Steven Rogers, comic-book artist and former Captain in the US Army, is a True New Yorker through and through. But when his relationship falls apart, Steve is forced to move back to his hometown, where the inspirations for his comic books lie.

Following the death of his father and then his mother two years afterwards, Bucky has been left raising his little sister Becca, and he is doing a damn fine job of it, thank you very much. He hasn't been distracted by cars or women since he took up his role as a guardian - in fact, he hadn't been distracted at all until a certain Steve Rogers appears on his doorstep.

However, both of them have dramatically changed from the time they were best friends. Bucky doesn't know that Steve didn't come back from war unscathed. Steve doesn't know
that Bucky has always been completely and utterly in love with him.

In a tale that focuses on the loss of childhood innocence, the pressures of society and the stigmas associated with trauma, Steve and Bucky learn to trust again, and maybe fall in love along the way.

(Thankfully, not aided by Clint Barton's Love Barn.)
Steve Rogers, famed mostly for his prolific yet short-lived career as a comic-book artist and even more well known for his equally brief spell in the U.S. military as Captain Rogers, was a True New Yorker through and through.

He had never visited the Statue of Liberty on principle alone, though he often appreciated it from his bus window as it sped past. He had been cautioned on several occasions whilst on holiday for forgetting that jaywalking is an offence in other states. He dated women - and the occasional man - solely because he needed the extra income for rent, because they had a half-decent apartment, or because they had a bed-frame instead of a mattress on the floor. Mice were wholly preferred over roaches, which bred so prolifically Steve worried about roach semen on his carpet, and he knew more street names than surnames.

Lastly, but perhaps most tellingly, he hated rural areas with a passion. Even a brief whiff of cornfields, or the sight of a tractor rolling lazily across a hazy field, was enough to put Steve off his dollar pizza. This was a sentiment shared most wholeheartedly by his girlfriend Sharon Carter, the one woman he had dated that he truly felt wouldn't give a damn if he up and left the next day.

Sharon was so utterly independent, it was often hard for Steve to picture her needing him for anything. And that was a good thing, in many respects. It meant that when he got home from a long day in the studio or a speech at the V.A., Sharon had already arrived back from work, made him a cup of coffee (slightly cold, but bitter enough that it could be overlooked) and built an IKEA bookcase for the apartment, modified it to fit into the corner, dismantled it, and then reassembled it into a chair. It meant that when Steve woke up in the morning, the sheets beside him were rustled and cool, a plate of hastily-prepared bacon was on the breakfast counter, and a note was taped to the fridge, usually some variation of, "Had to run to work! Love you hun xx."

But perhaps the biggest drawback to having the perfect, independent girlfriend was how Steve often found himself feeling as if there was something she just wasn't telling him.

It was the 4th of July holiday (incidentally, also Steve's birthday), 2015. Steve had spent the week imagining in his head his perfect day: a nice, homemade picnic that they could chomp on in Central Park, alone and silent and together; a night in watching crappy romantic movies because Steve couldn't stomach action flicks just yet (Sharon would vehemently refuse to admit that tears filled her eyes at the end of The Notebook. Steve had no such shame); then, at around midnight or one o'clock, they would pad into the bedroom, rid their bed of thousands of throw pillows and collapse together, either to have sex or sleep, both of which were infinitely viable options.

Steve had written grocery lists in his head of everything he had to buy and what he would say when she teased him about planning his own birthday party. He even had a ring in his leather jacket, just in case. He'd had the ring for four years now, just in case. He'd had the ring for four years now, just in case. The timing had never been right, and he didn't need it to be right, he needed it to be perfect.

He could wait for perfect.

Steve had brought a few banners home from work and hidden them in the bottom of the closet, so that night he hoked them out and got to work pinning them on the door outside. "Happy birthday!" they read, because his mother (his mother, God) had always put banners up on the door outside, no matter how much Steve protested they were babyish. Around the words, various superheroes of Steve's own creation smiled out at him, clapping him for living to the ripe old age 26, which was more of an achievement for Steve than most, some particularly bad days.
Captain America, a man of rousing patriotism and virtue, grinned out at Steve from underneath his blue helmet. Falcon, his best friend and confidante, geared up in red and white zoomed through the gaps in the letters with a WHOOSH. Agent 13 had a gun cocked in her hand, and was leaning against the Captain assuredly, sending onlookers a steely gaze. Black Widow crouched in the bottom right hand corner, constantly looking back and forth, whilst Iron Man lay lazily along the tail of the 'y', sipping on a martini.

He'd been asked in an interview once - because he was the kind of comic book artist that left most of the finer details up to debate - whether he had any inspiration for the characters he'd made. He'd gave a little chuckle, smiled at the interviewer and shook his head no.

"I don't know anyone who's made a flying metal suit in real life, if that's what you're asking me," he'd joked. But, despite most of his friends' belief that he was incorruptible, on this occasion Steve would admit that he'd been lying his ass off.

Of course he got inspiration from his life. He was an artist, after all. But to admit that would lead to people asking more questions about the section of his timeline where all the characters lay, and he wasn't prepared for that kind of scrutiny. Plus, if any of the aforementioned inspirations caught wind that Steve was creating caricatures of them for public consumption, it would be easier to be dead than live with the embarrassment.

With a little frown forming between his eyebrows, Steve realised he had never built up the courage to create a character out of Bucky Barnes. If he had, maybe something would have revealed itself through his artwork that he didn't desire the world to know. Or maybe the Bucky in his memories was so magnificent that any attempt to capture him in ink would lead to a disappointment (Steve told himself this was the reason).

He shook his head, checked one more time that the banner was straight and that it wouldn't fall off the moment he shut the door, and made his way back into the apartment. His eye caught on the bright white of a letter, standing out starkly against the black tiles of his hallway (Sharon had assured him that black tiles so shiny you could see your reflection in them were the epitome of style in hallway decor). Steve bent over, wincing as a pain erupted in his head, and grasped the letter.

It was addressed for Sharon Carter. Bank of America. Considering they usually sorted out finances together, Steve didn't think for a second that he shouldn't go into the kitchen, grab a knife to act as a makeshift letter opener and pry the envelope open.

(Sometimes, when it's night and it's dark and quiet and Steve has a chance to think things over, he wishes he'd just left the letter on the floor for Sharon. Maybe then he'd still be in New York. Maybe everything would've turned out differently.)

Steve grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl, poured himself some milk for after and sat down at the kitchen island, contemplating the statement. Incomings, outgoings, they all looked pretty standard. He briefly panicked at the withdrawal of $500 until he remembered Sharon had dropped her phone into the pool at one of Gabe Jones' parties and she'd had to buy a new one. He continued running his finger down the list of numbers.

It was only when he got to the end that he choked on his banana.

Incoming. Paid by ... S.H.I.E.L.D? What the fuck was that? And ...

"Oh my fucking god," Steve, a good Catholic boy, whispered under his breath. The banana skin dropped to the floor, leaving streaks on Sharon's immaculate tiles. Steve glared at the piece of paper, bringing it up closer to his face, wondering if that bomb had done more damage than the doctor
thought. It must have, for him to be seeing...

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

It was at this precise moment that Sharon returned home from work. Steve wasn't sure how long he'd been staring in abject shock at the bank statement, for the last time he'd looked at the clock it was half four, and now it was an hour later. Sharon let out a loud huff of breath at the door, the tell-tale sign of her handbag and shoes dropping at the floor in a pile that Steve knew as well as the sound of his own name, and appeared around the archway that lead into the kitchen.

"Hi honey," she said, a smile on her face that made her eyes crinkle. Steve shoved the statement under his ass until he could process if they were being scammed.

"Hi sweetheart," Steve replied, pulling Sharon over to him as she walked past. He pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. "You taste like chocolate," he said.

"Cocoa butter lip-balm," Sharon explained. She swayed around the island until she was face to face with Steve.

"Your party," she said suddenly, with such firmness it was as if she was delivering a mission statement. "It's tonight. Nine o'clock sharp, in that pizza place beside-" She motioned with her hand.

"The Laundromat," Steve suggested. His heart was in his shoes. He hoped she hadn't noticed, though by the way she clicked her fingers together and still had a sparkle in her eyes when she looked at him, she hadn't.

She always had a sparkle in her eyes after work; Steve reckoned she was born to be a nurse. It seemed to exhilarate her, almost, in a way he hadn't seen since his time in the army.

"Yeah, the Laundromat," Sharon nodded. "The one that shrunk your navy suit." Her eyes became cast. "I always loved that suit."

Steve remained silent, hoping she never found out that he had passed the valet a twenty dollar bill and told him, in no certain terms, to fuck that shit up.

"Yeah, me too," he replied.

"I got a few friends from work to come, and that guy from the army. What's his name again..."

Steve tried to read her face. She seemed to like whoever she was referring to, so it couldn't have been Falsworth or Montgomery. "Dugan," he settled on.

"That's it." Sharon clicked her fingers again. "I called his wife. Wonderful lady, truly. I can't wait to see her again, she said she was bringing me her famous casserole recipe..."

Steve gave a fond chuckle, placing his hand over hers."Sharon."

"Right. Sorry, I get distracted," Sharon said. She fussed with her hair. She had the appearance of someone who was constantly stressed, but enjoyed it. She couldn't live without the adrenaline of a deadline. A True New Yorker. "Maria Hill's coming too. You like her."

Maria Hill was brash, cold, and highly competent. She was the best Mario Kart player Steve had ever seen, though they didn't often play Mario Kart, because Maria was a True New Yorker. "I don't dislike her."
"Johnson, Hunter, Morse, May..."

"Do I know any of these people?" Steve asked. The bottom of his glass of milk had suddenly became a thousand times more interesting at some point of the conversation. He lifted the glass up and moved it from side to side, watching as the remnants of the milk diverted when they touched the trademark. IKEA.

Sharon glared at him. "Of course you do," she snapped. "They're my co-workers."

"They work at the hospital?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. "The hospital."


"Right, right, sorry Steve," Sharon apologised. Her hasty smiles were almost as beautiful as the ones that came out for mantelpiece photographs (not that they had a mantelpiece. They were True New Yorkers). "My brain is fried tonight, baby. I'm all over the place with your birthday and the July holiday..."

"Which you worked on," Steve said. His arms were folded, though he wasn't attempting to be confrontational. Maybe that was how he appeared, he wasn't sure. He wasn't very good at picking up cues since... Yeah. Sharon, though, was getting more flustered by the second. She busied herself slamming dishes around the sink.

