesn’t run. Instead he shouts, “Nat, get out of here!”

The second guy rushes at him, fists balled and flying. Peter doesn’t look strong at all with his wiry, teenage frame, but he’s surprisingly agile and fleet, and he sidesteps the punch and returns one of his own. More racks crash to the ground as the altercation dissolves rapidly into a fight. Outnumbered and outsized, Peter quickly loses whatever advantage he had in speed. Both the guys are on him, hitting and kicking, and he yelps as he’s wrenched around and bodily thrown into the counter. The glass shatters when he hits, and Nat ducks with a cry. She fumbles to hit the alarm button under the table with the register, and when she does, the bells start shrilly ringing. As terrified as she is, she scrambles around the counter, shards of glass biting into her hands when she crawls to Peter. Peter’s rolling onto his side, face bloody and flushed red in pain, and Nat grabs his shoulders and pulls him close. She jabs her thumb into the call button on her phone, finally dialing 911. “Get back!” she screams at the thugs. “Get away!”

With the alarm loudly ringing and Nat very clearly calling for help, the two guys only share a frustrated look before doing just that. They bolt, knocking more things down as they do, stepping on fallen CD cases and smashing them. Nat watches in a mixture of shock and horror as they wrench open the door violently enough that it rips the bell loose. It clatters and clinks to the floor. The two of them run out and skid to the right and then take off down the street.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

The small, feminine voice over the speaker of her phone jolts her out of her daze. Peter moves quicker, struggling up from behind her. “Are you okay?” he gasps, taking her shoulders and making her look at him. She’s so lost she can’t process the question, and Peter’s battered face crumples in worry. “Nat, are you okay?”

She is. She is. They didn’t touch her. They didn’t hurt her. She feels herself nod, quaking with relief and receding adrenaline.

Thankfully, Peter’s more with it, despite the fact his jaw is enflamed and his nose could be broken and he’ll be sporting a hell of a shiner in a few hours. He takes the phone from her hands. “Yeah,
hello? Hello? Hi! We’ve had a robbery at Rising Tide Records,” he says into it as he stands and staggers over to the front of the store. He limps through the mess of CDs, magazines, fliers, and glass all over the floor, getting to the door that’s still ajar and slamming it shut. “Yeah! Yeah, we’re okay, but we need – yeah, cops. Please send the cops!” He’s looking around frantically, trying to make sure they’re gone. “They ran. We’re safe, but we need – yes, ma’am. Okay.”

Peter goes on, running around, talking on the phone, relaying the store’s address. Nat sits there against the remains of the counter, locked in place by what just happened. How fast it happened. The memories are coming as she sinks, harsh memories of hands holding her wrists and hot breaths in her face and awful, hungry sneers and sadistic eyes and the hate in her heart and she can’t get away. Not from her past. Not from the things she’s done and what’s been done to her. It’s blurring with reality, with these random assholes harassing her, with Steve’s sweet kiss and caring eyes, with the nameless, faceless men she was with before, with Alexei’s cruel smile. It’s all blurring together, and she can’t tell what’s right anymore. Why is this happening? Who the hell is she kidding? Who the fuck does she think she is? She’ll never get away, never be anything more than the whore she was.

Everything that’s been simmering so close to the surface is breaking through, blurring reality with memory and nightmare, and the panic comes back, harder and searing and she can’t think except that she needs to get away because he’s drunk and he’s furious and he wants and he’s holding her down and she can’t breathe–

“Nat, God, answer me!”

She snaps out of it. Peter is right there in front of her. “What? What?” she gasps. “What?”

He’s searching her face, eyes wide and frightened. He looks awful, and, Christ, that’s her fault. If she’d just let those assholes go… If Peter hadn’t come… She can’t think about that. She can’t think at all. “Do you want to go? The cops are coming, and I know…” He shakes his head helplessly. “That’d be bad for you.”

Through the haze of terror consuming her, she manages to focus. He’s right. She can’t be involved in anything like that, not with a fake ID in her bag and her husband hunting her. Police reports and witness statements and who knows what else. She goes cold with fear again. Peter takes her hands, squeezing, grounding her further. “I can cover, okay? I can handle it, and I’ll call Detective Barton. But you need to go right now if you don’t want them to see you.”

“Pete, your face…”

“How, Nat. Come on!”

He pulls her to her feet. Grabs her bag and shoves her phone in it. Her hands shake as she puts it over her shoulder, and her knees feel like limp noodles as she stumbles toward the shop’s door. Nothing feels real or right, like everything is disconnected, like she’s seeing and hearing and touching the world through a vacuum stretched light years long. Peter rushes her out, opening the door. “Okay? Go. I got this. Go.”

She’s running before she even realizes. Well, not running so much as walking briskly with her head down and eyes on her feet. She doesn’t even pick a direction, not consciously anyway. She’s just going. It feels like everyone is watching her, seeing every part of her, and her skin crawls and her heart’s been pounding so much today that it feels like it’s about to simply give out. The day’s so sunny, so nice, but the light doesn’t seem to touch her. She can’t let anything touch her. Her skin is hot and oversensitized and the weight of everyone’s eyes is unbearable. She glances up, but no one’s looking at her at all.
It doesn’t matter. She’s down a few blocks in no time at all, still no direction in mind. Her legs won’t stop moving, like her brain’s subconsciously protecting her because rational thought seems to be failing. Muscle memory. Instincts. Just run. She has to. Just run. The panic is hot and heavy in her gut, and she can’t shake the paranoia, the sensation of being followed, of Alexei’s hands on her arms and her throat, holding her down and pulling her back. There’s an inkling of a thought now and then – call Clint call Steve you need Steve – but it’s never more than an inkling, and calling would mean stopping for a second and getting her phone out and having to talk, and people are watching and listening, so she can’t. She just keeps going. Just run.

By the time she stops, she doesn’t entirely know where she is. Blocks and blocks from the Rising Tide and even further from home. That’s what makes her stop, a shard of realization that she’s lost which cuts through the haze again and lets her panic balloon even further. “Shit,” she whispers. It’s not a bad neighborhood, not at all, and she recognizes it once she gets her brain to fucking work. She’s been here before with Daisy. Coffee shops and delis and the library is just another few minutes away. That makes her feel better, at least.

For a second.

Because as she stands there in front of one of the coffee shops, looking around and trying to settle herself, she sees him.

Rumlow.

At first she’s not sure. She only catches part of his profile. The guy’s across the street at the deli there, smoking and chatting with some other men. He’s in a black t-shirt and black pants, a muscled menace with his crew-cut dark hair and unshaven face. She looks away the instant her eyes settle on him. It doesn’t help at all that the mere hint of that man makes terror clench her gut until she wants to puke, makes her heart stop and her brain short and she’s looking down before she’s even processed what she’s seeing. She backs up, backs closer to the coffee shop, scared beyond thought. And she’s looking again before she can stop herself.

It’s definitely him. The smirk of his lips around his cigarette. The sound of his laugh when he guffaws over something one of the other guys says. The way he moves, threat and malice, and she can’t help the memories again. “You think you ain’t gotta service us because the boss man didn’t tell you to? Not how it works here, sweetheart. We spent all night protecting your little ass, keeping their hands off the goods. Time you pay us back.” She chokes on a whimper in her throat.

Rumlow’s here. Rumlow’s here.

And he’s turning. He’s looking across the street, grinning and laughing more, and, God, he’s looking right at her.

The whole thing lasts a second, maybe two, and then she’s turning. She’s running. She’s really running. Her hair’s flying behind her, her bag lurching up and down uncomfortably against her neck and hip, and people are watching now, but she doesn’t stop. Her legs are pumping. Her heart’s breaking apart. She can barely breathe. Run.

She has to.

The world is still a blur when she makes it home.

Home. Who the hell is she kidding? It doesn’t matter how much she convinces herself, how much she wants it, how hard she dreams about it.
She doesn’t have a home.

She gets herself inside her apartment. It’s probably a minor miracle that she does, that she made it here at all. Closing the door swiftly behind her, she locks it before collapsing against it. She’s shaking and still detached, still numb, but that’s fading. It’s fading fast. As she sinks down, her back to the door and bathed in sweat and shaking, it seems like she’s tipping, teetering, barely balancing on the very edge. The moment she closes her eyes, Rumlow’s face is there. The hard glower and the way his breath stank of booze and cigarettes and how his eyes glowed in hunger and cruelty. He saw her. He saw her.

How could she have been so stupid?

Of course there’s a small voice inside that reminds her that it’s possible that it wasn’t him. She’s so out of her mind with panic, so completely screwed up, that maybe her paranoia got the better of her. She imagined or hallucinated or who knows what. Or maybe it was him, but he didn’t see her or realize it was her. That’s why she dyed her hair, why she dresses differently, why she moved away, so he wouldn’t recognize her. Maybe he didn’t. He didn’t chase her, didn’t even react at all, so maybe…

No. God. She knows he saw her. He saw her and he’ll figure out where she’s been living. He’ll find her and drag her back to Alexei. He’ll hurt anyone in his way. That’s what he does, who he is, a violent, vicious thug who does his employer’s dirty work. Like hunting down his estranged wife and bringing her home. That’s what’ll happen now because she was stupid enough to run off without a thought for what she was doing, the danger she was putting herself in. She messed up. She messed up so bad, and it’s too late now. This cat and mouse game between her and Alexei has gone on for so long, and she’s never let herself get this sloppy and stupid. These last couple months of silence and peace and love have made her too weak and comfortable, and, oh, how the tables have turned. She sees it now, sees Rumlow coming with all the violence and power of a freight train, and it’s all over.

He’s never going to let me go.

And that’s all it takes for her to completely break. She tips her head back against the door, mouth open in a silent scream, tears flooding her eyes. Her entire body is quivering, the pain in her chest making it almost impossible to breathe. She rakes her fingers through her hair, rakes and pulls and chokes on the agony in her throat. It’s all coming up, poison pushing up from inside, and she can’t stop it. Vaguely she realizes she’s having a hell of a breakdown, bordering on a panic attack. Vaguely she knows she needs help. She needs someone right now. Clint. Steve. She needs someone to catch her because she’s lost her balance and tipped over and falling.

Only Liho’s there, though, rubbing her shins, going back and forth in front of them and waiting for Nat to pet her. Nat blinks through her tears, barely able to see more than blurry shadows. Liho meows softly, sitting next to her and looking up with yellow, inquisitive eyes. Nat stares back. She catches her breath slowly, one moment spent gasping to the next. The silence is booming like thunder. He’s coming. That’s all she can think. The storm of thoughts and emotions and feelings that’s been spinning inside her for days is now completely out of control, and that’s its beat, its heart, its eye. He’s coming. He’s coming to hurt me. There are so many things she can’t bear to think about, the things Alexei did to her, to anyone who tried to help her, to anyone he so much as thought had his eye on her without her permission. For all the times he loaned her out like a whore, used her to entice and reward and further his own goals, he was a possessive bastard. She thinks of Steve, of his sweet smile and innocent eyes despite the hell he’s lived himself, everything he’s given her with both arms open…
He’ll hurt Steve because of me.

Suddenly she’s moving, blinking her tears away and wiping frenetically at her cheeks. It doesn’t matter if this whole thing, her denying Steve sex like a coward and his surgery and those shoplifters and a chance encounter on the street, is simply spiraling out of control. It doesn’t matter if it’s all blowing out of proportion, out of bounds and beyond reason. She can’t see that anymore. She’s sprinting to her bedroom, pulling her emergency bag down from the top of closet. The black backpack clunks to the floor, heavy and dull, and she remembers the gun inside. It’s like a jolt through her, an icicle jabbing into her chest, and she stops and stares. The gun.

She’s not taking it. She doesn’t want it. She’ll get away, and she won’t need it. That’s the best thing. So she unzips her bag and reaches inside to where it’s hidden in one of her sweaters. Pulling the clothing out, she carefully unfolds the fabric until the gun is in her palm. It, too, feels like poison to her, and she can’t stand holding it, taking it, having anything to do with it. She sets it to the floor of her closet and pushes it into the shadows under her shoe rack like doing that can make it disappear. When she pulls her hands back, she sees blood on them she didn’t notice before. Spots of red on her palms where the broken glass from the smashed counter cut her in the shop. Stains of red on her shirt from Peter. When she looks down, she sees—

Red all over. On her hands. On her stomach. Between her legs. She staggers, sobs. She screams.

She chokes, swallowing down a desperate cry into her bloody hands. They’ll hurt her. Rumlow. Alexei. There’s no other choice. She’ll run before they get to her, before they find her. Taking her backpack, she rushes out.

But then she sees things by her bed. Her songbook. Her pictures. The ones of her parents smiling, of Wanda and Pietro smiling. Wanda.

Gaspimg, she rushes over and grabs them all and shoves them into her backpack. When she snatches up her songbook, a folded piece of paper falls from it to the floor. She picks it up.

It’s a drawing Steve did for her a couple weeks ago. One night they cuddled up in his bed, chatting about the places they’ve been, where they still want to go. Aside from his tours in Afghanistan and a couple places around the US, Steve hasn’t been much of anywhere. Neither has she. She laid on his chest, listening to his heart beat and his steady, calm voice as he told her about this poster that used to hang down in Walter Reed in one of the PT rooms. It was some motivational thing about finding a calm place inside, a peaceful source of strength. It had a picture of a beach on it, one of those picturesque ones with pearly sands and turquoise waters and lush palms. He mentioned how he never cared much for the trite, clichéd “peaceful place” stuff, but thinking about getting to see somewhere like that was surprisingly good motivation. Getting back a normal life and doing normal things like vacation. She can imagine it now like she did right then when she closed her eyes and listened to the steady thudding of his heart and sank into his warmth. The two of them, on a beach, alone with nothing to hurt them. Nothing hunting them or haunting them. A stretch of empty sand and empty sea and empty sky. A peaceful place. She made him promise to take her one day.

He drew her the picture instead, all he can do right now with his epilepsy out of control and the way things are. It’s her on that beach, exquisite in its details from the specks in the sand to the waves cresting against the shore to the breeze pulling at the strands of her hair. Her face, lost in thought, beautiful the way he captured it. The curl of her lips in a little smile. The sooty depth of her eyes. The big flower in her hair, tucked behind her ear. It’s a tropical blossom, striking, beautiful, so realistic she can almost picture a vibrant red bloom in the pencil strokes and shading. “Until we can do it for real,” he wrote on the bottom. “Love, Steve.” He slipped the picture
under her door after a day they didn’t get to see each other much, and she remembers how she sat right here on her bed, heart nearly bursting with love for him.

How can she do this to him?

*I have to.*

She pulls the pencil from her songbook. Takes the picture and writes on the side of it. Tells him she’s sorry, that she’s weaker than he knows, that she can’t do this anymore. Tells him she has to leave. Begs him to take care of Liho, to forgive her, to find someone else. Tears drip onto the paper, soaking through and spreading, and she hates herself more than she’s ever hated herself as she folds the picture up. It’s all a blur of misery and fear as she rushes out of her bedroom, out of her apartment, bag on her back and phone in her pocket and heart shattering with every strained pulse. She goes to his place. He’s probably not home yet. She can’t bring herself to knock to find out. She’s a coward.

*He deserves better.*

She slips the picture back under her door. And then she turns without looking back, weeping as she flies down the steps and out the doors to their building and down the street. Pathetic. Desperate. *Weak.*

But it’s all she knows, all she can do. She can’t let anyone touch her.

Not even the man she loves.
AUTHOR'S NOTE: There's a lot going on in this mammoth of a chapter. From here on out, but particularly this chapter and the next one, I need to slap down some big warnings for past rape and past domestic violence. Also warnings for some not so nice language (more than normal even) and someone slingin a nasty slur at Steve because of his condition. Please read as you see fit :-) Thanks!

“It’s in the way she fights her fears.
It’s in the way she hides her tears from me.
It’s in her eyes, I see the changes.
It’s in the way she smiles so desperately.
She is a wild flower. She is the deep sea.
The tide will always bring her back to me.
It’s in the way she loses her mind, running away,
Leaving everything behind.”
– Mads Langer, “Last Flower”

Nat’s not answering her phone. Steve’s getting worried. He pulls his phone away from his ear and presses his thumb into the red icon to end the call. That’s about the fifth or sixth time he’s tried in the last hour. He sighs, wincing as he fiddles with his phone, turning it off and then on like there could be a text from her or something in that split second it’s dark. There’s not. There’s nothing.

“Still no answer?”

Sam’s voice from the front seat of Tony’s SUV draws his attention. For a second he’s too rattled to answer, but he finds his voice. “Yeah.” He shakes his head, jittery all over again and anxious. No, he’s not getting worried. He is worried. “It’s not like her, Sam.” It really isn’t. That’s what’s bothering him so much. His meeting with Doctor Cho and her team (who are all very nice, thrilled, in fact, to have him interested in the study) went for almost four hours. It’s after seven o’clock now. Nat should be home from work; her shift at the store was over at six, when May was supposedly going to be back from her own appointments. Even if Nat’s not back at their apartments yet, she’d answer her phone, especially today. Especially after his meeting. She’d want to know how it went.

So the fact that he hasn’t heard from her is more than a little concerning.

It’s bothering him enough that it immediately dropped him from the high of the meeting. It went really well. Doctor Cho is from Seoul, a slight Asian woman, beautiful and smart and wise beyond her years. The second Steve met her, he felt much more confident about this whole thing, much more in control. She sat him and Sam in a conference room with her research team, which includes a few neurosurgeons from Harvard and Columbia, an electrical engineer and other computer engineers from MIT, and other doctors and researchers Steve can’t even begin to name. Doctor Cho gave a small presentation, detailing what the NeuralNet is, how it was developed, how it
works. What it would be like if it succeeds. It was just an overview, and Steve was handed more things to read before a heap of things to sign. A massive heap. Medical release forms, forms about his rights as a research subject, consent forms, forms upon forms upon forms… No detail was spared. Appointments for examinations by the study’s team of doctors, including routine CT and MRI scans, EEGs, bloodwork, psychological examinations, and full physicals. All of that. And getting his medical records from the VA, from Doctor Erskine and Doctor Banner. Who would be paying for this massively expensive operation. His obligations (which were few, and he could withdraw at any time – he was told that repeatedly). Theirs. The benefits and dangers (which were numerous enough that there was an entire packet detailing them, one he had to sign, and they will be reiterating the risks as the study progresses). It’s dizzying, how much is ahead of him, all these schedules and assessments and tests. He’ll really need Nat to help him stay on top of it all, considering how hard it is for him to keep organized.

And he really needs Nat to listen to him talk about it, to all the excitement he’s feeling, all the fear, too, because this is real and it’s really happening. Before he was so sure he needed to do this, but now… Well, he’s still sure. But he’s scared, too. He wants her reassurance, wants to know she’s with him on this. Needs to know it. There have been times (especially recently) where it occurs to him that the dynamics of their relationship aren’t exactly balanced. He’d have to be blind not to see how dependent on her he’s become. He talked about it with Banner last week; it took him a couple sessions of dancing around the topic before working up the courage to admit he’s concerned. Nat’s been so perfect for him, so completely loving and giving since his accident, but he’s starting to notice that something’s not right. He’s terrified it’s his fault. He keeps trying to tell her she doesn’t need to take care of him like she has (though if he’s honest, giving up her care is almost as scary as being the one causing whatever distress she’s feeling). She keeps insisting, in turn, that she wants to be with him just as things are. And, in turn, he keeps trying to suggest that things can be easier. She can move in. She can bring Liho to his place. He can sleep at her apartment once in a while. She always refuses with a smile, but he can tell it’s uncertain. That’s like what they have now, uncertainty, and this limbo where they’re living together but not, sleeping together but not, is starting to feel like a cage. Or a crutch.

Banner had nothing terribly useful to say, other than Steve should be as patient with her as she was with him, that adjusting to things as they are now with his epilepsy out of control and everything that happened is going to take time for both of them. That’s true, but it doesn’t feel like the whole story. She’s a marvel to him for how well she hides things, but she has her moments, and the closer they’ve become, the harder it is for Steve to ignore them (and not wonder about them). The night they almost made love… Something was definitely wrong there. She kept trying to keep it contained, but he could tell she was upset, is upset. Letting her get him off and doing nothing in return felt selfish then, and he feels selfish now for how things have been between them recently. He doesn’t know why, and all sorts of awful thoughts torment him. His own insecurities rear their ugly head again, that it’s being with him she finds difficult to accept because of all his issues. If she’s scared of being intimate because of his damaged body or his seizures. If she’s resenting the drain he’s become on her. His problems, his epilepsy and his PTSD and Bucky’s funeral and all of that, have dominated their lives this summer. She’s missed work, had to take care of him when he’s been too sick to even stand, had to put up with his breakdowns and nightmares and flashbacks. Maybe she’s tired of it.

He’s not sure what to do. He’s not sure what’s wrong with her, if it’s him or not, and it’s really starting to bother him. Like today, when she was forlorn and upset after the meeting with Erskine. Like when she ran off to work with her tail tucked between her legs. Like not answering her phone now. Maybe she doesn’t want to hear about his meeting because she’s through with all of this. That fear still clings to him, that no girl in her right mind would want to be attached to this. To him.
No, that’s not it, either. She wouldn’t do that. That’s not like her.

There’s something else going on here.

“I’m sure she just got tied up at work or something,” Sam answers after a beat. It’s placating bullshit, and he knows it, but he keeps going. “Or she left her phone at home.”

Steve doesn’t think so. Nat’s extremely well organized, extremely conscientious. She never goes anywhere without her phone. “Yeah,” he says, shaking his head. “Yeah.”

“So let me get this straight,” Tony says. He came to pick them up at New York Presbyterian. Taking public transit back seemed like too much, and Steve’s spent, emotionally and physically. Of course the drive’s been ridiculously slow, traffic brutal during the tail end of rush hour. They sat on the Brooklyn Bridge for almost a half an hour. Finally free of that, Tony’s turning and driving them towards home. “They’re going to implant a bunch of electrodes in your brain, wired into a bunch of microcomputers, and that’s going to stop your seizures?”

They explained the study to him on the bridge. Well, Sam explained. Steve was too caught up in Nat not answering her phone. It’s a more minor concern, but he also can’t tell how Sam feels about all of it. His friend’s been kind of dazed like Nat was, excited but tentatively so. Worried.

“Something like that. Super sci-fi stuff.”

Tony’s not so inhibited. “That’s awesome. I wonder what kind of processors they’re using. You said she’s from South Korea, right? There’s some crazy shit coming out of there, like amazing stuff. My dad used to collaborate with some folks in Busan and some guys in Russia. Damn, I’d love to get my hands on those tech specs. I mean, to be able to trace back where the bad stuff’s happening in your brain and counteract it with the right amount of current at the right time in the right place… That’s pretty neat. You think–”

Steve tunes him out. He doesn’t mean to. Tony gets incredibly wordy and long-winded when he’s caught up in technology, and Steve can’t really follow along anyway even if he’s not all consumed with worry (which he is). He finds himself staring out the window of the car, too lost up inside himself to focus on anything he’s seeing. The sky turned cloudy while he was at the hospital, and the sun’s setting earlier and earlier as summer winds down. The evening’s gray, not rainy, but definitely hinting of fall just around the corner. Despite the gloomy (maybe even ominous mood), people are everywhere, heading home from work or out to dinner. He feels a little overwhelmed just looking at all of them, his anxiety curling in his belly again. He doesn’t like being like this, in need of people watching out for him and taking care of him. Being a burden. An invalid. When he came out of the coma, he struggled so hard to get what he could of his life back. To walk and handle his own care and live on his own. To be independent. No matter how bad his PTSD and depression got, he always thought he’d have that. Now his PTSD and depression are better, finally better, only everything else he had is gone. It’s always been this balancing act between his mental problems and his physical ones, and the scales are tipped entirely in the other direction. He feels good about what happened to him for the first time since it happened, at peace with losing Bucky and everything the two of them went through together in Afghanistan, but the rest of him is so screwed up that he can’t live without someone overseeing him. He’s dependent on Nat, so fucking dependent on her for everything. She’s probably realized that. Back he goes to the same thoughts from moments before, the same worries. She’s not answering him because this is all their relationship is, and she doesn’t want to live like that.

He sighs and knocks his aching head into the car window and closes his eyes. Then he sinks, listening to Sam and Tony talk but not following the conversation, feeling the car turn and slow
and speed up, feeling his heart ache with worry, with how much he needs to hear Nat’s voice, with how much he needs to know that this is okay, that she’s okay.

He sinks, but only for a second. Hope is still there to buoy him. This is why you have to do this. He opens his eyes. So you’re not a burden. Not an invalid. He takes a deep breath. Get your life back. He raises his head, leans back from the window. Be more for her. He lifts his phone, unlocks the screen, and dials Nat’s number again. It starts ringing. Come on. Come on. Pick up. His heart beats fast and shallowly, and he swallows down his nerves. It’s ringing and ringing. Come on, Nat. Pick up. She doesn’t, and he deflates again. Shaking his head, he drops his phone from his ear. What’s going on?

“Steve?”

He jerks anew. “What?”

Sam turns around. His brown eyes are nothing but compassionate. “You okay, man?”


Sam sees through that, of course. Throughout the whole afternoon he’s been quiet, reserved about it all, but as stalwart and caring as ever. He gives a small smile that’s of course meant to be comforting. “Maybe she just needs some time, you know? This is good, but…” That smile falls a bit. “It’s scary. In more ways than one.”

“Think I don’t know that?” Steve says, but it’s without heat. He gives a quirk of a grin himself. “I’m scared shitless.”

“Good,” Sam says, and his eyes soften. “Means you’re thinking.”

“You think I shouldn’t do it?”

Sam and Tony share a look, and for a second, Steve’s more scared shitless of this, of what they’ll say. That Sam will finally reveal what he’s been thinking all afternoon. That he’ll tell him he’s crazy to even consider having a bunch of doctors he doesn’t know essentially experiment on him. But Sam doesn’t. “No. You should.”

“Definitely should,” Tony ardently agreed.

Sam shakes his head. “Just… You have to appreciate that this isn’t going to be easy for anyone.” Nothing has been. Steve sighs. “I know.”

“Give her a chance,” Sam says again. “The last few months have been crazy. Give her a chance to think, too.”

The rest of the ride back to Steve’s building is quiet, which is nice and somewhat odd for Tony in particular, but the vast unknowns stretch before them, and they’re all struck by just how unsettling it is. A few minutes later, Tony pulls up to the curb right in front of the doors. “You know, everyone’s way too torqued up about this for my tastes. We should be celebrating. They can turn Steve into a cool android, like a cybernetic super soldier or something, and we can all revel in being free from it all.” That’s not said to make anyone feel bad, and Steve knows it, so he doesn’t let it bother him. It’s true. This is a good thing.

And Nat will see that, too. Sam’s right. He just needs to give her time or space or whatever she needs.
Tony puts the car into park. “So pizza tomorrow? Delmonico’s.” That sounds good. Great food, nice evening out with their friends. Nat can invite Daisy, and Thor’s always a guarantee for something like that. It’s a welcome image, them all gathered around Delmonico’s big corner table in the dim, golden light, sharing a few pies and pasta, beer and wine and everyone happy. Nat smiling like she smiled the night of Block Fest, carefree and light, and everything’s normal and perfect. “Unless you want to do tonight.”

Sam answers for Steve. “Nah. I think the guest of honor’s beat. Tomorrow’s great.” The two of them get out of the car. Sam turns around. “Thanks, Tony.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Steve adds. “Really appreciate it.” He means it, even if he’s checking his phone again. Still nothing. He looks up at their brownstone. Maybe she’s home already. But if she is home, why isn’t she answering her phone?

_Something’s wrong._ He can feel it.

“Anytime,” Tony replies across the passenger seat. “Call you tomorrow morning, Cap.” With that, they close the car doors, and Tony pulls away and back out into traffic.

Slowly Sam and Steve start walking toward the building. Steve’s limping pretty badly. All the walking during the day and then sitting for a while has caused his hip to stiffen up significantly, and it’s not cooperating at all. He’s not noticing much, though, thumbing at his phone to call Nat again. Sam’s watching like he’s caught between rolling his eyes that Steve’s this worried and being worried right along with him. Steve hardly notices that either because just as he’s raising the phone to his ear, something rams into him, and the next thing he knows, he’s falling.

He yelps as he hits the sidewalk hard on his rear, and the impact sends pain from his bad hip up and down his leg like lightning. It takes him a second to get past that, to think to apologize for walking and not paying attention, but when he does, he looks up to see this guy leaning down over him. The man’s older than him, in his forties maybe, with spiky black hair that has too much gel in it and a chiseled face locked in an ugly, angry sneer. He’s shorter, stocky with muscle, and looks bad, like a dirty prize fighter, like he lives and breathes violence. “Watch where the fuck you’re going,” the guys spits, looming over Steve. “Stupid fucking cripple.”

Sam dropped to Steve’s side when the man collided with him, but now he’s standing again, pushing the other guy back. “What the hell did you just say?”

The man’s practically fuming, his eyes flashing malevolently, and Steve’s honestly worried he’s going to hit Sam. He scrambles up even though his hip’s even worse than before, gets on his feet and pulls Sam back. “Sam. Sam!” He gets himself in between his friend and the other guy, even though he doesn’t like the idea of having his back to this man. Gently he pushes Sam further away, trying to get some distance between them. “Don’t bother. It was just an accident, okay? I’m fine. I shoulda…” He can’t help himself, glaring over his shoulder even though he knows diffusing this is the right thing to do. “I shoulda been paying attention. My fault.” He doesn’t do anything about the cripple insult other than inwardly bristle.

The other man pulls a cigarette from behind his ear and jabs it between his lips. He doesn’t bother continuing the altercation, though, at least nothing beyond a parting glare that he probably assumes should send them running. They’re two war vets, though, and they’ve both seen serious shit. It takes a lot more to intimidate them, so the guy swears again. Steve can’t hear what he says and that’s probably for the best. He stalks away.

“What an asshole,” Sam mutters. “You okay?”
Steve winces and tries putting his weight on his bad leg. It’s tolerable. And his phone has thankfully survived the scuffle with only a minor scratch on the screen. No message from Nat. *Damn it.* “Yeah.”

They head inside. The trip up the steps is slow and a little arduous, but Steve takes it as quickly as he can because he’s getting frantic to find out if Nat’s back. She has to be home, in her place, maybe his, and maybe her phone has no battery or she’s in the shower or writing in her songbook with her head in the clouds like she does sometimes… A million miles away with that distant look in her eyes and that little smile on her lips that he loves so much. That’s what’s going on. When she gets that way, he’s pretty convinced a bomb could go off outside and she wouldn’t notice it. So there’s nothing to worry about. Nothing wrong. He’s just being stupid. Everything’s fine.

Everything’s—

The second he and Sam reach the top of the stairs, these new, fledgling hopes vanish like they were never there at all. There’s a man outside Nat’s door. At the sound of Steve’s heavy footsteps and breathing, the guy turns, keys in his hand, and Steve sees it’s Nat’s friend, Clint Barton. The guy who doesn’t like him. The guy who watches her like a hawk. And when he turns, Steve sees there’s a gold badge on his suit jacket pocket. A police badge. NYPD.

_Holy shit. He’s a cop._

Steve’s blood turns to ice water, and his heart starts pounding. The world feels like it closes in. Even though he’s spent the last couple hours doing nothing but worrying about Nat, it didn’t seem real, like it could be really happening. Now… “Where’s Natalie?” Barton asks. No greeting. No small talk. Nothing beyond that. “Where is she?”

Steve’s mouth falls limply open. He can’t stop staring at Barton’s badge. His thoughts are whirling in a storm, chaotic and frightening, and he can’t make sense of anything. “I – I don’t know. I’ve been trying to call her for a couple hours now – hey!” Barton’s turning back, angered and frustrated, and jabbing the key into the lock of Nat’s apartment. Steve rushes forward, leaving Sam at the top of the steps. “What the hell’re you doing?”

If Barton has keys, Nat probably gave them to him (and that rankles Steve a little, because Clint has keys – she trusts Clint with that and not him – but the hurt’s fleeting and not enough to stick). If she gave them to him, then this is okay, right? There isn’t much choice. Barton’s opening the door and then moving to block Steve from coming closer. “Leave. This doesn’t concern you,” he snaps, and his tone suggests there’s no room for argument.

Steve doesn’t care. “It sure as hell does!”

_“Leave,”_ Clint threatens again. “You don’t know what’s going on.”

He’s always realized there’s more to Nat than he knows, but suddenly that’s clear and present. This man is right here in front of him, telling him this isn’t his place with fire in his eyes and a badge on his jacket, and that scares him. Not enough to make him back off, though. “What happened? Why are you here?”

Barton sighs, scowling at him still, but he’s worried enough that he goes inside the apartment rather than continuing to stonewall him. Sam comes closer, face twisted with confusion and concern, but Steve doesn’t hesitate to follow Barton right inside. It feels a little wrong; Nat’s always so protective of her privacy. He’s been in her place before, but he’s always gotten the impression that she’s not comfortable with it.

She’s definitely not comfortable with him being in her bedroom, but that’s where they end up after
a second or two of Clint looking around in a way that’s one shade below panicked. He’s practically running, glancing in the living area, in the bathroom, in the spare bedroom. And he charges inside Nat’s bedroom without a moment of hesitancy. Steve follows, nervous and ashamed like he’s betraying her, Sam wincing as he comes as well. “There was a robbery at the record store a few hours ago,” Barton declares as he searches the bedroom.

That doesn’t sink in. “What?” Steve asks.

Barton goes back to viciously glaring. “Robbery. Shoplifters.” He doesn’t spare them more than that, though, before heading to Nat’s closet. He starts rifling through her clothes, wrenching things off hangers and throwing stuff around. It takes Steve a beat to realize he’s searching for something. “It wasn’t serious. They roughed May’s nephew up, smashed things. Nat left before the patrol unit got there. Peter said she wasn’t hurt.”

Still that doesn’t make sense. Parts do – she’s not hurt she’s okay they didn’t hurt her – but Steve can’t focus on that. “Why’d she run? I don’t–”

“Fuck,” Barton hisses. “Goddamn it.” He’s shaking his head, searching still but getting more agitated. “She ran.”

Sam’s exasperated, glancing among Nat’s bed, Steve, and Barton tearing apart Nat’s closet. A box falls to the floor with a thud, a box full of smaller boxes that all say L’Oréal on them. Hair dye.

“You just said that!”

Barton drops to a crouch, tearing through the mess. “I mean she ran for good. She ran away.”

Steve’s heart just stops. The world blurs, and it’s as if he’s being sucked down into its center, gravity crushing and compressing him. She… No. No, no, no. That storm spinning inside his head grows hotter, tighter, and he can’t grasp onto anything in it. He can’t speak. Can’t move. Can only reel in that, in the maelstrom, in the violent gales of it. She ran. His lips move around a breathy murmur. “Why?”

“Holy shit.” Sam’s strained whisper snaps him back to himself, and he looks down to see Barton pulling a gun from under Nat’s shoe rack. It’s a semiautomatic, a powerful one. Steve idly recognizes the make as a Glock. “What the hell…”

Barton seems about to erupt in anger. He stands, taking the gun with him, and pushes between Steve and Sam. He’s fishing in his suit pocket. Finding his phone, he’s dialing someone as he makes sure the weapon’s not loaded and the safety’s on. Steve can only stare at the gun – at the gun Nat has hidden in her closet – and the world’s tipping, off-kilter, wrong…

There’s a rustle. Liho creeps out of the closet, apparently having hidden in there during all that. She’s silent as she tentatively comes closer and rubs against Steve’s shin. He jerks in surprise and looks down and she peers right back up at him with questioning, yellow eyes. Before he even thinks twice, he’s leaning down to scoop the tiny cat up. She weighs almost nothing as Steve brings her to his chest, petting her quickly. His hands are almost shaking. Liho’s still here. She wouldn’t leave Liho. That means she didn’t leave, didn’t run. God, why would she run?

Why would she need a gun?

“Yeah, Hill. It’s Barton.” Barton’s on the phone, and he takes the gun and rushes past them like they’re not there. Like they don’t matter. “She’s gone. Took the emergency bag but left the gun. Yeah. Yeah… Everyone we can trust. We need people on this, Maria. Alright. Anything on the shoplifters? Goddamnit, I was hoping they’d be tied to Shostakov – no. No sign of – yeah, I think
we’d know if he made a move on her.” *He?* Steve’s blood goes cold again. “Alright. She can’t have more than a few hours’ head start on us. Yeah. Yeah, keep me informed.” He hangs up with whomever he’s talking. Sam and Steve follow him out toward the door, the former in frustration and the latter in a daze. Then the cop whirls, skewering them both with a harsh look. If Steve wasn’t so consumed with worry, he might have been pissed off at being treated like this. As it stands, he only takes the business card that’s shoved in his face. Barton’s voice is low and his eyes are steely. “If she calls you, Rogers, you call me. You hear me? You don’t go after her. You don’t spook her. You don’t even answer her. You just call me.” He shakes his head, a warning tight in his voice. “Stay out of it.”

With that, the other man is gone, leaving Steve and Sam reeling in his wake. Steve lets out a breath he hasn’t realized he was holding. He winces as Liho’s claws dig into his arm before she jumps down. The little darts of pain seem so sharp despite how much he’s twisted up inside. Everything else, the day he’s had and the study and his epilepsy, just drops away, and all he can feel is the pounding pulse of his worry.

“What the hell’s happening?” Sam finally asks, staring at the door Barton left wide open like none of Nat’s stuff matters. Like no part of Nat’s life here is real or valuable. “Is she…”

“I don’t know,” Steve answers. His voice sounds faint, wrong.

“You know that guy?”

Steve nods. “Didn’t know he was a cop. Didn’t know…” He thinks about the gun, the hair dye, the things Clint said about Nat running and someone making a move on her. He shakes his head, shocked and alarmed, dropping his gaze to the business card in his hand. *Detective Clinton Barton. 67th Precinct.* There’s an address and cell phone and office numbers. It looks real, starkly so. Steve can’t believe any of this. “Christ, Sam, I don’t know anything about her.”

It’s silent for a moment, that heavy fact hanging in the air like carbon monoxide or something, a poison you can’t see or smell or taste but one that’s hurting you all the same. Steve bites the fleshy part of his cheek, and all the emotions he’s been unable to parse suddenly bombard him. Fear. Anger. Shame and regret. Like this brilliant light, Nat burst into his life, and just like that, she’s gone, vanished. Disappeared.

*Run away.*

“Let’s check your place,” Sam offers. He moves like he can’t stand being still anymore.

Steve’s dumbfounded, tingling with the suddenness of it all. “Huh?”

Sam’s eyes are hard, though not with anger so much. He’s troubled for sure, like he doesn’t want this to confirm suspicions he’s had all along. Everything around the accident is still a blur to Steve, but he’s pretty sure Nat and Sam made their peace. Sam’s been fine with her since then. Now… “She has a key to your place, right? Let’s check it.”

They close the door but don’t lock it and go to Steve’s apartment. Steve’s hands are shaky as he fumbles for his keys. He doesn’t know what to expect anymore. Nat to be inside waiting for him like this is all a big misunderstanding. Her to be there hiding, terrified of whatever happened at the store. She’s not there at all, though. He finally gets the door open, and Max is waiting, wagging his tail and more than ready for his evening walk. Steve steps inside, scanning with quick, frantic eyes. The rest of the apartment is empty and just the way they left it. *Damn it.*

“Steve.”
Steve turns around. Sam crouches and picks up a folded piece of paper on the floor. Obviously it was slipped under the door. Sam opens it, and at first Steve doesn’t recognize what it is. Then Sam hands it to him.

Nat’s face stares back at him. It’s the sketch her put under her door a few weeks back, the one of her on the beach with the flower in her hair. The flower’s marred now, distorted and streaked by splotches of dried moisture. She wrote something right there above it. “Steve, I’m sorry. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t do this to you or to me. I can’t lie to you like I have been since I met you. It hurts too much. I’m not strong like you are. I’m not strong enough to face what I’ve been running from. I’m not strong enough to hurt you, and if I stay that’s what will happen. They’ll hurt you. He’ll hurt you. I can’t let that happen, so I have to go. Please understand. Please take Liho in. She deserves better than me, and I know you’ll take care of her. And please find someone else. You deserve better than me, too. I’m broken and you can’t fix me. No one can. Please forgive me. Love always, Natalia.”

He lowers the drawing, shaking his head. He can’t believe any of this. She’s been lying to me the whole time… Something inside him shudders, breaks, not with anger but with grief, and he’s tipping his head back. There’s an unbidden image in his mind of the flower alone on a dark and stormy beach, ripped from her hair by the wind when she ran. It’s all that’s there. She’s long gone.

Clint told him to stay out of it.

No chance in hell.

“Steve, Jesus, where are you going to look for her?” Sam’s not pleased, either, as Steve gathers up some money and some more of his sketches of her. He doesn’t even have her picture. The drawing will have to do. He folds them up and puts them in his jeans pocket. Then he rushes into his kitchen and downs his meds in record time. On an empty stomach, that’s probably not the smartest. “Steve, slow down!”

“I have to find her, Sam,” he says as he stands at the kitchen sink. He drinks down the rest of his glass of water in huge gulps. The pills feel like they’re lodged in his throat. “You heard Barton on the phone. She’s probably only got a few hours’ head start.”

“She could be anywhere!”

He doesn’t think so. He’s not sure why, but he doesn’t think she’d get on a plane or train or leave the state. Natalia. That’s her name. Natalia. He’s struggling to get his head around that. She didn’t even tell me her real name. “If she’s lying about her name, she has fakes IDs, and if she’s using fake IDs, she won’t risk an airport.”

“You don’t know that—”

“I can’t let her do this.”

Sam frowns. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe you shouldn’t get involved? That maybe she doesn’t want you to?” Steve stiffens and refuses to think that. “She basically said you’ll get hurt! She’s had a cop watching her since she’s moved in here! And obviously someone bad’s after her, someone the police probably can’t catch or something like that! This is dangerous.”

“All the more reason I gotta help,” Steve replies shortly, taking the bottle of pain pills and stuffing them into his bookbag. His hip’s throbbing, and a migraine is threatening, but he can’t let that stop
him. He’s fought through pain before. “This guy, whoever he is, did something to her—”

“You don’t know that,” Sam reminds him, and Steve turns and levels a fiery glare at him. Sam sighs shortly, pissed off and becoming more so. “Alright, maybe someone did. But you have no idea what you could be getting into here. She’s been lying to you. You have no idea who she is!”

Steve grinds his teeth together and shoves his prescriptions back into the cabinet haphazardly, not in the nice, neat order Nat always maintained. “I know enough.” He closes the door, shoulders his bag, grabs his phone from the counter, and turns to go.

Sam grabs his arm as he does. “Dude, please, listen.” Steve glances at Sam’s face, and he knows what’s coming. He knows it and he hates it, but he doesn’t pull away. He just averts his gaze to his sneakers and grits his teeth harder. Sam sighs again as if he’s being forced to go down a road he doesn’t want to go down. “Listen and think. Let the police handle it. Please. You don’t need this right now. You know you can’t handle it. You’re just finally getting better with everything that happened to you. You don’t need her problems piled on top. I’m not saying you shouldn’t care, because you should, but care within reason. Running off like this? Going after her half-cocked and potentially throwing yourself into the line of fire?”

Steve shakes his head. “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing. And you might make things worse, not better.” Steve hasn’t thought of that, and it cools his ire a bit. Not enough to make him stop. Sam loosens his grip on his arm but still doesn’t let go. “Look, you know I believe in you. I always have. I’m not a big one for harping on people about their limits, but you have to be realistic. If you’re doing this study, that’s what you need to focus on. Keeping yourself in the best possible condition for those screening tests. And you’re too sick to—”

“Jesus, Sam.”

“You know it,” Sam says, lowering his voice. It’s not without compassion. It never is. Sam’s eyes soften, and he leans closer. “Saturday night after that seizure you were too sick to do much more than puke your guts out and sleep for twelve hours straight. That was two days ago. You need to take it easy, not immerse yourself in more stress and trauma.”

He loses his temper a little, lets himself get angry. “You don’t understand. She took care of me when I fell. She was there for me when I needed her. Every step of the way, Sam, she was right there. I got no right to do any less than that for her.” He finally pulls away like an act of defiance. “This isn’t about me.”

“Right,” Sam replies, folding his arms across his chest. “Because you’ve got nothing to prove.”

That gives Steve pause. He thinks about it, about the medals he was awarded, about the disabilities he has from serving his country. About being called a hero. Captain America. And about what he felt in the car just minutes ago, about losing all that and becoming an invalid and a burden. Someone who needs help rather than helps others. He thinks about who he is in the wake of what he’s suffered, who he is without being a soldier or a hero or Captain America at all. And he can’t lie. “I do have something to prove. To me.” He takes a deep breath. That I can do this. That I can still protect people. That I can be for her what she was for me. “And to her.”

That she doesn’t need to run from me.

Sam stares at him evenly. For a second, his expression is unreadable. Steve stands firm, although the thought of Sam not having his back in this pretty well terrifies him. That won’t stop him, but,
damn, he needs Sam to be okay with this. Eventually Sam swears under his breath and shakes his head. “You are a stupid, stubborn asshole, you know that? I pity the rest of the Commandos, having to put up with your shit. It suddenly makes a whole lot more sense why they are the way they are.”

Steve can’t help a smile despite how freaked out he is. “Welcome to the unit,” he quips.

“Alright, so what’s the plan then? We’re just going to go wander around Brooklyn and show her picture to random people like a couple of crazy-ass idiots?”

“You’re staying here.”

Shocked, Sam shakes his head fervently. “Uh-uh. Absolutely under no circumstances are you going out there yourself. No.”

“Someone needs to be here in case she comes back,” Steve argues. It’s only logical. “Or if someone else comes here looking for her. I need you to do that.”

Sam was pissed off before. Now he looks absolutely furious and barely holding it in. “Then you stay here! Steve, if you have a seizure out there–”

“Bracelet.” He lifts his wrist and the silver and red chain glints in the kitchen lights. “Rescue meds.” He pats his bag, too. “And a cell phone full of contact numbers for you and Doctor Erskine and the VA med center. I’ll be fine if it happens.” That’s not enough. Steve knows it. He also knows he’s being a colossal pain in the ass and probably a step above completely moronic. Sam shakes his head, but he goes on before his friend can object more. “She won’t come to you.”

Sam’s expression dissolves into a frustrated, helpless frown. He knows that’s true. Knows it and clearly hates it and this whole fucked-up situation that’s suddenly consumed them. “ Fucking hell… You be careful,” he demands. Steve nods and starts to move away, but Sam doesn’t let him yet. “No, I mean it. You be careful. You have no idea what you’re getting into. You come back right away if you can’t handle this. You hear me? Don’t make me go out and look for you.”

That’s not said in anger. That’s a plea. Don’t let yourself get hurt. “I hear you.”

Sam releases his arm with a lingering, firm look, and Steve feels just a bit like an asshole for making him worry. The same look was always on Bucky’s face whenever he did something stupid back then, too, like getting himself into fights he couldn’t hope to win just because someone had to stand up. He swallows down his guilt and doubt and heads out. Max whines from Sam’s side as he closes the door behind him.

He’s down and on the street a moment later, walking with renewed energy, thoughts spinning again. He’s not letting himself focus on the lies, on the things he doesn’t know. There’s no sense in that. His mother always told him that he has a one-track mind, that when he focused on something, it was hard to break him out of it. He hasn’t felt that so much since waking up from the coma because he can’t focus and think right anymore, but he does now. He does, and it comes easy. It doesn’t matter who she is. Doesn’t matter who’s chasing her or why she ran. Doesn’t matter. He has to find her, bring her back, make her see that she’s wrong, that he wants her, needs her, that she’s not alone, that she doesn’t have to hide from him…

He has to do this for her.

Some part of his brain is thankfully functioning, and he ends up at the Rising Tide before he knows
It’s a logical place to start, one of the only things he knows about whoever she was before she started with him. It’s after eight o’clock. The shop normally closes at nine but the lights are partially off already. The door’s locked, and the CLOSED sign is flipped outward. It’s probably because of the robbery. He can see some racks of things are missing. There are full trash bags near the front. The glass of the counter is gone, and shards twinkle in the case and on the floor where they were missed during the cleanup. Everything is locked up tight. “Shit,” he whispers. There’s more illumination in the back, in the office he knows is there. Someone’s here. He could call if he actually had the cell numbers of any of Nat’s friends. God, he feels like an ass for not noticing how distant she’s really been, for not caring about how little he actually knows about her, for not realizing how much she’s been hurting. He doesn’t even have the capacity to call her friends.

So he does what he can do and knocks loudly on the door. The glass rattles. There’s no movement back there. They probably can’t hear him. Frustrated, he knocks again, harder, as hard and long as he dares. Just when he’s about to give up, he sees May hesitantly working her way through the racks. She looks scared, but when she spots him, her face relaxes and she rushes across the way to unlock the door. “Steve,” she gasps.

His mother taught him better manners than this, but he can’t help barging his way into the store uninvited. “Have you heard from Nat?”

May’s face is pinched in worry. “No. No, I… Clint was here earlier, and he was going to check her place. She wasn’t answering her phone.” Steve grimaces, feeling that knot of worry tighten up even more inside him. “Why? She’s not there?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I don’t know where she is.”

May pales. “Oh, God,” she whispers. “I should have been here. I should have…”

There’s no time for that now. “These shoplifters. Who were they? Did she know them?”

May shakes her head in small, riled jerks. Nervously she’s rubbing her arms through her floral blouse. “I don’t think so. I don’t–”

“They were just some douchebags.” Peter’s voice makes Steve turn. He’s there, emerging from the backroom, too, and Daisy’s at his side. The kid looks terrible, like he had a run-in with a fist too many times. His face is black and blue and enflamed, and his one eye’s so swollen it’s practically sealed shut. He’s got an icepack in his hand. “I don’t think she knew them. They were stealing stuff. That’s it.”

“Did they hurt her?” Steve asks desperately, scanning among the three of them for an answer. “Did they?”

“No,” Peter replies just a tad defensively. He leaves Daisy’s side to step closer to Steve. Even standing without his weight on his bad leg, Steve practically towers over the kid, and he’s got probably seventy pounds of muscle on him. Peter still glares defiantly. “I got here in time. And I wouldn’t have let her go if she’d been hurt!” At that, Steve steps back a little. Peter closes his eyes like he realizes he’s getting too worked up. He sighs shortly, controlling his emotions. “Look, after they left, I told her to run before the cops got here. I knew it’d be a problem for her, being involved with something like this. With the cops. So I told her to get out here, and she did, and–”

“Why would it be a problem?” Steve interrupts. God, none of this makes any fucking sense. He shakes his head, darting his eyes among them again. “Who is she?” A moment of tense silence
crawls by. No one answers his question. They’re all awkwardly looking at each other, and Steve’s watching them, and there’s no time for this. “I know her name’s not Natalie Rushman, okay? You don’t have to lie for her. And I just want to find her and make sure she’s okay. That’s all. So who is she?”

Daisy winces. Steve supposes she would be the one to come clean. She’s Nat’s closest friend. At least, he thinks she is. “I – I don’t know her real name. I didn’t meet her until after, after she was already living with Clint–”

Steve gets even more confused. Clint’s married; he knows that now. “She was living with Clint?”

“A couple years back. She was staying there for a while. He got her away from her ex.”

_Her ex._ “Her ex-boyfriend?”

Daisy falters. “Her ex-husband.”

_Husband._

_Holy shit, she was married._ He drops his gaze away without realizing, everything blurring as he stares at his shoes. _Holy shit._ She was married. She lied about that. On their first date, she lied to his face. And even though she admitted as much in that note, hearing it still fucking hurts. He’s blinking his sight clear, refusing to lose himself in his emotions, and looking back at Daisy. She has nothing but sympathy on her face. “Who is he?”

Helplessness fills Daisy’s eyes. “I don’t know anything about him. He’s – I guess he’s some bigwig in the music industry? I don’t know.”

Music industry? Steve thinks about Nat singing, her guitar and her songbooks and her immense talent that she seems to be hiding for no good reason. Frustration leaves him reeling, and he’s curter than he means to be. “That’s it?”

“She never talks about him!” Daisy says. “She never said his name or where he is.” _Staten Island._ Unless _she lied about that, too._ Daisy shakes her head, and brown hair streaked with hints of blue tumbles down her shoulders as she does, as she shivers. “But he’s a really bad guy. He’s after her, been trying to find her again. That’s why Detective Barton keeps having her move, why she ended up working here under a fake name, but I don’t know the details. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know why she ran this time and I don’t know where she’d go.” Her eyes glisten a little, and she suffers a second with her worry. With the thought of betraying her friend. “But I know she was upset today. It was because of – well, it was about you.”

That hurts even more because it’s cruel affirmation of what he’s been dreading all evening. “Why?”

The answer isn’t quite what he expects, though when he considers it in the context of Nat’s note, it makes perfect sense. “She thinks you’re too good for her.”

_God._ That’s what she wrote. _You deserve better than me._ He doesn’t want that. Never realized she could think that. Doesn’t know what he did to make her think that. It’s like a punch to the gut, how much it knocks the wind out of him. How could she get so twisted around? How could she hate herself so much? Suddenly so many things make more sense, why she won’t move in, why she won’t tell him about herself or let him into her apartment or let him touch her. He’s been so fucking blind.

Eventually his brain kicks back into gear. “I’m going to find her,” he declares. It’s obvious they
don’t know anything more, not enough to help him anyway, so he has to look somewhere else. Barton. He got her away. At least Barton has answers. Hopefully the guy will talk to him. I’ll make him talk to me. He comes back to himself, and they’re all watching him. He nods to their unspoken worry. “I’ll bring her back.” He turns to go.

“Steve, wait! Wait!” Daisy’s across the few feet between them in a flash, grabbing his arm before he gets to the door. She’s quite a bit shorter than him, too, and she’s looking up at him with worried, imploring eyes. “Just… be careful.” Again with that. He’s tempted to brush it aside, but before he can, she’s saying more. “Whoever this guy is… Nat’s absolutely terrified of him. Terrified. He’s got a possessive streak a mile wide. If he’s chasing her, or if she went back to him…”

“She’d go back to him?”

Daisy shakes her head in frustration. “I don’t know. I hope not. But if she did… Please watch out for yourself.” She bites her lower lip briefly. “And – and tell her to call me? Please? When you find her.”

Feeling even more rattled, Steve can barely bring himself to nod. He does, though. And he heads back out the door and into the night, wondering more than ever just who it is he’s fallen for.

He has to admit that Sam’s right. Asking people if they recognize Nat from her picture is stupid and useless. He’s rattled enough from what Daisy told him that he tries all the same, wandering around Flatbush, looking for Nat, showing his drawing of her, questioning people if they’ve have seen her. No one has, the ones who bother to answer anyway. Most just ignore him or look at him like he’s insane. Maybe he is. Apparently he’s hunting down a complete stranger. He realizes he needs to get to Barton and proceed from there, but his confidence is really shaken now, and he’s scared to ask what he really needs to. He’s scared to learn more about her. It’s stupid, but he can’t just shake it off. What else doesn’t he know? She has a gun in her closet. She dyes her hair. She was married, and she lied about it. Her ex is after her. And she doesn’t trust you, not to touch her, not to help her, not even to tell you the truth. She’s never told you the truth. What more is there to know? As much as he’s tried to fight it, wondering that in bitter hurt sends him down a spiral of doubt and anger and frustration. She’s played you. Lied to you. You don’t owe her anything. She already left him once, right when he needed her the most. This is the second time. While he’s in a far better place now, it’s still hard to see through that. It’s hard not to be hurt and bitter, not to let this moment throw everything they’ve shared into question. She’s a liar.

He can’t believe that. He won’t. Those long nights where he suffered with the pain from his accident, where he lay in her arms and cried after a bad nightmare, where she sang and wiped away his tears and rubbed his sore muscles until he could get back to sleep… He thinks of those. And the days where she cooked for them, where they shared dinner on his couch, where she sat and chatted her way through Parks and Recreation (which she’s never seen – how can she have never seen that?) and laughed and smiled and shared long, sweet kisses with him. And all the times she’s come with him to do what he’s needed to do, whether it be doctor appointments or appointments with Coulson or Bucky’s funeral. Whatever he’s needed, she’s given with a smile and both arms open. And getting him through all of his seizures, putting up with that chaos and mess and awfulness. And that note. God, it’s just words on a page, but he feels like he can see through them, feel her in them. He’s read it again and again while he’s walked the streets and aimlessly searched. There are no lies there. He can feel it. That’s Nat – Natalia – and she’s begging him to understand.

He doesn’t. Not at all. And he needs to.
A few fruitless hours later it’s late, almost eleven, and he’s exhausted. Sam’s texted a few times, asking if he’s found anything but mostly checking in on how he’s doing. Steve’s lied and said he’s fine. Truth is he can feel his body giving out on him, and Sam pretty much sees through his bullshit. His last text told him to come home. He can’t yet. He’s becoming more and more afraid that Nat’s gone, really gone. He’s checked everywhere they’ve ever been together around Flatbush, up in Prospect Park, the restaurants and coffee shops and stores. He’s searched the streets. He’s even called Tony and Thor to see if they’ve seen her, and of course they haven’t (and like Sam they see through his assurances that everything is fine, but he gets off the phone with them too fast for them to press him). Without anything to go on, there’s not much more he can do.

Except go to Barton. He’s been avoiding it because he’s being a chicken shit coward, but there’s no choice now. Maybe Barton’s found her. That hope eventually overcomes his fear of learning anything more, and he pulls the detective’s business card from his pocket and reads the address. It’s quite a few blocks east, and everything hurts and he’s so damn tired, but he trudges on in the dark. He’s feeling shaken and vulnerable enough on top of that that everyone he sees, everyone he passes, seems like threat, like someone out to get him. His anxiety ramps up, feeds him memories and lies, and it’s hard to ignore that, but he does. Needless to say, the sight of the precinct, with its plain brick front and glass doors, with light pouring out, is extremely welcome.

Steve takes a deep breath and hurries inside. It’s surprisingly busy for this time of night, uniformed cops everywhere working, taking statements, filling out reports, handling people who’ve been arrested. The waiting room is fairly full too, a random assortment of people who universally appear tired and unhappy. Steve walks past all that and heads to the front desk. There’s an older bald man behind it, and he’s grumpily typing at a computer terminal. For some reason, though Steve’s dealt with way worse shit than this before, the whole environment feels really off-putting. Daunting. Like Sam said, he’s getting tangled up in something with which he has no business being involved. He really doesn’t belong here.

But he’s here. “Excuse me?”

The tired cop hardly glances up. “Can I help you?”

Steve steeling himself against what he fears is going to be a struggle. “Is Detective Clint Barton here?”

There’s another quick flick of the guy’s eyes. “What’s this about?”

Answering that is difficult, particularly since Clint told him to stay out of it. And it’s not like he has anything to report (or anything to show for the hours he’s been looking for Nat other than more questions and a bruised heart). “Missing person,” he finally says, hoping that sounds serious enough to get him in but vague enough that the cop doesn’t press. He doesn’t even know Nat’s real name, so he can’t tell him who.

The guy doesn’t press at all. In fact, he seems like he couldn’t care less. “Your name?”

“Yes. Steve Rogers.”

“Take a seat.”

Disappointed but relieved at the same time, Steve heads over to the long, wooden benches that fill the waiting room. There’s a space near the end of one of them that’s pretty far from anyone else, so he sits there, setting his backpack close beside him. And waits. And waits. Checks his phone for any messages, and there aren’t any from Nat. A few from Sam and Tony, worried and telling him he’s crazy, telling him to go home, and he types back perfunctory answers about being fine.
and coming back soon. He waits some more. Fidgets subconsciously. Looks around and around again. The paint’s peeling on the wall. It used to be a nice blue, but it’s faded and marked up. There are papers pinned up everywhere, wanted signs, bulletins, posters from the FBI about keeping a watchful eye for terrorism and suspicious activity. More posters about reporting crime, about safety, about hotlines for victims, about domestic violence. He stares at that one. It looks old and faded. The picture is black with a lone casket covered in flowers. The big, white text reads: “He beat her dozens of times. She only got flowers once.” It’s horrible, makes him sick to his stomach, so he looks away.

The waiting room is surprisingly quiet. People aren’t talking, nothing beyond a few murmurs here and there, and he’s grateful for that. The migraine’s threatening more now after sitting for a while, so he stands with a grimace and limps over to the water cooler. He uses a little plastic cup to get a drink and take some of his pain pills. Then he sits again. Waits longer. His mind feels like it’s going to burst from his skull with all his useless worrying and thinking. Forcing the pain down and his breaths to come slow and easy, he takes the drawing back out of his pocket. The one of her on the beach. Sweeps his thumb over the flower he drew in her hair. Reads the note again. “I can’t lie to you like I have been since I met you. It hurts too much.” Why doesn’t she trust him? He trusts her. He trusts her with everything. “He’ll hurt you. I can’t let that happen, so I have to go.” She didn’t have to run. Whatever’s happening, they can work it out together. He knows that. “Please understand. Please find someone else. You deserve better than me. Please forgive me.” He doesn’t care if she’s broken. She doesn’t need to run!

“Love always, Natalia.”

“Steve?”

Steve looks up, blinking to get his eyes to focus, and finds a familiar but surprising face. “Maria? Maria Hill. From the third floor.”

Maria nods. She doesn’t look pleased. He’s only met her a handful of times, and he’s never seen her smile. There’s a vague memory in his head – hearing her voice in his apartment – but it’s all hazy from when he was so sick after his accident. Was she really there? And she’s a cop, too? Suddenly he gets the impression that nothing has been as it seems. “Come with me,” Maria orders, and he struggles to his feet, grabbing his bag and limping after her as fast as he can.

The squad room is busier than the waiting room. There are desks everywhere, some with cops typing at laptops, on the phone, talking to witnesses and people handcuffed to chairs. Filing cabinets line the walls, and there are a few offices, conference rooms, and interrogation rooms further back. Hill leads him to one of those – “Interview Room 2”, so says the placard by the door, but Steve thinks that’s just a nice way of putting it – and gestures that he go inside. That immediately make him feel even warier and more defensive. “What’s going on?” he asks once the door is shut.

“What the hell are you doing? You shouldn’t be here,” Hill snaps, and her glare is the definition of icy. Her lips are pressed together in a taut frown. “Barton told you to stay away.”

Steve’s sick of this bullshit. “Why?”

“This has nothing to do with you–”

“It has everything to do with me,” Steve harshly corrects. “She’s my girlfriend. She’s practically living with me. I can’t just sit here and do nothing if she’s in trouble!”

“There’s no sign that she is right now,” Maria retorts. She sets her hands on her hips, right above
the holster of her gun.

Steve shakes his head incredulously. “Then that’s all the more reason I gotta find her. She ran because of me.”

“Because of you?” Maria just stares at him, squinting like she can’t quite believe this. “Goddamn it. You have no idea who she is, do you?” Steve stares right back, undaunted. He’s not going to be treated like some lovesick idiot, and he’s not going to bow out or be told to go home. Not until he knows for sure Nat’s okay. Hill gives a breathy laugh that has not a speck of humor in it, shaking her head and looking upward. “Unbelievable. I put her in this apartment building because it was right near me and no one would think to look there. I could keep an eye on her, and she could lay low, and it was going to be safe. But the first thing she does is fall for you. I kept telling her not to, and she kept ignoring me and getting in deeper and deeper, and now here we are. She’s more screwed up than ever before, just like I knew would happen, and she takes off.”

Steve doesn’t understand and doesn’t like any of the implications, but before he can say a thing, the door to the room opens. It’s Barton. He’s frowning to beat the band as he comes in, his cell phone clenched in his hand. “I’ve got her,” he quietly declares.

He’s got her. He found her. Steve closes his eyes and nearly collapses from the weight of his relief. Maria looks equal parts relieved and pissed off. “What?”

“Call in,” Clint replies, staring at her as if Steve’s not even there. “Lieutenant’s asking questions, though. This is such a fucking mess. She can’t do this shit. It causes too many red flags, too much fucking exposure. People are gonna notice that I pulled units off patrol for this.”

Irritated, Maria sighs. “Where is she?”

“Upstate,” Barton says softly, barely above a whisper, and he comes closer and glances around like someone could be listening. There’s no one else there. “Orange County.” That’s almost a two-hour drive. Steve glances at the clock on the wall. It’s well after midnight.

Hill comes to the same realization with how late it is. “Then let’s move.”

“We can’t both go. The leak’s here. Whoever it is, he or she is going to put two and two together.”

Maria shakes her head. “If they’re feeding things to Shostakov, you shouldn’t do this alone.”

What the hell is all this? Who’s… Clint looks nothing but frustrated. He rubs his forehead, practically vibrating with anger. “Goddamn it,” he groans.

Steve doesn’t know half of what’s happening, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care at all. “I’ll go with you.”

Clint finally turns to him, and his eyes are fiery. “I fucking told you to stay out of this,” he seethes. “I don’t know why she bolted! I’ve been sneaking around all night pressing my contacts for info to see if they made her, if someone’s on her, and there’s a whole lot of nothing, which means she got scared over nothing, over a couple shithole shoplifters who happened to pick the record store to rob. And that might not have happened if she hadn’t already been compromised because of you.”

Again, that hurts. It’s basically the same shit Maria flung at him, that this is his fault somehow because he got involved with Nat. Like he should have known better. He’s losing his patience. “I want to help,” he says lowly, trying to hold onto his temper.
“Then get the fuck out of our hair and go home,” Barton orders.

“I can’t do that.”

Barton’s clearly at the end of his rope, too. His eyes flash and he steps into Steve’s space, threatening even though he’s a good few inches shorter. “You need to. You need to right now. You don’t want to be involved in this.”

This. It’s like there’s some sort of grand, amorphous threat looming. Obviously this is something really serious if these two cops are talking about a leak (they’ve got to mean a snitch in the police department, and that’s all kinds of disturbing) and people hunting Nat down and tracking their movements. This is bad, really bad, and Steve can’t deny that Barton’s as right as Sam and Tony are: he’s in way over his head. And he’s probably making this worse.

But he can’t just walk away. “I can’t give up on her. She needs me.”

Clint loses what little remains of his control. He practically rounds on Steve, eyes flashing and voice little more than a vicious hiss. “Don’t you fucking get it? You’re not Captain America here.” Anger rushes through Steve. “This isn’t a war you can win. You can’t be a hero. You need to leave.”

“No.”

“For fuck’s sake, Rogers, you don’t know—”

“–anything about her,” Steve irately finishes. His hands are balled into fists at his side, and his words are fast and frantic. “Yeah, I’m seeing that! You’re absolutely right. I don’t know who she is. I don’t know her name. I don’t have the slightest damn clue what’s going on or why she’s running or who you people are or what’s happened. All I know is that I love her.” Clint’s scowl goes lax at that, and he takes a small step back. Steve sighs slowly, forcing himself to calm down. He swallows through a dry throat. “I love her and I need to help her. So let me help.”

The room’s quiet. Outside the precinct is buzzing with noise, but inside this drab, unpleasant box, things are silent and seemingly immovable. Barton’s searching his face, searching his eyes, and immediately Steve knows why. He’s trying to figure out if Steve’s sincere, if he means what he says. If he’ll hurt the girl they’re trying desperately to protect. Steve never will. So he softens his tone and drops his confrontational stance. “Please.”

Clint stares at him a moment. Then he backs up, sighs, and shakes his head in submission. “Alright.”

Not long after that they’re driving north out of the city. It’s very late, after one in the morning now. Steve hurts. He can’t hide it anymore. He didn’t sleep much last night because he was so worried about his meeting with Erskine, his meeting that seems a lifetime ago. The long day wore him out, and now… He doesn’t want to admit that Sam’s right, but it’s getting hard not to with his head aching and his hip throbbing and his brain seemingly teetering on total failure. His muscles are throbbing with fatigue. The fact that they’re cramped in Barton’s Dodge Charger isn’t helping. The car is dark red with a black leather interior and a souped up HEMI V8. It’s definitely a sweet ride, but it’s tight up front and Steve can’t stretch his leg out the way he needs to.

It’s also not helping that they’re driving in complete silence. Barton hasn’t said a thing to him since they snuck out to his car and hightailed it from the precinct. Steve hasn’t wanted to bother him; he hasn’t been in combat for five years, but he knows the signs of someone checking his six.
Barton’s looking in the rearview mirror almost obsessively, which prompts Steve to do the same as they head north into Manhattan to get on the FDR Drive and cross the George Washington Bridge. From there they get on the Palisades Parkway, which Steve’s only been on a couple times in his life. Both of them are tense, worried, caught up in their own heads, and everything feels surreal and unsettling. This time of night, the road’s dead, and there are no streetlights along it as it winds northward through New Jersey. The trees hug the highway, and with only the car’s headlights cutting through the darkness it’s definitely creepy. The relative solitude makes it easier to see someone coming, though, and slowly Barton seems to relax with that, which in turn eases Steve.

They’re turning onto US-6 by the time Barton finally speaks. It’s been more than an hour of silence, so his voice is unexpectedly loud. “I’m sorry,” he offers, gripping the steering wheel tighter as he speeds along. Steve’s taken aback, both by the fact the other man is talking after it being quiet for so long and that he’s apologizing. Barton’s darkly staring at the road ahead, practically glowering at it, but none of that anger’s directed at Steve now. “I shouldn’t have said what I did back there about you being a hero. That was uncalled for.”

Steve grips his right knee tighter, pain shooting down his leg from his hip. “It’s alright.”

“When it comes to Nat… I have a really hard time trusting people.” That’s surprisingly honest. Steve turns from watching out the window to regard the other man. Barton seems fairly serene, glancing at him out the corner of his eye. “I care about her a lot. Saw her go through some serious shit. And getting her out of the situation she was in wasn’t easy.”

Steve can’t tell if he’s inviting him to ask about that or not. It sure as hell sounds like it, because Barton doesn’t say anything more, and the statement just dangles there like it’s waiting. Steve’s too tired to play games. “What was that?”

Barton glances at him again. “Not sure it’s my place to tell you.” Rebuffed and aggravated, Steve turns back to the window. The silence (and the tension) returns, but it doesn’t last long. Barton sighs again. “A few years ago, I got a call about a domestic disturbance at a night club, the Streak. It’s near the bridge, a real destination for Manhattan socialites.” Steve’s never heard of it. “Swanky place, so the call was kind of odd. I head up there to investigate. Place is jumping, but I got the impression just walking in that everyone was scrambling to hide their drugs, hide whatever else was going on. Rich people and their dealers. One of the waitresses put the call in because a guy was roughing up a girl. I go back there, and it turns out the complaint’s against Alexei Shostakov. Know who that is?”

“No.”

Barton frowns. “They call him the Red Guardian. That’s a total fucking misnomer. He doesn’t guard anything other than his family’s legacy of crime. He’s Russian mafia.” Steve jerks and turns to Barton. “Big time. His father Andrei runs a music label, but it’s mostly a front to legitimize themselves with the city’s elite and cover up all the other illegal shit they do. Money laundering, Drug and weapons trafficking, Bribery and kidnappings and murder. Dozens and dozens of felonies that stretch back a decade, and those are just the ones we know about. They have ties to crime families and syndicates all over the five boroughs. This is serious, world-dominating crap, and it’s all under the surface. They’ve got their fingers everywhere: cops, lawyers, judges, DEA officers… The FBI’s been after them for years, but they’re smart and they’re violent and they’re very careful. Very powerful. So the fact something like that happened, that a call for a simple domestic disturbance at a hoity-toity club got me out there… It was insane.”

Barton tenses up again, like the mere memory of it upsets him. It seems for a second like he’s not
going to go on, but he does. “Anyway, Shostakov’s drunk, high, partying, and apparently one of his thugs got a little carried away and slapped up one of his girls. I thought it was a hooker at first – he’s always got a fucking entourage of them, treats women like shit – but it’s not. Here, it’s his wife.” Clint turns and smiles sadly. “That’s how I met Nat.”

His wife. Natalia. Steve winces. He can’t even picture it, can’t make sense of any of it all over again. *The wife of a Russian mobster.* It seems like the sort of thing you’d see on *The Sopranos* or in a gangster movie, but this is very real, very undeniable, and extremely disturbing. *Holy shit.*

Barton’s telling him more. “Everyone was real dismissive of it all, covering up what happened, only they couldn’t hide the bruises. She’s got one on her face that’s huge and hideous, but it’s from ‘falling’, as she put it, right before I got there. Fucking bullshit. She was terrified. And every time the guy touched her, anyone touched her, she flinched, got this look in her eye. I’ve seen it far too many times. This haunted, helpless stare, and everything she said was a bunch of lies he was feeding her. Like a puppet.”

*Jesus.* Acid churns in Steve’s gut. It’s awful, burning, and he clutches his knee even harder to keep still. The images in his head make him ache inside. *God, Nat.* “Shostakov’s untouchable. Perfect prince of his father’s empire. Maria keeps thinking we’ll find a way to collar him and make it stick, but I doubt it. Not with his dad’s fingers in the NYPD, from the beat cops on Staten Island all the way up to the DA’s office. Even back then I knew there wasn’t anything I could do against him, but I thought I could help her. Protect her maybe. Get her away from him and out of that life. She looked so lost, so hurt. Vulnerable. She tried to hide it, and she was good at that, but I couldn’t stop seeing it every time I closed my eyes. I couldn’t stand leaving her to that life. So I tried to get through to her.” Clint pauses, grimaces, struggles with something. “She… worked for him.”

“What does that mean?”

The cop’s next look only makes everything hurt worse. “She was at that club all the time. She sang, sure, on occasion, but that wasn’t why she was there. I kept trying to get back in to talk to her. It wasn’t easy with Shostakov’s fucking thugs all over the place, but I caught her now and then. Tried to get closer, to convince her to run. It took months and months. She wasn’t all that receptive at first. She was terrified of me, too. Kept thinking I was gonna use her to try and get to him or that I’d bust her for being involved at all. I knew what she was doing, what he was making her do for him.”

Horror doesn’t describe what Steve’s feeling. He can hardly think, hardly understand. It feels like the car is speeding through a vacuum, through endless shadows, and there’s no way back. “Are you saying she was a…” He can’t even get the word out. “That he was forcing her to–”

“He had her chained to him like a fucking dog. Used and abused. I still don’t know how she got in that situation in the first place, but I knew I had to get her out. She was too scared to leave him despite it all. Afraid he’d kill her, with good reason.” Steve flinches, chewing his lower lip until he tastes blood. “I was starting to think there was no helping her. Witness protection was a no-go with Shostakov’s hands in the department. She didn’t trust me enough to go with me. And she wasn’t willing to run. I thought it was a lost cause.” Clint’s stare gets impossibly darker. “Then one night she called me. All the times I told her to, begged her to just call when she needed help, and she finally did. I dropped everything, rushed out to Staten Island to get to her… It was too late.” He doesn’t finish. He doesn’t need to.

It gets quiet. Steve can’t deal with the awful things flashing through his head. Sometimes imagining things is worse than the truth, but he doesn’t think so this time. That sense of nausea
twisting up his stomach is almost unbearable, and he feels dizzy, weightless, helplessly as the car races through the night.

“You need to understand,” Clint hisses, breaking the seemingly unbreakable silence. “You need to understand what you’re getting into. This isn’t some game. I’m never going to forget what he did to her that night, what he took from her. And I’m never going to be able to forgive myself for not getting her out sooner.” His voice tremors with frustration and worry, with deep regret. “Ever since then, he’s been chasing her, and every time he gets close, I move her again. I can’t let him find her. With the fucking leaks in the department and his guys all over Staten Island, I had to bring her closer to me, to Brooklyn. That’s why Maria and I put her in your building. But nothing ever lasts because that motherfucker always comes close again, sending his goons to sniff around. He’s not giving up on getting her back. It’s been years, and he’s not giving up.” The frustration Steve hears in his voice is nothing but troubling. Clint looks at him again. “So when you tell me you love her, you better mean it.”

Steve holds his gaze a moment, but then he falters. He looks away, back out the window at the dark, endless night. He can’t bring himself to answer. It’s too much right now. Too much. So he says nothing, which makes him feel all sorts of awful and weak, which probably confirms exactly what Clint’s been thinking about him, but the other man doesn’t seem to care. He doesn’t call him out on it at least. He just goes back to driving, and the silence returns.

Minutes pass, each like an eternity as they work their way through the winding mountains. Eventually they’re descending again, and there’s a valley to the right that’s loaded with lights despite the late hour. “Where are we?” Steve asks.

“Monroe.”

He’s never been there, never even heard of it really. Then he thinks back to the precinct a couple hours ago and realizes he probably should have asked this before. He doesn’t know if Barton would have answered then, but maybe now he will, now that the air between them is a little calmer, not exactly accepting but certainly less antagonistic. “Why? Who called in?”

Clint hesitates. They’re heading into the town. Steve can see a big shopping center and a couple of local schools on a hill. “A girl named Wanda Maximoff. She lives up here.”

“Why would Nat come here?”

“Before she left Alexei, she was really close with her, her and her brother, Pietro. Their father was intimately involved with the Shostakov family, the old man’s accountant, so he obviously had knowledge of some pretty serious shit. The FBI was trying to turn him for years. They finally got a break couple years back, enough evidence to indict him on tax evasion concerning one of the cover businesses in the family. Some sort of jewelry shop in Manhattan. Anyway, before the Feds could even make a move on him, Andrei had him and his family killed.” Steve stiffens. This gets worse with each thing he learns. “We’re pretty sure Alexei actually did it. At the time, it was his first major hit for his dad. Rite of initiation and all that. He executed them all, torched their house in Todt Hill. Wanda was the only one who escaped. Nat’s never told me the whole story, but I think she had something to do with her getting out.” God. “No one knows she’s alive, at least I don’t think anyone in Shostakov’s organization does. The whole case is definitely on the books as an unsolved arson/murder. I only know Wanda’s not dead because Nat told me once. So if this girl’s calling me…”

What he doesn’t say is obvious. Wanda calling Clint is a serious risk to her, particularly if she’s in hiding. That in turn probably means Nat’s in serious trouble. “Doesn’t make sense,” Clint grumbles. “We caught the shoplifters. The store’s video cameras helped us ID them, and we
brought them in and ran them through the system and they have no links to Shostakov. They don’t even live in New York. Why would she run?”

Steve can’t answer that. He has no answers for anything.

They’re working their way through the town. The streets are empty, and everything is quiet. Eventually they’re back in what looks like an enclave of sorts, a development that’s pretty isolated from the rest of the community. It’s tucked in the woods, but as they move deeper into it, Steve sees it’s actually fairly big. And somewhat destitute. They pass a couple stores, and the signs are written in Hebrew. He gives Barton a curious look, but the detective’s focusing on the road, making a few turns, glancing at a scrap of paper that he’s pulled from his suit coat. It has directions written on it. It takes Steve a second to realize why he’s doing that, that he doesn’t want to use his phone’s GPS so their location can’t be tracked. It seems overly paranoid, but Steve gets the feeling it’s not, and that once more heightens his dismay over this entire ordeal. If this Shostakov guy and his son have that much power, if they’re in the police force and the city government…

“That’s it,” Clint murmurs, his sharp eyes narrowed as he points to an apartment building ahead. It looks in decent shape, by no means luxurious but nicer than some of the others around them. Nothing about this seems safe, though. Clint pulls up and parks in front toward the end of the lot. He shuts the car off and spends a moment looking around. Steve does, too. He hasn’t done something like this in years, but the vigilant feeling comes back easily enough. “You stay here.”

Steve rips around. “That kinda defeats the purpose of me coming with you, don’t you think? And, no offense, I’ve seen more than my fair share of combat. I know what I’m doing.”

Clint glares a moment, and the tension threatens anew, but he gives up the fight on that easily enough. Wordlessly he reaches into his jacket and pulls out the gun, the same one he took from Nat’s place. He hands that to Steve.

It’s definitely strange (and a little off-putting) to hold a weapon again. It’s the first time since he escaped from the terrorists. But he doesn’t let it dissuade him, checking the gun to find it loaded and ready to fire. It also doesn’t escape him that this isn’t at all legal, an armed civilian going with a rogue cop into an apartment complex like this, but that’s only a technicality at this point. If Nat’s here, he’s going to find her and do whatever he has to to protect her.

The two of them exit the car. Steve barely hides a serious grimace when his hip and side almost buckle under him. *Fuck.* It takes a second of standing to get things cooperative again, and he stuffs the gun into the back of his jeans below his shirt. Then he limps as quickly as he can after Clint. The other man didn’t wait, traversing the shadowy walk up to the entrance with huge steps. Steve follows less than nimbly. They go inside, and there’s nothing there but a lonely set of stairs. Steve forces himself up them, struggling to match Clint’s pace, and he’s exhausted and sweating and shivering with pain by the time they get to the third floor. He limps down the hallway, trying to focus on their surroundings more than himself. This isn’t somewhere he’d want to live. It’s not dirty, per se, but it’s not clean, either, and it’s darkly lit and just has an unpleasant air to it.

Barton stops at an apartment near the end. He checks the paper again before putting it back in his pocket. Then he shares a tense look with Steve before knocking quietly.

A few seconds later, the door cracks open. Steve can see the chain’s still on it on the other side, so about an inch is as far as it goes. A pair of big, brown eyes stare out at them. “Wanda?” Clint questions softly.

“Prove who you are,” the girl demands. Her voice is heavily accented. Steve thinks it’s Russian.
Her tone is also timid but trying not to be. She’s not backing away despite her fear, and her eyes are bright and firm. “Prove it now.”

Clint reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out his badge. She glances at it, squinting a little in the poor light. After staring a moment, she shakes her head. “Don’t trust the police,” she says. “They work for him.”

Barton sighs helplessly, trying to hold his frustration at bay. “There’s nothing else I can show you. You’ll have to believe me. You called me.”

She looks hesitant, glancing between Clint and Steve, and for a moment, it seems like she’s going to slam the door in their faces. She may have indeed called Clint, may have thought that was a good idea at the time, but now she’s clearly changing her mind. She’s terrified of them, two men she doesn’t know at her door at two in the morning. I can’t let her send us away. Nat’s in there. “Wait. Here.” Steve reaches into his pocket and pulls out the drawing again. He slips it to Wanda through the door. Warily she takes it, opens it, and looks it over, the picture of Nat and the writing scrawled beside it. She reads it. Looks up. Steve offers what he hopes is a disarming smile. “I’m Steve.”

Wanda regards him a moment before looking again at the picture, at Nat’s face and the beach and the flower in her hair. Then she exhales slowly. The door closes but only long enough for the girl to undo the chain with a rattle. She opens it again and lets them in.

The apartment is tiny. It’s maybe a third the size of Steve’s with a small kitchen and no dining area. There’s one other room and the door to it is closed. Everything is dark, but Steve can see it’s well-kept, clean, and organized. Next to the couch, there’s a little coffee table, and on it there are some things, college text books and the like. A few other personal effects and furniture clutter the place, but it’s all rundown, secondhand and worn. It’s making the best of a poor situation.

Wanda herself is pretty if not a little pale and waiflike. She has long brown hair that’s pulled back behind her ears. She’s wearing a dark skirt and a scarlet-colored sweater that looks like it’s been washed too many times. Her nails are painted a deep crimson, and she’s wearing a lot of jewelry, rings and beads necklaces. She could be just your average teenage girl if not for the fact she’s watching them both with haunted eyes and she’s standing as tense as a coiled spring. Clint suddenly seems much softer, much gentler, and Steve gets a glimpse of who he must have been when he rescued Nat. “We’re not here to hurt you. We just want to take her home. Where is she?”

It’s quiet. Still. The silence feels like it goes on forever. Steve can’t breathe, he’s so nervous. Please tell us. Please.

Finally Wanda sighs and relaxes just a bit. “In my room. Sleeping. She didn’t want me to call you. She’s…” She shakes her head. “She’s scared.”

“Did Alexei’s guys make her?” Clint asks. “Did he find her? Rumlow or Rollins? She mention them?”

Wanda’s eyes widen. It’s clear she knows who those guys are, and though Steve’s never heard of them, it’s equally clear they’re bad news. “No, no, but I didn’t ask. I just… She wasn’t herself. Panicked and crazy and out of her mind. She thinks she can’t… She’s Black Widow. There’s nothing she can do to escape that.”

Black Widow. Steve doesn’t understand. Black Widow like the spider? Like a murderer? Like a woman who sleeps with a man and then kills him. He feels cold, aching inside. “She’s… She’s
not that.” It’s a bullshit statement, because he still doesn’t know a damn thing. But he feels like he has to say it, even though his voice is weak and wavering. “She’s not.”

Wanda stares at him. “I don’t think she believes she can ever be anything else. She was…” She closes her eyes and breathes a moment, like she’s struggling for strength. “Back before Papa and Pietro died, she was always smiling. No matter how bad it was, she smiled. She did it for us. She never let us see what was happening to her, how much it hurt her. She never let me see that she was scared.” Wanda frowns. “Like a big sister.” There’s wetness in her eyes, and suddenly there’s another side of Nat that Steve’s doesn’t know about, that he never anticipated. He can believe it, though. He can believe it because he never saw her hurt either, not like this. Not enough that he realized how deep it went. How damaged she was. And it was right in front of him. “She was always so good at lying. When she got here… I knew something was really wrong. I knew she was in trouble and not from him. In some ways, him she can handle. Not now. This was the first time she’s ever…” Steve closes his eyes. “Sooner or later, it all comes out.”


Stay out of it.

“She talked about you.” Steve opens his eyes and finds that Wanda’s staring right at him. At him, not Clint. Wanda’s eyes are wide, open, imploring again, just as Daisy’s were and May’s were. Begging him to fix this. “Steve. You – you have to help her. I’m scared, too. She’s going to run and we’ll never find her. I convinced her to sleep and at least wait until morning, but… If she leaves, we’ll never get her back. Never. So she can’t leave. She can’t. That’s why I called. You have to stop her. You have to make her stay.”

Steve takes a deep breath and turns to the bedroom door, closed tightly, sealed shut like it’s blocking out the world. Like it’s hiding her away. He has no idea what’s on the other side. Black Widow. A singer. Another man’s wife. Someone who’s lost and damaged. A broken flower. A battered victim. A stranger. A liar.

The woman he loves.

Whoever she was, whatever she did, whatever happened to her to make her this way… These things he’s learned and everything he still might. The lies and the half-truths and the dreams. None of that matters. Nothing’s changed, not really. Not in his heart, where he knows beyond a doubt who she is. She’s still who she was despite what he knows. She’s kind and loyal. She’s strong and sacrificing. She’s fiery and fierce and so beautiful. She’s an angel. His savior. And she deserves him, deserves everything he can give her. He has to show her that. He has to help her now. That’s what he came here to do. If he can’t save her…

He has to. He will. He’s not letting her go.
**Author's Note:** Warning: this chapter contains descriptions of rape and domestic violence. The content is very heavy, both because of that and because of the effects that has on a person. Please, please read at your own discretion. I'm pretty nervous about this one, and I hope I was able to treat a very serious topic with the respect it deserves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Oh, baby, I'm bleedin', bleedin'.
Can't you give me what I'm needin', needin'?
Every heartbreak makes it hard to keep the faith.
But, baby, I just need one good one...
When I bow down to pray, I try to make the worst seem better.
Lord, show me the way to cut through all his worn-out leather.
I've got a hundred million reasons to walk away...
But, baby, I just need one good one, good one...
Tell me that you'll be the good one, good one...
Baby, I just need one good one to stay."

– Lady Gaga, “Million Reasons”

He’ll be here soon.

She’s been thinking that for hours. He’ll be home soon. He’ll be here. She thought it while she made a late dinner. She chanted it to herself while she prepared his favorite meal. She made herself believe it while she baked the pirozhki, while she slow roasted the meat, while she cleaned their house from top to bottom and set the table and poured the wine. He’s coming. The mantra went on and on, stirring familiar feelings of dread mixed with hope in her chest as she showered, dressed in the black leather dress he loved so much, the one he bought her back in the beginning when he brought her here. She skims her hands down the front of it, frowning at her reflection. She hasn’t worn it in a while. It’s not fitting as well now, and she has mixed feelings about it. She has mixed feelings about everything, what the dress means, what she’s done in it, why it’s tighter than it used to be. But she doesn’t let that stop her. He’s coming home. She needs to make herself perfect.

On goes the makeup, heavy the way he likes it. Almost like stage-makeup. It’s a mask now, covering up everything inside, turning her into something she’s not. There’s a hint of a bruise on her cheek, and she loads that side with concealer. Cakes on foundation to make her skin flawless and smooth. Paints her lips so they’re plump and read. Turns her eyes sultry and smoky. He always tells her he loves her eyes like that, dark and alluring even if there’s nothing left of her he hasn’t seen, nothing inside he hasn’t taken. She fixes her hair, the thick red curls falling heavy on her bare shoulders. Transforms into the image he wants. Black Widow.

She can’t see herself under it anymore. When the make-up’s off and the leather’s gone and she’s
who she thought she was before… There’s no one there at all. She’s been hollowed out and empty and scared for so long that she can’t see anything past her deadened eyes.

But she can’t focus on that now. This can’t be about her anymore. She presses the flat of her palm to her lower stomach again, disliking the beginnings of a bulge there and praying he doesn’t notice until she can explain. She has to do this right, do everything right. That’s what he likes, perfection, and there’s a part of her that always wants to please him. She’s tied to that, like some intrinsic need reinforced by love and violence in equal parts, her love and his cruelty. She needs to be good for him.

*He’s coming.* She has to hurry.

So she does. She finishes getting ready, puts on the perfume that she hates but he loves, rushes back out of their bedroom to the kitchen. Dinner’s almost done. The house is immaculate. The table is set for two. He said he’d be back at eleven, and it’s a quarter to. Too early to move the food to the table really, but she does because she wants it to be perfect and there’s a small chance he’ll be back early. With the dinner steaming and the wine in the glasses, she settles into a chair and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

The minutes slip away, each one seemingly interminable except the next one does come after it. It’s an eternity of sitting and staring at the food getting cold. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. Forty. Time is like a cage, and she can’t move. Her eyes are blank, mind buried under dying hopes tangled with deadened apathy, and the steam stops rising from the bowls and plates. Like her vanishing dream that maybe she could make this better. *Last hope.* She grasps her belly again and feels like she should cry, but she can’t. She doesn’t know why she’s surprised. She’s not even sure it’s a game anymore, when he demands she pretend they have a life together, a home together, only to leaving her feeling like a fool. This is just the latest of so many times. And she tells herself this *is* better, better than what it was when she was working for him. At least this way she’s not… The tears still don’t come. The thought does, though. It cuts. It always will. *At least this way he’s the only one.*

Some days she doesn’t know whether to hate his father or bless him for making him stop using her like that. She knows it wasn’t because his father cares about her. No, it was about the family’s image, about curtailing Alexei’s recklessness and grooming him to take over. It was about his poor taste in business and reducing himself to nothing more than a pimp in his father’s eyes. It was never about saving her. She’s not worth saving.

Angry, she gets up and starts putting everything away. He’s an hour late. He’s not coming. This one feels like more of a betrayal than all the times before but only because she let herself get her hopes up. And she tries to rationalize it. She always does. He doesn’t know she’s doing this, making a special dinner, dressing up, trying to be like the woman he said he fell in love with. He doesn’t know, but if he did, he would have been home on time.

*Bullshit.*

Her throat’s tight as she finishes slamming the food into the refrigerator and washes the dishes. She knows anger’s not the answer. Anger only leads to more pain, and he’s beaten the defiance out of her long ago. He’s humiliated her too much for her to allow herself to feel empowered, but she does just a little, reveling in her rage as she bangs her way through cleaning up. She thinks about going back to the bedroom, wiping this lie off her face, ripping off this dress, *burning* it and
everything else. Burning down the house, her life, and running. She thinks about the lies, about the times he swore he loved her, about the tenderness he used to lull and trick her. She thinks about the bruises she’s worn for years. She thinks about *everything* she’s losing *every day* she stays here. The reasons to run pile up, minute by minute, day by day. Her hand keeps going to her belly; it’s almost compulsive, and she needs to stop, because who is she kidding? She can’t save this, can’t save her marriage, can’t change him. This is all stupid, dangerous. *Foolish.*

She thinks about Detective Barton’s card she has hidden with her parents’ pictures. “*You have to save yourself.*” Her eyes burn against the tears finally gathering, and she closes them to keep everything inside. She’s always afraid if she starts crying, she won’t be able to stop. The silence beats against her, thrumming harshly like the strained pulse of her own heart, and she wonders if it’s not already too late for her. There’s nothing *worth* saving. He’s stolen it all, dominated it, twisted and tainted and *ruined* it. In the end, those other reasons don’t matter. *Stay.* *Run.* It’s same in the end, and nothing matters.

*Except this.* One good reason. Her hand clutches tighter.

The door opens. She jolts in terror, knocking the dish she just finished washing right off the counter. The ceramic plate hits the tiled floor and shatters with a loud crack. Her eyes go wide, and her breath catches in her throat. Quickly she kneels to pick up the mess before he comes, gathering the shards frantically, not caring that they prick her fingertips. It’s hard to move in the dress – it’s always been so confining – but she scrambles onto her feet and rushes to the trash and dumps the broken dish away.

“What are you doing?”

His voice is rough, and the effect it has on her now is so different from what it used to be. Her gut clenches and her heart pounds and she tries like she always does to read his mood from his tone. Is he angry? Apathetic? Hungry for her? Or is there a hint of the man she married, the one who purred in her ear about how she sang like a bird and called her his fire and touched her with nothing but passion? She can’t tell anymore. And she’s too afraid to look around. “Nothing.”

His footsteps come closer, heavy on the floor, his expensive dress shoes clacking a little. He stops behind her, and she closes her eyes and tries not to shiver. The feeling of his eyes on her body used to excite her, entice her, and now it makes her heart sink and her skin crawl. Time slows again, turning into another cage, and she’s paralyzed by her own fear. His breathing is loud, so loud behind her. The feeling of his eyes on her body used to excite her, entice her, and now it makes her heart sink and her skin crawl. Time slows again, turning into another cage, and she’s paralyzed by her own fear. His breathing is loud, so loud behind her. He touches her back, and she practically jumps out of her skin.

“Ah, Natalia,” he breathes, coming even closer. He’s crowding her against the counter. “You cooked for me?” She can’t even bring herself to nod. She can’t do anything. She never can. He’s bigger than her, stronger than her. And he *owns* her. He never fails to remind her of that, that he bought her, paid for her heart, her body, and her soul, and she *owes* him. He’s huge and hot behind her, and when his hand runs roughly up her back to shove her hair to the side, when his lips tease at the tender skin of the nape of her neck, she has to tighten her core not to shudder. Any arousal she used to feel at such an intimate caress is long dead. “You did this for me?”

She swallows the knot in her throat. “I wanted to – to do something nice for you.”

He lifts his face to bite at her ear. She can smell the alcohol now. It’s pungent and awful as a hot blast of his breath hits her cheek. And it’s not just the alcohol. The other smells. The stink of the club, sweat and cigarette smoke and the cheap perfume from the other women he’s been with. The tang of blood and the lingering stink of violence. That always clings to him now. “Nice,” he purrs.

“I put everything into the refrigerator,” she says, squirming to get away. “It was getting cold.” He
doesn’t answer. She knows where this is headed, and she doesn’t want to go there. Not this time. Part of her was willing before, before he came in like this. And part of her is still clinging to the fantasy that she can stop him, tell him what she needs to tell him, and maybe, just maybe–

He reaches around and grabs her breast, squeezing painfully, and his hips shove up behind her. “Alexei,” she gasps. “I – I have to tell you – please can’t we–”

“No,” he growls. “Later.”

“I want to talk now. Please. That’s why I cooked–”

“Later.” She tips her head back a little in mounting resignation, searching the ceiling for answers that aren’t there, for a way out she can’t find. His fingers get harder, harsher, digging into the top of her dress, pinching between the leather and her skin. “You look like you did. Like you always did before when you sang for me.” She wants to argue that those days are long gone, and she’s realizing now that she was a stupid fucking fool to think this was a good idea, that she could somehow get his attention, buy his approval, but not wake the monster. It doesn’t matter now. It’s too late. She’s trapped. “You did this for me. My Black Widow.” She flinches at the name, the one he gave her. He laughs. Even drunk like this, he’s not above being cruel. There’s so much irony there. Black Widow. He’s the one using her, screwing her and abusing her, killing her slowly, not the other way around. “Trying to tell me something? You want me?”

“Alexei, please… You’re drunk. You should–” She swallows a cry when he grips her breast more harshly, grabbing onto the counter when he pushes up behind her again. She can feel how hard he is against her, and she wants to cry. It’s fear and horror and a touch of anger, so much fucking regret, and she can hardly think over the rush of her own blood in her ears. All the times he’s done this, made her do this… Why can’t she ever think? “I’ll help you take a shower. Reheat your food. We can – we can talk. We need to talk.”

“No.”

“Alexei–”

“No!” His hands turn harder, rougher, and he spins her around. She finally sees him but barely because she’s squeezing her eyes shut. He’s a demon, a maniac, unshaven with his dark hair all mussed and unkempt. With his rich silk shirt and his nice black slacks and ten thousand dollar Rolex on his wrist. The gold of the wedding ring on left his hand. She catches just a glimpse of that before he slaps her. The force of it sends her twisting to the right, but there’s nowhere she can go as pinned to the counter as she is. Pain explodes along her cheek and she tastes blood when her teeth gnash into her tongue. He grabs her chin and makes her look at him.

His gray eyes are wild, blown wide and dark with drugs and booze and power. He reeks of it. “You don’t tell me what I need,” he growls. His fingertips dig into her jaw, crushing, and she whimpers and shudders against him. “I tell you what I want, and you give it to me. Fucking stupid bitch. I keep telling you that, and you don’t listen. Understand me this time?”

She never knows what he wants, never knows how he wants her to play. Does he want an answer? Is he getting off on this, on exerting his control over her? Sing, Natalia. Sing like the bird you are. She’s too terrified to do anything more than quake in his hands.

“Understand?”

“Ye-yes. Yes! I’m sorry.” She winces again, fighting not to panic. His rage is always just beneath the surface, simmering all the time, and the alcohol and whatever drugs he took is a
catalyst. It always is. She needs to get away. Needs to stop this. Useless. “Let me get your dinner. I made it for you. I love you.”

He grins at that. It’s feral. “Do you now?”

The lie tastes like acid. “You know I do.”

He leans in to kiss her. She accepts it because acquiescing is easier. Better. Safer. Get him comfortable and happy, and maybe he’ll just fall asleep, leave her alone, let her go… He tastes terrible, like alcohol and garlic from whatever he ate before, and he delves deeply into her mouth. She fights not to stiffen or gag or pull away, lets him take what he wants until he’s through.

When he releases her, she immediately tries again, praying he’s sated enough to listen to her. “I’ll get everything ready again. It’ll only take a minute. I’ll—”

He’s not satisfied at all, and the fact that she goes back to arguing with him only angers him further. He shoves her into the counter again, the sharp edge of it cutting across her back in sharp agony. One of his arms is around her like steel. The other is pawing at the front of her dress. She squeezes her eyes shut as he bites at her neck. Why doesn’t it ever stop hurting? Why? “Please don’t,” she pleads. “I need to tell you – please listen to me…”

He’s not going to listen. He won’t stop. “You shut up,” he snaps, shaking her roughly like that’ll be enough to quiet her. Sometimes it is. She can already feel that haze coming inside her head, the one that protects her from what’s happening. The one that distances the world, mutes it, keeps her from it. The one that makes this bearable, where she goes to hide. The wall. It’s there and she can slip behind it if she wants.

She will. That’s the only way answer. The only way to get away, to survive, to endure. She was stupid for thinking this could end any other way than this. He’s grabbing at the leather dress, fumbling for the zipper in the back, clumsily yanking at it because he’s too drunk to manage fine motor skills. “You love me? Huh? You think you’re good enough to love me?” He’s ripping her dress. She’s falling away. “You know what you are? You’re nothing without me. You’re mine, my wife. I brought you here. I made a place here for you. I made you who you are, what you are. I tell you to sing–” He tears at the seams on the side, yanks at her bra until she’s bared to him, and she gasps. His other hand grabs her breasts like they’re his to hurt, squeezing and pinching only to cause pain. “You sing. I tell you to talk–” His knee rams up, which pushes the leather up higher on her thighs as he wrenches them apart, and she sobs. “You talk. And when I tell you to let me fuck you…” His hand is huge and rough and awful as it jabs in between her thighs, and she screams. He slaps his hand over her mouth and crushes her hand between their stomachs to stop her from pushing him away. “You let me fuck you. And you like it. You always did. You’re mine, Natalia, and you always will be.”

There’s something about that, the way he sneers that with such absolute certainty, the way his eyes glow with sadistic joy as he does, the way he forces her to kiss him and gropes at her with her hand right over her belly. The way he’s telling her she’ll never be anything else… It’s too much. Finally, after months and months, years, it’s too much. Everything to which he’s reduced her. Black Widow. His wife. His whore. The person she used to be rises up from the emptiness inside and rails against the haze.

She snaps. Flails behind her with her free hand. Grabs something. Swings it around. Smashes it against him. It’s another plate, and it shatters on his shoulder. It doesn’t do any damage, but it shocks him enough that he lets go. She shoves him back, fights, runs for the first time in months. She’s flying down the hallway, down to their bedroom where Detective Barton’s business card is hidden in her songbook.
And he’s chasing her. He’s screaming, roaring, bellowing that she can’t leave him, can’t get away. She’s holding the remains of her dress in place, sprinting as fast as she can, until she’s inside their room. She barely gets the door shut. Barely locks it in time. His furious shouts shake the spacious house, and she sobs, scrambling for her phone and the songbook in the dresser drawer. The business card slips out as she frantically shakes it. It tumbles down next to the bed, and she panics, falling to her knees to find it. She can’t find it!

It doesn’t matter. He bangs at the door, bangs harder and harder, and it breaks open, and he’s coming—

Nat wakes up. She jerks up, heart pounding, covered in sweat, and she doesn’t recognize the room. There are shadows everywhere, men in the darkness, laughing sneers and rough hands, and she scrambles to the headboard, pulling her knees to her chest and curling into herself. Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me don’t touch me don’t don’t—

“Did Alexei’s guys make her? Did he find her?”

Her eyes widen at the sound of the muffled voice. It’s coming through the door to the right. It’s not Alexei’s voice, and this isn’t their bedroom back at their nice house in Todt Hill. This is a little box of a room with hardly a working lamp. The light barely lets her see the things around her: a nicked dresser and a bedside table and a closet filled with dark, worn-out clothes. A door to the right of the closet. Bathroom.

“She’s Black Widow. There’s nothing she can do to escape that.”

Some part of her realizes what’s going on, where she is, who’s talking. This is Wanda’s tiny bedroom in Wanda’s tiny place in upstate New York. This is where her friend’s been hiding for the last few years, trying to work and go to school and blend into an overpopulated community, trying to survive with hardly any money and even fewer hopes. This is what Alexei did to her, murdered her family, her brother, stripped away everything she was, too, and left her broken and lost. This is the wreckage of her life, a dark, ugly room with nothing but long shadows.

And that’s Wanda’s voice through the door. Wanda’s voice and Clint’s voice. She moans a soft sob, panic coiling tight in her belly, and she can’t stop shaking. She doesn’t want him here. Wanda must have called him even though she begged her not to. He came to take her back. She doesn’t want to go back!

“She’s… She’s not that. She’s not.”

That’s Steve’s voice. Steve’s voice.

Her brain fucks everything up. The nightmare’s too close, and Steve’s right there, and things blend all together. Alexei and the countless tortures he inflicted upon her. Steve and his beautiful blue eyes, his callused but tender fingers, his sweet smile. Alexei and all his cruelty. Steve and all his love. It spins around her, and her heart is pounding so loud and fast she can’t hear anything else they’re saying. She rakes her fingers through her hair, pulls until it hurts, knows she needs to get away, because Steve is coming. He’s coming.

She’s out of bed with a muffled wail, tangled in the sheets and ratty blanket. That makes her trip, and she hits the little lamp and knocks it over. It crashes to the floor loudly, and considering how thin that door is, there’s no way they didn’t hear it. Terrified, she glances around, but there’s no way out, nowhere to run, no way she can let them in—
“Nat? Nat!”

**Bathroom.**

She bolts without thinking, racing across the room as the door opens. She barrels inside the other door next to the closet and slams it behind her, locking it. It’s black inside. She fumbles for the light, and it comes on overhead, ugly and fluorescent. The bathroom is hardly bigger than a closet. It’s a miracle the door doesn’t hit the toilet when it opens. The laminate floor is a dull brown, and the shower stall is tan and tiny. She runs into there, runs in and presses her back to the tiles and slides down, tucking her knees to her chest. This is crazy, stupid, and there’s no way she can escape. She’s trapped herself again, caged herself in here, and there’s nothing she can do but wait for him to get in.

But the door doesn’t break. He’s not banging and pounding on it. He’s just knocking. “Nat? Nat, it’s Clint. Are you okay?”

She quivers, hugging her knees tighter to her chest. Adrenaline surges inside her, but it has no outlet because she can’t move, so all it does is make the harsh lights above spin and every part of her throb. Tears stream down her face. This is stupid, so fucking stupid, and she knows they won’t hurt her – he’s never hurt you – but she can’t make herself believe it. Her body’s convinced of something her mind can’t understand, can’t even begin to reconcile with reality, and her heart…

“Nat, please let me in. Please open the door.” The doorknob rattles as Clint shakes it. She watches with wide eyes, shaking her head in small reflexive jerks even though he can’t see her. “Please. I just want to make sure you’re alright. There’s nothing to be scared of. It was all nothing, okay? I ran the guys who tried to rob the store through the system. They’re not his guys. They have nothing to do with him. It was just…” Clint’s voice trails off, like he’s struggling to find the right words. Something to say to get her to trust him again. She’s not sure there’s anything that can do that. Not right now. Not with all of this awfulness seeping from her veins like poison. She’s weak, so fucking weak. She quakes with a sob. How could she let herself get this screwed up?

This is all nothing. That’s what she’s been telling herself the last few hours. She’s not even sure she saw Rumlow, and some part of her knew those shoplifters were just shoplifters, and she’s overreacting and acting like a complete coward. Like someone who’s too damaged to function. She hated herself for leaving, and every step of the way, from the city to the train to this place, she battled with turning back. But that wouldn’t solve anything. What she heard Wanda say moments ago… She’s absolutely right. I can’t run from myself.

“Nat, please. Please.” Clint’s getting desperate. He can hear how riled he is. He’s normally so calm, so composed, but the fact that he’s upset is bleeding out of every word. “This doesn’t solve anything. You have to come out. Let me help you. Let me take you home. We can figure out something else, somewhere else you can go or live…” She gives a twisted little laugh at that. Like that would solve anything. “He’s not going to find you. I swore that I would never let that happen, and I meant it. So please open the door. Whatever’s got you so riled up, we can make it better. I promise you that.”

Nothing can make it better. I’m broken and you can’t fix me. No one can.

The doorknob rattles again, harder and more desperately. Clint’s losing his patience. “You have to let me in. Let me help you.” That’s his cop voice, harder and no-nonsense. “You’re making it worse by doing this. You have to see that! Open the door. Come on.”

I can’t.
There’s a shuffle, cloth rustling on cloth, and low, muffled murmurs. An irate sigh. More movement. She looks up from where she’s staring at her knees and sees a shadow under the crack of the door. A quiet second passes. Then another. Then a voice, soft and full of worry. “Nat?”

Steve.

She stares at the shadow, and everything twists up inside her again. What her body feels versus what her mind knows and her heart wants. She feels sick, aching with need, needing him so badly yet hating it all the same. Her skin tingles and her bones throb and her blood burns. “Nat, I – I don’t know what happened. I can’t pretend to understand what you’ve been through. But please… You have to let us in.”

“No!” she cries before she can stop herself. “Leave me alone!”

Steve leans into the door. She can hear the soft thud of his body, imagine him standing there with his mussed hair and beard and eyes closed. Hands pressed to the cheap wood like he’s touching her through it. “I don’t care,” he murmurs, his tone gentle and nonthreatening. “I don’t care what you did, what he did to you. I don’t care that you were married. I don’t care that you lied.” She flinches and pulls tighter into herself. “I don’t care about any of it. I love you.”

“You can’t love me,” she moans. “You can’t.”

“I do. I love you for who you are. I don’t need to know whatever you’re hiding from me to know that. I don’t need you to pretend you’re okay when you’re not. I don’t need you to be anyone other than who you want to be. And I don’t need anything more than for you to open the door and let me in. Please. If you want…” His voice breaks a little. He sighs. “If you want to end this, if you want to stop or take things slower or step back from me… I understand. I do. I can do whatever you want. Just please don’t do this. Don’t shut me out. You don’t have to run from me. Let me in, please. Please, Nat. Let me help you.”

The words are said with his whole heart. Genuine and honest and very him. She knows that. But her body fights her, her instincts stop her, and she can’t believe it. She wants to. Desperately she does. She closes her eyes and imagines his, so deeply blue, so open and giving. The light in them that she fell in love with the moment she met him. He’s right outside the door. He’ll never hurt you. You know it. He’s not the same. Not the same.

“You told me,” Steve says before taking a deep breath and calming his voice. “You told me that I could talk to you. When I needed to the most, you promised me I could trust you. That you’d listen and not judge. That you wouldn’t leave me. That I wasn’t alone.” She remembers. That night he came home from the hospital after his accident, when he was in so much pain, so lost in himself and his memories… She remembers holding him and comforting him and swearing to him that it would be okay if he could just talk to her. “And you were right. You were there for me. I just needed to trust you. So please, Nat. Trust me now.”

Salty tears coat her lips as she sobs, as she cracks. As she stands. As she walks to the door, slowly and with fear dogging her every step. As she unlocks it. Then she backs away, retreating to the shower anew.

It’s quiet and still for what feels like an eternity. The knob slowly turns. He’s coming, she thinks, shaking in terror, in want, in desperation. The knob turns, and the door opens.

And Steve is right there. He looks tired and pale, dressed in the same jeans and t-shirt he was that morning when everything started slipping away. There’s relief in his eyes, so much of it as he tentatively takes a step inside. He’s slow, careful, closing the door behind him though it’s a really
tight fit with his big frame. He never looks away from her, never acts like he’s going to come at her without her invitation or touch her without her permission. She feels a little bit like a cornered animal, and she’s ashamed of that, but she can’t shake the terror pinning her to the back of the shower stall. “Nat,” he says. “It’s alright.”

She wants to run to him. She wants to, craves the comfort of his arms. But she can’t bring herself to move. She can’t even look him in the eye. There’s the wall between them, and it feels insurmountable and unbreakable. It’s built of everything, the lies she’s said, the truths she hasn’t. The seconds and minutes and hours she’s spent running. The days of her life she’s lost. The things she’s done, before and since, that she hates. The shame and the desperation. All those dreams she wants. The person she can never be.

The wall stands tall, and he’s on the other side. He stands tall, too, even though she can tell his hip is hurting him. And he’s patient, staying back against the door of the cramped bathroom. The silence is excruciating. The seconds slipping by… They’re a cage again. The wall’s growing higher and higher with every one of them.

But there’s something about these seconds. With him standing there, watching her with a guarded yet hopeful gaze, barely breathing, tense with worry. He’s waiting. Waiting for her to do what she told him to do weeks ago. Trust me. Tell me.

And the words just come. “He raped me.”

They’re just words. They don’t say how much, how often, how Alexei treated her like his possession. How he damaged her body and her soul. How he degraded her, ruined her. They don’t say nearly enough. Even still, those three little words, the ones she never thinks let alone says aloud, the words she never admits to herself… They’re harsh, ugly, awful and disgusting and she presses further into the shower and cowers before his reaction.

Steve doesn’t move. He doesn’t run, doesn’t turn away. Doesn’t react beyond his eyes glazing with understanding. He nods. “I know.”

There’s more. There’s more he doesn’t understand. “He – he made me… He used me. I’ve…” She chokes on her voice. She still can’t look at him, because he’s right there and he’ll hate her, hurt her… “He made me his whore.”

“I don’t care,” Steve says again. “I don’t. It doesn’t matter to me. It doesn’t change anything. Nat… Natalia.” She winces, and he waits. He waits until she looks up at him. His eyes are glistening, his face open, his heart offered. “I love you.”

He’s here.

“Please let me take you home.”

Finally, after months and months, years, it’s too much. The person she used to be rises from the ashes and rails against the wall. She snaps. Braces her hands on the shower. Pushes herself forward. Stumbles through the first step but keeps going. Rushes out of the shower stall. Flies.

And he catches her. His arms wrap around her, tight and strong, and she collapses into him. Before she can think twice, she heaves a sob into his chest. And another. And another. “It’s alright,” he hushes. He kisses the crown of her head. “I promise you. It’s gonna be okay. I swear, Nat. It’s alright now.”

She’s not sure she can believe that. She’s not sure of anything other than the fact he’s here. He’s
here and he’s not going to hurt her. Nothing else matters. So she slips, lets go, falls into a different haze inside where she can finally escape. This haze is a haven, one filled warmth and safety. His warmth. The safety he provides. *His love.* Sobs wrack over her, the hysteria that’s been beating against her all day finally breaking loose. He says nothing, nothing to demean or disparage her. He just lowers them both to the floor, to the tiny space against the wall, and gathers her in his lap and against his chest as she cries.

The minutes slip away. They’re long and silent save for her rushed breaths and his heart beneath her ear, slow and steady and calm. It’s forever, it seems, until hers is beating slower, too, until she’s breathing easier, weeping quietly with her eyes closed and her face pressed into his shirt. Exhausted and aching but spent. Free. He’s been rubbing her back, slow and gentle sweeps of his hand that don’t hold her against him or force her close. It’s sweet solace, and she falls deeper into a soft surrender. It’s alright. She doesn’t have to run. She doesn’t have to be afraid.

Not anymore.

Vaguely she feels him kiss the crown of her head, murmuring those things. “Don’t be afraid. It’s okay. It’s okay now.” And vaguely she feels him move, groaning lowly in pain as he shuffles to his feet. Never once does he let her go. Instead he helps her wrap her arms around his neck before lifting her against him, holding her around her back and under her knees. It’s hard for him. She knows that, can feel the shudder of effort and agony through his muscles, but he doesn’t stop. He stands tall and strong, and he carries her out of the tiny bathroom, past Clint and Wanda, away from it all. He carries her out of the cage.

He carries her home.

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It’s raining. Nat wakes to the patter of it against a window. The air smells damp, more like autumn, and it feels cooler. A breeze rustles the curtains with a soft swish of cloth, and she blinks the last vestiges of a deep and dreamless sleep from her eyes. Immediately she recognizes where she is. Her bedroom. Her apartment in Brooklyn. Despite the gray day, there’s light, and it’s erasing all the shadows. Still, her things don’t look quite real. Her floral bedspread. Her closet (which seems to be in some serious disarray). Her bathroom door that’s open. Her phone on her nightstand and her emergency bag on the floor next to the closet. Liho is curled up on the end of the bed, sound asleep. It’s what it should be, what it was before all of this happened, but it doesn’t seem right.

She shouldn’t be here.

But she is. She doesn’t remember much after she fell apart in Wanda’s bathroom. Steve holding her, carrying her, getting her out of there. Clint’s hushed words to Wanda and Wanda’s wide, worried eyes, her pleas that Nat hang on and keep fighting. The car ride back to the city, tucked into the back of Clint’s sedan with her head against Steve’s chest and his arm around her. The way he was sitting couldn’t have been comfortable, with his back nearly against the door and squished as much as possible to give her room to lay down. He never moved though, nothing beyond running his fingers through her hair, and she slept. She slept the whole way back, the world silent save for the low hum of the freeway under the wheels and the sound of Steve’s heartbeat once again beneath her ear.

Somehow Clint and Steve must have gotten her up here. *Thor.* There’s a faint flash of recollection, of Thor’s face as he carried her up because Steve was too sore and exhausted to manage it. She winces in shame and embarrassment. Thor saw her like that, helped bring her home because she had a fucking nervous breakdown over nothing and ran like a coward. *Everyone knows.* She feels like a fucking moron.
She’s numb enough, though, that she can’t bring herself to care. She’s back and everyone knows what she did, what she is, and that’s such an overwhelming, enormous thing that she can’t grasp it, can’t process it. It’s better not to. Distance. Slip back down into the haze where things aren’t happening to her, where her body is separated from her mind.

She slips out of bed. She’s still wearing her clothes from yesterday. The door to her bedroom is cracked open, and she doesn’t know who else is around. She feels itchy and dirty, though, and confined again – trapped in old leather – so she forces herself to feel comfortable in her own place, at least enough to get some clean clothes and go to the shower. She’s got to be stronger, more rational. No one’s going to hurt her here. She keeps chanting that to herself – no one’s coming – as she washes in record time. Part of her wonders why she cares so much anyway. She’s so low, so beaten down and demoralized at this point, that it doesn’t seem like anything could damage her further. That’s self-deprecating bullshit, but her spirit is beyond cleaning. Thinking otherwise is the biggest delusion of all, that she could ever be happy.

She finishes up. Brushes the terrible taste from her mouth. Braids her hair and dresses in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. Tries to feel normal in the wake of something very abnormal and surreal. She comes back out of the bathroom marginally better but still hollow, like busting down that wall and letting all those tears out has emptied her again. This is the way she always used to feel, after he sent her out to entice his clients or lure them to him or reward them like some filthy prize for doing good business. After he finished with her, fucked her like she was nothing more to him than something to fuck, and left her to clean herself up and cover up the bruises. Weightless and drained, with nothing seeming right, but onward you go because there’s no other choice.

So she goes on, goes outside, and finds Clint sitting at her dinette table with a mug of coffee. Just Clint. There’s no one else there. That’s simultaneously a huge relief and a massive source of anxiety. He looks up from a folder as she comes toward him. He doesn’t smile. “Feel better?”

The need to lie pushes up her throat. She’s become those lies, every single one of them. I’m fine. Nothing’s wrong. It’s great, really. How are you? “No.”

Now his lips quirk in a little, sad smile. “It’ll take time.”

She sits at the table gingerly. There are phantom pains all over her, like bruises that aren’t really there, like this really is the morning after a beating or rough sex or any one of the many awful nights she lived before. A memory comes to her like this, when she was sore and recovering, sitting at the nice dinette table Clint has in his house with Laura and drinking milk and forcing her mind and body to adapt to the sudden change in her life while he silently keeps her company and lets her work through it at her own pace.

This time the change is of her own making, and it’s an entirely different kind of shame pulling her down.

“You should go back to bed,” he comments. Nat looks up, snapped from her thoughts. “It’s just nine. You only slept six hours.”

Feeling disoriented, she glances at the clock on the microwave and sees he’s right. It’s 9:06. She is tired still, though the time she did spend sleeping was thankfully restful. But she’s awake now and too rattled, and the fact that Clint’s alone is bothering her more and more. “Where’s Steve?”

She expects disdain from him, but on the contrary, Clint’s expression stays soft and non-combative. “He went home to sleep a couple hours ago.”

Again, that’s comforting but not at the same time. Hazy memories of the bathroom, of what she
blurted out to Steve, of how she acted, make her cringe and her aching eyes burn. Christ, he doesn’t need her shit. “Is he…” Does he hate me? Does he think I’m crazy? Does he want to leave me? “Is he okay?”

Clint takes a sip of his coffee. He, too, looks exhausted, a hefty five o’clock shadow hanging on his jaw and dark circles around his eyes. He probably hasn’t slept at all. “Okay enough.” More blurry moments come to her, Steve struggling to carry her down the steps of Wanda’s place but hiding it, his low voice talking to Clint, the two of them getting her into the car and Steve trying so hard to make sure she never lost contact with him even though moving fast and bearing her weight hurt him. She wants to scream and cry and hide away. “He’s scared. It was a shock to him.” She nods, unable to speak. “But it’s a good thing he came. He really stepped up for you. Not sure you would have listened to me.”

That doesn’t make her feel better. She braces her elbows on the table and buries her face in her hands. Shame like quicksand sucks her down deep. “I’m sorry,” she says on a shaking breath. “I’m so sorry.”

The rustle of Clint’s rumpled clothes draws her attention, and he leans forward to grasp her arm. “What happened?” he asks. The question’s not accusatory, not really, but it’s a little angry. Clint should be angry. Clint and Steve both. All of them. The shit she just put them through…

“These are the guys who robbed the shop.” The grip on her arm gets more insistent, pulling slightly, and she has to drop her hands from her face. She sniffs to hide how close she is to crying as Clint pushes the folder closer to her. “Look at them and tell me if they’re part of Alexei’s group. If you know them.”

She doesn’t want to look. If she does and they are, it’s terrifying. If they’re not, it’s just as bad but for other reasons. No matter what this is awful, and that numbness inside her, that distance, doesn’t feel like it’s powerful enough to block it out. Being attacked as she was became a passive occurrence after a while. Alexei was bigger than her, more violent, crueler, stronger, and he beat the resistance out of her. This, however, requires her to actually look at what she’s going through and deal with it. Coward.

Clint doesn’t let her hide, though, staring at her firmly and refusing to pull the folder back. Sighing shakily, she glances down. The two faces are the same two faces from yesterday: good-looking boys who think the world is their playground. She can picture their sneers, their glares, their arrogance. She can picture it, and while it’s disturbing, it doesn’t mean anything more than what it was.

And what it was has nothing to do with what happened to her, just like Clint said. Just like she knew yesterday before logic completely shattered. “No.”

Clint gives her another second, but she can’t say anything else. With a long breath, he pulls the folder back and closes it. “Well, that’s that, then. It’s an isolated incident.” Nat fiddles with the hem of her t-shirt in her lap, wanting to sink into the floor. “Was there anything else? Something else that scared you?” His voice is calm, gentle, undemanding. It makes her feel worse, like a child who needs to be coaxed and coddled. She says nothing. He sighs again. “Nat, come on. You need to talk to me here. What you did was stupid and dangerous. There are holes in the department, holes that could have reported back that Hill and I were looking for you. I had to run these perps through the system. I had to pull patrols to look for you and Rumlow. I had to do all that, and Alexei has spies fucking everywhere. You know that.”

“I know.” Her voice is nothing more than a whisper.
“Not to mention you were out there with no protection. If someone had followed you, you would have led them straight to Maximoff.”

She cringes. “I know.”

“I need to know if there was a reason or if you just–”

“Completely lost it?”

Clint nods. Nat swallows through a dry throat. There’s no sense in lying, not when the truth is right there on the table. “I lost it. Okay? Those guys scared the hell out of me, and I ran, and while I was trying to screw my head back on straight, I thought I… I saw Rumlow.”

Now Clint’s face hardens for a different reason. “You thought you saw him or you did see him?”

She feels stupid. “I don’t know! I was out of my mind.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Down by – down by where the library is. On 21st Street. I don’t know.”

Clint shakes his head, deeply frowning. “Did he see you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus, Nat–”

“I don’t know anything! I just… I was terrified, so I ran back here, and I don’t even remember what I was thinking. I just knew I had to get away. I had to.” It sounds wrong and pathetic. Looking back on it now, she can’t believe her thought process (or lack thereof). Her brain stutters on it, rails against her stupidity. But her heart… All the reasons she needs to run still pound with each strained beat. She’s damaged, broken. Alexei will hurt her. He’ll hurt anyone in his path. She can’t be anything more than what she was. She can’t have this life. I shouldn’t be here.

“I know I should have called you. I know that. But I couldn’t. Everything’s so messed up, Clint. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t. I can’t hide and lie and pretend this is who I am. It’s not who I am.”

“I don’t know who I am anymore.”

She bends, bows under the weight of it all. “I’m tired. I’m so damn tired.”

It grows quiet. She’s not crying. The tears won’t come again. It makes sense, given this hollowed out shell she is. Another rustle of cloth sounds thunderous in the silence, and when she looks up, Clint is kneeling in front of her, holding her hands where they’re limp against the hem of her shirt. “Nat, look at me.” She can’t. She doesn’t care if that’s pathetic, childish. She’s too mortified, too degraded. It’s too much. “Please. Look at me,” he implores softly.

He waits until she can bring herself to do that. It takes a while, but he doesn’t push, doesn’t ask again. When her bleary eyes are finally settled on his, he nods again. “I knew this was going to happen if you let anyone close. I knew it when you left Laura and me. And it’d be dangerous, too, complicate everything when you can’t afford complications. You have to be able to move fast, to cut ties and relocate and start over. You have to stay ahead of him, and the second you get attached to somewhere or someone, that will only get harder and hurt more. That’s why I kept telling you that the most important thing was always keeping yourself safe.”

He sweeps his thumb over her knuckles and holds her gaze, firm and true. He always has been. “But you can’t live like that. I know this isn’t exactly what I’ve been stressing to you for years now, but I can’t deny what happened any more than you can. It’s as much my fault as it is yours.”
She knows she should argue with that, that her failings and her behavior are no one’s fault but her own, but she can’t bring herself to. He won’t accept it anyway. “You can’t live behind a wall. For better or worse, we put you next to Steve, and all of this… Well, whether we wanted it or not, everything that’s gone on has changed you. Helping him with his problems grounded you, helped you, too. It’s more than a connection. It’s purpose. I can’t deny that. I can’t deny that it’s a good thing. I can’t deny that he’s…” Clint cocks his head, like he’s still surprised. “He’s as good as you made him out to be. He’s good to you. I had to see that for myself. Last night, I did.”

He wraps her hands up in his own and squeezes tightly. “For better or worse, he knows now. You can’t lie anymore? Fine. Don’t. There’s no reason to, not with him. And there’s no reason to run, not from him. He’s here, and he said he loves you.” Clint smiles and reaches up. He wipes a wayward tear from her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “And I for one believe him.”

There’s nothing but genuine honesty in Clint’s eyes. It’s pretty shocking, considering how he’s grumbled and argued and discouraged her from seeing Steve since the beginning. Still, it’s there all the same, and it’s the first thing since yesterday that’s real and good. Something real and good that’s come out of this madness. Eventually she feels herself nod. Clint pulls her hands toward him and kisses them gently. “You’re going to be okay. I promised you back then and I promise you now. I don’t…” He sighs. “I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to bring Alexei in. He’s so damn powerful that stopping him seems like a pipedream. But we can protect you. I can protect you, but not if you do shit like this. If you get scared, you talk. You come to me. Go to Steve or Daisy or someone you trust. You don’t take off like that. You let us help you. Okay?” She nods again. He does, too. “You’re worth saving, Nat. I told you that back then, too. Remember? You’re worth saving.”

That sticks with her after Clint’s gone. She’s only partially paying attention as he explains that he’s going to go home to get some sleep, that he’s going to keep an eye out for Rumlow, that he’ll be back that night, that Maria will be over in a couple hours to check in on her. She needs to stay in, lay low until he can investigate if Rumlow really was there, and that’s fine. She can hardly function, let alone put herself together enough to work or leave. She’s in a daze as she drifts around her apartment that still feels a bit fake and different, as she feeds Liho and drinks some water, as she goes back to her bedroom. The sight of the disorder instinctively bothers her, and she starts to straighten things up. She dresses her bed. Picks up a few clothes that are on the floor. Goes to deal with her closet. Someone ransacked it, and someone else (or the same someone – she doesn’t know) made a token effort to put things back, but it was obviously pretty quick and haphazard. Mindlessly she starts rearranging her clothes and putting things back on the top shelf and getting her shoes on their rack. She’s on her knees doing that when she leans back and spots her emergency bag.

It’s right there against the wall. She stares at it for a long moment, unfeeling, uncertain. The urge to run is still there. It’s always there. The million reasons she has to do it aren’t gone. They’re quieter, though. Less intrusive. It’s okay. She grasps the backpack, pulls it closer, and unzips it.

The gun’s in there. She swallows when she sees it. Clint probably put it back, right on top like a reminder that she needs to be careful, be smarter, be stronger. A few months back she was. She can remember thinking that she’s not anyone’s victim. All the promises that she made to herself, to be happy here, to make a new life, to be strong for Steve and focus on Steve… Clint reminded her of something else, too, something she let herself ignore. Being strong for Steve and focusing on Steve anchored her, gave her a purpose, yes, but distracted her, too. When he got better… It cut me loose. That’s what she was trying to tell Daisy yesterday, but she couldn’t exactly because she herself didn’t entirely understand it. Now she does. I still don’t know who I am.

She sighs and takes the gun out. For the first time she holds it without feeling so rattled. She let
her past get the better of her, let her place as his caretaker define her. She can’t do that. That’s not his fault at all, and she knows he needed her, needs her still. But she has to be her own person. 

You can’t live like that. She can’t fight for someone else when she won’t fight for herself. And she can’t make herself her own victim.

So she finds the sweater she used before and wraps the gun back up. She takes the other things out of her backpack, her pictures and her songbook, and puts the sweater back in. Then she zips the bag up and puts it away again, right where it was yesterday. Her songbook and pictures she takes back to her bedroom. She feels stronger, firmer as she puts them back, the book by her guitar and the pictures back beside her bed. Her gaze lingers on them, on her parents and then on Pietro’s devious grin and Wanda’s pretty smile. Thank you, she thinks.

She turns and looks around. The morning’s still gray and rainy, but things look clearer. She aches with it, how sharp everything is. How empty. How quiet. I don’t want to be alone. She’s moving before she can stop herself, grabbing her keys in the kitchen, leaving her apartment on light and silent feet. Flying down the hallway. Opening Steve’s. Her key slides in like it always has. The door opens the way it always does.

And everything looks as it should. The apartment’s dark with the lights off, but the shadows are familiar. So are the books on the table, the sketches, the magazines she bought and left there. The throw from her couch that she brought over. The bottle of water she forgot to throw away on his coffee table. The drawings from Block Fest on the counter. These things that are a part of her, a part of their life together. She closes the door behind her and locks it up again. Then she’s padding quietly into his bedroom.

He’s sleeping there on his left side, one arm around Max. The dog lifts his head a little; the front door opening and closing probably woke him, but he doesn’t bark. His tail wags in small flops against the comforter as if he’s trying to restrain his excitement at seeing her. He doesn’t want to wake his master. Nat can’t help but smile, and it feels good to do that, to see this, to be here. To know this is still here. It’s only been a day, but so much has happened, and everything is different. She feels fundamentally different. Open. Exposed. Vulnerable.

But not afraid.

Thunder grumbles tiredly as she crosses his bedroom to the other side of the bed. Carefully she slips in beside him, and the need for him overcomes her hesitancy. She pulls the comforter up over them both and wraps her arm around his stomach, pressing as close as she can to his back. He doesn’t move, doesn’t wake, breathing in a deep, peaceful slumber. She lets herself be comforted by that, lets the numbness be washed away by the slow pace of his even breathing, by how warm he is and how he smells and how he’s right beside her.

He’s here.

She closes her eyes and goes back to sleep.

It’s still raining when she wakes up again. It feels cooler yet, and she snuggles deeper into the warmth of Steve and his bed. A hand rubs over her forearm, gently tugging her closer, and she goes, soft and pliant. The miseries seem years removed, miles away, and everything is serene. Like a golden day with a touch of dark on the horizon, the threat’s far from her. She snoozes, dozes, drifts on the whims of her dreams. Nothing can touch her here.

Except him.
His palm runs up and down her arm, light and gentle, but the touch suddenly becomes electrifying, and her eyes pop open. Immediately she sees blue, bright and sweet blue, and Steve smiles. “Hey,” he murmurs. He’s sleepy, but it seems like he’s been awake for a bit. He’s gathered her in his embrace, nestled her against his chest. Max is down at the foot of the bed now, watching over them like he’s guarding them. And Steve’s arms are strong around her. Safe and warm and familiar. Her mind knows that. Her heart’s content.

Her body’s trapped again, though. He’s right against her, every pore of her suffused with that warm strength, with the scent of him. It’s terrifying but intoxicating at the same time. Like that night, that night after Block Fest… Part of her can’t even believe she’s thinking about this. Not this.

God, she’s fucked up.

“You okay?”

_How can I be okay? How can you be okay? This will never be okay._

She startles out of her thoughts with a small jerk. He brushes his thumb across her cheek. “Nat?”

“I – I’m okay,” she whispers.

He doesn’t buy the lie. “What’s wrong?” He looks down, like suddenly he’s questioning the fact they’re in bed together. Like suddenly he’s realizing he’s doing something awful, crossed a line even though _she_ was the one who came into his bed. He pulls away.

And her eyes flood with tears against her will. She curls her hand in his shirt and pulls him back. “No, don’t. Please.” Her voice sounds breathy and pathetic to her, weak with emotion. “Please don’t go.”

He stops trying to untangle his body from hers, though the doubt is still bright in his eyes. A miserable groan of thunder fills an uncomfortable moment of silence. His fear of her, of things they’ve had and shared suddenly turning bad and awkward, is like a knife to her heart, and she turns away, unable to look at him. The shame comes back, choking, and she squeezes her eyes shut. His _want_ to touch her is almost tangible it’s so strong, pounding against her and hurting her more than his gentle hands ever could. But he doesn’t. “And please don’t do this.”

“What?” The question is meek and fearful.

She swallows through a dry throat. “Please don’t make a liar out of yourself.”

“Nat?”

“You told me you don’t care, that it doesn’t change anything.” She curls into herself, tucking more into the blankets. “If you… If you look at me like that, if you won’t touch me, it changes _everything._”

It’s still. She can’t breathe. It doesn’t sound like he is, either. She can’t open her eyes too, because she’s too busy imagining the worst. The worst is horrifying. And surprisingly it’s not all the fears that have tainted her, that have ruined sex for her, that have dogged her for years and clung to every moment Steve’s kissed her or held her or been even close to intimate with her. It’s not him being like Alexei, grabbing her, pushing her under him, _taking her arms and holding her down._ It’s not him hurting her.

It’s him getting out his bed and walking away.
But he doesn’t. His hand is soft, nonthreatening, as it falls on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m sorry about before.” She turns a little, blinking tears loose as she does. He’s leaning up on his elbow, looking down on her, and there’s nothing but genuine remorse on his face. “That night… The reason you did what you did. The reason we didn’t…” He falters, clenching his jaw as he works through his own emotions. “I didn’t realize what that was. I didn’t understand.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says, and she wants nothing more than for him to understand that.

“There’s no way you could have known.”

He shrugs half-heartedly. “Doesn’t matter. I’m still sorry.”

“Steve—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” There’s no accusation in his tone or his eyes, but there’s hurt. Hurt for her. Hurt for them. “I wouldn’t have let you do that. I would never have even asked—”

“Don’t you see?” She can hardly keep her voice steady. The words tumble out, fast and pathetic. All the insecurity from that night after Block Fest, the desire warring with her fear, the anguish over her broken spirit and damaged body, over the things Alexei made her do, over the things he ruined… It rushes back. Competing fears of being touched and being unable to touch. Of wanting him to see her but being naked and vulnerable. Of wanting him to know but being unable to accept it herself. It steals the breath from her body, and she shakes her head. “That’s why I couldn’t tell you. I was — I was terrified it would change everything. I didn’t want to lose that. I was terrified you wouldn’t want me.”

“I want you,” he whispers fervently, turning closer but keeping a respectful couple inches between them. “God, I want you. I want to touch you. I want to make you feel good, to feel good with you. I want to give you everything.” He shakes his head, desperate to prove it to her. “I wanted it then, Nat, and I want it now. I’ll want it always. But I want you to want me to do it. And I’m willing to wait until you do.”

I do. She wants that very much, so bad it aches inside her, but her body and her mind are again at odds, and she’s too scared. Just like that night, she’s too confused. She can’t get the words out.

She doesn’t need to. He’s not pressuring her. “Until then… Tell me what I can do.” He rubs his thumb on her shoulder through her t-shirt, soothing circles that are nothing but innocent and comforting. “Tell me.”

The answer comes easily enough and without pain or hesitation. “Kiss me?” It’s a plea, a wish, a desire for acceptance and affirmation. “Please…”

Strangely enough, though, when he leans down and presses his lips to hers, it feels like simply another kiss, one of so many. There’s nothing new, nothing different. This isn’t a terribly heated or passionate one, but it’s long and sweet and comfortable. The soft scratch of the scruff on his face, the ways his lips are warm and a little chapped, the way his mouth fits to hers like it always does. The way he’s always just a little unsure, and that’s not because of her. It’s because of him. It’s because he’s kind and damaged himself and so achingly perfect.

And the fact that it’s the same as it was before feels so good, so real.

His fingers thread through her hair, mussed and loosened from its braid, and he deepens the kiss. She cups his face, loses herself in him, in the familiar heat and strength. It goes on like this, tender and slow and sweet, and she relishes it, basks in it, lets it soothe the pain inside her.
When he pulls away, her eyes flutter open, and she finds herself staring into twinkling blue again. He grins, a little devious. It’s not as natural as it should be, and she knows he’s purposefully trying to act light and easy and confident. It doesn’t offend her. “Well, that wasn’t too hard,” he says. He kisses her again for good measure. “What else?” His voice is a little rumble against her lips.

She closes her eyes. “I… I don’t want to leave. I don’t want to leave for a while.”

He leans back to look at her. “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of,” he promises.

She’s not so sure, and she doesn’t care. She doesn’t think she can face anyone else. Not yet. Eventually she’ll have to, but for now… “I just want to be here with you. Just you.”  

“I don’t want anyone else to see me. No one else.”

He rubs his hand up and down her arm again, his palm warm and tender. It’s like he’s wiping away the bruises that used to be there where Alexei grabbed her, wrenched her around, pinned her. “Okay,” he acquiesces. It thunders again. He drops another kiss, this one chaste, to her forehead. “Whatever you want. We don’t have to get up. We can sleep the rest of the day, stay in bed as long as you want. I’ll get us food, get my laptop… We can watch Parks and Rec.” It’s not so forced this time, his attempt to make everything seem like this is just another afternoon, a lazy one with nothing to do other than enjoy each other. Her lips tremble as they turn into a smile. She bobs her head. “What else, Nat?”

He thinks a moment. “I – I want you to let me love you,” she whispers.

“Oh, Nat.” He shakes his head, grimacing. “Nat, I know you do.”

“I want you to let me tell you my name. My real name.”

“Beautiful,” he whispers, reverent in the way he stares into her eyes. He weaves their fingers together, kisses each of hers where they curl over his, and tugs them to his chest. “You’re beautiful.”

He’s looking right at her face that has no make-up, no mask, at her puffy, red eyes and tear-stained cheeks and mussed hair. “You’re beautiful.”

She gasps a little sob, trying not to beam like a stupid fool at that simple thing. It feels like absolution in a way. It feels like benediction. Like one good reason to stay amidst the million terrible ones to run. A good reason she can hold close. One in which she can have faith. “I want you to listen to who I am.”

“I will,” he promises. He kisses her again. “Tell me.”

She does. The afternoon slips away, the thunder and rain slowly marking the passage of time. It’s not always easy, and she loses her nerve now and again. These are things she’s never told anyone, not Daisy or Maria, not Wanda, not even Clint. Who she is. Bringing them into the light feels surprisingly good. She tells him about the little girl born in Volgograd to a seamstress and an accountant, the little girl who loved to sing, who was called a bird by her father and who he
encouraged to fly. She talks about how her parents loved her, worked hard for her, believed in her. How they sacrificed to pay for it all: lessons in music, vocal training, speech teachers, everything to shape and mold and support her talent. She talks about how she became a success, a Russian singer with a bright future in the theaters and recording studios of Volgograd and Moscow, only her mother succumbed to cancer and passed away. Her father could no longer support her, could hardly take care of himself, and when he took ill, her chances of becoming the musician she wanted disappeared. That was when she met Alexei, the son of a powerful music executive in the United States. He was young, strong, and handsome, so charming, so alluring and exciting. She fell for him, fell hard and fast, and he swept her off her feet, enamored by the sound of her voice. He dangled the promise of what she could achieve in front of her, dangled it and made his proposal: come to the US where there’s infinite wealth, and she could find her rising star. She could send money back home to her father to save him, support him. She could be what she wanted, sing for the world rather than a single city.

She tells Steve how her father warned her not to be taken in by conmen, how sometimes things aren’t what they seem. She didn’t listen. She married him. It was simple, easy, giving her heart away. She came with Alexei to New York, met his father, started down the path toward a grand stage where she’d stand with her guitar and a microphone and fill the crowd with her songs. He promised over and over again that he’d make that happen for her, show her how, support her and love her and bring her dreams to a reality. Only as things went on she quickly realized what a mistake she’d made. It didn’t start off with the violence and the cruelty. That crept up on her as she saw more and more what sort of man he was, what sort of family into which she’d married. Her father died, and she learned the money she made wasn’t going home to Russia. She learned Alexei and his father are lies, images of propriety that are carefully crafted to hide a lifetime of evil, of murder and violence. She learned she was surrounded by criminals, it was too late. By the time she understood why he really brought her to the States, what he really wanted from her…

“I still loved him,” she whispers into Steve’s chest. It’s still thundering, still raining. He’s on his back again, and she’s tucked next to him, and there’s no distance between them now. Tears constantly trickle down her face, dampening his shirt, but he says nothing, does nothing, other than slowly stroke her hair. “I couldn’t make myself stop loving him. And I couldn’t run. I kept thinking… I could save him. Save us. Get back who he was or who I thought he was. I was too stupid to admit the truth to myself, that I’d fallen for a fantasy. The man I married never existed at all. He only ever wanted to own me and use me. That’s what I was to him. A tool to get what he wanted. Something to use. I see it now, but I still can’t… I can’t make myself believe it wasn’t my fault.”

“There wasn’t anything you could have done,” Steve assures. “And the only thing that matters is that you survived.”

She’s still not so sure. She feels empty again, hollowed out once more, but the pain isn’t entirely quiet. Even telling him that much… It’s not everything. That’s not the worst part of it. And it’s been years. Years. She closes her eyes. Where her hand’s tucked between them, she cradles the flatness of her lower stomach. “I feel so stupid.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” he promises again. “Nothing.”

“You don’t understand. I didn’t see what he was. I married him.”

“It’s alright.”

“I’m still married to him.” He stiffens a little. The hand on her head pauses a bit, just a tiny sign that he’s upset. That this is occurring to him. It makes sense; she ran from Alexei and never went
back. There was no way for her to legally divorce him. She remembers Clint taking her out of the hospital in a wheelchair, her hands limp on her lap. She remembers seeing the ring on her finger, an elegant gold band, *noticing* it after so many days and weeks and months of it being a part of her. And she remembers the wink of gold on his hand when he hit her. That wink of gold was a chain. A collar. A noose around her neck. *Another cage.* She remembers pulling the ring off her finger, yanking hard because it wouldn’t come loose. She remembers her rage, her bitter tears, as she finally got it off and threw it in a trashcan that they passed. That *felt* good, but it didn’t mean anything, not really. That doesn’t free her. She’s not sure anything can.

Not with him bound and determined to get her back.

“He’s not going to stop.” She cringes in newfound shame and fear over what she’s getting Steve into. “I’m so sorry. So stupid.”

Steve pulls her closer. He takes a deep breath. “No. No, you’re not. You’re not.”

“He wants me back. He still thinks he owns me. I’m – I’m not sure he doesn’t.”

“No. No one owns you, Nat.”

Tucking her face into him is all she can do to hide the pain. She can’t ever outrun it. The despair sucks her down. The grief. The surrender when he held her down and let him take.

But there’s that defiance that drove her to fight, too. That’s still inside her. “He raped me.” *Over and over again.*

He still doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t move away. Doesn’t stop caressing her hair. Not again. “I know.” His other arm comes around, guiding her face up so he can see her. His eyes are full of determination. “He won’t ever touch you again. I swear to you. I won’t let him hurt you.” Then he’s kissing away all her tears, kissing her lips, holding her to him like she’s more precious than anything he’s ever had. Like she’s worth cherishing. Like she’s worth saving. When he whispers over and over again that he loves her, she can almost believe that she is.

Chapter End Notes

Some powerful chapter art by the lovely [faith2nyc](http://faith2nyc).
Oh, baby, I'm bleedin' bleedin'.
Can't you give me what I need, baby?
Every heartbreak makes it hard to keep the faith.
But, baby, I just need one good one...

When I turn down to pray,
Tary to make the worst seem better...

Lord, show me the way
to cut through all his worn-out leather.
I've got a hundred million reasons to walk away
But baby, I just need one good one, good one...
Tell me that you'll be the good one, good one

Baby, I just need one good one to stay...

- Lady Gaga, "Million Reasons"
- Stay, Chapter 15
Follow Me

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Warnings for sex. The good kind. :-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I won’t let them hurt you.
They’re hurting you, no.
When your heart is breaking...
You can follow me. You can follow me.
I will always keep you safe.
Follow me. You can trust in me.
I will always protect you, love.”
– Muse, “Follow Me”

A couple weeks go by like they’re nothing. They’re not, though. Steve can’t explain it. A lot happens. Part of him was terrified right after he brought Nat back that everything between them would shift into something else, that no matter how hard he promised and how hard he tried, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from seeing her differently. He does see her differently, knowing what Alexei did to her, but what doesn’t change at all is how he feels for her. 

She has changed, though. She’s quiet now, withdrawn and forlorn in a way that kills him inside. It’s as if her fire’s been snuffed out. Her eyes are duller, like she’s seeing things he can’t. Her voice is quieter, like she has nothing she wants to say. Her hands are less certain where they’ve been nothing but comforting and confident since they met. She’s not who she was, but she is, too. He can’t get his mind around the dichotomy of it all. The thing is, these awful things that happened to her happened, and they happened years ago. She came through it, escaped, rebuilt her life. Fought back. The fact that all of this darkness was pulled into the light doesn’t mean anything. She’s still the girl he fell in love with. He knows that. He doesn’t think she does.

The truth is he doesn’t know what she’s thinking because she doesn’t talk to him anymore. There’s distance between them that frightens him, and he feels inept and useless because she pulled away and he didn’t stop it. He supposes it was insanely arrogant and naïve to think he could just tell her loved her and he’d protect her, that he could just make promises like he has the power to keep them. It was stupid as hell to believe that could be enough because here they are, two weeks later, and they’re literally living together but she’s as far from him as she’s ever been.

That’s the biggest thing that’s changed. For weeks he wanted Nat to live with him. He hinted and suggested and coaxed. Now she is, only it’s nothing he hoped it would be. After they brought her back, Detective Barton and Detective Hill were all over her. They didn’t want her alone. They wanted to move her again. They wanted her back at Clint’s house while they worked out when and where and how. Steve didn’t know all the particulars, but it seemed some of Alexei’s men were snooping around Brooklyn. Clint still isn’t sure if they’re here for Nat or not, but he’s worried enough that he doesn’t want her to remain where she is. Steve tried to stay silent through that discussion, to stay in his bedroom in fact to give Nat privacy while she talked with them, but the
second he heard Clint tell her she needed to move he couldn’t keep quiet. He burst out, said she couldn’t go, that she could stay with him, that she was safe with him. More promises he doesn’t know he can keep. In the back of his mind, he knew that he was being brash and foolish, but he didn’t care. He just got Nat back. He wasn’t going to lose her again. He wasn’t going to let them take her. If he did, if they did, he knew he’d never see her again.

Clint wasn’t pleased. He and Clint seem to have reached some sort of understanding between them, which roughly translates to Steve being off Clint’s shit list. The guy still doesn’t like him, though, and doesn’t like the fact that Nat’s with him, and to say he was okay with the idea of Nat staying where she is with Shostakov’s guys on the prowl is a bald-faced lie. He wasn’t harsh about it like he probably would have been before Nat ran, but he basically accused Steve of thinking with his heart instead of his head. The only saving grace was Nat who, in a small, deadened voice, said she wouldn’t go, that she wanted to stay here, stay with Steve. It was the one and only time she’s really expressed her wants since she ran. It was a good thing she did, because Steve doesn’t think Clint would have capitulated on it any other way.

Still, she’s been fairly well trapped in his apartment since then. Barton may have surrendered on the fight to hide her somewhere else, but he insisted she give up her lease. Steve and Thor helped her with that, moving all her furniture and things out of the building. Apparently Clint’s been keeping a storage unit not far from their building to act as a staging ground in case Nat needed to relocate quickly like this. In a matter of a couple days, her apartment was utterly empty and she was effectively moved in with Steve. Max was pretty thrilled with the idea of Liho taking up residence in his apartment, though Liho herself spent the first few days hissing at him and whapping at his nose any time he got close. It’s not exactly ideal.

Neither is the way this is working out. Nat’s not comfortable at all. She’s basically living out of a suitcase in Steve’s office, hardly unpacking a thing. She’s sleeping in his bed, using his bathroom now (not that there’s a choice), but she’s still not mixing her things with his even though he cleared out a few drawers in his dresser and half his closet for her. All she has is her backpack, her suitcase, and her cat. All that remains of the months she’s lived next door to him.

God, he hurts for her. It’s terrible, that she has to go through this. He understands more and more about how difficult her life has been, on the run, never safe, never being able to settle down and stay anywhere. On top of the emotional upheaval, the loneliness is clearly devastating. She’s got him, sure, but she’s essentially confined to his place. Clint thought it’ll be better if she takes a leave of absence from the record store for a while, at least until this cools down and they get a handle on what Shostakov’s guys are doing in Brooklyn. May’s very understanding at least and says she’s welcome back as soon as she can be. Without her job, though, she’s even more cut off. No one’s supposed to know she’s with Steve, although some people do. Sam and Daisy. Thor (since Thor helped them get her home, it’s kind of hard to keep him out of the loop). There’s no sense in involving anyone else. It’s like being on an island in a sense, and Steve can see the solitude and isolation gnawing at her. The isolation and the worry and the guilt. She’s got nothing to feel guilty about at all, but he knows she’s drowning in it, and he feels helpless watching her sink. He can hardly stand it.

It has to be this way, though. He gets that. If Alexei tracks her to the building, he’ll see an empty apartment with hopefully no trail to follow. That’s a comfort. And at least this way Nat and Steve are still together, despite what happened and what he knows and how she’s hurting, although that doesn’t seem to matter much when he doesn’t know how to help her. He’s trying not to walk on eggshells around her (or at least not be obvious about it), but he doesn’t know what to do. Yes, the assault she endured is years behind her, but it’s very fresh for both of them. She told him not to treat her differently, but she’s treating herself differently, and it’s really hard not to key off that. He’s afraid to touch her if she’s not ready, to kiss her if she doesn’t want it, to push or prod when
she’s so lost and low. What she told him haunts every interaction they have now, and he doesn’t want it to, but he doesn’t know how to lead her past it. He doesn’t know anything about rape victims, if she craves comfort or distance or his assurances or what. The internet is a mixed bag of advice, as usual. He considers asking Doctor Banner for a second, but then that feels wrong; even though Banner’s sworn to secrecy (and the guy’s too decent to blab to anyone anyway), it’s not his story to tell and not his right to tell it.

However, Steve does know a lot about the throes of anxiety and depression, about PTSD and all of its miseries. His experience with trauma isn’t the same as hers, so he knows he shouldn’t make assumptions about what she wants or needs. Hell, there were (still are on occasion) tons of times since Afghanistan that he didn’t even know what he wanted or needed. The only thing of which he’s consistently certain is that he doesn’t want to be defined by his injuries and his time spent as a POW. She has to want the same. She told him she did. He’s not so blind to the parallels here, not when they’re right in front of his face. You don’t want your past to dictate your future, so you run hard from it and ignore it with all your might and pretend you’re fine when you’re anything but. Ironically, though, your unwillingness to confront your pain prevents you from getting past it and prevents it from healing. And it becomes a vicious self-fulfilling prophecy. In trying so hard to stop your pain from defining you, it somehow defines you anyway. Suddenly your whole life is a lie, and the person you’re lying to the most is yourself.

That he knows very well, and he can see her falling into that endlessness. She’s not writing in her songbook. She’s not talking much beyond bare minimum answers. She’s hardly smiling. She spends most her days on his couch or in his bed, staring out the window with empty eyes, lost to him. Again with the dichotomies. Nothing’s changed, but everything has. She’s with him, but not. Different, but not. Broken and hurting. That was there before and it’s just now coming to surface. It’s like watching a flower wither, like watching poison slowly consume something vibrantly colorful and blackening it, *ruining* it. He misses her strength, her laughter, the way she makes everything brighter and sweeter and more perfect. He misses her. These two weeks have been an eternity of him helplessly wondering how to stop her from slipping away. He holds her at night, watches her sleep. She’s so peaceful then, so beautiful, and he can’t stand any of it, that she was hurt. That someone forced her down. That someone she loved raped her, reduced her to thinking she’s not worth loving. He can’t fucking stand it. The anger wells up inside him, almost feral for how dark and pressing it is. It’s anger twisted up with grief and pain, and he stares into the shadows of his bedroom with narrowed eyes. He’s not so perfect as not to want vengeance. He did during those long, awful hours in that cave watching Bucky bleed to death. He knew it was wrong then, and he knows it’s wrong now, but he can’t stop himself from giving into that anger. He would have killed every single one of those bastards if it would’ve saved Bucky’s life.

And he’ll fucking *kill* Alexei if he ever tries to hurt Nat again.

As it stands, though, the best he can do to make things right is to be strong, to offer everything he has with open arms, and wait until Nat wants it.

It’s cooler now with the end of September swiftly coming. The last vestiges of summer are giving up their hold, bringing rainier days, grayer skies, and drooping leaves on the trees around their neighborhood. Steve’s walking from the subway to the building. It’s early afternoon, the day nice and pleasant despite being cloudy. He’s had a busy morning. He was due at New York Presbyterian at nine o’clock for another MRI, which took longer than he expected. Everything with the clinical study was going well, although the amount of time it’s keeping him from Nat is worrying. He knows – *knows* – he needs to focus on the study, on keeping on top of everything the doctors and researchers want of him (and they want a lot; it’s becoming more and more obvious to him that this is a two-way street, and while the astronomical financial burden of this miraculously isn’t falling to him, he’s *paying* for it all the same with his time and his attention and, most
importantly, his body. And he is eager to do that, and so damn grateful for the chance, but he can’t commit to it, not emotionally, not with this going on). Thankfully his seizures have been quiet since he had that last bad one at the gym a couple weeks ago. One small blessing. He doesn’t want to put that on Nat right now, not in the least. If everything continues going well, Doctor Cho and her team are planning on doing his procedure, on implanting the NeuralNet, in January. It may even be right after the holidays. That’s just a few months away. It’s insane to him that this is happening and happening so fast. The fact that it is makes everything seem even more unreal. He hasn’t told Nat how soon things could start. Again, he figures she doesn’t need the added stress, even if he is excited and scared out of his mind.

At any rate, he doesn’t like leaving Nat alone for more than a couple hours, both because he’s worried about her and because he’s worried about Clint being right. Granted, he knows nothing about Alexei (or the guys he has roaming around Brooklyn), but he can figure enough from what they told him and what he could find on the internet that the guy’s a ruthless, sadistic maniac. Everything Clint said about him is true: he and his father are some of the most powerful mobsters in the city, maybe in the state. He hates the fact that Nat got mixed up with him, that he lured her in like he did and used her dreams and her father’s ill health against her. All this helpless rage keeps simmering inside him, and he doesn’t know what to do with it except bottle it up and do what he’s doing because there’s nothing else. He can’t undo the damage no matter how much he wants to.

He stops at work briefly to pick up something up. Fury is as guarded and circumspect as ever, and he clearly realizes something else is going on, but he doesn’t ask. That’s just as well. Steve’s appreciating his job more than ever before. It’s a blessing being able to work at home because he’s been able to stay close and vigilant. At least he can pour his restless energy into graphics. He knows Nat’s feeling bad about being a burden, that she’s not working and therefore not bringing in money. He couldn’t care less. He keeps assuring her it’s absolutely fine; he has money, not a fortune, but enough to take care of her until this blows over. Still, it’s another thing making her feel low and useless, like she has no control. At least he assumes that because he knows how he felt after his accident and he had to depend on everyone else to look after him. It’s humiliating, even though no one ever did a thing to make him feel bad about it. That was something he had to work through. He has to help her do the same.

That’s the bottom line. Somehow, he has to help her.

He’s pretty consumed by the time he gets to their building, so consumed in fact that he doesn’t notice the first time someone calls his name in the lobby. He walks right by, and that someone calls again, sharper and more irritated. “Mr. Rogers!”

Steve turns and is more than a little surprised to see Mr. Schmidt, the super, there. He’s an older German guy with a long, waxy face that has a large forehead, small, sharp eyes, and thin lips that seem like they’ve never smiled. Steve doesn’t know much about him, other than he’s completely humorless and more than a little off-putting. He and his assistant Mr. Zola take good care of the building, though, so that’s something, but he’s hardly seen the guy, let alone spoken to him, in the two years he’s lived here. The fact that he’s obviously been waiting for him seems weird. “Hi,” he says uncertainly.

“I must speak with you,” Schmidt says, narrowing his dark eyes. “Right now.”

Wariness prickles through Steve. “What? Is something wrong with my apartment?” Nat would have called.

“Now,” Schmidt says again, and his tone brokens no argument. Steve stares at him, feeling
increasingly unsettled, but he doesn’t see that there’s much choice. It’d be pretty rude to just ignore him. He sighs quietly and follows him into his office.

There’s a man there in a very nice, gray three-piece suit and glasses. He’s old, his face weathered and wrinkled but his eyes incredibly shrewd. His hair is a sandy color, streaked with white. He looks wealthy and influential and out of place here in this neighborhood of mostly young, artistic, hipster types. The second he sees Steve, he stands. “Captain Rogers?”

No one calls him captain anymore, not anyone aside from Phil Coulson who Steve thinks more and more has some sort of hero complex about him. So that formality is kind of odd. Steve frowns. “Do I know you, sir?”

The man smiles and holds out his hand. “I’m Alexander Pierce. I work for HYDRA Properties.” The building owners. He vaguely remembers hearing something about this guy before – from Thor, maybe? It’d make sense since Thor’s dad’s in real estate. Anyway, he’s pretty sure someone said Pierce was a decent guy, and it certainly seems that way as Steve shakes his hand. “I have to say it’s an honor. I had no idea we had Captain America living in one of our buildings.” His grip is warm and strong, and he pumps Steve’s hand firmly. “My son served with Task Force Warrior. What you did over there is the very definition of bravery.”

That sort of talk still makes him uncomfortable, even with Coulson making a movie about it. “Thank you. Is there, um, something I can do for you?”

“No. No, I’m fine.” Pierce lets his arm go and gestures to the chair opposite the little desk in the cramped office. Steve doesn’t want to sit, but there doesn’t seem to be any other option. Warily he settles into the chair.

“It’s nothing major,” Pierce says disarmingly. He sits on the side of Schmidt’s desk. Schmidt himself stays by the door like he’s guarding it. “We just need to ask you some questions.”

Okay… “About what?”

Pierce sighs. “About your previous neighbor.” He reaches over and grabs a folder from the desk, opening it and reading the top sheet. “Miss Rushman? Natalie?”

Steve goes cold. He swallows, steels his face, prays to God that his surprise doesn’t show. He twists around to look at Schmidt, but the man just glares at him with malice in his eyes. “What about her?”

“You know her, don’t you?” Pierce asks. Steve turns back. Pierce is staring at him, and there’s something off about it now. It’s more accusatory than it should be. “She moved out last week.”

“Oh, uh… I didn’t know that.” That doesn’t sound at all convincing. He’s still shit at lying. Pierce cocks an eyebrow. “You didn’t notice?”

Steve shrugs. “I don’t go out much. Just to the doc and back.” He can’t believe he’s saying this, that he’s using his epilepsy as a cover for Nat. It actually feels kind of good. “Got medical problems from the war. Been bothering me a lot recently.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Pierce says. He sighs again, his expression softening, and looks back down at his folder. “Mr. Schmidt documented here that he fixed the vent in her room because her cat kept getting into your apartment. That’s why I’m assuming you at least met her.”
Steve’s stomach churns uncomfortably in worry, and that small office feels even smaller, like it’s closing in. He doesn’t answer mostly because he’s shocked as hell that they’re asking. “Yeah,” he says, trying to sound casual. Again, it’s fake to his ears. “Yeah, I guess I met her.” If anyone was paying any attention over the last couple months, they’d know that was a bald-faced lie. He has to hope Schmidt wasn’t spying on them. He’s never even thought about the possibility until now. Is he missing something here? Disquiet leaves him even more uncomfortable, and he’s not sure if he’s being paranoid or not. “Why?”

Pierce smiles gently. “Oh, it’s nothing serious at all. She overpaid when she broke her lease.”

That takes Steve by surprise. “Huh?”

“She overpaid by…” He looks down at the folder again. “Two hundred dollars and sixty-seven cents.” He closes the file with a quiet flap of papers and sets it back to the desk. “We need to issue her a check. Unfortunately, she left no forwarding address, no information on how to reach her. No email. We tried the cellphone number she provided, but it’s been disconnected. We don’t have any way to contact her, so I was hoping you might know of some way we could reach her.”

“Oh.” Relief comes over him fast, and he feels fucking stupid. Lord, he is paranoid. “Oh. Well, I… I mean, I knew her name, but she never told me anything about herself. She kinda kept to herself.”

Pierce nods. “That’s the impression we’ve been getting from the other tenants.” They’ve been questioning the other tenants? Thor’s the only one who knows that Nat’s living with him; even the Langs aren’t aware. Well, Thor and Detective Hill, and he doesn’t think either of them would say anything. “Hope Van Dyne seems to think you were involved with Miss Rushman, hence why I came to you.”

Fuck. Maybe it would have been better to tell them. Again he hopes he keeps his face neutral as he shrugs. He’s got a take a chance and pray Hope didn’t tell them they’re dating. “I don’t know why she said that. I mean, Natalie and I talked a few times. She came over a lot to get her cat. She seemed like a nice girl. But I didn’t really know her. She never gave me any way to contact her.” That seems too forceful, and his voice sounds weird to him. He clears his throat. Better to end this. “Sorry. I wish I could help.”

Pierce looks disappointed. He nods, pursing his lips a little, before sliding off the desk. “Well, I thought it was worth a try.”

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for, Captain,” Pierce declares. He offers his hand again. “Thanks for your time.”

Steve stands, unable to hide a bit of a wince when his hip spasms and unable to deny his relief. He shakes Pierce’s hand again. “Sure.”

“Have a good day.”

Steve heads to the door, but Schmidt is standing in the way. He’s still glaring. Steve doesn’t like the menacing look on his face at all, like he’s some sort of maniacal tyrant seeking to dominate their building or some crazy nonsense like that. He stands there, immovable and undaunted even though Steve’s bigger than he is, and Steve stares back, losing his temper. “Can I go?”

Schmidt says nothing but does move. Steve gets out of there as fast as he can.
He’s still feeling unsettled by the time he gets up the stairs to his apartment. The building’s quiet. The Langs’ door is closed, and he thinks he probably ought to tell them the truth so if anyone else asks they all have their stories straight. The thing is (and maybe he’s thinking this from watching *The Godfather* one too many times or something) but he feels like the more people he involves, the more people he’s endangering. Is that a real thing or some dumb mobster movie trope that he’s mistaking for reality? He doesn’t know. At least he should probably tell Nat she’s owed some money. Maybe that’d lift her spirits some.

He goes into his apartment to find Clint’s there. That hasn’t been uncommon since Nat ran and they brought her back. Barton hasn’t been there long if the coat he has on is any indication. He stands from Steve’s table the second Steve steps inside. Max immediately comes over to Steve, tail not wagging quite as furiously as it normally does when his master comes back. He doesn’t like strangers in the apartment any more than Steve does.

Nat’s in the kitchen getting herself a bottle of water. She looks… okay. Beautiful as always, with her hair done up in a loose, wavy bun. He sees the red in it now more, now that he knows the deep brown isn’t her natural color. She’s wearing black leggings and a bulkier sweater that’s well-worn and well-washed. Her face has the same empty expression it always does now, which probably means Clint has nothing terribly upsetting to say. Steve asks all the same. “Something wrong?”

Nat shakes her head, looking down. She seems sadly unable to look him in the eye anymore. It’s one more thing that hurts. Clint’s the one who answers. “No.”

Maybe there’s nothing wrong, but something’s happened for sure. Every time Clint drops by (which seems to be once every couple of days lately), it’s always with some information concerning his investigation. If he’s tracked down Alexei’s thugs (Rumlow and Rollins seem to be the main two – Steve doesn’t know their first names, but they sound like a pair of violent assholes if there’s ever been one), if he’s received any new information on their activities in Brooklyn, if he’s made any headway in finding Nat a new place to live. Sure he’s coming around to check on her but also to keep her in the loop, which is nice and helps offset Steve’s irritation that Clint still doesn’t trust him. “What’s going on?”

Like now. Clint glances at Nat like he wants her permission, which Steve supposes is understandable so he tries not to take offense. When she gives a little heartless shrug, he sighs. “I have it on good authority from a snitch on the inside of Shostakov’s operation that the old man is on his deathbed.”

Steve doesn’t know what he was expecting, but that’s not it. “Huh?”

“Andrei Shostakov is dying,” Clint clarifies. There’s no heat in his tone. He glances at Steve, but mostly he’s watching Nat. “Stage four lung cancer. The family’s kept it real hush hush I guess, but he’s at the end. Only days left.”

Steve squints, shaking his head as he sets his bag down on the table. “What does that have to do with–”

“With the old man dead, Alexei takes over, which explains what Rumlow and Rollins are doing in Brooklyn maybe. Maybe Alexei’s enterprising, branching out into new territories or something like that.”

Suddenly Nat moves, slipping out of the kitchen with her bottle of water and going over to the couch. Max follows her as she sits. The dog hops up and lays his head in her lap. Absently she scratches his ears. Steve watches her, watches how concerned she seems. It doesn’t make sense. “Isn’t that good then? They’re not here for you.”
Nat sighs, and her shoulders slump. “Not necessarily,” she murmurs. Steve heads over to the living area and sits on the adjacent chair. He stares at Nat, unsatisfied with that, and she gives another submissive shrug, turning her gaze back to Max as she rubs his head. “Alexei’s father never liked the way he handled himself. Not with the businesses he dealt in. Drugs and…” She flushes and seems like she’s losing her nerve, but she goes on. “Drugs and sex, mostly. Andrei always thought that was beneath the family, as he put it. For years he was furious that Alexei was involved in that stuff. He was…” She falters again. “He was the one who got me out of Alexei’s club. It wasn’t because he cared about me, though. He just shut Alexei down to preserve the family image. The one night you came, Clint…”

Steve turns to Clint, who nods. “A couple domestic incidents got the cops involved. He was arrested once for beating up another girl.” Steve hates all of this, pictures this hellish hole where women are traded around like things to be used and abused with Alexei (he doesn’t even know what Alexei looks like, but it doesn’t matter – he despises him no matter what) overseeing it all like some sort of deranged pimp. “That pissed dad off something fierce. The charges didn’t stick, but word is the old man had to call in a lot of favors to make them disappear.”

Nat sighs, rubbing Max’s ears more. “Anyway, Andrei always wanted him to settle down and run things right. One day he’d take over, and then he’d need to be smarter, better. He’d need a wife and a family, not a…” She doesn’t finish.

Steve knows he shouldn’t ask, so he doesn’t, but the question tumbles around his head all the same. It has since she told him what happened to her. _Why didn’t you run?_

Clint continues. “Alexei’s obsessed with her. He always has been. With men like him, it’s about control. Ownership.” Steve hates that word, too. He read that online, about rapists and abusive relationships. Sex can factor in, but it’s the power and the imbalance of it that attracts sadists like Alexei. Power and fear and domination. “But if he’s feeling the pressure to be what his father wants now, that might be why he’s looking around again. He wants his wife back.”

That throws Steve for a second. He looks at Nat, aching inside. It seems to Steve that Alexei reduced her to nothing more than his slave, something he used and raped and beat. Just because he wants to be something more now, a more respectable criminal (whatever the fuck that entails), doesn’t mean he’s changed at all. If he gets Nat back, he’ll go right back to treating her like his possession.

That can’t happen. It won’t. “He’s not going to find you,” Steve promises. He keeps saying stuff like this, and the words come easy, and he _knows_ that, but he can’t stop. “It’s not happening, Nat.”

Nat glances at him, but she doesn’t smile. Clint sighs. “No. Maria and I are setting things up on the north side of Prospect Park. I know a guy from the force who lives in the neighborhood. Retired. I trust him with my life. It’s as good a place as any for now. It’ll be another few days before we can make the move.”

_Move._ Hearing that makes his heart sink. It’s not like north of the park is that far, but it’s still not here. Not with him. He’s not ready for that. He wants to argue that she’s can stay him, but the words get stuck in his throat. He can’t do that. She needs to do what’s best for herself, and that’s not living as a recluse, hiding in his apartment. She needs to feel safe, and she can’t feel that here.

He wants her to, though. So desperately he does.

Clint glances between them, but Steve feels as sad and lost as Nat looks. He heaves a sigh. “Alright, I have to run. Call if anything comes up, okay? Be back tomorrow.”
He leaves with nothing further. Steve stands and watches Nat a moment before the distance is too much. Then he comes over, sitting on Nat’s other side. He doesn’t touch her, not right away. She’s still, her shoulders slumped with defeat. God, it hurts. “Nat?”

She finally turns to him. The pain must have been obvious on his face because she tries for a smile. It’s a weak shadow of her normally vibrant grin. Steve exhales slowly, chances putting his arm around her shoulders on the back of the couch. That’s all it takes. She cracks and leans over, sinking into his side. Gently Steve pulls her closer, wrapping his arm around her as she snuggles into him. He slides his hand up and down her back. It feels good to have her near, to have her pillow her head on his shoulder like this and put her arm around his stomach, but it’s not enough. It’s not enough just to hold her. Not anymore. He kisses her hair. “Is there anything I can do?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m okay.”

She’s not, but she doesn’t say anything further, so they sit silently with her tucked into him, with him rubbing her back and his lips ghosting onto her head, with her arm tightening around him. No, it’s not enough, not nearly, but he doesn’t know what else to do.

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He figures out how to help later that afternoon. The hours crawl by almost silently. Nat withdraws again, hardly moving from his couch. She has her throw wrapped around her, and she opens her songbook, but she doesn’t write anything. Max hardly leaves her side, sitting right next to her on the couch and watching her with worried eyes. Steve brings her a cup of tea, which she doesn’t drink, and then he gets his tablet and stylus and sits in the chair adjacent to the couch and tries to work. He doesn’t get anything done, either. The state of things over the last couple weeks bothers him too much, and it’s pretty damn undeniable like this, with her staring uselessly at the blank pages of her book and him doing the same, only he’s staring at her. He can’t take it anymore. They’ve only been together… what? Almost four months now? Since the beginning of June, and it’s almost October. That’s four months, but it feels like a lifetime with everything that’s happened. How they are now feels so far and starkly different from how they were at the beginning of the summer when they were two lonely strangers trying to connect based on nothing more than hope and sweet first impressions.

And that’s when it occurs to him that maybe what she needs is to get that back for a bit. Inspired (and excited), he stands up and puts his tablet away. Then he gets his shoes and coat on. She looks up, confused, and he shrugs, hoping she doesn’t see through his ruse. “Forgot something at work. Gotta get it. You want me to pick up dinner?”

She squints in confusion. “You’re going now?”

It is pretty late, almost five o’clock. “Yeah. It’s fine. Sitwell knows I’m coming. What do you want?”

Unsurprisingly, she shrugs. “Doesn’t matter. Whatever you want.”

He pauses and leans down for a kiss. He never knows if it’s okay anymore, but she told him she wants it to be, so he doesn’t hesitate. He keeps it tender, and she kisses back after a beat. He cups her face, sweeping his thumbs over her cheeks. When he pulls away, he smiles, and so does she. It’s small, but it’s genuine. “Be right back.” She nods, and he leaves.

He doesn’t go to work. Instead he heads over to the little pizza place they ended up at on their first date. He orders some pizza, half cheese and half sausage, pepperoni, and mushrooms. Gets some paper plates and napkins. Buys some soda. On his way home he stops at the little florist right around the corner of their building and buys some flowers, roses that are red and pink. With his
haul secure in hands, he heads back up the steps of their building. His hip’s starting to bother him, and his head’s hurting a little, and the roof seems pretty damn far away. Thankfully he runs into Thor right as he gets to their floor. “Steven!” his friend greets as he locks his door. “You seem to have your hands full.”

“A bit,” Steve agrees.

“I can help get your door open for you.”

“Actually, I’m headed up to the roof.”

“Well, then I shall help you there,” Thor immediately says before it dawns on him that Steve’s destination is pretty strange. “What’s on the roof? And I thought that area was restricted.”

Steve hands him the bag of soda and supplies as well as the bouquet of flowers. “It is,” he replies as they walk around to the next flight of stairs. His hip tightens and spasms in complaint, but he ignores it. “It’s a long story. I have a key. I want to take Nat up there for dinner.”

Thor glances at him, still perplexed for another beat, but then he catches on. “Ah. Smart, Steve. A date that doesn’t require leaving the building.”

Steve grins, pretty proud of himself. “It’s not much, but it’s something I can do. Maybe she’ll like it.”

“I am certain she will,” Thor says. Steve isn’t, but he’s hopeful. At least it’ll get her out of his apartment for a little while. “Your picnic requires dessert, though, and a blanket. I have both. Jane bought a ridiculous supply of ice cream last week and I have to say I don’t care for it. Perhaps you two would like some?”

Steve hasn’t thought about that. “Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks. Nat loves ice cream.” They get to the access door to the roof. He hasn’t been up here since his date with Nat, and now that he thinks about it, they ran into Zola, Schmidt’s assistant, that night, didn’t they? For a second he’s worried they might have changed the lock because of that, but the key that Scott gave him still works. Relieved, he leads Thor out onto the roof. It’s significantly chillier now than it was in June of course, but the evening promises to be nice if not overcast. Obviously Scott’s been up here once or twice since because there are a couple of empty beer bottles that have been left near the door.

Steve and Thor set their stuff down, and Thor takes the mess with him as he goes to get the other things from his place. He’s back in short order, and he has a lot more than just the blanket and some ice cream. He brought a cooler with ice to keep the dessert cold. He has two of his own bowls and spoons. And he has some candles. “Ambiance,” he explains with a smile. “Clearly you know nothing of wooing a woman.”

Steve chuckles, and together the two of them set up the picnic. A few minutes later, everything is perfect. The red blanket is spread over a nice spot on the roof, and paper plates, napkins, and bottles of soda make up two place settings. The flowers are over Nat’s plate. The few candles are spread around, lit and adding a warm glow to the fading light of the day. It’s perfect. Thor throws an arm around Steve’s shoulders. “Not bad,” he comments, “if I do say so myself. And Jane says I have no flair for romance.”

Steve laughs louder and pushes Thor away with a brotherly shove. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He claps Steve on the back hard enough that Steve nearly trips as they head for the door. Thor pauses once they reach their floor again. He doesn’t know the whole story, of course,
not what happened to Nat that made her run that night, but he’s surprisingly perceptive. “She
knows that she has you,” he says, offering Steve a comforting smile at the next set of steps down,“and that you’ll take care of her. That is something, Steve.”

Steve offers a grim smile. “It’s driving me crazy,” he admits. “It’s like…” He shakes his head, battling a sudden onslaught of emotion. Frustration makes his eyes burn. “It’s like I’m losing her, and I’m just watching it happen. I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re doing it already,” Thor promises softly. “It’ll be alright.”

He’s not sure of that, that it’ll be okay or that he’s being what Nat needs, but he smiles more genuinely and nods. Thor says goodbye and promises to be by later to pick up his things. Then Steve takes a deep breath to center himself and heads back to his place.

Nat’s right where he left her. Her songbook is still empty. Her eyes are still distant and troubled. Steve exhales heavily when he sees that, standing in his doorway uselessly. The ache in his chest is deep and unrelenting as he watches her stare out his window. You’re doing what you can. You’re doing it already. “Nat?”

She turns. “Oh, hi.”

He holds out his hand to her and puts on what he hopes is a warm, easy smile. “You wanna come with me?”

Confusion passes over her face. “What?”

He steps further into the apartment, wiggling his fingers a little at her. He tips his head. “I want to take you somewhere.”

Now the confusion turns to dread, and anxiety fills her gaze. “I can’t – Steve, you know there’s no way I can–”

He’s right behind her now, and he crouches, ignoring the shot of pain up his side. He brushes her hair from her face. “Trust me,” he whispers. He leans forward, catches her lips in a sweet kiss. When he pulls away, she doesn’t seem as rattled. “Come on.”

It doesn’t take much more to coax her off the couch, though she protests. “I’m not dressed to go anywhere.” That comes first. Then, “We really don’t have to do anything.” And then, “I’m happy eating something here, Steve. It’s really fine.” And then, “Are you sure you want to do this? You look tired. You had a long day. I can cook something.”

“Nat, Jesus,” he says with a chuckle as he locks his door. “Stop. It’s fine.” She frowns, but he doesn’t let her dissuade him. He takes her hand, raises it to kiss her knuckles, and grins. “Come on.” He tugs her into following him.

Right away it’s pretty obvious where they are going. After all, there’s nothing up but a couple more floors of apartments and the roof. She pulls him to a stop on the landing of the fifth floor, grinning a little now that she realizes what he has up his sleeve, and it’s a touch devious. Just the sight of that is enough to convince him this was absolutely the right thing to do. “What’re you up to?”

“Nothing.” He grins back mischievously. The light in her eyes is glorious. “What makes you think I’m up to somethin’?”

She shakes her head, smile softening with love and appreciation. “Steve…”
“Come on.”

They reach the roof. Steve gets the door unlocked, and out they go. Everything looks just the same (thank God). The picnic is there waiting, the candles burning softly, the pizza and soda and ice cream, the flowers on her plate. He goes to those first and picks them up. He smiles broadly, offering them to her where she’s still standing in the doorway. “Got you flowers this time. I’m getting better at this whole dating thing.”