"People come into the hospital on holidays too, Steve," Sharon argued.

"Yeah, I know," Steve snapped, suddenly deciding, in no uncertain terms, 'fuck it.' "My question is how you know that, considering you're not a nurse."

The clanging of dishes in the sink abruptly ceased. In the darkness of their apartment, the silence was almost visible in the air, if not palpable. Sharon had her back to him, so Steve had no hope of reading her expression, not that he had a chance of doing so anyway, even when she was right in front of him.

"Don't be stupid, Steve," she said, though not entirely viciously. That was the first clue for him that he'd hit something sensitive. She always put her kid-handling gloves on for things she'd rather not discuss. "Of course I'm a nurse."

"Because RNs in the infectious disease department earn a six-figure salary, right enough."

The scarlet letter slapped down on the counter.

Sharon usually got their money out of the bank on her way home. This month, however, she had apparently forgot to withdraw her monumental salary before Steve witnessed it. It had been paid for her completion of MISSION 2A:51, apparently. (Steve didn't want to know. He didn't want to-)

Finally, Sharon turned around.

There were red spots high on her cheeks, visible even in the dim lighting of the under-cupboard LEDs from IKEA. Sharon had bought and assembled them before Steve got home from work.

"I can explain," she began.

"You should probably start," Steve replied.
She leaned across the counter. Her long, slender fingers worked between Steve's own. "I want you to know that I've never lied to you."

Her eyes were like daggers in him, but Steve was never one to back down from a fight. "You lied about this," he challenged.

"Because I had to."

"You never have to do anything, Sharon," he sighed. "You've told me that yourself, in not as certain terms, plenty of times."

Sharon retracted her hand from his as if he'd burnt her.

"I hate when you do that," she snapped. She turned away into the darkness once more. Steve let out a groan of frustration.

"What?" he asked. Maybe his voice went up a little in octaves, but he was exasperated.

"Pretend like you're the paragon of all virtues," Sharon argued. "The incorruptible man. The golden Adonis here to outshine us with your wisdom and purpose."

"You're just being spiteful," he spat.

"And you're being naive, Steve!" Sharon was yelling now. Or had Steve raised his voice first? He had, hadn't he?

This always happened. They always ended up screaming and yelling and crying and throwing things and Steve couldn't take it anymore, he couldn't-

"You don't think couples keep things from each other? Couples lie to each other all the time!"

"I've never lied to you," Steve protested.

"The fucking navy suit, Steve. The fucking Armani suit. You hated it, didn't you, and it just coincidentally got screwed up by a highly competent laundering service?" Sharon gave a wild laugh. "You know what, Steve, screw this. I'm so done with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked. Back it up, back it up. This was not how he planned for it to go. Sharon was crying now and he was pretty sure in a few moments, when the anger passed over him in a dull wave, he'd be joining her.

"It means we're over," Sharon said, crystal clear, so there was no mistaking what she had declared to the night air.

The apartment was so quiet.

The outside audience had paused to listen in.

The street lights flickered on, bathing her in a red glow.

Like a teenager wronged by a teacher, Steve jumped from the bar-stool and slammed his fist down on the counter. It left a satisfying crack.

"What?!" he screamed. Because fuck the neighbours (he was a True New Yorker). "That doesn't even make any sense! You're the one who lied to me!"
Sharon's lips were pursed. Probably because he'd ruined her breakfast counter, more than anything else. "I never lied to you, Steve."

"You told me you were a nurse! You're not a fucking nurse!"

"I am! Just not full-time. I work on a volunteer basis as my cover."

"Your cover? Don't tell me you're Mrs Smith now, Sharon."

"You met me in the army, what did you expect?"

"I expected you to be an army nurse, like you told me you were!"

"Why are you acting like this is such a big deal? I wanted to see if we were going anywhere, Steve! I saw the ring in your pocket. I wanted to wait until we were engaged, to see if I could trust you."

"We've been together four years Sharon! I've loved you for six! And you're telling me that you couldn't be sure you trusted me until you had a ring on your finger? You're it for me, you know that!" His breath was coming out like he'd ran a hundred miles. With a shamefully pathetic amount of emotion, Steve whispered, "I would die for you, Sharon."

"But I wouldn't die for you, Steve!" Tears ran in tracks down her porcelain features. She looked very beautiful, and very sad. "I wouldn't die for anybody! I protect ideals, Steve, not people."

"So people are disposable to you?"

"I never said that. People die all the time Steve. Ideals are immortal. They live on forever. I've told you this before, Steve, you just didn't listen!"

Was she telling the truth? In a forgotten desert in the corner of his memory, could he picture her in khakis, with a red cross painted crudely on her cheek, yelling these exact same words? Or did she whisper them in bed at night, when the sands ran lightened marathons upon the dunes, and the night sky was dark enough that Steve could see the turn of the earth and the puff of his own breath?

When she lay in his forbidden crib and clutched to the last of his humanity, had she whispered about ideals, about immortality and desires, about missions and their need for completion? Had he ignored her, preferred to spin a tale that she was describing stardust and skyscrapers that reached far beyond Afghanistan and Iran and everywhere else, wondrous worlds where there were superheroes and inspiration and truth abound? Or had he forgotten her words when that bomb exploded, when it took parts of Steve he'd never thought to cherish before they were gone? Had the war taken Sharon from him, too?

"You never listen, Steve! Why do you never listen?"

"I'm listening now," Steve said. He reached into the pocket of his leather jacket, as if clasping to some monument that had long since been toppled over. Sharon's tears were becoming sticky on her face, and there were blotches where she applied makeup in the morning, where the brush kissed her cheeks and where Steve so desperately, always, wanted to touch. "I'm listening now, Sharon. Please - please don't do this. I love you so much..."

"Oh Steve," she wept. Her hand reached out for the ring, and for a moment, it glinted in the dim glow of their apartment, reflected in the blue of her iris. "You know I adore you."

Did he?
"But I can't - We can't..."

"No, Sharon, please..."

"We're toxic for each other," she said. She pressed the box, which she had briefly considered, back into his sweating hands. "You know that as well as I do, baby. We tear each other apart."

"I'll fix it, Sharon," he said, clutching to her hands like it was a lifeline. "I know I start arguments a lot, I know I do, honey, but I can fix it. We can go to counselling, or I'll just ... I'll learn to shut the fuck up, okay, because I know it's usually me starting something ... But since Afghanistan I ... Sharon, please, Sharon talk to me."

"Steve, I can't," Sharon said. Tears, either from her own eyes or from Steve's, dripped onto the white expanse of her hand. "It's not just you. It's me too. I should've told you the truth from the beginning. But I can't - my job, it's so dangerous..."

"So keep your job. If you love it so much, keep it, and come home to me," Steve bartered, but somewhere deep in his heart he knew he was grasping at rocks that would keep on falling. "You know I'm not afraid of danger, Sharon, you know-"

"You nearly got yourself killed so many times," Sharon whimpered. "I died every time you got hurt, you know that? How could you live, how could you be happy knowing at any moment I could get blown to bits and my memory erased from history? Steve, how could you..."

She had crossed her arms against herself then, as if in consolation. How desperately Steve wanted to take her, press a kiss to her temple, reassure her that everything would be alright ...

How long had he been so touch starved? How long had everything Sharon had to give been so inconsequential to his needs? How long ...

"Baby, please," Sharon plead. It reeked of a final attempt. "You're breaking my heart."

"Sharon..."

She turned away from him. Again. Outside his window, a siren blared in fierce bells. The street lights had switched completely now from blank to bright.

"Just go, Steve," she whimpered. "Please."

He looked at her. She appeared a stranger to him, mascara running down her face, into her mouth, caking where her nose met her face.

The Sharon he knew - the Sharon he had fallen in love with, all those years ago, in Afghanistan, in Iran, in Iraq, in anywhere and everywhere he met her - was replaced with someone else. Someone who didn't love him anymore.

And how could she? She had fallen in love with somebody different, too. Somebody who had a sense of humour, who could laugh and love and cry and watch action movies without jumping and who didn't have nightmares every night and who didn't wake up screaming.

Sharon deserved better than him, though he wasn't sure he could get much better than Sharon.

It didn't matter. The holocaust was complete. He had no choice but to go into their - her - room, hastily pack an overnight bag with some clothes, a few of his comics and his pencils.
With one final look back at their apartment - bought and paid for by war - he shut the door closed softly behind him.

He heard Sharon break out in sobs once he did.
That's how Steve ended up on the first train out of New York towards his hometown of Leavenworth, Maine. And by train, he meant a train, two buses, a taxi, a few hours confused wandering around the countryside, and finally, a ride from a reluctantly sympathetic old woman by the name of Bertha.

Leavenworth was, by all accounts, the asshole of nowhere.

Sandwiched between an industrial cornfield of about a hundred acres which was as much of an eyesore as a centre of productivity, and a hardwood forest which blazed on particularly hot summer afternoons, it was a forgotten town which was only known by those who got lost shuffling between the slightly bigger towns to the east and the newer cities to the north. In actual fact, it was so small it could barely be considered a town, and it was certainly not a priority for mapmakers, which made Steve's task of getting home monumentally difficult, as his memory was still a bit shaky.

It was a place largely dedicated to rural dwelling, anchored to the rest of America via a run-down Main Street. Main Street was about a half mile long, and littered with stores owned by the slightly richer families which drew groups of friends after a day of school, or labourers after a hard afternoon's haymaking.

It was where the majority of Steve's childhood was spent, for anywhere else was either a cornfield or an unofficial dumping ground for off-cuts of wood or plastic. The streets were mostly cobbled, and those which had been deemed necessary to have tarmac were uneven and hell to drive on, so only few people bothered.

It was quicker to walk around Leavenworth anyway, and it kept the town's air from being thick and stifling like New York's. When people wanted to leave the town - though few ventured far outside its boundaries - they would huddle in a group like kids heading to their first day of school in the bus shelter, anxiously checking their maps and timetables for fear of getting so lost they could never return. Most were of the opinion that anything outside Leavenworth was loud and brutish, and so they felt no need to disperse themselves throughout the country. The result of this was that most families would have to go back to the first settlers in America in order to find someone who hadn't set up residence in the town.