Her eyes twinkle with what may be tears (or just the candlelight considering how dark it already is). She smiles, and her lips tremble, and now he knows she’s trying not to cry. “Hey,” he whispers. He sets the flowers down and comes back to her, wrapping her up in his arms. She leans against him, finally letting go of the door so it can shut. “I didn’t mean to make you upset.” Christ, that wasn’t what he wanted at all.

“No, no,” she gasps. She pulls herself together, pulls back from his shoulder, and smiles through her tears. “No. I just… You’re too good for me.”

Not too good to me. Too good for me. Steve shakes his head. “Other way around, Nat. Me buying you dinner is a drop in the bucket compared to what you did for me.”

Her lips quirk in a humbled grin. “ Didn’t realize it was a competition.”

“It’s not. But you need something nice. So here we are!” He puts on a giddy face and leaves her to get the flowers again. “Roses, Natalia.” He offers them to her, and he’s afraid for a second that he’s gone too far using her real name. Apparently he hasn’t, because she giggles as she wipes her cheeks dry and takes the bouquet. Steve heads back to their picnic. “And pizza. Mushrooms, sausage, and pepperoni. And a Coke for you.” He opens it for her. “A real one.” It is, in a glass bottle with an old-fashioned top and everything. He opens one for himself, too, even though he’s not a great lover of soda. “And…” He holds the two bottles by the neck and pops open the cooler. “Ice cream. It’s not coffee flavor. Sorry.”

She shakes her head, cradling the flowers in her arms. “Don’t care.”

He reaches out, and she takes his hand. “Your night out awaits,” he says dramatically, and she laughs more fully, and it sounds like music. It warms his heart, makes him feel like he’s flying, and he grins in relief when she smiles like she used to, like all the pain of her past and his epilepsy and her troubles are miles away. She rubs her thumb over his knuckles once before settling herself on the blanket across from him. He takes her plate, puts a slice of pizza on it, and hands it and the Coke bottle to her. “Miss?”

“Thank you, sir,” she says politely. She takes her plate but waits for him to serve himself before starting to eat. They dig in. It’s quiet on the roof. Brooklyn hums contentedly in the background, and a not quite comfortable silence descends as they enjoy their food. At first it’s okay; Steve has to admit he’s pretty famished and tired, and the pizza tastes really good. After a little bit, though, the fact that they’re not talking doesn’t sit well with him. Nat’s nibbling on the crust of her pizza, her eyes glazed with thought again, retreating back into her memories or, worse, her worries. That’s not what he did this for, not at all. He scrambles to come up with something to talk about, something other than his epilepsy and his upcoming surgery and her situation, and it’s like an epiphany (as dumb as that sounds). “So I was thinking…” He wipes his face with his napkin and gets another piece of pizza. “Maybe we could go over the basics?”

Her brow furrows in puzzlement. “The… the basics?”
You know… The basics. Like the first time we did this? Only this time we already know all the bad stuff.” Yep, dumb and cheesy, but it feels right. He doesn’t know about her, but on the disaster of their first date, he spent the entire time trying to tell her about him without saying much of anything. The bad stuff was so damn bad that he lied and danced around it all night. She probably did, too.

Now? They don’t need to do that. It’s still a risk, he knows, to push her like this. But he thinks her life before she came to the US was good. She’s fondly mentioned her parents in the past, and he honestly doesn’t know much about them. “Let’s talk about the good stuff. The things before, you know? Before I went into the army and before you came here.” Maybe this will make her feel better, talking about something good like that.

She’s smart, though, and she realizes what he’s trying to do. For a second he fears she’ll be pissed at him, but she’s not, of course. She reaches over and takes another piece of pizza, perking up and grinning as she folds the pizza in half New York style, the fold hold that threw her for a loop three months ago but now seems natural. She takes a bite. “Okay. Go.”

“I have to start?”

“You’re idea.”

“But ladies first. My mom’ll be so disappointed in me.”

“Go.”

He grins, taking another bite of pizza, making a show of thinking. “Alright, okay. Favorite food your mom made?”

She considers it for a moment. “Morozhenoe.”

He laughs. “You’re gonna have to tell me what that is.”

“Russian ice cream. My mother loved making it. God, it was good. Much creamier than anything you can get here.” She grins, glancing at the cooler. “I mean, I’ll make do with what you got us. If I have to. I guess.” He laughs. “What about you?”

“Lasagna, probably. My mom made a great tray of it. She got the recipe from my dad’s family, I think. I don’t know. All I know is it was delicious.”

“Favorite subject in school?”

“Art. Duh.” Nat rolls her eyes. “You?”

“I didn’t attend school as much when I got older. I had private tutors. Music. Dance. Vocal lessons.” Steve’s eyes widen, and she nods to confirm it. “I didn’t have exactly what you’d consider a normal childhood. My parents… They gave up a lot so I could chase my dreams. Sank everything they owned into it. That’s one of the reasons why I was successful there. A scout for one of the local ballet troupes saw me a dance at a competition. And she got me in touch with a voice coach. And…” She gives a weak grin. “Well, I was singing more than I was studying.”

Steve digests that, how different growing up was for her. It sounds lonely to him, concentrating so hard on dreams and talents rather than friendships and experiences. She doesn’t seem to regret it, though. “If you could have had a brother or a sister, which would you have wanted?”

Nat seems a little surprised by the question. “I don’t know. I never really thought about it, I
guess. But I suppose it would have been nice to have a little sister.” She smirks a little bit. “Or an older one. Maybe she would have steered me clear of the wrong kind of man.” There’s a rueful smile. “What about you?”

“Probably a sister, but Bucky’s sisters were enough. And I had Bucky.” She nods to that, and he can’t help but wonder if she was lonely as a child. He never was, thanks to the Barnes family being so close to his mother. “Favorite thing to do after school? Or tutoring?”

“Singing.” She grins.

“Never let it be said you aren’t driven,” he teases. “Buck and I weren’t so much. We used to go play football with some neighborhood kids down by our old school. It was nice. He made sure I was never picked last.”

“Can’t imagine anyone picking you last for anything.”

Steve flushes a little with the compliment. “When we got older, we used to play X-Box in his room. His mom made tacos every Friday and she let us eat dinner in there. Did that all the way through high school. Stupid, right?”

“Not really,” she answers. Now she’s more rueful, like she’s thinking about a mundane life, longing for one. Or maybe thinking about the sacrifices she and her parents made only for her to end up like this. She takes another bite of her pizza but doesn’t say anything more.

Steve doesn’t want the conversation to die. “What about your favorite childhood memory?”

“You first,” she says.

Steve grins. “Okay. So I’m… ten? Maybe? I don’t know. It’s my birthday, and Bucky came over in the morning, and my mom… Well, I think she must have saved up for forever, but she took the two of us to Shea Stadium for the day. She got amazing seats, behind the Mets dugout, and she bought us hats and hot dogs and all the soda and ice cream we wanted.” He thinks back on it now, sitting with Bucky on what felt like the hottest day of the summer, giddy with excitement to see the ballplayers going in and out of the dugout, Bucky’s arm around his shoulders as they shared a giant cup of Coke. It tasted just like the Coke in his hand now. “The Mets lost, but we didn’t care. It was awesome. And after that, she took us to get pizza and ice cream and we came home and played ball in the street outside our building until it was way past bedtime. It was…” Nothing special, he realizes, but everything special at the same time. “Perfect.”

She smiles. “Sounds like it.”

“You turn.”

She sets her plate down, and draws her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them and seemingly shrinking. Steve thinks she’s not going to answer. She does, though. “I was eight. My father worked for the State, and as a gift from a local party member he did some favors for, he gave my family tickets to the opera at Tsaritsynskaya. They were doing Swan Lake but a more modernized version of it with opera incorporated into it. I sat in between my parents and watched them dance, watched the sopranos perform their arias, and I just…” Her eyes are cloudy with the memory, sweetly so. “I just knew that was what I wanted to do. I always loved music, but that… that made me realize how much I lived it. I went home the next day and started writing music. I was so inspired.”

She looks radiant like this, hardly any make-up and hair loose in the breeze and dressed
comfortably. Her eyes are a million miles away, but it’s in a good way. He smiles just looking at her. “When did you write your first song?”

She snaps from her reverie and looks down at her plate. Blushing, she shakes her head. “God, I don’t know. With lyrics? Probably a couple years later.”

“You remember it?”

“Of course I do.”

He sets his plate aside. This is really a risk, but he can’t help himself. He’ll do anything to have her escape in something that brings her happiness. “Could you sing it?”

For a long moment, she just stares at him. Then she blushes and looks away. “No, no,” she says, shaking her head. “You don’t want to hear it. It’s terrible.”

Disarmingly he smiles, reaching across their little picnic to take her hand where it’s wrapped around her knees. “Can’t be. You wrote it.” She blushes again, this time at his sweet words. He rubs her knuckles. “You don’t have to, but if you want to… I’d love to hear it.”

Nat watches him a while longer, searching his eyes. Then she lets go of her knees and sits up a tad more. She takes a deep breath. Her voice is timid at first, tremoring and soft and uncertain, but a few seconds into it, she sings louder, clearer. Over the hum of the city around them, the melody rises, sweet and simple and pure. It sounds like something she’d write, though he doesn’t understand the lyrics. They’re Russian, and for some silly reason that throws him for a loop. It sounds different, alien but exciting, to hear her speak a different language. Her native language. It makes all of this, the life she led in Russia, that much realer. She’s not afraid of her past, not this part of it. Neither is he.

When she’s done, she opens eyes that she let slip shut and focuses on him lethargically, like she’s pulling herself from a memory or two with great effort. “Beautiful,” he comments. She smiles, and her cheeks color all over again. He wonders how much Alexei damaged her that she’s this uncertain about her music. If she was a rising star in Russia, she had to have more confidence before. Now that all seems ruined and shattered.

He doesn’t let that sour the moment. “What does it mean?”

“You don’t speak Russian?” she teases, emerging from her uncertainty a bit with a sly smile.

“Nope,” he returns, moving the pizza box and empty Coke bottles aside. “Gotta say I like hearing you speak it though.” He does. It’s kind of a turn on, the rougher sound of the words. It makes her voice sultrier somehow.

Sheepishly she grins. “It’s about a girl who gets lost,” she says after a moment. “She’s lost and can’t find her way. She gets scared. Then she hears a voice calling her, telling her to follow it.”

She says after a moment. “I, um…”

“Can I kiss you?” he whispers. “If you want.”

It seems weird to ask that. This is like their first date, but it’s not. They’ve kissed thousands of times. She’s seen him naked, gotten him off with her hands and mouth, touched every part of him. But he asks because he needs to, for her and for himself. And he waits until she looks at him, waits for her to nod. “If you want to,” she says.
He does. And he doesn’t hesitate. He cups her face like he did earlier, but where that kiss was chaste more than anything else, this one is passionate. It’s slow at first, but she’s quick to find it familiar and open her mouth to him. He takes what she offers, slipping his tongue between her lips. There’s nothing demanding about it, though, not about the way he tastes her or the way he grasps her shoulders and keeps her close. They kiss and kiss, and he leads, and she melts under his lips and fingers.

Eventually she sighs, wrapping her arms around his neck and tugging him down. He follows her as she lays on her back on the blanket, his arms bracketing her head. She’s right beneath him, his knee between her legs, but he keeps his weight off her. Leaning down to capture her mouth again, he lets her direct the kiss this time. She grasps his face between her hands, sliding her lips across his, tentatively pushing her way into his mouth. Again, this all seems so new, even though they’ve done it before. New and exciting and frightening, too. She slides her hands down his face, down his chest, up his shirt to dance across his stomach. Steve groans, and he can’t help rolling his hips into hers. His heart pounds with mounting arousal, and he’s getting hard fast, and every nerve in his body tingles because he wants her. He always has. He desperately wants her.

She gasps the second she pulls away from another heated kiss, and he trails his lips across the smooth, soft skin of her cheek, down the hinge of her jaw, over to her earlobe where he licks just to feel her shiver. She does, whimpering, clutching at him. Not pushing him away. All the signs that he figures he must have missed before… He’s hyper aware of them, of her fear and discomfort. There doesn’t seem to be any. Her hands ball in his shirt, pulling at him, and he thinks that’s okay, that it’s good, so he licks again before suckling at a sensitive spot behind her ear. Working his way down her neck, he kisses a reverent trail, pausing to breathe in the smell of her soap, of vanilla and lavender. He still keeps his body off hers, bracing his weight on his arms, but he’s moving his hips and not really realizing it.

She does. “Steve,” she whimpers, tossing her head back more to expose her neck. Lightly he nips there, worrying the soft skin above her pulse a little with his teeth before continuing down and across. He teases at her collarbones, dragging his mouth wetly across them. Her fingers go up and around to his back, digging in firmly. “Steve…”

He sighs softly, trying to cool his desire a little, and seeks another kiss. She gives it to him, but this one is far more reserved, and that immediately slashes across his mind like a bolt of ice. He pushes himself up and off her completely. “What? What? Are you okay?”

She pushes a hand to her forehead, smoothing down her shirt where it’s ridden up between them. “We’re… We’re out here. Out in the open,” she mumbles. She swallows, and it does nothing to hide her nervousness. “Don’t you think we should…”

A distant police siren serves as a good reminder that she’s right: they’re pretty much making out on the roof of their building with essentially no guaranteed privacy. He thinks they’re alone, but there’s no way to be sure. Besides, if they’re doing this, he doesn’t want it to be here. He wants her to feel safe and comfortable, not exposed on a blanket on top of cold, hard cement. “Come on.”

Pulling her to her feet, they gather up the remains of their dinner. The ice cream’s untouched, but neither of them care at all. Steve blows out the candles, and Nat cleans the trash. With their things in hand, they head back inside the building. They don’t talk. The moment’s ruined, and awkwardness stampedes between them. Steve’s struggling to hide his erection. It’s pretty uncomfortable, and he doesn’t want her to see. Christ, now everything feels wrong, because he wants to continue this, but he sure as hell doesn’t know how to ask. He’s so caught up in that that he nearly collides with someone coming up the steps as they go down. It’s Zola, Schmidt’s assistant, and the little man looks furious as his toolbox tumbles to the floor. “Sorry,” Steve gasps,
and normally he’d help clean that up but not with his jeans practically tenting. Hiding that behind Thor’s blanket is all he can manage. “So sorry!”

Zola doesn’t seem to care, though. He’s staring at Nat, and he continues to as the couple races down the steps. They make it back to Steve’s apartment, and he fumbles with the keys a little before getting the door open. Then they go inside.

It’s pretty dark. Nat immediately retreats into the bedroom without turning the lights on. Steve stands in his kitchen, moving without thinking, getting the leftover pizza into the refrigerator and Thor’s uneaten ice cream into the freezer. His body’s going on automatic pilot because his brain’s completely lost up in aborted desire and fear that he’s gone too far, that she very literally ran away from him. She got back here, the best she has now for a safe haven, and ran. Liho’s sitting on his counter near her food dishes, glaring at him with those piercing yellow eyes of hers, and he feels more and more like shit. He fucked this up. This was supposed to be a night for Nat to forget what happened to her, and he brought it all back because he’s a selfish asshole. Who the hell is he to think he can touch her after everything she’s been through? He has to fight not to pace as he goes into his living room and sets the blanket and her flowers to his couch. Then he stands there, shaking, hating himself and so damn afraid. What was he thinking? Pressing her like he did? Who the fuck–

“Steve.”

He turns around. Nat’s standing in the doorway to his bedroom. Her face is flushed and her eyes are dark with desire. She’s scared, and she’s torn, and she’s so uncertain.

But she’s here. She’s here and she’s stunning. She stares at him, her mouth open like she wants to say something. Eventually, in a timid voice, she does. “Please come to bed? I… I want you.”

He’s across the room in a breath and a heartbeat, lifting her into his embrace and carrying her into his bedroom. She clings to him, arms around his neck and face buried in his shoulder, and he stays close as he lays her on his bed. Leaning over her, he looks down into green eyes that are deep with desire. Desire and fear. Tentatively he lays beside her. He’s afraid, too, afraid of hurting her, of screwing this up, that he’s not going to do this right. It’s been a long time for him, too, and he’s not the man he was the last time he slept with a woman. The only time. And Peggy is nothing like Nat.

He sets his hand on her belly, which is rising and falling with breath, and she looks up at him from the pillows. His room is dark and very quiet. He doesn’t know what to say. So he says something he probably shouldn’t, because he wants to do this – he desperately wants to – and if he seems unsure, that may amplify her own insecurities, which is the opposite of what he wants. “We don’t have to do this. We never have to.”

She grasps his hand on the flat of her stomach. “I want to.” That’s not said with much confidence, and her eyes shift nervously. “I want you.”

Torn, he heaves a soft breath. Everything that happened to her feels like it’s pressing down on them, haunting in the shadows of the room, and it’s hard not to look at it, not to know it’s there. He can’t help but wonder what she feels when he touches her. Does everything Alexei did to her haunt her every time he does? Is it always chasing her? He gets that impression, but he doesn’t want to accept it because it hurts. It hurts that Alexei damaged her so badly that she can’t tell the difference between that cruel touch and Steve’s.

But that feels selfish to think. This isn’t about him. It’s about her. He has to imagine, after years of being treated like a whore and being used, no one ever cared about whether or not she felt good.
That sinks into his head – *no one respected and loved her enough to make her feel good* – and suddenly he knows what he needs to do. The thing she didn’t want him to do last time. He’s not going to push, but if he leads… Maybe she’ll follow. “Trust me?” he whispers again. He curls his fingers lightly, possessively, into her sweatshirt over her belly. “Please?”

“I trust you,” she whispers. She bites her lower lip, holding his hand firmer on her stomach, staying it. “I do. I just… I’m screwed up. I don’t want to be. Every time we do this, I tell myself I won’t let it get to me. I know you won’t…” She shifts uncomfortably. “I know you won’t hurt me. I know that. But what I know in my head doesn’t always line up with what my body’s telling me.” She gives a small, crooked, apologetic smile. “You know?”

He does know. Not like she does, granted, but his senses and memories betray him like that sometimes too. “You don’t have to be afraid,” he promises. “And we can stop whenever–”

She grasps his face and pulls him close. “I don’t want you to stop.” The kiss she gives him is passionate, encouraging, her tongue plunging into his mouth, and that’s all the assurance he needs. He fumbles to kick off his sneakers, pulling off his jacket. It’s almost painful to leave the warmth of her mouth for even a second, but he does, kneeling on his bed to strip off his shirt. She looks up at him with a mixture of adoration and that same fear in her eyes, and he can’t help a little wince. It’s not like she hasn’t seen all his scars before. And he can’t be afraid or ashamed of them, otherwise she won’t find the strength to let him see hers, whatever they are.

He doesn’t push that, though. He settles over her, keeping his jeans on even though they’re way too tight like this, and once again makes an effort to prevent his weight from pinning her down. She leans up to catch his mouth, her hands going to his shoulders, his pecs, and then up and around his chest to pull him closer. Every touch of her fingers to his skin is tantalizing, and, God, he wants her. He’s so hard it hurts. It’s been so long since he’s really had sex that it’s all he can do not to come in his pants like a teenager.

And he’s not doing that. He’s not doing anything other than making her feel good. Not until she’s ready. This is about her, not him. So he pulls away from her mouth, kissing down her chin again to her jaw. He forces himself to be slow, careful and methodical even, as he worships her neck. He listens to the sounds she makes, the little breathy gasps and tiny whimpers, to make sure she’s alright. Her hands go to his hair, gripping firmly but not hard enough to hurt, and he shivers as he sucks at the hollow of her throat, dipping his tongue there. “Steve…”

Like before, her head’s tipped back to give him more access, and he presses his lips to the bottom of her chin. “Shhh,” he whispers. “It’s okay.” He spends a moment more, mind racing as he tries to figure out the best way to do this. Going for it seems crass and cruel, but if he doesn’t…

*Lead. She’ll follow.*

He kisses his way down her throat to her collarbones just as he did on the roof, but he doesn’t stop this time. Instead he tugs her sweater down to expose more of her skin, the tops of her breasts, and he kisses there, too. Slowly and gently. He feels her stiffen a moment, but the tension abates as he takes his time, drifting from one side of her to the other. When she’s loose and softly whining beneath him again, he puts his hands on her breasts.

Again, it’s not like he hasn’t before. Before all this happened, they’ve fooled around plenty, and that night she got him off he touched her like this, *more* than this. It’s different now, though, *feels* different, and she shivers. Once more he waits until she’s comfortable with his hands on her, until she can make herself relax. She does, bucking her hips into his a little, so he goes on. He squeezes, caresses, sweeps his thumbs over them through the thick fabric of her sweater and her bra. She whines and grips his hair tighter. His breath is hot and wet against the skin over her
sternum as he kisses and waits and touches again when he feels like she’s ready for it. At least paying such close attention to her is getting his mind off his erection so it doesn’t seem so much like it’s going to burst in his jeans. He smiles with the stupid thought.

“What?” she gasps, writhing under his hands. “What’s so funny?”

He kisses her sternum again. “Nothin’. Don’t wanna screw this up.”

Despite her fear, still as bright as ever in her eyes as she props herself up to look at him, she gives a coy smile. “Then keep going.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Deciding to be bolder, he scoots down further, laying himself in between her legs a bit. That makes her nervous; he can feel it from the shudder rippling through her muscles, so he gets back on his knees even though that causes his hip to hurt and goes at it that way. He pushes her sweater up, revealing the top of her leggings and the smooth, milky skin of her belly. He’s never really seen it before. Gooseflesh pimples over it, roughening it under his fingers, but he soothes it away with slow, languid kisses and easy caresses. He makes his way up, mouth hot on her skin as he traces her ribs, lifting her sweater as he goes. Then he can’t go any further. “Sit up?”

She hesitates but just for a second. Taking the bottom of her sweatshirt, he helps her get out of it before tossing it lightly off his bed. Then he looks back at her from where he’s kneeling between her legs. She’s… “God, Nat, you’re beautiful.” The white of her bra is soft against the creamy tones of her skin. Things he’s only dreamed about seeing for the past four months are right in front of him, the curves of her breasts and peaks of her nipples under the satin of her bra and the slender lines of her torso and waist. The unblemished skin of her stomach and chest. Not entirely unblemished, he sees now. There is a scar there, a pretty savage one right above left hip. It’s about the length of a paperclip, silvery raised flesh that’s immediately noticeable. Worriedly, he thumbs that before he can stop himself.

“Please don’t,” she whispers.

“What…”

Clearly she doesn’t want to talk about it, reaching for him and yanking him back down. Her mouth hotly devours, pushing his lips apart and kissing with almost violent insistence. She swallows his grunt into her mouth, pulling him even closer, and starts to reach for his jeans. That immediately makes him think back to that night, to the blowjob she gave him and the things she wouldn’t let him do, with the way she used pleasing him to hide her own miseries. He’s not letting that happen here. He’s not going to push, but he’s not going to let her treat herself that way, either. Catching her hands, he brings them to his mouth and kisses each one. “No.”

“Steve–”

“I want to make you feel good,” he whispers. “Okay? You deserve to feel good, Nat. You deserve to know that you’re worth it.”

She bites her lip, struggling with that, but eventually she nods. He sets her hands to her sides. Then he touches her breasts again. She gasps, squirms, but doesn’t push him away. He gives her a second to adjust to that, to his hands squeezing and his thumbs brushing over the crested peaks of her nipples through the fabric, before he leans down. He spends a moment kissing the supple flesh above the top of her bra, letting her get used to that, too, and then he kisses down, kisses over her nipple. Kisses and then seals his mouth over it to suck.
It’s been a long time since he’s done this, and her pleasured gasp sends painful arousal straight to his dick. It’s hard to ignore that, but he does. Carefully he pinches the other nipple, paying even closer attention to her sounds, to the way she’s gripping the comforter beneath them, the way she stiffens and shakes. For a second he’s afraid it’s pain or dislike, but she pushes her breasts into his face when he tries to pull away, and he lets himself dissolve into the desire to please her. Switching sides, he teases and sucks until she’s writhing, until she’s okay with him sliding his fingers into her bra, until she lets him take it off.

Now she’s bare before him, trembling like she’s fighting not to cover herself. He swallows through a dry throat, staring despite himself, shifting uncomfortably over her because he hurts for her. He really does. “You’re…” Beautiful doesn’t suffice anymore. She’s gorgeous, stunning, amazing, breathtaking and everything he’s ever wanted. There’s nothing broken about her, nothing damaged. Her breasts are perfect, perfectly sized and shaped and made for his hands, maybe, if he can be permitted a lusty, selfish thought like that. He can hardly breathe. “You don’t even know what you do to me.”

“Steve, please…” Her hips buck into his again, and he dips down to taste her. He takes her nipple into his mouth, gently at first but then harder when she gives a blissful cry. Rolling the other nipple between his thumb and finger, he lavishes the one, sweeping his tongue over and around it until it’s firm and hard. Then he does the same to the other side. Her head’s thrown back into the pillows, her hands pulling at his hair, her hips grinding into his. He can’t help a few thrusts down of his own, rutting into her stomach. The friction of his pants makes it worse, but he can’t care. He can’t care about anything other than her.

And that’s why he asks. After a few minutes of this, he wants more. He thinks she does, too. “Can I touch you?” He doesn’t say where, but it’s obvious what he means.

Her eyes are blown wide with desire, but he can see the rush of panic in them. He watches and waits, knowing here more than ever he needs to be certain. He needs her to be certain.

She nods wordlessly, and he leans down to kiss her. She kisses back, not as untamed as before, the slide of her lips and tongue coming now in fits and spurts. That’s evidence enough of just how much she’s at war with herself. Dismayed by that, he leans back, hovering over her. “Are you sure?”

She looks into his eyes. There’s doubt there, of course. He doesn’t see how there can’t be. She’s afraid, but like she said, she trusts him. That’s clear in her eyes, too, just how much she does. How much she wants him. She nods again, cupping his face. “Yeah,” she breathes. “Yeah. I’m… I want to feel good.” She claims another kiss, this one firmer, and arches against him, wriggling and wrestling with need. Her eyes slip shut as she clutches him tightly. “Please, Steve… I love you.”

He doesn’t need more than that. He kisses his way slowly down her body, through the valley between her breasts and along her stomach until he reaches the tops of her pants. Hooking his thumbs in the elastic, he pulls them down, chasing languidly with his mouth. The lengths of her smooth, white legs are exposed, and he’s kissing her thigh, her calf, her ankle as he works her pants off. She closes her knees together once they are, and Steve sets his hands to them. They’re so narrow he can close his palm around them completely. He’s struck again by just how small she is, by how much bigger he is, and that shakes his confidence for a second. Lead. She wants this.

Gently he pushes her legs apart. She doesn’t resist. She’s got white panties on, and he catches a glimpse of the fact that she’s wet. That makes him feel good, at least. He tries not to let on that he’s nervous, but he really is, and he really wants his pants off, but he doesn’t dare scare her. And he’s not going to lay on top of her, not when she’s shaking like this, so he settles himself on his
side beside her, trailing his fingers lightly up her right leg toward the juncture of her thighs.

He watches her face. She’s got her eyes squeezed shut, and she’s flushed with arousal and breathing fast. He can’t tell if she’s more afraid than turned on, though. “Nat?”

“Touch me,” she begs in a throaty murmur. “Please. I want you to. Oh, God, Steve, please…”

He kisses her to calm her and slides his index and middle finger under the top of her panties. That alone is enough to make her gasp, but she stiffens like she’s struck with a livewire when he reaches the top of her mound. Her hand shoots down, grabs his wrist, digging in her nails, and he stops. Waits. Breathes. Give her the chance to do the same. She’s rigid beside him. “Nat, darling, look at me.”

Her eyes pop open and focus on him. He gives a comforting smile before leaning down to kiss her. Here again, he waits, lets her decide when and how much. She controls it, deepens it when she wants. And he lets her move his hand how she wants. The sharp bite of her nails into his wrist loosens slowly, and she squirms like she’s fighting with herself. Carefully he pushes a finger through her folds, the wetness there easing the way against sensitive skin. She cries out into his mouth, shoving her hips up, and he calms her with another kiss and by stilling his hand. When she settles into his unfamiliar touch, she shifts his hand lower, guiding him where she wants, and rolls her hips into his fingers.

Steve feels like he’s going to explode. He’s so hard it’s throbbling as he watches her use his fingers to get herself off. She wiggles her hips, spreading her legs more, easing into this with breathy moans and sweet sighs. His hand goes lax as she flattens her palm over it, curling her fingers atop his and making his curl in turn. He’s not an expert at sex by any means, but he knows where to touch a woman to make her feel good, and she’s guiding him right to it. He rubs his fingers there, caressing the bundle of nerves, and Nat cries out. She’s quivering hard now, her pale skin stark against the dark blue of his bedding, and he watches, transfixed as she takes what she wants, as she loses herself in pleasure. Her hips roll and undulate, and she’s pushing and pulling his hand against her core, touching herself through him.

It’s probably the hottest thing he’s ever seen.

Eventually, when she seems frustrated that it’s not enough, he slips his fingers lower. The warm, slick heat of her is intoxicating, and she juts her hips up to meet him as he touches her, as his index finger slips inside her. Oh, God. She feels incredible. She’s tight and hot and wet, clamping down on him almost like she can’t decide if she wants to push him out or pull him in. He tries not to think about what that’d feel like on his dick, but it’s pretty damn hard not to. He thrusts his hips into her thigh before he can stop himself, wincing at the discomfort of keeping himself confined in his pants. His boxers and jeans are too rough, not right and not enough, and he groans.

Her eyes slipped shut again during all that, but now she sharply looks at him. “No, no,” he gasps. He leans over to kiss her, breathing heavily. “I’m okay. It’s fine. It’s fine. You okay?”

She responds with a needy sob, shoving his hand down deeper into her and lifting her hips off the bed. She plants her feet there and works her body the way she wants, the way she needs, gripping his hand so hard that he doesn’t think he can pull away even if he wants to. He doesn’t want to. He’s absolutely entranced, feeling how hot and wet she is, listening to the sound of it, watching his fingers disappear inside as she pushes them in and rocks her hips to bring them out. As she fucks herself on them. God. It gets to be too much for her to handle, and she whines in frustration.

Lead. She’ll follow. He leans over again to swallow her frenzied moans, knocking her hand away a bit and thrusting two fingers back inside her. She grabs his jeans, tugging on the belt loops, and
screams into his mouth. The wet sounds of him touching her faster and faster fill the silence, that and her whimpers and harsh breaths. His heart’s pounding in his ears. He stills his fingers to cup her sex, and she practically keens in disappointment. "Shhh," he whispers into her lips. "Let me?"

She nods frantically, so he works his thumb through her folds and find the place that drives her wild. It does the second he caresses it, rubbing his thumb right over it carefully. She goug ses her nails into his sides, pulling back from his mouth to cry out again. He touches again and again, using the rougher edge of his thumbnail to torment her sweetly. She’s shaking wildly, bucking more and more. He knows she’s almost there, and it feels hard-fought, hard-won, long in coming. He wants her to have it. He’s never wanted something so much in his life.

He leads her there. His fingers push back inside her, thrusting deep, and his thumb presses down hard. She keens, frenzied, still dancing on a knife’s edge. He wraps his arm around her, pulling her body up as she shakes and rises and arches against him, and drops his face to her take her nipple back into his mouth. One hard suck, one more deep thrust of his fingers, one last rub of his thumb, and she’s coming.

He holds her tight through her climax. Her inner walls clamp down on his fingers, and every muscle in her body goes taut. She yanks at his hair, scratching her nails across his back, heaving a soft, sobbing wail. She’s even more beautiful as she lets go and rides the waves of it, jerking and quaking in his arms, hair mussed and skin sweat-slicked and lips cherry red from kissing. Her face is taut with nothing but pleasure. It’s incredible, watching her like this, watching her feel this good. It’s sweet affirmation, tender validation. It’s trust and love. She’s giving it to him.

Eventually she quiets. Relaxes slowly. Catches her breath. Opens her eyes, freeing tears that have been trapped. She’s calm, though, and peaceful. Quiet with gratitude and appreciation. She looks blissful, euphoric, dazed and lost and content to be that way. Her lips twist into a little smile, but she doesn’t seem capable of talking. He doesn’t need her to. Carefully he pulls his fingers free of her, lays them on her belly where she’s still breathing in heavy, spent gusts. He smiles, too. "You okay?"

Still she doesn’t speak. She sags in his arms, gloriously limp and pliant, panting against his neck. Steve watches her calm down and work through the aftershocks, the lingering kiss of pleasure, the emotions that come after it. He wipes his hand on his jeans before threading his fingers through her hair and tucking her closer to him. For a long moment, they just breathe. He kisses her forehead. "Nat?"

Suddenly she’s grabbing at his pants, unbuttoning them, pulling down the zipper. He jerks in surprise. He almost forgot how desperate he is, and second the pressure’s gone from his erection, it springs up almost painfully. "Nat, you don’t–"

“I want to,” she whispers, fumbling to push his jeans off his hips. “I want to. Please let me.”

“Oh, God, yes.” She grabs the length of him, squeezing and stroking right through his boxers. Then she puts his hand on her breast before wrapping an arm around his back and tugging in him over her. Christ. He’s already so close that he hardly lasts long at all, thrusting into her hand, her nipple a pebble under his palm, in his mouth when he latches onto it, as she holds his face there and lets him take what he needs. He comes with a cry into her skin, spilling hot and wet into his underwear and her hand. The world whites out with it, and he squeezes his eyes shut against the pleasure shooting up his spine.

When he comes back to himself, he finds he’s slumped onto her. Panic jolts through him at being such a stupid, selfish moron, and he scrambles to get off, grimacing at the wetness of his release all over her stomach and his, feeling like a jackass.
She doesn’t let him go, though. Of course she doesn’t. She rolls over a bit, tugging him down to lay at her side. His jeans are practically hanging off his ass and his boxers are soaked. He doesn’t care. He just wants to know that she’s okay.

She is. She kisses him sweetly, melting into his arms, curling into him and cuddling close. The room is quiet again, warm, smelling of sex, but they’re both breathing easily, satiated and feeling safe. She tucks her face into his throat, works her lips over the thrumming of his pulse. “Don’t ever leave me,” she whispers. “Please.”

Steve closes his eyes and folds himself around her completely. Arms around her small body, one hand splayed on her back and the other cupping the back of her head, leg thrown over her hip, trapping her against him… This is one more thing he can do.

Keep her as close as he can.

After they clean up, Nat falls asleep in his bed. By the time he gets out of the shower, she’s already out, dressed in a pair of cotton sleep pants and an old, comfortable t-shirt. Max is at the foot of his bed, and he lifts his head and wags his tail a little when Steve comes over. He rubs Max’s head a moment before digging around in his dresser and closet for a clean pair of jeans and an old West Point sweatshirt. Then he heads out to the kitchen, closing the door behind her so she can sleep. He needs to take his meds, and he’s contemplating getting his tablet so he can maybe get some work done. It’s almost ten o’clock, and he’s tired, but he doesn’t feel like sleeping.

Liho stares at him, smug almost. “What?” he says after he pours himself a glass of milk. “Think I did good, thank you very much.” He’s a little smug, too, smiling like a moron and downright pleased with himself as he starts lining up his meds. He pauses to open a can of cat food. “Yeah, why should I care what you think anyway? You eat crap like that. Gross. Seriously.” Liho comes over and purrs, rubbing his hand as he dumps the disgusting glop into her bowl. “Enjoy.” He pets her a few times as she settles into her meal.

He’s almost through with downing his pharmacy-worth of pills when he hears someone outside his apartment. For a second, he’s worried, because it’s pretty late, but then he remembers that Thor said he’d stop by to collect his stuff. He takes his glass of milk and heads out of the kitchen to unlock the door.

But the sound of keys jingling makes his blood run cold. No one aside from Sam and Nat has keys to his apartment. No one.

Except the super. And that’s exactly who’s there when the door opens. Schmidt. He’s pulling the key from the lock, the key that’s on a huge ring of keys to every apartment in the building. Steve’s stops dead in his tracks. Shock leaves him reeling. “What…”

Any thought that this is something okay vanishes when he sees the two men with Schmidt. He recognizes one of them instantly. The hard face and crew cut and vicious eyes. It takes him a second to put it together. The asshole who pushed him on the street. The day Nat ran, he was barreling out of their building, shoving Steve over, calling him a cripple…

Suddenly it clicks. Rumlow.

Rumlow’s here. Schmidt’s letting him in to Steve’s apartment. Schmidt’s letting him in.

That means somehow Schmidt figured it out. Schmidt and Pierce. Zola. They sold them out to Rumlow. To Alexei.
Alexei knows where Nat is.

Steve jerks back, furious and horrified, and Schmidt glares at him, that same malicious glare he had earlier that day. He opens the door wider to let Ruml and the other guy – has to be Rollins – through, and then leaves, closing it behind them. Rollins is bigger, beefy, muscle pure and simple. He looks like a vicious bastard. And he charges inside the apartment, grabbing Steve’s arm and shoving him from the door. Steve trips over his feet, his glass of milk slipping from his fingers and shattering. Pain blasts down his face when a fist smashes into it, and the next thing he knows, he’s on the floor and his skull feels like it’s broken. He coughs out a mouthful of blood, the warm, coppery flood of it making him gag. He shudders and struggles to stand.

“On your fucking knees!” Rumlow snarls, and Steve grimaces. “Get your hands up! On the back of your head, motherfucker! Right now!”

Fuck, that’s a gun. That’s a gun in Rumlow’s hand, and it’s jabbed right into his temple. He obeys, cringing and lifting his hands and weaving his fingers together on the back of his head. The gun presses firmer into his skin. Rumlow looms over him. “Where the fuck is she? Huh?”

Steve grits his teeth. His skull still feels like it’s splitting from the punch. “Who?”

That earns him another blow, this one with the gun. Rollins grabs his hair and hauls him back up after he’s sent sprawling. Steve chokes, stiff with terror, and for a horrible second, he’s back there, back in that cave on his knees with Bucky screaming. He’s back there, and he can’t do anything to fight back.

He’s not back there, though. He’s not. Rumlow’s in his face, not the monster from his past, and he’s pushing the gun into his forehead with painful insistence. “Don’t you play games with me,” he hisses, practically spitting in Steve’s face. Steve closes his eyes, shaking with the nearness of the flashback just as much as he is with the gun to his head. “We know she’s with you. The people who own this building? They saw you together today.” When? Steve can’t think. His head hurts too much. “I know you know where she is.” Rumlow shoves the gun into his forehead, and Steve can’t help but recoil. He can’t go far with Rollins gripping his hair. “You fuck the boss man’s wife without his say so? That gets you killed. So I got no problems with putting a bullet in your brain right now, pretty boy. You better fucking cooperate and tell us where she is.”

Steve balls his hands into fists behind his head. “Fuck you,” he snapped. He needs to lie, needs to say something fast. “She’s not here. She ran again.”

Rumlow glares at him. “You’re a terrible liar.” Steve schools his face into a glower, so furious he’s shaking. If he screams to Nat now, maybe that’d give her a chance to run. He should because there’s no getting out of this, but he’s too terrified to let them know where she is. He can’t let them know. “How about this? I haul the whore out of your bed and back to her man, and instead of just shooting you in face, I let her watch me do it. Huh? How’s that sound?”

Steve struggles. He can’t stop himself. Rage rises up inside him, and he’s fighting, not giving a fuck about the gun and the fact that he’s outnumbered and lamed by his leg and his pounding head. It doesn’t matter. Rollins smacks him again, and he’s down on his floor, his ears ringing and blood filling his mouth. Max is barking. Rumlow’s turning toward his bedroom.

No!

“Nat!” he yells. “Nat! Get the gun!”

It’s too late. Rumlow kicks his bedroom door open. Max is barking louder and louder, and Steve’s
blood goes cold with terror. He can’t move; Rollins has him pinned prone, boot on his back and another gun pointed at his head. It doesn’t matter. He fights. He has to. He has to protect her. Her scream cuts through the air, cuts into him like a knife, and he heaves a frustrated sob. He hears something crash, and Nat’s crying again, shouting at Rumlow to get away from her. Max yowls. Christ, he’s helpless. They’re going to hurt her, take her back, and he’s fucking helpless–

There’s a bang to his left, and his front door breaks open. He twists, sees a big form with long blond hair flying toward him. *Thor.* Rollins whirls, ripping his gun up to aim at Thor as he charges him, and Steve jerks in horror at the sound of it firing. Thor doesn’t stop, though, roaring, throwing his massive weight into Rollins and tackling him, knocking him off Steve. Immediately Steve scrambles up, pushes forward, practically dragging his bad leg because it’s not fucking working. He races into his bedroom.

Nat’s on the bed, and Rumlow’s got her hair. He’s dragging her across the mattress by it, gun in his other hand, teeth gritted and face pinched with frustration and wrath. Steve doesn’t waste a second. He used to be a fighter, a soldier, and he knows how to protect people. So he does. He drops low, barreling across his room and ramming Rumlow hard. He wraps his arms tight around the guy’s waist, and they’re tumbling across the bed. Nat shrieks. Steve and Rumlow hit the floor on the other side of the bed in a tangle of limbs. Steve’s already got his wrist, and he slams it down hard, once, twice, and the gun clatters away under his bed.

Rumlow spits rage at him, punching him hard in the side of the head. The strike hurts badly, knocking Steve from on top of him and into his night stand. The lamp crashes from it, breaking against the floor and sending the room deeper into darkness. Rumlow’s back on his feet in a blink, and he kicks Steve hard, right into his injured side. It’s on purpose, no fucking doubt about it. Agony burns up and down Steve’s flank, his hip throbbing like it’s been jolted with electricity, like he’s been shot again, and he can’t get air into his lungs. They’ve seized up, and he’s seeing stars.

And Nat’s screaming again. “Steve!”

He grabs Rumlow’s foot as the other man scrambles toward her. Finally sucking in a desperate breath, Steve holds on tight, squeezeing with all his strength and twisting hard. “Nat, run! *Run!*”

He can’t see if she does. Enraged, Rumlow whirls, yanks his foot away, and tries to kick him again. Steve rolls away from the blow, scrambling to his feet and falling into a defensive stance. Rumlow comes at him, all power and fury, but Steve’s stronger, faster, and smarter. He blocks the sloppy, overpowered blows, grabs Rumlow’s arm as he sidesteps, and spins him around. He slams him into the wall beside the bed, and more of his things fall to the floor. The whole bed gets shoved over. Rumlow struggles to get himself free, spitting curses left and right. “You stupid asshole! You think you can protect her? You’re dead! *You’re fucking dead!*”

Steve growls, ramming Rumlow into the wall again, but the guy pushes back hard, throwing himself back into Steve’s midsection. Steve’s weak hip buckles and he loses his footing. He ends up flat on his back in a mess of fallen books and papers. Rumlow’s on him instantly. Steve suffers another vicious kick to his ribs, barely scrambles away to avoid the next, but his damn side is failing more and more and he can’t move fast enough. Rumlow gets him right in the back, a sharp blow to his spine that drops him with a cry. The guy is savage, kicking him with abandon.

“Stop it!” Nat screams. Steve blinks tears from his eyes to see her standing on his bed, gun in her hands. The gun from her emergency bag. That’s open on the floor by the door. Her eyes are full of tears and she’s shaking. Her shirt’s ripped. There’s blood on her chin. “Leave him alone!”

Rumlow obviously isn’t threatened, though he does back off. “The little Black Widow tries to bite,” he sneers with a smirk. “Come on, honey. You know better. You’re only good for one
Steve fucking sees red. He howls in anger, lurches up off the floor, and tackles Rumlow again. They hit the side of the bed, bouncing harshly against the mattress. Rumlow’s dazed with shock, kicking and punching but it all misses. Steve twists them around, gets on top of him, straddles him, and hits him. Hits him hard. Hits him over and over again. His knuckles split, his hand aches, but he doesn’t feel the pain. He doesn’t feel Rumlow trying to buck him off or rip at him or grab his hip and hurt him more. He just keeps hitting. All that anger and hatred that’s been simmering inside him since Nat ran… It comes out in a flood. “You goddamn son of a bitch!” he cries, fist slamming into Rumlow’s face, one after another after another. “You don’t touch her! You hear me? You don’t fucking touch her!”

“Steve! Steve, stop!” Nat’s shout cuts through the haze in his head. Her hand catches his wrist as he rears back for another punch. “Stop!”

He stops. Rumlow’s groaning underneath him, face bloodied. He’s practically unconscious. Steve scrambles up and off him, breathing heavily, reeling in shock. He stumbles to Nat’s side and takes her arm, takes the gun. He aims it at Rumlow. The guy’s not moving where he’s lying beside Steve’s bed. He’s down. Not moving. Steve swallows hard, struggling to catch his breath. Then he pushes Nat behind him, pushes her backwards across the mess of his bedroom. His eyes never leave Rumlow, not for a second, and the gun doesn’t waver. They reach the door, and Steve backs out, keeping Nat protectively behind him. He pulls the door shut.

Max is there outside, whining. His paw is bloody and he’s barely walking, and Steve feels sicker seeing that. Thor’s there, too, his shirt wet and soaked red on his right arm over his bicep. Christ. In his desperation to get to Nat, he completely forgot about Thor, that Thor saved them. He looks okay, terrified but okay, and Rollins is prostrate on his floor, also seemingly unconscious. Obviously Thor knocked him out if the huge welt on his head is any indication.

Steve can’t catch his breath. He grabs Nat’s shoulders. “Are you okay?” he asks frantically. “Are you?”

She nods, stricken beyond words. “What the hell happened?” Thor gasps.

“We need to go,” Steve says, and he knows it in his bones. “He knows she’s here.”

“Who?” Thor asks, shaking his head, face flushed in fear and pain. “Who?”

There’s no time to explain. Max is hurt, and Thor’s hurt, and there are two unconscious mobsters in his apartment, and the building isn’t safe. They need to run. He leaves them for a second, racing back into his bedroom to get his shoes and her emergency bag. Rumlow hasn’t moved, but Steve doesn’t stay longer than necessary, keeping the gun on him while he frantically grabs what they need. Every second feels infinite, like Rumlow’s going to spring up and come after them again, and it’s all he can do to keep going.

When he’s got everything, he shuts the door behind him again. Then he rushes to the kitchen, taking up his bag from where it’s by the door and dumping all his medications into it. His phone’s on the counter, and he takes that, too, as well as its charger. “We can’t stay here,” he breathlessly declares. “Schmidt told them where she is!”

Thor’s completely lost. “What? We need to call the police!”

“No,” Nat whispers, shaking her head. “No!”
Steve stuffs his feet into his shoes without socks and puts the gun into the waistband of his pants. He’s across the room again, glancing at Rollins once to make sure he’s still out, at his bedroom door to make sure it’s still closed. Christ, they’re right there. Faster. Get out. He snatches up Nat’s shoes and gives them her. She’s shaking so bad that she can hardly manage getting them on, and he’s wrapping her jacket around her while she’s floundering. Once she’s ready, he crouches beside Max where he’s collapsed. Steve’s worried and furious beyond thought, and the dog whines in pain as Steve touches him. His paw looks like a mess, and there’s blood in his fur. Steve pulls him close, petting him frantically. “Jesus. God, I’m sorry!”

“Let me.” Thor moves fast, lifting Max into his arms easily despite the dog’s size and his bleeding arm. Steve takes both the bags and his coat, and they rush out of the apartment.

Schmidt’s out there in the hallway, waiting like a fucking snake. Obviously Thor didn’t realize he was involved when he busted the door down, and the man’s glare goes wide at seeing Steve come out of his apartment very much alive.

Alive and furious. Steve snarls, moving fast even though his leg’s giving up on him, snatching the man’s shirt and twisting him around to ram him into the wall. “You bastard,” he hisses, holding his shirt tight by the collar. “They pay you off? Huh?”

Schmidt is viciously cold. “Yes,” he answers simply, completely undaunted by Steve’s rage, “and you better run, Captain. I’ve already called the police.”

Shit. Steve’s eyes go wide, his heart thundering, his blood cold. He lets Schmidt go and backs up. Run.

Thor is smarter than anyone gives him credit for. “Go,” he says. “I’ll take care of Max, get him to a vet.”

Nat’s white as a ghost. “Get Liho!”

“And make sure Liho is alright. Go, Steve. Hurry!”

Steve grabs Thor’s arm, pulling him with them toward the stairs. They’re running, feet pounding on the floor, the three of them clinging to each other. “You get out of here,” he says, holding the other man’s gaze when they reach the steps, trying to tell him everything with that because there’s no goddamn time. “Okay? Get out. Go to Tony’s. Get Sam. I don’t know…” He pets Max’s head, so shaken. “Jesus, you all could be in danger…”

“I will be careful,” Thor swears with a stiff, frightened nod, “and I will make sure our friends are.”

“If they know about me, they could know about all of you!”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll be fine.” Steve can hardly stand it, burying his face in Max’s bloody fur for a second. “You have to go. Take her some place safe!”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Run! He throws his bag over his shoulder, carries hers, grabs her hand. They run down the steps. There’s no pain, no doubt, nothing to slow him down or stop him. This is what he has to do, what he can do. And he’ll do it, no matter what. He loves her, and he’s not letting anyone hurt her.

They burst out into the chilly night. It’s drizzly now, cold for late September, but the cool moisture feels good on his battered, overheated face. He grabs Nat’s arm and tugs her to the left, to the shadowy alley beside their building. They shouldn’t stop – he knows that – but he does, because he has to be sure. He has to be. “Nat, Nat,” he gasps. He pulls her close, cupping her face
between bloody hands. “Did he hurt you? Did he touch you?” Aside from a fairly nasty red splotch on her cheek where Rumlow probably hit her and her ripped shirt, she seems fine. She’s not hurt. He needs to hear it, though. He needs to. “Nat, did he touch you?”

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head. Tears fill her eyes. “No! No!”

He kisses her forehead, holds her tight as she heaves a gasping sob into his shoulder. She can’t catch her breath. Neither can he. The minute that follows they spend just standing in the shadows, coated in rain and too terrified to move. She’s okay. Steve squeezes his eyes shut, holding her to him, trying to get past his relief. She’s okay. No one hurt her.

But they have to go. They have to. There are sirens in the distance, shrieking through the night. The cops are coming.

“We have to go,” Steve gasps. He holds her face again, holds her gaze. “I’m gonna protect you, okay? They won’t hurt you. I swear to you, Nat. I won’t leave you, and I won’t let them hurt you.” He kisses her hard before taking her hand as tightly as he can. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“Steve,” she whispers.

“Come on!”

He doesn’t look back as he runs, leading her down the street and deep into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Bunch of wonderful people have made amazing artwork for "Stay"! There’s this lovely piece from anundigestedappledumpling!
And this amazing artwork from vbprodz:
Plus more amazing art from faith2nyc, who's just as responsible for this story as I am:

And this amazing gifset made by the lovely sleepygrimm!

We also have lovely chapter artwork by our wonderful faith2nyc:
Thank you guys so much! Makes me smile like you won't believe. :-)

“I won’t let them hurt you. They’re hurting you, no. When your heart is breaking... You can follow me. You can follow me. I will always keep you safe. Follow me. You can trust in me. I will always protect you, love.”

— Muse, “Follow Me”
— Stay, Chapter 16

Written by: thegraytigress
Artwork by: faith2nyc
"Yeah, it’s plain to see that, baby, you’re beautiful and there’s nothing wrong with you.
It’s me. I’m a freak. But thanks for loving me ’cause you’re doing it perfectly.
There might have been a time when I would let you slip away.
I wouldn’t even try but I think you could save my life.
Just don’t give up; I’m working it out.
Please don’t give in. I won’t let you down.
It messed me up. Need a second to breathe.
Just keep coming around.
Hey, whataya want from me?”
– Adam Lambert featuring P!nk, “Whataya Want from Me”

They go to Sam’s. Steve can’t think of anywhere else they’ll be safe or anyone else they can trust. He doesn’t want to involve his friend; the mere thought of doing it turns his stomach, but he doesn’t think there’s a choice. If Schmidt or that Pierce guy sold them out to Alexei, then Alexei knows his name. It wouldn’t take much for them to connect him to Sam, to Tony, to anyone and everyone he knows. All his friends are at risk. However, they have to get out of the city, and he knows Sam will help them.

Begrudgingly.

“Fucking hell, Steve,” Sam whispers, gripping the steering wheel tightly as he drives them to LaGuardia. The airport’s just a few minutes away at this point. It’s past eleven o’clock now, so thankfully the roads are quiet. Steve’s glancing around constantly anyway, anxious and hypervigilant, eyes darting from road ahead to the side mirrors to the rearview mirror to the passenger’s window to forward out the windshield again. He doesn’t think anyone is following them, but he can’t be sure. He can’t be sure of anything anymore, except that he has to keep Nat safe.

He twists in a sudden jerk to check on her. She’s laying in the backseat of the SUV, curled into the leather, back to him and buried under their coats. Steve’s not sure if she’s sleeping. She’s definitely not engaged with what’s going on. Like the night she ran, she’s disconnected. Processing but not. Aware but detached. It’s not as if she’s not functioning because she is, but it’s with stunning stoicism and very little emotion. Since that teary kiss they shared outside their building, she’s been removed, silent, only speaking when spoken to. He can’t tell what she’s thinking, what she’s feeling, if she’s lost up in her head, in memories brought on by Rumlow’s attack. She has to be terrified. Steve’s terrified for her. And she has to be worried about the future from here on out. The future. Steve’s getting the impression she’s never been able to think about
that, and he appreciates why now, knowing what he knows. Experiencing it firsthand. Everything is up in the air, destroyed by a few minutes of betrayal, violence, and terror. They’re on the run. They’re being hunted in all probability, and there’s no assurance they can go back home.

That’s more than upsetting, and he can’t stop thinking about it. He can’t stop thinking about everything. His brain’s running in overdrive, fueled by fear and anxiety and worry. He’s worried that they left two very dangerous mobsters unconscious in his apartment with other innocent folk in their building totally unaware. He’s worried Rumlow and Rollins won’t be arrested (or they will and will be released right away) and are coming after them anew. He’s worried about the Langs across the hall, about Thor, about Tony and Pepper, about what’ll happen to Sam for getting involved. He’s worried about Max – oh, God, Max – and Liho and a million and one other things, his medical problems and Nat’s trauma notwithstanding. He’s fucking worried.

However, Nat’s quiet and maybe even peaceful like this is just another awful thing that’s happened to her. He can’t wrap his head around that.

“Steve.”

At Sam’s persistent voice, he turns back and forces himself to focus. “What?”

Sam glances at him out of the corner of his eye. “This is crazy.”

Slowly Steve sighs, trying to hang onto his composure. Sam’s said that probably a half a dozen times since they showed up at his door winded and beat up and frantic, Steve breathlessly apologizing and telling him that they needed a place to lay low for a bit. Of course, Sam took them in, patched up Steve’s bleeding face, iced his swelling jaw, and begged them to go to the cops. He knows about Shostakov, knows about the extent of the man’s power and his reach, but accepting that – that there’s no way out and no one they can trust – isn’t easy. Sam suggested calling the NYPD, calling Detective Barton, the FBI, anyone who can do something to protect them. Steve refused. He kept thinking about Clint and Maria that night in the precinct, practically whispering to each other in a closed room like anyone might be listening, trying to figure out how to bring Nat back with the moles in the department watching their every move… Clint on the car ride to Wanda Maximoff’s, clearly worn from years of sneaking around and clearly intimidated by the breadth of the corruption that’s chained and confined him for this long. Witness protection was never an option for Nat. That’s what he said, and that alone is a horrific sign of how dangerous the situation is. Christ, Steve’s too afraid even to call Clint now. He wants to, needs to, because even though he’s ex-military and has seen more than his fair share of combat, he doesn’t have a fucking clue how to proceed here. Getting out of the city makes sense, but beyond that?

*Find a safe place and hole up there.* That has to be their goal: getting away and staying low and quiet and out of sight. *Dump my phone and hers.* That is a definite must, too, something he wants Sam to do if Sam’s willing. Steve’s phone is legally hooked to his name, of course, and his address, and if Shostakov has his fingers in the NYPD or worse, he can maybe get access to that information and probably track his location. He doesn’t know about Nat, but right now anything she has seems suspect and not worth the risk. They can buy pay-as-you-go phones and get a hold of Barton that way. *Rent a car.* That’s a necessity. This is Sam’s parent’s SUV. They thankfully live not far from their neighborhood in Brooklyn, and they are thankfully out of town. Still, Steve doesn’t feel right taking their car, even if it will be safer than renting one. They need transportation, and it has to be transportation they can control. *Get cash.* *Somehow.* That’s not as clear to him. Via the same logic as with their phones, he figures paying for whatever they need with credit cards isn’t too safe or smart. It’ll be much better to use cash, but he’s not sure how they’re going to do that. He has thousands of dollars in his bank account, so access to immediate funds is not the problem. If Alexei can track his credit cards, though, he’ll sure as hell be able to
track his ATM card. Nat’s got some money in her emergency bag, but it’s only a few hundred dollars. That won’t last them too long. He’s not sure he should risk taking out more, but he reasons that if they’re going to put a blip on the map of where they are, it should all be together and at the airport, where the possible destinations they could have gone are many. That should at least slow Alexei down a little and buy them some time.

And then, of course, there are the bigger worries. Like how they’re going to stay ahead of the bad guys. Like how sore his side is and how much his head hurts, and not just from the beating he took. How in the world is he going to protect Nat when he can hardly protect himself? If Thor didn’t come in when he did, Steve knows he’d be dead and Nat would have been taken. Hell, if Nat hadn’t threatened Rumlow with the gun, the guy would have done a lot more damage that the bruises all over him. And that relates directly to Sam’s biggest concern. Maybe it should be a minor one in light of how serious what’s happening is, but it’s not and it’s inescapable. Steve has enough of his drugs to last him a couple weeks plus his rescue medication, but that doesn’t change the fact that he’s one sick man planting himself between the fucking Russian mafia and his girlfriend. Crazy? Doesn’t quite cover it. He knows how to fight, how to use a gun, how to kill, but none of what he learned as a soldier is going to make a bit of difference if he has a seizure when he needs to put those skills to use. He doesn’t know if he can do this.

I have to.

“There,” Steve murmurs, pointing to the exit ramp that’ll take them to the bank of car rental places at the airport.

At first, Sam says nothing as he turns off the road, expression grim. As they get closer, though, the lights overly bright and a bit blurry through the streaks of drizzle on the windshield, he doesn’t hold it in anymore. His voice is soft and terrified. “You can’t do this.”

“Christ, Sam—”

“If these guys, if her ex-husband, is as dangerous as you say, they’ll kill you.” Steve grimaces, biting his lower lip hard enough that he tastes blood again. Sam glances in the rearview mirror, clearly checking to see if Nat’s awake. It’s still not clear if she is, but that doesn’t stop Sam, though he does lower his voice even further. “Running after her a couple weeks ago? That was one thing. It was crazy, too, but this is making that seem like the sanest, smartest thing in the world.”

Steve’s temper’s fraying. “What do you want me to do? Let them hurt her again? Let her run by herself? Face this by herself?”

Now it’s Sam’s turn to wince. He pulls into a parking spot outside one of the rental care places. Thankfully they’re still open, though not for much longer if the hours posted on the door are any indication. He shuts the car off. “No, of course not,” he says, closing his eyes wearily. An uneasy silence descends on them. Steve feels itchy with the need to move, but pain and his own exhaustion and the weight of everything pin him into his seat for a moment. Sam exhales slowly, and Steve watches him blink back wetness in his eyes. “But I don’t want this, either. Christ, there’s gotta be some other way.”

Steve doesn’t think there is, nothing other than turning themselves over to the cops and praying they end up with people who aren’t on the Shostakov family’s payroll. That’s even more insane to him, rolling the dice that way. “I can’t let her do this alone. I look back now, on how she stayed with me after my accident—”

“Steve.”
“And I didn’t even realize then what she was risking to do it. These bastards were hunting her, and she put everything she had on the line to take care of me. How can I do anything less? I love her. I can’t let them hurt her and I can’t let her go.” He knows he said the same things to Sam that night he went after Nat a couple weeks ago. They didn’t convince his friend then, and he’s not sure they will now, now when the stakes are even higher.

But Sam just looks scared and frustrated. He’s chewing the hell out of his lower lip, staring at the rental care place like he wants to scream. “Where’re you gonna go?”

Steve sighs. “I don’t know. Out of the city at least. Jersey?”

“And then?”

He doesn’t know for sure. “Lay low until I can get a hold of Barton. He’ll know what to do.” \_I hope.\_ Sam shakes his head. “Your plan sucks.” Steve’s lips curl into a rueful smile. “I should come with.”

“No.”

“Dude—”

“No. I can’t do that to you. I can’t ask that. This isn’t your fight.”

“Like it’s yours?” Sam turns to him. Glares even. “That’s a pretty fucking nice double standard you got going there, Rogers. You’re doing this for her to keep her safe, but I can’t do anything to keep you safe?” Steve struggles to hold onto his composure. He knows Sam means well, that Sam’s just as terrified and worried as he is, but he doesn’t want Nat to hear and think even for a second that he’s not willing to do this. He glances over his shoulder again, but she hasn’t moved even though the car stopped. And he opens his mouth to retort, but Sam’s already acquiescing. “You need to call me. Call as soon as you can.”

It’s possible Alexei can track down Sam’s phone, Steve supposes, but it’s probably not as likely. There also has to be a trade-off between paranoia and prudence, between being safe and being scared over everything. Nat’s been toeing that line for years; she knows better than anyone how it feels. Right now Steve’s belly is tied into knots and he doesn’t know what’s right. “I’ll buy some phones first thing tomorrow and let you know where we are.”

Sam doesn’t seem satisfied. “Okay. Give me yours.” Steve does, both his and Nat’s. “I’ll toss them out somewhere.”

“And you should get out of the city, too. Go to your sister’s.”

“Steve—”

“I gotta know you’re safe, too. You and Don and Tony. Please.”

Another heavy sigh accompanies Sam shaking his head. “Alright. You want me to rent this car?”

“No.”

Both of them turn to see Nat sitting up in the back. She wipes a hand down her face before pushing the messy mass of her brown hair away. She shivers through a breath, blinking what Steve knows are tears from her eyes, before focusing on them. “I’ll do it.”
“Nat, you don’t–”

Her eyes are so damn stoic, almost cold, as she grabs her bag. “I’ve got fake IDs. I can handle it.” She opens the back door of the car and scooches across to get out before Steve or Sam can stop her.

Steve lurches, grasping the door handle and trying to go after her. Sam takes his arm. “Let her go, man.” Steve stops, wincing in pain, staring as Nat shoulders her bag and boldly heads toward the building. She pauses outside, and his worry ramps up even further as she fumbles in her bag. Out comes a compact. She’s quickly, expertly covering up the bruises on her face with make-up. She’s doing it like she’s done this before, many times before, and he can’t shake the image of her standing in a bathroom, wiping away tears, doing her best to hide injuries with concealer and blush and eyeshadow, putting herself back together after Alexei broke her apart. He can practically see her slipping into an act, the way she’s painting her face and gathering her cool afterward, the way she’s putting everything away and tossing her hair back. The way she walks tall with her shoulders back and even a little confident swagger to her step. She’s smiling now but not in a way Steve’s ever seen. It’s flirty, maybe, and overly sweet, but not Nat at all. Not genuine. He winces again before he remembers it’s all an act. She’s making herself into someone else, someone who hasn’t been raped or beaten or hurt. She’s going in there to pretend. It’s alarming.

Sam sighs. “She’s gotta do what she needs to. And she knows what she needs. Okay? Let her go.” Steve watches her through the window of the store, watches her put on a dazzling smile despite how late it is and talk with the young woman behind the desk. She’s like a totally different person, just like that.

The sound of Sam’s door opening jolts Steve from staring. “I’m gonna go to that gas station over there.” Sam points across the road. “Stay here.”

“Sam–” Sam quickly shuts the door and walks off at a brisk pace, crossing the road fleetly with his head down and his hands in his jeans pockets. Steve watches him go and then turns around again. The car is disturbingly silent with just him in it. He swallows down the lingering taste of blood from where one of Rumlow’s punches gnashed his teeth into his cheek and returns to watching Nat. She’s laughing at something. Of course, he can’t hear what, but she’s laughing and smiling and he can’t fathom how effortlessly she’s putting on this happy, breezy show. He wonders how many times she’s lied like this, faked being okay. He’s absolutely flummoxed, amazed but not in a good way. The enormity of what’s happening sinks its vicious teeth into him.

It’s not forever. We’ll hide and then we’ll call Barton and he’ll help us get home.

He looks down, unable to observe anymore. His head throbs all the sudden, the pain so sharp that he nearly blacks out. During the fight, the adrenaline rush protected him in a sense, kept him from feeling anything too acutely. As the immediate danger has dissipated, though, everything’s coming back harshly. He’s been battling a migraine since they left Sam’s apartment. His chest and side are incredibly tender. Things don’t look right, blurry and a little distant. He doesn’t feel right, either. He can’t say what it is exactly, a tickling tingle working its way over his nerves like he’s uncomfortable in his own skin. It feels a bit like an aura but not enough to do anything other than set him on edge. He reaches into his backpack to make sure his rescue meds are there and easily accessible. Then he’s pulling out some painkillers. He doesn’t want to be fuzzy right now, not when he needs to be on alert, but maybe being a little hazy is preferable to being useless because of the pain. He downs the pills dry.

Nat’s coming back out, smiling and waving a bit at the woman behind the counter with a set of keys in her hand. Steve can’t hold back anymore. He shoves open the door and steps out into the chilly, drizzly night. Nat’s shivering as she comes closer, and it’s not because she’s cold and wet.
He takes her arm and tugs her closer. “You okay?”

She doesn’t relax into him, pulling away almost instantly. “We should go.”

It hurts, how dead her voice sounds, how she doesn’t want his comfort and doesn’t even answer his question. He reels with that a moment, with how rigid she is, before getting his body in gear and collecting the rest of their things. He takes their coats and the duffel that has clothes he’s borrowed from Sam. The jeans he has on are a little too big in the waist and a tad too short, but they fit well enough. Sam gave him another pair and a bunch more shirts, too, as well as some toiletries for them both. Hopefully they won’t need more than a day or two worth of stuff. There’s a blanket there, too, in case they need it. Steve also takes his bag from the front seat and thinks about offering to take Nat’s but decides against it. With the way she’s holding it so tightly, he’s not sure she wants him to. She’s staring at the road, eyes empty and face tense with something he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t like this at all. He checks the gun where it’s in his bag.

Sam comes back just as Steve’s finishing up. He has a plastic bag from the convenience store, which he hands to Nat. “Water, soda, couple of energy drinks. Snacks.” He sighs. “And here.” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a wad of bills. That he gives to Steve. Steve adjusts all the crap he’s carrying to free his hands better. There’s a few hundred dollars there. “The ATM won’t let me take out any more,” Sam says, and he sounds honestly apologetic.

That only makes Steve’s guilt worse. He shakes his head. “I can get money.”

“Save yours for later. Use this now. It’s safer.”

Nat’s watching the two of them with guarded eyes. “We should go,” she says again, this time more insistent and less as an excuse.

Sam doesn’t waste any more time, grabbing Steve’s shoulders and pulling him into a hug. “Jesus Christ,” he whispers, shaking. “God, be careful.”

“You too. You too!”

“And don’t you dare forget to call me. You hear me?”

“I won’t,” Steve promises. He drops some of their stuff to get his arms around his friend.

Sam squeezes him harder. There’s so much that Steve knows Sam wants to say, more things about how dangerous this is and how Steve’s too sick to handle it and how he needs to be home to participate in the study. Missing appointments is going to jeopardize his chances of receiving the surgery for his epilepsy, and they all know it. Christ, he has an appointment with Doctor Cho in two days, and he probably won’t be there. It’s been the proverbial elephant in the room since they left Sam’s apartment, just how bad this is for Steve’s future. But he doesn’t care, can’t care, and Sam loves and respects him too much to push him about it.

Steve pulls back after a moment, feeling the night press down around them. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Sam nods. He wipes at his eyes and looks at Nat. Now she’s not strong enough to hide how this is hurting her. Despite their differences in the past, Sam pulls her close into a hug, and she lets him. “Stay strong.”

He’s gone after that, after those scant few seconds, and Steve and Nat are alone and roaming the rental place’s lot looking for the car. They don’t talk. It’s raining more now, and it’s cold and miserable as they walk up and down the line of parked vehicles. Finally, they find it. It’s a black
Toyota Corolla, a nice one though the inside smells a bit like cigarettes. Steve wrinkles his nose as he loads the trunk and backseat with their things.

Nat says nothing as she slides into the driver’s seat. It’s unspoken that he’s not going to be behind the wheel, not after the accident and not with all his other issues. Seeing her driving is odd, though, and he doesn’t really know why. It’s one more thing about this crazy, difficult night that just seems out of place, like a thorn digging into his heel every time he steps on it.

The silence continues as they pull out of the parking spot and head back out onto the road. Steve sees that Sam’s SUV is already gone, which only adds more eerie finality to everything. Nat doesn’t say anything as she drives back out onto the bigger roads away from the airport. They’re heading out of Queens before she finally speaks. “Where should we go?”

*Out of the city.* Beyond that… “North, I guess?” Steve offers. “Take 17 into New Jersey. We’ll find a hotel somewhere across the Hudson.”

Nat clenches the steering wheel a little harder. She’s sitting very straight, very tense. “I don’t know the way,” she admits in a soft voice. “I took the bus before. I…”

He doesn’t know either. He’s been to New Jersey before, been to upstate New York, but not often and not recently aside from the night he and Barton chased her down. Without their phones, GPS isn’t an option. *People got around just fine before.* It’s stupid to feel this helpless. He walked across a fucking desert in Afghanistan bleeding and barely conscious with nothing but a fool’s hope and the stars to guide him. They can do this. “We’ll figure it out,” he says. “It doesn’t matter where, just as long as we’re out of the city.” He’s not sure why getting out of the city has become this goal, like there’s some mythical barrier between Alexei and them if they can get across the river. It’s insane. “Let’s just get out of the city.”

They do. They drive for a while, heading northeast on Grand Central Parkway. There’s more traffic here in the city, and Steve figures if he can’t drive he can at least keep an eye out. Eventually they do cross the river on the George Washington Bridge, and it feels surreal and unnatural. It doesn’t quite bring the level of relief Steve hoped it would, but it’s something at least. A little sense of safety.

Nat doesn’t seem to sense that at all. She’s as tense now as she’s been since they rented the car. The silence is bothering Steve more and more. The lights on the New Jersey bank of the Hudson are blurry smears and blobs through the wet windshield, which seems disturbingly apropos considering nothing’s terribly clear about where they’re going or what’s going to happen.

Steve still doesn’t care for it, not one bit, so he lays his hand over Nat’s on the steering wheel. She gives a little jolt, one he doesn’t miss. He doesn’t let it dissuade him, though, and he takes her hand from the wheel and kisses it slowly. “You okay?”

He asked that before, and here it is again, and he gets about the same amount of response. She gives a sideways glance and a frown. She doesn’t really answer, not with words, but at least she lets him hold her hand. He sighs slowly, helplessness paining him more than his various hurts, and he wonders what to do and what to say. There’s no way he can make this better; he knows that. All those promises that came so easy before… He can’t find it within himself to say them again, not after this. “You want to talk?”

She turns more this time, offers a longer look than a glance. “No. It’s okay.”

“It doesn’t have to be about… About any of this.” That sounds stupid the second he says it.
She smiles a little, though. “You want to do more of the basics?”

He laughs, but he’s not sure he has it in him right now. He’ll do it for her, though. That helplessness that’s been plaguing him all week is sharp and undeniable now. He risks pulling her hand to his mouth for another chaste kiss, and it seems a little like stealing even though what they did right before all this is only a few hours past. It feels like a lifetime, and it feels like she’s pulling away. “If you want.”

She is pulling away, gently untangling her fingers from his to grip the steering wheel again. She doesn’t answer, and the conversation abruptly dies.

Not long after that, they’re wandering around New Jersey. It’s well after midnight now, and they’re both exhausted. Steve’s been blinking through his fatigue while watching behind them. “I don’t think anyone’s following us.” To that Nat nods but doesn’t say anything. Steve watches her. God, it hurts. It’s driving him crazy. “You want to stop somewhere?”

Again she’s silent, though he can see from the clouded look in her eyes and the grimace on her face that she’s thinking about it. It is a tough decision, and he doesn’t know the right answer (or if there even is a right answer). On the one hand, it may be good to put as much distance between them and Alexei and his thugs as possible. Hell, Steve would take Nat to Hawaii if it meant she’d never be harassed by them again. On the other hand, though, that’s not feasible, and if they’re going to try to make contact with Clint, it’d probably be good not to be so far away. More than that, though, she’s spent. He can see it. And he knows he is, too.

“Okay,” she timidly agrees.

They drive along Route 17 a little further, heading up through northern New Jersey. It’s a heavily populated area, and there are hotels everywhere. Steve has no idea if any one of them is better than the others. Is a chain safer than a mom-and-pop type place? He doesn’t have a clue. And he also doesn’t know if they should stop off the main road, which will make for an easier escape should anyone come after them, or if they should go looking in one of the many towns along the way, which may be less obvious to their pursuers. There’s no way to tell what the correct course is.

Nat decides, though he thinks it’s out of weariness and defeat more than anything else. She turns off 17 and heads into a town called Franklin. They drive around a little longer before they find a hotel. It’s nothing fancy, just a long rectangular building with a bunch of rooms, but it looks to be clean and in decent condition, and the lot as well as the lobby is well-lit. They pull into a spot, and Nat puts the car into park and turns it off. Then they sit, silent and hesitant. Steve looks around. Aside from wet trees and wet pavement, there’s nothing much out there. Even still, they’re both too afraid to move.

Steve swallows down his anxiety. This is ridiculous. He unsnaps his seatbelt and grabs his bag. “I’ll go check us in.” She doesn’t argue, and he gets out of the car and limps his way into the lobby.

It’s nice enough inside, again very clean and pleasantly furnished but without anything expensive or extravagant. The place seems to be family run. There’s an older lady at the front desk, and she looks up from her book, clearly surprised to see anyone coming in. “You’re just in time. I was about to close – oh, my,” she comments, her round cheeks paling. “Are you alright?”

Shit. He forgot that he’s a mess. He winces. “Yeah, yeah. Sorry.”

She shakes her head. “Why in the world are you apologizing, son? You look like someone beat
“You up!”

Goddamn it. “It’s nothing,” he says, coming closer and wiping a hand carefully across his swollen jaw. His brain is scrambling to cover this up. God, he’s a fucking idiot. “Got mugged down in the city this morning.” He prays the bruises don’t look as fresh as they feel. “First time I’ve ever been there, too. Flew in from out west, and some guy nailed me down by Grand Central just as I was heading up here to see my sister.” The lie comes surprisingly easily. He manages a weak smile and prays, too, that his Brooklyn accent isn’t too obvious. “Talk about bad luck, huh?”

She grimaces sympathetically. “The crime down there… My word, it’s awful.” Tell me about it.

“Well, can I help you?”

“I need a room for the night? Maybe for tomorrow, too. My sister and I haven’t quite decided what we’re doing yet, so I’m not sure.”

The lady nods and goes into her computer. “Alright. Not a problem.” Steve stands there, trying not to fidget or feel like he’s fucking this up, as she types away at the keyboard. “We’re actually pretty empty right now, so you can have your pick. How does 2-12 sound? All the way to the left on the top floor. It has a nice queen bed. We also have free cable TV and WiFi.”

It’s all the same to him. “Sounds great.”

“Can I have a credit card, please?”

He tries to school his features into something calm and confident, like Nat did before. “Um, actually since my wallet was stolen, I only have cash.” A tiny rush of pride tingles over him that his lie’s actually working out to his benefit. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out the roll of bills. “That okay?”

The lady looks uncertain. He has to admit it’s probably pretty weird. No one pays for things with actual money these days, and he’s pretty sure hotels like to have credit cards on file in case there are incidental charges or damages. He wouldn’t know much about that since he’s rarely ever stayed in one as an adult. This is the moment of truth because if she doesn’t take their money… “Please?”

“I’ll have to take a pretty hefty deposit,” she says like she’s trying to talk herself into it.

“I really appreciate it,” he answers, trying to seem earnest and desperate but not too desperate. “They took my wallet and all my credit cards. I already called and canceled them. My mom wired me money from home, so it’s all I have.”

She stares at him a moment more, like she’s judging him. Steve doesn’t know if he should try to look more tired, hurt, and pathetic to garner some sympathy or more confident and uncaring. Whatever he ends up doing works. “Alright, son. Here, you fill this out.” She hands him a check-in form.

This feels like way more of a victory than it should. “Thanks.”

“That’ll be $100 deposit plus $129 for the room tonight. If you decide to stay longer, you can pay me the next $129 before noon tomorrow. Or pay it all now.”

His brain completely shuts off. It’s like everything comes to a screeching halt. This hasn’t happened in a while, in a couple months at least, so it completely takes him by surprise. His heart skips a beat and his lungs lock up and his blood goes cold. He looks at the money in his hand and the form she wants him to fill out. It might as well be written in gibberish, and the dollars… The
numbers don’t make sense to him. Things that should be easy and simple and *engrained* into him aren’t there all the sudden, like he just can’t reach them, and the panic comes like it always does.

“Are you okay?”

*Lie.* He has to. He has to hide this. He gives a smile, nods, swallows down the painful knot in his throat. “Yeah. Been a… Been a long day.”

She nods sadly and hands him a pen.

_Fucking hell._ He tries to take a few deep, calming breaths as he takes it and turns to the form. The words blur together. He can’t fucking *read* them. He can’t make sense of it, and he can feel her eyes on him like a crushing weight. She’s going to notice something’s off. That panic makes the room spin, and he feels sick and useless. *Come on.* He knows he needs to stay calm. Getting upset only makes it worse. *Breathe. Focus.* He blinks and blinks to clear his vision, grasping the pen and steadying his hand. *You can do this.*

Thankfully, as he stands there and stares at the form, his brain snaps more into gear. Reading that huge blob of text about the agreement and room rental is impossible, so he ignores it and looks at the parts he needs to fill out. *Name.* He can do that. Can’t be his name, though. Can’t be something too fake sounding, either. He thinks a second, trying to get his brain to cooperate better. *Steven Thorston.* He figures Don won’t mind him borrowing his middle name. It’s the first thing that pops into his head, and it’s stuck there, so he writes it down.

*Address.* Damn it. His thoughts are so muddy that he can’t remember his own address or even what an address is supposed to look like. The sheet guides him a little. *Street.* *City.* *State and zip.* He stares uselessly before a thought streaks through his head. *Said I was from out west.* He starts making stuff up, writing it down. *221 Larch Lane. Omaha.* It takes him a second to come up with the state. *NE.* He puts down a zip. Puts down a phone number (is that the right number of digits? Christ, he doesn’t know). Struggles and struggles.

But when he’s through, it looks halfway decent. He thinks.

She’s waiting. Her eyes are a little suspicious. “How much again?” he asks, trying to seem surer of himself than he is, trying to act like he forgot what she told him instead of desperately needing another chance to understand what she said.

“For both nights or just tonight?”

*Keep it simple.* “Just… Just tonight for now.”

“Two thirty-six eighty-nine.”

That doesn’t help much. He looks down at the money. His hands shake as he flips through it. *Fuck.* He tries to parse what she said. *Two.* That means two hundred. He finds two hundred dollar bills. *Thirty-six.* Thirty-six dollars. That’s less than forty. He thinks two twenty dollar bills will do it then, and the cents don’t matter. He’s not sure – *why won’t my brain fucking work?* – but he has to take a chance, so he hands her what he’s pulled out and prays.

She doesn’t think anything of it, taking his form and his money and glancing at both. “Alright, Mr. Thorston. Let me just get your change.”

He wants to melt for how relieved he is. He did it. Giddy joy rolls over him in a warm wave, and he struggles not to smile too hard. “Sure. Thanks.”

She smiles, too, and finishes up, getting his change, his receipt, and the room key. She hands all
that to him. He doesn’t check the money or the receipt, stuffing them into his coat pocket. “Oh, one thing.” She hands him the form back. “You need to sign.”

He takes the pen and scribbles on the line. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Get some rest. You seem like you need it.”

He grabs his bag and nods vigorously. “I will.”

“Sleep well, Mr. Thorston,” she says, taking the sheet back. “Goodnight.”

“Thanks.” He breathes a sigh of relief as he grabs the key. If he spends a moment more looking at the form, he might realize he signed his real name – *Steve Rogers* – on the bottom instead of the fake one. As it is, he’s out the door and back to Nat without a second thought.

It’s early morning when Steve wakes up. He’s lying on the bed, on top of the bedspread, and Nat’s next to him. His arm is around her, but she has her back to him and is curled away. That’s how they fell finally asleep last night, that distance still between them.

That, and the gun’s that’s in Steve’s hand.

He winces. He shouldn’t have fallen asleep with it. Carefully he twists to set the gun to the nightstand beside the bed. Everything that was sore yesterday from the fight is much more so today. It takes quite a bit of effort to lean up, his midsection protesting with ripples of pain, but he gets himself sitting. Nat doesn’t stir, and he watches her sleep a second. The bruise on her face is red and angry, but she’s peaceful. Happy enough with that, he goes to get dressed.

A hot shower doesn’t do much to alleviate how battered he is. He lingers under the spray longer than he should; with Nat asleep, there’s no one keeping watch. Maybe it’s not necessary. The night was completely uneventful, though it took the two of them quite a while to relax and let themselves believe they are safe. The room’s good enough, and he can see the parking lot pretty well from the second floor, so he spent a couple hours in the chair by the window keeping watch while she tossed and turned on the bed. At some point in time she gave up on trying to sleep and just sat there, cross-legged and staring emptily into the darkness. He figured she might not want to sleep if he wasn’t, so he made himself abandon his post (honestly moving at that point was harder than staying awake, but sleeping in the chair seemed decidedly unappealing). Playing sentinel wasn’t doing either of them any favors. Once he laid down, she did, too, and they’d both drifted to a light and fitful slumber.

Today’s a new day. He’s not sure what that’ll mean, only that he wants it to be better for Nat.

He looks at himself in the tiny, fogged up bathroom mirror. There’s pretty nasty bruising down his right side. He knows nothing’s broken, but it hurts like a son of a bitch. It will for days more. He just got over the lingering tenderness in his chest from the accident, so the pain in his ribs is like a familiar but totally unwelcome companion. Grimacing, he finishes drying off, brushing his teeth, and changing into a clean pair of boxers and the jeans from yesterday. He walks out of the bathroom to get a shirt out of his bag.

Nat’s awake, sitting in bed, and when she sees him coming out, she looks sharply away. He’s frowns. He can’t help it. “What?”

She shakes her head, struggling with her emotions for a second. “Your chest.”

He sighs and gets the shirt faster. “It’s okay. It doesn’t hurt much. And you’ve seen me banged
up before.”

“Not because of me,” she replies, getting out of bed herself.

Steve sighs, putting the shirt on and fighting back his grimace as he does. “This isn’t because of you.”

She doesn’t argue, simply slinking off to the shower like she’s got something to be ashamed of. He doesn’t even get a chance to tell her to stop it before she’s closing the bathroom door. Gritting his teeth in frustration, he heads to the window where he tightly drew the blinds last night and peers through the curtains. It’s a gray, misty day, rainy still, and the parking lot looks about the same as it did last night when he studied it almost obsessively. The same cars are there. It’s quiet on the road just outside the motel, but then it’s not quite seven o’clock so that makes sense. He sees now that there are actually a lot of trees to the right, the leaves brown and yellow and drooping with rain. It’s fairly wooded here.

There’s nothing else, though. He lets the curtains close again and turns back to the little table in the room where they dropped the bags Sam gave them last night. Fishing out an energy bar, he pretty much devours it, having not realized how hungry he is. After that he drinks some water and has some more junk food until he’s feeling decent enough to take his meds. Picking them out of his bag, he contemplates maybe skipping some and avoiding the possibility of the more troublesome side effects but decides against it. Increasing the odds of having a seizure out here seems riskier.

Nat comes out of the bathroom with wet hair she’s still toweling dry. She’s dressed in yesterday’s jeans and a pink sweatshirt. Steve watches her finish up, brushing and braiding her damp hair, getting her socks and shoes on, pulling herself together. She doesn’t put any make-up on, and that only adds to her looking pale and broken open. When she’s done, she cleans up their stuff a little and sits down on the bed.

The silence is crushing. Steve still can’t stand it, so he gets up and offers her a bottle of water and an energy bar. “What do you want to do?” he asks. She takes the water and the food but makes no move to open either. It’s clear she doesn’t know or doesn’t want to say. Steve collects his sneakers and finds a pair of socks in the duffel bag. He tries for a bit of levity. “I’m not used to this whole on the run thing, so you’re gonna have to teach me.”

That falls flat. She just sits, staring down at her lap and fiddling with the wrapper on the energy bar. He sighs, getting his socks on. “Alright. How about we go find something real for breakfast and then buy a phone? That way we can call Clint.” Clint can help you. He’s thinking that more and more last night. Clint can help because I can’t. “At least let him know you’re safe, okay?”

“Okay.” It’s something at least, even if it makes Steve feel like shit for deciding he could handle this on his own. Maybe he made a mistake trying to get her out of the city. Maybe he should have called Clint right away, risked Alexei or whoever tracking them via his phone or hers. It’s too late now.

Steve stashes the gun back in his bag with all his meds, and together Nat and he lock up the room. They head back down to the car. Nothing looks quite real this morning, like how things are hazy and weird when you wake up from a nightmare. Nat takes the keys and gets in, and Steve settles back into the passenger side. Off they go.

Franklin is a pretty nice place, affluent and quaint-looking although being close to the city and the major commuter thoroughfares means it’s probably pretty populated. There are a lot of trees and
forested areas and neighborhoods tucked into them. The fall colors are bright despite the gray day and the persistent drizzle, adding cheery splashes of red, orange, and yellow to the monotony. They find a little diner not too far from the hotel. Steve spends a second checking it out after they park, and when it seems safe, they both go in.

Unsurprisingly breakfast is silent. They both order, but other than that, they don’t really talk. She picks at her food, sips her coffee occasionally, but mostly keeps an eye on the street. Steve eats his eggs, feeling miserable and helpless all over again. It’s like all the progress he made yesterday in trying to help her has vanished. And he knows that’s not her fault; Christ, he’s shocked she’s this together considering all she’s been through. But she can’t keep shutting him out. It’s almost like everything she’s had to keep him at arm’s length emotionally, his problems, her lies… It’s all gone, and this is what’s left. This broken shell of a woman.

They finish up eating. Steve pays (thankfully this time he manages it without any problems), and they’re back out in the car. It takes a bit of wandering around to find a store big enough that they can stay somewhat anonymous. They come upon a Wal-Mart, and they go in to get what they need. Nat heads to the electronics area to collect the phone, and Steve goes to the grocery section to get more food. Their room has a microwave, so he focuses on things they can cook that way. He probably overbuys – they’re not going to be stuck here that long – but he doesn’t care. He takes his stuff to the check-out and pays for it. Nat’s waiting in the car. They load up their things and head back to the hotel.

The room seems untouched, though they’re nothing but cautious as they check everything out. Then they bring their bags. While Nat organizes their food supply, Steve gets the phone out of the packaging and activates it. He hesitates a second before convincing himself it’s just stupid paranoia and punches in Tony’s cell phone number.

It rings a couple times, and Steve worries for a second that Tony may not answer just because he doesn’t recognize the number. He does, though. “’lo?”

“Hey, Tony. It’s Steve.”


Steve glances at Nat, who’s sitting on the bed again. “Yeah. Yeah, we’re okay. Roughed up, but okay.”

Tony’s next question is obvious and unanswerable. “Where are you?”

“It’s probably better that you don’t know. Is Thor okay?”

Tony’s sigh is shaky. “Yeah, he’s with me. He’s fine. And Max is fine.” Steve swallows a knot in his throat, closing his eyes and tipping his head back. Thank God. “His paw is pretty cut up, and he’s got a gash in his shoulder, but he should be okay. And Detective Hill – is that her name? Scary police ice woman. She got Nat’s cat out, so you guys don’t need to worry about it.”

It’s a relief, no doubt about it. He’s been trying not to think about Max, not to sink into the guilt, so hearing he’s okay feels like a giant weight is off his chest. “Great,” he manages. “Thanks.”

“Sam’s here with me. He wants to talk to you.”

“Okay. Be careful, Tony.”

“Right back at you.”
There’s a little bit of rustling, and then Sam’s voice comes on. “Steve?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Steve can hear Sam’s breathing hitch. “Thank God. I’m with Tony and Thor. Thor said the cops are all over your place. He ran into Hill. They have an APB out on you and on Natalie.” Fuck. “I don’t know anything more. Thor said that she said to stay out of it.”

Steve raked a hand through his hair. Even with Nat right there, he feels incredibly alone, like there’s this huge divide between him and his friends. For all intents and purposes, there is. “You probably should.”

“This is so screwed up,” Sam whispered.


There’s not much Sam can say to alleviate the misery he’s feeling. All of their lives haven’t just been disrupted by this. They’ve been changed, threatened, turned upside down. He knows that’s not his fault, but Nat is his girlfriend, his choice, not theirs, and they’re being dragged into it. So even when Sam replies with a firm “yeah”, it’s barely enough to make him feel better. Steve hangs up with him, struggling with how shitty this whole situation is. Then he gathers himself and punches in Barton’s cell phone number. Before he dials, though, he looks at Nat. “You want to talk to him?”

She shakes her head, grasping her knees and pulling them close to wrap her arms around them. Steve exhales slowly and dials the number. Clint picks up much faster than Tony did. “Barton.”

“Hi, Clint? This is Steve Rogers.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Where the hell are you? Is Nat alright?”

Steve glances at Nat, but she’s staring at the darkened TV screen. “She’s fine. They didn’t hurt her.”

There’s a frustrated but greatly relieved sigh. Clint’s words come fast after that. “Listen, wherever you are, stay there. Things are going to hell here. Now that he’s got her scent, he’s pulled all sorts of strings to get half the department looking for her. Coming back home’s out of the question.”

Hearing that hurts. Again it’s about it all being real, the finality of it. Nat probably picked up on Clint’s words over the phone because she lays her head on her knees and closes her eyes. “What about Rumlow?”

“He and Rollins walked. Any attempt Hill and I made to arrest them was shot down. In fact, they claimed you’re the one trying to kidnap Nat.”

Steve’s heart stuttered. “What?”

“It’s a goddamn shit storm. There’s no one to dispute it.”

“Christ, Barton, you don’t think—”

“Of course not,” Clint interrupts sharply. “They’re doing everything they can to get everyone looking for you. With Shostakov’s connections, they’re making a lot of noise. Like I said, if you think you’re okay, you should stay where you are. I assume you bought a prepaid phone?”
“Yeah.”

“Give me the number.” Steve grabs the booklet that came with the phone and relays the phone number to Clint. “Are you sure you’re safe where you are?” he asks again, almost obsessively.

Steve’s too rattled to be insulted. “I think so. Is there... Is there any way you can come get her?”

Clint’s silent a second, like he’s surprised Steve’s asking. Surprised to Steve admitting that he’s not sure he can handle this. Or fucking scared that Steve’s maybe admitting that he can’t handle this. “No. No, not now. Not with all this craziness. Our captain knows I’m involved with Nat, so he’s watching me like a fucking hawk. If I move, it’ll lead them right to you. I need the heat to die down first. Sorry.”

Steve presses a palm to his forehead and leans back in his seat. Hearing that it’s impossible for Clint to help them... Sorry. God. “We’re safe enough.”

“Then stay where you are,” Clint advises once more. “Lay low. Don’t go out if you can avoid it.”

“Okay.”

“Run if you feel like you have to but try not to unless it’s really necessary. The farther you go, the harder it may become for me to get to you.”

“Okay.”

“Rogers, you need to take care of her,” Clint says. His voice is tight, grave. Forceful, after the moment of subtle doubt before. “You have to. You hear me? Remember what I told you in the car. If you love her...”

“I know,” Steve says. He does now more than ever. “I remember. And I do.”

There’s another silent pause. “I know you do. I know. And I trust you.” Steve closes his eyes again. “Can you put Nat on?”

He takes a deep breath, feeling resolved and terrified all at once. “Sure.” Standing makes his chest and side spasm, and he nearly falters as he limps heavily to the bed. He hands the phone to Nat. “Here. He wants to talk to you.”

Nat looks at him with fearful eyes. She stares at the phone like it’s something that can actually hurt her for a second before taking it and lifting it to her ear. “Hello?” she murmurs.

Steve turns away. It’s not his business, and he wants to afford her at least a shred of privacy by not hovering. He limps over to the table with their food. Sitting after moving around all morning was a mistake because his muscles have tightened up and everything is wretchedly sorer. He can hardly put any weight on his bad hip. Fucking Rumlow kicked him there but good, and it’s coming back to haunt him. Nat’s quietly talking in the background as he gets a bottle of juice and fishes out his pain medicine. He swallows a couple of pills and prays for relief. Then he goes back to look out the window and act like he’s not listening.

Nat doesn’t talk to Clint for long, just a couple minutes, and her answers are quiet, short, the barest, most minimal of one-word responses. Steve doesn’t like it at all. Eventually the room goes silent. He turns around at that, hoping to see her more comforted, but she just sets the phone to the bed and returns to hugging her knees. Damn it. “Dunno if you could hear,” he says, and his voice sounds thunderous in the quiet, “but Tony said Liho’s okay. And Max is okay.”
“Okay,” she whispers.

He can’t stand it anymore. He tries to take a step toward her, but his damn hip gives out and he’s stumbling into the chair by the table. He’s falling.

“Steve!” She’s up and beside him in an instant, grabbing his arm to steady him. Breathing through the twinges of pain up and down his side, he winces and fumbles to right himself. “Easy.” She takes some of his weight, guiding him up and toward the bed. “Easy. Just sit here.”

Steve does, panting from the suddenness of his goddamn useless body just giving out on him. “Sorry,” he gasps. She cups his face, looking into his eyes a moment, and she seems more present than she has been for the last twenty-four hours. “You don’t need this.”

She doesn’t say anything to that. Instead she’s going to their bags, to the ones she brought in, and fishing through them. She pulls out a couple rolls of ace bandages, the wide type made for rib injuries. They’re both well familiar with them from Steve’s accident. Apparently she also bought ice packs, the kind that don’t require freezing. She sets all that stuff on the bed. “Can you lift your arms?”

He does. It hurts pretty badly, much more than it did that morning. She helps him get his shirt off. Then she sits behind him and starts wrapping up his sore ribs.

It’s not like they haven’t done this before. In the weeks after he trashed his bike, she took care of him like this every day, wrapping and taping his ribs for support, tending to his injuries. Right after he was hurt, she used to promise him it’d be okay, her hands gentle and soft on his skin as she soothed away his pain. Now she’s silent, tentative, and that makes everything strange and different. Her fingers ghost over the bruises; he can feel the light touch, and it has nothing to do with treating him. It’s a guilty inspection, plain and simple, but before he can turn and absolve her, she’s unwinding the bandages around him. He swallows down his emotions. “It’s okay,” he mumbles again. Same useless shit as this morning.

Still she doesn’t answer. For a while she silently works, pulling the bandages as tight as is comfortable for him. He winces but remembers too that he needs to breathe deeply. Once the bandage is secured, she helps him get his shirt back on. “Lay down,” she instructs.

He blinks. Apparently in the lulling quiet and with the pain, he’s been drifting, so it takes a bit to focus. “Huh?”

With a nudge, she pushes him down on his uninjured side so that he’s facing away from her. “Lay down,” she says again, more emphatically. Surprised, he does what she says. She cracks the ice pack, causing it to get cold as the chemicals mix inside, and she works it in her hands for a second before laying it on his bruised chest between the bandage and his shirt. The cold is pretty strong, and he sucks in a harsh breath. “Sorry.”

The discomfort fades pretty quickly, and Steve blows out that taut breath. She readies another ice pack and sets that on his hip. Instantly the icy touch becomes soothing, and he relaxes and sinks into the small solace. “Thanks,” he murmurs.

Her fingers linger a moment, rubbing up and down his arm before settling in his hair. “Sleep for a while.”

He can’t deny that the second his head hit the pillow, he started drifting. Between the familiar comfort of her touch, the painkiller he took, and his own exhaustion, it’s hard to stop himself. “What about you?”
“I got more sleep than you did last night.” That’s a lie, and he knows it, but he doesn’t have the energy to argue. She goes on anyway with a bunch of logic that hardly makes sense to his rapidly addling brain. “One of us should sleep while we can. So sleep.”

He does. It’s against his better judgment, but he lets go. The sleep is fitful. It’s one of those where you’re down and dreaming but somehow aware that you are, that there’s an outside world and responsibilities that you left behind. It’s also loaded with unpleasantness, not the stabbing kind from a nightmare but just a vague sense of ugliness that taints everything. Something’s wrong. He sees Nat walking away from him, Bucky during one of the times they fought as teenagers, his mom on her deathbed. Sam, Tony, and Thor in trouble. Bloody pawprints. Bloody footprints in the dirt. Blood on Nat’s face. She’s standing in the bathroom, putting tons of make-up on, and she turns to him. It’s hideous, how badly she’s beaten. The make-up does nothing to hide it. “You think anyone will notice?”

Steve comes awake with a start and a short breath. He sits up, wincing and blinking away the fog in his eyes. Something’s wrong.

The something wrong is right by the door, gathering up her stuff and very clearly making to slink off while he’s sleeping.

Steve jolts out of bed, ignoring the sharp pang rippling up and down his body. It almost doubles him over, but he manages to get his feet beneath him. “What’re you doing?” he demands.

Nat turns to look at him, her eyes wide with being caught. She’s got her bag on her back, her coat under her arm, the new phone they just bought in her hand. Her mouth falls limply open, her cheeks whitening even further. He shakes his head uselessly because he can’t believe this. She’s sneaking off. She’s abandoning him. He shakes his head uselessly because he can’t believe this. She’s sneaking off. She waited until he was sleeping the day away, and then… Some part of him probably saw this coming; running is what she knows, what she does. She’s done it twice to him already. He supposes he shouldn’t have been so damn shortsighted and naïve; making her feel good, getting her off in bed, telling her that he loves her and trying to protect her… None of that fixes her. Not really.

But it’s still shaking him down to his core, that if he slept another couple minutes, she would have been gone. “No,” he says, shaking his head. “No, you can’t.”

It’s like that day she broke up with him. Her face fills with pain and fear and regret, and now he understands why. “I’m leaving,” she says. “You have to let me leave.”

“No.”

“Steve, please…”

“No.” He limps around the bed. “We’re past this. You can’t run from me again.” He says that with a lot more certainty than he feels. “You can’t!”

She stands there, shaking. “I – I have to.”

“No. No, you don’t.”

“Why can’t you see that?” Her voice breaks, and just like that, for the first time ever since he met her, he sees her get angry. Really angry. Her eyes are full of frustrated tears, and every muscle in her body is taut with rage. She’s breaking again, breaking differently. “Why can’t you let me go? Why didn’t you do it before? I ran! I ran for a reason, for a fucking good reason! Why did you bring me back?”
Hurt flares up inside him. “Nat, please…”

“You’re making this so much fucking harder. Don’t you see that?” She shakes her head furiously. “Don’t you get it? You can’t protect me from the mistakes I made! You can’t save me! You can’t make it right. Everything you’ve tried, you being here… It doesn’t change anything!”

He feels like a fucking fool. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’m not…” It seems like a pathetic lie the second he says it. “I’m not trying to be a hero. I’m not trying to–”

She sighs sharply. “Yes, you are. You are! What are you doing? Huh? Why are you tangled up in this? You’re giving up everything, and for what? Alexei… If he sees you, he’ll kill you. He’ll kill you!”

“I don’t care,” Steve firmly declares. “I don’t. I love you.”

“You can’t love me!” she shouts. He winces at words as well as the noise. It’s the same thing she said in the bathroom at Wanda’s, the same thing she hinted at when she broke up with him over the summer. The same lie that seems to be engrained into her. She says it again and again. “You can’t! I’m not worth this, not worth your life. Not worth you not getting better. You can’t love me, and I have to go! You have to let me go!”

He grits his teeth, trying to hold onto his temper. “No. I’m not doing that.”

“Goddamn it, Steve! What do you want from me?” she cries.

“I want you to let me in. Stop shutting me out. Stop bottling everything all up inside. Stop running from me. I realize that’s what you know, and that’s what you had to do before, but I want you to understand that you don’t have to anymore!”

She chokes on a sob, stepping away from him and back toward the bed. At least it’s not toward the door, for whatever consolation that is. Not much. Her hands press to her face. She’s shaking, shattering. “You don’t know…” She shudders more violently. Her bag falls from her shoulder and thuds to the floor as she holds herself. “You don’t know what this is like. Everything’s fucking falling apart. I never wanted you mixed up in this. Never. You don’t know how much it scares me, having you here, having you see.”

“Nat, it’s–”

“You don’t know what he made me do,” she hisses.

The room goes quiet. He doesn’t know what to say. He does know, or at least he’s figured out some of it. He swallows down a knot in his throat. “You said he made you his whore.”

She’s turning to him. Her voice is wrecked, ruined by probably years of unspent anger and aggression. Years of unresolved torment and pain. “You know what that means? What it really means? You know how many guys I’ve…” She falters but goes on and goes on harshly. “How many guys I’ve kissed? I’ve sucked off? How many men I’ve fucked?”

His mouth goes dry. She’s right. He doesn’t know, not really. Not like that. Not hearing how ugly and revolting and awful it was. It was all rape, the worst type of sexual assault and manipulation, sexual slavery in a sense, and he knows that, but he doesn’t understand it. It’s like he’s been thinking: he can’t understand it because it’s never happened to him. And he knows he should say something to that effect, but his mind is shocked silent and his lips and tongue are too numb to talk.
She’s going on, anyway. “I went into his club to sing, and he treated me like a slut. Like a prize or a treat or a fucking lure. Like another one of his girls. He had a whole harem of us, and we used to stay in this room in the back of the place, this room with red satin walls and black leather couches and expensive booze and drugs. That’s where he brought his clients. The Red Room, they called it. At first, I did what he wanted to make him happy. He told me that was how it was done here, how people got ahead in the industry, that... favors like that mattered. Promised me that he loved me, told me I was beautiful, that I’d be a star, twisted me around his fingers over and over again, and I was so damn lost I didn’t even realize what was really happening. That he was a pimp using me to do business. By the time I figured that out and told him no, it was too late. The one time I really fought him, he beat me so badly that I couldn’t show my face for weeks. I didn’t fight after that. I just did what he told me, went down on whoever he told me to, spread my legs for whoever he wanted. I did that for him.”

Jesus. Steve can’t breathe. He feels sick, sicker than when she told him she was raped, sicker than all the times before now that he’s caught a glimpse of her past. She looks at him finally, turning around and settling blazing eyes on him. “You know what they called me?” she asks. “What he called me?”

Numbly he shakes his head.

“Chernaya vdova.” Her voice is flat, dead. “It means black widow. You know what a black widow is, right?”

That was what Wanda called her. He didn’t understand it back then. He’s not sure he wants to. His lips move in a pained murmur. “It’s a spider who mates and then kills her mate.”

She nods. “The Black Widow, because if he sent me to someone, it was usually someone he wanted dead. He sent the other girls to his business partners. Me, I went to the people he wanted to trap and trick so he could kill them. That wasn’t a coincidence. It wasn’t an accident. He wanted me to know exactly what I was good for. He wanted me to feel the power he had.”

It’s quiet again. Steve stares. He doesn’t know what to think, how to feel. He still doesn’t even know what to say. She reaches down and grabs her bag and puts it back on her shoulder. Her sigh is heavy, broken. “You don’t want this,” she says quietly. “You can’t. You can’t love me. I let those things happen. I let him use me.”

“No–”

“I did. Maybe I couldn’t get away, but I sure as hell let myself get sucked into it. It’s my fault. Men are dead because of me. I knew what he was doing, and I didn’t warn them. I let them have me whatever way they wanted me and closed my eyes and ignored it and ignored whatever happened next. The lies I told, Steve... The lies I told myself and told everyone else about what I did in that club. The Red Room. In his bed.” She shakes her head. “You can’t change any of that. So please, please...” Her voice breaks again, cracks with anguish, and she crumbles before his eyes. “Just let me go. I have to go. I’m not worth all this.”

He snaps out of his haze. He’s not going to let her get away with that. “What you did all those years... It wasn’t you, Nat. It wasn’t you. He raped you. He beat you. He forced you! You didn’t have a choice!”

“I know,” she gasps around half a sob. Her eyes are wet. “But I still did it. I did it. And I have to deal with this alone. Alone.”

“No.”
“This thing you think you love… It’s a lie.”

“No. I don’t think that,” he says, shaking his head. “I can’t believe that. I can’t!”

“How can you not? What do you want from me?” she shouts again, practically bleeding out her frustration. She doesn’t give him a chance to answer. “What do you want? Don’t you fucking see? I can’t give you what you need! I can’t give you what you deserve!”

“You already did!” he says. “Don’t you see that? God, Nat, you already did! I don’t know what I have to do to show you that! I don’t know what I have to say to make you believe that you’re worth it!” Her scowl crumples. That cools his own ire, and he draws a deeper breath to calm himself. He’s not sure it’s welcomed, but he has to try, so he takes yet another step closer and grasps her shoulders. “You’re not his whore. You’re not his victim. Not anymore. Not unless you choose to be. Yeah, all this awful shit happened to you. I know how that feels better than anyone. And, yeah, it’s a part of you. You can’t change it, can’t outrun it, can’t hide from it. But you can’t let it define who you are. You can’t let it define what you do. You define those things.”

Her eyes fill with more tears. He pulls her a little closer. “When I was low, you told me that I needed to forgive myself. The same goes for you. You have to stop destroying yourself. These people and things that hurt us before, that broke us up and tore us down? They only win if we keep hurting ourselves now. You taught me that.”

A sob breaks free from her. It’s a tiny, choked thing, like she’s trying to hold it back. He stares into her eyes and doesn’t let her push it down. “The shame you’re feeling, that has you thinking you’re not good enough… It’s eating you alive. I’ve watched it do that for weeks. Don’t let it. You’re worth it, Nat. You’re worth it to me. You’re worth it to our friends. You don’t need to run off by yourself and let yourself be ruined by him all over again. I’m here, and I’m not leaving. I’m here. You want to know what I want from you?” He softens his voice further and lightly brushes a hand over the bruise on her face. “I want you to trust me. I want you to let me help you. Most of all… I want you to let me love you. Please.”

She holds his gaze a moment more, and then she cracks. She finally lets the sob go. Steve pulls her into his arms, wrapping her up tight, as she buries her face in his shoulder. Her bag drops to the floor again as she grabs him. He kisses her head. “Shhh. It’s alright.”

“I can’t take this,” she whimpers. He can feel the wet warmth of her tears soaking into his shirt. “I can’t. I’m so scared.”

“I know. I am, too.”

“Please don’t hate me.” Her voice is nothing more than a whisper as she begs. “Please, please. I don’t want to leave you. I don’t want you to leave me. I need you! I keep – I’m so scared you’ll realize how bad this is and walk away, and I can’t take that.” Steve closes his eyes against the thought. It’s pretty obvious that running isn’t just instinct to her. She’s think it’s easier to give up on herself than to have him give up on her. “Please stay with me. Please!”

“Not going anywhere,” he promises. “Not giving up on you. Not ever.”

She clutches his shirt harder. “I’m so messed up. I’ll – I’ll get it together. I’ll be better.”

“You don’t have to be anything other than who you are. You deserve a moment to breathe, Nat.”

She takes that. She finally realizes he’s giving it to her, and she takes it. She stops crying and just leans against him, burrowing into his embrace, and breathing. He says nothing for a while, letting her find her strength, her calm. He simply rubs her back, feels it rise and fall slowly, evenly.
Peacefully. The tension seeps from her, and he lets out a long breath of relief. “I shouldn’t be promising you this is all gonna be fine,” he murmurs into her hair. “That’s not fair to you. I can’t promise that.” Gently he leans back and lifts her face. “What I can promise is that I’ll stay with you as long as it–”

A car door closes. It seems oddly loud. Maybe it’s nothing, but something tickles up Steve’s spine. He stops talking, listening hard for a second before pulling away and limping to the window.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispers.

It’s them. Rumlow. Rollins. It’s gotten dark with evening, and it’s still rainy, but he can see them getting out of Escalade down the other side of the parking lot. They both look angry. Rumlow in particular is scowling, his face a mess of bruises. Steve watches him stuff something in his pants under the back of his jacket. A gun. And they head right to their rental car. They’re crouching at the back. Checking the plates. Shit.

He rips around. “They’re here,” he says, and now he’s the one scrambling to gather up their stuff.

Nat’s eyes go wide, and she rushes over to the window. “Oh, God… How’d they find us?”

“It’s gotta be the car!” Steve throws as much of the food as he can into their duffel. “They’re looking at it!”

Nat shakes her head in horror. “No, no… I didn’t use my name! I swear to God, I didn’t! There’s no way they could’ve…” She blanches. “Clint gave me the fake IDs. I don’t know where he got them, but if they got to him… But how’d they track the car here? How…”

It doesn’t matter how. They have to go. Now.

He forces his body to cooperate better, ignoring the stiffness and pain all down his leg and hip and chest. He fishes the gun out of his bag. That goes into his pants again. Shouldering the duffel and his bag, he hands her hers. “Come on. We gotta try to get to the car.”

She looks at him, and she says what’s so painfully obvious. “Steve, you can hardly walk. We can’t do this!”

“They have to be here.” Shit. That’s Rumlow’s voice. They’re down in the parking lot. Steve closes the door more until it’s barely cracked enough for him to see out. He can’t quite make them out, not with the heavy shadows and the railing obscuring his view. He can hear them, though. Their shoes are loud on the sidewalk. Their voices are loaded with malice. “I want Rogers when we find ’em. I’m gonna make that son of a bitch squeal. Fuck him up good.”

“Boss man said–”
“Don’t give a fuck what he said. He’s mine. Stupid fucking retard.” Rumlow laughs, but it’s cruel and humorless. “Wrote his name down. How fucking dumb can you be? He has it coming.” Steve goes cold. *I what?* He has absolutely no memory of doing that. *Oh, shit.*

There’s no time to wonder or feel bad. Their voices fade as they go inside the lobby. It’ll only be a matter of minutes until the two of them figure out where they are (if the front desk gives it up, which Steve is pretty sure they will if they’re threatened). Jesus, the people in this place… They’re all at risk. *No time!*

He pulls Nat’s hand and gets her out of their room. Behind them he quietly closes the door. “Come on,” he whispers, and he tugs her along the walk toward the steps down. Everything is wet, and it’s a little slippery, and going so fast on his bad leg is difficult. Nat steadies him, and they make it to the sidewalk. Steve stops there, creeping on nearly silent footfalls closer to the lobby. He’s trying to hear what’s going on, if they’re questioning the front desk, if there’s yelling or worse. *This is insane!* He backs up, pushing Nat with him. *Just get to the car.* It’s right there, just a little more behind them. *Get to the car. Get out of here. Run.*

Nat tugs his hand. “Steve?”

He shakes his head, retreating up more, staring at the lobby and expecting Rumlow any second. “What?”

“What!”


They slashed the tires.

He and Nat aren’t going anywhere.

Steve stares at the flat tires for a second, unable to process what he’s seeing at all, unable to accept that they can’t drive on that. That they can’t run. *We can’t run.*

And Rumlow and Rollins will be back out any second.

He looks around helplessly. There has to be something, somewhere they can… “Come on,” he gasps, pulling her to his side and running across the lot. The woods there are pretty thick, and there’s a shed there. Maybe it’ll be good enough to provide some cover until they can figure out what to do. They sprint into the trees, picking through them, and race to the little building. Everything’s wet, leaves sticking to them as they rush by. Steve limps faster and faster, desperate and frantic, knowing that time’s running out. *Come on, come on, come on!*

They make it. The building’s not in great shape, paint peeling off the cinder blocks of its exterior, and the doors are padlocked. Steve doesn’t try to open them, instead pulling Nat behind the small structure. They stand there stiffly with their backs to it, staring into the woods in front of them. Their hearts are pounding, breaths fast and charged with fear, as they listen. There’s nothing but the sound of the rain splattering on the leaves all around them. Long seconds pass, one after another after another. Steve shivers, leaning around the corner of the shed to look behind them.

“This is bullshit!”

Rumlow’s there. Steve can see him. Even at this distance, it’s obvious he’s pissed as all hell. He and Rollins are heading up to where their room is. “What’s the big deal?” Rollins snaps. “They’re trapped in there. Break the fucking door down.”
Steve pulls back, breathing heavily, reaching into the waistband of his jeans to pull out the gun. Nat stiffens beside him. Fighting’s not an option, though, not really, and the two assholes checking their room has bought them some time. They need to keep running. It’s dark and getting darker by the second, everything doused in a heavy, miserable gray, but he can see through the woods that there are houses not too far away. He also remembers there being a bus terminal for NJ Transit down the road a bit. They’re going to have to go through the woods to get out of this. That seems extremely daunting with how useless his leg is right now, but there isn’t much choice and they need to leave before Rumlow and Rollins figure out they’re gone and on foot.

Getting thoroughly soaked in the rain, Steve spends another second trying to collect his thoughts. Then he reaches for Nat’s hand, only his hand’s not working right. It’s weird, he thinks, how his fingers are numb and tingly all the sudden, and when he turns to look at her…

She’s glowing. There’s light all around her, light streaked with rain. Light and color and his stomach’s dropping down. He can’t breathe. He can’t–

No.

“No, no, no… Not this. Not now.”

But it’s happening. Nat may as well be a million miles away. He can’t reach her.

And he can’t stop the seizure from taking him down.

“No! No! Oh, God, please…”

He can’t stop it.

Things slip through sometimes. They get into the cage around his brain, piercing the storm beating him down. Vague, fleeting things. Nat’s hands. Nat’s body. She’s holding him. She always does when this happens. There’s her voice, desperate and reedy, as she begs him to come out of it. Shadows. More than one of them looming. She’s shouting, screaming, but he can’t understand the words. He can’t move, can’t speak. Can’t help. Can’t protect her.

He can’t do anything, and they’re coming to take her back, to take her away, and it’s his fault. It’s my fault. My fault. That’s the last thought he has before the seizure completely consumes him.

“No?”

He blinks. Blinks again. Tears and rain fill his eyes. Not rain. Someone’s leaning over him, dripping water. Eyes that are blue and green. Dark hair. Pale, perfect skin. Lush lips bitten red in worry tight with a frown. A face that he knows is familiar even though he can’t place it. “Steve, can you hear me? Can you look at me? Focus on my voice.”

It’s so damn hard to do that. He knows his eyes are open, but he can’t see. Everything feels like too much. He drifts on the errant, disjointed whims of his brain. His muscles don’t work right. His senses are scattered. Is he moving?
“Steve? Can you see me?” There are fingers in his hair. “Steve?”

“This normal?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he’ll come out of it.” That sounds like Nat. He can hardly cling to that. Nat. She’s here? He can’t think right, can’t make sense of anything, and unconsciousness still toys and teases with him. He’s not sure why, but he’s relieved. Something bad was going to happen. He can’t remember what, but he knows it was coming. Someone was coming. Someone terrible.

But maybe everything’s okay because Nat’s here. She’s still with him. They didn’t take her.

He blinks. Blinks again. And again. His body feels not his own as he squirms uselessly. His ears are throbbing. His skin is hypersensitive. His mouth tastes weird, but it’s familiar. Rescue meds. “Nnh,” he groans.

“Come on, Steve. Focus. I’m right here.” Fingers keep combing through his hair. “Steve?”

Frustration and fear burst out of the clouds in his head. He blinks, and this time he sees. She is here. She’s curled over him, and he’s lying with his head in her lap. And he is in fact moving. He’s all bent and crumpled in the backseat of a car. A nice car. There’s leather beneath him, and it smells new. Huh? Normally he’s confused coming out of a seizure, but this…

He needs to know she’s alright. That she’s real. “N-Nat?”

She smiles feebly. “There you are. You’re okay,” she whispers. “You’re okay!” She leans down to kiss him. Everything is still a muddy mess to him, but that feels right, perfect. To true to be anything else. She kisses his lips, peppers more lighter kisses all over his wet, cold, clammy face. “It’s okay now.”

“Ohay?”

“Yeah, we’re okay,” she breathlessly promises. “We’re okay.”

He doesn’t understand. He keeps blinking like that’ll make things clear, make things make sense, but they don’t until he slowly turns his head to the side.

There’s someone driving the car. That someone turns, glancing over his shoulder. Dark skin, black leather jacket, patch on his face. That same stoic, guarded expression, only now the lips are turned in a tiny hint of a satisfied grin. “You’re damn lucky I’ve been keeping an eye on things, Rogers,” Nick Fury says. “Now let’s get you two the hell out of Dodge.”

Chapter End Notes

Some amazing chapter artwork by the beautiful faith2nyc!
"Yeah, it's plain to see that, baby, you're beautiful and there's nothing wrong with you. It's me. I'm a freak. But thanks for loving me 'cause you're doing it perfectly. There might have been a time when I would let you slip away. I wouldn't even try but I think you could save my life. Just don't give up; I'm working it out. Please don't give in. I won't let you down. It messed me up. Need a second to breathe. Just keep coming around. Hey, whataya want from me?"

– Adam Lambert featuring Pink, "Whataya Want from Me"  
– "Stay" Chapter 17
A Thousand Years

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have to apologize for the length of this thing. I seriously underestimated how much I had to cover here. And then I thought I might split it, but the themes run solid through the whole chapter, so... here we are. And here we are! Some people have been waiting for this :-P. It probably goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway. Warnings for sex. Lots of sex. Also a warning for a scene concerning a previous miscarriage.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Time stands still.
Beauty and all she is.
I will be brave.
I will not let anything take away what's standing in front of me.
Every breath, every hour has come to this...
One step closer.
I have died every day waiting for you.
Darling, don’t be afraid. I have loved you for a thousand years.
I'll love you for a thousand more...
And all along I believed I would find you.
Time has brought your heart to me.
I have loved you for a thousand years.
I'll love you for a thousand more.”
– Christina Perri, “A Thousand Years”

She doesn’t know where she is. It’s not home. It’s not his bed. It smells different, feels wrong, and everything hurts. The pain gets sharper and sharper as she comes back to herself more, as the haze of unconsciousness fades from her head. Everything hurts.

That means she’s not dead.

She reels with realization for what feels like forever. When she finally opens her eyes, she sees it’s dark, shadowy with night. Strong scents invade her with every breath. It’s not the smell of blood, though, or the stink of his cologne or booze. It’s not the smell of sex and fear. It’s something else, something strong but sterile that’s cut by a hint of flowers. She blinks until she can focus better. There’s a vase of lilies on a little rolling table beside her. They’re pale and pretty. There aren’t any flowers at home. He hates them. Therefore, this can’t be the bedroom. The mattress feels thin beneath her, and there are light blankets covering her lower body. There’s something beeping, hushed conversation, footsteps outside. Outside her room. There are people there. Nurses. Doctors.

She’s in a hospital. A hospital.
That means…

No.

Her hand feels like it’s not her own, cold and clammy and shaking. So weak. She can barely move it, barely move anything at all, but she has to know. She has to feel the truth. Her fingers pull down the blanket, fumbling to check beneath. There are bandages there. She tugs at them, ignores the pain, ignores how everything feels wrong and the memory of the knife and–

There are stitches there right above her hip, holding her body together. Closing the hole where he cut into her body. She’s bleeding there, right where he stabbed her.

And she’s bleeding between her legs. She feels it now. As the numbness fades more and more, she can feel the wet warmth, the pads beneath her and against her sore thighs, the uncomfortable scratchiness of them touching her where she can’t stand to be touched. She’s bleeding.

She knows it then. The truth. She lost the only thing that mattered.

He killed it.

The cry that comes out of her mouth is brutal, not because it’s loud or sharp, but because of how much it hurts, how she can’t hold it in. It’s really nothing more than a keening moan, one twisted up with a sob, one tortured and tormented to the very brink. Tears burn her eyes, burn her battered face, and she twists around, curls into herself, around her belly, around the hole in her stomach where he ruined her one last time. Around the empty place inside where there’d once been something beautiful, the only beautiful thing she’s had in forever… It’s gone.

She closes her eyes and prays she’ll be forgiven.

“Natalia?” Vaguely she recognizes the voice. The man who promised to help her. The man who promised to get her out. He’s there, quickly rising from the chair on the other side of the bed, coming directly to her bedside to pull her hands away from her middle. “Natalia, don’t. Don’t. You’re safe here. You’re safe.”

It doesn’t matter. He got her out, sure, and got her here. He helped her. But he didn’t save her. The only thing she wanted to protect… It’s dead. There’s nothing but darkness. Emptiness.

It takes her completely.

Then she opens her eyes to light, to birds chirping and Steve’s arm draped over her belly. He’s right beside her, breathing into her neck, warm and heavy and pretty dead to the world. He’s been out of it since his seizure, which of course isn’t all that uncommon as she’s learned, but it hasn’t made the last twelve hours any easier. After Fury – Steve’s boss apparently, who Nat’s never met before despite all the times Steve’s talked about him – miraculously found her behind the shed with Steve writhing his way through the seizure in her arms, they drove straight through the night. Nat was half asleep, Steve still collected in her embrace, when they turned down a dirt road that had so many ruts in it that the SUV was jerked and jostled continually. She was blinking the fog away as she looked out the window at the starkly clear night and the world bathed in bright moonlight. The terrain was nothing she’s ever seen before. There are wooded mountains around them, like lumbering giants in the distance. They’re in a valley of sorts, and rows and rows of tall, green stalks that look just a bit wilted surround them. Corn. Those tall stalks turned to grasses as they kept driving, wheat maybe, long and reed-thin and topped in spidery tendrils. They glowed pearly in the moonlight, like a silky ocean rolling in gentle waves. That alone had been so enchanting that all sense they were in danger just faded away.
She realized when they stopped that Fury took them to a farm. The sprawling countryside, with its lazy hills and long fields of grass and wheat, stretches far around them, and other than the old house in which they’re staying, there’s nothing near for miles. Once they parked last night, Fury was grim and silent, helping her get Steve out of the car and on his feet. Thankfully Steve was aware enough to walk a bit, to mumble some questions about how Fury found them, what he wanted, where they were. If it’s safe here. As he aided Steve in limping down a dusty hallway to one of the bedrooms, Fury didn’t answer anything they asked save for one thing: “You’re safe.”

He set Steve to the bed where Nat clumsily worked to get off his muddy clothes, which were still damp from being soaked hours before. She pulled off his shoes, tugged away his jacket, stripped him down his boxers and helped him lay down while their mysterious savior brought up their bags. Fury watched her with dark eyes a moment more as she worked, and when she looked up to stare back, she was uncertain but not because he felt bad to her. On the contrary, as he stood in the doorway and looked over them with his one good eye and a tense but not uncaring frown, somehow she knew he really meant them no harm. “Get some rest. We’ll talk in the morning.”

She fell asleep with Steve in her arms in this strange place she doesn’t know after this strange twist of events she can’t comprehend, and she slept soundly.

Now it’s a new day, a beautiful one, and sunlight’s streaming in through the open shutters on the bay window to their left. She can see things that she couldn’t last night in the darkness. The bedroom’s spacious, old fashioned, decorated in a way she supposes she vaguely knew about from books and pictures. The hardwood floors are well worn, scraped in some places, and all the furniture looks used and dusty. The walls have wallpaper on them, wine-colored roses and vines. It’s slightly faded. So are the curtains and the pink velvet upholstery on the chairs across the room that are arranged in a little sitting area. The bed’s old, too, a wooden four-poster with quilts that seem hand-made. She imagines this is country living, American farm life, and it’s completely alien and simplistic but oddly comfortable.

Outside the huge window that’s letting in all the light, she can see trees close to the house and a vast field beyond of rippling grain. It doesn’t look tended to her knowledge (which is laughable; she’s never even been out of a city environment before). The field’s overgrown, nature’s doing rather than actual crops. There are more trees in the distance, making a boundary between this field and the next. The birds chirp louder. A gentle breeze rustles the curtains and sends the leaves of the closest branch whispering. Down below, the wind makes the grasses dance. It’s stunning, and she takes a deep breath. Despite the dust, the air smells fresh. Sweet. Free.

It doesn’t seem possible that they’re here, wherever here is, but they are.

Nat exhales slowly, closing her eyes a moment and relishing the feeling of Steve beside her. He’s hardly moved during the night. As she rubs her hand up and down his bare back, she tries not to think, but it’s impossible, and the second she succumbs to it, guilt prickles right through her. She should have been so much better to him. God, these last couple weeks… He’s been amazing. Wonderful. Patient and supportive. He’s been everything she’s wanted, everything she’s needed. He’s done so much for her, loved her no matter how hard she pushed him back or how desperately she shut him out. He’s been perfect, and she’s done nothing but hurt him for it. Trying to run yesterday was an awful mistake. She can see that now. It was cold and uncaring, driven by her shame, her cowardice. Maybe it’s all she knows, but she has to do better now. Of course, part of her tries to reason with that guilt. The situation they’re in now isn’t her fault. He doesn’t blame her, not for this or for her past or for anything she’s done or become. He’s said that again and again. And part of her is starting to accept it, to believe it. The way he’s taken care of her, the way he’s made her feel… The night after their rooftop date before everything went to hell. That’s the first time since she got away from Alexei that a man’s touched her like that. It’s the first time in much longer, in the years since Alexei first tricked her into loving him, that she’s felt any kind of
pleasure. Steve gave that to her, made sure it was good and right to her, respected her like no one else ever has. He loves her.

And if someone as good and pure as he is can love her, there must be something there worth loving. Something there worth fighting for. As she lays holding him, staring up at the ceiling where the white paint’s peeling just a bit, breathing the fresh air and feeling it fill her body, she knows in her heart that he’s right. Somewhere during all this, with the threat of him learning the truth and that ruining everything between them, she’s ruined it herself. She’s ruined herself. She’s always so afraid that Alexei can control her no matter where he is, and that fear has been a yoke around her neck. She keeps telling herself that it’s not and that she’s not anyone’s victim. She keeps promising herself that she’s going to deal with what happened to her, rise above it somehow, make peace with it. Fight it or outrun it or overcome it. The thing is, though, she could never do that alone. She shouldn’t have to. She deserves more than that. She sees that now.

For the first time in years, she thinks she can heal. She thinks she is healing. Moment by moment, kiss by kiss, touch by touch… She’s healing a piece at a time. And it’s because of him.

She looks down at his face, so contented and peaceful. The bruises there don’t look as angry and aggravated today. She prays the ones on his chest are better, too. She prays he keeps sleeping untroubled, unbothered by his problems. She’s worried about him. That prickles through her, too, and it’s tied to the guilt. To what he’s risking and giving up to stay with her. But she can’t think about it now. Instead she thinks it’s time to get up and find some answers. Carefully so as not to disturb him, she lifts his hand off her hip and kisses his palm before wriggling out of his arms. As she does she catches sight of her belly where her shirt’s ridden up during the night. The scar’s there. His hand was right over it. She stares at it emptily, the raised skin, the mark that’ll never go away. The pain twists in her a little, but she takes another breath of the cool, clean air and ignores it.

After pulling the quilt up and over Steve, she takes a second to freshen up. There’s a bathroom down the hall, but she doesn’t head there until she grabs the bag of toiletries and their gun from where she plucked it out of the mud yesterday and aimed it at Fury before she knew he was there to help. It’s a damn good thing the guy didn’t take it personally. Still, she doesn’t know with whom or what they’re dealing, all her good inclinations about him aside. She puts the weapon inside her hoodie she dons over her t-shirt before slipping on silent feet to the bathroom. There she quickly brushes her teeth and washes up. It’s harder to calm her nerves now; she has no idea where they are, what’s going on, if it’s really as safe as it feels. Heading back out, she sees there are stairs at the end of the hallway. The hardwoods creak as she walks on them, and she winces at the noise. It’s probably fine. If Fury brought them here to hurt them, he would have already, right? Still, she walks even more carefully as she heads down the steps.

The big house is silent and seemingly empty. Downstairs there’s a living room with a fireplace and more outdated, neglected furniture. A den is adjacent to it, with an old desk filled with papers and a few bookshelves well stocked with everything from dictionaries to almanacs to novels and picture books. She spots a few children’s books there, Guess How Much I Love You and The Velveteen Rabbit among others. One’s open on the desk. It’s Where the Wild Things Are. She recognizes it from the pictures, though she’s never read it herself. Like everything else, the book looks like it hasn’t been touched in years. The whole house is like that, she realizes, a snapshot of a family that hasn’t changed or been changed in a long time, that’s been left exactly as it was to collect dust.

She walks past the den. This house is huge. To her left there’s another living area, this one with a television that seems like it’s about ten years out of date. Toys are on the floor, once more like they’ve just been abandoned. There must have been children living here. Maybe one of bedrooms upstairs was theirs? They obviously aren’t here anymore. It’s eerie, as if there are ghosts about,
but everything is bright and peaceful even if the colors are faded and muted. Nat walks on and finds herself in the kitchen.

At the round dinette table, Fury’s sitting. He has cup of coffee in front of him; now she really smells the fresh brew, and it’s enticing. He also has a bunch of files. They’re for work, she thinks at first, but then she sees they’re not. They’re files on Rumlow and Rollins. She feels cold seeing their pictures. The files don’t look official. He closes them as she comes closer. He’s still wearing black, black trousers and a black sweater, though his long leather jacket is gone. The sunlight coming in through the windows behind them gleams off his smooth head. His face is so damn stoic, empty almost. His one eye is sharp, though, and keen. Watching her. “Morning,” he greets evenly.

She comes a little closer. “Good morning,” she says.

Fury scrutinizes her. Nat’s never met anyone quite like him. Steve always says Fury’s an interesting character, somewhat mismatched for running an ad firm. He’s mysterious and intimidating, imposing, but again, not in a bad way. Nat’s been around so many violent men, dangerous men, and Fury’s not that, at least not to them. “You want some coffee?” he asks, tipping his head toward the stove.

Nat turns and looks and finds an actual percolator there. The kitchen is much cleaner than the rest of the house but no more modern. “Is this your place?” she asks.

Fury tips his head. “Yes, it is. Belonged to my father and his father before him.”

She nods to that, looking around appraisingly again. “It’s nice.”

“Glad you like it,” he answers evenly, “since you’ll be staying here a while.”

That’s not a threat. It’s just a statement of fact. She nods again, even if it’s a little hard to think about or accept right now. “Thank you.” Fury just stares at her. Because she can’t read him that easily, she flounders to say more so he doesn’t think his hospitality’s not appreciated. Sure they spent hours in the car last night, but they hardly talked. “And thanks for… for getting us out back there. For saving us. We would’ve…” She shivers to think about it, going instead to the cabinet to find a coffee mug. Fury’s still watching her, and it feels like he can see through her. “They would’ve killed Steve.”

“ Probably,” he agrees. “These are some not so nice people you two are mixed up with.” Nat winces as she pours herself a cup of coffee. Her hands tremble a little despite herself. “Cream and sugar are right here. There’s also cereal in the cupboard there.”

“Steve didn’t get mixed up with anything,” she clarifies, gathering her composure. “This is my problem.”

Fury leans back in his chair a little. “You and he have a lot in common. You both seem to think it’s your job to take a world of hurt on your shoulders.” He folds his arms over his chest. “It’s a hero’s fallacy, believing you’ve got to face hell alone. That you can’t bleed on anyone else. I knew that about Rogers the minute he walked into my business. It’s fucking crazy, to be frank.”

That seems like such an odd thing to say. She stares at him, her cup of coffee forgotten on the counter. None of this makes any sense. “Who are you?”

And that’s pretty bold and presumptuous. Fury doesn’t react though, nothing beyond continuing to stare at her. “I could ask the same of you, Natalia.”
Nat jerks. Shivers again. She shakes her head. This doesn’t seem possible. “How do you…”

Fury’s expression finally shifts into something softer, and he drops his arms so that he doesn’t look quite so guarded. He sets them atop his folders, clasping his hands together. “You want to sit?”

Normally she’d bolt. The inclination is certainly there, her instincts screaming that she should run now while she can. She ignores them and takes her coffee before settling in the chair across from him. Fury watches her a moment more before giving a little chuckle. “You know, my granddad owned this house when we were growing up, and he taught me a hell of a lot about the world. He was a good man, helping the other farmers around us, serving our country during World War II, and he loved people. But he never trusted them much.” She flinches. She can’t help it. He appraises her a moment longer, like he’s trying to gauge her reaction, before looking down at another of his folders. He opens it. “Natalia Alianovna Romanova, would-be Russian pop sensation, wife of Russian crime lord Alexei Shostakov. Came to the United States in September 2009 at the age of nineteen. Became a US citizen in 2010. On the surface a promising singer who’s married into a prestigious family in the music industry. Not so, as it turns out. For years she was on the FBI’s watch list as a potential witness against Shostakov, particularly after the murder of the Maximoff family. She went missing…” He looks at one of his folders again. “March 12th, 2013, after a brief stay at Staten Island University Hospital for trauma consistent with domestic violence and sexual assault.”

Hearing him say it like that, with professional detachment, is more than uncomfortable. She forces herself to be still. “She just up and vanished completely. No current address. No phone records, credit or bank records. No driver’s license. No one had eyes or ears on her since until one Steven G. Rogers, former captain in the United States Army, crashed his motorcycle, and there she showed up at his side at New York Methodist. Apparently, she’s been on the run for the last few years, constantly moving from place to place to place, until finally settling in Brooklyn, where she’s been staying despite increasing activity concerning her ex-husband noted in the area.”

Her blood goes cold. How does he know all this? “I don’t…”

“That sound right?”

“Who are you?”

He actually smiles. “Well, I suppose this is the time and place to come clean,” he comments after something of a pregnant pause. “Air out the past.” His eye glazes with nostalgia. Nostalgia and grief. “Being here always… It made me want to be honest. To be simple. To appreciate the world as it is.” He nods, more to himself than her, and pulls himself from his memories. “I was CIA. Black ops.”

It comes so far out of left field that she can’t process it for a second. Images of the KGB agents go through her head, of James Bond and Mission: Impossible. That’s about all she knows of that world. Hollywood nonsense. “You’re a spy?”

His lips press together in a frown. “I was. I was for years. I was until…” He sighs. “Well, until I met my wife. She pulled me out when I was in deep. Told me she could save me. When you see the worst of humanity, the worst of evil, day in and day out, and someone gives you the chance to see the best, you take it. The stuff I did, the things I knew… That shit changes you. She changed me back, brought me out of darkness, I guess, until I could be human again. Brought me back here, back to my roots, so to speak. Made me a new life.”

He looks around with fond affection, as if this old place is far more than a house. Nat does, too, and for a moment, with the house so quiet around them, she can almost feel like it has a heart, like
it’s beating. “We settled down here. Got married. Had kids. For a while, everything was perfect. Peaceful in a way I didn’t think I deserved. And she was right about saving me. I didn’t think I could live without it, without that life I had, but I forget it, healed, moved on.”

I healed. Hearing him say that resonates. For a second, she can almost feel that inside her. Fury looks down at his cup of coffee with a wry but pained grin. It’s nothing more than a tense twist of his lips. “But nothing lasts forever. One night she’s coming home after taking the kids to the store. I stayed behind to work. Drunk crosses the double line. Just like that…”

The pain that goes through her is sharp. It’s so sudden. Just like that. Just like that, everything can change. Under the table, she presses her hand to her belly, to the scar that still feels warm with Steve’s touch. “After I lost them, I went to the city. Kept this place, but I couldn’t live here anymore. So I found an apartment and picked up a job doing security down by Prospect Park. The company was called SHIELD. Day in, day out, I did my job there. It grounded me, gave me something to do after losing everything. Helped me stay alive. One day, I’m working at one of the major banks in the area, and I hear some folks talking about a drug deal that went down the night before. Two cops killed. They think it’s organized crime, that maybe even some of the higher ups in the precinct there were involved. One of the officers gunned down turned out to be my coworker’s sister. And he says to me that the police knew for months before that the captain was dirty, but they couldn’t do anything to touch him. Too much corruption, too little power of their own, and innocent people went down for it.”

There’s a particular glint in his eye then. “It occurred to me as I heard that that standing guard at a bank wasn’t doing shit to protect the neighborhood. I knew I could do that. Even when working for the CIA was darker than hell, that was the ultimate goal. Getting my hands dirty in the background so people could be safe. And for the first time since losing my family, I cared about something, cared about being something. So I pulled strings, convinced the owners of the security company to sell it to me. They wanted out anyway. Took me a little while to get set up. The recession hit the area hard, and a lot of the business were struggling. I figured doing ads for them was a good way to get information, to poke around the various companies and who runs them. Get into local events, local neighborhoods. I hired artists and staff to get the job done, but mostly I was just doing what I do best: bending the rules to spy.” He grinned more genuinely. “I kept the name. SHIELD.”

“Why?” Nat asks incredulously.

“The best lies often have a shred of truth to them. You know that,” he explains. “Besides, trolling has its uses. It’s a shit ton of fun to keep people wondering. The office pool on how I lost my eye is huge.” She smiles despite herself and looks down, wrapping her cold fingers around her warm mug. “Stabbing myself with a pencil over shitty copy is my favorite theory.”

“And no one knows that you do this?”

He shrugs nonchalantly. “Wouldn’t be much of a spy if they did. I run a tight ship, Miss Rushman.”

“Is it…”

“Legal?” She nods, glad she doesn’t have to accuse him of breaking the law. “No. Not entirely, though as a private citizen I have more latitude than you might think. I help the cops anonymously where and when I can, ones like your friend Detective Barton. Ones I know are on the level. I guess it’s like being a vigilante, but it keeps my small corner of this huge, ugly, evil world clean. And if I hadn’t been poking into Rogers’ business, working my old government connections to get info on you…” He cocks his head. “Well, I wouldn’t have known the second Brock Rumlow and
Jack Rollins stepped over the river into Brooklyn. I wouldn’t have known they’d flushed you and Rogers from his apartment, or even that you and Rogers are dating. I wouldn’t have known the NYPD put out an APB on you, bought and paid for your ex-husband. I wouldn’t have known the make and model of the car you rented on a bogus ID made for you by conman that Shostakov turned a year back. And I wouldn’t have known that Rogers accidentally signed his name on the hotel room agreement in Franklin and that the woman who runs the place got spooked and called the cops, and that the cops there called it up to the state police, and that some bad cops there called it into the men hunting you.”

Nat’s blood goes cold, hearing all that. “I…” She swallows down the knot in her throat. “I don’t judge. What you did… I said it before. You saved us.”

“Damn right,” Fury says, and she can tell he’s pretty proud of himself. “Listen, the second Rogers walked into my agency looking for work, I knew he was good people. I know everything going on in Brooklyn, so I knew who he was when he moved back home from Walter Reed. I knew the kind of sacrifices he made for this country, the sort of hell he went through. I was part of Desert Storm, of countless other operations like it, and I saw what it was like, what terrorists and tyrants can do. I saw other POWs. It was dumb luck I had a real fake company that could use his skills. Let me keep an eye on him, and it let me do things for him, like have him work from home or produce whatever he can whenever he can without any consequences.”

“And why?”

“Because I had to help him. I had to keep him close and try to protect him.” He gives a half-hearted grin. “Not that I didn’t do this for you.”

“I’m not offended,” Nat murmurs, and she’s not. “He deserves to have… to have you looking out for him.”

“Well,” Fury says with a heavy sigh. “Can’t exactly call myself a guardian angel. Nothing that saintly.” You have no idea. “Anyway, you two will be staying here for a while. It’s quiet, remote. Miles to the next town. No one knows I still own it. You’ll be safe here until all this shit blows over.”

It’s not in her nature to trust, but she does. “Thank you,” she softly says again. That’s not enough to express her gratitude, but sadly it’s all she has.

He seems satisfied with it anyway. “I’ll make sure you have supplies. Cell reception’s pretty poor here, but you should be able to makes some calls to Barton and Rogers’ friends. Wilson and Stark? Anyway, I can’t stay without someone noticing, and it’s a fucking haul back and forth to the city, but every couple of days I’ll come. Bring you what you need. Does he need to see a doctor?”

Yes. “He’ll probably refuse it.”

“What about that study he’s doing?”

He really does know everything. She doesn’t have an answer, and her voice grows heavy with guilt. “I don’t know.”

Fury doesn’t look pleased, but he doesn’t say anything further about it. It’s quiet a beat. “If it makes you feel any better,” he eventually offers, “the Feds are building a case against Shostakov.” She looks up from where she was staring blankly in her coffee cup, excitement jolting through her. Excitement and hope. “I don’t know all the details; my contacts in the Justice Department are
playing this one close to their chests considering all the corruption at the local and state level. Shostakov’s more in bed with HYDRA Properties that just a little bribe to entice them to give up his estranged wife. It’s turned some heads. That and a dozen other indiscretions. HYDRA Properties is a huge company, and the higher-ups are pissed over the scrutiny. All other sorts of bad shit is coming to life, like bribery and money laundering and using locations owned by HYDRA to store drugs and stolen goods. His club turned whorehouse…” *The Streak.* And inside it there’s the Red Room. “Owned by HYDRA. You know how dirty he is better than anyone.”

She does. And, despite all that, she knows this doesn’t mean anything. If she had a dollar for every time Clint has told her the FBI or the NYPD was making a case against the Shostakov family, she’d be rich. Still, hearing that lightens her heart a little. Maybe, just maybe…

One day, this may all be over.

Fury drinks the rest of his coffee. “Help yourself to anything you want in the pantry. There’s enough food to last a few days. I’ll need to head back to the city later today, but I can be back the day after tomorrow. I’ll bring more.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. But actually…” She stands, leaving her cup of coffee untouched. “Actually I think I’ll go back to bed for a bit.” It feels weird to think that, to want it, to *choose* that when she doesn’t know exactly where she is or what’s going on. All she knows is she feels safe, and she’s tired.

Fury cocks his eyebrow. “Whatever you want.”

Nat smiles, appraising him with nothing but gratitude. “Okay.” She starts to go.

“Miss Rushman?” Pausing, she turns around. “Don’t tell anyone what I’ve told you about myself.” His face is hard, but his eye twinkles almost mischievously. “Otherwise I’ll have to kill you. Or at least take your gun away.” He glances knowingly to the front pocket of her hoodie.

She flushes, grabbing at the weapon in embarrassment both that it’s so noticeable and that she thought she needed it. “Sorry.”

“Have to be more subtle than that.”

She nods. “I will. And I won’t. Tell anyone, I mean.” She smiles. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

“Likewise.”

She turns to leave the kitchen. The house is still quiet, seemingly breathing around her, as she heads back through to the steps. Upstairs it’s peaceful, just as she left it, and she walks down the hallway to the bedroom.

Steve’s still lying in bed precisely as she left him. The room is cool, the air yet fresh and inviting, and she pulls the gun out and sets it on the bedside table. Then she crawls back in bed beside Steve, pulling the blankets around them both. That makes him stir, and when she looks at his face, his eyes crack open. She draws him close as he sleepily blinks himself awake. It looks to be a struggle, and not one worth fighting. He nuzzles into her neck and gives a mumbled, “Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” she whispers.

His hands fumble at her, pulling her to him. “Doin’ okay?”
“Yeah.” Despite everything that’s happened, everything that still might, the answer comes easily. And she knows it’s true. She knows it. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She kisses his forehead before tucking his face into her and wrapping herself even more around him. “Go back to sleep.”

He does. She does, too.

It’s like they’re living a dream. A fantasy. She can’t believe any of this is real.

Part of her recognizes that it’s not. This place – Corning, she learns it’s called, in western New York, about six hours from the city – isn’t anything special. It’s nothing more than this old farm house and its overgrown fields and pastures around it. It’s not truly paradise or anything that clichéd, but it feels like it. And it feels safe. It’s not, not really, because they can’t leave and they can’t let anyone know where they are. Alexei can come for them here just as easily as he can in Brooklyn. The physical distance is meaningless given the power and reach that man has (and the jealousy and malice and violent obsession), but it has some illusion of being substantive.

At this point, she’s happy to take an illusion.

Days disappear, one after another after another. Time doesn’t seem to exist here, here where the fields are endless and dancing in the gentle winds, where the clouds cover the sun to sweetly drop rain before being blown away again in an infinite parade of white and gray. There are clocks in the farmhouse, big grandfather clocks in the bedroom they’re using and one downstairs, and she’s been winding them simply out of curiosity and appreciation of their beauty. She can hear them ticking away the minutes, ringing the hours. The pendulums are swinging surely. So time is passing, but it feels somehow meaningless for the first time in her life. She was always in a rush as a girl, a rush to sing and dance, a rush to live her dreams. And then there were the long hours at her mother’s bedside as the cancer took her and again as her father began to wither. The minutes stretched long with terror in the face of Alexei’s wrath, under the restraint of his twisted passions and perversions. The game she’s played with time since, wondering how long this peaceful moment or that one would last. Time has always held such power over her, and now…

It doesn’t here. Here there’s nothing but quiet, the empty house and the empty fields, and Steve.

He’s back on his feet fairly quickly, just a day or two after Fury brought them here. His steps are still taken gingerly, and he’s a little slow to move around and easily tired, but he recovers with amazing alacrity. All signs of the pall having a seizure usually leaves on him aren’t there, and it’s so refreshing. As much as this small sanctuary has been a blessing to her, it seems to be one to him, too. When he woke up that first day, he was completely flabbergasted that his boss came to their rescue back in New Jersey, so much so that he jokingly thought the last seizure had launched him into some alternate reality or something. He thanked Fury profusely, and Fury told him that he owed him free labor from now until eternity, and that may have been in jest but Steve didn’t argue. He was so thrilled to be here, to be somewhere safe, that he didn’t care. Steve had questions of course, and he asked Fury, but Fury didn’t answer, didn’t explain beyond saying this is simply what he does with something that may have been a wink at Nat. When Steve confronted her later about it, she just told him some secrets aren’t meant to be shared.

At any rate, the days go by. It’s just the two of them nearly all the time. Fury’s still worried that him staying here will attract attention, so as he said to her that first morning, he goes back the city. He always returns with supplies, a load of groceries, clothes, even Steve’s medications (it shouldn’t be surprising that he knew to get them, but still it is). He refuses any money they try to give him, his expression always that stoic, slightly grim frown, and reminds them to lay low and stay out of sight. They do. It doesn’t take much at all for them to fall into a routine. They sleep and rest and recover. They bask in the silence, the peace, this moment they inexplicably have to breathe. They
cook (well, she does. Steve, she has learned over the last few months, is a terrible cook). They clean. They spend time in the living area, watching TV (the signal is pretty poor, and the selection of DVDs is pathetic, but neither of them care at all). They cuddle on the old couch and watch daytime soap operas and old movies and game shows. They talk or play the fairly large collection of board games like Monopoly (which she’s terrible at) and Scrabble (which he’s terrible at) and Trivial Pursuit (which they’re both terrible at) and laugh at one another and kiss more than they ever have before.

Sometimes they just enjoy the silence. They sit on the porch in the swing, gently going back and forth with her leaning on his shoulder or his head in her lap, and soak in the stunning view. And they roam about the house like two guests unwilling to disturb a sacred place still filled with peaceful spirits. They sleep in the master bedroom, and Nat tries to ignore the tiny tickle of unease that that room was probably where Fury and his late wife slept. There are pictures of his family all over the house. Like the toys, they’re untouched. Sometimes she wanders around and studies them. His wife was a beautiful woman, dark-skinned with stunning brown eyes and lush black hair. They had two kids, a boy and a girl who don’t look older than ten. In every picture, they’re all smiling. Fury’s smiling. Given how tense and dark he always seems now, it’s hard to reconcile the image of the man he was with the man he’s become. It pulls at her heart to think about the happy family that was once here. Just like that. You can lose what you have right in front of you in the blink of an eye.

She watches Steve with that on her mind, how important it is to cherish what you have. What’s right here. She cards her fingers through his hair one night as they swing and watch the sunset. The autumnal colors are blazing and beautiful, splashes of crimson and amber and ochre and gold everywhere in front of them. Two cups of coffee are cooling on the old table near the porch swing, their wispy tendrils fading into the chilly air. Steve and Nat not cold at all, though, cocooned as they are in a quilt from inside and close to each other. He’s drifted to sleep leaning against her, his face in her neck and her arm around his chest, and she’s watching him, watching the dirt road for anyone coming, watching the daylight fade to night. Watching and deciding that inky darkness creeping through the sky can’t touch her here. Her past, all that ugliness that’s ripped into their lives… It’s a thousand miles away. A thousand years removed. This is heaven. She’s here to see it, to feel it in her arms, to breathe it in and know how amazing it is. A dream.

Of course, this bubble in which they’re living isn’t impenetrable. The world may seem like it’s been condensed to the two of them and this sweet old house and idyllic countryside, but it’s not really. Fury comes and goes, always tense and worried like he doesn’t know how long this safe haven can sustain them. Clint calls. He calls every day, and Nat knows he’s worried. “Rumlow and Rollins are gone again,” he says one afternoon.

Nat’s standing against the opening to the living room, watching Steve sketch something on one of the pads Fury brought him. It’s a picture of her. She can tell already even though he’s barely done more than frame her face. “What does that mean?” she asks, inwardly shuddering in dread not just at the news but also at it puncturing the veil of safety around them.

“It means the moles in the department are fucking protecting them,” Clint irately responds, “again. I don’t think they know where you are since I don’t.” Right after bringing them here, Fury decided that no one should be aware of exactly where he took them for the same reasons Steve refused to tell anyone when they were in New Jersey. Though that still makes Nat a little uncomfortable, she understands. Once more, it’s a reminder that the world outside this house and these fields, the world they left behind, is terrible. Clint seems to feel as unsettled as she does. “Your phone’s untraceable?”

So says Fury, and she believes him. She’s told Clint this before. “Yes.”
“Then they’re not finding you. As long as you trust this guy—”

“I trust him. He saved our lives.”

Of course Clint has his doubts. He always does, and his doubts have saved her ass more times than she cares to count. He has no way to even confirm Fury is who he says he is, and that bothers him a great deal. But he lets it go because there’s no choice. “Alright. Just stay down.”

They do, and Clint calls again the next day, this time while they’re watching a gameshow. Steve gets the phone first, and he talks for a second before handing it to her. “He sounds agitated.”

Clint has varying levels of agitated. This is the gruff, annoyed level. He doesn’t even bother saying hello after she greets him. “I have some news. Don’t know if it’s good or bad yet.” He sighs. “The old man died.”

She doesn’t follow for a second. That’s how detached she’s let herself become. “What?”

“Andrei. He died yesterday. Passed away in his sleep.”

Shock crawls over her, and she stands up. Suddenly she thinks of him, of Andrei – her father-in-law – and his nice, crisp Armani suits and boxy, bearded, handsome face. Sharp eyes and high cheekbones and a prominent brow. The way he commanded power, so much so that she believed instantly when Alexei took her to meet him the first time that he was the epicenter of the New York music industry. He may have been a crime lord, and he certainly was cold and calculating, but there was something noble about him. Something regal even. He was a lord among men, running his family’s business like a king runs a prosperous kingdom. Though he was never exactly kind to her, he had wanted far better for her than Alexei gave her. Alexei caught hell after murdering the Maximoffs the way he did, so violently and viciously. Nat’s pretty sure Andrei knew she was the one who got Wanda out before the executions and fire, but he never did a thing to punish her. Killing the Maximoffs was business, and ordering their deaths troubled Andrei long afterward because of his close friendship with Wanda’s and Pietro’s father. Alexei’s penchant for sadism only further damaged the family that day, further strained his relationship with Andrei.

And now Andrei’s dead. She isn’t sure what she feels.

Clint’s still talking. “–all sorts of people coming out of the woodwork. It’s a major mess right now. Obviously there isn’t going to be a smooth transition of power. Hell, we already know a lot of the influential people Andrei had in his pocket, councilmen and cops and judges, have no love for Alexei. So I’m not sure what’s going to happen.”

She’s pacing. “Does this mean he’s–”

“It could mean anything.” Clint interrupts sternly. “I have no idea. It could mean he’s got his hands so fucking full dealing with trying to hold the family together that he can’t spare the time and effort to search for you. Or it could mean he redoubles his attempts to find you and bring you back so he can show some stability. Or it could mean nothing. I have no fucking clue. All I know is it’s utter chaos right now. Alexei’s done himself no favors being such a wild, violent asshole for years, and a lot of people seem nervous about staying loyal.” God, she can’t believe this. She paces more, pressing her hand to her forehead. Steve’s watching her worriedly. “So until the dust settles, let’s just operate on the assumption that nothing’s changed. He’s looking for you, so you stay there.” The same advice that’s been said over and over again for days comes once more. “Stay quiet. Stay out of sight. Stay away.”

She gets off the phone, shaking with uncertainty, with doubt and hope and fear all at once. Steve
hugs her tight and reminds her that they’re safe where they are. He’s right. What’s going on out there can’t touch her here.

A couple days more pass and suddenly it’s a week since Fury brought them to his farm. She goes to tell Steve that night that she’s tired and heading up to bed. He’s on the phone with Sam when she spots him in the den. He doesn’t see her because his back is to the door, and his back to the door because he’s looking out the window. Again. He keeps watch almost obsessively, checking the farm’s perimeter numerous times a day, making sure every door and window is secure and locked, keeping the gun loaded and close. It is now. It’s right on the desk. And it’s moments like these where she remembers the most that the outside world is looming.

“No, Sam. Sam… Yeah, I get that. I really do. But I can’t…” He sighs, leaning forward and pushing himself up and out of the desk chair. For a second she fears he’ll turn and see her listening in, but he doesn’t. He limps to the window and stares out into the night. “If I can’t get in the study, I can’t. I don’t know what you want me to say. This has to take precedence right now. It’s… Then I live with it.” She winces. His voice is getting tenser and tenser as he argues with his friend. She can hear Sam’s voice over the phone’s little speaker but not what he’s saying. Steve’s shoulders go taut. “Epilepsy isn’t going to kill me. I can deal with it. Maybe Erskine is wrong and there are different meds I can… Fuck, Sam, you know I can’t do that.” Steve sighs heavily and listens to the angry response, leaning into the wall a little. It seems like the weight of the world is pushing him down. “I know. We’re not going to be here much longer. It’s not forever, okay? Once things are under control, we’ll come back. I know you’re worried. I… Yeah, I know that, too. Just…” Steve’s voice cracks a little. “Keep taking care of Max, huh? Is he okay?”

She doesn’t want to listen to anymore so she heads up to the bedroom. Later that night when she’s mostly asleep, Steve gathers her into his arms and kisses her temple and tells her he loves her.

More days go by. They’re lethargic, languidly slipping from morning to afternoon to night, and she hardly keeps track of them. They’re meaningless. Fury comes and goes and comes and goes. Once in a while he’s arguing with his administrative assistant (Sitwell, she thinks his name is) on the phone, but that’s the only thing that makes those time stand out. Steve stays close. The bruises on his face fade almost completely (and so have hers), though he’s still walking with a limp. The trees get even more vibrantly colored outside as October slowly disappears. Laundry piles up, and she washes it. Food enters and exits the pantry. Clint keeps calling the cell phone they have, but he doesn’t have anything new to offer. That’s fine. It’s as if the world has come to a stop, and she’s not sure she cares. She’s not angry or upset or even bothered by it. It’s so quiet and protected here that she starts imagining everything she left behind really has vanished. She can stay in this place with Steve forever, and no one can ever find them. No one will ever hurt either of them again.

She sinks into the dream fully. They swing on the porch swing, and Steve talks. He talks more about his childhood, about his mother, about anything and everything. She loses herself. It’s the warmth of his arms around her where she’s laying across his lap, the timbre of his voice vibrating in his chest where she’s pillowed her head, the steady pace of the swing and his heartbeat… It’s lulling her so much that she decides she’s never going back.

One afternoon in this long stretch of bliss she’s sitting on the swing by herself. It’s late afternoon, the sun dropping low to the horizon and turning a pristine blue sky violet, indigo, and navy. As twilight descends, it’s gotten a little chilly. She has her songbook open on her lap and a cup of cocoa. She wants to write. For the last few weeks, ever since Block Fest in fact and everything got so twisted around, she hasn’t had the interest or motivation for her music. For hours she sat in Steve’s apartment, book open and pencil in hand but absolutely nothing coming out, like the song inside was withering away. It killed her to feel that way, and she knew it killed him to watch it, but
there was nothing there, nothing in her heart or head, no melody to hear or lyrics to sing. Nothing.

Here she can feel it again. It’s in the quiet, in the colors, in this old house and these peaceful pastures. In the closeness she has with Steve. The song’s there, and the inclination to let it grow and live and thrive is, too, but she feels almost restless about it. Uncertain. Hesitant. She wants it back for sure, but it’s never been so lost to her before, and it seems like embracing it again is too big, too daunting. So she’s sitting, swinging in the last hours of the daylight, trying to work up the courage to write something down.

“Nat?”

She let her eyes slip closed, and when she opens them, she sees Steve on the steps of the porch. The last of the sunlight is streaking over him, making his hair seem gold spun and his eyes even more blue. He’s let his beard grow in more since coming here, and she suddenly notices that his hair’s a little longer than it was over the summer. He’s dressed in dark blue jeans and a red flannel button-down shirt over a white undershirt. He’s got a worn leather jacket on, one that Fury gave him from his closet. She can’t help a little smile, because he kind of looks the part of a farmer.

“What?” he says, smiling back.

“Nothing,” she answers.

He squints at her a little, obviously trying to figure something out. “You okay? You looked like you were a million miles away.”

She closes her book, banishing her thoughts. “You wanna sit with me? Share my hot chocolate? Made it with extra cocoa and marshmallows.”

“Maybe in a bit,” he says. “Come on. I want to show you something.” He tips his head toward the fields.

Curiosity gives her pause. She hasn’t explored the pastures around the house nearly as much as he has. “What?”

Clearly he’s playing his hand close, reaching out a hand to her but not explaining any further. “Come on.”

Playfully suspicious, she stands and takes his hand. He grabs the quilt that’s on the swing and leads her down the porch steps. Together they walk hand in hand down and around the house. They head through the backyard, where the grasses are more well-kept, and past the old barn and the rusty, decrepit tractor that’s sitting beside it. He takes her into the field. The reeds are soft but thick, tall enough that they brush her knees and tickle her thighs. She hesitates a moment, a little leery of heading out there. He smiles softly. “Come on,” he says again.

They don’t go far, just a couple hundred feet from the house. It’s so quiet. Not a breath of a breeze rustles the field as they walk through it. In fact, it’s so still that she can look over her shoulder and see the path behind them where they disrupted the grasses. He takes her to a spot where the field’s flat and the vegetation isn’t so thick and tall. She looks around. With the house behind them, it’s just a golden stretch that goes on seemingly forever. The mountains ahead are smaller and more distant. It’s getting dark fast, which makes her a little more nervous, but he’s nothing but steady and even a tad excited. “Here.” He lays the blanket down. “Sit.”

She does. “Okay, you got me,” she says, trying to hide her anxiety. “What’re we doing out here?”

“Patience is a virtue,” he sing-songs. He sits down cross-legged beside her, hardly even grimacing
though it’s pretty clumsy with his hip. Then he nudges her back. “Lay down.”

She can’t help but go a little rigid. “Huh?”

“Lay down,” he says again. She stares at him like he’s crazy. “Oh, come on. Trust me. Lay down.”

It’s stupid to be afraid, but she is, just a little. She does trust him, though, more than she’s ever trusted anyone, so she does. She scooches down a little to lay flat on her back, stiff and stupidly tense. He lays right beside her, one arm under his head, the other across his belly. It gets quiet again really fast, and she stares at him in utter confusion. “Okay? Are we waiting for something? Because it’s kinda cold… And we’re all alone. And we shouldn’t—”

He glances at her out of the corner of his eye. “Watch.”

“Watch what?”

The amused sigh that follows is a tad long-suffering. “Lord, Nat. Watch.”

Obviously he’s not going to tell her, so she settles with a little huff and looks skyward. For a few minutes, she’s still not quite sure what he’s talking about.

But then the sun slips all the way down below the horizon, and the last light of day fades. The dark navy and midnight blues of the sky become even deeper, and as she peers into the vast dome overhead, she catches the first glimpse of some stars. They’re nothing more than tiny, faint specks, little twinkles so dim that she questions whether they’re there at all. As the daylight dwindles even further, though, she starts to realize what he’s after.

Wow.

Slowly at first but then faster and faster, the stars come out. Awestruck, she tries for a second to count them, but it’s impossible. There are hundreds. Thousands. Millions. In some places they’re so clustered together it’s more a cloud than crisp, individual lights. They’re all brilliant. It’s breathtaking, dazzling, incredible. “Beautiful,” she whispers.

He gives a deep breath. “Yeah. You could never see the sky like this in the city.” She has to agree with that. She’s lived in a city all her life, both in Russia and here, and she’s never experienced anything like this. This peace and quiet. The absence of light pollution and motion. The stillness. It’s remarkable. Steve shakes his head, lips curled in a smile. “Last night I was checking on things out here, and it occurred to me that you’d be able to see everything. Really star-gaze. It’s like…” He trails off, so wrapped up in the huge expanse of light and majesty above them. She stops looking at the sky to look at him. He’s bathed in starlight, eyes as deep and dark as the sky, so long and relaxed in the grass. He’s beautiful, too. Just as breathtaking and incredible. “It’s like it’s all right there. Like you could just reach out and touch it. Hold it in your hands and keep it for a little while.”

“Steve…”

“You see that light there?” He’s pointing at something towards the horizon. “That’s Venus.”

That takes her totally aback. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. And that’s Anteres. It’s part of Scorpius. See the tail? And that over there…” His hand moves. “That’s Cassiopeia. It’s like a W.”

She does see it and feels ridiculously proud of herself. “Show me more.”
Delighted, Steve grins widely. Suddenly he’s talking nonstop, his soft voice filling the silent field. He shows her all the constellations they can see in the October sky. She almost forgot with all the hell of the last few weeks how much he loves space and NASA, and he’s enthusiastic and shockingly knowledgeable. He tells her about all the planets that are visible, too, all sorts of random facts about them. After a while, though, she’s modestly embarrassed to admit that she’s not really listening as he excitedly explains about Saturn’s rings and laments how unfair it is that Pluto’s been demoted to a planetoid after years of being one of the family. After a while… she’s not even gazing at the stars much anymore. She’s gazing at him.

He catches her staring, leaning up a little and chuckling. “What? Yeah, I know it’s nerdy. Bucky always thought so. And Sam does. Maybe I should have been an astronaut instead of a soldier. Would have been awesome to—”

He can’t finish because she’s pulling him close and kissing him hard. His groan is a rumble against her lips, and she nudges open his mouth with her lips and tongue, weaving her fingers through his hair and refusing to let go. He doesn’t want her to, turning closer and holding her just as tightly. Pausing for a breath feels torturous, and she delves back into his mouth, into the way he tastes and how warm his skin is and how he still smells like Irish Spring to her. How his beard tickles against her cheek as she kisses her way down his jaw.

How he feels on top of her.

She tugs and pulls, and he rolls more, and the night sky spins overhead as he blankets her body. He hesitates for a second but only that. She doesn’t let him wait more. She doesn’t let any part of her past ruin this moment. It’s consuming her and not just desire. This dream. This belief that she’s safe here, that nothing and no one can hurt her. That no one can touch her unless she chooses it.

And she chooses him. “Please…” she whispers, pressing her knees to his hips to keep him close. She wraps her arms around his neck, shivering in delight as he nibbles at her ear, at the hinge of her jaw, at the soft skin of her throat. “Please…”

His hands feel huge but familiar on her shoulders. He’s kissing more at her neck, hot, wet kisses down and across, and she closes her eyes and slides her hands along his back. Muscles ripple beneath her touch. She’s unhurried in pulling his shirts free of his jeans to touch beneath them, to trace her fingers up the acres of warm skin of his back and then down his flanks. She can feel the scars there, but they don’t scare her. Not anymore. Nor does his mouth hotly claiming hers again or his hands tugging at her sweater. The thought that this is wrong, that they’re out in the open, that it will be painful, that he could hurt her or worse… It never crosses her mind. It can’t. She’s better because he’s made her better.

She reaches for his belt.

He pauses and leans back at little. His eyes are so full of passion and love, but there’s concern, too, the same concern that’s always there. He takes his hands from the bare skin of her stomach. His lips twist into a touch of wry smile as he looks around. “I mean, we’re kinda out in the open. Again. Are you really sure about this?”

She gives a devious grin all her own, trying to act overly confident. “Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

He laughs, but it’s clear her answer’s not enough. “Nat, are you sure?”

For all the fear she’s felt for years, for all the damage that’s been done to her heart and body and soul… For all the torment she’s suffered, and for how intimacy’s been twisted into a perversion
and ruined for her… For all the times she’s hated the touch of another, hated vulnerability and weakness and herself so deeply…

For all of that, she’s never been so sure of anything. “Yes,” she whispers. Tears fill her eyes, but they’re not tears of pain or grief. She’s certain in the core of her – this is what’s meant to be – and she’s so overthrown with relief and joy that she can hardly contain it. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m so sure, Steve. I… I want you. I want to give you everything I have to give. I’m ready. I want to take this step.” She smiles again, softer, and those tears start trickling down her cheeks. Her voice is even, though, low and powerful. “I’m not afraid anymore. Not anymore.”

“Nat…”

“I want to be yours. I want you to be mine. I… I want you inside me, every part of you. Please.”

His eyes glisten wetly, too, but he nods. Smiles. Wipes her tears away with the callused pad of his thumb. “Oh, God, Nat… I love you.”

She pulls him down insistently, the scant few inches between them unbearable. He fumbles to kiss her breathless while he gets his coat off. Bunching it up, he nudges it under her head. Then he strips himself of his shirts, mussing his hair further as he pulls them over his head. There’s so much light from the stars bathing them, soft and ethereal, and it covers his pale skin in a heavenly glow. Bucky’s dog tags are there, shining silver against his sternum. She’s gotten so used to seeing them there that they just seem like a part of him. She looks down to his belly and runs her hands up from there, slowly and carefully, mindful of the scars and the hint of lingering bruises. Gooseflesh pimples beneath her fingers across his abs and pecs and shoulders. He gives a shaky sigh, staring down at her through hooded eyes. They’re liquid pools of blue and black, teeming with love, with lust, with need. She glances down at his crotch where he’s straddling her hips, and for a second there’s a touch of bright fear, but it’s not fear of pain so much as it’s fear of doing this wrong. Of not being enough. It’s been so long.

He doesn’t let her fall into it. He curls over her, stealing another deep kiss. His tongue dips into her mouth as he explores her, pushes her sweatshirt up further to expose her bra. It’s cold; the sudden caress of the chilly, evening air to her skin is a little shocking, but his hands are right there to cover, to shield, to warm her through and through. She moans into his mouth, rocking her hips up into his, feeling how hard he is when he rolls back down onto her. His hands cup her breasts, thumbs rubbing over her nipples through the cotton of her bra. They’re already tight and crested from the cold, and that simple touch is electrifying. She gasps, biting his lower lip gently, hooking her arms around his shoulders.

That doesn’t keep him where she wants him, though. Again he kisses his way down her body, fingers pushing under her bra to tease at sensitive flesh. As he worries the skin over her collarbone, he lifts the cups of her bra and pushes them higher to free her breasts. She gasps, shivers (though more from excitement and his touch than from the cold), and he’s quick to pull her sweatshirt down more to cover her again. “Sorry,” he whispers.

She’s not having any of that. He has to be freezing like this, so she yanks at the other half of the blanket on which he was laying before to get it up and over him. He groans into her shoulder as the quilt cocoons around them, quickly trapping the heat of their bodies between them. It’s tight and narrow, but that only makes it better, more perfect. Then she pulls her sweatshirt back up and wordlessly begs him to touch her.

With dedication and determination, he does. He lifts her clothes higher, taking her right nipple into his mouth in a hard suckle. He’s bolder now, a little less careful and more demanding, and all she can do not to lose her mind is clutch the blanket tighter, holding it to keep it in place as he swirls
his tongue over her. The pressure is unbearable, sending bolts of pleasure right to her core. He nips and licks and sucks, taking his time, sweetly torturing her. The whimpers falling from her lips are soft, but they seem so loud in the night. For a second she remembers where they are, what they’re doing out in the middle of this field, that anyone could see them, but there’s no one there. No one and nothing aside from the stars. She watches them twinkle, smearing as pleasure blurs her world, and she grabs at his hair. He gives her nipple a soothing lick before turning to the other one and lavishing just as much attention onto it.

Eventually she can’t take the torment anymore, pulling him up to kiss him fervently. It’s wet, messy, filled with desperation. The feel of her breasts flush to his chest is incredible, nothing like it’s ever been before. Between her legs she’s wet, and she aches, throbs, wants. More than she ever has in the past, she needs. Her hands fumble towards his belt again, lips tangled and heart pounding. She manages to get it open, to open his jeans and push them down off his hips. Her fingers snake under the waistband of his boxers, grasping the hard, thick length of him and giving a gentle pull. He cries out, pulling away from their kiss. Darkly satisfied at seeing him so twisted up in pleasure, she does it again. And again. She squeezes, twists her wrist on the upstroke, kisses him hard when she does. He’s trembling, wet at the tip as she runs her thumb over the crown in a tantalizing sweep. “Oh, God,” he whimpers. “Stop… I can’t…”

There can’t be anymore waiting. He can’t catch his breath, pulling back to grab at her jeans. He unbuttons them, undoes her zipper, and with much clumsiness works them down and off her. He pushes his own pants down further so they’re bunched around his knees where he’s kneeling between her thighs. For a second she catches sight of him, of how hard he is, and expects to feel that familiar and awful fear. It doesn’t come. Not now. Not ever again. Possessively, she closes her fingers around his erection, feeling him pulse and throb with her touch, and she shivers in anticipation.

Suddenly he pulls away like he’s remembering something important. He frowns deeply in dismay. “No, wait. Wait. We can’t… We need…”

She knows what he’s asking. The burning throb inside her cools as trepidation steals its way into her heart. It’s fear of a different kind. “I… It’s okay.”

He doesn’t understand. Of course, he doesn’t. “What?”

She can’t lie. She can’t. “I can’t get pregnant.”

His face fractures. That isn’t what she wants. This moment, this perfect moment, to slip away like this because of her ruined body… “Nat?”

“I can’t,” she whispers, and the shame comes back. It’s cold and awful. “I can’t. He – he hurt me so bad that…” She can’t finish.

He stares at her, face slack with surprise. Then a storm of emotions works its way over him. Anger and grief and shock and disappointment. They come so fast that she can’t parse them, can’t read them, and she feels terrified, terrified that she’s ruined this or that he’ll reject her now.

But that’s crazy. Of course it is. He leans down and kisses her soundly, deeply, his hands slipping up her legs and thighs to her stomach. “It doesn’t matter,” he breathes into her mouth in between kisses. “Doesn’t matter.” Knowingly or not, his palm presses over the scar a moment before his fingers drift down to touch between her lower lips and be certain she’s ready. She shivers.

Then she gasps a moan, a sob, a desperate, plaintive cry, and clings to him as he slips a finger inside her. Her hand goes between her legs, grasping his wrist and pulling it away. That’s not
what she wants. *She wants him.* She spreads her legs wider, as wide as she can in the narrow space beneath the blanket. She offers herself to him. *Whole-heartedly.* His erection feels so huge, trailing wetness when it brushes against her thigh, and she shivers. “Please…”

He shivers, too, and gently pulls her hips down against him. Then he’s sliding into her.

*Oh, God.* It hurts a little. He’s big, and it’s been years. The pain comes in little twinges and stretches of overly tightened and scarred muscles. When he had his fingers inside her days ago, that wasn’t as thick, as long and deep, as this. He’s going so slow, being so careful, and she feels a little stupid because she’s hardly a blushing virgin. But this *feels* like a first time, their first time, *her* first time after so many times spent as a victim. All the violence and cruelty she knew dances around her subconscious as he fills her, but she doesn’t acknowledge it because it has no place here, no place in her heart or her body, and no place between them.

And then there’s nothing between them. His hips are flush to hers, and he’s all the way inside her, sheathed completely in the hot, tight cradle of her body. She’s trembling underneath him, overwhelmed with how it feels. With how *whole* she feels. The pain’s fading like it was never there at all. Maybe it wasn’t, not really, and it was the ghost of old hurts and old violations coming to grab at her. No matter what, it has no hold on her now. This is it, the moment she’s feared but wanted so much, so badly. The moment she’s waited for, in a way, for forever. This is it, and she feels right, good, *amazing.* Pure.


“No!” she gasps, clutching at him. “No, please.”

“Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” she promises. Her voice breaks. “Please, Steve…”

“What?” he asks breathlessly. “What?”

“Move.”

He does. He pulls out almost all the way and gives a torturously slow, tender thrust back in. A moan is torn from her throat. God, it feels good. The hard length of him massages muscles that have known so much pain and trauma, caressing nerves that have never really felt good. Even before Alexei turned into a monster, sex with him wasn’t ever like this, wasn’t ever about her pleasure as it was about his and his control over her. This is nothing like that. Steve slowly builds up a rhythm, moving a bit to find the angle that has her gasping and her eyes rolling back into her head. With every thrust he’s brushing against that place inside her. He does it with deliberate care, not too hard, not too fast. She doesn’t know if he’s doing that on purpose or not, and she doesn’t care. It feels incredible.

He leans down to kiss away her tears. She wraps her arms around his neck and shoulders as he does, capturing his lips and tasting salt, clenching her knees tighter about his hips and hooking her feet behind his thighs. He rocks into her, steady and sure, and every time drives pleasure deeper into her. It’s coiling tight in her belly, licking up her spine, shooting along every nerve in her body. Under the blanket the heat between them turns damp, skin slicking with sweat and gliding together. Mindlessly she spreads her legs even wider, meeting his thrusts with movements of her own, desperate and eager and drowning in need.

Thoughts fade. Time stands still. There’s light all around them. She opens her eyes, sees his face,
beautifully slack with pleasure. Perspiration drips along his neck to the hollow of his throat. She watches it roll down his skin, unable to think much beyond how he is inside her, how close they are. She can feel every fast beat of his heart right in the core of her, every charged breath between his lips right against hers when he leans down to kiss her again. She’s present for every second they’re joined as one. She slides her hands down his back, along shifting muscles and wet skin, to his ass, digging her nails in as he moves faster and faster. He’s losing control now, losing it quickly, and his rhythm keeps faltering, breaking, speeding up and slowing down as he struggles to hold on. He’s trying to hold on for her. She tips her hips up more so that he’s brushing against the bundle of nerves at the apex of her sex, desperate to find release herself. She doesn’t know if she can get there like this. It’s hard considering how close they are, but she slides her hand down between them, touches herself.

That’s too much for him. His hips jerk once, twice, and then he cries out, going stiff as pleasure overtakes him. She watches, feels it inside her, feels wet heat and the weight of his body coming down. He’s panting damply into her neck, moaning with every fast breath, his thrusts slowing to nothing when he finishes.

They lay there for an endless moment. Steve’s shivery, returning to himself ever so slowly. She cradles him between her legs, so surprised by everything that she doesn’t even realize that she hasn’t…

He pulls out, pulls away. “Steve,” she whispers, but he shushes her with a kiss. Then he’s sliding down her body, under the blanket, fingers strong where they grasp her hips and hold her firmly. Lips trail down her belly, kissing sweaty skin, and she trembles when they brush over the scar. “Steve, Steve, please…”

She is wholly unprepared for the kiss pressed between her legs. It’s like a jolt of lightning, and she thinks it’s wrong, dirty, but she waits in pained ecstasy for it to come again. It does, this time more insistently though still gentle and tender. “Oh, God,” she whimpers. “Oh, God, God…” He’s licking her now, unconcerned about the mess he’s left, that she can feel there. It’s almost like he’s taking care of it, taking care of her, cleaning it away. No one’s ever done this to her, not like this. It’s filthy and powerful and so, so good, and part of her can’t believe it’s happening, can’t believe his tongue’s darting inside her, his fingers searching, caressing, rubbing with just the right amount of pressure. The fire in her core burns wild, the knot inside her coiling tighter and tighter as her muscles clench and ripple with mounting bliss. She can’t see him, even if she could keep her eyes open, because he’s under the blanket, but, God, it feels like he’s everywhere, all around her, inside her so deeply that she doesn’t know where she ends and he begins.

Then he crooks his fingers inside, sucks lightly at the slick, sensitive nub of flesh, and it pushes her right over the crest. She hears herself shout, hears blood whoosh in her ears. Pleasure blasts over her in an inferno, that fire bursting free and covering her in a molten wave. She’s lost in it, whining, quivering, clutching at his head as he takes her through it. It’s unlike anything she’s ever felt before.

And when it’s over, when her senses start to focus and the world returns to her, when he emerges from beneath the blanket with love in his eyes and a little smile on his reddened lips, she grabs him at him. She hardly has any strength left, reeling still with the power of her climax, but she draws him over her again, draws in him to a deep, languid kiss. She can taste herself, taste him, on his lips and tongue, and she shivers with that, shivers with receding pleasure, shivers with how good she feels.