The desolate Main Street was, upon reflection, a sad sort of sight. But in Steve's memory it was ablaze in sepia tinged nostalgia, alive with the games of his youth. Even now, children had brightened up the tarmac with hopscotch drawn from stone against gravel, and the cobbles shone in the wake of a storm.

Steve remembered hopscotch, and Leap Frog, and What Time Is It, Mr Wolf (in which Tony Stark was always, always the wolf, unless you wanted a full blown Stark Tantrum), but he also recalled the first night he got drunk and stumbled down the street towards the bus station, where he and the equally intoxicated Bucky Barnes propped up against each other and slept the whole night through.

He remembered, with a small smile on his face as he passed it, the alleyway where Tony puked the night away following a particularly dicey round of tequila at the local pub. And he remembered the playground, which had been renovated with new and expensive looking (though anything would be, by comparison) equipment since he’d left. It was at the very tip of Main Street, and so if you climbed to the top of the jungle gym you could see over almost the entire town, could admire the bedraggled street merging almost seamlessly with the surrounding countryside.
He'd met Natasha Romanoff in that playground. She'd pushed him off the top of the jungle gym. He hadn't seen her in eight years.

Houses were spread haphazardly across the hills of Leavenworth, either at intervals of a quarter of a mile or five miles apart, of which there was rarely an in-between. Steve's childhood home was in a small clustering of thatched bungalows previously used for housing farmhands, and which had a feeling about them not too far detached from a communal living area. Every day, a neighbour would jauntily enter his kitchen, make themselves at home with a cup of tea and speak to his mother, who simply nodded and listened and smiled, until the sun went down against the backdrop of crickets and the occasional departing mouse. Then, when their house was once again their own, Steve would crawl onto the sofa to rest his golden head upon his mother's knee, falling asleep to the click-clack-click of her knitting needles and the soft, steady huff of her breath.

But perhaps his favourite part about growing up in Leavenworth was that he was, at any given moment, a half hour's walk (fifteen minute run) away from the Barnes' residence; a two story (though it would be kind to call it that, given its modest size), stone-walled home squashed between a river and a hill.

When rain came in torrents from the sky, Steve often sat in his warm home with the fire gently flickering and looked out his window, imagining that he could see the floor of the Barnes' kitchen fill with two inches of water, which lapped at the bottom of the dining table and laid waste to anything metal it touched. Winifred tried, unsuccessfully, to prepare for the rain, and she knew so many wives' tales about the clouds and how they could sense their own moisture that she was known as Leavenworth's very own weather woman.

As soon as the rain stopped - for indeed that was the only time Sarah would allow Steve to leave the house, fearing he'd catch his death of cold - Steve would pull on his wellingtons and stomp through puddles deeper than most streams on the route he could very well recite in his sleep. He would appear at the Barnes' door, often greeted by a frazzled Winifred or a bemused George, who would ruffle Steve's damp hair and say gruffly, but with fondness, that he'd been expecting the little guy.

On occasion, though, Bucky would open the door, and that was perhaps Steve's favourite form of greeting, though any entrance into the Barnes' was cherished by him; it was a warm and wild place, with children pouring from each crack, and screams bouncing off its walls either in play or in pain.

But when Bucky opened the door, for a moment Steve could stand there and stare at his best friend, as if he had finally got confirmation that running through the mud and gutters the day after a rainstorm was the best and indeed only thing he could do.

Bucky smiled at Steve as if he had never seen him before, or else he had, but in a dream, or on television. He would put his arm around Steve's shoulder and lead him into the house, patting his back along the way, and say something charming and Bucky-like, such as, "You're my best guy, Steve, you know that?" or "You didn't have to come, Steve, but God am I glad you did." Steve would leave his wellingtons at the door, get changed into some of Bucky's dry clothes (which always smelt like George's aftershave) and spend the rest of the day with Bucky and his siblings mopping up water, filling buckets and pouring them out the back door, racing to see who would get the rooms drained fastest or attempting to find Bucky's dog, who always ran away when it's bedroom became a lake.

Sharon had always said childhood memories were the most unreliable of all.

"It's always sunny in memories," she had proclaimed, wrinkling her nose in disgust over a plate of sushi. "That's the first indicator that they're heavily tainted with investigator bias." Steve had always resolutely, but internally, disagreed with her.
Now that he was looking out at the literal tumbleweeds making their way across the cracking tarmac, now he could feel the uncomfortably stifling summer sun on the back of his neck, frying through several layers of skin, he was inclined to believe Sharon's assumptions. The clean country air was so thin and unpolluted that he almost took his first asthma attack in five years out of sheer displacement.

Steve Rogers came to three conclusions that day, which he wrote in the notebook he bought from a petrol station along the way (it was a scientific "technical" journal, with alternating pages lined and blank, and which he had snuffed the scientific nature of and reserved it to art):

1) *Leavenworth is a shithole.*

2) *Sharon is always right, even when you think she's wrong.*

3) *You are a True New Yorker.*

His distrust in memories was further exacerbated as he continued on towards his mother's house - or, indeed, what had been his mother's house, and which now was his. Leavenworth in his mind was a bustling place; maybe not like the metropolis of New York, but still busy enough that if you were lost there would be a multitude of friendly faces to smile at and ask for directions. On that day, however, the streets were bare, there were no occasional passing cars and there were definitely no subway maps for Steve to follow.

It took him six hours to find the house he previously could've found in his sleep. The cottage - which was unlike most New England houses for it resembled more intensely those you'd find in England or Scotland than the panel-clad domiciles of America - was squished in between three others, whose previous inhabitants were now either dead or senile, the latter of which peeked out at Steve through shutter blinds which hastily snapped closed if they assumed he would notice their interference.

The windows were sagging in their frames, and the thatched roof, which had not been maintained for many years, was lower some places than others. The paint was chipping off where the house met the dry earth, and the garden was unkempt, with weeds and ivy creeping up from the ground towards the roof with slow and unstoppable persistence.

It was a sad house which Steve did not love to look upon, and so he cast his eyes downwards to the metal keyhole and tried to fumble with his keys in the quickly darkening light. Finally, he managed to open the door, and with great difficulty he pulled his suitcase in, trying not to drop his new artist's notepad.

He'd only realised he left his old one at home ... no, Sharon's house ... once he got on the second train. By then it was infinitely too late. Besides, all that journal included was some sketches of New York, multitudes of pages outlining the curve of Sharon's shoulder or the determination of her frown, and both of those things were invalidated now. Sharon would probably find more use for them than he would, out in Leavenworth, the edge of America.

The second Steve burst through the stiffened door he was hit with pangs of nostalgia. The furniture, unmoved since the wake, smelt of age and thick, heavy perfume from the neighbours who had attended. Wilting lilies adorned a dusty vase which sat upon the mantelpiece, and Steve and his mother smiled out from behind a dirty pane of glass.

Steve trailed into the room, trying not to remember his mother coughing in her armchair. (He couldn't help but to check; the bloodstain on the arm was still there, but darker.) The wallpaper was peeling off where the walls met the ceiling, and the carpet was coloured black where furniture was absent and dark brown where it was.
"If you could see the state of this place now, Ma," Steve whispered, to her spirit more than to her image on the mantelpiece, "you'd box my ears, I know you would."

He could almost hear her reply: "You silly boy," she would say, rather fondly, and rustle her hand through his golden hair. "Here, I'll forgive you if you go make a drop of tea, wouldn't you? Old Annie's coming over later, don't want her thinking I'm raising you with a silver spoon."

Old Annie was dead and buried too now. She'd lived longer than his mother, who was her nurse, for a time.

Steve stepped minutely closer to the mantelpiece. As he did so, the kitchen became visible through the open door. The stove was still covered in thickened remnants of stew, which Bucky (Bucky...) had made at the wake and spilled over the hob because his hands had been shaky. He'd refused to let Steve cook for the guests on the premise that it was not Bucky's mother who was dead. The fridge had Steve's last high school report stuck on, the corners of the page curling with age and yellowed - straight Bs, Bucky's had been all As, he remembered - as well as a post-it note detailing Sarah's shifts for that week.

She'd always worked too hard. Five twelve-hour shifts was too much for anybody, never-mind her weak lungs. She'd worked herself into the ground helping other people. What would she think if ...

The picture showed her younger than Steve remembered her, and he was about six. She was smiling, bright and wide, but without as many lines around her thin, painted lips. Her spindly hands were pressed into Steve's shoulders, pushing him forward as if to show him off. She was always showing him off. Her tiny, asthmatic son who did nothing worth bragging about. Her dress was yellow and her hair was still in rollers from the night before.

Steve barely remembered the day that photo was taken. It was a few months before his dad was killed in action; a few weeks before he was shipped off to Iraq.

It had been the first day of Spring, which was always Steve's favourite season, and he'd woken up early that morning to peer out the window and see if the cold had disappeared and the first daffodils had sprouted, which indeed they had.

Sarah, God rest her soul, had got from her cosy bed with him and walked with him through the garden, surveying the vegetables they had planted the previous summer, checking on the bird houses, making sure the hedgehog hotels were upright and had plenty of water still in them.

Joseph, which was the only name Steve remembered his father by, had lolled out of the house. He had leaned against the doorframe with a camera in one hand and a cigar in the other.

"Smile, darlings," he had said. Sarah had grabbed Steve and pushed him in front of the camera, and he had almost blinked at the flash, but managed to restrain himself. Joseph had waited patiently, for his camera was one that printed photos there and then, as he thought candidis were the best type of memories to have. Then, as photo emerged, he had taken one look at it, quickly showed it to Sarah, and muttered, "it's alright." (Steve always suspected he liked it more than that, considering when he went into the garage to deliver Joseph his lunch he saw it pinned to Joseph's notice-board, alongside his orders.)

In the present day, with both of his parents were dead and buried and long forgotten by most, Steve felt something wet hit against his hand. Perturbed, he promptly turned the photograph around to face the wall, and then sat down hard in the worn sofa, rubbing his hands against his face.

He must've fallen asleep, for when his eyes opened next, it was morning.
Perhaps if the hometown to which he returned was not Leavenworth, but rather a town in which one could breathe a certain way without needing a citation from the gossipers, Steve could've remained happily isolated in his cottage, working from home, answering surveys and proofreading work written halfway across New England. But Leavenworth rivalled even the fictional Green Gables in the speed at which news spread throughout the inhabitants, and so when Steve got out of the bath the next morning he found himself with a very eager guest on his doorstep.