He pulls back, rubbing his thumb along her cheek. He’s a little breathless and a lot loose with euphoria. “You okay?”
There aren’t words to describe what she’s feeling, so she only nods, kisses him again, pulls him down into her arms, holds him tight. He sags onto her, laying between her legs, boneless and completely sated.

After a few moments spent basking in the aftermath, she starts to notice the rough ground beneath her. The blanket’s a little damp, and their sweat is rapidly cooling and leaving a chill. They’re still out in the middle of the field, and anyone can see them. They need to get up and go back.

But time is still stopped, and the stars are shining. Nat watches them glow as she rubs her hands slowly up and down Steve’s back and wonders how she ever lived a life without him.

She sleeps well that night. She dreams, too, and her dreams are quiet. She dreams of Steve’s apartment, of the dark alley where she finds Liho wet and meowing. Of Wanda and Pietro, stealing a bowl of ice cream with her from the freezer of the Shostakov mansion while their father and her father-in-law talk business over vodka. Of Daisy laughing as she does up Nat’s hair. Of the hospital again, the numb silence in her heart as she lays there and listens while the doctors tell her that she’s lucky to be alive, that she’ll have to stay for a few days while her body’s still bleeding, while she’s beginning to heal. Of her father’s weathered hand on her head, reminding her that birds often fall when they learn to fly.

Of a stage, her stage, and the crowd cheering and blue eyes watching her sing.

She wakes up to a new day, to the fresh air and sunlight and old bedroom, to Steve sleeping with his bare back to her. It’s another day here in the dream, and she’s farther from the darkness than she ever has been. She takes a deep breath, enjoying the pleasant ache between her thighs, and rolls closer to Steve. With careful lips she traces the scars on his back, heart swelling with so much love that she never realized she’s capable of feeling like this. He doesn’t stir, even as she wraps her arms around him and kisses the back of his neck. She grins against his skin; she can still smell the scent of the field on him. Feeling energized and happy, she gets up to go and start breakfast.

She’s barely gotten the eggs out of the refrigerator when Fury appears. The ex-spy bursts into the kitchen, scaring her half to death, and with no preamble he announces, “News on the street says there’s a warrant out for him.”

“What?” she asks, shocked.

Fury stares at her. “There’s a warrant,” he declares again, slowly and very distinctly, “out for Alexei Shostakov’s arrest.”

Hearing it again doesn’t make it make any more sense. Nor does it make any sense that Fury’s here at eight o’clock in the morning, which meant he probably drove through the night to tell them this. That can only mean it’s real. She’s really hearing this. She nearly drops the carton of eggs she’s holding. “They’re arresting him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s true yet. My contacts can’t confirm anything.”

Holy shit. “When will you know something?”

“I don’t know,” Fury says again. “Everything is real hush-hush right now. They don’t want to spook him and give him the chance to flee the country.” He drops a couple shopping bags on the table. She notices right away they aren’t as full as they have been. “Don’t want to get your hopes up too much, but this could all be over soon.”

He leaves shortly after that when Sitwell calls, irately saying he had business out of town to explain.
his absence and that he’ll be back soon. Nat hardly notices. She’s still standing there with the carton of eggs, too shocked to function. They’re arresting him. They’re taking him into custody. She knows she shouldn’t get her hopes up too much. This is hardly the first time the cops – the good cops – have tried to take Alexei down. None of those arrests ever stuck. He was in and out of jail like people go in and out of a revolving door. But maybe… If Fury came all the way up here to tell her, it has to be serious.

*This could all be over soon.*

For the first time in the weeks that they’ve been hiding here, she’s frustrated with being so isolated. There’s no internet (and no computer even if there was), so she can’t search the news websites for information. Their phone doesn’t have much connection to the cellular network, so she can’t get information that way. She watches TV for a bit, frantically scouring the channels, but of course the local stations aren’t going to cover something like this. The house is completely silent. She checks on Steve, so antsy and riled that talking to him seems to be about the only out, but he’s still sleeping. There’s nothing she can do but wait.

Eventually she gets her wits about her enough to cook. And eventually Steve does get up. He’s very lethargic this morning, a little slow on the uptake, so she waits for him to shower and dress and come down to eat before telling him the news. Just like she did, he doesn’t seem to understand at first, and she doesn’t think it’s solely because he’s a little bleary. “Are you serious?”

“That’s what he said,” Nat replies, finally cracking eggs over the skillet and trying not to tremble with excitement.

Steve blinks and stares at her. “Holy shit…”

That about sums it up. A few minutes later they sit for a quiet breakfast, neither of them daring to speak almost like if they do, this amazing turn of events will vanish or turn out to be fake. Steve lines up his meds, takes them one at a time, but he seems to be in a daze as he does. So is she as she washes up their couple of dishes and goes to dress. A shower feels good and helps refresh her, but she can’t focus on it. She can’t focus on anything.

The whole day goes like that. They hardly talk. They’re both restless, trying to keep busy with the same things that have been good enough for the last few weeks, but nothing holds their attention. Steve tries drawing in the den, but he’s not managing much. She has her songbook open in the kitchen, but it’s too hard to focus. She keeps uselessly tapping her pencil to a blank page. That’s all she can do. She’s too scared this isn’t true. She’s scared it is, but it won’t matter, that all this will only end in disappointment like it has so many other times.

And… she’s scared their time here could be coming to a close. Despite the fact they’ve been trapped, that this old house has in fact been a prison of sorts, part of her doesn’t want it to end. The few weeks (more than two, she thinks, but less than three – she’s not sure exactly how long it’s been) have been nothing short of magical. Just the two of them, living together, loving each other… The peace and quiet. The freedom in that, even if they couldn’t leave. She’s not sure she wants to go back to real life, to let go of this fantasy. It’s necessary to face what she left behind, and she knows that. Steve needs to get back to the study, to his doctors, to his friends and the life he left behind. She shouldn’t feel this way.

But she does. It’s not an angry thing by any means, just… She’s had him all to herself in ways she never imagined, and she doesn’t want to give that up. She feels like this is it, that they’ve become so close and not just because they finally had sex. He’s healed her, and she’s earned that. She’s earned him, earned his love. She feels worthy of it now. She knows he’ll be the first one to tell her she never needed to prove anything, but she knows she did. And she has.
Smiling, she starts to write.

It’s a few hours later that the phone rings. The silence seemed so unbreakable that the sound of it is shrill, like a siren almost, and Steve comes running into the kitchen. His eyes are wide, watching in tense anticipation, as she takes the phone from where it’s beside her songbook and looks at the caller ID. It’s Clint. She swallows nervously and answers it. “Hello?”

“Nat? Nat, you’re not going to believe this.”

Her heart speeds up. “What?”

“The FBI. The fucking Feds! They arrested him.”

And now her heart just stops. Even though she knew it all day, hoped for it all day, the world explodes in joy at those three words. “What?” she stammers, grinning like mad. “What?”

Clint’s voice is tinged with excitement. “The old man dying was like pulling the bottom out from a house of cards. Andrei’s allies immediately turned on Alexei. Immediately. His protection dissolved almost overnight. Their entire empire is crumbling. It’s all over the news. The FBI picked Alexei up this morning on dozens of charges, murder, arson, bribery, racketeering… It goes on and on. He’s being held without bond.”

Without bond. That means he can’t get out. Nat wants to cry she’s so relieved. She stares at Steve, not knowing what to say. He’s staring back, smiling hesitantly. Thank God. Thank God.

It’s over.

It’s a struggle to think, to speak, with the enormity of that before her. “What… I mean, how…” She stammers, shakes her head, so shocked that this is really happening. “What now?”

There’s a sigh on Clint’s part. “Dunno yet. I’m not sure it’s safe to come back right now. The Feds went after some of Alexei’s men and business associates, too. People are being arrested left and right out on Staten Island and here and in Manhattan. Internal affairs hauled our captain out in cuffs. The fallout on this is going to be big, Nat. I may not know until the dust settles. One thing’s for sure, though. You don’t have to stay there. We can get you someplace else, someplace better.”

That’s not as wonderful as it should be. There’s no place better. “Okay.”

“You okay?”

Obviously she sounded glum. “Yeah! Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Alright. I’ll call back a little later.”

He hangs up. Nat drops the phone from her ear. Steve’s still watching her, wide-eyed and waiting. She shivers through a breath and nods.

He’s across the couple of feet between them in a blink, sweeping her into his arms. “Holy shit!” he gasps. He laughs brightly, spinning her around. She grabs his neck to hold on, almost out of her mind with it all. He sets her on the counter, smiling brighter than the sun. “They arrested him? They arrested him?”

“Yeah,” she breathlessly says, nodding emphatically. “Yes!”
He grasps her face, kissing her and kissing her. It’s a little hard to manage it because they’re both grinning like fools, but they make do.

Clint does call later. She talks to him alone because Steve’s walking the house’s perimeter (maybe that’s not necessary anymore, but he’s doing it anyway). She’s cutting up the peppers and tomatoes for their salad when the phone rings, and after they start talking, she has to stop because she’s worried she may cut herself she’s so distracted. “What’re you saying, Clint?”

Clint repeats himself. “Look, just because he’s behind bars doesn’t mean things are finished. There’s a chance they may want you to testify against him.”

Her blood goes cold. Her hands start shaking. She makes herself put the knife down. “Clint, I don’t know if I can do that.”

“I know. This isn’t going to be easy, not at all. I, um… Well, it was never much of an option before, but I think it is now. With this Fury guy helping, we have more options. He came to the precinct earlier. Nat, he thinks he can get you into witness protection now. Safely. He has people he trusts in the government who can make it happen.”

She presses her palm to her forehead. This is too much. On top of everything else today that’s too damn much. She can’t think. For years when she was hiding, they all longed for that, for the chance to move her some place truly safe. No fake IDs. No lies. No relying on poor Clint and Maria to find secure apartments and neighborhoods. No checking over her shoulder constantly. Witness protection on the federal level… This can be a real chance to start over, to start a new life. “I don’t know what to say.” She really doesn’t.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” Clint replies. He sighs. “I know. But it could be for the best. The FBI can do things for you that I can’t. If they ask you to testify… They can keep you safe. What you know can put him away for life.”

She shivers with the thought, with the novel and enormous situation suddenly looming before her. She does know things. Drug deals. Murders. Kidnappings. She heard Alexei speak with any number of his business partners and thugs in the Red Room. She serviced the ones he planned to murder. She knows a lot of incriminating information.

Christ, this isn’t going to end just like that. She was stupid to believe it ever could.

But despite all that, the potential new threat to her, the pain of potentially having to testify in court about who she is and what she did and what happened to her, there’s only one thought in her head. “What about Steve?”

Clint doesn’t respond right away, and that more than anything tells her everything she needs to know. “I… I don’t know that he’d be able to come with you. Or that he should. There are warrants out for Rumlow and Rollins. Believe me, we’re going to catch them. And with them in custody and you out of the picture, it’s probably safe for him to come home.” Nat closes her eyes. “Probably best that he does.”

She can’t accept that. “But he could come with me. If he wants to.” If I want him to.

Another pause. A hint of a sigh. “Maybe? Fury seemed pretty willing to do anything to get you somewhere safe and to keep you happy as a witness. It’s… It’s a huge sacrifice for him, Nat. There’s no going back, not for a while. Federal case like this could take years. It could even be never.”
“Remember what I told you? That day in the hospital.”

It comes to her. It’s not the right day, and she knows it, but it comes. “Don’t give up, Natalia. There’s still a reason to fight. You’ll heal. Believe me, you will.”

“Call me Nat.”

She closes her eyes. “Nothing’s more important than keeping myself safe.”

“That’s still true. I know you love him and he loves you. But… Think about it, okay? Think hard.”

She does. She’s thinks about it and thinks about it, long after she gets off the phone with Clint, long after she and Steve have dinner, well into when they’re laying side by side in the bedroom and listening to the wind outside. The window’s open, and the gentle gusts are blowing in what feels like a cold front. The curtains billow inward with it. They’re both watching them, silent as they have been all day. He seems as incapable of processing any of this as she is, and he doesn’t even know the half of it. She’s feeling… unsettled but not upset. Shaken but not scared. Alone.

But she’s not. Steve takes her hand between them, weaving their fingers together. “I know… I know this changes everything. And I’m real happy for you. I can’t even tell you, Nat. So happy for you. This is everything you deserve. You can get your life back.” She closes her eyes. She should tell him about the choice before her, but she can’t face it. Hiding in their dream is much easier. “Whatever that means, whatever it is… I’m with you. I’ll be with you no matter what.”

She can’t stand it, not what he’s saying and not what she’s feeling, so she turns over to kiss him. It feels so good, so sweet and perfect. She brushes the backs of her fingers through his beard, drawing his face closer and deepening the kiss. Hunger settles into the core of her in a sudden rush of heat. Something’s going to happen. She can feel it in her bones, in her blood. This dream they’ve been living feels tenuous, limited, and time’s threatening to resume its endless march forward. It’s always against her.

She doesn’t want to face that.

So she climbs atop him, not breaking the kiss. Straddling his hips, she rocks herself down. He groans into her mouth, pulling away from the increasingly ravenous contact for a breath. “Nat? You okay?”

“Of course,” she whispers against his lips. She playfully nips at his lower lip. “Are you?”

He smiles, but it’s a little tame. “Bit of a headache.” Now that he’s said that, she does think he looks a tad pale. She leans back in worry, making to get off him. “No, no.” He grabs her hips to still her. “No.”

“We don’t have to if you’re not feeling up to it.”

“I’m fine,” he says firmly. His grin turns flirtier. “Besides, you think there’s anything under the sun that’d make me not want you?”

God, the things he says. How much he means them. Love thrums in her arteries and veins, her heart racing with it. She leans down to kiss him, hot and wet, plunging her tongue into his mouth. Another moan vibrates between them, and he slips his hands under her cotton cami. They drift over her ribs, up to her breasts, and she pulls back from his mouth to grasp and still them. “No,”
she whispers. “No, I want to take care of you.”

“Nat…”

“You’ve done nothing but take care of me,” she whispers. She lifts his right hand to her lips, kissing his thumb. “In every way I wanted. In every way I needed.” Her lips go up his index finger before sucking it into her mouth. His eyes darken, mouth falling open as he draws a surprised breath. “You took care of me. I want to do that for you.”

“You have. You always do.”

“This hero thing you have going…” She grins before sinking her teeth gently into the fleshy part of his palm. “I know you think Captain America didn’t come home from the war. I know you think that. But you have to see… Captain America’s been right here at my side, protecting me whenever I’ve wanted it and even when I was too stupid to realize I needed it. And don’t try to deny it.” He doesn’t look like he’s capable of talking at all, let alone forming any sort of cognizant response. In fact, she’s pretty sure all his blood has rushed south, so to speak. “You don’t have to sacrifice all the time. You’re worth it, too.” He just stares as she kisses her way down his arm. Then she presses it down into the pillows, takes his other and does the same with that. “So let me.”

“You don’t have to…” He shakes his head. “You never have to.”

“I want to,” she whispers against his lips. She takes another kiss, tender but firm in its conviction. In its desire. He opens his mouth to her, lets her control it, lets her take what she wants. She doesn’t want to take, though. She wants to give. She slides her mouth from his, kissing down his chin, his jaw, over his beard. Down his throat. She licks at a tendon there, plants a trail of hot kisses lower still. Grabbing the bottom of his t-shirt, she pulls it up and off him. He looks up at her with hazy adoration in his eyes, and right then she feels nothing but beautiful and sexy. Powerful. It’s a heady rush, a jolt that goes to the core of her. She can do this. I want to.

She runs her hands up his chest, over the hills and valleys of his abdomen to the swell of his pecs where she thumbs at the tiny buds of his nipples. He gasps softly, closing his eyes. There’s a thrill to touch him that she didn’t appreciate before, exhilaration that twists desire tighter inside her. Smiling, she kisses her way down his body, down his sternum, sliding her tongue over his smooth skin, tasting clean sweat. She settles between his legs, running her hand along the smattering of hair that runs down his belly and under his pajama pants. Then she looks up at him, watches his lips part with a heavy breath. She grins wider at him, playful and teasing. There’s not a drop of doubt in her heart that she can’t do this or doesn’t want to. She needs him to know that.

He seems to, raising a hand to brush fingers through her hair before running them down her face. His thumb brushes over her lower lip. She sucks at it again, lightly twisting her tongue around it, and he shivers. “Nat… I want you…”

“Let me.” She takes his pajama pants off, both them and his boxers. He’s hard already, stiff and red, and his erection jerks in her hand the second she touches it. Hushing him with a kiss to his left thigh, she scooches up between his legs more, grasping his hip with her other hand. And she’s not even nervous when she starts to kiss up the length of him, nibbling up a vein, before licking over the tip, tasting him anew. The cry that earns her makes her smile, and she squeezes firmly at the root of him with her hand to keep him steady as she takes him into her mouth.

It’s nothing like any of the times she’s done this with any other man. It’s not even anything like before, when she was so horrified and ashamed and desperate to get him off to avoid him touching her. This is slow, sensuous. This is about taking him apart with her lips and tongue and teeth, with
her hands, with her body and her heart. There are no lies here. There’s nothing to hide, no walls between them, and she revels in the moment, revels in the power she has, in how much she wants to make him feel good. It’s possibly the most freeing thing she’s ever known.

She sucks harder, not pausing for even a second to think about anything other than how he whimpers, how he shivers beneath her, how he feels in her mouth, hot and thick. The salty, bitter taste of it that for once doesn’t repulse her. He’s holding very still, struggling against himself, and she hums softly around him, encouraging him to rock his hips more. He does, and she relaxes her jaw and closes her eyes and takes him deeper, drinking in every pleasured whine, every tremble of his thighs, every gentle tug of his fingers in her hair. There are no bad memories. Not now. Not ever again.

It doesn’t take long at all before he’s close. She remembers from last time, remembers how his breathing falls apart, how his stomach muscles clench, how he quakes with the effort to hold on. She doesn’t want him to hold on. She wants to do this for him, to let him come like this. She’ll take everything he gives her.

But he let go. “N-Nat,” he gasps, tugging a little more on her hair to get her to stop. “Nat, please… Not like… I want you…”

She pulls off, giving him a final gentle lick. Then she leans up, straddling him again and pulling off her cami in one swift, graceful motion. The power of that, of undressing herself willingly for him… God, she could die from how he’s watching her. The desire in his gaze is unfathomable, and she quirks a smile as she pulls off her shorts and underwear, too. Like last night, the air’s chilly, a cold caress over her exposed skin, but she can’t feel anything but the heat of his eyes. She leans down to kiss him, a mess of tongues and his desperate moans as she rocks her wet core over him in a series of tantalizing swipes. When she’s ready, it takes nothing at all for him to push inside.

It’s easy, amazing, painless. Perfect. She leans back, tosses her hair behind her, arches and rolls her hips forward. Everything throbs with how deep he is inside her. In some ways it’s more intense than the last time, the angle sharper, and she swivels her hips just to experiment and feel everything more. She’s never had sex like this before. She’s never been on top, never been in control of the pace or penetration, never had any say in how she was taken. Her body sings with pleasure, with passion as she slowly she moves, as she rolls her hips and rides him the way she wants. His hands go to her hips, but he doesn’t do anything other than hold on. Delight explodes across her thoughts with every cry he makes, every short breath, every toss of his head back into the pillows. She quickly discovers what he likes, what she likes, faster and slower, shallower and deeper, harder and harder. Her thighs tremble and burn with exertion. When he thrusts up to meet her dropping down, the place inside her jolts with white fire, nerves sparking everywhere. She can’t contain a cry, arching her back against the onslaught of fire, and he takes her breasts. Her hands close over his, keeping them there as he pinches and tugs her nipples. Pleasure compounds on pleasure. She’s losing herself in it, drowning, frantically taking each and every one of his thrusts in a desperate search for completion.

He bucks up harder. Vaguely she notices him planting his feet on the mattress, and his next thrust drives her forward. It’s so deliciously good, and she’s so close, so close. She’s never felt like this before, never thought she can actually find release with someone inside her. Never thought it can be easy and simple like this. But she’s there now, dancing along a razor’s edge. A feral hunger overtakes her – she wants to know what it feels like – so she grabs his hands and leans forward, pinning him down into the mattress with her weight and squeezing his hips with her knees and holding his wrists into the pillows. He watches her with eyes blown wide, his breath a hot gust against her lips. She works herself harder, grinding her hips down and squeezing him inside,
capturing another kiss as she does, and he moans, meeting her movements now rather than the other way around. It’s incredible, to have him like this. To have him want her like this.

To have him love her.

Her muscles ripple around him inside her as she climaxes, as ecstasy blots out the world and overwhelms her body. There’s color. Light. Heat and pressure inside. So much pleasure that it feels like she’s dying from it, like there’s no air to breathe and no thoughts to think and nothing else beyond this. He comes, too, undone by her release, and she collapses on top of him.

They lay still and quiet for quite some time. Eventually she finds it within herself to lean up from where her face was tucked in the sweat-slicked skin of his chest. He’s watching her still, eyes open and so deeply blue. Like the sky. He smiles slowly, kisses her even more slowly. She melts into it, completely spent, completely satisfied. Healed.

She climbs off him when her thighs start to ache enough to bother her. It’s hot and sticky between her legs, and the emptiness isn’t entirely comfortable, but she doesn’t care much. She collapses at his side, throwing an arm over his yet heaving belly. He tugs her close. Together they lay naked and panting and listening to the wind again.

“I think…” His voice is loud in silence, and she opens eyes that drifted shut. “I think in a way I’ve loved you my whole life. Like everything that happened to me… It happened because we’re meant to be together. If they hadn’t taken me in Afghanistan, if Peggy hadn’t thought I was dead, I might have been with her. I might never have known you or known this.” He breathes deeply, settling his hand between her breasts and nuzzling at her shoulder. “All of the darkness in my life… It brought me here, with you. Been thinking about that a lot since we got here, how glad I am that I was strong enough to make it to you.” She looks at him. He smiles. “I feel like I’ve loved you forever. I’ll love you forever. Forever, Nat.”

She captures his lips in a long, sweet kiss, holding him tight. She’s not letting go. Forever.

But forever isn’t real. That’s the fantasy they’ve been living. The dream. It’s not something they can have. It never has been. There can’t be a forever.

She knows that now.

Steve wakes up sick the next day. Nat doesn’t realize it at first; the fact that he sleeps in isn’t all that alarming, as he does tend to stay in bed later than she does. After giving his shoulder a kiss, she dresses in her pajamas again and plods downstairs to make some coffee. Coffee turns into oatmeal and watching the local news and waiting for Clint to call. The phone doesn’t ring, not even after obsessively checking it for almost an hour. Frustrated with that, she goes back upstairs with the intent of showering only to find Steve curled up in bed and shaking. “Steve?” Terrified, she rushes over and touches his arm. “Steve? What’s wrong?”

His head’s burrowed into the pillows, so at first she doesn’t see the agonized grimace. He groans and tries to turn away. “Headache,” he finally grits out.

His head’s burrowed into the pillows, so at first she doesn’t see the agonized grimace. He groans and tries to turn away. “Headache,” he finally grits out.

She leans back, the knot of fear in her gut loosening somewhat. She knows he suffers from persistent migraines. He hasn’t much recently, at least not like this, since they’ve been living together, but in the early days of their relationship, she noticed it. More than once he canceled dinner because of them. This is the first time she’s seen it up close. She sits on the bed beside
him. “What can I do?”

He moans again. “Light,” he whimpers.

It’s cold today, cold and raining, but even the gray, gloomy light coming through the windows is too much. Quickly she gets up to close the shutters and draw the curtains together as much as possible. That blots out the light a little. It’s not much. She comes back to the bed. “What else?”

As it turns out, there isn’t much more she can do. The migraine takes him down hard and fast. He’s reduced to shivering in bed, tears silently bleeding from his eyes, as she rubs his arm and his back and any part of him to try to take his mind off the skull-splitting pain. He vacillates between wanting her close and being unable to tolerate even her touch, curling more into himself and moaning pitifully that he’s sorry. It shouldn’t hurt that he’s like this, but it does. It does so badly. She gets him dressed, although he’s so dizzy more than once she thinks he’s going to fall. She also tries to get him to take some pain medicine, and he grouchily fights her on it, complaining he’s too sick to his stomach. She convinces him, and sure enough, he throws up not long after that. He thankfully makes it to the bathroom when he does, and she kneels with him, rubbing his back while he vomits miserably. Helplessness doesn’t begin to describe how she feels.

Hours go by. She helps him shower, thinking the hot water might soothe his pain. If it does, it’s minor. Dressed in clean pajamas, he crawls back into bed with the pillows over his head and sleeps in fits and spurts. Restlessly he dozes and writhes and tries to get away from the discomfort, and she can’t do a damn thing to make him feel better. There’s nothing other than waiting for it to pass. In some ways, it’s worse than a seizure. Those can be brutal to witness, but they’re blessedly short in comparison. This is like watching someone you love being tortured, and you can’t rescue him from the pain. You can only sit and watch and offer useless words that hardly pass for comfort.

She sees the scar on his temple as she brushes back his hair and puts a cool compress on his forehead. She sees it there and is reminded all over again. Guilt and grief gnaw at her. As if that’s not enough of a reminder of what’s at stake, Sam calls early into this endless afternoon. When she sees it’s not Clint, she’s tempted not to answer. She knows in her gut what it’s about, and she doesn’t want to hear it, not after a day spent watching Steve suffer. Sam deserves far better than that, though. She takes the call out in the hallway where Steve won’t hear (although she thinks he’s sleeping again, at least lightly). She swallows down the lump in her throat. “Hello?”

“How’s it going?”

She presses a shaking hand to her forehead and peers through the crack she left between the door and frame. Steve rolls over. She catches just a glimpse of his face. He doesn’t look entirely awake, but despite that he seems completely miserable. Her heart clenches painfully in her chest. There’s no sense in lying, and maybe she’ll feel better talking with Sam. If anyone can understand, it’s him, and she’s scared. “Steve’s sick.”

Sam’s voice immediately goes tense. “Sick how?”

“Well, not really sick. He’s got a migraine. A really bad one. It’s been going on all day. He can’t get out of bed. He threw up.”

Over the phone Sam sighs. “The brain damage—”
Brain damage. “I know.”

“There’s not much you can do. Wait it out.”

“I know.”

“If he’s not better soon, you should call a doctor. Actually, you should come home.” Nat closes her eyes. “He should be back here where Doctor Erskine can keep an eye on him. Doctor Cho, too. She called me. Steve has me listed as an emergency contact, I think. That’s why I called.” He sounds rattled. “She needs Steve to come in now. He’s missed more than a few appointments, and if he can’t commit… They’re going to find an alternate candidate for the procedure. She can’t wait anymore or they risk losing funding.”

God. Nat bites her lip. She knew this was coming. Like everything else, like her role in Alexei’s crimes and what that could mean, it’s been in the back of her mind. As the dream fades and the world punctures the bubble around them, it’s all coming to the forefront. “Did she say when?”

“Monday.” It’s Wednesday. That at least gives them some time. *Time to do what?* There’s nothing to do. The helplessness churns uncomfortably in her belly. She heaves a sigh. “I know your ex is in jail. It’s everywhere. Doesn’t that mean it’s safe to come home?”

She wishes it’s that simple. Maybe it should be. No. “I…”

“If it’s safe, you gotta bring him back. He needs to be here.”

She can only hear the desperation in Sam’s voice. The worry. The love for Steve. Nat bites her lip until it hurts. “I know.” That’s all she seems capable of saying. “I know.”

*I know.*

Later it’s thundering. The bedroom’s even darker with the storm and early evening. Steve has settled considerably over the last couple hours. The debilitating misery that’s dominated his body and twisted his muscles all day is finally abating, and he’s resting easier. It seems like the worst is over. Nat lays beside him, holding his head to her chest, running her fingers through his hair. She sighs, closing aching eyes. It’s been a long and difficult day, and she’s exhausted physically and emotionally. “I have to tell you,” she murmurs into his head.

“Hmmm.” He’s not entirely awake.

“I think you’re right. I think… I loved you before I even met you. I felt it somehow. When he was…” Her voice breaks, but she doesn’t stop. “When I was running from him, I thought I lost everything. I thought… There was no reason to go on. They told me… In the hospital, they said…”

“There wasn’t anything we could do.”

“It was like all the hope I had in this world had died. Inside me. It was gone.”

“With the amount of scarring to your uterus and cervix this wound will cause, you will have trouble conceiving again. It’s impossible to tell you for certain, but… In my experience, the chances of a successful pregnancy after this sort of trauma are extremely low.”

Her lips ghost over his hair. “But something didn’t let me give up. I didn’t know what it was then. I just kept telling myself I needed to survive. I needed to keep going. I needed to live through it. I didn’t even realize what that something was until that day you showed up at my
door.”

He sighed into her neck. “Yeah?”

She’s not sure he’s listening. She doesn’t care. “Yeah.” She kisses his head again. “It was you. The promise of you. You’re right, Steve. Everything I went through led me to you.”

He doesn’t answer. His breathing has evened out, and she knows he’s at long last fallen asleep. She can tell almost immediately it’s a deep one. Weaving their hands together over her stomach, she caresses his knuckles in soothing circles, infinitely relieved that he’s finally free of the pain. And she keeps talking to the thunder, to the rain pattering outside and the wind brushing against the house. “Forever,” she whispers. “That’s what we have. Forever.”

She knows it’s not true.

Sometime later, the phone rings. Nat wakes from a light doze and slips out from under Steve’s upper body. She tucks him into the quilts and blankets before taking the phone from the dresser beside the bed. “Hello?”

Finally it’s Clint. “Everything’s settled,” he says. “I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon to drive you to the Buffalo airport. I’m going to book you a flight to Philadelphia. That’s close enough to stay connected but not so close as to be in immediate danger. Plus an old friend of mine works for the FBI there. Kate Bishop. She’ll take care of you, get you started with the Feds and witness protection. Fury says the office there is ready to handle it all and keep you safe as long as necessary. He told me where you are. Never would have guessed he’d hide you on a farm, or that he’d have a fucking farm for that matter.” He gives a gleeful, relieved laugh. “Nat?”

She stares at Steve, at the scar on his head, the scars on his back. The lax expression of peace on his handsome face. He deserves better than the pain he’s faced, that he continues to endure. He deserves more than a life in hiding for sins he didn’t commit. He needs to heal. For that, he needs to go back to Brooklyn, to the doctors who can help him and the friends he loves. She knows that. He needs to go home.

And she can’t go with him.

“Nat?”

She jerks from her thoughts. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“You want to go through with this, right? I think you need to. I think it’s the best option.”

She knows he’s right. No choice. “Yes.”

“One or two tickets?”

It’s happening. The dream’s ending. The fantasy’s fading. The bubble’s collapsing, and the world’s pressing in. Time’s racing onward. I love you forever.

She closes her eyes and prays she’ll be forgiven. “One.”
More glorious chapter artwork from the wonderful faith2nyc! Beautiful.

“Time stands still.
Beauty and all she is.
I will be brave.
I will not let anything take away what’s standing in front of me.
Every breath, every hour has come to this...
One step closer
I have died every day waiting for you.
Darling, don’t be afraid. I have loved you for a thousand years.
I’ll love you for a thousand more…”
— Christina Perri, “A Thousand Years”
“Stay” Chapter 18
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Alright, folks! We're getting to the end here. Thank you all your comments and kudos! Much, much appreciated. Warnings on this chapter for the same stuff that's been all over this story. I say anything specific and it'll give it away. So just... warnings. By now, you know what you're in for.

It’s always scary how things can suddenly shift. Out of the blue, everything changes. Just like that. A new day dawns, and right away Steve can tell something’s wrong.

He’s sitting at the breakfast table watching Nat cook. She keeps looking over her shoulder at him, always with a sweet, tender smile, but something’s off. He doesn’t think it’s just because she’s worried about him. Truth be told, the sudden migraine yesterday scared him, too. It’s been a while since he’s had one that bad, one that totally drops him, one that chews him up and spits him out and leaves him essentially nonfunctional. His memories of yesterday are blurry at best, just hazy impressions of Nat with him, rubbing cool compresses over his throbbing head, helping him drink, humming and whispering and soothing him. Obviously something happened other than him being down and out for the count, something that upset her, but he doesn’t know what. So physically he’s feeling a lot better today (there’s a little lingering pain and grogginess but nothing he can’t handle), and mentally… Emotionally, this should be a day to celebrate. They’re safe. Shostakov’s in jail. There’s a chance they could be going home soon. Home.

And they’ll be able to be together with this all behind them. Maybe that won’t happen all at once, but it will. He’s sure of it.

He doesn’t think she is, though. He watches her at the stove, eggs in the pan in front of her, and she looks like she’s a million miles away. Totally consumed with something. That’s hardly the first time she’s been like this since coming here, but this time is different. It’s more troubled, like
she’s struggling with something rather than lost in thoughts and memories. He wonders what’s bothering her, wonders how he can help. She was up early this morning, he knows that much. When the sun was rising and filling the room with pale morning light, he felt her slide out of bed. She was back a little later, dressed in old jeans and a purple sweatshirt, to kiss his lips and then his forehead and to tell him to sleep in, so he did. He didn’t have it in him to rouse himself anyway, at least not beyond vaguely hearing her voice down the hallway. She was on the phone. Somewhere in the haze and flashes from yesterday he’s pretty sure he heard her on the phone then, too. Maybe with Sam? Clint? He doesn’t know. Whatever it was about, it’s weighing on her now. She’s doing her level best to hide it, and perhaps earlier in their relationship she could have, but he knows her too well now. He knows every part of her, everything she’s given him, and he’s got to make whatever’s bothering her better. “Nat?”

“What?” she says, turning around.

He gives a weak smile. “You’re, um… It’s burning?”

Nat gasps and goes back to her pan. “Oh, shit,” she hisses, more in disgust at herself than in anger. She takes the blackening eggs off the heat, wincing at the mess. “Damn it. Sorry.” She turns the water on in the sink to get the pan rinsed right away.

Steve’s tempted to stand and still her, but something about her posture, the tension in her frame, suggests to him that he shouldn’t touch her right now. “Hey, stop. It’s fine. I don’t care. Just… Nat?”

She’s shaking. Catching his eyes over her shoulder, she sighs and dumps the pan into the sink, pressing her hand to her forehead. “I can’t do this,” she whispers. “I can’t.”

Concern knifes through Steve, sharp and cold. “Do what?”

She stands there, water still running from the faucet in a hissing deluge. Her hands curl over the counter, and she leans into it, bowing her head a little. He can’t stand how she looks, like something’s crushing her, defeating her, beating her down. He’s about to get up, to say something, but he can see her muscle loosen as she takes a deeper breath. And another one. She’s gathering herself piece by piece. Then she finally turns the water off, turns to look at him more fully, and her eyes are shining with wetness. For a long moment, one that feels infinite for how heavy and interminable it is, they just stare at each other. The worry inside Steve tightens up further like a vise. “Can we talk?” she asks.

He can’t find his voice, so he nods. Still she lingers at the sink a little longer, like she’s doubting she actually wants to do this. She does do it, though, coming over and pulling the chair out with a low, scraping rattle over the linoleum floor. She sits, and still she hesitates, not looking at him, eyes focused on the edge of the table. They’re glistening. The silence is so heavy. Steve can hardly breathe as he watches her and waits for her to find the courage to say whatever’s on her mind. How bad can it be? That’s the only thought in his head. It can’t be that bad. It’s over. He’s in prison. We can go home.

She bites her lower lip, at long last summoning the courage to look at him. “I was going to tell you later, try to make it easier, but…” She frowns, crestfallen. “Nothing’s going to make it easier.”

Steve’s blood goes cold. “Make what easier?”

Another moment of her struggling with herself follows, and it’s striking, watching her fight for her composure. Watching her find her certainty. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her like this, this sure of something, this determined and resolute. It’s not harsh or arrogant or anything like that but soft
and subtle, the way everything is with her. And she’s gorgeous sitting there, the light coming in
catching the red of her hair that’s gotten so much more prominent over the last few weeks without
her trying to mask it, the creamy tones of her skin so vibrant and healthy with the peace and rest
they’ve gotten. Her lips are pert and pink, pushed together in a frown. Her eyes are green more
than blue this morning, and he can’t understand what she can possibly have to say that has her so
upset.

Finally, when he feels antsy enough to fidget, she starts talking. “Clint’s coming this afternoon.
He should be here around one.”

That’s good, isn’t it? Clint coming. It’s good. Maybe he’s coming to take them home. Or maybe
he has news. So it’s fine.

Obviously it’s not, though, not if she’s this troubled by it. Realization slowly starts to sink into
Steve’s brain, but he’s not ready to acknowledge it yet, not capable of it. Not at all. His empty
stomach roils uncomfortably. “Okay.”

She looks away and then looks right back, like she knows she needs to look him in the eye right
now. “He’s…” She licks her lips, worries the lower with her teeth a little, and then forces herself
to go on. “He’s going to take me to the airport.”

He doesn’t process that for a second. “Take you… to the airport?”

Her head bobs in a little nod. “Just me.”

That realization becomes undeniable. He feels like the floor’s disappearing, wrenched out from
under him so that he’s falling. Falling hard and fast. His nerves jolt and then tingle with horror
and panic. He’s on his feet before he thinks to stand, and his eyes narrow as he stares at her. Just
like that his heart’s pounding, lungs heaving for air that doesn’t seem like it’s coming, body aching

Her frown gets deeper, but she doesn’t look away. “It’s the only way. Fury’s been able to set up
witness protection for me. Real protection from the FBI. They’re going to… They’ll help keep
me safe if I testify against Alexei.”

This should have occurred to him. It should have. Christ, they were never going to able to just go
home. He’s a fucking fool for thinking so, for hoping so. Even with Shostakov in jail, there’ll be a
trial and media coverage. He doesn’t know a lot about this type of stuff, but he has to imagine with
a criminal empire as big as the Shostakov family in the midst of toppling, this could get long and
complicated. Nat’s a witness. No matter what else, she’s that. A witness and a victim. God, a
storm of awful thoughts thunders through his head. What if the Feds go after her for something?
She said Alexei used to make her sleep with the men he wanted to kill and offer up sexual favors to
his associates. Accessory to murder? To other crimes? Are they leveraging that against to make
her cooperate? Will they?

The words burst from his mouth, and he’s shaking. “No, you can’t.”

“Steve—”

“You can’t do this,” he argues. His voice is rushed with fear and anger. “You can’t. It’s not
safe.”

Calmly she shakes her head. “It’s the only thing that is. I can’t… I can’t run anymore. I have a
chance to do the right thing, and I have to take it.”
"Jesus, Nat—"

“No one’s forcing me,” she says softly. “Clint and Fury set it up, but they didn’t demand that I do it.” He can’t understand that. Can’t process this, either. She shakes her head. “This is my choice, the first choice I feel like I’ve made in forever that affects my life. My choice. I don’t want to live like this anymore. I’ve been hiding from him for so long, terrified he’d find me and bring me back home. I’ve cowered in his shadow, let him own me and control me from afar. God, Steve, I hurt you because I was so scared of him. I can’t do that anymore. I have to live my life. And if I can do something to put him behind bars forever, I have to try. I have to.”

Of course she has to. He knows that. He saw the fire and passion and power inside her the second he met her. The beauty and kindness and strength. He saw it then, and now it’s on display like never before, with her hair aglow and her eyes so green and firm and her voice level and certain. He can’t help but be proud of her for this, for finally standing up for herself, for having the agency to decide her own fate and future. To make a choice.

But his pride and love aren’t strong enough to overcome his pain. “Then I’ll come with you.”

Her face loosens with grief. “You can’t,” she says, but her voice wavers.

So does his. “Why not?”

“Because you can’t. You deserve—”

His anger surges from his control. “Don’t tell me what I deserve! Don’t tell me that you’re not good enough for me! Don’t fucking do it!”

She stays calm in the face of his fire. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Then why? Is it because we had sex?” She flinches. Guilt and frustration make the kitchen spin. Steve wants to pace because he’s so agitated, but he can’t make his muscles work. “Is it? Or is it because I was sick yesterday?”

“Yes,” she murmurs. “Both those reasons.” He goes cold in horror, but it’s not right to do that. She wouldn’t let him sleep with her if she didn’t want it. He knows that. He knows how it felt, how perfect and right it was, and how much she lost herself in it. And he knows she’d never, ever leave him because of his medical issues. They’re way past those sorts of doubts and insecurities.

But what’s left is worse in a way. What’s left is her love, her devotion and sacrifice. Her love and his health, two very good reasons to leave among a million selfish reasons to stay. “You need to go back to Brooklyn, Steve. You need to go home. Sam called and told me that the doctor in the clinical trial told him… They can’t wait for you.” He looks away hotly. It would come down to this. He’s tried ignoring it for days, weeks, tried convincing himself it doesn’t matter, that he can live like this. He knows he can. He’s dealt with his epilepsy and everything that’s come with it for two years. He’ll face it for the rest of his life for her. Doesn’t she see that? “They’re going to pick someone else if you don’t go back.”

“I don’t care,” he snaps stubbornly. “It’s not more important than you.”

“I can’t be the reason you give this up. I can’t be.”

That hurts. “You are. I’d rather be sick every day until the day I die than be apart from you for just one.” She winces, and he regrets being so dramatic but not enough to take it back. He quiets his tone, though, and takes a deep breath. “I’ll come with you. I promised I would when we ran that night. I promised I’d stay with you. I don’t want you to go through this by yourself.
Whatever it takes… I’ll be there with you.”

“You can’t,” she says again, this time somewhat guiltily.

“Why not?”

“There’s only one plane ticket. And… And I called Sam. He and Thor are on their way here to… to get you.” Steve stiffens. What? She did what? He feels utterly betrayed. “They’ll be here a little after Clint. Fury’ll wait with you until they–”

“You can’t do that! You can’t just…” He can’t finish. Again his anger flares. It’s mean and sour and harsh, but he can’t stop it. He’s too fucking hurt. Christ, just when he was feeling like everything was settled, that they could be together… It’s all being ripped away, and he’s scrambling to hold on. “I’m not a goddamn child,” he seethes. “I can make my own decisions, too. I’ve lived with this – with this fucking monster in my head for years. I think I can choose whether or not I can stand it! I think I have the right to!”

She’s not daunted. “I love you,” she says firmly. “I love you more than anything. You taught me what it means to love, to trust. And I couldn’t live with myself if I knew you gave up the chance to get better to be with me. It’s not because I don’t think I’m worth it. Not anymore. It’s because I love you and I want you to be happy.”

“Nat, you make me happy!”

She shakes her head, but it’s not so much in denial as it is in refusal to accept it’s that simple. Steve knows it’s not before she even starts speaking. “I was there with you when Doctor Erskine told you about the study,” she says in a quiet voice. “I was there and I saw how excited you were. How the idea of getting your life back made you feel. You can’t pretend that’s nothing, not even for my sake. And you can’t throw it away.”

“So I have to throw you away?” he retorts. “I have to let you go?”

“For now,” she admits, “yes, you do.” He can’t look at her. He’s too angry, too hurt. Too fucking defeated. After all they’ve struggled through to be together… He can’t believe it’s come to this. And he knows it’s inevitable. They’re two broken people, surrounded by the chains and cages of their respective pasts, and escaping that… It was never going to happen.

Letting that dream die is too hard. Nat’s talking, trying to comfort him. “It won’t be forever.” She’s trying to sound light and strong, but it’s hard to hear that over the rush of blood in his ears. The kitchen feels like it’s closing in, like the house is becoming a cage all its own. “It won’t be. Once… once Alexei’s in prison and all his guys are in custody, I can probably come back.” She’s trying to convince him when she’s not convinced herself. “And Clint tells me there are ways, you know? Ways we can talk. Fury will set it up. They’re bringing phones for us, so we can call each other. I know it’s not much, not what we’ve had, but it’s something. It’s something. And maybe Skype or something on a secure—”

He can’t listen anymore. All the sudden he’s moving, staggering, running out of the kitchen and out of the house. His feet are heavy and sloppy on the old, rickety porch as he stumbles away, desperate to run. Like the night he stole the motorcycle, the night he crashed, he’s desperate to fly.

But just like then, he can’t. There’s nowhere for him to go. And he’s too damn dizzy with the aftereffects of the crippling migraine and his fucking hip doesn’t work right and he’s too exhausted to get much further than a few dozen feet out into the field. Then he stops, everything hurting, and stares at the distant mountains. They look like they’re burning with the fall colors and the sun
striking them just so, but the air’s not hot and he can breathe easily. That grounds him, the cool
breath in his lungs, the grass around him and the low-lying fog clinging to it, the silence. It
grounds him, but it doesn’t make him feel one fucking bit better.

There’s no feeling better. She’s leaving, and he may never see her again. Be with her again.
Touch her or kiss her or hear her sing again. He’s so worn that he can’t do anything else other than
stand there and suck in breath after breath and look around. He supposes it was too much to hope
that the love they’ve shared the last few weeks could last, that the peace they found here could
exist in the real world. The real world is hell, cruel, and it’s dead-set on ruining them.

“Steve?”

Of course she’d follow him. She loves him, and he knows that. That sinking realization – she has
to do this – feels like ice in his chest, like the cold morning air is seeping inside his skin and
freezing his blood and bones. He knows she’s right. God, he does. I have to go home. But it hurts
too much to accept it. “You promised me you wouldn’t do this again,” he murmurs, and he knows
it’s a low blow, but he’s desperate and bleeding. “You promised you wouldn’t run again.”

She’s right behind him, barely a foot between them, and she can reach out and touch him but she
doesn’t. “I’m not running,” she answers. “I’m… I’m leaving. There’s a difference.”

He gives a choked, bitter laugh. “Right.”

Now she does take his shoulder, pulling him around so that he has to look at her. Her eyes are
bright, her cheeks immediately flushed rosy in the cold, and her breath is a puff of air in front of
her that disappears as she speaks. “Every time I ran before, I did it because I was afraid. I was
ashamed, and I was selfish. I did it to protect myself. This?” She reaches up to cup his cheek, to
caress away the wetness Steve suddenly feels there. Her thumb brushes over his lower lip. “This
is to protect you. My choice is to protect you, just as you protected me. I have to. Steve, it’s never
going to end.” Her voice wavers. “Never. Not unless he dies or is in prison.”

He knows that. He can’t make his voice work, though, and he closes his eyes, embarrassed to cry.
She doesn’t let him be. She pulls him closer, wrapping him up in her arms, and his legs give out.
Together they go down into the grass, him tightly tucked in her embrace. He’s much bigger than
her, but somehow she’s got him completely. She’s always got him.

And she kisses his lips, sweetly, slowly, cradling his face. “I can’t ask you to live like this,” she
whispers when she pulls back. “I know you would. You’d do anything for me, and I know that
and thank you. I’ll say it with everything I am, everything I can give. Thank you for everything
you’ve done for me.” She shakes her head, threading her fingers through his hair. “But I can’t hurt
you like that. You took me this far, showed me how to be strong. Took care of me. I have to take
care of you, too. I have to be strong for you. I have to protect you. I have to.” She blinks loose
tears, kissing him again. “That’s why I can’t stay.”

She kisses and kisses him. She tastes like tears, hers and his, and he shivers with far more than just
the chill in the air. He’s savoring everything, even if it is cold and wet and salty and a sudden
reminder that moments like this are numbered now. He supposes it’s always been that way, that
their kisses always taste like tears and they’ve trembled through their pain in each other’s arms.
That nothing could last between them, not really, not outside hopes and dreams. Damage
compounds other damage. Exaggerates and exacerbates it. It doesn’t heal it. You can’t stay. And
I have to go home.

It’s quiet. Calm. He feels his heart slow its rapid pace, feels hers where he has his face nuzzled in
her throat. He’s breathing easily there, lulled by her pulse against his lips, drifting on empty,
useless thoughts. He closes his eyes. “You remember that picture I drew? The one with you on that beach.”

He feels her grin. “Yeah.”

“We could go there.” That’s crazy and impossible, and he knows it, but he keeps talking, offering up a fantasy because the wonderful one they were living is dead and reality is too harsh to face. “I promised I’d take you, so I’ll take you. I’ll take you, run away with you, so far that no one can find us. Our own beach. We could live there. No one for miles and miles. Just the beach and the ocean. We can swim, get drunk, eat lobster…” She laughs. “Make love all day.” He wants it so bad he can almost feel it, sand between his toes, warm water embracing him, her easy, happy smile underneath him where he blankets her body with his… “Nothing can hurt us. We can be together.” The flower in her hair. The last flower. “Forever.”

“We will be.” Her tone is soft but certain again, and she leans away to grasp his face and look into his eyes. There’s so much strength in hers. So much courage. She smiles. “We will be. I know it. We went through everything we went through so that we could find each other, right?” Somehow he manages to nod, to have a modicum of faith that things happen for a reason. That this is going to be okay. In the end, somehow it will. “So we’ll be together because we’re meant to be.”

“Nat…”

“This isn’t going to be the end. I know it. We’ll make it, Steve. It’s going to hurt, and it’s going to be hard, but we can do it. We’re strong enough to do it. I know we are, because we’ve made it this far. And when it’s over, I’ll come back. You’ll have the surgery and be better. He’ll be in jail where he can’t hurt us. And we will be together.” Her lips press to his again, insistent and confident and passionate. He loses himself, grasping her face and holding her close, as close as he can. She pulls away with a soft sob, but she’s not afraid. He sees that. “So you go home. Okay? Go back and wait for me.”

“Forever,” he swears.

Her arms go around him again, and she kisses him like she’s trying to memorize the shape of his lips, the way he tastes, the heat of his body and the feel of his hair in her fingers. “Wait for me,” she breathlessly implores. Her eyes close, and his do, too, and they hold onto each other. “Wait for me to come home.”

They spend the rest of the morning tangled up in one another, as close as they can be. They don’t talk much. There’s nothing to say, nothing to ease what they’re both feeling. They just lay in the unmade bed, staring at the ceiling, curled around each other, touching wherever they can. The grandfather clock in the room ticks and tocks, so loud that Steve notices it for the first time in weeks. Each one feels unstoppable, a suddenly finite march of seconds until the end. He tries not to count them.

Nat’s combing her fingers through his hair when the phone she put on the mattress beside them finally rings. Her hand comes to a sudden stop, and Steve closes his eyes and drops his face into the warmth of her shoulder. He feels her fumble to answer. “Hello? Hi. Yeah… Yeah.” A heavy breath leaves her. He fights not to scream. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

She hangs up. She doesn’t get up, though, or make any effort to push him off. She just sets the phone down and kisses his head and goes back to caressing his hair. “I love you,” she whispers. “Don’t ever doubt that, okay? No matter how far apart we are, I love you. And I’m coming back
He clutches at her shirt and swallows down that scream. He’s not letting it out. She deserves better than him falling apart, so he’s the one who moves first. It’s clumsy and slow, but he gets off her. His head wracks a little with pain and vertigo once he’s standing, but he doesn’t let that stop him from moving away. Stubbornly he wipes at his leaking eyes and goes to get her bag. That’s what she was doing early this morning when she was shuffling around the room, packing her few things, her clothes and her books. The only things she really has. He picks them up and takes her coat and goes downstairs.

His bag is by the door. Seeing it there gives him pause. It’d be easy. He could just insist, plant himself like a tree in front of that door and refuse to move until she agrees to take him with her. She’d give in. He could be packed and ready to go in a matter of minutes, and she’d have to let him come. But the passing thought’s never anything more than that: passing and fleeting and impossible. Pointless. He’s not going to do that or cry or scream or do anything other than support her. That’s all he can do now, make sure she leaves knowing that he’s okay, that she can do what she needs to without worrying about him. He should be able to handle it. He’s damn good at pretending things don’t hurt. He needs to give her that.

And he’s got something else he needs to give her, too. The thought pops into his head almost randomly, and he sets Nat’s things down near the door so he can lift up his bag. He’s rifling through the contents, searching for something he knows is in there. Just as he hears Nat finishing up with the bathroom upstairs, he finds what he needs.

She comes down the stairs looking more put together than she has in a while. She’s got her hair swept up into a loose ponytail, and she put on make-up, just enough that he’s notices it. She looks simple but stunning, and he stares a moment, not caring that it makes her flush a little. He wants to commit it all to memory, every color and curve, every texture and detail. His memory’s really good, photographic even, so if he can do that, imprint her image into his brain… He’ll be able to see her in his sleep, in his dreams, in his waking hours. He’ll be able to draw her and bring her to life. He’ll have her close in this little way, the only way he can now.

At the bottom of the steps, she opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but before she can speak there’s a knock at the front door. It opens before either of them even turn to it, and there’s Fury. Steve still can’t quite accept what he knows about Fury now (not that he knows a whole lot, and clearly there’s a great deal more to the man than anyone realized). He’s dressed in black trousers and a black turtleneck with his leather jacket on, and Steve thinks he only looks all the more mysterious and imposing. His one eye narrows as he spots them.

With him is Clint. Considering their rocky start, Steve never thought he’d appreciate seeing the other man arrive. He’s not sure he does now. He can’t deny the relief that shows on Nat’s face, though, that despite what Barton’s arrival heralds, she’s glad to see him. It’s understandable. It’s been weeks, and a lot of scary, tumultuous, dangerous shit has happened between that afternoon Clint was last at Steve’s apartment and now. No matter what else, Nat finds comfort in him, so much so that she crosses the foyer to hug him. “You okay?” Barton asks, not doing much to mask his relief at finally seeing her.

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Steve watches them embrace, feeling just a bit like a third wheel. Clint lets go after another second or two, rubbing Nat’s arms and searching her face like he needs to make sure. Steve knows now not to take that personally. The detective finally turns to him. “And you’re okay, too? Your friend Don Blake said they roughed you up pretty good, your other issues notwithstanding.”
That’s not meant to hurt, and Steve knows that, too, but it still gets under his skin. He’s feeling overly sensitive about it all, his epilepsy and his migraine and old war wounds that’re sending him back home when he should be standing guard in front of the woman he loves. No, he’s leaving that job to Barton and whoever else in the government. He doesn’t even know who. “I’ll be alright.”

“Sure, you will,” Fury agrees, “once we get you back to your doctors.”

He bristles inwardly. It’s so damn hard to keep his temper in check. Yeah, he’s sensitive and bitter and angry at being treated like a child again. His mind knows that these people want what’s best for him, and his mind also knows that this – going back home and participating in the clinical study – is what’s best. His heart can’t be convinced, not as he sees Nat’s eyes well with tears she’s trying to blink away. She goes to get her things.

Steve turns away from her, unable to watch, and tries for a measure of detachment. He used to be so much fucking better at not caring. “So now what happens?” he asks Clint.

Clint looks hesitant, like he’s already figured out that Steve’s toeing the line between cooperating and trying to force his way along. He turns to speak more directly to Nat. “Your flight’s tonight. I’ll go with you to Philly, and Kate will meet us at the airport. Once she has you, she’ll take you straight to a hotel. This is her picture so you’ll know her when you see her. Just in case we get separated.” He hands Nat a photo, and Steve catches a glimpse of a pretty young woman with jet black hair and blue eyes. “You’ll be safe with her. Best sharp-shooter I’ve ever known, and she’s smart as hell. She’ll get you in touch with the Justice Department.”

Nat stares at the picture. Steve can tell she’s nervous about this. Who wouldn’t be? “Okay.”

Fury gives a phone to her. It’s a simple one, nothing but utilitarian. “As promised.” He gives Steve one, too. “They’re not trackable, and they’re locked down. Basic texting and calling. I’ve preprogrammed each of your numbers into them. Yours also has mine, Detective Barton’s, and Agent Bishop’s.” Nat thumbs through the phone quickly to familiarize herself with it. Steve doesn’t bother. The thing feels clunky and weighty in his hand. Fury glares at them both sternly. “Do not lose them and do not, under any circumstances, call each other constantly. It’s a huge risk to be doing this, and I had to do a hell of a lot of convincing with Bishop and the others involved with your case to get their blessing. If I didn’t think it would help you both, I would never have agreed to it myself. Sparingly, understand?”

It’s not a rhetorical question. “Yes,” Nat says softly. Steve just nods, sliding the phone into the pocket of his jeans. It’s the only connection he’ll have with her, and it has to be used sparingly. He squeezes his eyes shut and turns away, lost in thoughts that buzz like an out of tune radio. It’s not fair. That repeats over and over again like a mantra in his head. It’s not fucking fair.

Nat’s voice pulls his attention back. “What about Steve?” She sounds scared, looks it, too. “He can’t go back to his apartment. They know where–”

“Maria’s already working on getting him into a hotel for now,” Clint answers, “and we’ll have some uniforms on him until we know for sure it’s safe.” He turns to Steve. “I spoke with your friend Sam. He’s going to stay with you.” That helpless irritation crawls over Steve again, but once more he can’t bring himself to do anything more than nod. “Maria’s waiting for you at the precinct. She’ll get you where you need to be.”

“But he’ll be able to participate in the clinical trial.” Nat’s eyes are wide and worried. “Right? He has to.”
“He will,” Fury assures.

Clint nods, more to appease Nat than anything else, and regards Steve evenly. “This is all just precautionary. I highly doubt anyone’ll bother you again, not with the shit storm Shostakov’s facing right now. His estranged wife’s boyfriend isn’t going to be high on anyone’s hit list.” Christ, that sounds crass, but it’s probably true. “But it’s better to be safe than sorry. Hill will keep an eye on you, and it sounds like your friends are more than willing to stay with you however long it takes to get things settled. I’ll check in with you, too, and obviously you’ve had him—” Clint tips his head toward Fury. “—watching over you all the while. We’ll protect you. You’ll be fine.” The man watches him, and what he wants Steve to do isn’t at all subtly communicated.

And Steve does it because Nat being comfortable with her choice is far more important than how he feels about it. She’s wavering, and she can’t do that. He meets Nat’s gaze. “I’ll be fine.”

It feels a bit like beating a dead horse (and it’s not entirely true, considering everything that’s happened), but Clint adds, “We kept you safe for years with him actively hunting you. We can keep him safe for a few weeks while we round up the rest of Alexei’s thugs. It’ll be alright. You focus on what you need to do.”

Again Nat doesn’t look certain, like now that it’s come to it, she can’t convince herself this is for the best. She’s staring at Steve, fear bright in her eyes, and it’s not just that she’s worried about him going back with some of Alexei’s men still maybe out looking for them. It’s everything. It’s needing to know that he’ll be okay, not just physically. That he’s okay with this. He is, and he’s not, and everything’s twisted up and upside down and nothing makes any fucking sense right now except that he needs her to be okay. “I’m fine, Nat.” He hears himself promise that, and his tone is surprisingly level and certain. “I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“Impossible,” she says with a little quirk of an embarrassed smile. “Love you too much for that.”

Hearing her say that right now makes his heart ache even worse. The air between them feels thick with unspent emotion, with pain and longing and barely contained grief. The conversation dies for a moment as they search each other’s eyes, but there’s nothing more to find than love, than the desire to get through this. She’s got to do this. He’ll wait.

Clint glances between them before heaving a soft, unhappy sigh. “Well, we need to get going.” He glances at his watch. “It’s past one, and Buffalo’s a solid three hour drive from here, and I want to make sure we have time to spare.”

Nat nods. This is it. Fury hands her coat, her bag. Steve watches her put them both on. She’s moving slowly, like there really is something in the air that’s clinging to her and trying to stop her. It doesn’t, though, and she turns to Steve with shining eyes.

He hands her what he wants to give her. “Here.” In his palm is a strip of photographs. They came from one of those photo booths, the kind where you pay a few bucks and it takes your picture a handful of times inside a little box and prints them right on the spot. The colors are overly pixelated, and the quality’s not great, but… They took them the night of Block Fest. On the way back from the concert, they stopped and did it. Nat wasn’t too sure about it, dancing around with a nervous smile as Steve, euphoric from the good fun and food, cajoled and coaxed before flat-out pushing her into the booth. He didn’t realize at the time of course why she was so reluctant to have her picture taken, but once he got her in there, her trepidation melted away pretty quick. He can still see it in the first picture, the one at the top, where her smile isn’t as bright and her eyes are hesitant. But the rest… They’re both grinning like mad, her on his lap because the booth was too small and cramped, arms around each other. She’s kissing his cheek in another, and he’s tickling at her sides in the third, and the last one…
It’s like all the love they’ve shared is wrapped up in that one picture, that one moment. There aren’t any shadows, no pain or darkness, nothing but their smiles and their faces together and their eyes alight with happiness. That’s who they are, underneath all the scars and damage and demons. Love.

She takes the strip of photos. “I found it in my bag the other day,” he explains. He gives a little grin. “Completely forgot about ’em, you know, since that night…”

“Yeah,” she breathes, studying the pictures.

“You take it.” He closes her fingers around the photos. “It’s not much. I’d… I’d give you something more, give you everything, but I don’t have anything else. At least this way you can keep me with you. You can see me when you need to. You can see us and remember.” She looks up at him, eyes teeming in tears. He tries to make his smile stronger, wider, more confident. He grasps her forearms tenderly and pulls her close, hugging her tight. “I love you, too,” he whispers in her ear. “And I’ll wait for you. I promise.”

For only a moment she stays like that, flush against him, clutching at him and shivering. Then she pulls away like it’s too much, too hard, not enough, and turns to go, leaving him wanting. He’s trembling with it, with how abruptly it ended. Every nerve in his body aches, tingles, yearns, and he’s reaching for her before he can stop himself.

But she comes back. She was at the front door, Clint right beside her to open it and guide her out, when she rips around and runs at Steve, throwing herself into his open arms with a cry. Their mouths crash together in one last, desperate kiss. It’s fiery, powerful, rocking him to his soul, filling the very fabric of his being. He takes it all in, the way she tastes and how she feels and the rush of warmth and strength inside. He breathes it in and makes it part of himself, engrains it into his mind and heart. This is the woman he’s meant to be with, and he knows it. Somehow, this will be okay.

The heat of her lips on his and her body against his lingers after she pulls away and walks out and gets into the car with Clint and drives off. Steve watches her from the open door, watches until the car is gone from the dirt road and there’s nothing but silence and rows of wheat waving in the breeze. The cold wind pushes him back, but he stands there, staring, until Fury closes the door.

He feels dead inside.

There’s no other way to describe it.

Steve sits in the kitchen of the farm house. It’s quiet. Fury’s still here, but he’s been on the phone with Sitwell. At least, it sounds like Sitwell, and Fury’s not too pleased the guy’s badgering him so much. Steve isn’t paying much attention to it, though. Nat’s been gone an hour, and he supposes Sam will be here soon, but he can’t bring himself to move to pack up his clothes. His bag’s at his feet, and he knows he needs to get his meds into it where they’re spread on the counter from that morning, but he can’t even do that. He doesn’t want to do anything.

Nothing except sit there and stare at the cabinets. He’s emptied out. Hollow. There’s a gaping hole in his heart, a place where he’s been carved out, a deep wound where he’s bleeding. It’s not going to heal any time soon, let alone in the hour it’s been since she left. It hurts. This fucking well hurts. He knew it was going to, knew that it’d kill him, but he didn’t quite figure on what that really means until right now. Depression swoops in hard and fast and sucks him dry like a leech to his heart. It takes all his energy like a greedy thief, and he doesn’t care right then if he makes it back to Brooklyn, if he gets home in time for the study, if he ever does anything worthwhile again.
That’s what depression does. It’s been a while since he’s felt it like this, not since his accident at least. Not since Nat changed the momentum of his life and gave him love and purpose. He forgot how awful it is. It’s consuming him, and he’s letting it. He figures he’s earned the right to be depressed, to sit there and goddamn mope if he wants.

“Ever hear that old saying? Frown any harder and your face’ll get stuck that way.” Fury comes into the kitchen, sliding his phone into his jacket. He sighs, long-suffering. “Never hire people. They just fucking drive you nuts.” Steve doesn’t answer. He’s pretty sure Fury’s not talking about him at least, though Lord knows he’s caused enough trouble. Fury goes to the counter and gets himself a mug. “You want some coffee? Tea?”

What he really wants is to be left alone, although telling the other man to fuck off in his own kitchen is pretty damn rude, especially after everything Fury’s done for them. If not for him, Steve would have been killed in New Jersey and Nat would have been dragged back to Alexei right then and there. None of this would have happened, this time they had together that was a gift pure and simple, if Fury hadn’t made it happen.

But the bitterness is too much, too hard a pill to swallow, so he just shakes his head. “Might make you feel better,” the other man comments matter-of-factly, getting a tea bag for himself. “Me, I like a little tea when shit gets rough. Tea and honey.”

“No, thanks,” Steve mutters.

“Suit yourself.” He crouches to collect the tea kettle and, with it in hand, he steps to the sink. The sound of the tap filling it is way too loud, and Steve grimaces. Fury notices, of course. He always does. “Although it seems to me that what I told you a few months back applies more than ever.”

“What’s that.”

Fury sets his kettle to the stove and switches the gas on. “That it’s not a bad idea to accept help,” he says. That’s what we’ve been doing. Look what it got us. “Don’t let yourself be hurt. Remember?”

Steve glowers at the table. “Seems I’m fucking fated to,” he says. “I keep hurting myself.”

Fury’s lips twist in a wry smile. “Maybe,” he comments. He leans back into the counter, crossing his legs at the ankles as he does. “My granddad used to tell me that life doesn’t throw more at you than you can handle.” Steve can’t help the harsh grunt that bursts through his lips. That sounds like a crock of shit to him, the same sort of garbage his physical therapist spouted at him when he was trying to walk again or that Banner says when he’s feeling overwhelmed or that Sam sometimes offers to the group he counsels at the VA. Placating nonsense, and it’s only true because it has to be.

It’s true because it has to be.

“Keep fighting for her.”

Steve looks up sharply. “That’s what I have been doing! That’s what I was trying to do, only no one seems to fucking respect that!” To hell if that sounds petulant. He’s too low to care.

Fury stares at him evenly. “You’re needlessly sacrificing yourself, kid. Laying down on the wire rather than fighting smart. There’s a difference.” At that, Steve’s ire abruptly cools, and he’s able to focus, really focus, on Fury without his emotions clouding everything. The man gives a little nod at having his attention. “When I heard Captain America was moving back to Brooklyn, into
my neighborhood, I read up a lot about him. Turns out he’s a master tactician on the battlefield. Smart and capable. Someone who knows how to get the job done without casualties, civilian or otherwise. Someone who’s a shield against evil for the innocent. And someone that good at saving people? Ought to know something about how to save himself.” Steve frowns. He knows where this is going. Of course, he does. “You have a chance to get better, Cap. You really think someone who loves you as much as she does would ever be okay with you giving that up?”

“I know that,” he murmurs. “Known it all day.”

“Then accept it and move on. Sitting here and feeling sorry for yourself or getting angry that everything turned out this way helps no one. Get up and keep fighting for her by fighting for yourself.” Fury’s expression softens into a small, compassionate smile. “Have a little faith that things happen for a reason. It’ll work out, one way or another.”

That’s the same thing Nat told him, the same thing he told her. And he’s still got to be strong, maybe stronger than he’s ever been. Since the war, he’s fought to hang onto so much, to Bucky, to the person he was before Afghanistan, to the life he lost. He’s fought to stay with Nat, fought so hard. Fought for them. This is part of that. Fury’s right. Nat was right. Letting go is part of being strong. It’s going to hurt as much as anything ever has, even more maybe, but it’ll be worth it. Somehow… It will be okay. It all comes back to the same thing Bucky told him, back on that mountain in Afghanistan when fate yanked them apart. “Keep going, Steve.”

Stand up and keep going.

“Go get your stuff,” Fury quietly commands, “and get packed. I’m going to make you something to eat. And then you go home with your friends, go back to your life and the study and work and everything you left behind, and keep your head up. That’s what you can do to protect her now. Keep your head up and keep fighting.” He walks over and, in a show of affection that seemed wholly uncharacteristic just a few weeks ago, clasps Steve on the shoulder. “What kind of tea do you want?”

Steve manages a little smile. Nothing’s changed, not really, and Fury hasn’t told him anything he doesn’t already know. Hearing it makes it feel real, though, that there really is something he can do to help Nat now. Stand up for himself. Take care of himself. He’s never been terribly good at either of those things, not until Nat showed him how to feel good about himself and how to forgive himself. He can honor her now by doing that. Be strong. “Just plain tea. Extra honey.”

“You got it.”

He gets up and collects all of his medications and puts them back into his bag. Then he limps upstairs to pack his clothes and toiletries and sketchbook. He’s moving on autopilot a little, feeling tender and a little detached. Things look and feel the way they do after a nightmare or the flu, maybe, not quite real and present. Getting his bags ready should be an accomplishment, but he just sets them to the floor by the door before tidying up a little. As he does, he finds the gun on the nightstand where he set it two nights before. It’s under some towels Nat used to cool him during the migraine. He picks it up, staring at it emptily. She should have taken it with her. He doesn’t care if Barton is at her side or this Agent Bishop is a good markswoman. The gun’s meant to protect her.

Fat lot of good it does here. The irony that he’s here and it’s here and he’s holding it and neither of them can do a thing to help her now… He sighs and stuffs the gun into his bag. He’ll give it back to Clint when he sees him again. Then he shoulders his stuff, grabs their duffel, and spends a final second appraising the old room that’s come to feel like home. It doesn’t look like they’ve ever been there now.
Don’t let it get you down. Keep going.

It feels like he’s been up here a while, but he hasn’t. The tea kettle is whistling in the kitchen. With a heavy breath, he turns around and heads back to the stairs. At the top he hears a knock on the door, and his heart stops. Disappointment and relief work over him in equal measure. He knows it’ll be good to see Sam again. Sam will have a smile on his face, a warm hug to give, something comforting to say. Sam and Max. Max. He can go home to Max.

That makes him feel better, and he starts down the stairs. Fury’s coming out from the kitchen and down the hallway on the first floor, and he opens the front door.

It’s not Sam.

“What–”

Fury never gets a chance to answer. Rumlow punches him in the face, and he goes down hard. “Your secretary sends his regards,” the man sneers, looming over Fury where he’s groaning and scrambling away on the floor. “You really should have known better than to trust someone named Jasper. What the fuck kind of name is that?”

“No,” Fury moans, and Rumlow kicks him square in the gut, shoving him away with his foot to get inside the house. Fury struggles to protect himself, but there’s nothing he can do to stop Rumlow or Rollins or the other guys they have with them from bursting inside. “Rogers, run! Run!”

Steve’s blood goes cold. He’s standing halfway down the steps. There’s no running, no preventing them from seeing him. He tries, though. He can’t go all the way down, not with them coming in and coming at him, so he turns, ignores the spasm of his hip, and races back up the steps. “Don’t let that fucker get away!” Rumlow shouts. “Bring him down! Bring him down! Find her!”

They think Nat’s still here. The sharp shock of relief – they don’t know where she is! – doesn’t last, not with Rollins and two of the other guys stampeding up the steps. Steve glances over his shoulder at them before twisting and thundering back down the hallway. Christ, he can’t leave Fury! His mind’s pulsing with that, with barely controlled panic, with a dozen other thoughts. Sitwell sold them out (Steve never liked that asshole), but does that mean that Alexei’s out of jail? He somehow got bail? Fuck, fuck, fuck! There’s no way to know, and it doesn’t matter. He has to get out of here before they realize Nat’s gone, and he needs to get Fury out with him.

And that means he needs to think. He charges into the closest bedroom to hide and try to come up with a plan. He hasn’t been in this one before; he and Nat never went into any of the other spacious rooms upstairs, feeling just a bit like intruders. “Holy shit,” he whispers now as he beholds it. It’s a den. Maybe. Someone in Fury’s family – this grandfather of his that he keeps talking about? – was a serious ancient war buff. There’s a huge old desk, a couple bookcases loaded with books on famous skirmishes, and a plethora of really old battle paraphernalia hanging on the walls. Swords and shields and armor and Steve can’t freaking believe it. Everything’s extremely dull and covered in a thick layer of dust, but they’re weapons all the same. Frantically he looks over it all before running to the curtained windows. Peeking through them, he sees a black van and a couple more guys out there. Damn it. He’s severely outnumbered, at least five to one. What’s worse is what he feared from his mental image of the outside of the farmhouse is absolutely true. It’s way too high to jump down to the ground outside, not unless he wants some broken bones for his efforts. Through the bigger bedroom where they were sleeping, maybe he can get to the big tree next to the house, but it’s a serious jump and if he misses… He doesn’t trust his hip to manage that. That means the only way down is back through the hallway.
Which means he either surrenders (not an option) or fights. Breathing heavily, he looks over the array of old weapons. He doesn’t know if he’s really lucky or stupid as hell to be even thinking about this, but he sprints over to the wall and grabs what he can to defend himself.

Outside there’s pounding, feet walking confidently down the hall, doors being kicked open. “Come on out,” Rollins calls in a low voice. “You make us take you outta here, and you’ll regret it. Come on! It’s time to go home!”

Never. Steve doesn’t wait for them to find him. Pulling the gun from his pants, he brings the old shield he took off the wall in front of him. It’s thick and surprisingly heavy as hell, a tarnished silver, circular disc that looks like some sort of replica from *Spartacus* or *Gladiator*. Hopefully it’ll actually block bullets, though there’s no way to test that. Regardless, he runs down the hallway, shield in front of him, gun behind it, head ducked down and heart pounding and praying with all his might this shocks the thugs enough that he’ll have a moment of surprise to his advantage.

It does, and he rams into the first guy before the asshole gets past his alarm enough to actually shoot at him. The shield hits with a dull hum, and the impact shakes it enough that Steve nearly drops it. He doesn’t, though, throwing his weight into the collision and plowing the guy into the wall. The drywall breaks, and down the man goes with a cry. Steve kicks his gun away. Then he whirls, feeling more than seeing Rollins aiming at him. Clumsily he hefts the shield up and gets it between himself and the other man. It’s not a second too soon. The bullets clank against the metal and wood, vibrating Steve’s left arm with the force and driving him back, but it does stop them. Steve doesn’t have time for any sense of euphoria because Rollins is on him almost instantly, grabbing at the shield and yanking it to the side. That drags Steve by his arm, twists his bad leg, and he stumbles back into the wall as Rollins wrenches him around. Rollins growls and hits at him again, slamming him back and crushing him under his own goddamn shield. He stagers, losing his grip on his gun as he clambers to push the shield away from his chest and throat. The weapon clatters to the floor at his feet. *Shit.* Rollins is driving the shield up higher and higher, and the second his abdomen is exposed, the bastard rams his gun up. *Shit!*

Steve barely shoves away before trigger is pulled. The bullet goes into the wall instead of into his belly. He whips the shield around, catching Rollins’ shoulder, and the other man falls back. Steve falls, too, and scrambles to right himself, scrambles to get away as Rollins growsl in pain, gets frustrated, and shoots at him again. In close quarters, his aim is horrible, and the shots go wild. One glances off the shield, the angle of the hit nearly ripping the straps from Steve’s fingers. He doesn’t let go, staggering towards where his gun fell while keeping the shield between him and his opponent.

He can’t make it. Rollins bears down on him, shoving him back into the wall anew, trying to get his gun around the shield. Steve grabs his wrist with his free hand, gritting his teeth and shoving it up so the shield’s locked between them and the gun is pointed skyward. It’s a chaotic contest of strengths for a second before Steve finds better balances and pushes back hard, snapping the shield up. The edge catches Rollins under his chin. The man falls back with a spurt of blood, but before Steve can so much as move, the other thug is on his feet down the hall.

Down the hall and shooting at him. Steve’s dazed from exertion, slow to get the shield up, and he gets clipped in the arm by one of the bullets. He stagers back, nearly dropping the shield. Stinging pain slows him further, and he’s vulnerable – *no!* – and the guy’s aiming right at his chest and he’s going to be shot.

It’s a fucking minor miracle that the guy pulls the trigger and all the gun does is *click click click.*
He’s out of ammo. Steve’s body reacts faster than his mind, and as the guy’s eyes widen, he throws the shield, swinging his arm around. The hallway’s surprisingly wide; that’s the only way he gets the heft to sling it with any force. The disc spins through the air, careening down the hallway, and crashes right into the man’s face. He cries out, dropping the new magazine he was frantically trying to load into the gun, and hits the floor like a dead weight. The shield clatters down beside him. Steve stands there, gawking, fairly shocked that actually worked (and that it was pretty cool, to be honest).

His minor victory doesn’t last long. Something rams into him from behind – Rollins – and drives him into the wall. He hits hard, head cracking into it. Everything blurs, and his muscles turn to jelly. The air gets punched from his lungs, and his head throbs and fist rams into his face.

And the next thing he knows he’s down on the floor.

He goes down roughly, his feet twisted up with each other, sliding along the wall until he’s on his side and being crushed by the asshole pummeling him. Rollins is practically on top of him, flattening him, punching at his face. Steve’s got his arms up to protect himself, but Rollins is vicious, striking over and over again. One of the blows hits and Steve cries out, mouth filling with blood as he bites his tongue. He can barely breathe with Rollins crushing his chest with his weight.

And then the fucker’s jabbing the gun at him but not shooting, not killing him, and he doesn’t understand until his ears stop ringing and he can hear again. “Where the hell is she?” Rollins snaps, digging the barrel under his chin. “Huh? Fucking answer me!”

“Bring him down! Bring him down here!” That’s Rumlow, yelling from the first floor. “He’s fucking mine!”

“You’re gonna scream before we’re done with you,” Rollins hisses right in his face, and he balls his fist in Steve’s shirt and yanks him up. Horror leaves Steve reeling – it’s a dark corridor in the cave and they’re dragging him down and Bucky’s screaming for him and he’s bleeding and bleeding and bleeding – and he can hardly focus, barely breathe, unable to parse reality from the flashback edging on his mind. It doesn’t help that Rollins smacks him a good one again, the blow jolting him enough that everything blurs further. Then Rumlow’s dragging his limp body down the hallway, ripping his clothes as he does, and Steve chokes on the blood in his mouth. Tears blur his eyes. Unconsciousness threatens. He has to stop this. He has to. He can’t tell them anything. Bucky needs him. He can’t tell them a goddamn thing—

Not Bucky. Nat.

Fight!

He barely twists, barely turns, barely catches a glimpse of the gun he dropped before. The collar of his shirt is turning into a fucking garrote, but he sucks in a breath and summons all the strength he has left. There’s only a fraction of a second where he has a chance, and Rollins is shouting to Rumlow so he doesn’t notice, and Steve pulls and reaches with everything he has…

And grabs it. His fingers close around the grip. He snatches it. Twists. Aims. Pulls the trigger.

The shot’s deafening, echoing through the hallway. The bullet slams into Rollins’ neck. Blood sprays and Rollins drops. The pressure around Steve’s throat immediately goes lax. He gasps, heaves, sucks in a shaking breath, and crawls away. Shaking, he clammers to his feet.

Rollins is dead. He probably died instantly. His eyes are still open, staring lifelessly upward, and a puddle of red is spreading from around the hole in his throat. Steve winces, feels nothing but sick
and furious. Dragging another breath into his lungs, he steps around the body and heads toward the stairs, gun clenched in his hand.

There’s nowhere to go but down.

“Jack? Jack, you fucking moron, did you shoot him? I swear to God if you…”

Rumlow stops his bullshit the second Steve comes into view, limping down the stairs with the gun in both hands and raised and ready. Surprise works over the thug’s hard expression, and his lips press together into a furious frown. “Fucking unbelievable,” he hisses.

Steve narrows his eyes into a glare. The gun doesn’t shake at all, even if he’s limping something fierce and his head’s swimming in dizziness. “Let him go,” he demands, pointing the gun directly at Rumlow. Rumlow has a beaten-up Fury still on his knees right beside him. Rumlow’s gun is to the other man’s head. Fury’s face is bruised and covered in red. His eye patch is gone, leaving the rheumy white of his damaged eye uncovered. It feels wrong seeing it, though Steve doesn’t look directly. No, he keeps his gaze unwaveringly on Rumlow and the gun right with it. “Let him go now.”

Rumlow sneers, “And here’s Captain America. Captain America. Gotta say you don’t look like much, Rogers. And that’s just the most pathetic title I’ve ever heard.” Fury twitches. Rumlow digs the gun more into his head to remind him to be still, but he doesn’t look away from Steve. “I didn’t know when I paid off the guy who owns your building that I was coming after a war hero. In my line of work, that shit’s downright weird. And when you got away from me? Made a fool of me? I read up.” That arrogant smirk is tinged with boiling frustration. “I know you got tortured over there, that you lived like an animal in piss and shit for eighteen months while the Taliban fucked you up. I know your brain’s as fucked up as your leg. Crippled and a retard.”

Jesus. He’s not going to let this get to him. He reaches the bottom of the steps but doesn’t come any closer. “Let him go!” he shouts. “Right fucking now!”

“Christ, Rogers,” Fury grits out. “Get out of here!”

Rumlow doesn’t even falter. His glare is nothing short of murderous. “What’d she see in you, huh? She must have pitied you.”

“Fuck you,” Steve hisses.

“She always did like feeling bad about shit,” Rumlow comments with a snide laugh. “Wallowed in it. And she always thought she could save the big man, save their marriage. Like some kind of fucking Lifetime movie. Not that it mattered. Didn’t matter at all what she thought as long as she kept sucking dick.” He tips his head to Steve with a hideous, vicious, sadistic grin. “She’s good at it, ain’t she? Did she suck yours enough to make all your pain go away?”

“Shut up!” Steve roars. “I’ll kill you, I swear to God. Let him go!”

Rumlow’s glower gets harder. He doesn’t give a fraction of an inch. “You got that backwards, motherfucker. Now where is she?”

Steve grips the gun tighter, glancing at Fury and wishing he’d do something. “Long gone,” he answers tautly. “You’ll never catch her.”

That threat hits too close to home. Irritation makes Rumlow look absolutely on the edge. “Not good for you, pretty boy. You have to realize you’re fucked.”
He does. He hears the other guys coming into the foyer from where they were likely searching the house. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees them. Two more with their guns drawn. *Fuck.* He knew it before, but it’s beyond obvious now. There’s no getting out of this. “Doesn’t matter,” he hisses.

“One chance,” Rumlow says. He pulls the gun from Fury’s head to point it at Steve. “One. You tell us what we want to know, and we’ll only kill you. You don’t… Believe me when I tell you we can torture just as good as the fucking Taliban can.” Steve can’t stop his response, terror sapping his strength, and he flinches despite himself and takes a step back. Rumlow grins almost hungrily before returning his face to a hateful, angry scowl. “Yeah, you’re scared shitless. So do yourself a favor and answer the question. Where is she?”

“Run!”

Fury attacks in a blur of black. Out comes a knife from a hidden sheath strapped around his calf, and he stabs Rumlow in the leg before throwing it with devastating accuracy. It sinks deep into the forehead of the guy who came from the kitchen, and the man pulls the trigger of his gun as he falls. The subsequent spray of bullets provides ample distraction, and Steve does just as he’s ordered. He sprints around the bottom of the steps, jumping over the fallen thug and racing toward the kitchen. More shots chase him, tearing up the walls and floors, smashing the pictures of Fury’s family. Glass shatters and slashes through the air around him, and he instinctively protects his face as he bolts through it. His hip slams into the kitchen table as he nearly loses his footing, and the pain almost shuts him down. He breathes through it, stumbles past, struggling to keep his balance and his composure. Behind him there’s more gunfire, shouting, Rumlow and another voice. *The back door.* It’s right in front of him.

He has to go.

He bursts through, thundering across the back porch and down onto the grass. Gunfire showers down from above. The guy he knocked out before has broken the window in the bedroom and is shooting at him with wild abandon. The grass explodes around Steve, and once more he almost trips as he sprints as fast as he can toward the field. Panic makes his heart thunder, horror dancing through his chaotic thoughts. The desert. The mountains. Bucky. Nat.

He has to run. The men are coming around the house, and he hears the van’s engine roar to life. They’re coming after him. He has to lose them in the field. He has to.

He never gets the chance. His hip locks up – *heat and pain* – and he goes down in the grass. Dirt ends up in his mouth – *sand* – and he grabs at where he’s been shot only to find nothing there. He hasn’t been shot. *Fuck!* His goddamn screwed up side just fucking failed, seizing up and dropping him like nothing, and now there’s no getting away. He squirms to his knees, tries to get up more and run, but it’s too late. They’re on him in an instant.

“Drop the gun!” Steve grits his teeth and swallows down his panic, stopping and twisting around. Two guns are pointed at him, and two trigger-happy assholes are holding them. “Drop it now!” There’s no choice. He drops the gun. “Hands up! Get your fucking hands up!” He does that, too. *No choice.* He squeezes his eyes shut as a gun is pressed to the back of his head. One of the other guys collects the weapon he had. “You don’t move. Don’t move!”

He doesn’t. There’s no point now. The sound of heavy, uneven steps and heavier panting fills the quiet afternoon. A second later, Rumlow’s right in front of him, stomping through the grass. He looks furious, face pale and bathed in sweat, eyes blown wide with rage. The leg of his black jeans
by his thigh is soaked with blood. The one thug hands him Steve’s gun, and he immediately points it right at Steve’s forehead. “I oughta blow your goddamn head off.”

Fear and rage leaves Steve trembling. For one second, as he blinks away the tears and perspiration in his eyes, he thinks he sees the terrorists, the one who had him on his knees just like this with a gun right to his forehead.


“Bleeding to death in the house,” Rumlow spat, grabbing at his leg with his free hand, “which is where I should leave you. Motherfucker!”

Steve closes his eyes, horrified. Christ, Fury did all this for him, sacrificed himself, and it’s for nothing. Nothing.


That earns him a rough hand across the face, and he would have ended up on the ground again with another mouthful of dirt if not for the hand snatching his hair and keeping him upright. He blinks until the world’s more settled, swallowing the taste of blood and the burn of bile in his throat and his heart that’s pounding in terror. Rumlow’s looming right over him. “Yeah, well, we’ll see about that, Captain. Get him up!”

Hands grab his wrists and yank his arms behind his back. They haul him to the van. His bad hip’s still not working right, so he ends up mostly dragging his leg, but it does nothing to slow them down. The back of the van’s open, and the last of the thugs are there. The driver and the guy he hit in the face with the shield, who’s glowering at him in hungry rage. Plus the two who’re holding him. Plus Rumlow. Steve’s gut clenches in abject terror. Christ, he can’t fight. He can’t fight.

A zip tie gets wrapped around his wrists and pulled miserably tight. He tests them, but there’s no give, no way he can get free. That awful realization is still sinking in as they slam him into the back of the truck, kick his legs wider, and pat him down less than gently. They take the phone Fury gave him. Rumlow pockets that. One of the guys comes with a thick wad of cloth, and Steve’s eyes widen in horror. He struggles, but there’s nothing he can do to stop them from gagging him with it. Another of them has his bag, and the asshole dumps it out on the ground. Steve watches his pills spill all over the dirt. “Like a fucking pharmacy,” the guy mutters as he pawns through them. When he spots the bottle of painkillers, he tosses those to Rumlow.

Rumlow grins. “Seems you’re worth something.” He downs a bunch of them dry. Steve turns away. “Will your brain explode if you can’t take all these?” He can’t answer, but Rumlow presses anyway. “Huh? Huh?” He stomps on the pill bottles, grinding Steve’s medications into the dirt. Steve watches in silent, helpless anger. “Guess we’ll find out. In the van. Let’s go. Boss is waiting back home.”

Terror settles like ice in Steve’s chest. For some reason, this didn’t occur to him, that they’re going to kidnap him. Take him back to New York. To Shostakov. He’s not in jail. He’s there in the city, and they’re taking Steve to him.

No! With renewed desperation, Steve digs his sneakers into the ground, grunting from behind the gag, fighting as much as he can. It doesn’t stop them. They drag him to the back of the van and yank him inside. There aren’t normal seats, just a bench along either side, and they throw him onto
the cold, metal flooring between them. Steve squirms and kicks at them, but they only curse and kick back, and they’re a lot more capable of hurting him than he is them. He cries out at a particularly nasty blow to his back right above his kidney, and it stuns him enough that one of the bastards is able to get a sack over his head and draw it tight.

Now he can’t see. *He can’t see.*

“Enjoy the ride,” Rumlow hisses in his ear, and the doors slam shut.

Steve moans and rolls onto his good side as much as he can. Blackness swallows him whole, and dizziness leaves him trembling on the floor as the men come in around him, laughing and talking. More doors open and then close – the driver and passenger – and the van speeds off in a disorienting, awful lurch. *No.*

Just like this, everything’s changing. They’re taking him. *They’re taking him.*

And he can’t stop them.

Every second he lays there, waiting to be hurt because *he can’t see them.* He breathes fast and shallowly through his nose, trembling and expecting pain. Then a worse thought stabs through his stricken mind. Christ, if he has a seizure like this, with his breathing restricted by the sack and his mouth filled with cloth, bound and trussed and totally helpless… They wouldn’t even need to hurt him. He could asphyxiate.

Will they even try to save him?

Rumlow’s voice echoes cruelly in his head. *Guess we’ll find out.* They’re chatting more now, voices in the darkness, and he can almost picture them laughing at his seizing body, laughing and not caring as he chokes to death.

*Oh, God. Please…* He squeezes his shut and wonders if he’ll survive long enough for Alexei to destroy him for touching his wife.

Between the painfully miserable ride and his own battered body, Steve blessedly passes out somewhere along the way. The next thing he hears are the doors opening and the men grumbling as they move around. Cloth shifts on cloth, and Steve blinks and blinks, not sure that he’s really awake. It’s pitch black around him, so it’s impossible to tell. And he’s lost time. How long has it been? Are they there? What now? *What now?*

“Come on, you lazy fucks,” Rumlow growls, and someone grabs his legs, startling him half to death. He kicks, but it doesn’t matter. Cruel fingers dig into his calves and thighs and yank him until he’s out. More hands take his arms, hooking into his elbows, and haul him upright. He’s so damn dizzy that he’s sure he’s going to puke, and it’s only through sheer will power that he doesn’t. “Let’s go.”

His bad hip and flank have stiffened up considerably, and his arms and shoulders hurt terribly, so going anywhere is difficult. They don’t release him when he nearly falls, dragging him like a dead weight instead. “Walk!” someone snaps, and he’s hit across the back of the head. Terrified and flinching, Steve forces himself to try harder, and he eventually gets his feet beneath him and stumbles a little less.

He doesn’t know where he is. He doesn’t know who’s there. He still can’t see, can’t hear (at least nothing much beyond them yelling at him and his own pounding heart and charged breathing), can’t feel he’s so overwhelmed. The air’s fairly warm, at least, and it’s concrete beneath his feet.
A garage? Doors open, and he’s shoved through them. A couple new voices bark orders and curses, and he’s being walked further. Turned. Pushed. Shoved. He stumbles down some stairs, so unbalanced that he feels like he’s falling with each step. The air gets colder again, and another door opens. He’s pulled more.

The men are silent as they move him more and then make him stop. He stands there, rigid and panting in fear, haplessly waiting for whatever is coming next. Something cold and sharp – box-cutter! – touches his hands, and for a second, he’s terrified they’re going to slice his wrists open. They only slice the zip tie, though, and he’s so shocked about that that he almost forgets to struggle.

Almost. Despite the awful pain radiating from his shoulders, he pulls away when they grab his arms and bellows muffled cries that no one cares to hear. “Shut up!” Rumlow shouts viciously, and Steve yelps when pain explodes along the back of his head anew. He can’t stop himself from going limp, the agony sapping his strength and energy. Everything’s so black that he can hardly tell the difference between being awake and drifting in unconsciousness.

He’s pretty sure he’s doing the latter, because when his brain starts thinking again, he realizes he’s sitting now. His arms are bound behind his back again, but it doesn’t feel the same. There’s a tiny bit more give in the length between his wrists, and his fingers skirt along warm metal. Handcuffs. The chain is wrapped around a metal bar. He’s not going anywhere. He moans at that, mostly in despair, and lets his head fall back.

Someone grabs the sack and pulls it up and away. God, the light is harsh. Steve blinks in agony, freeing fresh tears, and struggles to focus through the thick haze he’s seeing. Between the dizziness and his uncooperative eyes, it takes a second or two to do that. When he does, he sees Rumlow in front of him.

The man’s absolutely gloating, grinning cruelly. “You awake, you piece of shit?” He pats Steve’s cheek harshly, slapping more than anything. Steve pulls away, grimacing and giving a garbled groan. When Rumlow backs away, he can see he’s in a chair. The chair’s in a little gray, cement room that has a few bare light fixtures above spreading illumination. There are racks of tools and things against the far wall. It looks like a basement.

Not the cave. Might as well be.

He can’t focus on much more than that, though. Rumlow glares at him. There’s a bloody bandage around his leg, and he’s favoring that side. “There’s been a change of plans,” he announces. He’s fiddling with something in his hands. “Boss decided that, given your prior experience, you might not be too willing to cooperate with us no matter how hard we beat the shit out of you.” Steve blinks as he finally realizes Rumlow has his phone. “At least, it’ll take a while, and there’s no time. So instead we’re going to send a little message.”

He lifts the phone. The little light in the back comes on. The flash. The camera. Steve grunts as someone behind him – he didn’t even realize there is someone behind him – grabs his hair and yanks his head back. Belatedly he understands why. So the camera can see him. And so that the man holding him can press his gun cleanly into Steve’s temple. Steve trembles in fury and fear, breathing harshly and quickly through his nose. Rumlow stands back, obviously adjusting the focus on the phone. “Smile. Say cheese.”

The camera goes off. Steve closes his eyes, completely helpless to stop it. Rumlow takes a look at the result, pursing his bruised lips and nodding. “Nice picture.” He turns it around so Steve can see it, and he immediately jerks away at the sight of the bruises and blood and the gag and his watery eyes. The guy behind him lets go. “Aw, come on. You look great. Look at all that love
and sacrifice and devotion.”

_Fuck you._ He can’t say anything, though, shaking in his bonds so hard the handcuffs are rattling. Rumlow’s busy with the phone again. “Anyway, she’ll come running, don’t you think? When she sees this. I mean, if she likes you enough to _willingly_ let you fuck her…” Rage has Steve lurching in his chair, only the guy behind him grabs his hair and violently yanks him back. Not that he was going anywhere anyway. Not that he can do anything to protect himself or her now.

Rumlow looks disgusted. There’s a glint of malice in his eyes, and it’s the only warning Steve gets before he strikes him hard across the face. Flesh blood fills Steve’s mouth, and the world turns into streaks of light and dark as he struggles to overcome the pain and dizziness. Memories press to close, and he squeezes his eyes shut. Rumlow’s ugly face is right in front of his. “And when she comes for you and the boss gets her back, he’s giving you to me. After all the shit you’ve put me through, after what you did to Rollins… You’re going to wish it was the fucking terrorists working you over.”

Down comes the sack over his head again. Rumlow smacks him once more for good measure before they walk out, shutting the lights off and slamming the door behind him.

It’s silent. For a long time, Steve’s too afraid to move, too afraid even to breathe. But he does. He curls over in the chair as much as he can, panting and whimpering behind the tape, fighting to stay calm. The pitch black is back, wholly consuming him, and he’s shaking so hard he can’t stop. He’s going to die. A million awful memories are right there, prodding at his consciousness like they have been all this time, and he gasps a little, desperate cry. _Oh, God… Oh, God… Please… Not again. Not again._ He can’t let them in. He can’t. Can’t. He has to stay strong, keep fighting for her, for himself. _Keep going._

But he can’t. All he can do now is wait. Wait for her to come. _Please…_ She _can’t_ come for him. _Please, Nat…_ Tears roll down his cheeks, soaking the cloth over his face, and his body wracks and shudders through silent sobs. _Please don’t come back… Don’t come… Don’t…_

Chapter End Notes

faith2nyc made us some more stunning artwork for this story. Thanks, darling!
“Stay” Chapter 19

“We keep this love in this photograph. We made these memories for ourselves. Where our eyes are never closing. Hearts were never broken. And time’s forever frozen still. So you can keep me, inside the pocket of your ripped jeans. Holding me closer till our eyes meet. You won’t ever be alone. And if you hurt me... That’s okay, baby. Only words bleed. Inside these pages you just hold me. And I won’t ever let you go. Wait for me to come home.”

- Ed Sheeran, “Photograph”

Written by: thegraytigress
Artwork by: faithshyvc
Their flight’s been delayed again. It shouldn’t feel like it’s a sign, but it does. They’ve been sitting in the Buffalo airport for almost three hours, and now, after yet another announcement from the flight crew, apparently it’s going to be even longer. Clint’s on edge. He has been since leaving Corning. The entire three-hour drive from there to here was silent, with him quietly brooding and Nat too numb to care about much of anything. She’s been living in a haze since that last kiss, functioning but disconnected. She can’t stop thinking about Steve, worrying about him, hoping with all her heart that he’s okay. That he understands and forgives her and loves her still. She knows he does, but she can’t shake this feeling that something’s wrong.

It’s also not helping that Steve hasn’t answered her texts. She sent him two, one when they arrived at the airport a few hours ago and one just recently. Since then she’s been obsessively checking her new phone for a response from him. There hasn’t been a thing. She doesn’t know what to make of that, hence her fear that he’s upset or, worse, ignoring her. She knows Fury said to use the phone sparingly, and they’re not even more than a day removed from each other and she’s trying to contact him, but she needs to talk to him. She needs to. After living out of each other’s pockets for weeks and weeks, she’s gotten so used to everything about him. His touch and his kiss and his sturdy, warm presence. The look of his blue eyes and the smell of his hair and the sound of his voice. That fact that he’s always there to comfort her and support her and give her whatever she needs. That’s all become so engrained into her that its absence now is striking deep, like something’s bleeding inside her or a bone that’s out of place and throbbing. Like he was inside her, and he’s been yanked out. She misses him so much already.
“Still no answer?”

Clint’s question pulls her from staring blankly at her phone. Maybe he should be annoyed with her behavior (hell, even she thinks it’s a tad lovesick and ridiculous), but he’s not. There’s nothing but genuine concern and compassion in his hazel eyes as he settles himself and appraises her.

She shakes her head. “No.”

He looks a little troubled, though it’s obviously a minor concern compared to the fact that they’re still sitting here with no end in sight. “Give him time,” he advises. “If you’re feeling bad, so is he.”

“I know,” she murmurs. She shuts her phone off and sighs heavily. She’s so nervous and tired that the light salad she had for dinner a couple hours ago feels like a lead weight in her stomach. Right now she wants nothing more than to sleep, but she can’t. Even with Clint there she feels too exposed and unprotected, and there’s no way she can rest without Steve replying to her. The fear that he may never do it is simmering in the back of her mind, like a murky, foul air clinging to and poisoning her thoughts. 

He wouldn’t do that. She knows it, but there are a thousand buts undermining her certainty.

Clint grasps her hand and squeezes. “You’re doing the right thing. You know that, right?” The entire time since they left the farm, this has been framing the context of every brief conversation, every glance or touch, every moment. He’s afraid she’s going to have second thoughts. It’s almost palpable, how much that possibility bothers him, how frantically he wants to steer her clear of it.

“This is for the best.”

She doesn’t have the heart to argue with him. “I know.”

“Steve knows that. He knows. And he wouldn’t want you to tear yourself up over it. So don’t worry about it and don’t worry about him. He’s fine, Nat. Maybe he just wants some space. Time to gather himself or something.”

“I know.” It’s all she can say, even if this time it’s a lie.

Clint stares at her. She doesn’t want him to look at her like this, with his own grief and fear in his eyes smothered under too much certainty. And she doesn’t want to hear what he has to say, though she can’t begrudge him for saying it. “I’m proud of you.” It’s spoken not as a police officer to a victim but as a friend to a friend. From a man to someone he loves like his sister. “You got out. That was one thing. And you’ve survived all this. Since the second you woke up in the hospital, you’ve survived. It was amazing, seeing you pull yourself back up. Seeing you learn to live again. But now? Standing up to him like this?” He squeezes her hand again. “This takes more strength and courage than I’ve ever seen.”

Hearing that… It feels good. And it’s honest, genuine, true. She lets the words soothe her, lets them ease her heavy heart. I’m a survivor. She’s thought that once or twice, but it means more now. It’s not just about enduring what he did to her. It’s not only about recovering, starting again, staying safe. It’s about fighting back. She’s proud, too, proud of herself. And she’s scared and grief-stricken and even a little excited and really bordering on the edge of utter panic with just the thought of facing the man who destroyed her, but she’s not going to run. She can’t anymore.

“You’ll be okay,” Clint promises. “This is going to end, and you’ll be alright. And you can go back to Steve. He’ll wait for you.”

She knows how hard it probably is for Clint to tell her that. He’s like an overprotective big
brother. She smiles at the thought and squeezes his hand back. “I know he will.”

Clint pushes further, like he’s trying extra hard to dot his i’s and cross his t’s. “And he’s got his friends. They seem like decent people. The two guys – Stark and Blake? And Wilson. They’ll make sure he–”

“Attention passengers of United Airlines flight 239 with nonstop service to Philadelphia. Unfortunately your plane has suffered more mechanical issues and had to turn back.” At the woman’s announcement, a collective groan goes through the gate, the slew of weary and irritated passengers becoming even more so. “We’re working on getting another plane here as soon as possible, but it may not happen until almost ten o’clock.” Clint curses under his breath and checks his watch. It’s only eight. “We apologize for the inconvenience and ask that you stay in the gate area. We will likely be announcing a gate change as soon as we can get everything settled.”

“Fucking hell,” Clint grouses. His calm, comforting demeanor disintegrates back into total irritation. He stands. “I’m going to go find out what the hell is going on. Maybe they can get us on another flight.”

Nat watches him stalk over from their seats to the counter. Already a line is forming of angry people probably looking to try to do the exact same things: get information or switch flights. She exhales slowly, tugging her bag tighter onto her lap. Staring at the front pouch a second, she slips her hand inside to pull out the photostrip where she tucked it earlier. It’s almost too much even glancing at Steve’s face. God, he looks so handsome and happy in these pictures. She stares like an addict before sliding the pictures into her coat pocket, needing to keep them closer in some sort of irrational belief that it’s like having him close. Then she’s closing her eyes and sighing again, this time shakily. *He’ll be alright. He’s with Sam and Thor. They’ll make sure he’s alright.* No matter how many times she tells herself that, she can’t derive any solace from it. She opens her eyes and stares out the huge window right in front of her at the massive array of glittering lights, planes and carts and runways, but it’s just a dull, uninteresting blur that doesn’t hold her attention at all. *He’s alright. Stop worrying. He’s fine.* Sick of her thoughts, she closes her eyes again and tips her head back a bit. She should be watching. She *knows* she should. But she can’t. She wants to shut off for a minute.

It’s hardly more than a couple seconds after that when her phone vibrates in her hand. She jolts with shock, sitting up so fast she nearly drops her bag. Her eyes widen. It’s a text from Steve. *A text from Steve.* She can’t help but beam she’s so excited, swiping her thumb across the screen to unlock it.

Her excitement shifts to abject, consuming terror. “Oh, God,” she whimpers. The world’s falling away, everything abruptly distant and muted. Her hands are shaking. *Oh God oh God, oh God– God, no!*

But it’s true. It’s real. *It’s right in front of her eyes.*

Steve.

He’s in a chair, hands obviously tied behind him leaving the muscles of his shoulders and biceps uncomfortably bulging under a dirty, torn shirt, the same shirt he was wearing when she left. He was tightly gagged with a dirty cloth. His face is bloody and sweaty, his eyes wet and filled with fear. There’s a gun to his head. She can’t see who’s holding it, can’t see much of anything else because the picture’s zoomed in on him. She can’t hardly breathe, can’t think, can’t do anything other than stare at the awful image. Her heart’s thundering, straining against her sternum, and cold sweat breaks out all over her. With the picture there’s text. “COME HOME RIGHT NOW. COME
ALONE.”

God, Alexei’s not in jail. He’s not in jail. He’s back in Staten Island.

And he has Steve. They have Steve.

For what feels like an eternity of hellish horror, she just sits there and stares. It doesn’t make sense, and a thousand thoughts buzz in the back of her head – what happened how’d he get out of jail how’d they find Steve did they hurt him did they hurt Sam and Don and Fury oh God oh God I have to get out of here – but they don’t sink in, don’t do anything other than spin uselessly. She stares and stares like she can’t believe it, like it’s not right there staring right back at her, like the threat isn’t starkly clear: come or they’ll kill him. She stares at Steve’s beautiful blue eyes. They’re full of angry tears, full of fear, begging her. Begging her. This is her fault. Her fault.

Oh, God.

“Nat?”

Nat jerks and looks up. She immediately shuts off her phone and holds it close to her chest. Clint’s back, looking down on her. Vaguely she wonders how long she’s been sitting there looking at the picture. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? It feels like it.


She knows she does. She can feel herself shaking, feel the sweat on her face, the way her heart’s pounding in a frantic, shallow pace. She’s probably white as a ghost. “Yeah!” she manages after a breath. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“He answer?”


Clint frowns. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I am. I just… I need a minute. Okay? Going to run to the bathroom.”

He doesn’t look at all convinced. “Want me to go with you?”

“No! No, no.” That sounds too rattled and abrupt, so she covers it with a smile. “No. It’s just down there.” She gestures further down the busy terminal. “I’ll be right back.”

Still he doesn’t seem okay with it, but she doesn’t give him a chance to argue, getting up and walking briskly away. God, she feels shaken, feels like the world’s turning upside down and she’s tumbling right off it and into some sort of endless oblivion, but she doesn’t stop. She can’t stop.

Somewhere between the gate and the bathroom, her brain separates from the shock and horror and finally kicks more into gear. Thankfully (and surprisingly, given how crowded things are outside), the restroom is pretty empty. She throws herself into a stall, locking it firmly behind her, and grabs her phone. Her fingers tremble as she closes the terrible picture before she can look at it again, instead wracking her brain for Sam’s cellphone number. She has to be sure. She knows in her heart it’s true, but she has to be sure.

Somehow she manages to punch Sam’s number in and call. It rings. Please pick up. Please answer. She closes her eyes and begs. Prays. It rings more. Please... Please... Please...
“Hello?” comes Sam’s frazzled voice. “Who is this?”

Just his tone is almost enough to douse any hope she may have had that this is a trick. That Steve’s safe and on his way back to Brooklyn with his friends. That that’s not Steve (Christ, it’s his face and his eyes and his shirt that he was wearing and it’s ripped so that she can fucking see Bucky’s dog tags around his neck). She can hardly catch her breath enough to speak, and the words come out in a jumbled rush. “Sam, is Steve with you? It’s Nat. Is Steve with you?”

Sam’s tense and frightened. “Nat? Nat, oh, thank God! Is he with you?”

And that’s all she needs to hear. She closes her eyes against the harsh burning of tears, leaning into the cool, flimsy metal of the stall. God… “No,” she whimpers, barely holding back a sob. “What happened?”

“We came like you said to! Don and I got there and the whole place was shot to hell. We found Steve’s boss hurt in the main entry. EMTs took him.” Sam sounds like he’s on the verge of screaming and sobbing at the same time. “They got him out, but Steve’s not here. He’s not here. We looked everywhere. The cops are checking the fields, checking the closest town, but – but they…” He chokes on his words. “They found his meds out in the driveway all dumped out. Jesus, Nat, someone took him. I’ve been calling and calling, but I – oh, fuck. It’s gotta be your–”

The bathroom door opens and Nat practically jumps out of her skin. Her body moves faster than her brain, and she ends the call so it’s quiet, so no one can hear Sam’s frantic voice over the tiny phone speaker. She’s breathing in fast-paced pants, verging on hyperventilation, on complete and utter panic. Her eyes are wide and her pulse is absolutely booming in her ears. Someone’s here.

Over the pounding of her own heart, though, she realizes right away it’s just two women, cheekily and loudly debating who’s better looking between two male actors as they use the facilities. The stalls down the wall thud shut. The rush of cold relief nearly drops Nat, but she stays standing and breathing. Breathe. She does. One breath after another. One moment until the next. She stands and slows down and calms herself.

They took Steve. They took him.

Sucking in a deeper breath, she lets that sink in. Really sink in. It’s awful, jabbing into her soul with curled, vicious claws, ripping at her with every breath and every pained beat of her heart. They took him. Alexei took Steve. Fuck, of all the ways this could go, for some reason that hasn’t occurred to her. That the bastard who ruined her life will use the only thing she loves to hurt her again. To finally take her again. To make her come back to him. Those claws dig deeper, tearing and cutting, but what comes out of those wounds isn’t just despair and fear.

It’s anger.

She’s moving after that, head swimming in a fire of rage and the fear that’s stoking it. It’s building and building. Consuming. She leaves the bathroom and looks back down the way at the gate. Clint’s still there. She can barely pick him out with the throng of angry passengers, but she does. He’s on the phone with someone. Go back and tell him. Christ, she knows she should. She should. Clint’s a cop. Of course, he can help with this.

But she knows enough of what she saw, the cement walls and floors and racks. That’s the basement in the house in Staten Island. Alexei warned her once never to go down there, and she never did, but she always knew what went on. She heard the muffled screams sometimes late at night, burying her face into the pillows of their bed and pretending with all her might that her husband and his men weren’t torturing and killing their enemies right beneath her. She knows
what it means. There’s only one way down and one way out. If Steve’s there…

He’s in the heart of Alexei’s proverbial stronghold. There’s no way the cops will be able to get to him in some kind of raid without Alexei killing him first. And she knows Alexei won’t hesitate to have someone pull the trigger or to pull it himself. This whole fucking thing reeks of desperation. He knows that she knows, too. It’s like all the mind games he played with her, how he made her sleep with the men he planned to kill just to make her more afraid. To make her hate herself. To dig the knife into her just a little deeper, twist it just a little more. He’s obsessed, jealous, probably out of his mind with the threat of losing everything he has. He’s desperate.

No. No, she can’t tell Clint. She can’t have anyone else involved in this. No more. It’s too dangerous. Christ, everyone around her has been sucked into this nightmare. Steve’s been nothing been hurt because of her past. He’s waded into this hell because he loves her, and now his life is in the balance. He’s been taken as fucking bait to lure her back like he means nothing. And as she stands there, burning in that fire that’s growing into an inferno, she knows. She knows. She can’t ask Clint to do what needs to be done, what she knows in her heart she has to do. This is her burden, her mistakes and her choices and her nightmare. Her demons. She won’t risk anyone else. Her hand drops to her lower stomach without her realizing, pressing over her coat and shirt and jeans to that scar.

No one else is going to suffer for her. No one.

That anger burns hotter, and she waits until she’s certain Clint’s looking the other way before running as fast as she can back out of the terminal. Alexei wants her back. He wants her. She can’t run from that anymore, and she won’t let Steve die. Never. So she’s going back. She has to. This is it. One way or another, this is where it’s going to end.

She rents a car using another fake ID and the last of her money. Buffalo’s on the opposite end of the state, about as far from the city as you can get while staying in New York. She’ll have to drive all night to get there. There’s no other option, though. As she pulls onto the New York State Thruway, she tries to clear her mind, tries not to notice the missed calls and texts from Clint and Sam piling up on her phone. She feels terrible ignoring them like this. After all Clint’s done for her… She can’t think about that now. She can’t think about anything, nothing other than Steve. Steve alone in that basement, surrounded by people who want nothing more than to hurt him, than to use him to trap her. Steve, reliving a nightmare all his own. God, just thinking about that, about what this must be like for him…

She clenches the wheel tighter and drives faster. “I’m coming,” she whispers, glancing at the rearview mirror again. It’s so dark that it’s impossible to tell if any particular car is following her. She supposes it doesn’t matter; she’s going exactly where Alexei wants, doing exactly as he asked. She can’t stop looking, though. She’s so rattled, shaken to her core, but the fear’s not enough to extinguish that fire. Nothing is. “I’m coming. Hang on… Please hang on…”

There’s no answer of course. The car’s silent aside from her soft, measured breathing and the rumble of the road beneath the tires. She can’t bear the quiet, but the thought of doing anything, talking to herself or even turning on the radio, feels so terribly wrong. She knows she needs to think, to figure out what the hell she’s going to do. She’s been trying. This is stupid and foolish, and she damn well knows it. Alexei is dangerous, and she’s walking back into his house and essentially giving herself over to him. She’s doing that without any weapons, with no way to defend herself. Even if she had a way to fight, he’ll take it from her. He’s bigger, stronger. What’s worse, selling herself back to him… That’s not going to save Steve. She knows that. She forces herself to accept it. Alexei’s violent and sadistic and obsessed. He’s not going to let Steve
go, not even if he has her again. Not after what Steve’s done. Anyone who so much as touched her back at club in the Red Room without his permission met a horrible end. Steve has done much more than touched.

And Steve has something that Alexei’s wants. Her. Alexei always got off on using her and demeaning her and controlling her, but he genuinely wants her. Back in the beginning… There were times when she knew it was real. It wasn’t just him using her. That was before he fell so deeply into drugs, into the power, into narcissism and corruption. Back in Russia, when they met… It feels wrong to call it love now, but it was more than just sex. At the very least, he wanted her to love him. All the years after they married, he degraded her, demeaned her affection, denigrated her so badly, but he wanted what she gave him. He probably still does. That’s what Steve has that Alexei covets, and that obsession…

He’s never going to let Steve live.

That shakes her to her core, makes her eyes flood with tears that blur the road in front of her. She has to get him out. That has to be her goal: doing whatever is necessary to get him out. And she’ll do anything. She knows that like she knows she needs air to breathe. She’ll do anything. She’ll…

She wipes at her cheeks, furious at the tears that have escaped, and grips the wheel even tighter. She’ll let that monster have her again if she has to. If it’ll spare Steve. Nothing’s more important than Steve walking away from this unharmed. But she has to figure out how to make that happen. She needs more than surrendering herself. She has to have some kind of plan.

So she drives and she thinks. The road seems endless as it stretches ahead of her into the darkness, and her thoughts are circular and useless. Yet again she spots the unanswered texts and calls from Clint and Sam flashing on the phone, and she knows they’re worried sick about her. Yet again she contemplates answering. This is fucking dumb. She should call them and get help. She should. What she’s doing is insane. It’s suicidal almost. But she can’t call. She can’t.

Blood on her hands. There’s so much of it.

Just like that, memories sweep out of the silence, out of the shadows, and take her frightened, vulnerable mind. The basement of the mansion. The kitchen. The long, wide hallway that leads down to living areas. Their bedroom. Their bed. Just like that, she’s back there, laying in it, tears leaking from her eyes. It’s that night, that night she waited for him. That night that she cooked and put on the black leather dress and did her makeup and hair the way he liked. That night that she tried to save what they had, everything they made. That night.

The last night he raped her.

She lays there, shaking, too frightened even to cry beyond that trickle of tears. There’s something warm and wet between her legs. She can’t bring herself to touch anywhere down there; it hurts too much. Everything hurts. Instead she presses her hand to her belly and clenches her thighs together and rolls weakly to her side, taking the ruined sheets with her. She squeezes her eyes shut and listens to the hiss of the shower in the master bathroom, trying not to move again like if she does, he’ll come back. She tries not to think, like if she starts, the shattered remains of her spirit will simply crumble to nothing and no one. And she tries not to remember, not to feel the ghost of his cruel hands pinning her and his rough kiss, not to see his violent eyes or smell the alcohol on his breath or the stink of sex and smoke. Don’t let it in. She can’t.

Run.

That thought she wouldn’t let herself think comes rushing back. Run. Get away from him. She
can’t stop it anymore. It starts as a whisper that curls around her heart, that gets louder and louder until it’s a scream. The person she used to be. That person is screaming. There are fingers pulling and prying inside her, clawing at the apathy that she’s used to convince herself to stay, to let this happen. The lies she’s used to protect herself. They’re all torn away, and there’s only one thing left. One thing. She’s a fool to think she can ever save him. It’s too late, and he’s a monster, and this… She holds her stomach tighter, palm flush to the smooth skin there. *This she has to protect.* The one good reason.

So she moves. Her eyes dart to the expensive bathroom, to the dark tiles and the steam billowing from the shower. She can see him in there, washing, luxuriating, taking his fucking time like he deserves to be clean after all he’s done. He’s been in there for a while already. His back’s to the door, and for a second… For one second… The knives in the kitchen. His back’s to the door.

But she only slinks past on silent feet. Finds a pair of sweatpants and underwear and a clean t-shirt. Ignores how sore she is as she quickly dresses. Everything still hurts, throbs, her face where he hit her and her wrists where he grabbed them and her body where he violated her, but she doesn’t falter, covering her bruised, naked skin and going back to the drawer where it’s been dumped onto the floor. Crouching, she picks through the mess, reaching under the bed until she finds it.

*Detective Barton’s business card.*

With that and her phone clenched to her chest, she creeps out of the bedroom and down the hallway. The kitchen’s just as it was minutes ago, with the smashed plate all over the floor and counter. She can hardly breathe as she steps around it and heads to the other side of the kitchen, to the hallway that will get her out. Then she stops and listens. It’s quiet. The house is still. Her heart’s positively pounding, and she can’t stop shaking. She dials the number.

“Hello?”

It takes almost more than she has left to actually speak. Her small voice cracks. “You promised me you could get me. You said you would.”

“Natalia? Natalia?”

She closes her eyes, battling hysteria. “I can’t stay. I have to go. Can you?”

“Are you okay? Are you? Did he hurt you again?”

She bites her lip hard and tastes blood and tears. For a second, one second, she hesitates, fears, wonders if this is really the only way. If this is the only choice. *It is.* “I need someone to come get me. Please.”

The relief in Detective Barton’s voice is immeasurable. “Okay.” His tone hardens. “I’ll come right away. Where are you? At home? I need to know—”

From behind her, something slaps her hand, knocking the phone right from her fingers. She yelps as it clatters to the kitchen floor, as he grabs her arm and wrenches her around. “What’re you doing?” he yells, slamming her back into the counter in a vicious jab. She cries out, panic jolting over her. He’s right there, hair still wet, bare-chested, barely dressed at all in black boxers. There’s rage in his eyes, rage like she hasn’t seen before. It’s so much worse than every other time, so much more violent and dangerous. Untamed. There isn’t even desire there anymore. He shoves her again. “Who were you calling?”
She clenches the business card tight in her fist, terrified to let him see. “N-no one.”

He’s seething. “No one? No one this late? No one?”

She’s terrified. “Please…”


It doesn’t seem possible that he can know, but maybe he does. Maybe months ago he saw her slip out of the Red Room on occasion, saw her talking to Detective Barton those scant few times. He seems omniscient, the way he can always see through her. “No,” she lies. “No, I wasn’t—”

It’s too late. It doesn’t matter about before, about the dinner she tried to make and the show she tried to put on. The act she tried to perform, that she loves him and wants this to work. Everything’s falling apart, and there’s no going back, not to the longs hours she spent waiting for him to come home, not to when he cornered her in the kitchen, not even to the horrors in the bedroom that are still fresh on her body and in her mind. It’s too late.

“Is there someone else?” he demands, grabbing her throat and squeezing hard. “Someone else who’s had his hands on you?”

She can hardly get the air into her body to answer. “No!”

“You whore. When you will fucking learn? No one else touches you!”

“No…”

“Not unless I say!” he screams.

She can’t breathe anymore, so she just nods, choking and crying. She’s his. His wife. His whore. His Black Widow. She’ll shout that at the top of her lungs if it will make him stop.

He’s not going to, though. It’s not enough. He lets go of her throat only to slap her. She falls from where she was pinned against the counter, hitting the floor roughly. Tangling a fist in her hair, he hauls her up to her knees. Another slap makes her eyes fill more with tears and her lip split, and she cries out. She scrambles away despite the hand yanking at her head, scrambles and sees the broken shards of plate from before. There’s one that’s long and sharp, like a knife. Grab it. The razor edge of it is wicked in the light, and it’s just inches away. She can reach it. Grab it!

She has a chance to, to take that shard and whip around and stab him. She can do it. She can almost feel the warm rush of blood, see the horror and surprise on his face, hear his alarmed, pained gasp. He’d never see it coming. She can kill him and protect herself, free herself, finally end it. End it.

But she doesn’t. She doesn’t know why, if it’s love or cowardice or weakness or fear or some misguided sense that this is still salvageable… It doesn’t matter why. In that split second, she lets the chance slip away.

And she’s punished for it. There’s another hit to her face, this one a backhand that sends pain blasting along what feels like a broken cheek. Her head smacks into the kitchen cabinets, and she’s so dazed from those consecutive blows that she can’t do anything other than weakly whine as he throws her back down onto the floor. “Fucking bitch,” he spits. “I should have left you home. Left you back there and let you watch your father die. Burned you with those two brats you cared so much about. Let my men fuck you raw until you learn your place. You think can you walk away from me?”
There’s no chance to answer, even if she could speak. He kicks at her midsection, and it’s all she can do to remember what’s there, to curl into herself and protect her belly. Her back’s to the cabinets and he’s crowding her against them, kicking and kicking, trying to get at her chest and midsection. “Stop!” she screams. It’s total desperation fueling her cry. Total terror. “Stop! Please! Please! Stop!”

He doesn’t. She wails, keens, pushes away with everything she has left. The one last hope, the last chance, spills from her bloody lips. “I’m pregnant!”

Now he stops. He stops and he stares, looming over her, and she’s quivering, hiding behind her battered arms. She’s too afraid to see his face and learn his reaction. For weeks she’s feared this moment, dreaded it, waited for it, and now it’s come. It’s come and she can’t make herself look. Seconds slip away, each one long and filled with agony and terror. Finally she drops her arm just a little and peers over it with teary eyes.

He’s just staring at her. There’s this blank quality to his face, his expression slack and his wild, dangerous eyes oddly empty. She dares to breathe, dares to lower her arm more, dares to hope.

He’s right. She never learns.

His hand shoots down and snatches her hair again and hauls her to her feet. Distantly she hears her phone vibrating. It’s on the floor where he batted it from her hand. It’s probably Detective Barton. He can’t help her now. No one can. She cries huge, hot tears as the man she married reaches onto the counter behind them both, reaches to where she knows the knife block is. She cries as he leans right into her face. His voice is a low, vile hiss against her cheek. “You think I care?”

And she cries with the pain in her stomach, cries with shock, cries as he walks away with the red knife still clenched in his fingers and revulsion in his eyes. Cries and cries as she cups her abdomen, as the red flows out in a flood. Red all over her hands.

So much red.

Her phone’s still vibrating. The sound of it tears her from the memory, and she sucks in a short, rattled breath. Fuck. She drifted. She drifted. And she’s driving. The car’s flying down the thruway way above the speed limit, so she slows down, catches her breath, forces the nightmare away, reaches over to grab her phone on the passenger seat. It’s Clint calling.

She shivers and doesn’t answer. It’s still too late. She can’t turn back, and no one can help her now. This is what she has to do. She has to save Steve.

I have to go back.

She drives. It takes a long time to come back to herself, but as the fog of that hellish moment recedes and rational thought returns, she forces herself again to realize that selling herself back to Alexei isn’t going to be enough. No matter how much he wants her, he’s always wanted to cause pain more. To hurt people. She’s going to have to do more than that.

He wants you back.

Christ, that’s what her life has been for years. That’s dictated her existence since the second she woke up in that hospital with Clint at her side. Alexei is obsessed with her, and he’s a hungry, desperate man who’s never been overly adept at controlling his desires. Even before he showed his true colors, he liked control, liked deciding things for her, directing to her to do what he wanted
when he wanted it done. What to sing and how. He managed her career, decided her costumes and makeup, directed when she performed, and she gladly let him. Trusted him. He craves that. He craves her submission, her obedience.

Only she’s not the woman she was back then. She’s not. She’s not even the woman she was over the summer. Steve’s changed her, shown her strength, shown her how to be more than a victim. Shown her how to love herself. Shown her that she has power to make her own decisions.

So she can’t just give herself back to him, not really. But she can make him think she is. Feed him what he wants, lull him into believing he has her just as he’s always wanted her. His possession, his doll, his whore. He wants a performer, an actress? She can do that. Just like she tried that night, she can sing a song for him, put on a show, live a lie. Only this time…

This time she’s not going to hesitate. This time, she’s going to kill him. The first chance she can find, when he’s fucked out and satisfied, when he thinks he has her low and defeated and cowering before him… That glint of manic satisfaction in his eyes after he’s taken what he wants. It’s haunted her for years. She needs to use that against him. Natalia Romanova was destroyed, beaten down and chained to him by her own desire to fix something she thought had value.

But Nat, Steve’s Nat, knows better. Steve’s Nat is strong. Steve’s Nat is brave. And she’s not afraid to do what needs to be done. She knows what. She thinks about that moment in the kitchen, where she could have grabbed that piece of broken plate and attacked. She knows. It’s settled into her bones, this dark, aching thing that makes her heart pound and ache. This is never going to end. There’s no way for it end other than this. As long as that man lives, he’ll torment her. Torment Steve. Torture her and the people she loves. Clearly jail didn’t stop him. It never has before and it didn’t this time. And if he gets her back… He may take her back to Russia, to the ties Andrei always maintained there, and escape the charges he’s facing here. Flee the jurisdiction and start their horrible life all over again back home. She knows in her heart that that’s a very real possibility.

And that can’t happen. She’ll kill herself before she lets it happen.

But she’ll kill him first, the first second she can. She knows him. She knows him. He’s an addict, and it’s not just drugs and alcohol. He’s addicted to power, to the rush he gets when he forces her and dominates her and breaks her. He’ll be desperate for that, desperate for a fix. She can give that to him. When he’s spent, when he’s come, when he’s so fucking sure she’s too beaten and brutalized and defeated to fight back… She’ll show him exactly what he loves to see. That high he wants. She’ll give it to him.

And then she’ll kill him.

Her breathing slows to something slow and even. Her grip on the steering wheel loosens, the affirmation coiling in her gut and giving her strength. That’s why no one else can be involved. There’s already blood on her hands, the blood spilling over her fingers as she stood there in that kitchen, as the life inside her died, the life she couldn’t save. Her own blood, her heart and soul that she let Alexei ruin. And Steve’s bloody face, his blue eyes filled with terror. So much red.

She’s the only one who can do this. She’s the only one who should.

So she will. She’ll figure out a way to get Steve out, something she can say or do to spare him, to convince Alexei to let him go or keep him alive long enough for help to come. She’ll outsmart the evil. It’s the only weapon she has. Her mind and her body. Her strength and courage. Her love for Steve. The greatest weapon. And then she’ll trick that bastard into letting his guard down. The second he does…
He won’t hurt anyone else. Never again.

She’s not afraid. Not anymore. She’ll do what she has to. The fire inside is burning, and it’s burning for Steve, for the baby she lost, for the friends she’s made and the people who care about her. For the million reasons she needs to fight now. For herself. She’ll do whatever it takes to end this. “I’m coming,” she whispers again, speeding up again, barreling down that dark, dark road to whatever nightmare lies ahead. For the first time in her life, she’s racing toward it, racing to face it. Racing to save the only thing worth saving. “I’m coming, Steve. Hang on. I love you. Hang on for me…”

I’m coming.

It’s nearly three in the morning by the time she reaches the Shostakov residence in Todt Hill. The Verrazano Bridge slumbers in the distance, dotted with tired lights, but the stars and moon are tucked behind drizzly clouds, making the night incredibly dark. The neighborhood is very wealthy, large mansions and compounds behind secluded, gated drives. While perhaps not as opulent as some of the richer, posher enclaves of the Northeast, it’s still impressive, not so flashy as to draw undue attention but swanky enough that there can be no doubt that the people who live here are important. Huge oaks and maples line their particular street, old and prestigious, and she’s forgotten how beautiful they are. They’re thick with autumn foliage that’s bright and warm even in the blackness. She tries not to think they’re welcoming her back as she takes the turn down their street, where limos and town cars used to drive her and Alexei to and from the dinners and parties in the beginning and the club after that. The road’s silent now and dark as hell.

She’s shaking. As she drew closer and closer to the city, her anxiety ramped up significantly. More and more memories have torn loose from her mind, filling the silence with bad things, things she can’t stand to let herself acknowledge. For everything dark moment, though, there were good ones too, so good and so strong that the awful nightmares that were trying to dissuade her were simply overpowered. These horrors are meaningless against the memories she’s made with Steve. Harsh kisses contrasted with Steve’s gentle, sweet lips and respectful affection. Hands grabbing her juxtaposed with Steve’s fingers trailing reverently over her body, mapping and exploring and touching with nothing but love. Dark, violent eyes compared to Steve’s blue ones, alight with laughter and deep with desire and firm with conviction. Cruel words were powerless against the ones Steve spoke to her. Over and over again, he remade her, made her stronger, tougher, smarter and better. So those dark moments didn’t stop her.

And they won’t stop her now. She’s shaking, but she’s driving onward, taking slow, deep breaths to calm herself. Closing her mind to the miseries to keep them at bay. She focuses. Steve needs me. That’s all she can care about. Steve’s there, just ahead, and she has to get him out. Whatever happens to her doesn’t matter. She has to free him.

She’s still not exactly sure how she’s going to do that. The anxiety of coming back here after years of running is one thing, but this worry – how am I going to save him? – is just compounding it. She pulls the car along the street outside the mansion and parks on the side. Then she shuts it off. She just sits there, though. The fact is she has no idea how she’s going to manage this. Let Alexei have her. Let him take what he wants from her, and when he’s distracted or sleeping or drugged out or whatever it is, kill him. That’s so fucking simple that it’s stupid. And it’s still not going to guarantee Steve’s safety. She knew that hours ago, and nothing’s changed. She’s twisted and turned it around for what feels like forever, and she’s no closer to an answer. There may not be one. She doesn’t know what she’s going to find at the house, what she may face. Rumlow and Rollins. Alexei. But will there be more of his men? Clint and Fury made it sound like his organization has basically dissolved over the past couple days since the arrest (the arrest that didn’t
fucking stick, but maybe the damage has been done?). Loyalty in the world of organized crime, at least in this corner of it, was never much like The Godfather in her opinion. There wasn’t much honor that she saw, no integrity or devotion. These guys work for money. For women. For drugs and booze and power. If Alexei can’t provide that anymore…

Her phone vibrates. She looks over, trying to take a deeper breath. Someone’s calling yet again. This time it’s a number she doesn’t recognize, at least not at first. A few seconds spent blankly staring at it and wracking her brain prove fruitful. Tony. That means Sam must have told him that Steve’s missing and must have given him this number. Swiping her thumb across the screen, she blankly reads the text. The words don’t really sink in, at least not as anything more than another reminder that she’s scaring the living hell out of everyone she knows. She sighs heavily. Shit. The urge to get help rises again inside her. She doesn’t want to face this alone.

But she needs to. Blood on her hands. Hers alone and no one else’s.

Ignore it. She does. She has to. Get out of the car. She does. She has to. The night’s wet and chilly and a little windy, the cold air cutting right through her coat. She knows they’ll take it from her, but she brings her phone anyway. She doesn’t take her bag, though. There’s nothing in there to help her and too many things to make her doubt what she has to do. Closing the car door, she sucks in breath after breath, looking around the wet street that’s glittering where the few street lights wash over it. Then she starts walking. Go. She has to.

The trek to the gate at the end of the mansion’s driveway isn’t long. She could have parked closer, she supposes, or driven up, but that didn’t feel right for some reason. She left with nothing three years ago, walking out, staggering really. It feels wrong to bring anything back or to come back differently. Alexei always has his gate guarded, so it’s not like she’ll get far anyway. Needless to say, she’s pretty surprised to find the little station beside the gate empty and the gate closed but not locked. Is she wrong about this whole thing? Is this some kind of trick? She stands there, listening, trembling and biting her lip, but Todt Hill is entirely peaceful and silent this time of night, and the shadows (while frightening) are just shadows. Christ, if she’s wrong about this…

She’s not. She knows she’s not. And Steve needs her. Of course, a bunch of novel, awful thoughts slice through her head. Alexei or his men could have moved Steve since taking that picture. Or (God) maybe they’ve already killed him. She swallows the knot in her throat. I’ve come this far. She keeps walking, heading up the dark, empty driveway. Memories bombard her. This used to be her home, after all. The slight curve and incline are familiar, as well as the landscaping, the well-manicured shrubs and flowers beds. Her shoes are loud in the quiet, more like beats of thunder than the light steps they are on the cobblestone, as she heads up to the house.

It’s just the way she remembers it. The mansion is spectacular, a rustic yet modern Tudor-style home with tall, sharply slanting roofs and bricks on the exterior. There are trees around it and nicely maintained gardens in which she used to escape during the better days to write and sing softly and find some peace and solitude. The house is huge, though it doesn’t look it from the outside. It’s not garish. Were it not for the endless parade of awful memories she has of the place, she could have loved it. She can still remember how she felt the first time Alexei brought her here, fresh off a plane from Moscow, the wedding ring new and exciting on her finger. She can still remember learning that her father in law and his wife lived with them in a separate section of the estate, another house that was further back on the property and even more secluded and distant from the road. Maybe that should have been a sign then and there that nothing was right about her new family, but she didn’t see it.

The driveway splits to lead around the mansion to that second area, but she stays focused, heading up further to reach the door of the main house. She doesn’t need to do anything so mundane as
knock or ring the doorbell. The lights are on inside, and the second she gets closer, the door opens.

It’s Rumlow. He looks waxy and weird in the illumination from inside. Also, he’s standing funny, like something’s wrong with his leg. And the gun he has is pretty unmistakable, even if he’s not pointing it at her. “Took you fucking long enough,” he grumbles almost casually, as if he’s not there to essentially kidnap her, too. Take her back into this hell against her will. She says nothing as she approaches, stopping right in front of him. She’s tempted to ask about Steve, dying to, in fact, because she’s terrified for him, but she doesn’t dare. Rumlow stares at her before stepping aside to let her come in.

She does. The front entry looks just as she remembers, spacious and circular and open. There are parquet tiles under her feet that glimmer in the low light and a table in the center area that has a vase of flowers atop it. The flowers are dead.

Rumlow closes the door behind them and locks it. She can smell the tang of blood on him. She prays it’s not Steve’s. He glares at her a moment, but his gaze is strangely devoid of its usual leer. He’s always had that since the very first time she met him, this hungry glint in her eyes like she’s just something there for him to torment and fuck. Now he looks… frustrated. Rattled. Like this isn’t what he wants. And he’s nothing but mechanical as he grabs her arm and shoves her up into that table. His touch alone is enough to make her skin crawl, and a million more awful memories prod at her consciousness, but again, he’s not doing anything other than patting her down for weapons. She has none, of course. He takes her phone from her coat pocket but doesn’t do anything further to touch her or grope her.

He’s rough and aggravated when he snatches her arm. “You’ve caused a hell of a lot of trouble,” he hisses furiously, and then he’s dragging her down the hallway. She stumbles a second, everything inside her screaming loudly and frantically now to run. To struggle and fight and get away and get out. It’s innate, like the blood thrumming hot and fast in her veins, but she ignores it. She has to. As he pulls her along, more and more things come back to her. The vaulted ceilings with their dark beams. The rich décor. The great room next to the stairs. The living areas and hallways and the way the place always feels cold to her despite its warm look. This used to be her home, and once upon her time, she actually dreamed of being happy here, of her children playing here, of her husband loving her and her family thriving and her career flourishing. She actually dreamed of having it all.

Now she has nothing. And, strangely enough, Alexei has nothing, too. She can see that the house has fallen, figuratively and literally. There’s no one around, but more than that, things aren’t clean like they used to be as if he’s fired the cleaning staff. The furniture looks lonely. It’s never been well-used, more like a scene from a magazine than a home, but there was life to this place when she lived there. Even as twisted and awful as it was, there was something more to it than this hollow, empty shell. In the den where Andrei and Alexei so often drank and talked business, where Andrei tried to turn his son into something more than a violent man chained to his passions, everything is smashed and dumped to the floor. Shattered glass and fallen books and broken furniture. Before she even sees him, she knows Alexei has fallen apart.

Seeing him, though, is far worse than she could have imagined. There was a time when she found him incredibly attractive, beautiful even, with his dark hair and dark, smoldering eyes and rugged, thick appearance. He’s always had a commanding presence, and she used to find his strength and power intoxicating. Now he reeks of corruption, of addiction and obsession taken too far. Of self-destruction. This was what his father feared for years, and here it is, coming to pass right before her eyes. When she last saw him, he was a monster fettered to his desires. It’s so much worse now. The expensive silk shirt he has on is rumpled. His black suit pants appear like he’s been wearing them for a couple days, like he hasn’t had the time or care to shower or change. His hair is
thick and greasy. He’s unshaven, pale beneath the hints of the dark beard framing his thin, dry lips and cleft chin. She always found his face a tad severe with its high cheekbones, but between how prominent they are now and the sallow, drugged-out exhaustion set into his eyes, he just looks gaunt. Ruined. As far from the promising young man she married as he’s ever been.

And when he sees her, he abandons the bottle of vodka he’s drinking at the kitchen table and stands up. His eyes glimmer, and a huge smile spreads on his lips. It makes her stomach clench and her heart pound. Just seeing him is enough to make the room spin, to make terror chill her blood, but she forces herself to keep breathing as he comes closer. After all this time… “You came,” he says.

That voice has haunted her nightmares for years, but hearing it now makes it seem new and threatening. It’s deep, gravelly, English tinged with that heavy Russian accent he’s never shaken even as he pushed her and pushed her to learn to lose hers. She looks at him as he stops in front of her, feeling Rumlow behind her like a wall. She can’t run. She’s not going to run. His bloodshot eyes drink her in, all of her, and he shakes his head. “Finally you came back.” He seems almost incredulous, which is fucking unbelievable considering the lengths to which he’s gone to force this very moment to occur. He raises his hand and brushes it down her cheek.

She recoils. She can’t help it. The urge to cower away from him is almost impossible to fight. It’s like lightning shooting over her muscles, and she has to tense her body to stay still. “Where is he?” His eyes flash. God, he’s unhinged, more so than she’s ever seen. It’s becoming increasingly obvious that she’s not even dealing with a rational man. She has to stay calm, stay in control. The words come out fast, before he can hit her. “I came back to you! That’s why I came. To help you.”

“Help me?” he says, glaring, seething, but surprised.

She swallows the lump of horror in her throat and nods. She’s not thinking, not questioning. Going with her gut. “You need help.” She looks around at the bottle of vodka and the drugs she didn’t notice before on the filthy kitchen counter. “Don’t you?”

His eyes are wild. He squints like he can’t understand. “You’re lying.”

She’s gotten good at it from years of hiding and years before that of convincing herself that what was happening to her was alright. She can lie now, and he’s so fucked up he may believe her. That plan in the car – show him want he wants, be what he wants – drives her thoughts. “No. No, I’m not. I got scared, and I ran but–”

“For three years!” he shouts, and she winces and tries to contain that but then remembers what he wants from her. Her at his control. She drops her gaze and quivers. “You hid from me for three years! You made me look like a fool!”

You did that yourself. “Sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

His eyes burn even hotter. “And now you’re with him.”

She has to lie. She has to. This is the only chance she has to get close to him on her terms. “No. No, we’re not together. We’re only friends. He was my neighbor. He helped me when I needed it.”

Alexei glances to Rumlow. Nat can’t see the other man’s expression. “He found you in his bed,” he hisses. The wrath on his face is terrifying. “You let him touch you.”
God, she’s rolling the dice on this. Taking a huge fucking chance. She doesn’t know what Rumlow has seen while he’s been chasing them, what Steve may have said in their hands, what Alexei may have found out. Obviously it’s been enough to think that kidnapping and threatening to kill Steve would be enough to bring her here. But the full nature of their relationship, how far it’s gone… No one knows that. No one aside from her and Steve.

She has to go with this. If she wants any chance of getting close enough to Alexei to kill him, she has to. And if he finds out Steve slept with her… He’ll kill him. She can’t let that happen. “Not like that,” she says, forcing herself to keep her voice desperate and frightened but just a bit hopeful. “No one’s touched me like that.” Alexei’s nostrils flare like he’s barely holding his rage inside. Nat holds her breath. “No one since you.”

Rumlow spits behind her. “Fucking hell. She’s playing you!”

*Goddamn it.* Nat shakes her head, driving down her anger and summoning tears (it’s not all that hard). “No, no! No. He never – we never… No one’s touched me!” She lets herself give a little sob. “I was scared. I thought you’d hurt me. I thought–”

“Do you love him?” Alexei demands. He’s close enough now that his breath, stinking of booze, blasts all over her face. That brings back too many awful memories, pain and blood and how much he’s hurt her, and for a second she can’t think. She can’t even answer. And she can’t do anything but cry out pathetically when he grabs her arm. It hurts; his grip is as tight as iron, fingers digging into her wrist through her coat strong enough that it feels like her bones are grinding together. “Do you?”

Her voice is a strangled whimper. “N-no…”

That’s not enough for him, and the next thing she knows, he’s yanking her by the arm through the house. She cries out again, struggles weakly on purpose like she always used to. He’s like a train dragging her along. Vaguely she realizes Rumlow’s behind them, that he’s furious and scowling but less at her and more at Alexei. There’s no time to process that as Alexei hauls her to the door that goes down to the basement. *The basement.* Nat struggles for her balance as her arm’s nearly torn from its socket as Alexei viciously whips her around in front of him so he can drive her down the steps. He’s silent as he shoves and pushes. Desperately she tries not to fall, running down as fast as she can. Before she has even a second to think about escaping him at the bottom, he’s taking her arm again, violently hauling her to the place he told her once never to go.

As they exit the finished section of the basement, she expects to see more of his men, but there’s no one, nothing. Nothing but the lights overhead and the hallway that leads down further. There’s the room. *Steve.* Her heart’s hammering in absolute terror. *Oh, God…*

Alexei bellows at Rumlow, “Open it!”

Rumlow does, glaring all the while. He pulls keys from his pocket and unlocks the door. Then Alexei’s barreling inside, dragging her right after him.

Steve’s in the center of the room, cuffed to the metal chair there. The chair’s bolted to the floor. He’s hunched over, and there’s a black sack over his head. *Oh, God.* He’s goes rigid in fear at the sudden cacophony of the door slamming open and people coming in. The muscles of his arms strain, and the sack jerks back and forth as he looks around frantically. *Oh, God!* Alexei stomps over and yanks it off.

Such a conflicting storm of emotions pounds into Nat that she can’t think. There were times over the summer, particularly after Steve told her about Afghanistan, where she’s wondered what it was
like for him. They’ve always been awful thoughts, the kind that get in her head uninvited and linger only a second before she banishes them. Now she can see, see Steve’s red-rimmed, watery eyes so filled with fear, see his battered face, see the way the nightmares are shifting in his mind. It’s like he’s trembling before the threat of a panic attack, like he’s riding the edge of a flashback. She knows because she’s walked that edge with him, fought it off with him. Held him back and kept him sane. He’s trembling, breathing fast through his nose, the gag soaked with sweat and tears and stained with blood. He whines through it the second he sees her, squeezing his eyes shut and looking away. She cries, too. This isn’t for show. The desperate sound breaks from her throat before she can stop it. Oh, God! God! She’s been terrified of this moment since she received that picture, terrified of actually seeing him like that. If he has a seizure now—

Alexei squeezes her wrist, pulling her all the way inside so that she’s right in front of Steve. He fumbles at the little table to the side of the room and grabs a gun that’s there. It’s the same gun Clint gave her, the one they must have taken off Steve when they kidnapped him. Alexei swings it around until it’s right at Steve’s forehead.

“No!” Nat shouts in panic. “No!”

“Do you love him?”

“No! No!” God, if she says anything else, will he shoot Steve? She’s stiff with terror, shaking her head desperately. “No, please!” She doesn’t even know what she’s saying, if she’s denying the truth or begging him not to do this. “I don’t love him!”

Steve jerks again, handcuffs rattling, and Nat’s eyes dart to him. Please don’t believe me… Please, Steve… Please play along… Steve can’t say anything, but the horror on his face is all the answer she needs.

And Alexei sees it. “Did you fuck her?” he rages, letting Nat go to jam the gun right into Steve’s forehead. Steve flinches, turns away, closing his eyes. She can’t see what he’s thinking, other than he’s out of his mind with panic. Alexei doesn’t care that Steve can’t speak, shouting louder, digging the gun in deeper. His wild, hoarse voice echoes through the room. “Did you touch her? Did you? Did you fuck her?”

She moves. She doesn’t stop even as her body screams resistance and grabs Alexei’s arm. She pulls him back. “He didn’t,” she assures in as soft and calm a voice as she can manage. “He didn’t. There’s no one other than you! No one!” She takes his face between her hands and before she can think twice, she kisses him.

Steve’s horrified grunt is somehow louder than the painful thundering of her own heart. Don’t… Please… It takes everything she has not to bow to the waves of revulsion threatening to turn her inside out. It feels so wrong, so awful. But it works. Alexei’s rage fades with surprise, and he does exactly what she wants. He drops the gun from Steve’s head and backs away to deepen the kiss. He tastes the way she remembers: alcohol and cigarettes. Like pain and blood and a million other terrible things tied to the act, sense memory flooding her until standing still is a trying torture.

But she does. She does what she always did. She lets him touch her. The kiss gets more savage. She’s so used to Steve’s tender, sweet kisses that it takes her by surprise when Alexei becomes more demanding, more possessive. She doesn’t fight. And when he pulls away, she looks down, submissive. Cowering. It’s not wholly untrue. She can’t look at Steve. That’ll give everything away if she does.

And she doesn’t think she can bear to see the betrayal on Steve’s face.
Alexei’s rage seems like it’s gone, just like that, like that kiss doused the violence and left only his desire. She knows that look. It has her terrified to her core in the past, but she doesn’t let it now. She does make it seem like it is, though. She shivers, dropping her gaze, seeming soulless and broken. He stuffs the gun in the waist of his slacks. Then he reaches in his pocket and pulls out keys.

_The handcuff keys._ Nat goes still, trying not to act like she’s watching, that she’s noticing. Alexei makes to toss them to Rumlow. “Do what you want,” he says. “Then put a bullet in his head.”

Rumlow scowls. “Hardly fucking payment,” he snaps, “you cheap fuck.” Nat sucks in a soft breath. Rumlow’s a cruel, vindictive asshole, but she’s never heard him talk to Alexei like that. He’s always been eager to do his job, taken joy in it. And she remembers hearing Rumlow outside that motel in New Jersey, arguing with Rollins that Steve’s going to be his to kill because of what happened in Steve’s apartment. He seems totally uninterested now, angry beyond finding any sort of sadistic fun in this. _Because he hasn’t been paid._

Her mind races. _Tony._

“Don’t shoot him,” she says quickly. She doesn’t look at Steve, not at all, instead turning to Alexei imploringly. “Don’t.”

Alexei closes his fingers around the keys. His jaw clenches with doubt again. “What?”

God, this has to work. _Buy me time to get him out._ If she lets Alexei take her back up now, Rumlow will torture Steve and kill him. She knows that. She has to stall that bastard. “He has rich friends.”

At the mention of that, of rich friends, both of them turn to her. Rumlow and Alexei. And Steve. She can hear his hitched breathing, feel his eyes on her, but she doesn’t dare so much as glance at him. Doing that will betray her motivations and lies. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Rumlow demands, voice thick with warning.

She swallows, tries to seem timid and weak and desperate to please. “His friends. They’re rich. Two of them.”

Rumlow looks doubtful, like he wants to stalk over and throttle her. “Bullshit,” he hisses.

“Anthony Stark,” she supplies in a quiet voice. At least it’s not hard to be ashamed of doing this, although the reasons are all wrong. Dragging Tony into this… “Tony. His father owned Stark Industries, and Tony’s got ties to the money. He runs a garage in Brooklyn. The Iron Mechanic.” Rumlow’s just staring at her in irritation and surprise, squinting like he can’t make sense of that. Alexei is watching her, too, but his lips are curling into a smirk like this is confirming to him that she’s helping him. Taking care of him. She didn’t anticipate that angle, and she tries not to let her relief at that tiny gesture show. Instead she stares evenly at Rumlow. “He’ll pay. They’re close. The two of them are really good friends. Stark’ll pay.” She doesn’t know if that sounds overly eager, but she decides to keep at it. “If not Stark, he’s good friends with Don Blake, too. Donald Thorston Blake. His father owns Asgard Enterprises. They have—”

“—real estate worldwide,” Rumlow finishes, narrowing his eyes into a scrutinizing glower. “Are you lying?”

Nat ducks her eyes. “No. No, I swear! Check my phone. There’s a text there. From Stark.”

Rumlow does just that. He fishes Nat’s phone out from where he put it in his pocket and turns it
on. Nat knows what the text says. “Nat, it’s Tony. Sam told me Steve’s missing. We have to find him. Where the hell are you? We’re worried. Call ASAP.” He rips around and stares at Steve. His fist finds its way into Steve’s hair, yanking his head back, and Nat can’t hold back a wince at the brutal treatment. “Is this true? Huh?” Steve doesn’t answer, not that he really can with the wad of cloth between his teeth. His eyes flick to Nat, full of confusion and anger. Rumlow yanks his hair harder. “Is it?”

Steve drops his gaze in what can only be described as defeat. Betrayal. Something inside Nat dies. Rumlow seems satisfied with Steve’s response. He skewers Alexei with a downright baleful glare. There was once a chain of command, but there doesn’t seem to be one now, now when everything has clearly shattered. “You told me you would pay me to bring your wife back.”

“And I will,” Alexei returns. “I will.”

“With what? Huh? You fucking lied to me!” Alexei doesn’t flinch, standing his ground as Rumlow’s face breaks in rage. “Yeah, I got people working for me too, asshole. After I brought him here, they called, and you know what they told me? After you made bail, the Feds froze everything you have. You can’t pay me shit! You can’t pay anyone shit!”

Alexei scowls, but Nat can see the cracks in his veneer of confidence. “I can get money.”

The smaller, stockier man steps closer, bleeding violence. There’s nothing but confrontation in his stance. “I should have left with everyone else. You’re a sinking ship, and you’re stupid as shit. She’s worth nothing!” he hisses right in Alexei’s face. Nat backs away, chancing a look at Steve, but he’s hunched over again and trembling. She can’t see his face. “She’s a prostitute running from her pimp. I should have fucking seen that, should have realized that before I tracked them down for you. She’s not worth anything to anyone other than you. Him?” Rumlow jerks his head toward Steve. “Apparently he’s worth something.”

“No. This is backfiring. No, no, no. Her mind’s racing, struggling to find a way to fix this before it gets worse. She wanted to buy herself time, to save Steve’s life and keep Rumlow off him, but if Rumlow takes him, if Alexei gives Steve to Rumlow as some sort of compensation… “Fine,” Rumlow says. “I’ll ransom him and then kill him.”

Alexei raises the gun and points it right at him. “But I get my cut, understand?”

Rumlow stops. The muscles of his face flex as he grinds his teeth. “You motherfucker…”

There’s a reason Alexei is the Red Guardian. As low as he looked before, right now he’s fierce, cold, murderous. Nat can’t breathe, watching the two of them stare at each other in a silent battle of wills. A battle over Steve’s life. A battle she created. God, she prays this works…

Alexei’s grip on the gun doesn’t waver. “My house. My prisoner. You work for me.” He dangles the keys in front of Rumlow’s face, the keys to the handcuffs. Without them, there’s no way to get Steve out of here. “Make the call. A million.”

“Shooting for the fucking sky, huh?” Rumlow hisses. “You greedy fuck. He’s not worth that much.”

“No, or I can shoot you right now and take it all myself. It doesn’t matter to me. And if you fuck him up before we can get the money…” The threat’s left hanging. Alexei keeps the gun right on Rumlow and reaches to snatch Nat’s wrist. His nails dig in deep again, and he drags her away.
Steve raises his head as they pass just enough that she catches his gaze. He’s in pain, shaking with it, shaking with fear, and he closes his eyes wearily. She can’t help the tears that come, and she also has to look away, too afraid Alexei will see. He can’t see. Not now. This is it.

She has to do something now to end this.

Rumlow glares at them until they’re outside, until Alexei shuts the door. Leave him alone. Even though she’s facing a nightmare all her own, Nat can’t stop thinking that. Please don’t touch him. Don’t hurt him. Please… Alexei pulls her down the hallway. Shame and fear makes her sick to her stomach, but she swallows it down. No choice now. The plan she made in the car, the things she promised herself…

This is it. Her chance. She knows it in her bones.

The house is a blur as he pulls her back upstairs. She can’t focus on anything other than his grip on her arm and the deafening pounding of her pulse in her ears. A minute later they’re back in the kitchen. Nat’s shaking. She doesn’t know if she can do this. For all her angry thoughts on the trip down, for all the fire she felt in her heart, now that it’s come to it, she’s terrified. He lets her go a second to stagger to the counter. The handcuff keys catch the light as he pockets them, twinkling in a taunting reminder. He leans down and snorts up a line of coke. Nat can’t watch. Rubbing his nose, he turns back to the table and takes a swig of vodka right out of the bottle. He’s still holding the gun.

And once he’s done with that, he’s taking her arm again and leading her down the other hallway. The one that will take them to the bedroom. Unwittingly her eyes fill with tears again. Once upon a time, she knew how to escape into her head. She had walls. She had ways of surviving this. Now she’s not so sure. I have to. Give him what he wants. Act defeated. Then kill him. Take the gun and the keys and save Steve. That’s the only thought keeping her sane. Save Steve.

Seeing the bedroom again is worst of all. It’s mostly the same as she remembers it, only it’s like everything else: in complete chaos and disarray. The bed’s not made, the black duvet on the floor around it, the white quilts hanging off one side and pillows everywhere except the head of the bed. There are clothes all over the floor and strewn on the chairs of the seating area. Drugs and papers and things cover the dresser and vanity. It’s a mess. And her things… Her clothes. Her makeup and jewelry. Her clothes. It’s all just as she left it, like she’s still living here. It’s disturbing. And it’s fucking crazy, but she actually feels a little sorry for him, sorry that she ran and his life seemingly grinded to a standstill.

But her sympathy is small and fleeting. He drags her right to the bed, and she shudders. She can’t help herself. It’s engrained into her. She doesn’t fight, not even as he viciously wrenches the coat from her shoulders. Clenching her muscles is all she can do to keep still, pliant, and submissive. After he gets her coat off, though, all he does is throw it onto the bed and stumble away to the massive walk-in closet. Confused and frightened, Nat just stays there. She pulls in shallows breaths, trying to keep them as slow and even as she can, trying not to lose control. He comes back a second later, carrying a dress. She recognizes it immediately. It’s not the black leather one he loved so much; that one’s gone forever. It is, however, another cocktail dress, this one red, that she used to wear to the club, to the Red Room. The second she sees it, her gut twists up and she feels sick. It’s yet another thing in this hell that’s soaked with memories.

And he’s shoving it at her. “Now,” he barks. He sniffs, high out of his mind, eyes absolutely wild. Shocked, she stupidly stares at it for a second, not processing what he wants. He loses his temper, crowding her against the bed. “Now! Get dressed!”

Oh, God… Horror splays her mind open, and more and more awfulness pours out. Nights at the
club in this dress. Singing with tears choking her. Sitting in the Red Room, surrounded by men who leer at her and slaver like dogs. Being shoved into a wall, and it’s so constrictive that she can’t fight. It takes her another second to pull away from all that and realize that he’s waiting for her. *Oh, fuck.* She swallows down her pounding heart at what this means, what he wants. A *show.* Maybe this can work in her favor, but her revulsion is damn hard to overcome.

And it’s hard to turn her back to him, even for a second. She has to, though. She takes the dress and scurries into the bathroom. The urge to close the door behind her overcomes her fear that he’ll get mad at that, so she does. Shockingly, he lets her.

It’s a struggle not to hyperventilate. It’s a struggle to think, to even move. Panic leaves her reeling, the expansive, white tiles of the room spinning around her in nauseating circles. But then she rushes to the counter on silent footfalls and starts quietly opening the drawers. He’s too goddamn drugged out to realize what a mistake he’s made. Unfortunately, there’s not much she can use as a weapon. She finds an old straight razor, remembers how Alexei likes them, how he stood here and meticulously shaved while she cowered in the shower or in the bed. The edge is a little dull, but just holding it in her hand makes her feel infinitely better.

She moves fast after that. Finding the razor reminds her of her plan, her purpose. With that comes detachment, which she desperately needs. Quickly she takes off her shoes and socks and strips off her jeans and sweatshirt. The silvery flesh of the scar on her hip catches her eye in the mirror, and she winces. She doesn’t let herself look, instead wriggling into the dress. Christ, she’s gained weight since then, enough that the dress doesn’t fit as well. It’s a testament to how drawn and miserably thin she used to be. She gets it on, though. Barely. “Fuck,” she whimpers. She forgot the damn thing’s strapless, which means no bra, which means where the hell is she going to hide the razor?

Thankfully some part of her brain is functioning. She slides it along the side of her underwear, using the elastic to keep it in place on her hip. The dress is looser there than around the bodice, so the fabric should hide it. Nonetheless, this is dangerous as hell. *Like any part of this isn’t.* She gasps something that’s a mixture between a soft sob and a laugh, shaking in fear. Getting her hands still enough to brush out her hair and get makeup on is difficult, but she manages that, too, skipping cleaning up the foundation from earlier that day and launching straight into eye shadow and rouge and lipstick. A few minutes later, her eyes are smoky and her cheeks are colored and her lips are enticingly plump and red. She’s staring at the same lie she saw in the mirror three years ago. This time, though, she’s going to protect what she loves.

“Natalia!” he bellows impatiently. “Natalia!”

She lurches and finishes up. Barefoot, she jets to the door, wincing as the razor starts cutting the side of her hip in stinging bites. She pauses, breathes, tries for some measure of equanimity. She needs it now, needs calm and control to survive this. *Let him have me. Kill him. Save Steve.*

She can do this.

She opens the door. He’s on the bed next to her coat, glaring at her. That glare cools, though, as his eyes flick up and down her form. They’re appraising, and she can practically see his arousal battle with his anger. “Get over here,” he growls. Once again, it takes *every bit* of strength she has to do that. She pours her concentration into the act, into seeming afraid and submissive, into being beaten down and offering herself up as a desperate peace offering. That’s what he wants, what he’s looking for. It won’t stop him from hurting her, but it’ll give her a chance to hurt him.

The second she gets close enough, he leans forward to grab her waist and haul her closer. Her heart jumps and not just from the aggressive contact. His hand’s right over the razor. He doesn’t
notice, though, too muddled and too turned on. He drags her between his knees and pins her there, pressing his legs around her. “You should never have left me,” he says in a low voice. His eyes are swimming, blown so black from desire and the drugs. “I missed you. I’ve wanted you.”

The sudden tenderness makes her head spin. Her skin crawls as he presses his palms over the flat of her belly. “I’m sorry.” She hears herself murmur that. “I’ll do better.”

“Yes, you will,” he purrs. His hands thankfully stay there. She knows it won’t last, and her flesh aches in anticipation of his rough touch. “You will. We’re going back.” Nat closes her eyes as he kisses her midsection through the dress. “Back to Russia. He’s dead. We’re finally free. We’ll go back.”

She can’t fathom how terrible that would be, but she doesn’t have to. It’ll never happen. And she knows better than to express any sort of opinion. He finally reaches up to cup her breasts through the dress. She squeezes her eyes shut and tips her head back, biting the inside of her lip until she tastes blood, hesitantly putting her hands on his shoulders. “We’ll start over there,” he murmurs into her stomach. “Do everything my way. My fucking way. He’s dead. He can’t stop me. Go back home and start over. Take the money and run.”

His restraint snaps. She can’t contain a squeal as he snakes an arm around her back and shoves her into him even more. Her breath locks up in her throat, terror tight inside, mind racing with panic. When does she go for the razor? Where can she stab him? How–

“No one will stop me,” he says, and then he’s twisting her around, pushing her onto the bed. She makes herself go limp, lets him do it. Lets him climb on top of her, pinning her under his weight. Something flops to the ground beside them. The rest of the duvet falls off the bed. The expensive sheets feel cold and awful. The horrors are right here. She’s living them, remembering them, trapped in them. He sneers at her. “I’m taking everything that’s mine. That means you. And I’m killing anyone who tries to stop me.” He grinds himself down on her.

She can feel the keys in his left pocket.

Her breath’s coming in a soft, fast pant as he kisses at her neck. It’s impossible to focus with his weight on her, with the weight of everything crushing her down, but she forces herself to, forces herself to move her hands to his shoulders, to his back in a scared caress, to his hips as he moves against her. To his belt. He grabs her right hand, holding it to the bed roughly, and a sharp pang of fear leaves her breathless and nauseated. He doesn’t touch her left. Relieved beyond measure, she rolls her hips up in a desperate motion, trying to seem a mix between turned on and frightened (the latter part’s not hard to fake) but mostly trying to jostle him closer so she can get her hand into his pocket. He gets rougher, squeezing harder, more frantically rutting against her. When he pulls back, she slips her fingers in, praying he doesn’t notice. He doesn’t. He takes a kiss instead, and she goes limp and receptive and reaches.

Her fingers brush against the key ring, but she can’t grab it. A desperate cry hitches in her throat, and he swallows it down, pushing himself up higher on her. He doesn’t even realize what he’s doing, what she’s doing, because that dumps the little keys right onto her fingers. She snatches them and slowly retracts her hand, closing them tight in her fist and digging her hand under herself to hide it as the kiss goes on and on and on.

Hold on.

He pulls away for a ragged breath. Then he lets her go to lean up. For a second she fears he’s going to rip her dress, but he only goes to unbutton his shirt. She stares up at him, trying to look empty and pliant and hopeless. He smiles ferally, struggling with his shirt because he’s so damn
high and clumsy, and he tips a little to the side. *Get the razor.* She inches her hand down to where her dress is bunched up by her thighs. *Get it. Stab him.*

*End this.*

But he stops moving. Gets off her. Stands, staring at the floor. Shocked, Nat leans up a little, gripping the keys even tighter and keeping her hand beneath her. She doesn’t understand what’s happening, not why he stopped or what’s distracted him, until he crouches and picks something up off the floor.

It’s the photographs. The strip of them Steve gave her earlier that day before she left Fury’s. The ones of them at Block Fest, close to one another and smiling and kissing. The ones of them happy. Her coat fell off the bed, and they must have slipped out of her pocket.

*Oh, no… No…*

Alexei’s eyes go wide. His lips tremble. There’s pain on his face, pain and grief and betrayal, and in that second, Nat knows it’s over.

*He knows it’s all a lie.*

His fingers curl around the strip of photos, crinkling and crushing them. His eyes flash like lightning. There’s a split second, just a breath of a moment, where he’s reeling. Where she can strike. But she’s reeling, too, and she fumbles to push herself up, to get away, to reach for the razor. He’s faster, roaring in rage, snatching her hair and yanked her toward him. Pain rips across her scalp. She screams, struggling wildly, fumbling at her leg. “You fucking whore!” he shouts, bearing down on her, grabbing for her neck. “You fucking liar!”

Her fingers finally latch around the handle of the razor, and she rips it free. The blade slices her skin as she does. Panic and terror fuel her, and she slashes at him. There’s a spurt of red as the razor cuts across his cheek, his chest, but he saw the strikes coming and leaned back so the wounds aren’t serious. She cries out in horror and disappointment, frantic because she failed. Alexei grabs her wrist and yanks her arm up while finally clenching her neck. He squeezes hard, twists her wrist harder, his face the picture of wrath. Nat can’t get the air in her lungs to scream as blackness dances along her vision. Her fingers go numb, and she drops the only weapon she has.

He’s crushing her into the bed. His face is beat red, blood dripping from the slice on his cheek. He’s hideous, like a monster, as he chokes her. “You lying bitch! You lied! What’d you think? I’d fucking fall for it? That I’m fucking stupid?” Consciousness fades. Nat kicks and squirms, but she’s not going anywhere. His grip is implacable, strangling harder and harder. There’s no air in her body. Her lungs are burning. “Did you think that? Did you?”

She tries to moan out a denial, tries to shake her head. She can’t.

“You love him,” Alexei hisses. It’s not a question anymore. Nat whimpers, a pathetic gasp for air between trembling lips. “You can have everything with me, and you want to be with him.” He leans closer, right between her legs, and glares murderously at her. Completely unhinged. Totally *insane* with jealousy. “I’ll show you what your love does. I’ll carve him up and make you watch every second. Then I’ll make you sing.”

The hand’s abruptly gone from her throat, but there’s no time to do anything other than suck in a reedy breath because he’s wrenching her by the wrist he’s still holding. She falls off the bed, choking and blinking tears away, the room spinning and her heart straining. He’s dragging her, and if he was rough before, it’s nothing compared to now. She’s being pulled across the floor, and
he’s completely uncaring about how he’s twisting and damaging her arm. Nat cries a hoarse sob, trying to get her knees and feet beneath her. Somewhere down the hallway, after being banged into the walls and doors, she finally pulls back and scrambles to her feet. He lets her do that but only barely, and then he’s forcing her back through the kitchen, through the house, back to the steps and down into the basement. Nat can’t breathe. She holds tighter and tighter to the keys. That’s their only hope now. She clutches them until they’re cutting into her palm. Don’t let go! Don’t let go!

The corridor seems even darker than before, but that may be because her head’s absolutely swimming in dizziness and fear. She gulps for air, twists, struggles uselessly, but she can’t stop him. They get to the metal door, and Alexei kicks it open. He throws Nat inside, and she stumbles in with a cry, going down hard onto her knees. The cement scrapes them raw. Don’t let go!

Rumlow’s smoking in the corner, and he looks aggravated at their sudden appearance. “What the fuck…”

Alexei’s a crazed demon. Blood’s drooling down his cheek, down his chest which is heaving with hysteria. He’s got the razor Nat dropped. She didn’t realize he picked it up. Steve’s still in the chair, still alive – thank God! Thank God! – and still awake. Frantically he pulls on the cuffs the second he sees Alexei coming at him with the blade.

“No!” Nat scrambles up as fast as she can. She throws herself between Alexei and Steve like a shield. Steve grunts, jerks back, trembling hard, but she presses herself more into his chest, practically crawling up him to blanket his body with hers. “No, no, no!”

“What the fuck’re you doing?” Rumlow shouts.

A hand tangles in her hair and yanks, trying to get her off Steve. She refuses to let go. Refuses. “Don’t hurt him! Don’t hurt him!” She’s shrieking, closing her eyes as tight as possible and sliding her hands down Steve’s straining biceps and forearms to where his wrists are bound and bloodied. She knows there’s only going to be this one second, just that and nothing more, but neither Alexei nor Rumlow can see what she’s doing. And she’s not just throwing herself in between Steve and the men trying to hurt him.

She’s slipping the handcuff key right into his palm.

Steve jerks, gives a garbled cry, and Nat screams as Alexei finally yanks her off by the hair. She struggles wildly until he backhands her. The pain is crippling, and she falls. Steve shouts something she can’t understand.

“He’s not worth anything if he’s dead!” Rumlow stands right in front of Steve, blocking Alexei just as Nat was. “Back the fuck off!”

“Get out of my way! Get out!”

“Stop thinking with your fucking dick!”

There are shoes scraping on the concrete, shouts and curses. Nat blinks the tears from her eyes and watches Rumlow and Alexei scuffle. The tension that’s been building between them since she got there, since Rumlow realized he’s not getting paid, boils over. Alexei’s got the gun he took from Steve again, and he’s pointing it at Rumlow. Rumlow has his own aimed at Alexei. Alexei glowers, eyes steeped in rage. “She’s mine,” he hisses, “and he is, too. I paid you to bring them here.”

Rumlow shakes his head, obstinate and menacing. “You didn’t pay me anything!”
“I have for years. I *made* you. You work for me! So get the fuck out of my house! *They’re mine!*”

Rumlow looks angry enough to burst. His heart’s pounding, a vein visibly throbbing in his neck. He whips the gun to point it right at Nat, obviously trying to leverage shooting her into forcing Alexei down. Nat lifts her head, ignoring the pain down her jaw and neck. She jerks in fear and stays still on the floor. “I’ll leave,” Rumlow seethes, “but I’m taking him. I don’t care what you do with her. He’s buying me a fucking ticket out of this. If nothing else, I get to kill him.” He holds out his hand. “Now give me the goddamn keys or I blow her fucking brains out.”

Alexei stares him down, and there’s a moment where everything’s still. Nat can’t breathe as she waits and watches. *Please…* Eventually, Alexei cuts his losses and reaches into his pocket. His eyes go wide when he realizes what’s happened.

And Nat can’t help a small rush of pride.

Steve’s hands shoot up from behind him and grab Rumlow’s gun. He shoves up just as Rumlow pulls the trigger, and the bullet goes into the floor beside Nat. She scrambles away, and the gun goes off again and again, shots flying haphazardly and punching into the cement everywhere as Steve and Rumlow wrestle. One of the lights shatters, sending the basement into a dim, flickering hell.

A second later the magazine runs dry, and Rumlow screams in frustration. Despite what’s happened to him and how long he’s been bound, Steve lurches out of the chair and throws all his weight into him. The guy yowls again as he goes down, the two of them a tangled mess of flailing limbs on the floor. Nat rushes to help.

She can’t, though, because Alexei’s reaching down, grabbing her arm, violently yanking her up. The razor blade’s suddenly right to her neck, gouging sensitive skin, as he hauls her close and puts her between the two men struggling wildly on the floor. He points his gun at them, and now it’s shaking as he shifts it between the two targets. He shoots neither, though, because Nat’s sinking her teeth into his arm around her shoulders.

He yelps, and she shoves back, pushing with all the strength she has. Her feet hurt on the floor as she digs in and drives him out of the room and into the corridor. They hit the wall hard. It’s only the element of surprise that allows her desperate move to succeed, and the second he overcomes it…

“You bitch!” he roars, and he spins her around. She tries to wrench away, tries to run, but he catches her dress and yanks hard. Losing her footing, she trips and falls. She doesn’t get her hands out quite in time to catch herself, and her head smacks into the cold, unforgiving cement. Pain rushes over her. In its wake she’s dazed, and her brain’s frenzied cries to get up and run never reach her body. She’s just lying there limp and helpless. She blinks and sees Steve, sees him straddling Rumlow, fist raised and slamming down, the other man struggling weakly beneath him. It’s only a flash – *he’s free he’s fighting* – before a shadow falls over her and the door slams shut.

*Alexei.* He tangles his fingers in her clothes, ripping more, and hauls her up. Nat chokes on a whimper. The pain’s still crippling her as he carries her away. Feebly she pushes at the arm around her chest. She tries to get her feet beneath her, tries to coordinate her steps, tries to dig her toes into the cement to slow herself. Tries to blink away the blurriness, the shadows pressing. She can’t. She drifts, sucked down into the agony and emptiness, miserably detached from the world. A tiny voice inside her is screaming, but her body can’t respond, and she’s a prisoner in her own mind.
Vaguely she realizes they’re back upstairs. Vaguely she notices he’s taking her to the front of the house, that he’s bleeding and panting and wild with panic. They’re down the main hallway, past the den and those spacious rooms, heading to the door. There’s a shard of terror bright in Nat’s mind. If he takes her from the house…

Just as she’s coming back to herself enough to struggle more, he stops. Listens. Turns around. There’s a faint, shrill wail. Sirens? She barely holds onto that tendril of a thought before he’s heaving a frustrated cry, his voice wrecked with anger, and taking her back inside again. Weakly she slaps at him, pulls away, but he’s much bigger and stronger. He always has been. And he’s taking what he wants. There’s nothing she can do, nothing she can say. No way to stop him.

She’s his.

That’s the thought beating through her brain, the truth pounding in her heart, as he rushes through the mansion. No. She cries out, sobs, hits harder, but her hands don’t work right and she doesn’t have any strength. She never has any strength. The past blurs with the present, this nightmare meshing with the millions like it from before, and she can’t tell anything apart. Her brain is broken open, a fissure running even deeper than before, and it’s all coming out. In her mind, she sees herself coming down this very hallway, going to the front door. In her mind, she’s passing herself that night, the night he stabbed her, the night she got away. She watches herself stagger drunkenly, cupping her stomach where she’s bleeding and bleeding, the red thick and wet all over her fingers and down her legs. Bloody footprints on the pristine parquet and handprints on the walls. She’s desperate, sobbing with every breath, opening that door and limping with the last of her strength out into the night. Clint’s coming. She remembers thinking that, running down the driveway, running down the road, bleeding and crying and praying it’s not too late.

It’s not too late!

Nat snaps out of it. They’re back at the bedroom. Roughly Alexei throws her into it. She collides with the bed hard, the blow shoving whatever air she has in her lungs right out of her, and she sags to the carpet. He’s slamming the door shut, locking it. Nat scrambles up. The past is sucking her down, but she refuses to fall into it. She refuses. She’s not going to let him have her again. Not without a fight. Not like this.

His eyes are filled with terror and hunger and rage, so much rage, as he comes at her. He doesn’t speak, only giving an animalistic cry, and grabs her. She ducks, baring her hand into a fist and ramming it into his side. The blow meets hard muscle. It hardly slows him down. She doesn’t stop, though, pushing at him, kicking and hitting with everything she has left. He catches her wrists, pushes her back against the bed. Panic drives her, spreading energy into her, and she scratches at his face, at the slice there. Shrieking in pain and anger, he brings his knee up, catching her right in the midriff. Her lungs seize again at the agony. Just like that, she’s doubled over, breathless and suffering.

And he’s forcing her onto the bed.

She screams, fighting like a wildcat, clawing and struggling with all her might to get her knees between them. She can’t. He’s too strong, too heavy, and he slaps his hand over her mouth. There’s a banging, but it’s distant. He lets go of her face to punch her in the gut, and she goes limp. No. That banging gets louder and louder. He’s ripping at her dress. No!

There’s a deafening crash. It’s the door bursting open. Nat barely catches a glimpse of a torn shirt and jeans and blond hair racing toward them – Steve – before weight’s gone from her. She sucks in a frantic, wheezing breath, rolling onto her side and clenching her legs together as she labors for air. Steve rams Alexei right off the bed. A gun fires, and the lamp beside the bed shatters. The
two of them hit the floor hard, Steve on top, bruised lips pulled back from reddened teeth as he fights to keep the other man down. His knuckles are bloodied, the gag loose around his neck, his eyes filled with fear and his own rage. Alexei sputters, bucking furiously, shoving Steve back. He’s still got the razor, and he manages to slash at Steve. Nat can’t see if it hits, but Steve cries out and Alexei roughly pushes him off.

Steve rolls away. He’s slow to get up. It’s instantly obvious he’s at a serious disadvantage. His bad hip seems like it’s locked up, stiff and useless, and it’s hampering his agility something fierce. Alexei smirks almost gleefully, brandishing the razor and going at him with abandon. Steve barely dodges the first wide swipe and the next, but Alexei drives him back further. His leg crumples and he twists to compensate, spinning to get away. He slips into a harried defensive stance, twisting to avoid another series of rapid, vicious stabs and slices. Lightning quick he grabs Alexei’s wrist, ripping him around, and the momentum carries them both into the vanity. The mirror shatters in an explosion of glass. Alexei kicks Steve’s leg, and Steve chokes out another cry, trying to push back, to regain some ground. The razor is shaking between them, Steve pushing back on Alexei’s hand, Alexei surging down with no restraint. Steve flails, grabbing, finding, stabbing back with a piece of the mirror into the other man’s shoulder.

The wail Alexei gives is absolutely blood-curdling for how desperate and wrathful it sounds. The strike works, though, and he rears back just enough for Steve to thrust his good leg between them and knee him away. Alexei stumbles back into the bed, reaches into his pants, gets the gun.

Nat moves without thinking. From the mattress, she jumps on his back, hand going for the gun he’s trying to aim at Steve. She does everything she can, throwing her weight onto him, dragging him down, digging her nails into his back and arm to hang on. He trips, tips, turns, goes down beneath her, and they both end up on the floor in a heap on top of the duvet. The gun drops from Alexei’s fingers as they roll, as he forces her onto her stomach. There’s no time to reach for it, the razor slashing again, and she cries out as it cuts down her back. She hears Steve yelling, hears him clambering over, feels him yank Alexei off her. The cut’s not deep, but it’s burning, sending awful, paralyzing licks of pain up and down her spine, and she barks a sob and tries to move. The next few seconds are violent, terrible blur. She can hardly track it, can hardly dig in the mess of bedding. Steve punches. It misses. Alexei kneels him in the belly and then shoves him back into the bed. He loses his balance. They tackle, fighting for dominance, fighting with everything they’ve got, and Steve loses. Alexei decks him hard as he falls, right across the face. He hits the carpet, twisted in the sheet. A bloody cough barks from Steve’s lips, and he scrambles on his hands and knees away.

Where is it? Nat sobs in panic. Where is it? She wrenches the duvet aside, reaches under the bed. Where is it where where where–

Steve screams. Like a towering wrath, Alexei kicks him in the chest. Once. More times. There’s unspeakable malice in his wild eyes, indescribable jealousy burning like an inferno. Steve tries harder to get away, but it’s not enough. He’s spent.

Alexei grips the razor tighter, sneering in victory, and drops down over his victim. He’s too fast for Steve to stop, too strong now and fueled by the desire to finally win. To get back what’s his. To kill. He digs his knee into Steve’s sternum, trapping Steve’s arms under his weight, and grabs his hair with his free hand, wrenching his head back. Steve cries out again, and the razor’s sharp edge comes right to his neck.

No! Her fingers brush against something hard amidst the soft, expensive silk, and she grabs it. She whirls, gets to her knees. “Stop! Stop now!”
The room goes silent. Absolutely still. The razor stops right against the shaking, vulnerable flesh of Steve’s throat, but it stops. Steve’s face is covered in sweat, and his eyes are huge with terror. He’s completely motionless under Alexei, pinned and helpless with his life very literally in the hands of a murderer.

And that murderer is glaring at her, glaring with so much hate and disgust that it feels like a palpable force slamming into her. It’s a fucking challenge, and she’s not giving in. “Get off him,” she says lowly. She grips the gun tighter to stop it from shaking and coldly narrows her eyes. “Get off him now!”