He heard him before he saw him, though that was usually the case. Regardless, Steve did not trust his memory to place the panicky walk up his front path and the repetitive, insistent knock on the door that was too loud for most normal people to warrant using. He pressed his face up to the peephole, where the bright brown eyes of Tony Stark smiled back at him.

Steve groaned and hit his head against the door. It sent a pain shooting through his temples, but he knew it would pale in comparison to the headache he would receive within the next five minutes.

Tony Stark. Why did it have to be Tony Stark.

Of course, if you didn't know Tony, you wouldn't understand why Steve, in his fragile emotional state, thought that he was the last person he could ever conceivably want to see or gain comfort from. Even Steve in his normal, relatively sane state would want to bang his head against a door when Tony Stark spoke. Tony was just that kind of person. His father had been that type as well.

The proverbial notion that good fathers often had inferior sons did not apply to Howard and Tony Stark. You'd be hard pressed to find two men more alike and yet more undeniably separate; whilst they shared their charismatic tendencies and affinity towards anything made of metal and screws, Howard was sharp where Tony was soft, and Tony was troubled where Howard was carefree.

The very essence of their differences was what led Howard to find raising the boy so difficult. Where Maria could look past Tony's vaguely patronising ways, Howard found it almost impossible to comprehend the idea that something - indeed, someone - he had produced was of higher intelligence than himself. It was a calamity, in his opinion, that Tony exceeded him in every definition of the word, from getting his first girlfriend at the ridiculous age of nine, to losing his virginity at fourteen, to getting black out drunk at fifteen, to smoking pot at sixteen, Tony was always infinitely ahead of his father, who took until his twenties to fuck up his body and his life with various intoxicating substances and possibilities (and yes, Maria, for Maria was not a woman you drank recreationally).

They shared their love for all variants of alcohol, be it vodka, whisky or women - though Tony was substantially more interested in men for the majority of his time at MIT, given that they were the majority influence in his engineering lectures and so he found satisfaction in their arms out of ease and found he rather enjoyed it - but also shared their distaste of each other in various scathing manners which no inhabitant of Leavenworth ever desired to hear.

Betty Ross had been the closest house to the Starks' residence, and so she heard, at every hour chime for twelve years, the screaming, petty insults, and drunken stupors the men threw at each other while Maria either burst into tears or chucked something at them be it a plate or a glass, depending on her mood (Maria was insane, though you could not blame Howard for that. According to Sarah Rogers, she had always been insane).

Whilst Steve did not have the pleasure of witnessing the familial troubles of the Stark household firsthand, he did have the joy for many years of being Tony Stark's best friend (besides the enthusiastic
James Rhodes) and confidante (besides the reluctant Jane Foster). Before he had met gained Bucky Barnes as his partner in crime, Steve had spent his life with Tony Stark as his closest companion. They'd met under the bleachers. But that's a story for another day.

After taking a deep yet shaky breath, Steve opened the front door of the cottage. He tried to make it slow and steady, so as to convey to Tony to enter in the same manner, but as usual, all forms of inferring were lost on Tony, and he barrelled into the house with the force of a hurricane, filling the morgue with life.

"Rogers? Is that you?" he gasped, grabbing onto Steve's arms. His hands were still as pointy as they had been in high school, but significantly more calloused and rough. Tony looked deeply at Steve's face, as if committing him to memory. "Goddamnit, it is you! I thought Romanoff had finally lost her mind. She said she saw you, and I said, it couldn't possibly be that meathead, sure he fucked off to the Big Apple eight-odd years ago! But she was right, like she usually is, but I was right too, because you're here, but you're not really here, are you? You're an imposter. That's the only explanation. Oh, wait till I tell Rhodey about this..."

The speed at which Tony talked made his babble unintelligible. Steve didn't even bother asking him to repeat himself, because he was too busy looking at his old friend.

Tony was still the same blustering person he'd known before. He spoke with his hands, his eyes were wide and animated, he had the same cowlick and hair that stuck out in random sections. He was wearing a pair of overalls that said something along the lines of 'mechanic' (though with the speed at which he was moving, it was difficult for Steve's already slowed mind to comprehend) and overall just seemed the same as eighteen year old Tony, give or take eight years of maturing on his face.

It was a relief, in many ways, that he was still the same. It tugged on Steve's organs, actually, how Tony was exactly the same, yet he was so entirely different. Unconsciously, Steve pulled his sleeve down over his scarred hand.

"Tony," he said, smiling tiredly. "It's really me. It's Steve."

"Steve," Tony whispered. He looked as if Steve had invited him to Disneyworld. "It's really you. Fuck me sideways, I thought you'd never come back."

"Well I-"

"You have to come see my shop. You will come, won't you? I've been working on a Camaro lately. Boy, she's a beauty. If I was into cars, I'd fuck her, you know what I'm saying? And the Ford. God, it's a sad piece of work. I look at it and I cry, but it might work for you, if you like that sort of thing, and you probably do. It's basically a mini-van, you're a mini-van kind of guy. Also, you should see those crazy Eastern Europeans, they've just moved in on Main Street. Couple of kids, really, drifted here from Sokovia one day without a word - Hey, do you have kids now? Am I going to see six little Rogerses running through here in a minute? Because you know I'm allergic."

Steve could only pick up the last half of that spiel, and he highly doubted he'd want to understand the rest of it. "No, Tony," he said hurriedly, before Tony got another word out. "I don't have any kids. I'm actually-"

"Come on!" Tony yelled. He grabbed onto Steve's arm, either not noticing or not caring when Steve tensed more than a patient at a chiropractor. "You're gonna love it, Steve. I can't wait to show you my coffee maker, too. You won't believe what I've done to the sexy beast since you last saw her. Fifty dollars in the Walmart sale, you remember that? You drove me there two days after you got
your license, I crashed your Ma's car into a lamppost? God bless Sarah, she never said a word. 'Course, I got the dent out myself, didn't I? Looked good as new. Better than new actually. Fuck me, I am a professional. But anyway, the coffee maker. I added an automatic option to it. Basically, you talk to it, and - get this - it automatically makes your coffee for you.”

He stopped at the gate of the cottage, looking Steve in the eye seriously.


"Wow," Steve whistled.

"Exactly," Tony agreed. He grabbed Steve's arm again (though this time, he only tensed slightly) and strode down the path. It would take approximately twenty minutes to get to the old Stark mansion (at least, compared to Steve's modest cottage it was a mansion. In reality, it was a big enough house that Tony could avoid seeing his father until dinner, but still small enough that he could hear Howard scream at Maria no matter how far away Tony hid). Steve was not being dragged the whole way, so he politely - or he assumed it was politely - removed his arm from Tony's iron grasp.

"I know my way from here," Steve said. He was only slightly bitter that the entire town had apparently been watching him come back but hadn't helped him find his house. Of course, they didn't know that his head was fucked either, come to think of it.

"Oh no," Tony said, as Steve made to turn down Rosenthal Drive. "My shop, Steve. I don't own that house anymore."

It was said so flippantly Steve didn't think much about it for a few moments. When Tony's words finally registered, Steve stopped in the middle of the path, much to Tony's displeasure.

"Come on, Rogers," Tony groaned, grabbing Steve's hand once more. It was like high school all over again, where Steve spent two years being dragged behind Tony as he moved from one venture into the next. "We don't have all day."

"You don't own the house anymore?" Steve repeated. Tony, who had previously been stalking on ahead, dragging a reluctant Steve behind him, ceased.

That's when Steve saw it.

Tony had changed. He had changed dramatically. And now that Steve had noticed it, he couldn't keep seeing it.

Tony's hands were red, with small cuts and scars over his fingertips. Under Steve's scrutiny he began scratching at his palm helplessly, appearing more like the eleven year old with braces and teary eyes that Steve had first known him as. There were wrinkles around his eyes and none around his mouth, and the Tony Steve had known would've been the first person to develop laughter lines. His overalls were greasy with oil stains pressed into them, and the colour of his clothes were faded, as though he had tried many times to get the stains out but to no avail. His face, which had been tanned and healthy eight years ago, was blanched white, and smiles appeared forced on his handsome features, pulling slightly at his cheeks. He shuffled on his feet, uncomfortable, and his Adam's apple worked in his throat.

"No," Tony said. His eyes were wide and looking anywhere but at Steve. When he didn't offer further explanation, Steve opened his mouth once more.

"Did you move or something?" he asked. It was perfectly plausible that the Stark clan had relocated to a smaller abode; Sarah had always said under her breath that Howard had a habit of living well
beyond his substantial means.

"Yeah." Tony raked his hand through his hair. "Yeah, I live in the apartment above my shop now."

They had resumed walking by this point, and Main Street glittered in the distance, the sun reflecting off concrete.

"Maria must like that," Steve said, in something that he had intended as a joke but instead seemed to cut into Tony like a physical dagger. "I mean, she always needed so much room for her clothes and everything, and your parents..." Didn't like to be in the same room as each other, he thought to himself, but decided to keep that in his mouth and swallow it. Thankfully, Steve's brain didn't fight him on this decision.

"Mom..." Tony's palm had started to bleed once more. He winced as he peered down to scrutinise it. "Mom died a few years back, Steve."

"Oh my god," Steve said. "I had no idea."

"Yeah, about six years ago, now." Tony squinted up at the sun. "Car crash."

It was hard to imagine Maria dead. It was harder still to imagine Tony sombre, wearing a suit and tie, reading a eulogy. Steve had a sudden influx of regret.

"I'm sorry," he said. It wasn't enough; he knew that. Six years ago while his friend was suffering, he'd been partying it up with the Howlies (for that was his troop's shortened nickname, Howling Commandos for long) before they shifted bases. He'd met Sharon six years ago.

"And your dad?" Steve asked. He assumed that Tony would scoff, maybe throw out some curse words to describe him, but he remained silent. "Oh god," Steve said again.

"Yeah," Tony said. "That was a shit day."

'Why didn't you call me?' Steve wanted to ask. He wanted to scream at Tony for pretending this wasn't bothering him, for not mentioning how blood was trickling down his wrist now and staining the (already reddened) sleeves.

"Oh my god," Tony sniffed. He was clearly deflecting. Tony Stark had never been subtle. "This fucking hay-fever. I swear, you'll see me in a few years' time on the side of the road over there" - he jabbed his thumb in the general direction - "spluttering about antihistamines. Just let me die, Steve, wouldn't you? It would be kinder than letting me suffer."