Alexei doesn’t, not even with her pointing the weapon right at him. At this range, there’s little chance she can miss. His eyes dart again between her face and the gun, and a painfully long moment slips away. Then he laughs. “You wouldn’t,” he says. He presses the blade deeper into Steve’s throat, cutting a thin line right above his Adam’s apple. Steve tries to move away. Alexei grips his hair tighter, crueler, and he gasps, squeezing his eyes shut.

Furious, she lifts the gun more and aims right for his fucking head. “You want to bet?” Alexei stops and holds his breath. She doesn’t waver, not for a second, getting to her feet with surprising grace. A few slow steps and she’s pointing the gun right at his face. “Let him go. I mean it. I’ll kill you.”

For a second, he’s utterly motionless. Then his lips curl into a hideous, arrogant smile. “Little Natalia. Wants to be a big star, wants to sing for the world. Big dreams. But inside she’s nothing but a weak girl. Inside she’s nothing but what I made her to be.” He sneers harder, but she can see the cracks now. The doubt. “And outside, she’s nothing but a whore. My whore. My wife. She’s mine.”

“No,” she hisses. “Not now. Never again.”

“When are you going to learn—”

“Get off of him. Right fucking now.” Her finger’s tight on the trigger, undaunted and unshaken, and she’s never been so calm, so sure. This is it. This is where she makes good on her promise to herself, where she protects what she can’t afford to lose. Where she saves who she is, what she loves. Blood on her hands. Tears in her eyes. She bursts out into the night, staggers down the street, runs away, runs runs runs—

“I’m not running anymore. I’m not scared of you anymore. You can’t hurt me anymore.” She jabs the gun right between his eyes. “And I’m not asking again.”

Alexei stares at her. She stares right back. For the first time in forever, she meets his gaze and stares. She’s not afraid. She never will be again. She has power, courage, fire in her mind and worth in her soul. She’s not his victim.

The silent moment goes on and on. Second by second, his control erodes, the illusion that he’s had that he’s stronger, bigger, that he owns her… It’s crumbling away. “You bitch…” he hisses, but it’s desperate.

“You called me Black Widow,” she says calmly. “That was the name you gave me. That’s who you wanted me to be. Stupid. You know what a black widow is, right?” He doesn’t answer. Coolly she cocks an eyebrow. “It’s a spider who mates and then kills her mate.” The gun presses in harder and harder, hard enough to shove his head to the side. “Did you really think that never applied to you?”
His eyes widen. He’s scared of her. *Scared of her.* He knows what she can do, what she will do. How powerful she is. She stays perfectly still, unyielding, unbreakable, and finally, after what feels like forever…

He closes his eyes in defeat. That’s it. Slowly the blade moves away from Steve’s neck.

Now Nat shivers, breathes hard and deep through her nose. It’s all there. The moment. *Take his life.* Conviction twists in her gut. Again, she has a chance to. She can do it. She can almost feel the gun recoil as she pulls the trigger, feel the vibration of that up her arms and in her bones, hear his scream. See his body fall back dead. She can kill him now like she never did that night. *End it.* For all the times he tore her down, that he demeaned her and reduced her to nothing and no one. For all the times he hit her, battered her, broke her. For all the times he raped her, used other men to rape her, used her body as his possession and turned it against her. For all the times he convinced her she was worthless. For her innocence and her dreams and her sense of self.

For the baby that died. For Steve right now.

*Kill him.*

But now that it comes to it… It’s not worth it. This isn’t who she is, not who she’s become. It’ll change her, damage her, ruin her. She’s better than that. She’s worth *everything.*

So she loosens her grip on the trigger. Then she waits, staring at him sternly. There are sirens wailing louder and louder. Her heart’s beating slow and steady, strong but true. She’s not backing down, not giving an inch, until he obeys. Until *he* submits. It takes him a little longer to realize that and a little more still to accept it. Then he shifts up, letting Steve squirm and twist his way out from under him. Steve shoves him back forcefully before clumsily scrambling to his feet. He’s breathing heavily, putting no weight on his bad leg, limping in a wide berth away from Alexei to reach Nat’s side. He takes her free hand, weaving their fingers together, and watches with wide eyes.

Outside there’s banging in the house. Shouting. People coming. Lights flashing in the street beyond the windows. Inside the bedroom, though, everything falls into this tense, grotesque stasis. It seems unbreakable. Alexei kneels there, hands in his lap, head bowed. Nat stands there and keeps the gun on him, glaring, unable to overcome the rush of power and fear and adrenaline. Unable to accept that it’s over. *It’s over.* Steve’s right behind her, and his touch slowly starts to ground her, bring her back. He’s there, squeezing her hand, sweeping his thumb over her knuckles. He’s alright. He’s safe. It’s okay. *It’s okay.*

Finally, she lowers the gun and turns to him.

And there’s an awful shriek. Horrified, she whirls back to see Alexei springing up and charging at her in a fast, last, desperate attack. A last opportunity to end her. She fumbles to bring the gun around, but she’s too slow. *Too slow.* He stabs at her with the razor.

It never hits. The sound of a gunshot echoes like thunder through the room, and Alexei drops back, his body jerking almost inhumanly. He hits the ground on his back and doesn’t move again.

Nat gasps, lowering her arms. She can’t believe it. Twisting around, she sees Clint in the broken doorway of the room, his gun still raised. He glances at her, relief bright in his eyes even though his face is hard with anger. He briskly moves in past them to stand over Alexei’s body.

But Alexei’s dead. The bullet got him dead center in the chest. His eyes are open, face locked in a surprised grimace, blood pooling beneath him. *He’s dead.*
She stares, too shocked to process it. Again, just like that, everything changes. After years of fearing him, hating him, running from him… Just like that, he’s gone.

Clint kicks the razor from Alexei’s bloody, limp hand for good measure, but when it’s obvious it’s over, he exhales slowly and lowers his gun. All around them, more people are coming in. Police. EMTs. Federal agents. It’s a blur of noise, of voices and faces and hands pushing her back and away from it all. It’s over. She can’t believe it. It’s over. Can’t accept it. It’s over. Relief overwhelms her, wiping her mind of her thoughts, her body of sensation, her heart of anything other than this singular truth.

It’s finally, finally over.

She sighs, closes her eyes, and lets Clint take the gun from her. “Are you okay?” he asks. She can’t even answer. She just collapses, falls, goes down onto her knees. Steve goes with her. He wraps her up in his arms and holds her tight as she finally lets down her guard, lets it all in, and cries.

Not long after that, they’re outside in the driveway. Along with a slew of cop cars, there are a couple of ambulances there, and she’s sitting in one. The EMTs are finishing up with her, dabbing at the welts and bruises on her face, bandaging her back (although the wound requires stitches – they’re going to take her to the hospital). Steve’s right beside her. They’re treating him, too, getting medication into him for pain and his seizures, and they’re insisting he go with her to Staten Island University for a thorough examination and observation. Aside from a few nasty cuts and bruises and one bad slash across his belly where Alexei caught him in the fight, he’s alright. It’s nothing short of a miracle, but he’s going to be fine. They both are.

And they’re quiet, sitting together at the back of the ambulance and watching the haze of flashing lights and activity with bleary, exhausted eyes. There’s a lot going on. The FBI is raiding the house. They brought Rumlow out, beaten up and fuming but very much alive. He was railing, yelling, struggling against the handcuffs and the officers escorting him. They pushed and shoved him into a cop car. Steve watched that with hard eyes, breathing heavily with a haunted look in his eyes. And now comes Alexei’s corpse, strapped to a stretcher and wrapped in a body bag. They wheel it to a truck from the county coroner, and she stares, not sure what she’s feeling. Relieved. Lingering anger. Lingering fear. A sense of release. She’s empty, like all this darkness is just gone from inside her. Like a weight’s off her.

Like she’s free.

They slam the back of the truck closed and the vehicle rumbles off. As it does, Clint comes closer, running a hand through his spikey hair. He looks tired, but he’s calm, calmer than she’s ever seen. Still… He shakes his head. “What the hell were you thinking?”

There’s no answer she can give. Not really. “Sorry.”

That’s probably not enough to make up for worrying him so severely. Still, he doesn’t seem all that upset. He even smiles. Not just that. He’s even proud. “Good thing it was pretty obvious where you went. Once I heard about some asshole judge granting Shostakov bail, anyway. And about them taking you.” He raises a shoulder at Steve, whose lips turn up in a little, weary smile. Clint sighs, incredulous. “Jesus Christ. You two have been nothing but trouble since you started in with each other.”

Nat can’t help a little grin of her own. “Sorry.”
He grunts, nodding, still not upset. He turns to Steve. “I called your friends. They’re okay. They’re going to meet you at the hospital. Rumlow was stupid enough to text a whole ton of evidence to Stark. There’s no way he’ll ever get out of this one.” Steve nods, too. Clint gives him a comforting look, an appreciative smile, and tentatively he returns it. Then Clint clasps him gently on the shoulder, pats a couple of times like he’s affirming something to himself. “It’s all alright.”

“I know,” Steve answers. He shakes his head, looking down to his lap. His wrists there are heavily bandaged, and he picks at the gauze a little. “This never should have happened.”

“Nope,” Clint agrees, “but it did. And it’s okay. The Shostakov family’s dead. Their empire’s dying. Those who should be in jail are. And you two are safe. It’s the best we could hope for.” There’s movement up the driveway a bit, a FBI agent gesturing Clint closer. He sighs. “Alright, stay put a bit. I’m going to finish up here and ride over to the hospital with you. Just in case.”

There is no need for just in case, not really, but she knows what this is. Clint making sure she’s really okay, like he always has and always will. Making sure Steve’s okay, too. Making sure they’re alright because he almost lost them. Looking out for them. So she only nods at him and watches in a bit of a daze as he walks back up to the house to talk with the men there.

Then she sighs, blinking hazily and turning away. Nothing seems real. Her body’s tingling, familiar and her own but somehow seeming like it’s new, like it’s different. Like everything’s different. In the distance, she can see the Verrazano Bridge. The sun’s just starting to rise over there, a pretty orange against the royal purple of the clouds. She smiles just a bit at the obvious symbolism. Fate sending her a message, she supposes.

“You saved my life.”

She turns at Steve’s soft words. He’s watching her with teary eyes. The bruises on his face look sore, but they’ll heal. And he’s shaking now, but he’s strong as he holds her gaze and brushes the hair from her face. He gives another small smile, still clearly overwhelmed by it all. “You came back, took him on… Saved my life. I…” His voice fails him, and he swallows thickly. “Thank you.”

She thinks he shouldn’t do that, that this would have never happened to him if not for her, but she doesn’t say it. And she thinks back to the basement, to the nightmare down there, to the lies she spoke. It’s stupid and random, but suddenly it’s too much to bear, overcoming the numbness inside. “I didn’t mean it,” she whispers.

Confused, he shakes his head. “What?”

“When I told them I didn’t love you. I didn’t mean it.”

For a second, he just stares at her like she’s crazy. Maybe she is. Crazy pretty well defines what she just did. But then he just laughs and cups her face, sweeping his thumbs over her cheeks. “Nat, God, I never believed that. Not for a second! I knew you were lying to him, not me.” He pulls her in for a kiss. It’s tender but only at first. She gasps into his mouth, passionate and desperate, the rush of it burning away everything Alexei did to her that night. Everything he’s ever done to her. It’s another fire inside, and it’s raging between them, the power of what they have together. Of what they’ve overcome together.

He pulls away after a moment, her fingers sweeping through his beard, and tips his forehead to hers. “I know you,” he whispers into her lips. “I know who you are. I know what you are. You can’t lie to me.”
She smiles. “No?”

“No. You’re not a liar. And you’re not what he made you be. You’re not weak, and you’re not his. You’re not any of that. You never were.” He rubs a thumb across her lips. There’s nothing but gratitude and admiration in his eyes. So much love. “You’re a warrior.”

A warrior. Rising from the fire with love in her heart and strength in her body and armor made of steel. She pulls him close and kisses him again and again and lets herself be reborn.

Chapter End Notes

Gorgeous artwork for this chapter provided by the lovely faith2nyc!

"Stay" Chapter 20
"Warrior"

“All the pain and the truth
I wear like a battle wound.
So ashamed, so confused.
I was broken and bruised.
Now I’m a warrior.
I’ve got thicker skin. I’m a warrior.
I’m stronger than I’ve ever been.
And my armor is made of steel.
You can’t get in. I’m a warrior.
And you can never hurt me again.”
- Demi Lovato, “Warrior”

Written by: thegraytigress
Artwork by: faith2nyc
AUTHOR'S NOTE: So we are nearly at the end, my friends. I hope you enjoy the resolution. I had to add a chapter (there was no way I could fit everything I need to cover in one), so there will be two more after this. The usual warnings for this one: sex and mentions of a previous miscarriage. Enjoy!

“You’ve held your head up. You’ve fought the fight. You bear the scars. You’ve done your time. Listen to me. You’ve been lonely too long. Let me in the walls you’ve built around. And we can light a match and burn them down. And let me hold your hand and dance ’round and ’round the flames in front of us… Dust to dust. You’re like a mirror reflecting me. Takes one to know one, so take it from me. You’ve been lonely. You’ve been lonely too long. We’ve been lonely. We’ve been lonely too long.”
– The Civil Wars, “Dust to Dust”

“That’s just about the last one,” Steve says, carrying the box into their new kitchen and setting it down on the counter with a heavy clunk. “Sam’s getting the rest.”

Nat turns where she’s unpacking the dishes, brushing a wet strand of hair from her forehead. It’s December, but even with the windows open and letting in the crisp winter air it’s hot in the apartment. Of course, it’s not helping that they’ve been moving all day, lugging what seems like an endless parade of boxes from the truck down on the street and up three flights of steps to their new place. She’s sweaty and really tired, and there’s still a lot of work to do.

But it’s pretty obvious Steve’s spent, at least for the moment. He heaves a big sigh, plopping down on the dinette chair. Max comes over to him from where he was at Nat’s side, tail wagging and tongue licking, and Steve pets him enthusiastically. Then he slumps and clumsily stretches his bad leg out in front of him, nearly tripping her as she crosses the way to collect the box he brought in. “Sorry,” he says, but he’s not sorry enough to actually move.

She mock glares at him, setting that box to the counter where the rest of the pots and pans are. Leaning back, she makes a quick assessment of the space with which she can work. The kitchen’s bigger than the ones in their old apartments, which is good considering they’re consolidating two kitchens’ worth of dishes, pots, pans, and utensils. In fact, it’s great. Everything is great. The whole apartment is larger, with a nice living room, a real, formal dining room, two bathrooms, and two bedrooms. The bigger one will be theirs, of course, and it overlooks the street below. The
other one they’re turning into an office/guest room where Steve is going to set up his art studio. There are nice, shining hardwoods throughout, and the walls are a mixture of new drywall and brick. It’s airy and spacious. Perfect.

And the neighborhood’s perfect, too, quiet and not as busy as Flatbush. They’re north of Prospect Park now, so it’s not much of a move, but it feels monumental for how important it is. After Alexei’s death and the exposure and arrest of so many of the Shostakov family’s criminal ties, HYDRA Properties fell under intense scrutiny from the federal government for a slew of infractions, tax evasion and accepting bribes included. Nat and Steve’s old super, Johann Schmidt, was arrested for his role in Nat’s attempted kidnapping. In exchange for leniency, he ratted out Pierce and a lot of the higher ups in the company. Apparently he was doing their dirty work for years, and he has a lot of incriminating secrets to spill, not just about the company’s ties to Andrei Shostakov but to organized crime in general. Nat and Steve have been watching this all unfold from afar. They’ve been staying with Sam the last couple months as the aftermath has exploded into this firestorm. Needless to say, moving back into the building wasn’t something either of them cared to do after what happened.

So they looked elsewhere for a new place. A fresh start. They weren’t the only ones. Thor left, too, packing up his things and moving in with Jane over in Manhattan. He claims he’s helping her with her research, but it seems to everyone he’s trying to reconnect with his father and brother. Asgard Enterprises has a corporate office in the city, and he’s been visiting there more and more. It’s a good thing, and he seems happy to be rebuilding a relationship with them. The Langs also moved out, heading to what Scott called “greener pastures” out west in San Francisco. In actuality, Hope’s father wants to go back to where he started, and she wants to go with him to take care of him and his business. It was sad to see them go, though with Hope’s busy career and Scott’s friends in the area it seems likely they’ll be back from time to time. And Maria also left the building for fairly obvious reasons. She’s furious that she walked into a situation like that, that she placed Nat into it without realizing the amount danger and corruption around her. She swears never again, and Nat definitely believes her.

Fury’s assistant, Jasper Sitwell, is also in jail. Fury himself, pale and wobbling on crutches and nursing a pretty serious gunshot wound to leg, was the one to make sure the FBI got him for his role in kidnapping and attempted murder. Afterward, he and Maria supposedly ran into each other at the precinct and commiserated about the situation. Nat’s not sure, but it sounds like Maria has one foot out the door of the NYPD and is heading to help Fury run SHIELD. It also sounds like Fury’s about to come out of the proverbial shadows, turn SHIELD back into the security company it used to be and should be. Having an ex-CIA agent with a heart as big as Nick Fury’s looking over the neighborhood makes everything already seem so much safer.

At any rate, the building that inexplicably brought them all together isn’t a part of their lives any longer. It feels like a big deal, but it’s not. Like so many things over the last couple months, it’s a change to which they’re slowly acclimating. Moving away from their old neighborhood to this one, officially moving in together… It’s just another step they’re taking together. Another moment in which they’re building a new life.

She loves their new apartment. Even though it is bigger, it’s not extravagant. It’s homey and comfortable, and it’s theirs. Hers. For the first time in years, she’s moving, and she has a say about where, how, why. She has control. She’s unpacking their things without the shadow of her past haunting her, decorating without fear sucking any joy or excitement from the moment, living without having to wonder how long she’ll be able to stay. How long this will last.

It’s going to last forever. She still can’t believe it’s happening. Months after that night, she’s still reeling sometimes. Of course, it’s not so simple. After a couple days in the hospital, she and Steve
spent a few more with the FBI and the police, giving statements and aiding in the authorities’ investigation of the incident. Her involvement lasted far longer than Steve’s did, which she supposes makes sense. She thinks back on it now, she much she told them. Names and dates, as best as she can remember, and what she saw. What she did. It was terrifying, to be that open and vulnerable, but Agent Bishop (who came to New York to deal with the case) was nothing but sweet and understanding. She was kind and patient, regarding Nat with sympathetic eyes, never once judging or admonishing her for her complacency and forced participation in Alexei’s crimes. Nat appreciated her compassion so much. With Steve at her side, she let out all of that darkness, the truth that’s been a collar around her neck for so long, and in some ways, that was more freeing than seeing Alexei die.

The fallout is still spreading. It will for months, maybe even years. Dismantling a criminal empire as big as the Shostakov’s, with its fingers in the music industry and real estate and the police force and city and state government… That will take time. Clint, Agent Bishop, and the federal prosecutors keep telling her that. They promise her they will attempt to minimize her role in any legal action, but she may be called to testify against some of the others who’ve been arrested and indicted. Thankfully, Rumlow took a deal. He realized pretty quickly that he was screwed, what with a plethora of witnesses against him and the damning evidence he texted to both Nat’s and Tony’s phones. He’ll be in prison the rest of his life, not just for Steve’s kidnapping and assault but for the dozens of murders, arsons, and drug offenses the Feds have on him. Still, there may be others who come out of the woodwork as the waves of Alexei’s death ripple through the city. Other evil Nat saw and experienced. She’ll be ready to face it head-on if she needs to.

She can face anything now. The woman she was six months ago… She’s gone. The woman she is today is strong, made braver and tougher by her past and her fears and the people who love her. She’s finally, finally starting a new life in a new place. Fury even showed up at Sam’s unexpectedly last week to give her her new identity. It’s a real one, one of which the FBI and the police are aware, one that will keep her safe from anyone who may try to find her. It came complete with legal documents provided by the state of New York and the federal government. Fury pulled quite a few strings and worked some connections to make this happen. And he smiled a knowing smile, that same one he had for her in the farmhouse, as he gave her the new driver’s license. “Congratulations.”

She looked at it, at her picture and the name next to it. Natasha Romanoff. That took a moment to sink in. This was huge, new. A little overwhelming. Natasha. She realized pretty quickly, though, that she liked it. It felt good, really good. It felt like her, like who she’s becoming. Natasha, but still Nat to everyone who loves her. To herself. Her eyes stung with grateful tears as she swept her thumb over the picture. Then she looked up at him. “Thank you.”

Fury’s one eye appraised her fondly. “Trouble, Miss Romanoff. No matter what happens, trouble always comes around. But you never have to take it on alone again.” He turned to go, the leather of his black leather long coat swishing as he limped down the hallway. “And your days of lying and running are done.”

“Nat?”

Steve’s voice pulls her from her thoughts, and she turns around. He’s still sitting there, flushed from the cold and from carrying all their stuff. His eyes are twinkling but a little concerned. “Something wrong?”

“No.” She says that, and it’s absolutely true. Absolutely. She smiles, a little ashamed with how wide it is, how embarrassingly huge, and looks around their place. “Just…” This time, so different from all the other times. The dreams she’s had, the things she wants. Their future, stretching out
before them starting with this next step. It’s nothing special but everything all at once… She shakes her head. “I’m just happy.”

Steve gets up with a little wince, limping across the tiled floor to her. Max follows, limping right behind him. She’ll never forget when things finally settled after that night in Staten Island and she and Steve were released from the hospital. When they went home with Sam, and Steve finally saw Max after being apart from him for so long. How Steve went down on his knees in Sam’s apartment, practically sobbing he was so relieved and excited, and Max jumped all over him despite the bandage still on his shoulder and paw, whining and licking desperately and so excited. That was the moment where life felt real again, seeing Steve hugging and petting his dog, seeing Sam laugh and join in, seeing that scars really do heal.

She feels bad sometimes about the lamed paw Max permanently has now, but Steve always brushes it off. “We match,” he says with a grin.

He’s grinning now, pushing her into the kitchen counter with a mischievous glint in his eyes. She goes willingly, back to the edge, his arms bracketing her in place as he braces himself on the smooth granite. “Yeah?” he teases, lips tantalizingly close to her own. “You like it?”

She’s pretty sure he’s not talking (or at least not just talking) about the apartment. She squirms, pushing him back. “You’re making it hard to get anything done, you know.”

That grin gets even bigger and more devious. “Am I?” His voice is a low purr against her cheek. He starts kissing and nibbling there. Every brush of his lips to her skin is electrifying. He’s so much bolder than he was a few months ago, so much more certain of himself. She has to say she finds this newfound confidence sweet (and incredibly alluring). It’s from a combination of things, she knows. It’s the fact that the hellish nightmare and all of the stress and doubt that came with it is behind them. It’s the fact that she’s healing, that she’s not afraid anymore, that she hungers for him now and isn’t afraid to show it. It’s the fact that she trusts him more than she ever thought she was capable of trusting anyone.

And just a little bit of it is him overcompensating. He’s been so calm, so contented and easy-going and laid-back since they returned to Brooklyn, and she knows he’s happy, really happy, and he’s healing, too. The time he spent as Rumlow’s prisoner set him back, rehashing pain that’s still close to the surface, but Doctor Banner’s been helping him work through it. She has been, too. Therefore, the damage he could have suffered he hasn’t, and that’s been both amazing and such a relief. She thinks he’s been extra happy to assure her that he’s okay.

However, there’s more than that. His surgery is just a month away. It’s scheduled right after the New Year, and it’s the beginning of December. Christmas is in a few short weeks. Steve was able to get back into the study by the skin of his teeth, a fact for which Nat (and Sam and Tony and just about everyone) thanked God just about every day. Since then, he’s been Doctor Cho’s willing guinea pig, showing up to a bunch of rushed PET and MRI scans while the surgical and research teams map out his brain damage and seizure activity. Nat ran into Doctor Erskine at one of the many appointments Steve’s had over the past month or so, and the man was thrilled Steve was able to resume the research (and he didn’t press about what happened, which was nothing short of a blessing). He was also hesitantly hopeful that the team was making steady progress on designing the procedure to cater to Steve’s specific seizure pattern, tailoring the NeuralNet to best suit his needs. That’s what this is about, after all. Designing a system to help those who don’t fit into the mold of normal treatment. Regardless, she felt better after speaking with him. Well, better and worse. Better because Steve hasn’t lost his chance to treat his epilepsy due to her. Worse because this is actually happening, and she’s lying if she says she’s not scared to death.
And so is he, hence the overcompensating. He’s excited, too, and he’s not hiding that nearly as well. Excited and worried and scared and overjoyed and just overwhelmed that this is almost upon them. Right after the holidays, Steve, Nat, and Sam are flying to Boston, and they’ll be spending the next few weeks in special housing attached to Harvard’s medical center. If everything goes well, Steve will have the surgery and spend a few days in the hospital recovering. Then he’ll need to remain in the area for a week or two as Doctor Cho and her team test and calibrate the NeuralNet. After that, they can fly back home to Brooklyn, and Doctor Erskine will resume his primary care. He’ll still need to follow up with the research team once a month for what looks like a couple years, but aside from that…

It’ll all be over.

The whole thing is terrifying, so they’ve been trying not to focus on it, instead concentrating on finding a new place to live and the daily steps of putting their lives back together. They’re not ignoring what’s coming per se. They’re just not letting it control them. It’s like Doctor Banner’s been saying. It’s like her own therapist has been telling her these last couple weeks as she’s started sessions with her. It’s not about forgetting your past or ignoring it or getting over it. It’s about learning to let it be a part of you.

*One day at a time.*

And she’s not about to disabuse Steve of his good mood or even call him out on it. Instead she throws her arms around his neck. “You are,” she murmurs, drawing him closer. “You’re making it impossible to get anything done.”

“Hmmm. Sorry.”

“But it’s our place.”

“Our place,” he says, like he’s testing it out and liking the sound of it.

“So I suppose you can distract me all you want,” she says, nipping at his lower lip teasingly, “wherever you want.”

Again he hums a pleased affirmation, finally stealing her lips in a deep kiss. Nat’s eyes slip shut, and she twines her hands in his hair, keeping him close. His hands slip under her rear and lift her pretty effortlessly onto the counter so she’s more at his level. Then he devours her, and she sighs happily into him and melts.

“God, get a room.”

Sam’s somewhat irate groan has Steve pulling away with soft, wet sound, and he turns around from between Nat’s legs to grin at his friend. “Got one. Got a whole apartment actually,” he quips.

Sam shakes his head, setting the last boxes over on the dinette table. He pets Max when the dog comes over. “Then spare my virgin eyes until I leave.”

“Yeah, that’s a bunch of bullshit.” Steve leaves Nat there wanting to go join his friend. “But I think you should probably go anyway. It’s gettin’ late.”

Sam rolls his eyes. “And leave you to put your bedframe back together yourself? And assemble the IKEA stuff? Maybe you’re a war hero, but you’re shit with a screwdriver. Come on.” Steve gives Nat a dopey grin before following Sam out of the kitchen. They start talking loudly about the Giants and how they blew their season way back in October and how nice it would be for New York to have a football team that doesn’t suck. She listens as they debate it, the two of them
fishing around the boxes and things for Steve’s toolbox. Once they have that, off they go to the bedroom.

She smiles and shakes her head. “What? You don’t have to keep me company. Go hang with the rest of the guys.” Max doesn’t, though. He comes right back to where he was before Steve came in before, plopping down on the kitchen floor next to her socked feet and obstinately staying put.

Her smile gets softer and fuller as she leans down to pet Max’s face, cupping his snout to rub along it. “Don’t suppose you’ve seen Liho, have you?” Liho went missing almost immediately that morning. The second Nat opened the cat carrier, she was gone, bolting to hide in her new surroundings. Max pants a little with his eyes practically rolling back in his head in satisfaction as she starts scratching his ears. Nat sighs. “She doesn’t take as well to change. Not like you do.”

That’s true enough. Change, even the good kind, is daunting. Easing into this new life of theirs is scary, too, and sometimes she’s still afraid she’ll wake up one morning and find it’s all been a dream. She never does, though. She wakes up, and Steve’s always right next to her, warm and solid and sleeping. She doesn’t know what she did to deserve this, him and his love and this new world opening its arms to her, and accepting that it’s real still isn’t all that easy.

“Oh, well,” she says on another long breath. “She’ll come out when she’s ready, right? When she gets lonely.” With Liho on her mind, she decides to take a break and find the cat’s dishes and food. That’ll help lure her out.

After she’s done with that, she rolls up the sleeves of her sweater and regards the piles of boxes yet awaiting her attention. Lord, she’s tired. It’s dinnertime, and it’s been a long day, and she’d really like a long, hot soak in that surprisingly big tub in the bathroom adjacent to their bedroom. Room for two. She grins at her thoughts and goes back to work, deciding that can be a reward for later. The kitchen and bedroom need to be in better order before they can rest.

For another hour or so, she does nothing but focus on unpacking. Dishes go into the cabinets. Pots and pans in the Lazy Susan cabinet (she’s never really seen one before and it’s pretty cool) by the stove. Cleaners under the sink. Food in the pantry (they’re going to need to hit the store tomorrow). Appliances on the counter. She makes absolutely sure that the coffee maker’s ready to go. Then she stocks the fridge with a few bottles of water they brought. Down goes the new kitchen mat, and the new towels she bought a few days ago are hung from the oven handle. While she’s doing all that, Liho does eventually emerge, scooting through the shadows to dart across the floor toward her bowls. Nat plops down on the tiles to pet her, tired and relieved that she’s feeling good enough now with the move to finally come out. It’s always a little hard to get used to a new place.

She hears footsteps coming down the hallway and looks up from where Liho’s purring practically on her lap to see Sam. He’s a little sweaty and a lot tired, but he appraises the way she’s set up the kitchen and nods approvingly. “Wow. Looks great.”

It’s almost too much work to get up, but she does, wiping her hands on her well-worn jeans. “Thanks.”

Sam smiles, coming over to wash his hands in the sink. He dabs them dry on one of her new towels, and she’s oddly proud of that. Stupid, but it’s just…normal. Her towels that she picked out in her kitchen that she unpacked and her apartment that she chose. Hers. “Moving sucks ass,” he comments. “Forgot how much it does.”

She’s not sure she agrees, not when she feels this good about what they’ve accomplished, but she
nods anyway. “Hey, thanks for all your help. You really didn’t have to.”

“Yeah, I did.” He regards her evenly. Sometimes she forgets with everything that’s happened that Sam spent that harrowing night terrified for Steve, that those weeks she and Steve spent together on the farm were torture for Sam. Sam’s been tight to Steve’s side since then. All his friends have been, Tony and Thor too, but Sam especially. Hell, she and Steve were staying at Sam’s until today. He offered his home up without a complaint, without a doubt or even a second thought. And now, with the surgery drawing closer and closer, she knows Sam’s going to close ranks even more. He’s beyond any doubt one of the best, most decent people Nat’s ever had the pleasure of knowing. He’s more than a best friend. He’s like a brother, like family. Having him with them has been a blessing for Steve.

And for her, too. “Well, I appreciate it all the same. And so does Steve. He’s very lucky to have you.”

Sam grins at the compliment. “Yeah, well, Captain America needed my help. Can’t exactly turn your back on that. It’d be like treason or something.” Nat chuckles, shaking her head. His smile slips just a little. “Keep an eye on him tonight? He’s trying to hide it, but he’s really tried. Overdid it today, the stupid jerk. Should have known he was full of shit about being able to do this himself.”

Nat figured Steve was. Since Staten Island, Steve’s been surprisingly desperate to do things, to regain more and more of his independence. It’s like almost losing his life or being so helpless in that basement revitalized his sense of self and strength. This goes hand in hand with his euphoric mood. She’s not about to take that from him either, even if he does wear himself out sometimes. He can do whatever he wants. He’s more than capable, more than entitled, more than powerful. He saved her. If he wants to put together a home for him, for her, for them, she’ll damn well let him.

Still, she’ll make sure he takes his meds and sleeps. Now that they’re on the home stretch to the surgery, everyone’s been really overprotective of Steve, wanting to make sure he’s not pushing himself too hard, that he’s well-rested and ready. She’s certainly guilty of doing the same. “Sure.”

Appreciative, Sam nods. “I’d hang around, but you guys deserve some time alone in your new place. To, uh, enjoy it.”

Nat rolls her eyes again. “Uh-huh.”

“Call tomorrow?”

Nat hugs Sam tight. “Yep.”

“Night, Nat.”

“Night.”

A couple minutes later, it’s really quiet. She can vaguely hear Steve working in the bedroom, but other than that, the silence is almost perfect. It’s gotten a little chilly now with the windows open, and she goes to shut them, padding quietly through the living room and kitchen and thinking about figuring out where they can order pizza.

The sound of something breaking gives her pause midway through pulling down the last window. There’s a muttered curse after the crashing noise. “Steve?” she calls, concerned. Quickly she heads down the hallway to their bedroom. “Steve?”
Steve’s there, crouching on the floor, and he’s fine. There’s a stack of a couple boxes on the bed right next to him, and her bag’s precariously balanced on top of them. “Sorry,” he says with a wince. “I didn’t see your bag was open.” He’s picking up the shattered glass from the picture frame that obviously fell. After a second, though, he stops moving.

And so does she. Fear prickles over her, but there’s nothing she can do as he sees what was in the picture frame. It’s the one of her parents, the one of them together after their wedding. But he’s seen that before, and that’s not what caught his eye.

It’s the thin picture that was hidden behind it, the black and white one that’s a little smeary from when it was printed. He picks it up out of the glass, and he’s staring at it like he doesn’t know what it is, but he does. Of course, he does. And then he looks right at her, confusion all over his face.

She swallows down the rush of discomfort turning her stomach, the pain that’s making her heart clench and head spin. The bedroom closes in a bit, and the weight of his eyes feels crushing. She doesn’t think about lying, though. Not for a second. “I was pregnant.”

He squints, turning back to the sonogram picture in his hand like he doesn’t understand, but he does. Of course, he does. Still, he shakes his head, floundering in his surprise. “You were…”

She comes closer and gently takes the photo from him. It’s been a long time since she’s seen it, since she’s even thought about it. Sitting on the bed, she takes a deep breath and makes herself look at it. The baby. Its head. Its little body, barely developed at all. She takes a long breath. “I was… I was fourteen weeks. Nine weeks when I found out. And I thought…” She sweeps her thumb over the image. “I didn’t care. I didn’t care if it came from him. I was going to protect it. I was going to try to save what we had so I could make a home for it. I thought I could change him, that the baby would change him. Make him stop. That’s why… That’s why I stayed, even after Wanda got out and Pietro died. It’s why I stayed when there was no more reason to.”

He says nothing. He just sits beside her, hardly brushing against her, and watches her work through her emotions. It’s stupid, really. It’s over and done with, and Alexei’s dead, and there’s nothing anyone can do to change anything. But it’s almost like cleaning a bad cut or ripping off a bandaid, like facing that last little burst of pain that you just don’t think you can bear. “That night… The night I ran from him. I was trying to tell him. I made a nice dinner, got myself dressed the way he liked…” She closes her eyes against the rush of anger, anger at him but mostly anger at herself. “I thought if I could make myself the way he wanted, he’d want the baby, too. If I could sell myself to him, he’d be happy, and everything’d be okay.” She shakes her head, staring at that picture. “It was never going to be okay.”

Her hand goes to his where it’s right above her hip, right where Alexei stabbed her. She sighs shakily. “After… After I got better and moved out from Clint’s house, months after it was all over, Wanda found a way to send me some things. She had the picture of my parents, my old songbook, and this. I forgot I gave it to her. I gave it all to her to keep it safe. I knew if he found it…” She closes her eyes. “I think I always knew. And I should have run right away. I should have. I know I should have.” She knows she has to accept that, too. She has to come to peace with the choices she made. They were the only ones she could.

The silence that comes is heavy. She feels rotten for it. This is their new place, their new bedroom. Their new beginning. The darkness shouldn’t have been able to find its way in here, but here it is. In some ways, Wanda was right. She’s never going to be able to outrun it.
But it’s not about that, is it?

Nat sighs, remembering again. *You can’t outrun your past. You have to learn to let it be a part of you.* “I should have told you,” she murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

Steve remains silent and still a moment longer, clearly digesting what she’s told him. Then he sighs. “It’s not your fault,” he says. He takes her hand from her stomach, wrapping it in his own before pulling it gently into his lap. “I know why you didn’t.”

He does, she realizes. It’s the same reason he didn’t tell her about his epilepsy right away, why he hid how damaged he really was. She thinks she should cry, but the tears don’t come. Maybe there aren’t any left, but she’s pretty sure that’s not why. She’s healing. And it hurts, but there’s no reason to cry anymore.

So she takes a last, long look at the ultrasound picture, at the baby she lost and has hated herself for not protecting. Then she pulls away from Steve and stands. In one of the moving boxes near the closet, there’s a little box she bought from the store when she was out shopping for things for their apartment. It’s a pretty, wooden thing with flowers etched into the lid. She got it because she liked it, a truly impulse buy (which she’s rarely done before), and she’s been wondering on and off since what to do with it. She thought before maybe she can put her guitar picks and music things in there, or inspirations for her songs, or jewelry (not that she really has any, but maybe). Now she knows.

She gets it out. Opens it. Takes a deep breath and puts the picture inside. She’s just about to close the lid when Steve stands and comes to her side. “Hold on.” He reaches under the collar of his t-shirt and fumbles for a second before pulling Bucky’s dog tags up and over his head. He pauses, too, looking at them in his palm. Hesitates. Presses his thumb over the little metal card with Bucky’s name on it. Exhales slowly and closes his eyes a bit in what could almost be a silent prayer. Then he lays the dog tags on top of the ultrasound picture. He gives a little shrug and half a sweet smile. “Seems like it’s a good time to finally lay things to rest.”

Though it doesn’t feel possible, she can’t help but love him even more. And he’s right; it is a good day to do this. To let things go. To understand and embrace the past, yes, but to do so in the light of the future. She closes the lid with a little thud and heads over to the still empty closet. Standing on her tip toes, she puts the small box on the shelf and gently slides it to the back. She leaves it there, backing out of the closet. It’s not empty anymore.

Steve comes closer and takes her hand, weaving their fingers together and squeezing gently. He doesn’t say anything as they stare at it. He doesn’t need to. This is their past, all the pain and trauma and darkness, all the things they’ve lost and the things that have been stolen from them. They’ll be kept here, gone but not forgotten. A part of their new home. A part of their hearts. Quiet and safe and a foundation on which to build a future.

Nat takes a deep breath and squeezes Steve’s hand back. He’s right. *It’s time.* This is them tearing down the final walls.

And this is them saying goodbye to everything that was behind them.

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A couple weeks later, it’s Christmas. Nat’s only moderately embarrassed to admit that she’s never really celebrated it, at least not in America. Nothing about the holiday was ever special or pleasant when she was married, and she was never allowed to decide anything about it, not how they enjoyed it or what they ate or did. Steve (being Steve) gives her free rein to do whatever she pleases without her even asking him about what he wants, and she decides instantly that, since they
have a new home and a new life, she wants to try her hand at hosting Christmas Eve dinner.

Yeah, that was stupid crazy.

“I’m screwing this up,” she moans as she stares in utter confusion at the turkey Steve just lifted from the oven. Their apartment smells wonderful, like the meal she’s cooking, and that’s some consolation that maybe she’s doing this right. She hopes so. With Laura’s recipes and the internet as her guides (the latter being rather patently unhelpful), she’s been at it all day. At least she has managed to buy everything she needs (though that was mostly due to diligent and almost obsessive note-taking and list-making rather than any sort of intuition or know-how). And at least she hasn’t burned anything (yet). She knows she’s a pretty decent cook, so at the time this seemed like an awesome idea. Now… “How can you tell if it’s done?”

Like Steve knows. He’s useless in the kitchen. He fumbles in the drawer for the meat thermometer they bought when they went shopping together a couple days ago. Then he’s getting his phone out, Googling it no doubt, and Nat almost succumbs to mild panic. She has a house full (well, an apartment full anyway), and he’s researching how to cook a turkey at this last stage. The noise from the dining room and living room is pressing, even though it’s lively and full of good cheer. It’s the first time that everyone’s been together like this except for that brief moment at Block Fest last summer before everything fell apart. When she first decided to do this, she thought to keep it small, maybe just Sam and the Bartons. They couldn’t not invite Thor, though, and Tony after all they’ve done for them. And it didn’t seem right for Steve to have more people there than her, so her friends from Rising Tide came onto the list. Now she’s cooking for something like fifteen people: Sam (and some good-looking girl from the VA he’s been dating for the last couple weeks), Tony and his wife, Thor and Jane, Clint and his family, May and Peter and his girlfriend MJ (it seems to be rather serious).

And Daisy. She’s the one who comes into the kitchen and rolls her eyes. “You two are pathetic.” She has a long brown sweater and black leggings on and a lot of beady jewelry. Her hair’s in a loose bun, and she’s carrying a glass of wine which she sets onto the cluttered kitchen counter. “Let me.”

“Like you’ve ever made a turkey dinner before,” Nat retorts, not quite good-naturedly.

Daisy grins. “My skillset would surprise you. Now you move.” She’s saying that to Steve, and Steve frowns. “Go on. Go play with your friends.”

“But I was going to—”

“I can help. I’m all for girls doing and being whatever they want, but there are times when that old saying applies: this is woman’s work.” She grins toothily. “Plus it’s hard to talk about you behind your back when you’re standing here.” Steve frowns harder. He looks really nice today in a black sweater that clings to his muscles in all the right places and gray pants. He looks well. Nat almost canceled the dinner, though, when he went down with a series of seizures over the weekend. On Saturday it was bad enough that she almost took him to the hospital. They came one after another in a cluster, but Doctor Erskine said over the phone that she could wait it out and see if it improved. It did. Still, it knocked Steve out for a couple of days like it always does. Yesterday was the first day he was really on his feet and normal again. It scared her, and Daisy knows it. She smiles. “So shoo, Captain.”

Steve gives Nat a lingering look, because he really does want to help with the cooking. She needs it for sure. She has potatoes to mash and sides to heat and a turkey to finish. But she only smiles because it’s okay, and Steve hands her the meat thermometer and heads out to join the others.
Daisy swoops right in and takes it from her. She sticks the end into the turkey in a couple different places, checking the little digital screen. Then she smiles. “Yep, this is done.”

Nat can’t help but be relieved. “Now what?”

“Now you mash potatoes while it rests,” Daisy says. With the oven mitts, she moves the roaster to some hot pads on the counter so they can focus on the other food. Nat gets her sides out of the fridge. Thankfully while Steve’s been resting and spending time with his friends over the last couple days, she’s been able to get most the cooking done, so everything else, including the desserts, is ready. Considering how fast the group is devouring her appetizers, that’s a really good thing.

Daisy stands close to her at the stove as they work. “So how is he?”

Nat sighs. She stops with the masher a moment to glance over her shoulder out to the living room. The Christmas tree is there, the biggest they could find when they went shopping a couple weeks ago. It’s very nice, a real one, and it’s making the whole apartment smell wintry and piney. They decorated it with ornaments they bought, pretty glass bulbs and figurines, and piled the lights and tinsel on. They’re both hoping to make new holiday memories since neither of them have too many recent good ones of their own. To that end, the apartment has very quickly turned into a home, warm and cozy as they’ve finished unpacking and moving in. Steve’s furniture is in better condition than hers, so that’s what’s around the living area. The guys are there, watching the football game on the flatscreen that Sam and Tony mounted for them last week, and Thor and Clint are pretty animated about it. Sam and his date are off to the side, fiddling with the new phone he got from her for Christmas, and Peter and MJ are cuddled up in the recliner right next to the tree. Laura is talking to May, and Lila is running around with Max. Cooper is buried in his PSP. Tony and Pepper are at the table, sharing a plate of hors d’oeuvres and chatting with Jane as she pours herself some eggnog. Steve goes to them, and Tony wraps an arm around his shoulders as Pepper gets him a plate of food. Steve laughs about something Tony says, tipping his head back with it. The whole scene looks good. He looks good. He’s healthy and happy.

Which is worrisome because it’s not quite real. He’s not healthy. Not entirely and not yet. “He’s okay,” Nat answers, turning back to the pot with the potatoes. She sighs and admits to the truth. “He’s scared.”

“And so are you,” Daisy says, and there’s nothing judgmental about that at all. Nat knows it, too. She nods, swallows down the feelings she’s trying not to reveal today. “When do you guys fly out?”

“A week from tomorrow,” she answers. “Right after New Year’s.”

Daisy’s looking at Steve now. She turns back after a second. “Doc thinks it’ll be okay, though, right?”

Nat shrugs. It’s a pretty shitty attempt to hide how much she doesn’t want to talk about this. “They don’t know. That’s why they’re doing the study. They can’t promise anything.” She takes a deeper breath. “He made me his medical proxy.”

She doesn’t say more than that, but she doesn’t need to. This happened last week, at his last pre-op visit with Doctor Cho. They went over some final paperwork, and included in that was a form to select a proxy in the event that something goes wrong. It’s vitally important that he have someone formally designated to make medical decisions on his behalf in the event that he can’t. He chose her without a second thought, even as she suggested that Sam may be a better option. He chose her with love and faith bright in his eyes, put her name down and signed it and made it real and legal.
Days later she’s still unsettled because of it.

Daisy stares at her in concern. “It’s alright,” she promises. “It’s not… It won’t come to that.”

Maybe. Immediately Nat’s mind goes right back to the worst-case scenario. That’s where it always goes the second she lets herself think about this. Something goes wrong, and Steve doesn’t ever regain consciousness after the surgery. He doesn’t wake up. She has to decide what to do. It’s hard to picture it, to imagine it. She doesn’t want the responsibility, but she knows that’s cowardly. She has to do right by him.

But that’s the worst case. The worst case. It’s not going to happen. Daisy can practically read her mind. “Nat, don’t worry so much. He’s going to be fine. You’ll be fine. Everything is going to be fine, and it’s going to work.” She grins teasingly. “And it’s fine. It’s not a big deal. So you’re his proxy. So what? It’s not like he asked you to marry him or something.” Nat goes still, absolutely stock still, and tries not to let her expression betray the truth. Tries and fails. Daisy’s eyes go wide, and her mouth falls open. “Holy shit. When was this?”

Resigned, Nat sighs. “Last week.”

Daisy’s still staring at her, shocked to high heaven. “And you said…”

“Nothing.” She pours milk into the potatoes and adds probably more butter than she should. Daisy’s eyes are heavy where they’re staring at her. She thinks about telling the other girl to pick her jaw up off the floor, but she just sighs again. “He doesn’t want an answer now. He said to think about it and wait until after his surgery to tell him.”

“That’s… not how proposals are normally done,” Daisy declares, and she’s angling around check Nat’s left hand like she somehow missed an engagement ring there before.

“Well, normally the man asking you to marry him isn’t a week away from having his brain operated on,” Nat returns. She tries to keep her voice light, but it comes out strained and worried and burdened with emotion. God, ever since Steve asked her, her mind’s been tripping all over it. She doesn’t know what to think, how to feel, what to say. He didn’t get down on one knee and present a ring or do anything like that. No, it was one late night in bed after they made love, and he was laying on her, lower body between her legs and head pillowed on her stomach, still breathing hard, still coming down. “Would you marry me?” he whispered. She went cold with surprise, fingers pausing as they combed through his hair. He lifted his head to look at her, eyes as deep and dark as the night around them, and smiled. “When this is over. Will you think about it? Tell me when it’s over.” He closed his eyes, kissed her stomach, and melted more into her arms. “When it’s done.”

That seems like this huge unknown. When it’s done. She doesn’t know what she will say. God, she loves him. She knows that with every beat of her heart and every breath in her lungs. She knows it in the core of her. But she’s just months removed from her last husband (well, now her dead husband) hunting her down and turning their lives to hell. Is she really ready for that? Is Steve? He’s talking about another major life change on the eve of this major life change, and this one can potentially end in disaster. And she knows that he’s maybe trying to find something on which to hold, something maybe to hope for on the other side of this. She’s not sure she’s the best option for that or that marriage is. Frankly, she’s been trying not to think about this. It’s more uncertainty heaped on top of too much uncertainty already.

Daisy watches her a moment more, and she seems to sense Nat’s distress about it all. She touches her shoulder. “Well, don’t think about it for now. If he said to wait to answer, then wait. It’s all going to be okay. He loves you, and you love him, and I don’t think fate’d put the two of you
through all this to take him from you now. Some scars need help healing. That’s all.” That’s true enough, Nat supposes. Daisy grins wider. “And... whatever you decide to do about what he asked, it’ll be okay. Personally, though? I think you’ve both have been lonely way too long to do anything else. You deserve a win.”

There’s a loud peel of laughter from the other room. Nat glances over her shoulder and sees Steve joking with Tony and Thor and Sam. He seems carefree, so loose and happy, that she can’t help but lose herself in just how he looks right now. In how he makes her feel. In how much she loves him. She never imagined when he brought Liho back six months ago after she escaped into his apartment that it would lead to this, to a new world and a new love, to here and now and spending the rest of her life with someone who will take care of her and treat her with respect and devotion (though, when she really thinks about it? She knew. She knew from the moment she saw his blue eyes that there was something about him. And Steve was right: she loved him before she knew him, loved the promise of him, survived hell to find him). This is hers to have, so why not have it?

That surgery looms like a shadow. She’s so scared.

“Speaking of scars healing, did you get my email?”

That snaps Nat out of staring, and she turns back to Daisy and their meal. Embarrassed, she starts mashing again more vigorously. Ugh. She doesn’t want to talk about this, either. “No,” she says, playing dumb.

That never works with Daisy. She sighs. “Alright, dude, listen. You couldn’t do this before because that asshole was stalking you, like taking stalking to a whole new level of stalking. But he’s dead. And his stooges he had doing his dirty work? Dead or in jail.”

“You know, it’s not so easy to just turn off three years’ worth of behavior,” Nat chastises weakly.

Daisy smiles softly. “I know. But you have to take this chance, Nat. This guy’s completely on the level. He has no ties to Shostakov in the music industry. None. He just runs like a little mom and pop record label, and he’s hungry for new talent. Desperate for it. Really. If you don’t trust me, maybe Mr. Fury can—”

“Of course I trust you, Daisy. I just...” Nat shakes her head. “I just don’t know if I’m ready for that.” She hasn’t even gone back to work, not really. She has a new identity, this new home, and she’s been taking care of Steve. That feels like enough right now, all she can handle. Seeing some stranger about her music, about a chance to finally get some sort of recording contract? About the chance to sing again, to play her guitar again, to make something of her book full of songs? That’s too big, too much for her to think about. “In a few weeks, maybe. When it’s over.”

Daisy’s disappointed, and she doesn’t hide it well. She nods all the same. “When you’re ready,” she concedes. Nat feels better hearing that. “But, just so you know, I’m gonna be reminding you constantly until you are.”

“Ladies!” Thor says, his voice booming as he enters the kitchen. He’s got an outfit on that can only be described as a bad Christmas sweater, and Nat has to wonder if he even realizes how dorky it looks, both the cheesy snowflake design and the fact it’s too small on his huge frame. He claps his hands together and rubs them eagerly. “I was informed there is a turkey that requires carving.”

Daisy grins brightly and gestures to the stove. “Have at it, big guy.”

The three of them go to work to finish the meal. Soon the others are coming, too, to help get the plates and the dishes out to the table. They’re doing a buffet sort of thing since the dining room
table they have isn’t big enough for all their guests. Many hands make light work, and the chatter is loud and happy. Steve comes over to sweep Nat’s hair from the back her neck and drop a kiss there before taking the potatoes from her and loading them into a serving bowl. Now she more genuinely smiles, feeling jittery with excitement and with thoughts of Christmas and Steve and their friends and family. There’s no reason to worry about the future right now.

Pretty soon people are serving themselves and spreading around the living room and dining room to eat. Plates are piled high with turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, salad and corn and green bean casserole (which Nat has never had before, despite being an American holiday staple. It’s really good, for being so simple). She tried her hand at ambrosia, and she has to admit that’s really tasty as well, all sweet fruit and fluffy whipped cream. Steve said his mom used to make it for Christmas all the time, and she can tell by the way he’s savoring it that she got it right. Her pride at that is probably a tad ridiculous, but she can’t help it (and doesn’t want to). She also figures by the fact that the conversation goes somewhat quiet as people start eating that she hit the nail on the head with dinner. She doesn’t need more confirmation (or gratitude) than that, but of course she gets it. “This is amazing, Nat,” Steve says. His plate’s nearly empty after all of a couple minutes. “Delicious. Thanks.” He raises his glass of water to the room. “And thanks to all of you for… Well, for everything. It’s been a crazy year. Crazy six months. I don’t think we would be here right now if not for each and every one of you. So here’s to you guys. And here’s to…” He looks at Nat, and there’s a touch of fear in his eyes. It’s the same fear that’s always there now, fear mixed with excitement. “Whatever’s coming next.”

Everyone shares in the toast, and there are more words spoken about how insane everything’s been, how wild the ride was to get from last summer to here. “We’re here, though,” Sam says. He throws an arm around Steve’s shoulders. “I never thought when you told me you were going on date with your new neighbor that it’d bring us to this place, but… what’s meant to be is meant to be. You called it.”

Steve flushes and shakes his head. “Come on.”

“No, you did. You knew it. You knew her, knew she was right.”

Steve looks over at Nat and smiles. She smiles back. “Maybe,” he offers with a wink.

The rest of the evening goes by like a dream. Dinner is devoured, and out comes dessert, apple and pecan pie, chocolate cake, and Italian cookies from Pepper’s coffee shop. In the end, they all eat way too much. Nat ends up sitting with the Bartons, chatting with Laura about the meal and how good it was, talking to Lila about her school year so far and Cooper about the games he’s been into lately. Cooper’s still a little uncomfortable around her, but he tells her he’s glad she’s safe now. “My dad’s been a lot happier,” he says with a little smile, “so thanks.”

She looks at Clint where he’s talking to Steve and Tony. It’s obvious from his loose posture, easy smile, and eager eyes that he is relaxed. He has been since Alexei’s death. With Nat finally safe, it’s like a weight’s been lifted off him, and for the first time since she met him in the dark of the club, he really does seem happier, lighter, like he’s finally switched off. He really has a snarky sense of humor, she’s discovered over the last couple months, snarky and dry, and he laughs, really laughs, like right now. She doesn’t think she deserves thanks for the change, but she’s realizing more and more that sometimes it’s okay to just accept things. So she smiles and nudges Cooper over on the couch so she can get closer and let him show her how to play his games.

A little while after that, the party starts to wind down. It’s snowing pretty heavily, and it’s Christmas Eve. People are anxious to get home and do their own things. Peter’s making excuses to escape, and it’s pretty obvious he’s interested in getting MJ somewhere alone. He gives Nat a
hug. “Sorry about the black eye,” Nat blurts as they walk to the door. She’s realizing she never really apologized to him for saving her ass in the record store last fall. “And for all the rest of it.”

He seems confused a second. She has to admit it kind of came out of nowhere, and a lot has happened between now and then, so it’d be a tall order for him to connect the dots right away. But he does. Then he grins and shakes his head. “Oh, that was nothing. Actually…” He leans a little closer, glancing at MJ where she’s out in the hallway of their building. “The shiner? MJ thought it made me look rugged.” Nat giggles. “And the story behind it… Well, scored me some points in the hero department.”

“You don’t need any help there, Spiderman.” Nat grins. “Go on.”

Peter’s positively pleased as punch at what she said. Then he gives her a flustered kiss on the cheek and takes off. May comes after him, laughing and shaking her head, and gives her thanks and a hug, too. “I know I told you before, but you’re welcome back to the store. The job’s there whenever you want it.”


May smiles in understanding. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas!”

The Bartons are the next to go. It’s getting late, and they still have to drive home. Lila’s practically asleep on Clint’s shoulder. “Call me when you get to the hospital next week,” he says, rubbing his daughter’s back, “and let me know how it goes.”


Clint smiles that same comforting smile. That hasn’t changed. “Remember what I told you before?”

“That nothing’s more important than taking care of myself?”

Clint’s expression turns wan at her teasing grin. “No. I mean, I did say that a few times, but no. I said that it’ll be okay. And it will be.”

*It’ll be okay.* “I know.”

They go with a tender hug from Laura and a rushed one from Cooper. Then Sam and his date make their goodbyes, with promises from Sam to call tomorrow. Thor and Jane go with them. Finally it’s just Tony and Pepper. Pepper’s been cleaning up (which she insisted on doing no matter how many times Nat told her it’s not necessary). Now Tony takes her arm as she comes back to the table. “We should go,” he says, tipping his head back toward Steve where he’s tiredly slumped in one of the chairs. “Give these two a chance to rest.”

They get their coats. Steve finds some energy to see them to the door. “Great party,” Tony declares as he shrugs into his jacket. He holds Pepper’s for her. “You know, for a first attempt. From a rehabilitated hermit.”

“You’re a pain in the ass,” Steve says fondly.

“Yep,” Tony says proudly, but a look of discomfort crosses his face. “So… when are you going
exactly?"

Nat knows Tony knows. They’ve all talked about it at length. This is just his way of building up to something that’s obviously bothering him. “Week from tomorrow,” she answers.

Tony glances at Pepper, but she only smiles softly. He sighs. “You know, Steve, the offer still stands. If you want me to come, I can. Pep’s got things in hand.”

Steve smiles but shakes his head. “No, no, it’s alright. Sam’s gonna be there. And Nat. I’ll be fine. Doctor Cho’s got more degrees after her name than anyone ever. She knows what she’s doing.”

Tony’s not really disappointed, but he does a really bad job hiding his worry. “Well, I think I’ll stop by on New Year’s. Say goodbye, wish you luck, all that jazz. That okay?”

“Oh okay.”

“Have a few drinks, a few laughs. I mean, I’ll drink, since you can’t, and I’ll probably laugh at you.”

“Tony–”

“I would have done it, you know.”

“Huh?” Steve’s face fractures in confusion.

Nervously, Tony shoves his hands into his coat pockets. “Paid them or whatever. Gotten the money to get you away from them. Whatever they wanted. Whatever it took, I would’ve done it. Gone to the company, crawled before the board to get back in their good graces, signed the rest of life my away to my dad’s dreams, worked like a slave…”

Steve’s eyes glimmer. “Jesus, Tony.”

Tony smiles again, but it’s strained. “Just saying. Thankfully you have her looking out for you.” He tips his head to Nat, and Nat blushes in a mixture of embarrassment and pride. “And she kicks ass, so I didn’t need to. But I would’ve. I would’ve paid or… I dunno. Invented a suit of armor or something cool like that and gone in there and shot those assholes to hell. I don’t like building weapons, never have and never will, but I was always really good at it. Thor and I would have kicked some serious ass.” His eyes glisten, too. “Anyway, so you know.” A cheeky grin breaks out on his face, one that does nothing to hide his tears. “Avengers, right?”

Steve’s suddenly grabbing Tony and pulling him close into a hug. “Yeah,” he gasps into the other man’s shoulder. “We are.” They stand like that a moment more, and Nat can’t help but feel a rush of warmth. Pepper smiles, too, and that makes her wonder how much Tony’s been struggling with what happened and what’s still coming. Tony and Thor. Clint. Sam. All of them, their family, supporting them and protecting them and caring so much about them. Maybe it’s trite and clichéd, but it’s true. It’s Christmas, and that’s the greatest gift they’ve been given.

Not long after that, the apartment’s quiet. Everyone’s gone now, and Nat’s in the kitchen. There’s a huge pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Most the food’s been put away at least, but she’s exhausted just seeing the mountain of work. “Ugh.” Max comes to sit by her like he always does, watching her with tired, happy eyes. He’s been well-pet, well-loved, and well-fed today, but she still sets one of the plates full of turkey scraps down on the floor for him. “Merry Christmas, pal.”

There’s a rustle behind her. Steve comes into the kitchen with a black trash bag that he’s been
filling. That he sets to the floor with a thud. “I’m too tired to clean. Let’s just get a new apartment.”

Nat laughs. “We’ve barely finished moving into this one.”

He grins like a loon and comes over to her. Again he’s sweeping the hair away from the back of her neck and leaning down to kiss there. She moans a little, closing her eyes and bracing herself against the kitchen counter. “Come with me,” he husks into her skin.

“Mess,” she reminds him. “Gotta clean it up.”

“It can wait. Come on.”

She can’t deny him anything. He leads her out of the kitchen, and for a second her weary brain is surprised they’re not going to their bedroom. It’s after eleven, and she’s down for sleep or sex (or both, and she’s not particular about the order). But he takes her back to the mostly tidied living room, to the couch next to the Christmas tree. He’s dimmed the lights, so the colors of the tree are even more striking. It’s glowing, twinkling, prettier than something so simple has any right to be. “Check under there,” he instructs.

Nat frowns. No, no, no. She shakes her head, folding her arms sternly across her chest. “We both said no gifts. We agreed. No gifts. Staying in Boston is costing a lot of money, and moving here and the stuff we had to buy and everything else—”

“Shhh. It didn’t cost anything.” He silences her further with a quick kiss. “Now go look.”

Angry with him for doing this (she didn’t get him anything!) but increasingly curious, she bends over to search under their tree. Sure enough, there’s a small box there. It’s wrapped in shimmery red paper with a silver ribbon around it. She pulls it out and goes to sit on the couch. Despite feeling terrible about this, she’s also excited. No one’s gotten her anything for Christmas in a long time, a very long time. She holds the little box reverently, staring at the nice wrapping job he did and the little gift tag that simply reads “To: Nat” and “From: Steve” in his familiar scrawl.

Steve sits next to her. He’s excited, too. “Open it.”

She does. It’s a jewelry box, which she figured it was. Holding her breath in anticipation, she opens the little velvet case. “Oh, God…” Her voice fails her. “This is…” It’s a ring, a beautiful one. It’s white gold, and there are diamonds atop it, three of them. The little, round gems catch the light and glimmer majestically. “Steve, it’s…”

“It’s not an engagement one,” he comments with a shy smile. “Not really.”

“Yeah, but…” She can’t find the word. Stunning. Exquisite. Too much. “Perfect.” She knows a thing or two about jewelry, though. There’s no way this was inexpensive, let alone free.

“It was my mother’s.” She turns at his soft words, the box cradled in her hands. “My dad gave it to her right before he left for Desert Storm.” Right before he left and didn’t come back. The parallels aren’t lost on her, and her heart gets heavy with it. He doesn’t seem upset, though. “She gave it to me when she passed away. Said to give it to someone I love.” He takes the ring from the box. “Never got a chance with Peggy. Maybe that was fate telling me something I didn’t understand then. Now… Well, now I know it’s right.”

She doesn’t know what to say. “Steve…”

“If you want it,” he whispers as he holds it before her. “Only if you want it.” If you want me.
Her eyes sting. “Of course, I do.”

“Back when you had to leave, I told you I’d give you anything. Everything. I still can’t, Nat. Not yet. But I can give you this and a promise.” He shifts more beside her, taking her right hand and sliding the ring onto her ring finger. Nat stares at it. It’s absolutely gorgeous in the faint light. Steve sweeps his thumb down her hand and then weaves their fingers together. He brushes her hair aside yet again and kisses at the nape of her neck. “It’s going to be okay.”

The sound she makes is supposed to be a laugh but it’s far more like a sob. She looks up to find him even closer, his eyes dark with emotion, with that fear, yes, but with love and hope, too. “Shouldn’t I be promising you that?”

“So promise me,” he says with a weak smile.

She cups his face, angling around more. “It’s going to be okay.” Saying that makes her feel better, more sure of it, even if it’s not any more certain now than it was mere seconds ago. She smiles with all the strength she has and kisses him.

There’s nothing hurried about the way they make love. There never has been, but tonight especially there’s no place for roughness or frenzy. After kissing on the couch and after those kisses turn deeper and more passionate, she stands and leads him to their bedroom. Gently she pulls him to their bed, and she sits on its edge with him between her legs. Her lips are tender, mapping the planes of his stomach and chest as he pulls his shirt off. She lines his muscles with her mouth, kissing and sucking and leaving a wet trail downward. Her fingers don’t shake anymore as she undoes the buckle of his belt, as unbuttons and unzips his pants. Then she’s grasping him through his boxers, stroking slowly yet firmly the way she knows he likes. He jerks, moans, grasps her shoulders to steady himself as she mouths at the hard length of him through cotton. Everything about this is familiar now, safe and comfortable, and she’s nothing but confident as she teases him, kisses him, suckling and tormenting and bringing him willingly to her beck and call.

When she leans up to work his pants and underwear off his hips, she catches sight of the scar across his lower stomach. It’s long, stretching perpendicular to his abs, not terribly noticeable or deep but there. It’s from when Alexei slashed him. And she’s seen it before, of course, but right now… She abandons his erection to grasp his hips and kiss it, kiss the entire length of it like her lips have the power to undo the pain, to soothe away the damage and erase the mark that’s permanently etched into his body because of her. Like she can help heal it. He gives a gusty sigh, tipping his head back, running his fingers through her hair as she turns the scar into a source of pleasure. She’ll kiss every one of them on his body like this, reverent and tender and loving.

She’ll kiss every single one.

So she does. All the lines on his chest, the places where he’s ever been hurt. She caresses his back, feels the raised flesh there, kisses harder at the scars on his hip and side where he was shot. He gasps at her tender ministrations, runs his fingers through her hair even more, rolls his hips into her seeking friction. She obliges him, wrapping a hand around him again, squeezing and stroking anew until he’s shivering above her and bucking into her grip.

Nat gives his heaving abdomen a parting kiss and then leans up and back. He scrambles for her blouse, and both of them get it up and over her head. Before she can even free her arms of it all the way, he’s reaching her for her bra, unhooking it while he takes a heated kiss. His tongue presses inside her mouth, licking between her lips and teeth to thrust against hers. She can’t stop a whimper at that or at the cups of her bra dropping and her breasts falling into his hands. His fingers immediately pinch and pull at her nipples the way he knows she likes, and he’s merciless.
She can’t hardly stand how much she wants him, how deeply she *needs* him. In no time at all her body has learned this, learned pleasure and desire and desperation, learned to crave his touch and his taste, his heat and his strength. It’s throbbing inside her, hot and wet in her core, and she throws herself back to offer her breasts to him fully. He drops beside the bed as she does, catching a nipple in his mouth, sweetly attending to it with harder sucks and then gentler brushes of his tongue over the aching peak. The ache gets worse and worse. She grabs at his hair, urges him on, opening her legs to him. Licking at her other nipple, he works her pants open, slides his fingers down inside and under her panties, right to where she’s wet and ready for him.

It’s not enough. She keens, and it sounds pathetic, but she can’t stand the pressure anymore. Pushing him away, she rolls to her knees and shimmies out of her pants and underwear. Then she crawls up the bed a bit and lifts her hips high while dropping low onto her elbows, practically presenting her most intimate places to him. Offering herself completely. It’s not a position she ever thought she could take, not this open and helpless and exposed. This submissive, in a way. This trusting.

But she can let go with him. She knows that. She can let go and let him in, let him protect her. She shivers with burning need as he lightly trails his fingers up the backs of her thighs, feeling dizzy and feverish when his mouth follows. His fingers curl around her hips, his breath a warm, slow tickle against sensitive skin. He presses suckling kisses into her inner thighs, little secret marks she’ll know are there. His fingers finally slip between her legs, sliding into her folds and pushing inside her. She whines and shoves back into him, waiting and wanton and not the least bit with it in order to care if it’s pathetic. She can’t manage to speak, at least not beyond more incoherent whimpering, but he seems to understand without it. He presses a kiss to her core that has her crying before planting another on the small of her back. Then he’s grabbing her hips and guiding himself inside.

White bursts from behind her eyelids, and she clutches the sheets. Every time with him feels different and new yet familiar and comfortable all at once, and the dichotomy of it always leaves her reeling in bliss. He’s deep inside her, pulling her hips back to meet him, and every thrust, every slide, shoots fire up her spine. She can tell it’s hard for him to do this, hard to hold his weight on his knees like this with his weak hip. His rhythm stutters and falters, but its discordance makes it all the better, deliciously frustrating and unpredictable. She feels his lips work up her back, along her scar there, the tender skin where she was slashed that awful night. He’s careful, kissing with gentle devotion like he, too, is trying to heal where she’s been hurt. She closes her eyes and loses herself in it, in his hips working against her rear, in the thick heat moving inside her, in the soft beat of his breath against her shoulder. He wraps his arm around her and guides her up until she’s on her knees with her legs spread wide. Now he’s driving up into her, and it’s full and deep and perfect.

Nat loudly moans, tipping her head back. Her thighs are burning and trembling in this position, but he’s pounding against that place inside her with every thrust. Both his hands cup her breasts, squeezing and keeping her upright. His mouth attaches to the side of her neck, sucking and biting lightly. Against that she arches into him, working back into his thrusts and pressing her breasts more into his touch. That makes him groan into her neck, and he’s struggling even more to keep an even rhythm. She can tell he’s close. She is, too. Her heart’s pounding, their darkened bedroom spinning around her as she flies higher and higher. When he drops his right hand to her sex, rubs his fingers onto the oversensitive bundle of nerves there, it’s over.

Pleasure arcs over her, and she cries out, stiffening as she climaxes. Her muscles clench and twist, rippling around him inside her, and that takes him with her. Those little grunts into her skin get louder, faster, hoarser, and more frantic. He’s clutching her harder, rocking through his release. She shivers as the waves of her orgasm slowly recede, shivers to feel him weakly pumping into her
a few more times and his mouth tiredly working at her neck. She slumps forward, exhausted, and he goes, too, blanketing her back and lazily kissing everywhere he can.

They’re still for a while, catching their breaths in the silence. He’s hot and heavy, but she doesn’t care, flattening against the mattress under him even though it’s not terribly comfortable with his arms still around her chest and belly. Her heart finally slows down, and there’s air to breathe again, and she’s tired and wonderfully spent.

It takes a little longer for him to finally move, to pull out of her and roll off her. He slumps down beside her, panting a little heavily yet, and wearily she throws her arm across his stomach and uses it as an anchor to pull herself closer. She buries her face into his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. He slides his hand up and down her back like he so often does after they’re intimate. She cherishes it, how he keeps touching her like that, keeps her close. It feels once more like he’s caressing the scar there, gentle and loving.

“Tell me again,” he whispers. She watches him swallow, his Adam’s apple shifting with it. “Please? Promise me.”

Nat closes her eyes and kisses his chest. “It’ll be okay.” She doesn’t sound sure.

“It’ll be okay,” he echoes. Neither does he.

They have to be, though. It has to be. It will be.

Chapter End Notes

Artwork for this chapter done by the lovely faith2nyc!
AUTHOR'S NOTE: Well, guys, this is the second to last chapter. We're finally there. It's not too late for what I hope are some fun, last-minute cameos, though... Enjoy :-)
regulate their function. He knows what can go wrong with it all, how serious it could be. He may wake up with worse brain damage or new brain damage or not wake up at all. The risks are huge.

Somehow, though, as frightened as he is about that, he’s more frightened for Nat. She’s gone through so much the last few months, with everything that happened with Alexei and the legal drama that’s still ongoing in the background. Despite all that, she’s been so strong, stalwart, sure of herself in a way he never imagined. She’s come forward to the FBI about what she knows, offering herself to them as a witness. She’s taken care of him, nursed him through his seizures, helped him with his own nightmares and traumas though hers are only beginning to heal. She’s brought down the last of her walls, told the last of her secrets. She’s made such tremendous strides, so much so that he’s absolutely in awe of her, and he doesn’t want to be the cause of any of her pain.

What if something goes wrong? What is she going to do? How is she going to deal with that? She shouldn’t have to, and he made it worse by asking her to be his proxy. By asking her to marry him. Both those things were stupid and selfish, but he wasn’t able to stop himself. He doesn’t want to burden her or make this more difficult for her at all, and that’s exactly what he did.

God, he’s scared.

The night stretches long like this. It’s awful, and he knows he needs to sleep, so he keeps trying no matter how futile and fruitless it is. Tomorrow is going to be long and difficult, and he’s not doing himself or anyone else any favors going into it exhausted. He dozes in fits and spurts, dreams of things that aren’t distressing but aren’t too comforting, either. She sleeps like that, too, lightly and restlessly, sometimes curled against him and other times with her back to him. Sometimes her hand wraps into his, and they anchor each other against the unspoken fears, the unknowns looming in the shadows all around them. The digital clock beside the bed counts the minutes, the hours, until dawn. It’s tedious and slow, stretched unnaturally long, but when the alarm finally buzzes at five the following morning, suddenly it feels like no time has passed at all.

Steve closes his weary eyes, pulls Nat close, and tries to ignore it a little while. She drapes an arm around his chest, fingers curling into the material of his t-shirt tightly, like she’s just as desperate to go back to those long, miserable hours of night as he is. At least back then it wasn’t today. Today is finally here. It’s undeniably starting. Steve isn’t sure if he’s ready to greet it at all, let alone with high hopes. He closes his eyes.

“Just breathe,” Nat whispers, kissing at his chest. Her fingers relax from his shirt, as if she realizes she’s holding him too tightly, clutching him too desperately. His mother’s ring catches the meager light in the room, sparkling comfortably. He stares at it. “Breathe.”

Steve didn’t realize he stopped, but his lungs are burning, heavy and full in his chest. It takes effort to make his muscles unclench and relax, to make his diaphragm do what it’s supposed to, but he exhales and inhales again. He keeps the pace slow, easy, and after a minute or two, he feels better, calmer. More ready. More capable of facing today. Nat’s with him, right at his side, so no matter what… It’ll be okay.

Eventually they do get up. They have to. He needs to be at the hospital at seven, so they get going. He showers, brushes his teeth, shaves. Nat’s in the shower as he does that, and he stares at himself in the fogged-up bathroom mirror after he wipes the shaving cream away. It’s his face, of course, and he looks well if not tired. It’s still weird seeing himself without the beard, though. He always thinks that now. The doctors didn’t specifically say he had to shave it, but they’re going to shave most of the left side of his head, so for some reason it makes sense. He tries to picture what he’s going to look like with no hair. Or with the multiple large incisions he’s going to have (and he
grimaces at that). It’s impossible not to do, though he knows he shouldn’t try. That’s been his coping mechanism the last few weeks. He shouldn’t try to picture what life is going to be like after today. He’s kept himself in a limbo of sorts. He doesn’t even know why he proposed to Nat. It was a shitty proposal, too. He wanted to do so much more. He was thinking about it for weeks before he rather impulsively went for it. He gave her his mother’s ring, but, God, that felt like an afterthought. It’s not nearly enough. And the proposal itself wasn’t anything special or romantic. It was more like word vomit spewing from his mouth, an overly eager and desperate attempt to do just what he shouldn’t: promise anything beyond his surgery. Like having Nat there waiting for him with the ring on her finger makes him waking up to see it more possible somehow? It doesn’t, and now he’s put her in a difficult position. A painful position. He should never have—

“Stop,” she murmurs, walking up behind him to wrap her arms around his middle. He was so lost up in his head that he didn’t even hear the shower stop and her get out. She kisses the back of his shoulder, the terrycloth of her robe soft against his skin. “Don’t think. Just breathe.”

Just breathe. He can do that, does do it, takes more slow, measured breaths with her wrapped around him and breathing right with him. It’s going to be okay. He rubs his hand along her arm. The ring on her finger sparkles in the fluorescent lights of the bathroom. It really is.

They keep going. Nat dries her hair and pins it back and up into a loose bun. He goes out to the bedroom and fights to keep from pacing as she puts on her make-up. There’s a knock at the door a few minutes later, and he jolts in surprise, rushing across the room to open it. It’s Sam, of course, and he looks as tired and unsettled as Steve feels. He winces. Seeing Steve without his beard clearly bothers him, probably makes it all too real. “You guys about ready?”

They are after another couple of minutes. The three of them bundle up against the winter chill with coats, hats, gloves, and scarfs and head down the way to Massachusetts General. They’re silent. No one has the strength to talk, to do anything other than focus on their footsteps and walking against the blustery wind. Everywhere Christmas decorations are still up, but it’s got that gloomy feel to it, the doldrums of the post-holiday haze. Nat takes Steve’s hand, weaving their gloved fingers together as they step through the sliding doors of the hospital’s entrance. From there it’s just a few hallways to the lobby.

Sam spots a coffee cart. “Nat, you want something?” he asks, reaching into his coat for his wallet. Then he seems to remember that Steve can’t eat or drink and grimaces. “If that’s okay with you.”

Steve’s too worried to really care about how hungry he is or how nice the coffee smells. “Sure, I’ll, uh…” He spots the check-in area. “I’ll go see what I need to do.” He knows that he should go up to the surgical ward. Doctor Cho’s team gave him a whole packet of instructions, and that included where he needs to be and at what time. Still, it’s pretty obvious Nat and Sam need a moment, need to collect themselves, need a cup of coffee. So he double checks what he’s supposed to do while they get their drinks and a muffin. They’re twenty minutes early, anyway.

After they’re done with their little breakfast, they head up to the surgical floor. Nat takes Steve’s hand again in the elevator. The doors open with a ding and they get off before walking to the reception desk. Steve gives his name, and the lady smiles brightly and welcomes him. Then it’s more waiting, this time in the waiting room. It’s nice, if not blandly decorated. A set of double doors, locked and only openable from the inside, are near the reception desk. Otherwise it’s a bunch of surprisingly comfortable chairs, a few toys over in a children’s area, and a couple tables loaded with periodicals. Steve and Nat sit. Sam moves around, wandering from the kids’ place to the fake plants in one corner to the art on the wall (which he inspects with surface interest) to the windows where there’s a decent view of a garden interior to the hospital and the snow falling on it. Essentially, he’s pacing. He hasn’t smiled once the whole morning. Once or twice he seems to
realize he’s getting too torqued up, and he returns to sit near Steve and settle for a bit. He sighs. 
*Breathe.* That seems to be the theme of the morning. *Keep breathing.* But Sam’s up and pacing 
again almost immediately.

On the flip side, Nat’s hardly moving at all. She’s picking through a magazine in the chair next to 
Steve. She *seems* calm, the picture of poise in fact, sitting back in her seat with her legs crossed 
and the magazine on her lap. She seems calm, but Steve knows she’s not. She’s reread the same 
page three or four times now. She realizes it after she turns the page, so then she flips it back and 
starts at the top of the article again with a long breath. Again and again she’s done that. If 
someone should ask her what the passage is about, it’s pretty obvious she’ll fail the test.

And Steve himself is jittering. He’s vaguely aware that he’s doing it, that his leg is bouncing with 
barely contained hyperactivity, that he’s rubbing his jeans by his knee almost compulsively. He 
can’t stop. His anxiety is ramping up more and more as the minutes slip away. He keeps watching 
the clock in the waiting room, glancing at that and at Sam and Nat and the other people around and 
the TV quietly playing the local news where an anchor is talking about a winter storm coming in. 
None of it really registers. He’s fidgeting and checking the clock (only a couple minutes have 
passed since the last time he looked) and sighing and fidgeting some more. It’s well past 7:30 
now. They’ve been sitting thirty minutes, and every single one of those minutes feels like an 
 eternity. He needs to calm down. He knows that. It’s the same thing as last night. He *needs* 
to stay cool and composed and not let his emotions get the better of him. He knows the drill. He’s 
been through enough medical nonsense in his life (more than his fair share in fact) to know it’s 
90% waiting and 10% actual action. Today is going to be like that: long periods of useless stress 
and clock-watching and dread punctuated by moments of sheer terror and relief. The hardest part 
is going to be dealing with the wait.

It already seems like it’s too much to bear. His harried gaze shifts from the clock to the reception 
desk (where the nurse is placidly typing away at her computer) to the doors. Maybe it’s not too 
late to call it all off. He doesn’t have to go through with this, right? There’s time to change his 
 mind. He hasn’t gone in yet, so he can. Maybe it’ll be better if he did. Sam’s still pacing, so rigid 
with worry that he seems almost brittle. Nat’s still uselessly rereading the same page. God, he’s 
not worth this, not worth the way they seem too frightened to function, too scared to breathe. It’s 
not worth this. He can just get up, tell the nurse he’s changed his mind, *walk out*–

A hand grasping his on his knee snaps him from his thoughts. He jerks and turns. Nat looks up a 
little from her magazine. She smiles, coaxing his fingers away from the death grip they have on 
his leg. Her thumb caresses his knuckles in a comforting sweep, and Steve takes a breath. *Right.* 
The fresh air in his lungs feels good, pure, rejuvenating, like the air he was holding inside yet again 
was nothing short of toxic. *Keep breathing.* His body relaxes slowly, a muscle at a time it seems, 
but in short order he feels more in control again. He can do this.

“Steven Rogers?”

The call is like a siren. All three of them jolt and look to the double doors by the reception desk. 
A nurse is there, a tall, pretty African American girl whose nametag reads Maya. Her searching 
eyes settle on him. Steve doesn’t know if she has telepathy or something or if it’s just that 
obvious. There aren’t that many people waiting, so maybe it is. Regardless, she smiles kindly. 
“We’re ready you.”

And they’re up and heading back into the surgical ward. The pre-op area is a series of sections. 
They’re not really rooms, just spaces divided by curtains or walls. There are no doors, and there’s 
not a ton of privacy. Thankfully it’s so early in the morning that there aren’t too many other 
patients. Maya leads them down to a slightly more secluded area. “This should be a little quieter
for you,” she says as she gestures to the clean, empty bed.

Steve frowns at the preferential treatment. This is probably as close as one can get to a private room here. “You don’t need to—”

She grins and closes the curtains once all three of them are inside. “Not every day I get to take care of a war hero on my shift,” she says. Steve flushes harder and is tempted to argue further, but Nat gives a little smile and a small shake of her head so he decides to let it go. Maya’s already moving on anyway. She has a folder, and she pulls over a computer fastened to a tall, rolling desk. “So I’m going to get you checked in and ready to go here. Shouldn’t take too long.”

It doesn’t. She goes through his information, and he confirms it. It’s basic stuff like his name and address and date of birth. Past medical history. That goes on longer, and he stays patient even as he has to explain information that the surgical team must already know. After she’s done interviewing him, she places the hospital ID bracelet around his arm and gives him a gown into which he should change. Steve stares at the plastic covered label on his wrist. His name and date of birth and medical record information. It’s hardly the first time he’s seen one of these, let alone worn one, but it feels different now. Like everything else, it’s monumental. *This is really happening.*

Maya leaves him to change. Nat holds his coat and his clothes as he takes them all off. She folds them neatly, being extra conscientious like she needs the task to keep sane, and hands them to Sam who puts them into a bag for later transport to what will become his room after the procedure. The hospital gown is the standard sort. Steve doesn’t like it, how thin it is and how he can kind of feel his ass hanging out the back. Nat and Sam are too consumed to even joke as he climbs into the bed, and Nat pulls a coarse hospital blanket over his lower body. He shivers once he’s settled. There are way too many bad memories attached to the feel of this, the gown and the gurney and the smell and sights of a hospital.

But maybe this is the start of making some better ones.

The nurse comes back. Doctor Cho is with her. She’s a very petite woman with a young, pretty face and sleek black hair always drawn into a very professional bun. Though she looks young and impotent, there are amazing smarts behind her deep brown eyes. “Good morning, Steve,” she greets. “How are you feeling?”

Steve glances at Nat where she’s sitting beside the bed and Sam where he’s standing by the other chair near the curtain. He considers lying, but what’s the point? “Anxious,” he admits. “Kinda scared.”

Doctor Cho smiles and pats his leg. “Of course, you are,” she says softly. “Anyone would be.” Steve offers up his arm and Maya starts collecting his vitals. She’s unobtrusive, but he still can’t focus on anything other than the fact that this is happening. “But you needn’t be. You’re in very good hands. The equipment is here and ready. The research team is raring to go. The surgical suite is prepped. Everything’s set.”

“So he’s going in now?” Sam asks softly.

Cho glances at her watch. “Well… Not exactly. We need to wait just a bit. Doctor Richards has been delayed in getting here.”

Steve looks up sharply from where Maya is taking his blood pressure. His stomach twists up. Reed Richards is the one performing his surgery, the principal neurosurgeon leading the team of Harvard doctors. Steve met him at New York Presbyterian a couple weeks ago at one of the last
pre-op meetings. The man seemed extremely nice (weirdly fluid as he walked and long-limbed, but nice). He’s a highly-acclaimed doctor, and Steve felt good after talking with him about exactly how the procedure would go down. If Richards isn’t here… “What does that mean?” Nat asks, her eyes full of concern.

Cho’s professional façade falters just a bit, and now she doesn’t look terribly pleased with how the morning is actually going. She still gives an admirable effort to hide it with an overly confident, sunny smile. “Well, it doesn’t mean anything yet. He’s flying in from Buffalo this morning. Unfortunately, the weather’s turning bad. It looks like you guys got here just under the gun yesterday.” She frowns more openly. “Last I spoke with him, his flight’s been delayed just thirty minutes. That’ll still get him here in time to do this.”

That doesn’t sound like resounding confidence. Before Steve can process enough to respond, Doctor Cho is smiling again and patting his leg some more. “Trust me, Captain. This is happening today. We’re going to get the Net implanted and ready to go. There’s nothing to worry about.”

All the sudden he’s feeling the opposite of what’s been plaguing him all day, that maybe the surgery won’t happen. That all of this may be for nothing, and his hopes of living with fewer seizures… Nat’s taking his hand again and squeezing gently. Another reminder. He takes a breath, lets his muscles unclench and uncoil. “Okay.”

“In the meantime, just sit tight. As soon as I know Doctor Richards is on the ground here, we’ll get you prepped for surgery.” Cho gives his leg a final pat before disappearing back through the curtain. Maya finishes logging Steve’s vitals before telling them to call if they need anything. Then she goes, too.

The three of them stay still for a second. Nothing seems certain any longer, and the wait is shifting from fearing the procedure itself to fearing it won’t happen at all. The muted hum of the hospital outside the curtain seems loud, but Sam’s sigh is much louder. “Alright,” he murmurs. “It’s fine. Settle in, right?”

Steve chews his lower lip but nods. There isn’t much choice.

So they settle in. The curtain becomes this shroud of sorts that blocks the outside world, a barrier between them and the rest of life. They’re held in a queer stasis behind it, where time has slowed to a stop and nothing seems to exist beyond this moment. Sam paces again. There’s much less room to do it, but he manages. He’s got his phone out, and he’s texting (probably Tony to let him know what’s happening). Nat turns on the TV that’s mounted high on the wall by the curtain, and she flips through the channels with fake interest. The hospital has basic cable, so that’s something at least. At first, she chats about what’s on, the cooking shows and the reality TV and talk shows, but Steve’s too distracted and nervous to respond much, so she quiets. Steve watches, but nothing sinks in. It’s just nattering in his head, a useless buzzing that meshes with the hum of his anxious thoughts. What if Richards can’t make it? Does that just mean they’ll reschedule his operation? They won’t cancel it completely, right? He feels weightless, like he’s in even more of a limbo than before, like everything is just up in the air with no clear direction of where it’s going next.

He hates waiting.

“You know, you don’t have to lay here,” Maya says when she comes to check on them an hour or so later. She smiles comfortingly, like she can sense the unease and tension among the three of them. “You’re certainly free to get up and walk around. Just no eating and drinking.”

Steve doesn’t really feel like moving too much. Plus there’s the matter of being essentially naked
under the hospital gown. “I’m okay. Any news?”

“Did Doctor Richards’ plane take off?” Sam has finally settled in the chair by the curtain and he’s still fiddling with his phone almost constantly. “Doctor Cho said it was delayed by a half an hour, but that was more than a half an hour ago, so…”

Maya frowns apologetically. “I don’t know for sure. I’m sorry. Let me see if I can get some information.” She leaves again.

Sam shakes his head, standing and coming to Steve’s side. “I’ve been checking all the flights coming out of a Buffalo. There are a couple heading here, but they’ve all been delayed way more than thirty minutes.” Sam thrusts his phone at Steve, and Steve takes it. He thumbs through the information Sam has on the screen, and his hopes immediately waver. Sure, they don’t know which flight in particular Doctor Richards may be taking, but it doesn’t matter. Sam’s right. They’re all delayed thanks to the weather.

Nat looks over Steve’s side to see, too, and she asks the question they’re all thinking. “If he doesn’t get here, will they cancel the surgery?”

None of them can answer that. There’s nothing they can do right now to control the situation or sway it one way or the other. All they can do is continue to wait.

Therefore, it’s back to Sam restlessly moving around the little cage of the pre-op area, checking his phone constantly and grumbling occasionally about how much he hates hospitals. Nat flips the channels like she was flipping the magazine pages before. The TV’s still nothing but useless background noise. And Steve fidgets. He picks at the blanket, at its edge where the weaving is coming undone from so much use. He fiddles with his hospital bracelet, reads the information dozens of times like there’s any possibility it can change. With his eyes, he traces the zig-zag pattern of the pale, yellow curtain over and over again. Counts the lights and the knobs and buttons of the idle equipment flanking the bed. Smooths the chest of the gown and shifts in the bed. It’s all useless, repetitive motion and not even all that self-soothing, but he can’t stop.