Steve had hay-fever too. That's why he knew that on that day, the pollen-count was the lowest it had been in July for five years. He chose not comment. His brain was co-operating well that day, so he decided to test it further.

For the remaining street Tony talked on and off again about the Camaro and the Ford, and the way that sometimes, business executives pulled into the garage on their way to the big cities in the North and he got to touch their bonnets ("And sometimes other things, if you get what I'm laying down.") and run his hands along the steering wheels, pretending he was one of the businesspeople, like his father was before him, though Tony carefully avoided making that comparison.

"So I went to MIT, alright," Tony divulged as they opened the door to the garage. "And wait till you hear what shit my life has gone to, Steve, just you hear. Here, sit down there."

He rolled a hot-red bar stool over to Steve for him to sit on. Steve tentatively lowered himself onto
the - surprisingly - sturdy seat (upon further inspection Steve realised that Tony had got that stool from IKEA, and had reinforced it with more screws and bolts than was probably wholly necessary).

As Tony talked, Steve half listened, half looked around at the garage.

It was as if Tony's brain had physically manifested itself into the small space. On two of the walls hung Tony's impressive collection of screwdrivers and drills, varying tyre prototypes and post-it notes with hastily scribbled and incomprehensible words. On the others there were pages and pages of technical drawings, of blueprints and designs and ideas and brainstorming sessions, all finished off with a quick 'A.E.S.' signed in the bottom right hand corner. In the middle of the garage sat a bright red Camaro, and out on the drive there was the aforementioned Ford which Steve, admittedly, did like the look of (though he was a True New Yorker, so he really shouldn't have).

He counted a total of three desks within the garage, all of which had an accompanying hot-red bar stool as a seat. There were pencils and pens lying discarded anywhere a scrunched up piece of paper resided, and empty packets of chips or protein bars decorated the occasional clear space on the desks. A tiny whirring contraption sounded on the third work surface closest to the door, and when Steve properly stopped to take in his surroundings he came to realise that he was encircled by robots of differing sizes and prototypes, one of which was wearing a party hat with 'Dumbass' blazoned on the front.

It was a place that was so incomprehensibly Tony, so bursting to the seams with it in the same way as Steve's cottage was fit to explode with Sarah, that Steve had to close his eyes for a few seconds to digest.

His and Sharon's apartment - just Sharon's apartment now, he thought, without bitterness - had been bare. Minimalist. Fashionable. Trendy. But never this amount of excitement and personality and interest, never this sense of comfort in both the space and the person inhabiting it.

"So basically, I come back from MIT - four years I spent in that place, best four years of my life, by the way, and I was forced to come back because my fucking asshole Dad can't keep a car straight on the road - I mean what are the chances of hitting someone in bloody Leavenworth, like come on, there's like a car every five seconds, they're less common than Oprah on daytime television now. But anyway I graduated with my PhD in mechanical engineering and physics - not that I'm bragging, but I'm totally bragging - and I thought, 'My life is pretty damn good. I'm getting laid a lot, I'm getting paid a lot, and I'm getting laid a lot. Have I already said that?'

"But then I get this phone call and I'm like, 'Howard you fucker', and I come back for the funeral, thinking that's it, easy peasy, get this over with and I can go move to New York or something, bring Rhodey along for a bit of fun too, though he was already getting mushy over Carol Danvers at this point so he was basically a lost cause.

"But then I find out Obadiah - you know Obadiah, dad's business partner, bald as an eagle, ugly as Donald Trump's asshole - had been exploiting loopholes in Dad's will so he got the lion's share of the profits and I was left with the debt Dad racked up paying for hookers.

"Now, I'm not one for sitting down and letting that fucker get the money I was rightfully entitled to, so I hired this lawyer - actually, two lawyers, they're like a package deal or something, like Laurel and Hardy - and I asked them, 'What can I do? This guy's totally fucked me over. Like, repeatedly. In the asshole.' But not literally, because gross. And they were like, 'If you stay in Leavenworth, we can take out an injunction on him, but you need to stay for a few months at least.'

"I agree. I mean, a few months for the amount Dad had in the bank? I'd be laughing. But instead I end up in this shithole for six years now and there's no progress on the case. If this keeps going the
way it's going, I'll have more lawyers' fees than awarded funds, but it's not about the money now, you know what I mean? Even if I could only get a dollar more than Obadiah, I'd want it. I'd carve his face out in paper cuts with it.

"So," Tony said, finally stopping to take a breath. "What's up with you?"

Steve blinked three times fast. "Uh..."

"Do you mind if I work on the Camaro while you're talking? I need to take care of her, or else she'll divorce me, and I don't need another person taking all my money."

"Uh."

"Speaking of divorce - is that why you're here? Not that I'm prying but I'm totally prying. Who was she? Blonde? Big rack? Lots of anger issues? Come on, Steve-o, you can tell me, I'm your dearest friend. Besides Barnes, but..."

Steve felt his heart jump in his chest. He frowned down at himself, wondering if the palpitations were back.

"I wasn't married," Steve replied. His brain had finally finished processing Tony's story and could now focus on his own. "I had a girlfriend. It didn't work out."

"Aw," Tony said, with a small pout on his face. "Did she dump your tiny but perfectly formed ass?"

"Uh..."

"Come on, Rogers, don't tell me you're still a prude."

Steve crossed his arms. "I was never a prude," he protested.

"Oh, I know you weren't," Tony hummed. He popped the hood of the Camaro open and a nice gust of smoke puffed up from it, decorating his cheeks with black. "But you never gave me enough details about it, and Betty kept her mouth shut all those years about what you did in the Love Barn. That means it was either really good or really fucking-"

"I'm not having a conversation with you if you mention Clint Barton's Love Barn," Steve warned. "And if you can't respect that, I'll just have to tell everyone what you did in the Barn..."

The smirk dropped off Tony's face. "You wouldn't," Tony gasped.

Steve just maintained eye contact, challenging him. If Steve could take on Sharon Carter and come out breathing, he could sure as hell take on Tony Stark. Right enough, Tony backed down rather quickly and busied himself with the Camaro. Every now and again he whispered things to the machine that made even Steve blush.

Thankfully, they were interrupted just as Tony finished speaking words of affirmation to the vehicle and had turned his attention back to Steve.

Steve saw him walk in, talking away to someone behind him who was laughing. Steve's throat clenched over almost automatically, as he watched the two figures converse in the doorway for a moment, giving him a chance to wring his hands together and try to think of something to say. Tony Stark, for once in his life, knew when to stay quiet, and he ducked his head behind the Camaro's hood.
"It's been a long time," Steve tried, once he passed through the threshold of Tony's garage.

Bucky turned to him. His eyes were wide and his hair was slicked back with grease. There were a few lines around his eyes, and his clothes were more crumpled than Steve remembered them, but he still had the same chin. Still the same strong jaw, which was clenched so tightly it looked painful.

"Steve?" he breathed. Steve gave him a weak smile.

"Yeah, Buck," Steve said. "It's me."

Bucky's grey eyes narrowed. He was still as handsome as he ever was, and was donning a leather jacket, far too dark and heavy for the stifling July heat. Combined with the beanie on his head and the glove that covered his right hand, Bucky looked as if he'd just come back from a trek to Siberia. Perhaps he had gone to Russia with Romanoff after high school after all. Maybe he'd never quite recovered from the cold.

Steve smiled at him again. It was all he could think to do. There was a brief moment of silence, and then--

"Fuck you," Bucky spat, and promptly stormed out of the garage.

Tony, and the person Bucky had been speaking to, who was now recognisable as Sam Wilson, turned to Steve, looking about as baffled as he did.

"That went well," Tony said, flipping a rag over his shoulder. "Rogers, would you pass me the screwdriver? There's a good dear."

Steve continued to gape at the door, which was still swinging on its hinges with the force Bucky had slammed it. Sam Wilson came over to him and patted him on the shoulder, his touch jolting Steve back to reality in a way that it always had the tendency to do (he might've missed Sam the most when he woke up screaming after Afghanistan, but he was damned if he was calling five years later to show his weaknesses).

"Nice to see you again, man," Sam said, and Steve found that when he looked up at Sam's face, he was grinning at him, that bright white smile that would calm a starving bear.

"You aren't wearing your glasses," Steve said quickly, in case Sam would fall back on old habits and bring him into a hug. Sam seemed to recognise his reluctance; of course, he'd gone to school for that, hadn't he?

Sam reached his hand up to his face as if to check. "Oh yeah," he laughed. "Almost forgot I had them. Got that laser-eye shit five years back. Betty recommended it."

"Does she not wear them anymore either?"

Betty Ross had been the first person Steve Rogers had ever kissed. He wasn't in love with her, but he could've married her, and probably would've had he stayed in Leavenworth for a longer period of time. One of the main reasons he had fallen for her was the way that the thick rim of her glasses had framed her face just so and magnified her bright grey eyes. They were familiar eyes, Betty's. Steve felt at home just looking into them.

"Nah," Sam said. "She started playing volleyball in college, said she didn't want to get them smashed and make her parents pay for new ones."

"Did you both go to Maine?"
"Not much choice but to go to Maine for me," Sam said, just lightly enough but still conveying something. "But yeah. Most of us, 'cept Tony, Nat and Buck, went to Maine."

"I'm guessing Betty did Bio."

"Biochemistry and Bioengineering, I think. I did Psychology and Sociology. I'm working up at the post office now, Betty's in a lab about fifty minutes drive away."

"Sam is the town postman and unofficial guidance counsellor," Tony provided. He pushed his hair back off his face, seemingly not caring that the oil on his hand transferred to his forehead. Sam let out a laugh.

"And Tony is the town whorehouse," he joked. "You should see them. I think some of the bigwigs in business drive through here just to get to him."

"Don't you doubt it, darling." Tony winked at him. Sam pretended to faint. Steve felt his chest swell with something foreign, something True New Yorkers probably shouldn't feel.

"And Bucky?" Steve asked. Sam smirked. "Not that I care or anything," he amended. "Just curious."

"He went for law in Harvard," Sam explained. He shifted on his feet, but that might've been due to the unstable nature of Tony's floor (it was covered in porn magazines and oily rags. These two things were hopefully unrelated). "And Nat did Regional Studies. Russia, Eastern Europe, that sort of thing. The two of them got a shitty apartment in Moscow for a year."

"We never heard much about that year," Tony said. He dropped a screwdriver on the floor so he could lean over his workbench and whisper conspiratorially to both of his visitors. "I'm guessing Barnes and Romanoff teamed up to be the KGB's best agents in history."

"The KGB dissolved years ago Tony," Steve said. Sam just rolled his eyes.

"Try telling him th-"

"That's what they want you to think!"

"Oh my god, Tony," Sam and Steve groaned simultaneously.

"Oh, so you're here five minutes Rogers and you think you can team up with Sam in his 'oh my God, Tony's? The nerve on you."

"Tony, behave," Sam warned.

Tony grabbed his screwdriver and gave a salute with it. "Okay Mom," he said, his tongue pushing against the inside of his cheek.

Sam started some of the magazines off the floor. "Since Tony's parents died-"

"Dead parents are a vetoed topic in this garage, Wilson."

"Just ignore him," Sam muttered to a bewildered Steve, "he loves being dramatic."

"Do not!"

"Do too! Anyway, I'm being his mom and his dad right now. It's hard work."

"And I couldn't think of a more beautiful man to do it."
"Don't hit on me Stark, I'm warning you. I've seen you puke up your lungs, we're basically family. That makes you flirting with me incest."

"Samuel Wilson, why I never-"

The long suffering Sam let out another sigh. Tony glared at him, seemingly unknowing of what he had done wrong this time. Steve had to stifle a laugh.

"And don't mind Bucky," Sam said, a bit softer now. He leaned against the wall of the garage, and Steve did the same. "He can be a bit rough around the edges, especially lately."

"Rough around the edges?" Tony let out a loud and squawky laugh that sent a sharp pain shooting through Steve's temple. Sam's eyebrows drew together in concern. "That's a laugh. Barnes is so cold now he's the fucking winter soldier. Only time he gets temperate is around Nat, and we all know how that would turn out."

"Bucky doesn't want to date Nat," Sam said, in a voice that seemed to Steve as if he had had this argument many times before. "They're just friends, Tony."

"Friends who bang. Ergo, he wants to marry her and have her babies. What I would pay for a BuckyNat sex-tape..."

"This has been a very informative visit," Steve said, in something that must've seemed to be a joke because both Tony and Sam held back laughter. "But I should probably head home about now."

It was already one o'clock, and Steve could feel his stomach growling with hunger. Plus, his head had had just about enough of Tony Stark.

"Poor Steve," Tony cooed. He leaned down on the bonnet of the Ford. "Having to go home and wallow about Barnes breaking his heart again."

"I am not going to wallow," Steve protested.

"He's not going to wallow," Sam provided.

"And Barnes has never broke my heart," Steve argued.

"No, it was the other way arou- ow, Wilson, what the fuck was that for?"

Sam had thrown the tiny whirring contraption that had been sitting on the third desk at Tony, and it had hit him straight in the ribs. Steve noticed, with vague amusement, that it was in fact a modified bouncy ball, which came flying back to Sam, literally, on its own merit after hitting its creator.

"You don't know when to shut up," Sam said pleasantly. He turned back to Steve. "Do you not want to come to my place for lunch, Steve? Mama's making apple pie."

"Why do I never get Mama Wilson's famous apple pie?" Tony protested.

"Because she doesn't like you," Steve said, and his memory must've served him correctly because Sam burst out into fits of laughter while Tony just looked scandalised. "And thanks, Sam, but I think I'll just head home. I need to sort out a job, and unpack some boxes and stuff. But thanks."

"Hey, no problem," Sam said, placing a hand on Steve's shoulder. This time, Steve couldn't restrain his flinch. Sam took a step back, whilst Tony raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to speak.

Steve hurriedly stuck his hand up in the air in a form of wave and made a dash for it, not unlike
Bucky had done just moments before.

God, Steve thought to himself as he half walked, half jogged towards his house, Bucky Barnes must hate me.

Little did he know that this was the furthest thing from the truth.
Chapter 4

Steve did not end up making himself dinner, nor did he sort out a job, nor did he unpack his (one) bag of stuff he'd brought from New York, nor did he clean the house, nor did he do anything semi-productive.

Instead he stopped on the way home and bought himself a bottle of whiskey before remembering that he wasn't supposed to drink alcohol with his medication. He then returned to the shop to get some orange juice and a couple protein bars. He went home, sat and, yes, wallowed in his own self-pity, staring out the large window in the living room that his mother used to enjoy spying on the neighbours through, chomping his way through five protein bars and drinking a pint of orange juice, and considered just how shit his life truly was.

He picked the sketchbook (for want of a better descriptor) off of the floor and flipped to the back. The pencil hovered over the sheet where he had written his three conclusions. Steve remembered Tony's invasiveness, how he couldn't leave well enough alone, how he had demanded to know every aspect of Steve's life within moments of coming back into it. With a huff of breath, Steve began writing:

Tony Stark is a narcissistic PRICK who thinks that just because he's smarter than everyone he has the right to involve himself in people's lives, no matter how much they dislike him. If he had been in Afghanistan, he would've been the FIRST PERSON to let some other poor fucker DIE for him.

A lump formed in Steve's throat. The pencil rolled out of his fingers, and he threw the sketchbook onto the floor as if it had burnt him.

What he had written was true, but it hadn't helped him any. In fact, it had probably made his wallowing even more pathetic.

He must've sat there for hours, alternating between glaring out at the rolling fields surrounding the cottage and at the artificial light of his iPhone, which still had a picture of himself and Sharon smiling out at him, both their arms around her aunt Peggy.

The sun started to settle against the backdrop of the hills, and the light declined to a soft glow that was only interrupted by the blinds on the window.

Bucky always had a thing about the sky above Leavenworth on nights like this. Sometimes he'd have phoned Steve, wake him from a half sleep, and tell him to look out his window. Steve would always comply, because it was Bucky, and Steve loved Bucky, more than almost anyone else.

One time, the clouds had been purple and dusted with bright pink. It was breathtaking, and in that moment, as Steve stared out his bedroom window and knew that Bucky was, without a doubt, doing the same thing just a half hour away, he felt closer to Bucky than ever.

Yet this metaphorical closeness had not been enough for Bucky; it never was. Bucky had ran around to Steve's house so that they could stand, side by side, elbows knocking as they leaned against Steve's windowsill.

"They look like cotton candy," Steve had said. With the warmth of Bucky's body beside him and the sweet reflection of the outside world in his irises, the migraine that had sent him home from school that day was a distant memory.

"They look like how I feel when I'm with you," Bucky, ever the man with words, had said. Steve
had grinned at him then, and Bucky had smiled back, a strange look on his face.

"You're my best friend," Steve said, and it was the truest thing he had ever said. It was still true, in many ways, at least to him. Maybe not to Bucky, anymore.

A soft orange glow bathed Steve in warmth, and reminded him that he needed to take his medication before he drifted off to sleep (not that there was much chance his insomnia would have disappeared that night out of all nights, but there was always hope. There had to be).

One tablet from the blue box, one from the orange, three from the red. Sharon usually organised them in a daily planner for him each morning before she went to work. He realised with a sad clarity that he wouldn't have bacon cooked every day for breakfast either, not unless he got up and did it, and he was always too tired after a night's sleep.

He flipped through a few decade-old magazines as the sun disappeared, resting its head upon the grass and the surrounding cornfields. Wind began to rattle at the single-paned window, rocking it in its wooden frame. Steve sat and watched as the rain started to come down in torrents, so thick and fast it seemed as if heaven was drawing the curtains on a magnificent and terrifying play.

Something stirred in Steve as he watched the rain pour down in rivets and collect in the dips of mud and grass. A pair of grey eyes, filled with enthusiasm and vigour as they worked. Several pairs, indeed, of grey eyes filling buckets of water and throwing them out the window in unison as the kitchen got flooded by the storm.

Did the Barnes' kitchen still flood? Had it flooded for years since Steve had left? Had they had enough hands to keep the water from leaving yellow stains on the old refrigerator?

The next morning, around six o'clock, Steve pulled himself from the old chair where he used to nap peacefully but now could not close his eyes while in its embrace, and began his search for wellingtons. He found his old ones in the small room before the back door, and he pulled them on, ignoring the slightly tight fit. They'd been too big on him for years, but Sarah was of the eternal optimism that her son would grow up big and strong eventually.

Steve realised she'd been right. She was always right; she was like Sharon, in many ways, but particularly this one.

The world outside was silent and still smelt of rain. A few birds moved silently above his head, and Steve stopped briefly to admire them, their v-shaped formations, the uniformity of their army. It reminded him of Afghanistan. Iraq. Iran. Everywhere and anywhere he'd seen birds circling the dead. But then, everything reminded him of war.

He took a breath and began to stomp through the deep puddles towards the Barnes' residence. This path, he recognised, was not lost to time, nor was it any easier to transverse now that he was a foot taller and a hell of a lot stronger. The dirt held him down, sucking him into its drowning waves, and Steve pressed on with determination and a fire in his chest.

Steve felt more like his Leavenworth self than his New Yorker self, for a moment. It passed as quickly as it had came as he slipped and fell into a particularly muddy puddle. The Leavenworth Steve might've been small and weak, but he was nimble and delicate, and he wouldn't have fallen.

Nevertheless, stubbornness was a common trait in all Steves, and so he pushed on, a boat against the seemingly overwhelming current.

When he reached the two story house he was struck for a moment at how much the same it looked,
though there were minor differences. A new mailbox. No flower-boxes hanging from the windows. The wind-vane was lying abandoned, rusting in the guttering. Moss was creeping between the stones, when previously it had been immaculate. But the garden was neat and tidy, and the corners of the grass spoke of someone who took infinite care to trim weeds into a solid line, whose perfectionism must take hours per week.

Steve rapped his fist two times fast against the door and stepped back, waiting. He realised then, too late, that he should've brought a bucket, but he assumed that Bucky would have one. He waited with bated breath and finally, at least three minutes later, the door opened to reveal Bucky.

Steve always loved it when Bucky opened the door. But this time Bucky was not happy, but confused. He stared blankly out at Steve, who was shivering on his doorstep like an abandoned puppy.

Bucky appeared softer than he had in the garage. He was wearing a beaten pair of pyjama bottoms, ratty slippers and a blue t-shirt, which allowed Steve to see the brown expanse of his left arm, and the ... shiny metal? Of the right one.