At around ten o’clock Sam’s bursting at the seams with frustration. “This is getting ridiculous. I’m gonna go see what’s going on. Be back in a bit.” He slips out through the drawn curtains.

Nat sets the remote down on the hospital bed near Steve’s feet. “Hopefully the walk calms him down a little at least,” she comments with a little smile. “Although I doubt he’ll be able to find out anything.” Steve doubts it, too. Nat stands, stretches, and then goes to where Sam walked out. She peeks through the curtain, and for a second Steve fears that she’ll go, too (which is ridiculous – she should certainly go and stretch her legs or get a snack or just get away, and he’s said that numerous times over the last couple hours, but no one is listening to him). She doesn’t leave, though, closing the curtain instead and coming right back to the bed. She sits on the side of it. “How’re you doing?”

He grunts a rueful, uncomfortable chuckle. “Goin’ crazy. You know.” She smiles, brushing a hand across his forehead. “You?”

Her fingers are light and sweet as they slip through his hair. “You know,” she murmurs, her smile widening. “Going crazy.” He laughs a little more and kisses her wrist as it passes by his mouth. A breath of her perfume fills him, the scent of lilies and spring. “Have to get my fix in.”

“Hmmm?”

She pets his hair a little more firmly. “Of this. Can’t picture what you’ll look like without it.” He
closes his eyes and melts into her touch. “You’ve been…”

Her voice trails off, and he grins. “You can say it. Scruffy.”

“I was going to say rugged,” she replies matter-of-factly, leaning closer to him, “but scruffy works too. You’ve been scruffy since we met. You remember?”

He wraps an arm around her, pulling her more into his chest. “Sure. Wasn’t all that long ago.”

“Feels like it.” Her voice is a murmur into his shoulder, and he relaxes more into the hospital bed, gathering her more against him until she’s practically laying with him. “Feels like we’ve been through it all together…”

“That’s because we have,” he softly says. He kisses her forehead. Everything inside him tightens up into a knot. “This is just… one more thing, right?” He doesn’t know that he believes that. He wants to. His accident. Her ex-husband hunting them. Being flushed from their home and going on the run together and hiding on the farm and what happened in Staten Island… It really does feel like a lifetime ago that he first met her, unshaven and shabbily dressed, or the time he was sweaty and filthy from the garage with her waiting outside his apartment looking for her missing cat… A lifetime. “It’s just one more step.”

She doesn’t say anything, just kisses his smooth jaw and then settles down to breathe against his neck. He looks down and sees the ring on her right hand, twinkling as she grips the blanket tighter and tighter. He doesn’t say anything, either. Breathe.

There’s a little knock on the wall outside, and then the curtain is pulled back. Doctor Cho comes in. Nat immediately jerks out of Steve’s embrace, flushing with shame as she settles back into her chair. “Oh, it’s fine,” Doctor Cho says comfortingly. “No reason to be embarrassed.”

“Have you heard anything?” Nat says, maybe a little curtly to cover up her emotions.

Cho’s face falls. “Yes. Unfortunately, Doctor Richards is stuck in Buffalo.”

The world feels like it’s falling. Between his ears, Steve’s heart is pounding. His lips don’t work right at first, so it takes him a second or two of just sitting there uselessly before he’s able to speak. “What does that mean?”

Cho sighs. “I don’t know yet. We’re up against a deadline here, so I would prefer not to delay. If we can’t perform the surgery today, we’d be looking at rescheduling for next week. That’s the next time the team is all available as well as the operating room and the equipment.”

Next week. In the grand scheme of things, that’s not so serious a thing. It’s just a minor delay. Here and now, though, it feels huge, like an eternity, and disappointment is harshly clawing at him. Steve glances at Nat, and she looks as upset with this as he feels. Before either of them can speak, Doctor Cho is continuing. “But I am trying my best to avoid that. There’s someone else here who has the technical expertise to perform the procedure. He’s…” Cho winces a little and tips her head in resignation. “Well, he’s something of a character. Not the most cooperative or giving, but I think, given the chance to work on something unique, maybe pioneer something like this… He might go for it. He likes accolades.”

Steve’s not sure he likes the sound of this. “Is he… I mean, does he know what he’s doing?”

“He’s one of the preeminent neurosurgeons in the country, if not the world,” Cho explains. “He’s actually just visiting Harvard from NYU. It’s just dumb luck that he’s here. I’m working on getting a hold of him. His friend is a colleague of mine. Doctor Christine Palmer. If he agrees, we
can proceed as planned.” It’s pretty obvious she’s not too sure of the likelihood of this working, but she’s again doing everything she can to hide that. She smiles. “So just sit tight a little longer while I do what I can. Are you okay with that?”

He still doesn’t see how there’s much choice. “I’m here. Came this far.”

Cho nods. “Yeah, you have. Alright, I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

She’s gone again. Steve releases a breath he didn’t realize he was holding and turns to Nat. She takes his hand. “It’s going to be okay,” she promises.

He just doesn’t know what to think.

Hours slip away. Steve stays right where he is. Nat stays with him. She’s either in the chair or on the hospital bed. She’s as close as she can be, and she insists that he tries to sleep, that he needs the rest after last night and considering what may be coming. He does make an effort to, closing his eyes and listening to her hum or talk to Sam and try to keep up all their spirits. Once or twice he gets close to deep slumber, drifting enough into it to get his mind to let go. But his rest is too light to last.

He wakes up this time to find that Nat’s gone. Sam’s in her chair, and he’s the one leafing through a magazine. *Sports Illustrated.* Steve blinks until he can focus and sees it’s an article about the Giants and their attempts to recover former glory. “Lost cause,” Steve mutters.

Sam looks up. “You or them?”


“She’s been gone a while. Getting some fresh air, I guess. And no.” Sam closes the magazine and sets it to the little rolling table beside the bed. “This ‘preeminent’ neurosurgeon sure is an asshole for making us wait this long. He better be as good as Doctor Cho says.”

Steve shrugs half-heartedly. “Hopefully.”

“Don’t know how you can be so patient,” Sam says, shaking his head. “And calm.”

Clearly Sam has gone blind. “I’m not,” Steve says. “Just too scared shitless to process much of anything.”

“Compartmentalization?”

That’s one of the things they talk about in group at the VA, one of the things Doctor Banner always told him really does nothing to further his recovery. It still has its uses, though. A little detachment helps now and again. “Gets us through.”

Sam nods. He looks away. Steve can tell he wants to say something. It’s been that way the whole day, Sam giving him these long, worried looks with eyes that are teeming with pain. Finally, now that they’re alone, he drums up the courage to speak. “I just, um… No matter what happens here…”

Steve can’t bear to think about it. “Sam.”

“After losing Riley, I never thought…” Sam’s voice breaks. He clasps his hands together and leans closer, bracing his elbows on his thighs. It takes him a second to get his composure back. “I never thought I’d have anyone else, you know? Anyone like him. I lost my best friend. I lost…”
act like I got my shit together, but I don’t all the time.”

Steve knows that. Sometimes with how much his problems consume him and how strong and stalwart Sam is, he forgets his friend suffers, too. “You got it together enough to carry me,” he says. “Don’t know what I did to deserve that. I thought… After I lost Bucky, I didn’t think there’d be anyone else, either.”

Sam gives a wry, sad grin. “Then I guess maybe we were meant to run into each other.” That sounds like what Steve said to Nat back at Fury’s farm, that maybe all the awful shit happened for a reason. Riley’s death. Bucky’s. No, not so much that they were killed for a reason, because there was no reason for such a senseless thing. But something good came out of it anyway. The two of them, Sam and Steve, two lonely, damaged soldiers trying to find their way back to their lives… They found one another.

Sam sniffs. “Anyway, point is, never thought I’d have a wingman again. A right-hand man.”

Steve grins cheekily. “Technically I’m on your left, so you’re my right-hand man.”

Sam laughs, looking at where he’s sitting in the chair compared to the bed. That’s true enough. “You’re a shit, Rogers.” Steve laughs, too. He reaches to Sam, and Sam grabs his hand and holds tight. “Never seen anyone fight like you do. Tooth and nail. Even when you have every reason to quit, you fight. I’ve watched you pull yourself up and through stuff that’d kill me.”

That’s not true. “Sam, I woulda never been able to do that without you.”

Sam’s eyes glisten. “Maybe.” He smiles. “Nothing keeps you down. This isn’t going to be the first thing.” His grip gets tighter. “No matter what, you get back up.”

Maybe he has in the past. He fought through his time as a POW. He walked across the desert, alone and bleeding. He woke up from the coma, struggled to get his mind back, to get back on his feet. He’s struggled with his epilepsy every day since. His life has been nothing but struggle since he was taken prisoner and since Bucky died. Through all that, though, at least he had a choice. He could choose to keep fighting. He didn’t always know what he was fighting for, didn’t always think it was worth it.

But he’s here. He’s here with Sam, with Nat. Nat loves him. He knows that. So even though he has no control now, no choice…

“This isn’t going to be any different,” Sam says. He squeezes Steve’s hand even tighter. And he sniffs more, but he doesn’t make any effort to hide the tears in his eyes. “Right? It’s not. You’re gonna get the surgery. It’s gonna fix your dumbass broken brain.” He grins. “And you’re gonna be fine. After all the crap you’ve been through... It’s time for a happy ending.”

Through his own tears, Steve grins, too. No, he can’t control this, not any part of it. Not if this neurosurgeon can make it here or if the experiment will work. Not if he wakes up from the procedure and walks away. Not when or how it’ll happen. Nothing. That faith that he’s had more and more since Nat came into his life, since he realized he’s not to blame for Bucky’s death and that this life is worth living... That’s all he has now. That and love.

It’s enough. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

There’s another knock, and the curtain is pulled back again. Steve hastily wipes his cheeks, but he can’t really hide the wetness there. Neither can Sam, who pulls back and stands and turns away to compose himself. It’s a good thing Doctor Cho is way too excited to notice (or care if she does).
“Great news, Steve. He’s agreed to perform the surgery.”

Steve sits up. “Re-really?”

Cho grins. “Yes. He’ll be here in a couple hours, so we’re only going to be a little behind schedule. This is fantastic.”

Sam doesn’t seem so sure. “So he’ll know how to handle the NeuralNet? I mean, it’s experimental, so how–”

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’ve already briefed him on the procedure and sent him Steve’s data. He’ll be able to take over.”

That’s vague as hell. It took weeks for Richards to review Steve’s PET scans and EEG readings and plan out this procedure. The new doctor will be able to do that in a matter of hours? Sam shakes his head. “This guy is essentially gonna pinch-hit. Last minute. That’s what you’re saying.”

Doctor Cho’s expression falls, and her posture deflates a bit. It’s like it’s suddenly occurring to her that this is unsettling to her patient. “I realize this is a sudden change, but trust me when I tell you that Doctor Strange–”

Sam loses it. “Oh, no.” He comes to the foot of the bed, shaking his head at Steve. “No, no, no. No way in hell you let someone named Doctor Strange operate on your brain. What, Doctor Frankenstein was busy?”

Sam folds his arms obstinately over his chest. “Nope. Uh-uh. Not happening.”

Steve can’t help but smile wider. He knows he shouldn’t; Sam’s still on edge and has been since they got up that morning, and he’s only looking out for him. However, he has to admit it’s a little funny. “His name’s really Doctor Strange?”

Cho glances at Sam, but Steve’s lighter, softer tone eases her tension. “Stephen Strange.”


Cho winces slightly. “He prefers Stephen. And I’ll suggest you not talk to him directly. Or at all.” The wince gets deeper. “His bedside manner’s not… great.”

This is getting better and better. Sam glares, and he’s scowling more and more. “Fantastic.”

Wearily, Cho sighs. “Look, I have complete confidence in Doctor Strange to implant the NeuralNet. Complete confidence. He is an amazing surgeon. And, yes, he’s a tad eccentric and egocentric.”

Sam glowers. “Read: asshole. Just like I said.”

Now Cho frowns. “But I can assure you that he can do this. That is if you still want to.”

If I still want to. He can back out bow if he wants. He doesn’t even need much of an excuse. His surgeon can’t make it, and now he needs to put his faith in someone else, someone he doesn’t know. That’s crazy. He can call the whole thing off.

But he doesn’t want to. “No, I want to go through with it. I trust you, Doctor Cho, and if you think
he can do it… That’s good enough for me.”

I’ve come this far.

Doctor Cho smiles. “Alright. Just… sit tight a little more. I’m going to get things set up. It won’t be too much longer, I promise.” Then she’s gone yet again, disappearing through the curtain.

Their little space is silent. Sam’s stiff at the end of the bed. The worry is radiating off him in thick waves, ones that feel almost tangible as they slam into Steve. Steve throws the blanket off and slides out of the bed, holding the back of the gown shut. He crosses the few steps between them and grabs Sam by the shoulders and hauls him into a hug. “It’s gonna be fine,” he murmurs, squeezing Sam tight and his own eyes shut. “Like you said. It’ll all be fine. Just gotta…” He takes a deep breath. “Keep breathing.”

Sam embraces him back, clings really. A shuddery sigh hits Steve’s shoulder, and Steve lets go of the gown to hug Sam more completely. They stand like that a moment more, and then Sam grunts. “Nice view.”

Steve grunts and yanks away, fumbling to close the gown more. “You ass,” he chuckles.

“No, technically, it’s your ass,” Sam says with a laugh of his own. He wipes at his eyes, smiling despite the tears. There’s the rattle of a cart and another knock on the wall outside. It’s Maya, and she’s got materials to put in an IV. “And I guess you better get it back into that bed if you’re doing this.”

“Doing what?” Nat’s voice follows Maya in as she pushes the cart close to the hospital bed. She’s right there behind the nurse, and she looks a little lost. Stunningly beautiful and flushed like she’s been running around. “What did I miss?”

Sam’s still blotting at his eyes, still trying to hide how close he came to completely falling apart. “I’ll let him explain,” he manages. “Excuse me. Gonna, uh, get some air.”

He leaves, and Nat comes in more. Maya’s taking a spot by Steve’s right side as he settles back into the bed. Nat glances between the nurse where she’s working on getting the IV inserted into Steve’s hand and Steve’s face. Steve gives a shivery sigh, his stomach knotting up again now that this is really happening. “Doctor Cho got someone else to agree to do the procedure, so…” He shrugs as much as he can with the nurse sticking a needle in his arm. “Yeah.”

Nat just stands there, staring in stupefaction. “This is happening now?”

Maya gets the IV situated and tapes the port into place. “Sounds like it. The anesthesiologist will be down soon to talk to you. Is there anything I can get you right now? If you’re anxious, I can bring something to help you stay calm.”

“No, no,” Steve answers. “No, I’m fine.”

Maya smiles again before leaving and shutting the curtain behind her. Steve stares at Nat, at the way her eyes are blankly taking in what’s finally happening, at how hectic her color is, at the way she’s standing there, clutching her bag on her shoulder, completely motionless as if she, too, is in some kind of limbo. Steve doesn’t like the shock on her face, the way her gaze isn’t quite focused on him. She looks like she wants to bolt. That scares him, because he knows there’s no way he can do this without her. “You okay?”

She doesn’t come any closer. “I want to answer your question.”
He’s overwhelmed enough that he doesn’t get what she’s saying right away. “My question?”

“About me marrying you.”

Now Steve sits up ramrod straight. All the hazy clutter in his head abruptly falls away. “What?”

Nat’s face crumples, and even though she’s smiling, her eyes fill with tears. Still, she’s calm, purposeful, as she crosses the tiny bit of distance between the curtain and Steve’s hospital bed. “I will,” she says a bit breathlessly. She sets her bag down on the empty chair and reaches for Steve’s hand. “I will.”

She wants to marry you. For what feels like an eternity, Steve’s brain stutters around that. She wants to marry you. He can’t think beyond it, can’t believe it, can’t make himself accept it even though he knew she would. Deep in his heart, beyond his doubts and misgivings and fears, he’s known it. That’s why he asked to begin with. She’s known nothing but pain because of a husband, a man she loved and trusted and to whom she pledged herself. He wants to show her something else, what it’s supposed to be.

And he will after this. “Okay,” he whispers, unable to keep a huge giddy grin off his face. “Okay. When… When we get back to Brooklyn, we can–”

“No.” She sits on the bed before bringing his hand to her face and kissing his knuckles. “Now.”

That doesn’t make any sense. He stammers a second before he repeats her. “Now?”

She smiles, nods, and kisses his hand more. “Now. Right now.”

“Nat…” It’s too much. He really can’t think, can’t do anything other than stare at her and struggle to comprehend what she’s saying. What she’s offering. Why. “No. No, you can’t. We can’t. Not here. Not now.”

“Why not?” She shakes her head. “I spoke with the hospital chaplain. He’ll do it. He can perform the ceremony right here.”

“You already gave me a ring.” She lifts her left hand. Her left hand. His mother’s ring is there. “And I went and bought one for you.”

“You what?” he sputters.

She nods. “I went out and did it right now. So we have rings. And Sam’s here, so we have a witness. And the chaplain will come right to us and do it. There’s nothing to stop us.”

“Yes, there is. There is!”

“Steve, I want to do this.”

“You can’t,” he retorts, his heart shuddering in his chest. She just stares at him, as fiery and stubborn and certain as he’s ever seen her be, but he can’t accept this, so he shakes his head. “God, Nat, you can’t. What if I don’t…” He can’t even make himself tell her what he fears. “I won’t do that to you. I won’t marry you and leave you alone if something happens. I won’t tie you to me like that! If – if…” No, he has to. He has to say it. “If something happens and I die, or worse something happens and I don’t wake up or they mess up and I’m… not me anymore… God, I don’t want you stuck with that. I’d want you to move on, not spend your life chained to what happens to
me! Nat, you can’t…” His voice breaks, and he looks away as his eyes flood with tears. “I want to marry you with everything I am. That’s why I asked you, why I gave you the ring. I trust you with everything I am. I love you more than anything.” She fights back a sob. “But I don’t want you to do this because you feel like you have to, or because you feel like you owe me, or anything like that. I don’t want that.”

She swallows that sob and holds herself together. “Well, good, because that’s not what I’m doing.”

He can’t stand how much this hurts, how much he wants her. “Nat, please… You’re not thinking straight. You’re not.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve never been so sure of anything.”

“Nat…”

“I love you, too,” she whispers as she leans closer. “I love you. That’s why I said yes. And that’s why I want to do this now.” She cups his face. “I don’t care.”

He tries to pull away, tries to deny. “No.”

She doesn’t let him. “I don’t. Whether or not we’re married, I’m in this with you. No matter what happens. No matter…” Now she struggles to say what needs to be said. “No matter if you don’t wake up or wake up different… No matter what happens, I love you. I could never leave you. I could never walk away from you. That’s impossible, Steve. Whatever happens to you happens to me, too. We’re in this together. We stay together.” She lifts his face to meet hers in a tender kiss. “So I want to do this now. I want to be your wife, whatever that means, for now and for forever.”

“Please…”

“Remember that night? Our night in the field?” He does. He remembers the stars, the grass, the quiet. Her body, warm and beautiful. How she offered it up to him. How she loved him. “Remember what I said to you?” He will. He’ll always remember. She smiles. “I’m not afraid anymore. Not anymore.”

“Nat…”

“I want to be yours. I want you to be mine. And I don’t see any reason to wait.”

He stares into her eyes, the eyes that inexplicably drew him into her life from the moment he met her. There’s no fear in them. No doubt. No pain. There’s only certainty and serenity. Love. He doesn’t feel worthy of it, but he is. He is because she’s choosing him. She’s saying yes. She wants to marry him right now.

And he knows she’s right. Just breathe. “Okay,” he says.

She sweeps her thumb over his lips. “Yeah?”

He kisses her finger before nodding. “Yeah.”

Then she’s pressing her mouth to his in a desperate wish before running off to find Sam and the priest.

Not more than thirty minutes later, they’re getting married. Steve’s never thought much of what
his wedding might be like one day, but he sure as hell never pictured this. He’s not wearing a tux or even a suit (or even clothes for that matter). Nat’s in leggings and a sweater, not a dress much less a wedding dress. There’s no music, no flowers, no bridal party throwing rice and cheering. No guests or a nice dinner or a dance floor or anything of the like. He’s not even standing. The anesthesiologist has come and gone and they are minutes away from knocking him out. Because of that, there’s not even much time.

But there’s enough. And it’s quiet and secluded too, with the curtain drawn and everyone else instructed to leave them be for a few minutes. The hospital chaplain is there. He introduces himself as just Stan, though it seems odd to address a minister without a formal title and not by his last name. He doesn’t seem to care, though. He’s an elderly fellow with thin, white hair that’s brushed back and wet with gel, a mustache, and thick, gold, aviator-style glasses. His face is weathered and wrinkled but warm, and he talks with a mundane yet gentlemanly tone. Steve likes him right away, even if he seems a little wary of doing this. It’s understandable why. In a matter of an hour (if Doctor Cho’s to be believed), he’ll be undergoing radical, life-changing, experimental brain surgery, the outcome of which being a rather serious unknown. Nat’s signing herself up for something she can’t possibly predict, taking on a burden the nature of which she can’t fathom.

But Nat just takes Steve’s hand, the one without the IV port in it, and stands proudly and confidently beside his bed. “I know what I’m doing. This is my choice. It’s what I want. I love him, and I won’t stop loving him if something goes wrong.” She turns to Steve and smiles. “But nothing’s going to go wrong. I know it.”

Stan watches the two of them for a moment more as if he’s trying to gauge how sincere that is. Doing his due diligence. Steve and Nat are nothing but adamant, though, hand in hand. He glances at Sam, who’s standing by the side of the bed with Steve’s mother’s ring in his hand as well as the simple, silver band Nat just bought. Sam just cocks his head with a smile. “Don’t look at me, dude,” he says. “The two of them are crazy. But they know what they’re doing, and they’re doing it together, and I’m behind it completely.”

Steve smiles. Nat weaves their hands together tighter. Stan turns back to them. “It’s not that I don’t have faith in what you feel for each other,” the old man says. “It’s clear to anyone who looks at the two of you that it’s love. Still, I have to ask, have to make sure this isn’t just some act of desperation–”

“Excuse me, sir,” Steve says softly. He can’t keep quiet, not given the lengths to which both of them have gone to be together, to stay together. “When is love not an act of desperation?”

Stan’s eyes are deep with thought at that, filled with a lifetime of memories and experiences. His thin lips pull into smile. “I suppose that’s true enough, son. Alright, I get the impression there’s not a lot of time, which unfortunately means we’ll need to keep this short and sweet and to the point.”

“That’s fine,” Nat assures. “We can…” She falters for a breath but recovers and smiles brightly. “We can celebrate later.”

Stan nods. “Do you have rings?”

Sam comes forward with them. He hands them to the chaplain, and Stan takes them in his weathered hand. He lifts Steve’s mother’s ring and gives it to Steve. “Repeat after me. I, Steven Grant Rogers…”

Steve lifts Nat’s left hand in his right, holding the ring between his thumb and forefinger of his left. He takes a deep breath. “I, Steven Grant Rogers.”
“Commit myself to you, Natasha Romanoff, as husband.”

It’s weird hearing her new name like that. There’s a mischievous glint in Nat’s eye and a blush crawling down her cheeks. Steve grins. “Commit myself to you, Natasha Romanoff…” *Natalia. Nat. “As husband.”*

“To learn with and grow with… To explore with and adventure with… To respect you in everything as an equal partner, in the foreknowledge of joy and pain, strength and weariness, direction and doubt.” Steve repeats it all, word by word, phrase by phrase. He never looks away from Nat’s glittering eyes. “I swear to you I will protect you, care for you, cherish you as I cherish no other, and stay with you at your side for all the risings and settings of the sun, that I will love you until the very end.” He slides the ring onto her left hand.

Stan smiles in approval. “Now you,” he says, handing the other ring to Nat. “I, Natasha Romanoff…”

Nat takes his left hand. “I, Natasha Romanoff…”

“Commit myself to you, Steven Grant Rogers, as wife…”

She smiles. “Commit myself to you, Steven Grant Rogers, as wife…”

And she says all the same words, repeats all the same phrases, swears the same promises. Steve’s heart is pounding in excitement. There doesn’t seem to be any air, yet his lungs are working fine. He’s lightheaded and soaring. For how weird and sudden this is, nothing has ever felt so right, staring into her eyes, hearing her voice, feeling her fingers woven together with his. Everything falls away, the noise of the hospital and the unknowns before them and their pasts still behind them. There’s only her, and he realizes it doesn’t matter when and where they do this. They’ve already tied themselves together so completely that this is just one more step closer. One final step closer.

*Just breathe.*

“…and that I will love you until the very end.” Nat slides the wedding ring on his finger, and Steve stares at it. It’s so new, a simple silver against his skin, but it already feels familiar and right. She folds their fingers together again and smiles. He smiles, too.

Stan grins and nods. “Then by the power vested in me by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss.”

They do. Steve leans up and she leans down, and their lips meet. It’s just another kiss, one of thousands that they’ve shared in good times and in bad, in pain and passion and fear, in grief and delight and love. It’s just another kiss, but it feels monumental despite how mundane it is. Steve’s fingers push into Nat’s hair, keeping her face close, and she smiles against his mouth before kissing him again, harder, holding onto him with everything she has. He knows she doesn’t want to let go. He doesn’t, either.

But they have to. Sam and the chaplain are talking, signing the marriage license. Nat and Steve are asked to do the same, and as they do, the hospital staff start pushing into their little bubble. Doctor Cho is there, as well as the anesthesiologist and a couple of nurses. “Steve,” Doctor Cho calls, “it’s time.”

Another man comes in behind them, flanked by his own staff. He’s tall, with a long, very striking face that has sharp, blue eyes, a narrow chin, and a high brow. Dark brown hair is slicked back.
He looks arrogant and unfriendly and he has to be the surgeon, even if he’s dressed in an expensive black blazer and slacks rather than scrubs. “Doctor Strange?” Steve asks, still holding Nat’s hand even as the medical personnel crowd him.

The man grins an irritated smile. “Captain Rogers. Not sure which asses you kissed to make this happen, but they must have been some angels in disguise.”

Nat grimaces as she’s fairly unceremoniously pushed aside so Strange and his team can get closer to the bed. Sam huffs in the background. “So you’re the preeminent neurosurgeon here to save the day?”

“Yes,” Strange nonchalantly says as he leans close to Steve’s face. He’s looking at him very curiously, but Steve can’t say for sure what he’s looking for. “Definitely going to need something particularly rousing for this. This is Captain America.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sam demands. Beside him, Doctor Cho grimaces and shakes her head like she’s embarrassed.

“1812 Overture maybe? John Philip Sousa.” Strange turns to glance at his guys. “You taking notes? Keep up. Although I suppose the Star-Spangled Banner’s too predictable. But sometimes you have to go with the obvious.”

Steve shakes his head, increasingly uncertain that this is a good idea. Who the hell is this guy? “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Just like that, Strange is snatching a tablet from one of the nurses and flipping through the images on it. Steve catches glimpses of them and realizes they’re his most recent PET scans. He saw them back at Columbia when the team, including Doctor Richards, met to explain his procedure in detail, about where the electrodes are going and how it will work. Strange is moving through them lightning quick. “Music to operate by, Captain. Have to set the scene. Wow, this is… They should have sent you to me months ago.” Steve sees Nat and Sam share an angry look. “And let’s nix this plan of Doctor Richards’, shall we? Too exploratory. I can get this done faster and neater with less potential bleeding.”

That rankles Sam even more. “Wait, wait. You’re just throwing out Doctor Richards’ procedure?”

“And who are you exactly?” Strange snaps, turning around to glare at Sam quite boldly. “I’m the one with the alphabet soup of degrees after my name. Let’s just defer to my expertise, shall we? I was asked to help, so I’m here, even though I should be enjoying an outrageously expensive lunch with the dean of Harvard’s medical school right now as they try to kiss my ass thoroughly enough for me to switch hospitals.”

“A fact for which we’re very grateful, Stephen–” Doctor Cho stammers.

“You’re just going to wing this,” Sam returns, completely undaunted and unconvinced. “You’re going to go in there and operate on his brain without a plan.”

Strange sighs and tosses the tablet onto Steve’s bed right between his legs. “I’ve performed hundreds of procedures like this on brains more damaged than his. Granted, this time is a bit more extensive–” That’s a hell of an understatement. “–but if you want to develop a new technique, I’m the one to do it.”

“Is that all you care about? The chance to be a trail blazer?”

“That’s part of it, yes, but frankly why I’m here shouldn’t matter. I’m here. Now, if you’d rather
wait for the good Doctor Richards to come, be my guest. I’ll go back to my lobster and champagne and egregious ass-kissing. Or, if you want it done right, you can stop wasting everyone’s time and let me do this my way.” He cocks his head. “Trust me: I can get these implants in place better than anyone in the world, and I can make sure this works instead of making the situation worse, which, given your friend’s epilepsy history, would be a very bad outcome.”

He turns to Steve. “You should be thanking your lucky stars the weather screwed you over.”

Steve’s too lost to really follow any of that. There are so many people around, and any illusion of control he may have felt over the situation (which was practically zilch) is rapidly dwindling to less than nothing. He doesn’t know what to think, how to feel, if he should trust this guy when it really comes down to it. This is his mind, his life, at stake here.

Then he catches Nat’s eyes, still shining so brightly with love and faith. She believes in him. And he’s come this far. “Okay,” he says on a long breath.

Strange turns. “We’re good?”

Steve nods. “Yeah.”

Strange gives a curt nod of his own. “Then let’s do this.” He’s gone after that.

Doctor Cho smiles. “Don’t worry about a thing, Steve,” she promises. Then she follows the other doctors.

There’s no time to worry. The activity around him gets more fast-paced and suddenly, after hours of waiting, mere minutes after getting married, he’s facing surgery right now. “This will help you relax, Captain,” the anesthesiologist announces as the contents of a needle are injected into his IV. “We’ll take you over to the OR in just a moment.” Nurses are cataloging his vitals, taking his pulse and his blood pressure, logging the data on tablets. Steve blinks and tries to track it, but the sedative makes it difficult for him to do anything other than watch with blurry vision. He feels warm, loose, free. The commotion gets more and more distant as he starts to drift. That’s the point: getting him comfortable and sleepy. It seems fast, but he doesn’t fight it. They’re adjusting the gurney, stringing more things into his IV, and there’s a hum of conversation, words that sound too long and complicated for him to parse and understand. All he knows is this is it. They’re moving him.

Sam’s right there, looming over him. He squeezes Steve’s hand. “You keep fighting, huh?” His big brown eyes are full of tears that he wipes away. He smiles. “We’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Okay,” Steve murmurs. It seems dumb to say just that, but his brain’s not working right anymore, and he can’t think of anything else. “Okay.”

Then Nat’s there. She’s leaning close, taking up Steve’s other hand and brushing his hair back from his brow. She’s smiling, too, as bright as the sun. Beautiful. “You’ll be okay. I know you will be. I know it.”

The sound of her voice lulls him, and he drifts more, grinning dopily. “Hmm… Nat?”

“What?”

“Natasha… Natalie… Natalia…” Everything seems so fuzzy and distant. Vaguely he knows it’s the drugs, but he can’t care. He’s happy. She’s there. And she married him. His voice slurs and he stumbled over his words. “Can’t – can’t decide which I like the most. They’re all… They’re
all you.”

She laughs and lets go of his hand to cradle his face. “Just Nat. Your Nat.”

“Did I…” The world gets dark. He can’t hardly see her anymore, but he knows she’s there. She’s always there. “Did I tell you that I love you?” He should have said that when they got married. He really should have.

“No,” she murmurs against his cheek. “Not yet.”

“Then I love you.” He feels her lips brush against his. “Stay with me?”

“Always.”

“Okay.” He grins. “Meet you on the other side.”

Then she’s gone. They’re wheeling him away. He’s staring up at the ceiling, at the streaks of bright lights and the smears of shadows. There are still voices. None of them are hers. That’s mildly distressing, but he’s too warm and fuzzy to care.

He’s being moved again from the gurney to the operating table. The doctors are talking. They’re readying equipment, and one of them comes over with a mask. It’s placed over his mouth and nose. He blinks, and through the blur of color and light, he sees Doctor Strange. He’s in surgical garb now, hands gloved and face behind a mask. “Alright, Captain,” he says in a low voice. “It’s time to finally fix your brain.”

“Deep breaths, Steve. Just keep breathing.”

He obeys. His lungs move, his chest rises, and he inhales. The air fills him, and the medicine takes him down. As the darkness wraps him tightly in its embrace, he’s not afraid. Nat will be there when he wakes up. She said so, so she will be. And he will wake up. He will. He knows it.

He just has to breathe.

*Just breathe.*

__________________________

*Keep going, Steve.*

There are voices. Something’s beeping and beeping.

“It went very well. Very well. There were no complications whatsoever. The electrodes are in place, and they’re all already active and responding to the Net. It’s better than I expected, honestly.”

“So what now, Doctor?”

“Well… Now we wait for him to regain consciousness. It may not be for a while yet.”

“But he’s okay, right? You said he’s okay.”

“He is. His vitals are strong and everything looks good. We just need to wait a little longer. The anesthesia will keep him down for a while yet, and after that he should wake up.”

*Wake up, Steve.*
“Thank you so much, Doctor Strange. None of this would have happened without you.”

“Just doing my job. Can’t turn down the chance to work on an interesting case like this. Plus the whole… Captain America thing.”

“Well, thank you. Thank you.”

“You still owe me, Doctor Cho. I expect to be at least the second author on the paper. Maybe call it the Strange-Cho technique?”

Someone laughs. “No.”

“No one ever seems to go for that. So sad.”

Sad? Didn’t it work?

“Steve, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes? Squeeze my hand.”

Can’t. I can’t do it.

“Be patient. He’ll come around when he’s ready.”

“How will we know if it…”

“The system is already calibrating itself to his brain’s electrical activity. These sensors here in his temporal lobe are learning the specific signals of normal function. Once he wakes, they’ll be able to record more input to use as a baseline measure. With that, the Net should be able to recognize seizure activity the instant it begins and use its own current to counteract it. It’s pretty remarkable, how quickly it will learn to adapt and respond. And thanks to the multiple control units working together, it can monitor huge areas of cerebral tissue.”

“You hear that, Steve? You have a super computer in your head.”

I do?

“Come on, man. It’s been more than twenty-four hours. You need to wake up now.”

I’m trying.

“You want to go for a little bit? No sense in both of us sitting here watching him.”

“I’m alright, Sam. I can’t leave. I have to be here when he wakes up. I promised him.”

Nat.

Did he tell that her he loves her?

“I’ll get you some coffee and something to eat, okay?”

“Thanks.” There’s the sound of footsteps. It’s the first thing that registers beyond the voices and the endless beeping. “Wake up, Steve. Open your eyes. I’m right here. Open your eyes… Please…”

Wait for me.

“I’m scared, Nat.”
“He’ll wake up. I know it. He squeezed my hand today.”

Did I? I… did. I did.

“He’s going to be fine. I know it.”

Wake up. It’s time.

“I know it’s hard to wait, but there’s no reason to be alarmed yet. Though the surgery went perfectly, it’s still a major change to his brain tissue, and that may require time for him to recover. This has never been attempted before, so it’s impossible for me to say how long it may take him to regain consciousness. I can tell you that the NeuralNet is reading a great deal of normal brain activity. His reactions to light and painful stimuli are good. His level of consciousness is increasing, even if it doesn’t seem it. Sometimes people don’t wake up all at once. I don’t see anything concerning at this point.”

“That’s not all that comforting.”

“Have some faith, Sam. He’ll be okay. We just need to wait a little longer.”

“How much longer?”

“As long as we have to.”

Keep going. You have to tell her.

“Steve, stop being such a dramatic asshole and open your eyes.”

Trying. There’s so much fear there. He’ll wake up and be back where he started after being shot, surrounded by strangers and unfamiliar faces. He’ll wake up to world he doesn’t know, to a body that doesn’t seem to be his own. To a life that’s changed forever.

No. That’s not what’s waiting for him. He hasn’t lost time, lost his life. He hasn’t lost anything. No. He has everything, and he just needs to open his eyes and see it.

“Come on, Steve. Please… I’m waiting for you. I’m here, just like I said. Come back to me. Come back.”

She’s waiting for me.

Someone’s humming. It’s soft, quiet, unobtrusive. Pretty. Familiar. He opens his eyes. At first there’s only light, a blurry world filled with it. It’s blindingly bright, consuming, and he loses himself in the overwhelming power of it. There’s no panic, though, and no pain, and as he blinks and breathes, the light slowly begins to fade. He doesn’t quite remember where he is or why he’s there. He can’t think, but that’s not overly distressing. He just lingers, warm and content, until it slowly fades.

Nat.

She’s all he sees. She’s there in the chair beside the bed where he’s laying with a bandage around his head and a cannula in his nose and a blanket covering his body. Her songbook’s open on her lap, and she’s writing in it. Writing and humming. Her face is serene, eyes distant with thought and concentration, the red of her hair framing her. That bright light is the sun, and it’s streaming through the large windows of the hospital room. When it hits her, her hair glows like fire. She’s stunning. Amazing. Breathtaking. The light cradles her, stunningly beautiful, radiant and pure.
It’s seem like a glow all her own.

Like a halo.

“I see you,” he whispers.

She looks up, jerking from her thoughts. The book slides from her lap to thud onto the floor as she lurches closer and grabs his hand. “Steve? Steve?”

He blinks languidly, freeing tears that have been trapped. His words are soft, his voice hardly anything at all. But he has to speak. “Like an angel. Light all around you.”

She gasps a little sob, leaning closer. She brushes her fingers across his cheek. “Steve?”


Her sobs get louder, tinged with unimaginable relief. She presses her lips to his forehead in a frantic kiss before pulling away and rushing to the door. She’s yelling. “He’s awake! Sam! Get the doctor! He’s awake! Sam!”

The noise makes his head throb. He’s tired. So tired. He can barely stay away. And he should ask if it worked, how much time has passed, if he’s okay. If she is. But he can’t make himself.

He just has to know. He reaches a shaking hand out to her. “Natalia…”

She comes right back, grabbing his fingers tight and holding his hand between their bodies. Her tears rain down onto his face. “What, baby? What?” The ring on her hand glitters in the light as she caresses his cheek. The ring he gave her. “What’s wrong?”

He closes his eyes and smiles. “Did I say that I love you?” He honestly can’t remember. He should have. He will. A million times over. I love you. I want you. I need you.

Stay with me.

She smiles, too. He can feel it. “Yeah.” Her voice is a breath of life against his lips. “Yeah, you did. You did.”

“Good. Had… had to be sure. Had to know.” Relieved and happy, he sinks down. This is the other side. He’s there, and she’s with him. It’s over now. They’re finally free. “Love you. Love you forever.”

She kisses him tenderly, kisses away the last of their tears. “I know. I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

More stunning artwork from the lovely faith2nyc!
"Stay" Chapter 22

“Oh, I’m a lucky man to count on both hands the ones I love. Some folks just have one and others, they got none. Stay with me. Let’s just breathe. Practiced are my sins. Never gonna let me win. Under everything, just another human being. Yeah, I don’t want to hurt. There’s so much in this world to make me bleed. Stay with me. You’re all I see. Did I say that I need you? Did I say that I want you? Oh, if I didn’t I’m a fool, you see. No one knows this more than me.”

– Pearl Jam, “Just Breathe”

Written by: thegraytigress
Artwork by: faithz NYC
Stay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh, we were walking just the other day
And it was so hot outside you could fry an egg.
Remember you were talking and I watched as the sweat ran down your face
Reached up and I caught it at your chin
Licked my fingertips.
We were... We were just wasting time...
Let the hours roll by doing nothing for the fun.
A little taste of a good life.

Whether right or wrong, it makes us want to stay, stay, stay, stay, stay for a while.”

Doctor Banner still wears a lot of green. His office is the same, too, with its nicely painted cinder block walls and the window revealing the pretty summer day outside and the couch and coffee table with the flowers and tissues. With the two leather chairs. Steve still prefers sitting there, but it’s more out of habit than discomfort now. A lot of things in his life are like that. Comfortable. Easier.

Happy.

“You look really well,” Banner comments. He hasn’t seen Steve in a couple weeks because they’ve reduced the frequency of his sessions. It was a joint decision, though Steve was gone recently anyway to Los Angeles for a film festival. Coulson’s documentary on his experiences in Afghanistan premiered there, and he was invited to attend, of course. He wasn’t sure about it when he heard, but with Nat’s gentle prodding, he decided he deserved to see it. That he should see it. She went with him, of course. The trip was multi-purposed because the man with whom she’s working locally wanted her to meet some people there in the music industry, so it turned into them both supporting one another through taking these big steps.

And there were other reasons, too, like a private beach in Malibu that Tony’s family owns. A delayed honeymoon of sorts. Steve can’t help but smile at the memories of it, of the couple days they spent there, alone for miles with nothing but the pearly sand and the blue sea and the bright sun and each other. It was amazing. Somehow he kept that promise he made to her when things were so dark, to take her away to their own little world beside the ocean, and it was every bit as perfect as it could have been.

“Trip was good?”

Banner’s question brings him back to the here and now. He smiles. “Yeah! Yeah, it was great. We had a great time. It was nice to get away for a bit.”

The psychiatrist nods, folding his hands together on top of his pad. He’s not even writing anything down. “And seeing the documentary? How did that go?”

Steve winces a little, shifting in his seat. There’s no sense in lying or downplaying it. “It was... Well, it was hard.”
“Of course, it was. It should be.”

Steve nods. “I got through it. Nat helped a lot.” Banner smiles at that. He’s been so very pleased with Steve’s progress since last summer. It’s been a year since his accident, since he first met Nat, and so much has changed, him definitely not least of all. “It was kinda surreal, actually. Watching the story play out like… like it wasn’t me who lived it. But it was, you know? I saw my face up there, heard my voice telling how it happened… Talking about Bucky, about what we went through together. I got to meet the farmers who saved me. Did I tell you that?”

Bruce is moderately surprised. “No.”

“Yeah. I guess Mr. Coulson flew them in for the screening. That was…” Incredible didn’t really begin to describe it. His saviors were only ever ghosts in his memories, mysteries, people he knew only vaguely from a scant few impressions and what he was told. In reality, they were an Afghan family, a man and his wife and their older son and younger daughter, and they looked at him with such warm eyes. Such compassionate eyes. He supposes he should have known that they’d be like that, though. He can remember it even now, the blur of gentle hands and worried voices and those warm, compassionate gazes. Heroes risking everything to save a stranger, a man who could be seen as their enemy. Steve takes a breath, smiling more. “They hardly spoke any English, but we understood each other right away. I never really thought… Well, they’d wonder about me? I guess? I don’t know. That seems selfish, but I guess I never realized that they didn’t know if the soldier they saved actually survived.”

“He’s done more than survive,” Banner replies quietly.

Steve can’t help but be proud at that, too. “It felt really good. Really good.” It really did. It felt like putting an end to it all, a good, meaningful resolution. He smiles, eyes distant as he recalls more of that night, of Nat at his side and Coulson so thrilled to finally debut his movie and all the people involved to tell his story. “I think Bucky would’ve been proud of it. I ran into his folks there and a couple of his sisters. They looked well. His sister had her baby. They named him James. He looks like his uncle.”

“That’s great news.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was good to see them. The whole thing was good. I’m… I’m glad I did it. Glad I went and saw it. I needed to.” He exhales slowly. “I thought for the longest time that nothing good would ever come of it. But the story they told… Our story. Bucky was a hero. He got the recognition he deserved for what he did. So did the folks who rescued me, and the surgeons in that hospital, and the people who lied for months about the fact I was there so the Taliban wouldn’t find out…” *All of them.* “I guess I never realized what a miracle it really was, how many people came together to save my life.”

Banner nods to that. “It was a miracle.” His eyes are deep and understanding. “Bucky wasn’t the only hero, though. You realize that too, I hope?”

Steve laughs, feeling his cheeks redden a little bit. No matter what, no matter how much time passes or how much he heals, he’s never going to be comfortable with that. Not entirely. *Captain America.* He’s still Captain America. He knows that now. He’s still the man he was when he left for Afghanistan, still the person he always has been. The one that couldn’t stand bullies and stood up to mean kids twice his size and the one Bucky called too stubborn for his own good. The one his mom kissed at night. The one who wanted to be a soldier to protect people.

The one who did everything he possibly could to save his best friend, who honors his memory every day by living the life he was given. The one who is loved by so many, including his wife.
The one who can love, who’s broken free from the vicious cycle his life used to be to embrace what he’s become. Who he’s become. The same yet different. Exactly who he’s meant to be.

“Yeah, doc. I realize that.”

Chuckling himself, Banner sets his pad to the table and leans forward. “And how’s it going with the NeuralNet? Everything okay?”

Enthusiastically Steve nods. “Yeah, it’s going great. Doctor Erskine and Doctor Cho are still tweaking it, but I haven’t had a seizure in… I don’t know, a month? And that was the first one I’ve had in a while.”

“Wonderful,” Banner remarks, and Steve can tell he really thinks that. “That’s really amazing.”

*Phenomenal* was the word Erskine used at his last check-up. Steve rubs a hand over his head. He’s kept his hair a lot shorter than it used to be, both because it’s been easier for the research team and because he wanted the change. It’s long enough to hide the surgical scars, but he knows where they are, has memorized how they feel. They’re a small price to pay. Between the device in his head and the medications he’s on, his epilepsy has *finally* come under control. It’s not fully in remission, not yet, but it’s been reduced dramatically to the point where he doesn’t live in fear of it anymore. Doctor Cho is absolutely thrilled with the outcome. It’s not without its drawbacks. It took them some time to get the Net calibrated initially. He ended up staying in Boston for almost a month back in January as they worked through it, which was just as well because the surgery definitely took a lot out of him. After the Net demonstrated it was successfully counteracting his seizures, he was sent back to New York. Since then it’s been almost weekly visits to Doctor Cho’s team at Columbia. Steve can’t deny it; sometimes he *feels* like there’s something inside his head, zapping his nerves in this kind of unsettling, itchy, low-level buzz, but it’s a minor complaint. A *really* minor complaint. Over the last six months, he’s been able to come off a lot of the AEDs that used to make him so sick. His migraines are better, too. He’s still doing physical therapy to deal with his bad hip, and he’s still taking medications for his PTSD and other issues, but overall? He’s totally willing to admit it. It *is* a miracle.

So much has seemed that way of late. One miracle after another. Bucky coming home to rest where he belongs. Nat’s past letting her finally escape it. Meeting her. Marrying her. And everything since. His world has changed, and it’s changed him. He can’t imagine the man he was a year ago, broken and bitter and alone. Drowning in his own misery. Struggling just to go through the motions. Now he’s alive. Now he knows what it feels like to live. It still hurts sometimes. His scars still trouble him, but it’s okay. He can handle it. He can do anything.

“And work’s good?” Banner asks, drawing his attention again.

“Yes. I mean, it’s different. I lost my job when SHIELD turned back into, well, SHIELD, but I told you that.”

“Yeah, a couple months back.”

“But I’m keeping busy. Guess all the work I did for Block Fest last year paid off because a lot of the businesses around Flatbush have me doing freelance stuff. I enjoy it, and it’s paying the bills, so it’s good.”

“Good. And PT’s going okay?”

“It’s going fine. Melinda’s not complaining, so I assume it is anyway.”

Banner smiles. “And you’re sleeping alright? Eating alright?”
“Yeah. And yeah. Doctor Erskine’s happy.”

“And Nat? How’s she?”

Steve pauses. He doesn’t really need to think about the answer. Not at all. But he can’t help but sink into the warmth that blossoms in his chest. It’s this pervasive sense of well-being, of completion. Wholeness. **Happiness.** When he woke up at Walter Reed to learn that Bucky was dead and his body was permanently damaged and Peggy moved on and years had been taken from him, he never thought he could feel that again. It seemed forever barred to him.

But it’s not. It never was. Nat’s showed him that in ways he never imagined. In these last six months since his surgery… God, she’s only become more beautiful. More powerful. More confident. That’s what’s so striking to him, her calm certainty. The way she moves the world around her. It’s stunning. They’ve fallen in together like they were meant to. They were meant to find each other, and they’re meant to be together. He thought that before, when things were at their darkest and most difficult, but now he knows it.

“Steve?”

“Yeah! Yeah.” He snaps from his thoughts yet again, wiping the broad smile from his face just a little. “She’s great. Everything’s going really well. Her career’s kinda taking off, so that’s good. Small beginnings, but she’s excited. So am I. I’m excited for her.”

“That’s great.”

“She’s singing tonight. At Block Fest,” Steve says. “She’s nervous.”

Banner laughs. “I’d be. You couldn’t drag me in front of a crowd with a freight train.”

“She’s right outside actually.” Steve pictures her out there in the waiting room, sitting and reading a magazine or checking her phone. “She wanted to come with me today. I think that’s the only time she’s ever come along just because she wants the distraction. Otherwise you’d never be able to tell she’s scared. She’s so calm all the time now.”

“So are you.” Banner’s expression softens into an appreciative grin, even when Steve looks surprised. “You’ve come a really long way, Steve. The man who walked into my office week after week last summer, all the months before that, and sat here and stubbornly and silently refused to accept anything… That man has healed so much of himself, not just physically but mentally. Emotionally. It’s truly remarkable.”

Maybe it shouldn’t feel like such a huge compliment, but it is. And he’s so proud again. “Thanks.”

Banner leans back and stands. He lets his hands slap against his thighs. “Well! I guess that’s all I have on my list of things to talk about.”

Steve’s confused, but he stands all the same. “Really?”

The doctor shrugs. “You’ve earned a day off. And it’s beautiful outside, so go take Nat somewhere nice and enjoy it. We can pick it up again next week. Besides…” Banner smiles wryly. “Seems to me like maybe my work here is nearly done. You’re cured, Captain Rogers.”

And **that** shouldn’t feel like such a huge accomplishment, but it **does.** “There is no cure, right, Doctor Banner?” He gives a knowing grin as he shakes Bruce’s hand. “Just learning to live differently.”
Bruce laughs again. “Alright, now I know my work is done. Get out of here.”

“See you next week?”

“I’ll be here.”

Steve can’t quite get the smile off his face as he strolls out of Banner’s office and into his waiting room. Nat’s there, of course, just as he pictured her, sitting in one of the nice chairs with her legs crossed and a magazine open on her lap. The second he walks out of the door, she springs to her feet. She’s got her hair (now such a vibrant, natural red) done up in a ponytail, and she’s wearing a black babydoll t-shirt with tan capris. She looks summery and free, even with the surprise all over her face. “That was fast.”

Steve grins as he takes her hand. “Special therapy today. I’m supposed to take you some place fun and enjoy the nice weather. Have a good time.” He cocks an eyebrow suggestively. He never used to be this much of a flirt, not even with Peggy. He was always pretty hopeless with women. With Nat, though, and here and now… Well, she’s his. And she seems to like his pathetic attempts to woo her, even if he doesn’t need to anymore.

Like now. Nat laughs as they walk out of the office and down the halls of the VA center. “I highly doubt your therapist told you to do that.”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” he lightly admonishes. “Besides, I thought I read somewhere once that sex is actually really good therapy. Really good. Very healing to both mind and body.”

“Well, no wonder you’re so much better,” she says coyly. They get outside and a wall of hot, summer air immediately blasts them. The sun is bright, and the sky is pristinely blue. It’s gorgeous out. Steve pulls his sunglasses out of his bag and slides them on. Nat does the same, and she grins. “Where to?”

He thinks a moment. “What time does Block Fest start?”

She tries to appear nonchalant as she unconcernedly scans the VA parking lot. “Seven.”

And it’s a little after nine o’clock in the morning. They have all day. All day to waste. It’s not exactly the first time that’s happened, but it’s the first time in a while, and today feels special for some reason. “I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“This is your therapy,” she teased. “What do you want to do?” He grins devilishly. “And it has to be something other than ‘enjoying’ the day from our bedroom.” She doesn’t seem overly adamant about that, despite how firm she’s trying to sound.

“But ravishing you—”

“Down, boy.”

Okay, okay,” he says with a laugh. Then he thinks for a second, as the sun soaks into his skin and the gentle breeze cards through his hair. He smiles. “I know.”
“Then later on the sun began to fade.
And then, well, the clouds rolled over our heads and it began to rain.

We were dancing, mouths open.
We were splashing, and the tongue taste
And for a moment this good time would never end.
You and me. You and me just wasting time.

I was kissing you.
You were kissing me, love.
From a good day into the moonlight.

Now a night so fine
Makes us want stay, stay, stay, stay, stay for a while.”

About an hour later, they stop by their apartment to pick up Max. Then they head to Prospect Park. It’s not far at all from their place, a pleasant walk down a few blocks. The park’s already pretty busy, even this early in the morning. Max is loping alongside Steve, and Steve’s got his leash in one hand and Nat’s hand in his other. Nat can’t help but steal glances at her husband as they walk along the paths. Her husband. That still throws her for a loop, that she has that and that it’s right and true and full of love rather than fear. At any rate, he looks really good, Dodgers cap and sunglasses on, a dark blue t-shirt clinging to his muscular frame, face unshaven but not with quite the full beard he used to have. He looks different but the same, too, more like the man she thought she first saw underneath the darkness when they met. It’s amazing, just how much he’s transformed from a broken war vet to this, to the person he’s become. Who he always was yet someone new. A survivor and a hero and a good man. She thinks she’s honored to have helped him find himself again.

And to have him help her.

The park’s really nice. The trees are lush and verdant, so very green with the height of summer. The grass is neatly mowed and trimmed. People are all over, playing and laughing and chatting, walking and running and biking. The world seems full of promise, warm and brimming with vitality, and taking a deep breath brings that energy right into her body. It feels so good to be here, in Brooklyn, at home. Home. Miles and a lifetime away from cold Russian winters and the dark shadows of the Red Room and the nightmare she barely escaped. As she looks around, she’s still amazed that she’s here. It’s been a year, a long, difficult, incredible year, and she’s here.

“What’re you thinking about?” Steve asks, breaking what’s become a long but comfortable moment of silence.

She flushes and smiles, shaking her head. “Nothing. Beautiful today.”

He nods, turning his face up to the sky. “Yeah. Kinda like one in a million. Really perfect.”

It is. They walk a bit longer and start talking about other things. He keeps inching the conversation toward Block Fest tonight like a little shit, and she just rolls her eyes and plays with him, steering it back. She has to admit she’s gotten pretty good at keeping her emotions under control, even more than she used to be. Back then it was a necessity, a self-defense mechanism that she couldn’t survive without. Now it comes easily but for entirely different reasons. She’s so at peace with herself that there’s no reason to be anything but composed. Truly she feels like she can face anything now, even what’s shaping up to be a very over-hyped first public performance.

“You never told me what you’re going to play,” he says as they lazily walk along a bend in the cool shade. Max stops to sniff at one of the big maple trees there, and Steve lets him. He leans
into the trunk, and Nat leans into him. “I assume you’ve decided? You know, it’s your big debut and all. It should be something special. And you probably should have a plan. Like more than one song planned even.”

“It’s called a setlist, you dork.” Truth be told, she doesn’t have one. Not really. It’s pretty bad to be so ill-prepared, but Steve’s more perceptive than he has any right to be (of course, he should be. He knows everything about her, including when she’s hiding how nervous she really is under a load of fake equanimity. In the privacy of her own thoughts? Yeah, she can admit it’s a front). “I have one, and it’s a secret.”

“Daisy knows.”

Daisy is practically her manager now. She’s been absolutely true to her word, sticking by Nat’s side every step of the way. Ever since Nat hooked up with Vision (that’s his name, no kidding), her career’s really been moving fast. Sometimes it feels too fast, but she knows that’s her hang-up more than anything else. The guy Daisy put her in touch with here in Brooklyn actually has some pretty big connections out in LA and in Manhattan, and Vision is one of them. Vision is kind of… Well, weird is probably the best term. Reddish skin. Bald as a baby’s bottom. Tattoos on his arms, one on his forehead that looks like this weird yellow gem… But the man knows his stuff. He’s an amazing producer, and he immediately took a serious liking to Nat’s sound, the unique quality of her voice and the soulful, mournful power of her songs. He’s encouraging her to embrace more of her Russian heritage, claiming it adds depth and mystery to her music. She’s been working with him to start recording some things in the city, and it’s going so well it almost seems like a dream.

But she’s nervous as hell. Tonight, at the seemingly insignificant Flatbush Block Fest, Natasha Romanoff is going to singing for the first time for an audience. Well, Natalia Romanova has sung many times for audiences back home in Russia, but this is monumental. After nearly having that dream stolen from her, ruined by what she was forced to become… She’s gotten it back. It’s here, tonight. Today is a tremendous day, and the butterflies in her stomach are seriously distracting. And they’re not the only thing.

She drops her hand to her belly almost without thinking before stopping herself and touching Steve’s instead in a cozy caress. “Well, secrets among girls and all that. You’ll find out tonight.” Lord, she loaded that with double meaning (if she can actually go through with it), but he’s none the wiser. Oblivious as he leans down to kiss her. It goes on way longer than it should, and a fleeting thought about public displays of affection making people uncomfortable goes through her head, but she ignores it. They’re in a park, and it’s a day for lazing and kissing and loving. No one thinks twice.

Steve finally comes up for air after Max has pretty well wrapped the leash around both of them and gotten them and himself all tangled up. He laughs. “They’re still trying to keep us together.”

“Huh?”

“Our pets,” he explains like she should have known. She supposes she should have. He crouches to unwind the leash from their legs. “You ever think about what would have happened if Liho never broke into my apartment?”

She has once or twice. Catching his face, she kisses him again. “Not worth thinking about.”

They keep walking. Steve starts telling her about what he did with Tony the night before while she was at the recording studio. Apparently Tony is finally doing something with some of his
inventions. It looks like it may be a pretty big deal. He’s taking his designs for one he calls an arc reactor (Nat has no idea what that is or what it does) back to Stark Industries, and it sounds like it may be a game-changer of sorts for the clean energy industry. Nat’s glad to hear it, glad that Tony’s finally doing something more than fixing cars and screwing around. And Thor’s gone back to work for his father. It seems like they’re making amends. He’s been traveling a lot, between his new position with his father’s company and Jane’s success. Thor’s even made some efforts to heal his relationship with his estranged brother.

It’s all really great news, and she’s happy for them. “They said they’re coming tonight, though. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“That doesn’t sound like something Tony’d say,” Nat says, failing to hide a nervous blush. “Or Thor.”

“Oh, I paraphrased.”

They get to the dog park. It’s a pretty open field, and Steve lets Max off the leash. He reaches into his shorts pocket for Max’s ball and gives it a good toss. Max immediately goes running, and Steve goes running right after him. They’re both moving pretty well, all things considered, limping but not so much that it slows them down. Nat finds a tree to lean against as she watches them play. Steve throws the ball for Max a bunch more times, and Max is cavorting with the other dogs and barking and fetching and so excited. Steve chases him a little, pets him like crazy when he catches him, laughs so carefree. Her hand goes down to her stomach again. Anxiety twists up in her again, but it’s a good kind. Anxiety and excitement, feelings so far from that night in Staten Island where she lost everything. She supposes she doesn’t need to pile all of this into one night. Summoning the courage to actually get up in front of Block Fest and sing seems like a huge enough endeavor. This can wait.

She doesn’t want to wait.

But her voice doesn’t come when he staggers back, sweating and breathing heavily and grinning like a loon. She reaches out to wipe an errant bead of perspiration that’s dripping down his cheek. “Drink,” he gasps. “Lunch. Ice cream.”

She giggles. “Aye-aye, Cap.”

They head off to find something to eat. Right outside the dog park there’s a hot dog cart, and they buy lunch and some water and soda. They settle down for their little picnic under another tree, this one’s canopy big and broad so as to make a great deal of pleasant shade. Max sits next to them, panting and happy, as they eat. Steve devours three hot dogs in a blink. Nat picks at hers. “What’s wrong?” he asks.


He grins and wraps an arm around her. “I know you are.”

*You don’t know the half of it.*

She makes herself eat some of the hotdog, no matter how queasy she is, and sip some soda. That settles her stomach a little. After they’re done, they start heading back towards their apartment, though their path is anything but straight. They take their time, meandering through the park, stopping to listen to a Reggae band they come across. Nat realizes almost immediately that these guys are also performing at Block Fest tonight; she recognizes the group’s name from Daisy’s incessant talking. They’re really good, and the corner of the park is filled with the clean ringing of
steel drums, the strumming of guitars, the lively beat of easy, mellow happiness. When the musicians take a break, Nat somehow finds it in herself to go talk to them. She surprises herself all the time now with how bold she can be, how brave. They’re very nice, super friendly, just a local band jamming for free in the park on a perfect, lazy, summer day. The lead guitarist offers to let her sing with them, and everyone (including Steve) pushes a bit, but she manages to escape with a bunch of blushes and flustered smiles. God, how is she ever going to get up on that stage tonight?

She and Steve find another shady spot in the grass not far from the band and listen for a while longer. He lays flat on his back, arm bent at the elbow and pillowed under his head, and she has her head on his chest. They’re staring up at the sky. It’s gotten cloudy now, big, towering pillars of gray and white. Thunderheads building up and looming and seemingly coming out of nowhere. She frowns at that. “Hope it doesn’t rain tonight.”

“Not supposed to,” Steve says. He sounds sleepy as he pets Max beside him, and sure enough he yawns a couple seconds later. He drapes an arm around her midsection and closes his eyes. “But if it does, you’ll be singin’ in the rain.” He grins.

“You’re so lame,” she murmurs.

“You’re way hotter than Fred Astaire, though, so it’s fine. I wouldn’t mind.”

“I’m not even American, and I know Gene Kelly was the one who did ‘Singing in the Rain.’”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Yes. Yes, it was.”

“Oh. Which one is Fred Astaire then?”

“The dancer.”

“I thought he was guy who sang ‘White Christmas’.”

“That’s Bing Crosby. Wow, that’s just… No one can be this ignorant about classic musicals.” Steve doesn’t retort. Nat twists a little to look up at him. “Steve?” He’s fallen asleep. She rolls her eyes fondly, worries for a second that maybe they don’t have time for an impromptu nap, but they do. So she pushes his hand a little lower on her stomach, cradling it there, and lets her mind drift.

_Fly, ptickka._

She opens her eyes, and she swears she hears her father’s voice, that low, distinct timbre of it that she remembers so clearly and that always made her feel so safe and loved. But it’s just the park, the people around them chatting and laughing, the music still a vibrant hum of happy sound. Nat smiles all the same, the memory or dream — _her father’s deep brown eyes and his huge, warm hand on her head and her mother at the stove, humming along with her as she practices and practices and practices_ — slow to fade like a lasting kiss. She squeezes Steve’s hand tighter and hopes they’d be proud of her. She thinks they are proud from heaven.

Max gets up from Steve’s side and comes over to lick her face and practically lay on top of her in a hot, heavy blanket of fur. She chuckles and shoves him off. The sky’s getting darker and the air’s becoming muggier and stiller. She nudges Steve awake, gets him up with a groan. He blinks his gogginess away and whines about ice cream, and off they go.

It’s getting to be midafternoon and uncomfortably hot. Sweltering, really, as the air tends to
become when an afternoon storm is building. They pick up the pace a bit on their way home, though they do manage to find a vendor selling ice cream cones much to Steve’s pleasure. They even have coffee ice cream. It’s all homemade, a cart belonging to a little shop right next to the park. It takes a few minutes to get their treats, but then they keep walking. For a bit, anyway. It’s melting so fast that it’s too hard to eat quickly and not fall on their faces, so they pause by a stone wall along the path and concentrate on devouring their cones. Thankfully her stomach doesn’t mind this. It’s so cold and so sweet and so good, and she just enjoys it.

Even though the sky’s starting to rumble. “It’s going to rain out the festival,” she mutters glumly, trying not to show just how much that’s worrying her.

He looks up, squinting. “Just an afternoon shower. A passing one.”

“When did you become such an optimist?”

Another cheeky grin. “When I married you.” He leans over to take a kiss. There’s chocolate on his lips. They taste even better like that. “Figure if I have that, no reason to ever be blue again.”

“Lame and sappy.” It’s not much of a retort, and it barely hides how much that makes her feel, how her heart’s swelling again until she can hardly breathe. Then she can’t breathe at all when he kisses her again, harder. Her cone gets bumped, and she ends up with ice cream on her hand. “Ugh.”

He kisses that away too, practically licks the sweet, sticky mess in a way only she can see, and that’s a lot more pointed and heated and not at all suggestive. Thunder grumbles louder. “We should probably get home before it rains,” he says seriously. “And to continue my therapy for today.”

She rolls her eyes again but doesn’t debate because a fat drop of water hits her nose. The sky’s really dark now, thick with the promise of precipitation, and they really do need to hurry. They’re quite far from home still, fifteen minutes maybe, and by the look of the clouds, she’s not sure they’ll make it.

They don’t.

They’re a couple blocks away when the sky finally cracks like the weight of the rain is too much, and down comes the deluge. It’s a hot flood. Steve grips her hand tighter, leads her through the sheets of water coming down, urging her on. They run, but there’s no escape, and Nat shrieks and laughs as she’s soaked instantly.

A couple minutes later they’re back at their building, panting and staggering into the lobby. They’re absolutely drenched, utterly waterlogged and dripping, and their shoes squeak on the tiles as they cling onto each other and stumble toward the elevator with Max panting and shaking the rain away repeatedly. They’re kind of all over each other before the elevator doors are even closed, Steve backing Nat into the corner and grabbing her hips. He’s kissing her, wet skin sliding on wet skin, and she’s dizzy with how good it is. “You and your ice cream,” she moans when he attacks her neck with his mouth. She tips her head back to offer more of it. “Had to have it.”

“Have to have you,” he husks, for a second, an image of him doing just that in the elevator of all places flashes behind her eyelids and, God, it’s too hot to even consider it.

But he pulls away like she turned to ice because the elevator dings and the door opens and someone from one of the floors below them gets on. It’s an older lady, and Steve swallows nervously, getting his hands off his wife in a hurry. “Sorry. It’s, uh… raining?”
Nat has to bite her lip to keep quiet. She makes a paltry attempt to cover her wet, wet t-shirt (and just how turned on she is), but it’s pretty pointless. The elevator reaches the old lady’s destination, and she gets off, shaking her head but smiling. The second the doors are shut again, Nat bursts out laughing. Steve does, too. They’re still laughing breathlessly when they stagger to their apartment. Steve fumbles to get the door open, and once he does, Max goes right in, shaking more and getting water everywhere.

It’s still pouring outside, obvious through the windows. Nat doesn’t bother to close the ones that are open or even turn on the lights, heading right to their bedroom and peeling off her wet clothes as best as she can while kissing Steve mindless. He’s kicking off his sneakers, undoing his shorts, wrenching his sopping wet t-shirt over his head and chucking it somewhat in the direction of the hamper. She dumps her shirt on the floor and shimmies out of her capris as best she can given she’s pinned to the wall by his weight and given the fact the fabric’s pretty well sticking to her. She succeeds, though, and clad in only her bra and panties, he lifts her against him. She grabs his hair, devouring his mouth, as she wraps her legs around his waist. He’s not too graceful when he carries her to their bed, but he’s nothing but tender as he lays her there.

She smiles up at him. Excitement bubbles inside her, and she almost loses her cool and tells him everything, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t have much of a chance anyway because he’s kissing her again. Outside it thunders, and the rain splatters loudly against the windows of the bedroom, but inside there’s nothing but warmth and the pleasure of his touch and the heat of his mouth. She feels safer than she ever thought she could.

“Wait,” he murmurs just as she’s pulling him between her legs and grabbing for his damp boxers.

“Huh? I thought you were going to ravish me…”

“Down, girl,” he teases. He leans back and climbs off the bed, limping over to the dresser on the side of the room. He’s fiddling there in the shadows for a moment, by the speakers connected to the iPod dock, by the old record player from his mother that he put there when they moved in. They use it all the time.

There’s a little crackle of static before deep, low horns fill the room, and Peggy Lee’s sultry voice follows as she croons about her lover lingering longer in her arms. Nat doesn’t know whether to roll her eyes or fall more desperately in love with this man. She does both. “You and your old timey music.”

“Don’t tell me you can’t appreciate it,” he murmurs, lazily climbing back into bed. He lays at her side, skin still wet but so warm. “I may not know who sings the classics, but I know they’re good. This one made me think of you. It’s one of the records I bought when I asked you out. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“We can stay together forever,” he murmurs, leaning closer and kissing her sweetly, stroking her bare stomach. “Forever. We have all the time in the world…”

They do. They have all day. All their lives. All the time there is. She closes her eyes and pulls him atop her and believes in herself. In him. In everything they’re building. He kisses her breath away. The rain pours and pours through the summer storm, beating along with their shared hearts and shared breaths. He loves her tenderly, carefully, slowly. There’s no rush. No reason to do anything else. Nothing but him and her and this time they have. She offers everything. He fills her completely. He takes her to the very heights of perfection until she’s flying, soaring, far above and beyond.
Afterward, he’s dozing beside her again. As the afternoon slips away without their care or concern, Frank Sinatra’s iconic voice fills their bedroom. It can’t be more recognizable.

And it can’t be more right. She smiles. The best is truly yet to come.

“Hey, love,
Oh, just groping you, rolling in the mud.
Stay a while.
Stay a while.
Come on. I want to stay, stay, stay, stay, stay for a while.”
– Dave Matthews Band, “Stay (Wasting Time)”

Steve turns out to be entirely right. The storm doesn’t last, not hardly more than thirty minutes, and the sun comes right back out and blasts away the wet. Puddles evaporate quickly in the heat, and for a while the afternoon is too steamy to stand. As the sun starts to go down, though, things cool, and the evening is pretty and promises to be pleasant.

Which is great. Wonderful. Perfect, because Block Fest this year is even bigger than last year. Nat had a vague impression of that listening to Daisy and May coordinate it over the last couple months, but seeing it now… Wow. It’s sprawling through Flatbush, literally filling its few blocks to the brim and spilling over into Prospect Park. There are hundreds of vendors on the streets selling food and drink, face-painting and caricatures, jewelry and clothes and all sorts of wares. The local businesses all have their booths and tents and tables out, too, and there are people everywhere. It’s incredible. The good cheer is positively contagious in the air, families and couples and groups of friends enjoying the sweet summer night.

It’s the perfect end to a perfect day.

The Rising Tide is busy. Nat stopped there on her way to the park. She’s due to perform in less than a half an hour (thirty minutes!), so she should really be there getting ready, but she’s not. She’s not ready. She’s too nervous to breathe. She thought some vague attempt at normalcy might help calm her rattled mind, but it’s not really. Being immersed in this lively festival of people who are gathered to hear her sing is not helping at all.

“You look white as a ghost,” Daisy comments. She glances at Nat as she sets out more records and CDs for the eager shoppers. She knows everything, of course. She’s the only one who does.

“Feeling okay?”

“Do I look like I’m feeling okay?” she returns, probably more harshly than she should but she feels on edge. “Feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“Nerves or…”

“Don’t,” Nat warns with a smile.

Daisy grins wider. She lowers her voice and stands closer. “Did you tell him?”

Nat shakes her head. As the afternoon has worn on and the festival has loomed closer like some sort of countdown to doomsday (God, overdramatic much?), she’s focused more and more on her other issue. The other thing she needs to accomplish. And she came up with a plan, which she prepared while Steve slept the afternoon away. Like she needs a plan. The whole thing seems so
silly, how anxious and scared she is over nothing (but it’s not nothing, not really. It’s everything). Still, this feels right, like this is the right time. The best time. “Not yet. I’m going to.”

Daisy looks doubtful. “You got enough on your plate right now.”

That seems true enough. Her message is burning a hole through her bag on her shoulder, and now that she’s decided to do this… Well, she wants to. Her heart’s been low-key pounding in anticipation all day, but now it’s absolutely racing and she feels shaky with exhilaration. This night is going to change her life.

“I’m proud of you.”

“Huh? What?”

Daisy grips her shoulder, pulling her the rest of the way from her thoughts. The other girl stands there, staring at Nat with teary eyes. She nods. “I’m proud of you,” she says again. “I’m proud of you for doing this. For finally chasing your dreams. Even when I didn’t know anything about you, I knew you loved music, that you live and breathe it. Everything you’ve done since you got away from him… Tonight’s kind of the last step, you know? The thing he tried to ruin, tried to keep from you… You’re getting it back.”

Truth be told, Nat’s thought about it that way from time to time, but it’s never really sunk in. Since Steve’s surgery, so much has happened so fast that there’s barely been a moment to take it in, that she has real contacts in the music industry who think she has tremendous talent, that she has a recording contract with someone who respects her and knows how to help her be successful. That she has a producer and a manager and a real chance to do what she’s always wanted.

But singing into a microphone in a recording studio isn’t going to be enough. If she can’t do this…

Daisy hugs her. “Tonight’s the night,” she says, holding Nat close. “They’re going to love you.”

Nat’s eyes suddenly well with tears. God, don’t cry. She can’t ruin her makeup now; there’s hardly any time to fix it. She sniffls and holds it back. “You think so?”

“Definitely. We all do.”

Her heart pounds so hard and fast in her chest that she fears it’s going to burst. How is this her life? “Thanks!” she whispers. “Thank you for everything!”

Familiar voices get louder in the crowd packed onto the street, and Nat lets go of Daisy to see Steve and his friends. Tony and his wife and Thor and Sam and his girlfriend. He’s still with that beauty from the VA. Tony’s eating something that looks ridiculously greasy (a burger in aluminum foil maybe), and Thor has a cup of beer. Steve’s wearing a blue polo shirt that really brings out his eyes (hence why she bought it for him) and a pair of gray shorts. “You ready?” he says as they get closer. “I’ll walk you down.”

Is she? She smiles, but it’s still ridiculously awkward and not the dazzling show of airy poise she was going for. “Go on ahead. I’ll meet you by the stage.”

A brief look of concern crosses Steve’s face. “You sure?”

She summons some confidence. Truth be told, she’s about ready to melt into a gooey puddle of nerves. “Yeah. I’ll be right there.”

Steve nods and goes back to the group. The whole lot of them disappears in the crowds, heading
down the street in the direction of the park where the stage has been set up. Nat takes a deep breath. “This is so dumb,” she moans with a self-deprecating smile. *Like staying here will protect me.*

*You don’t need to be protected. You never did.*

With that thought filling her head, she leans down to grab her guitar in its case.

“Nat?” Peter’s voice distracts her from actually walking away, though, and she turns around to see him coming closer from where he was down the way at one of the tables. He and May are making out like bandits tonight with the sidewalk sale, but they’re working really hard to keep up with the slew of customers picking through their inventory. Maybe he wants some help with something (or a chance to slip out – that wouldn’t surprise her).

But it’s not that. He looks a little concerned. “Detective Barton’s looking for you. Says it’s important.”

Oh, God. It’s completely irrational, but fear shoots through her in cold bolts. The reaction’s still engrained into her even after months of knowing she doesn’t need it anymore. But, as she turns and looks behind Peter to where he was, to where May is talking to Clint, she sees… “Oh, my God.” She drops her guitar like it’s nothing and practically runs across the way, slipping through the little crowd of shoppers in the Rising Tide’s tent. Her heart’s pounding again and she can’t breathe and for some reason she never thought…

But it’s true and real. “Oh, God!” She grabs Wanda hard and pulls her close into a frantic hug. “You’re here! You’re here!” Her voice cracks and she gasps the words, too astonished and relieved to hide it. Her eyes flood with tears, stinging as she squeezes them shut and embraces Wanda tighter. So much for her makeup. To hell with it. “I can’t believe it!”

Wanda pulls away after a second. She looks good. Nat hasn’t seen her since that night she ran away, all the way back last fall. She knows vaguely that Wanda’s been okay, in contact with the FBI and trying, too, to stand up to her past. But she hasn’t *seen* her, not like this. Not outside in public, unafraid and strong. She still has a meek, timid air about her, a touch of skittish uncertainty, but she’s here and she’s so pretty with a nice red, floral summer dress on and her skin not so pale and drawn and her hair full of luster and shine. There are lighter highlights to the deep mahogany of it, like she’s actually been out to have it done. It’s incredible. “I clean up nice, no?” she jokes, holding Nat’s hands as she leans back. “So do you. But you always did.”

Nat flushes, smoothing down her own black dress. “I didn’t know you were coming,” she gasps, still reeling with the shock of it. “I didn’t know you even knew about this!” She can’t stop smiling.

Neither can Clint. He’s beaming. “That’d be me. I went and picked her up from Nyack. Thought it’d be a nice surprise.”

It is. It’s wonderful. God, seeing that Wanda’s free, too, not just knowing it but *feeling* it… It really is over. All of it. “This is amazing,” Wanda says, wiping at her own eyes. “Just amazing. Finally, Natalia. *Finally.*”

Nat can’t breathe. The emotions she’s feeling… It’s not possible for someone to be this happy. This thankful. But she is. She’s finally happy.

“Nat!” Daisy calls. “You really have to get down there! You have ten minutes!”
In fact, she’s so happy that the panic hardly registers. “You’re coming, right? To the show?”

Wanda nods enthusiastically. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Okay, I have to go. I can’t be late. So I’ll see you—”

Wanda’s arms suddenly wrap around her again, tugging her back as she starts to rush away. Nat goes willingly, melting into the hug, and closes her eyes. “Thank you,” Wanda whispers into her ear. Nat’s not sure what she’s thanking her for. Being her friend in that nightmare they suffered when they were innocents trapped in the Shostakov family’s empire. Protecting her and Pietro as much as she could. Saving her life. Stopping Alexei for good and putting an end to the hell they were living on the run. Maybe all of it.

They’re both free now. Free to live. Free to love and be loved. Free to be so happy. Free.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Nat murmurs, squeezing tight. “We did it together.”

Together.

A couple minutes later, she’s running. Running toward her dreams, not away from them. She’s racing through the crowds on light feet, her guitar tight in her hands, her bag over her shoulder. She’s flying.

And she gets to the park. It’s crowded, packed with festival goers, and the night is hot and alive with excitement and fun. The current band is loud, blasting its way through their final song, and Nat picks her way through the people watching and cheering to get to the side of the stage. There’s a little group there, and the event coordinator (Block Fest is so big and popular and successful this year that Daisy actually needed an event coordinator) greets her. He’s a nice guy, a little scatter-brained and fast-talking, and he babbles through some instructions that Nat hardly hears as he takes her to the rear of the stage. Her heart’s pounding and she feels cold with sweat and her stomach is so upset she really does think for a second she’s going to throw up. Now that it’s happening, that the stage is right before her, that this moment is finally here after months of worry and anticipation, after years of waiting and fading dreams and losing her way…

All her confidence just disappears, like it was never there at all. She doesn’t know if she can do this.

But then she sees Steve. He’s waiting at the rear of the stage, by the little hidden alcove where there are rickety steps that lead up. He smiles as she gets closer, smiles that smile of his that’s only ever for her. “You made it,” he says.

She’s so flustered she can’t think. “I had to run.”

He laughs lightly, takes her arms and pulls her closer. “No, I mean…” His fingers brush through the fiery mass of her hair. “You made it, Nat.”

“I’m scared,” she confesses as she fumbles to get her guitar out. Her hands are shaking like crazy. God, she’s more than scared. She’s terrified.

He’s not, though. He helps her get the shoulder strap around her, steadies her hands, her body, her soul. His blue eyes are warm, deep with love, filled with faith in her. It’s unwavering. “No. No reason to be. I know you, and I know you can do this. You can do it. You were made for it. You were made to sing, made to fly.”

Her heart soars with a dream come to life. Steve’s right, of course. She has made it. She’s come
here to this place, to this chance, strengthened by the hellfire through which she’s walked. Guided by her heart. Changed by the people who love her. She’s here. That realization soothes her so much, and she takes a deep breath, a cleansing, calming breath, and suddenly her heart stops thundering and her stomach unknots and she’s not so cold and afraid. He’s here, too, at her side as he has been through it all. She’s going to fly. She can now, and he won’t let her fall.

He’ll never let her fall.

I can do this.

“You’re gonna knock them dead,” he says. “No matter what. You’ve earned this.”

She nods. “Yeah.” Yes. The band is finishing up. In a minute or two, she’ll be up there. There’s no time, but she has to tell him something. “I figured out what I’m going to sing.”

Again, he laughs. “Uh, well, that’s good?”

“I’ve been writing it. I started back when we were hiding. Remember? At the farm.”

His face softens slightly, and his eyes deepen with understanding. “I remember.”

“I’ve been working on it for months, through everything that’s been happening, and…” She reaches into her bag. She doesn’t know what she’s doing, not really, but it feels right. Suddenly, right now, it feels like what she has to do. So she hands him her gift, her message, and it’s just a plain white envelope with his name written on the front. “I want you to go out there and listen to me sing.”

He’s confused, eyes darting between her offering and her face. “Of course I will, Nat.”

“Listen,” she implores. “But before I start… I want you to open this.”

“Nat?”

“Please, Steve.” Her eyes sting again, and maybe a tear or two escapes, but she’s too excited to cry. Instead she pushes her guitar to her back and throws her arms around his neck and kisses him feverishly. She kisses him with every bit of love and respect and adoration and gratitude she has inside her. It’s a lot. She hopes he can feel it, that he knows it. He kisses back, surging into her mouth, tasting her like a man hungering, lifting her against him and holding her tight. Time seems to stop completely as they stand there, so close to one another that she no longer knows where he ends and she starts. One. Just as they’ve been since they met. One and meant to be that way.

Her heart soars. She’s warm. She’s safe. Cherished. The dream come to life.

There’s a deafening loud round of applause. Steve pulls away and looks at the stage. “Sounds like this is it.”

“Yeah.” She hands him the envelope. “Open it and listen.”

Once more he chuckles, but this time it sounds a little nervous and uncertain. “Okay, I will. I promise.”

They have to let go now. She goes up the little steps as the stagehands hook her guitar up to the sound system, as the emcee’s voice booms over the mic, calling for more applause for the last act before introducing the next one. Steve heads out into the crowd, holding the card. Nat watches him until she can’t anymore.
Then she hears her name. “Give it up for Natasha Romanoff!”

It’s time. Her feet move. Her lungs breathe. Her heart beats. She walks slowly across the little stage, to the solitary mic standing there, tall and alone. It’s daunting, and for a second she almost loses her nerve. But she doesn’t. One more step. Keep going. The last steps, really. One more step.

And then she’s there. The crowd is loudly cheering. Waiting. It takes almost more strength than she has, but she looks out over them. There are so many people out there. So many. So many eyes watching her, hearts waiting for her. She searches through them all. Most she doesn’t know, though she’s grateful to them for coming all the same. Then she sees them. Her friends. Her family. Clint and Laura and their kids. Daisy. Thor and Jane. Peter and his girlfriend and his mom. Tony and Pepper. Sam. Wanda.

A hint of blue. Blue eyes and blond hair and that knowing, sweet smile. Steve. Their gazes meet, and all of the world falls away. He’s just a couple rows back with Sam and Tony, and he’s got the envelope. Once more time slows to a stop. She stands there in the peaceful, unhurried moment, hands on her guitar, heart still and contented. Open it. She watches as he does. Look inside. He does. She can’t see his hands, but she knows what’s in there. She knows what he’ll see.

The picture. It’s not great, a thin sheet of paper with a blurry, black and white image. But it’s unmistakable. This is as far away from the nightmare as imaginable, as different and beautiful as it can be. At long last she’s telling her husband about the life they’ve made together. She never saw it coming, not for a second. Never thought it was possible.

But it is. Their dream. Their future. Their miracle.

Their baby.

He stares with an almost adorable expression of absolute shock on his face for another second or two. She waits, watches more, watches the confusion fall away and the realization settle into his widening eyes. Then his head shoots up, and he stares right at her. The emotions she sees there… She’ll never forget them. “Really?” he mouths.

She beams, eyes burning, and nods.

His eyes fill with tears, too. For another moment more, it seems like he just can’t process that, like he doesn’t know what to do. Then he grins, grins like she’s never seen him grin before. He wipes at his cheeks with hands that are shaking, and his friends are grasping at his shoulders, and he laughs. She can hear it even over the murmur of the confused crowd. His eyes find hers again, even as Sam asks him what’s wrong and Tony wonders if he’s okay. Steve finds her. His lips move. She can’t hear his whisper, but she knows what he said. “I love you.”

Listen.

She takes a deep breath, the life inside her and all around her thrumming with power and purpose and peace. This is it. She’s finally here. She’s where she’s meant to stand. She’s doing what she’s meant to do. She is who she’s meant to be. This is it. It’s all over, and now she’s going to fly.

Her fingers are slow and precise as she strums her guitar, and the world fills with music. She closes her eyes and sings.
“You’ve been on my mind.
I grow fonder every day.
Lose myself in time.
Just thinking of your face.
God only knows why it’s taken me so long
To let my doubts go.
You’re the only one that I want.

I don’t know why I’m scared.
I’ve been here before.
Every feeling, every word
I’ve imagined it all.
You’ll never know if you never try
To forgive your past and simply be mine…

I dare you to let me be your… your one and only.
I promise I’m worthy to hold in your arms.
So come on and give me the chance
To prove that I’m the one who can walk that mile until the end starts.

If I’ve been on your mind
You hang on every word I say.
Lose yourself in time
At the mention of my name.
Will I ever know how it feels to hold you close
And have you tell me
Whichever road I choose, you’ll go?

I don’t know why I’m scared
’Cause I’ve been here before.
Every feeling, every word
I’ve imagined it all.
You’ll never know if you never try
To forgive your past and simply be mine…

I dare you to let me be your… your one and only.
I promise I’m worthy to hold in your arms.
So come on and give me the chance
To prove that I’m the one who can walk that mile until the end starts.

I know it ain’t easy giving up your heart.
I know it ain’t easy giving up your heart.
Nobody’s perfect. Trust me I’ve learned it.
Nobody’s perfect. Trust me I’ve learned it.

So I dare you to let me be your… your one and only.
I promise I’m worthy to hold in your arms.
So come on and give me the chance
To prove that I’m the one who can walk that mile until the end starts.

Come on and give me the chance
To prove that I’m the one who can walk that mile…

Until the end starts.”
– Adele, “One and Only”
THE END
Chapter End Notes

So that's it. When I started writing "Stay" last summer, I had no idea it would get so big or so popular. I am astounded by the support I have received in writing this story. It has dealt with some very difficult topics, and at time it's been as hard for me to write as it maybe was for people to read. Still, I've received so many comments from people telling me that this story has resonated with them, that Steve's struggle has reminded them of their husbands or brothers after coming home from the war, that Nat's life has closely mirrored their own or the life of someone they know. I am humbled and honored to have told this story, which has been inspired by the trauma of someone I know and care about very much. I said way back on chapter one that "Stay" was dedicated to the people who have lived through circumstances like these, and I very much meant it then and mean it even more so now. Your lives are testaments to strength and bravery, and I hope I was able to capture just a little bit of how compelling and awe-inspiring it is.

To that end, I want to thank everyone who has read this fic and reached out to me, here or on tumblr or twitter. Your comments, kudos, and encouragement has meant the world to me. Special thanks to missingthebetterhalfofme for crafting the stunning photoset that helped inspire this story. Also special thanks to Winterstar for being such a source of support while writing this. And, of course, my undying gratitude goes out
to faith2nyc, my co-conspirator in all things Romanogers. She has worked tirelessly on this story, brainstorming, beta-reading, doing amazing art for it, and selecting music. I've been more the tool crafting her vision than anything else, and I've have had so much fun and been so blessed by her. Thank you!

If you or someone you know is the victim of domestic abuse/rape, there is help:
The National Domestic Violence Hotline
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
The National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673
RAINN

Thanks again for reading! See you all next time.

Song list:
“Stay”, Rihanna featuring Mikky Ekko
“Wise Up”, Aimee Mann
“Happy”, Leona Lewis
“Iris”, The Goo Goo Dolls
“You and Me”, Lifehouse
“Remedy”, Adele
“Halo”, Beyoncé
“Running Away”, Hoobastank
“In the End”, Linkin Park
“Broken”, Lifehouse
“Angel”, Sarah McLachlan
“See You Again”, Wiz Khalifa featuring Charlie Puth
“Neon Lights”, Natasha Bedingfield
“Turning Tables”, Adele
“Last Flower”, Mads Langer
“Million Reasons”, Lady Gaga
“Follow Me”, Muse
“Whataya Want from Me”, Adam Lambert featuring P!nk
“A Thousand Years”, Christina Perri
“Photograph”, Ed Sheeran
“Warrior”, Demi Lovato
“Dust to Dust”, The Civil Wars
“Just Breathe”, Pearl Jam
“Stay (Wasting Time)”, Dave Matthews Band
“One and Only”, Adele

All credit to the artists.

Come find me on tumblr!

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