"Um," Steve said, forcing himself to look at Bucky's face instead, though Bucky too was staring at the mangled scars on Steve's right hand. "Does - does your kitchen still flood?"

Bucky continued to gape at him. He took in Steve's wellingtons and his general soaked appearance. Steve felt horribly awkward, and had the distinct impression that his impromptu visit had been a mistake.

"It rained," Steve motioned to the sky. "So I thought of you."

A brief pause. Steve strained to fill it. Bucky made no such attempt.

"I always think of you when it rains," he tried, which he suddenly realised was true. Even in Afghanistan, where the dead rarely got the benefit of being rained upon to secure them into the earth.

Bucky remained silent and then, with slightly less force than he had stormed out of the garage, but just slightly, slammed the door in Steve's face.

Jarred, and just a little humiliated, Steve continued to stand on the doorstep, thinking that maybe Bucky had forgotten something and that he would come back to let Steve in, or even to say a single word. But a few minutes passed, and Steve realised that Bucky wasn't coming back.

Through the open window (Bucky loved the smell of the rain - the only thing Steve seemed to know about this new Bucky) Steve could hear him talking to someone. His little sister.

"Come on, Becca, help me out with this," Bucky groaned. Steve heard the sloshing of water in a bucket, and then the clang of it being emptied out the back door. "Come on, Becks, stop crying and help me out."

"You have no sympathy Bucky Barnes!" Becca yelled. There was a sound of a fist hitting a wooden table, and Steve recognised Becca's trademark temper hadn't changed as she had aged.

"He's a schmuck," Bucky said forcefully, in a voice that dared you to challenge him. "Don't be worrying about him, alright? It's just..."

"Don't say it's just a crush, Bucky!" Becca yelled. This was apparently the worst thing Bucky could've implied. "People my age can fall in love too."
"I know that Becks," Bucky sighed. The sounds of moving water ceased, and Steve could hear a chair scraping against the floor as Bucky presumably sat down beside his sister. "Believe me, I fucking know that. It's just... Hey, don't cry, precious, please don't cry. Darling, what am I supposed to say, huh? I don't know what to do, sweetheart, I really don't."

"Mom would know what to say."

"Well Mom's not here, sweetie, so you're going to have to make do with me, alright?"

Their voices became muttered then and Steve, fully convinced now that he'd been totally and utterly shunned, stomped down the path towards his house again.

To think he'd squeezed himself into too-small wellies and fell into a puddle for that dickhead. Well, Steve would show him.

The second Steve got into the cottage he pulled out his notebook once again and quickly sketched a likeness of Bucky Barnes. He entitled it, 'The Winter Soldier.' His hair was long and barely touching his shoulders, his eyes were grey and cold, and his eyebrows were furrowed. He looked dangerous and unwelcoming.

No one could blame Steve for being shunned by that person. It was nothing to do with him at all. It was to do with who Bucky had become.

Vindicated, Steve moved to the lined page beside the blank one and scribbled down with enough force to break the pencil lead:

**Bucky Barnes is an asshole. Whatever you remember about him is WRONG. He is NOT a good person, he is NOT a hero, and he is definitely, 100% NOT your best friend.**

Steve felt the temper that had burnt up inside of him on the walk home subside somewhat as he stared at the page, replaced with a sinking feeling of disgust at himself. Though it was the truth (wasn't it?) something felt sick about it, like Steve was putting a bullet in his partner's back, and this was the second person he had done this to in as many days. But Bucky wasn't his partner in crime anymore. Steve could say these things about him and not have to feel guilty, right?

Besides, who was ever going to see the notebook anyway, right? It wasn't that Steve was a bad person. The doctor had said that traumatic brain injury could cause anger, so. It wasn't Steve, it was his brain. The usual culprit.

Sighing, Steve closed the book over. Now that his anger wasn't heating him from the inside out, he could recognise how cold the cottage really was after eight years of being unheated. His toes had been blue that morning when he - well, not woke up exactly, but when the sun rose. And he didn't have enough money to keep the fire going continuously, not until he found a job.

He somewhat remembered that he passed a camping store the first day he arrived back in Leavenworth, and so Steve pulled on his coat and began the walk to Main Street, deciding just to forget that Bucky Barnes even existed.

It proved to be a harder task than he had ever imagined.

The camping store took some searching for, but eventually Steve found it, purposefully running past Tony's garage to get to it. He peered at the sign and willed his brain to allow him to read at his proper speed, but obviously his brain had cooperated too much the previous day and so it took him a few minutes to read the faded sign.
"Barton's Outdoor Equipment," he read out. "(And Archery) (And Daycare)."

Barton. Could it be ...

The second Steve stepped in the revolving doors, he recognised what a mistake he had made.

The space seemed to have previously been a very small factory due to its high roof and industrial beams, and due to the wail of a breeze coming through the small, prison-like windows Steve could guess that it had been the cheapest purchase on the market at the time. The store consisted of about eight aisles filled to the brim with coats and gloves and tents and boots, and the air was stifled and hot, speaking of a lack of air conditioning. There was a second floor, though it was only accessible by a rickety looking ladder, and appeared to be more of a storage area than anything else. The lights were dim and flickering, and along with the stifling heat, it reminded Steve an awful lot of barracks, despite the screams of children, which had definitely not been present in Afghanistan.

Steve almost immediately clocked Clint Barton who was, as usual, nursing a broken leg and some plaster on his nose. He, thankfully, or perhaps unfortunately, hadn't changed a bit besides some laugh lines. He was still dressed in his trademark bull's eye t-shirt and purple hoodie combined with too big jeans and purple converse. The only thing that was slightly different was the three kids hanging off his arms, who seemed to be fighting over a ... dog toy?

"Steve Rogers!" Clint called out across the store, which only had a few other shoppers present in it. The man and woman, who were perusing with great intensity the variation of tents available, lifted their heads momentarily and then returned to their passionately whispered debate. "My God, Natasha was right."

"She always is," Steve said, mostly to himself, but Clint chuckled and nodded regardless. He walked over to Steve and grabbed his hand, pulling him into a tight hug. Steve froze up, but Clint, much like Tony, was never one to recognise things like that.

"Where have you been?" Clint asked. The three kids who he'd been holding apart were now all out brawling behind him. He was either oblivious or, knowing Clint, just didn't care anymore.

"New York," Steve replied. "They yours?"

"Oh yes," Clint said. He looked, upon closer reflection, tired. But happy. How Steve had always imagined he'd see himself in the mirror at this age. "Cooper, Lila, Nathaniel, in age order. Nathaniel after Nat, of course. Thought he was a girl but he turned out to just have a small one."

"Daaad!" Nathaniel called out, at the same time as Lila jutted out her hand and hit her brother in the nuts. He let out a squeal that should've levelled Leavenworth.

"Hey, I heard we should be referring to you as Captain rather than Mister Steve Rogers now," Clint said, squeezing Steve's shoulder. "How many tours did you do?"

"Three," Steve answered. Clint's eyes widened. "One in Iraq, two in Afghanistan. Got promoted to Captain a few months after base camp."

Clint let out a low whistle. "That's impressive," he said. "Wait till I tell Laura. Laura!"

Who the fuck is Laura, Steve wanted to ask, but Laura appeared before he had the chance to, along with the famous Natasha Romanoff, who with one look ceased the children's argument immediately.

"Laura," Clint said, putting his arm around her waist. "My wife. Cooper's her son, then the other two are my spawn."
"I'm a cougar," Laura said, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "A whole six years in it, too."

"Ah," Steve said, and then, after only a moment to let his brain catch up, "I thought he was the cougar, because you certainly don't look a day over twenty-one, ma'am."

While Laura fawned, Natasha Romanoff rolled her eyes.

"Steve Rogers," Natasha said. "Still attempting to be a 1940's gentleman, I see."

"It's not attempting if that's what he is," Laura said.

"Don't you be getting any ideas about my wife," Clint warned good-naturedly.

"I wouldn't worry," Steve comforted him. "I'm actually just out of a relationship. That's why I'm back."

"If you want a rebound, I'm sure Natasha could get you one," Laura suggested.

"Yeah, she knows a lot about love these days- oh fuck that hurts, Nat, what the fuck."

Natasha had stuck a tent screw into Clint's arm, and was smirking at having done it. She was as beautiful and terrifying as always.

"I know a bit more than I used to, that's true," she said. Her voice was like gravel, and it drew you in like a cursed spell. Many men had fallen for her charms and ended up castrated for it (either metaphorically or, in one poor fella's case, literally). Whether it was unintentional or purposefully lowered to encourage you to lean in, Steve was beyond falling for her tricks, and if that meant his deafened ear allowed him to only pick up every alternate word, then he'd just have to fill in the gaps.

"Are you married too?" Steve asked.

"Married? Her?" (This time, Laura dug Clint in the arm.)

"Not married, no," Natasha muttered. "Just a tad interested."

"Have you been to the doctor yet, Steve?" Clint asked. He was obviously obtaining more enjoyment from this than anybody else. "Because that's who she's yammering on about. Doctor Bruce Banner, isn't that his name?"

He said it as if he'd heard it repeated often enough to never forget it. Steve wished he had that confidence in his memory.

Natasha remained coolly pale, never flushing. She'd only flushed once since Steve had known her, but that was in the Donut Scandal of 2004, so he wasn't thinking about it.

"He's smart," Natasha said, which meant coming from her that he far surpassed Einstein. "Mature."

"Just because I make a couple of dick jokes doesn't make me immature, Nat, come on."

"It kind of does, dear."

"Honey, don't back her up. I know you're the Dream Team now but we're in this together. Legally," Clint held up his wedding ring. "Remember?"

Laura smiled sweetly back at him. "Yes dear," she replied. "Unfortunately I do."
While Clint gaped at his wife in mock shock, Steve continued to consider Natasha, who never shifted nor moved from her spot, hands against her side, hair perfectly curled and caressing her cheeks, bright eyes so deceivingly innocent.

Steve remembered sitting out on fire-escapes with her when they broke into stores late at night. Not to steal, just because Natasha liked the challenge of picking locks, and scaling walls, and corrupting Steve. He remembered her laughing with Bucky as they raced down hills, either running or rolling or a mixture of the two. They'd both lay at the bottom of the slope, covered in grass stains and dandelion fluff, laughing so hard their faces turned red and their chests heaved with the strain. Steve remembered Natasha going diving in the lake and then flipping her hair over to dry in the sun. It had lay in wet ringlets against her cheek for hours on account of its thickness, and Clint always attempted to get it to dry in a Mohawk style, to no success. She had indulged him, always looking at him with a soppy look on her face, as if there was no person on this earth she loved more than him.

"Did you go to Russia?" Steve asked. Casually. As if he didn't really care if she did or she didn't.

"Yes," Natasha smirked. She always smirked. She knew more than other people. She had picked up a slight Russian accent, which had all but disappeared in the time Steve had known her. "Barnes and I took a little pilgrimage to Moscow after our first year in college. We had fun. Spent a lot of time in a cramped studio apartment. Barnes screwed half the city. I stayed with one man - Alexei Shostakov. He was - highly intelligent."

It was the way she spoke. It made Steve blush no matter what she was saying.

"But he spoke only Russian," she shrugged, "and he loved Moscow more than his own blood. Knew it like the back of his hand. I understood - I felt the same way about New England. So I left him behind. Went back to school again."

Natasha had been adopted by Nick Fury, the equally terrifying man with a small house at the end of Main Street, at the age of ten from a Russian orphanage that had burned to the ground. How Fury managed to get the adoption signed off by the Russian authorities was none of anyone's concern, but the day Natasha arrived in Leavenworth was the day Nick Fury melted (only towards her though. He maintained the strict headmaster to every other youth in the town).

Sarah had whispered sadly to Steve that Natasha was proving a challenge to old Fury. "He's sick sometimes, Nick," she would say, "and the stress can't be helping him. She's bitter, and scared, and deprived. Whatever he was thinking I don't know. He's a stronger person than me, that's for sure."

Steve had disagreed with that, feeling that his mother had always been the strongest person in the world, except for maybe Bucky, but he understood the sentiment. Natasha was a nightmare up until the age of eleven, when she finally started to calm down and build proper friendships, first with Clint, then with Bucky, and then, reluctantly, with everyone else. After that there were three things everyone knew you didn't touch with Natasha; her Bucky, her Clint, and her father, whom she loved more than life itself, it seemed at times.

"What do you work as now?" Steve asked. He was genuinely curious, for if he was an employer he would take one look at Natasha and mark down on her page that she was a spy or a murderer, despite what the police checks might say. She just had that hardened look on her face.

The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. "I teach elementary school," she said. Steve near dropped on the spot. "We do some classes during the summer as well to help the parents, but it's hard. Sometimes I get overwhelmed. We have thirty children right now, and no teaching assistants. It's really a crying shame. You don't even need any particular qualifications; I'd train anyone who applied on the job."
Steve nodded, not really understanding what she was implying. Then, when Clint and Laura motioned with their hands for him to speak, he broke out of his obliviousness.

"I'd do it," Steve said. Natasha pursed her lips. "I mean... I'd be interested. I like ... kids, and stuff. And art. They do art in elementary school, don't they?"

He must've looked desperate, because Laura smiled and nodded at him. Steve felt his shoulders relax.

"Well, if you're interested" - Natasha put emphasis on that last word for a reason Steve didn't feel the need to analyse - "then I'll write up the paperwork tonight and you can start next Monday. It's just occasional classes, totally voluntary for the kids. I'll pay you in hand, of course, just until I get everything sorted out with the board. Then you can begin properly in September."

So brutally efficient, as always. Steve smiled at her and let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding.

"Thanks, Natasha," he said. "Thank you so much."

"It's not a problem," she said. Her tone still rattled him. "I figured since you were buying camping socks, you might need some money for firewood. I'm nice like that."

Steve glanced around and realised that he'd been subconsciously leaning towards the socks throughout the conversation. He immediately blushed. Natasha smirked. Clint was grinning from ear to ear.

"That's great, Steve!" he said, thumping him on the back (Steve had to restrain himself from breaking his arm). "You're going to get on your feet in no time, I'm telling you. Hey, Nat, we should invite him to movie night."

"Oh Steve, you'll love movie night," Natasha drawled, which made Steve think that he would very much not love movie night.

"Okay," he said, only because Clint would keep his hand on his back if he didn't agree. He began to search out the quickest exit, and found it was the way that he had come in. He'd been only five steps from the front door when he'd been ambushed. "Okay, I'll come."

"It's at my place," Natasha said. She grabbed Steve's hand (what was it with these Leavenworthers and touching?) and pulled a lid off a biro she'd had tucked behind her ear with her teeth. Natasha had that habit because she realised at sixteen that boys liked her mouth, and so she had been obsessed with putting her lips on things ever since. "Seven o'clock. In the evening, obviously. Tomorrow."

"All the old gang will be there," Clint grinned. "You, Nat, Rhodes, Wilson, Stark, Jane, Betty, Barnes..."

"Bruce might be making an appearance," Natasha shrugged. "Might not. He said he'd see what he had on."

According to her murderous expression, that was the worst possible thing Bruce could've said.

"I'll be there," Steve promised. "I have nothing on."

"Good," Natasha purred. She waved her hand dismissively. "I'm sure you have things to be getting on with, Steve. We'll see you tomorrow."
He smiled thankfully at her and waved goodbye to Clint and Laura. The second he was out of the shop Steve slumped against the outside wall and began to hyperventilate.

He was so stupid, he was so, so stupid. Why did he say yes to movie night? What if they were watching something with explosions? Every movie has explosions now. And so many people in one room ... So many people touching him, so many people beside him, laughing, smiling, being people.

Steve had really let himself in for it this time, and Sharon wouldn't be there to put a reassuring hand on his shoulder and make excuses and get him home and wrapped up safely in the comfort of their bed and create silence. This time, he'd be all alone.

Slowly, Steve caught his breath, cursing himself for letting anxiety get a hold of him again. He made his way along the path, calming himself by counting his steps, one two three, one two three. He got to two hundred when he passed by a house that had been abandoned when he left Leavenworth eight years ago, and which was now obviously inhabited.

Upon first glance at the house's dwellers, who were a girl and a boy, in their twenties, sitting on rocking chairs on the front porch, Steve drew the connection between them and the Eastern European kids that Tony had babbled on about. And, although Steve didn't particularly like to make blatant judgements about people he barely knew, he clearly understood why Tony had considered them 'crazy.'

There were fifteen cats it seemed, though they were moving too elusively and quickly to properly count, moving through the high grass of the garden, and creepy garden gnomes peered out at passersby on the line between the grass and the pavement. The girl was wearing a long, billowing black gypsy skirt and a deep red shrug. Her eyes were wide and her hair looked as if she had been electrocuted mere moments before.

Her brother, on the other hand, looked slightly more put together in a pair of denim overalls and a blue checked shirt. His hair, though, was bleached bright white, for it couldn't be considered blond, and he watched over the people who milled around Main Street like a predator, or perhaps like prey, for there was a protective watchfulness in it. Steve had seen that kind of look before, seen it reflected in the mirror too many times, or in shards of broken glass distributed in sand.

Despite this paranoia and Steve's distinct impression that the girl, who the boy referred to as "Wanda", was a witch through and through, they seemed happy. Content. As if they had picked this run-down home in a tiny, forgotten town with fresh air and little prospects purposefully, so that they could begin a new life of anonymity and peacefulness, for that was undoubtedly what Leavenworth provided, and why Sharon, despite her best intentions, could never spend more than a week in its embrace.

The fact that Steve was beginning to adjust to the country air once more and was actually finding that the lack of pollution was doing wonders for his headaches may have been the first indication that Steve was not a True New Yorker, but perhaps a true Leavenworther underneath it all.

However, at this stage, as he still stung from Bucky's rejection and was baffled by Natasha's unassuming and hidden kindness, this thought was far too terrible to contemplate, and so he continued on down the path towards his home, where he would spend the rest of the day choosing what he was going to wear to the stupid fucking movie night.

God, he hated Leavenworth.
Steve realised that a t-shirt and a pair of jeans couldn't offend anybody, but upon yanking everything out of his suitcase and throwing it to the ground in exasperation, Steve soon found that he had brought nothing but Armani, Calvin Klein, and a multitude of other designer clothing that probably wouldn't go down well in this sleepy town. He'd put the jeans he'd been wearing for the past week in the wash and hung them out to dry the previous day, where some fucking asshole bird had shit all over them, so they weren't an option.

So, he did what he had been forced to do; he walked around to Tony Stark's garage once again so he could beg him for pair of clean jeans because, realistically, he had no one else to ask. It was a sad state of affairs, to have to rely on Stark for anything, but he didn't feel comfortable going to Clint (he had no money to spend in his store, at least not on clothes of any value or style) and he couldn't remember the way to Sam's house.

Plus, Bucky Barnes hated his guts, so. There was that. Stark was his only option.

Like he'd said, Steve's life was going to shit.

He trailed himself back down to Main Street, realising just how much he missed the subway, and noticed with a small smile how Tony's garage had a sign over it which said, "Stark Industries. You break it, I fix it. For cash money."

He pushed open the door - which still squeaked a little on its hinges, Bucky must've fucked it up right - and heard with dread settling in his stomach not one but two voices speaking to the Camaro with great love and affection.

"You beauty of a machine," Bucky whispered, his head against the hood and his arm stroking the Camaro's side as Tony soldered something underneath. "You're a real doll, a dame, look at those gams on you. Beautiful. I'd marry you in a heartbeat, buy you a ring tomorrow..."

"It's working," Tony called up. "Keep sweet-talking her, you miracle-worker, she's holding together today."

"Of course she is," Bucky said, patting the Camaro's wing-mirror. "She's a wonder. Aren't you a wonder, darling? What's your name? Beautiful car like you deserves a..."

He stopped talking. The soft, sappy look that had been on his face disappeared as he recognised Steve in the doorway. Tony let out a little yell and Steve winced as a piece of metal fell and hit him in the face.

"She didn't hold together," Tony mumbled, pushing himself out from under the vehicle. Blood was running slowly out of his nose, and he picked up a rag to clean it with (Steve was surprised he hadn't died of oil inhalation yet). "Damnit, Barnes. I really thought it'd work-"

"You have a visitor," Bucky snapped, throwing a cloth down on a workbench Steve hadn't noticed before, and now wondered how he missed something so obviously Bucky. It even had pictures around it, several of Becca, some of Bucky (before the metal arm, it seemed). One photo was pinned underneath the others, so Steve could only see the corner of it, but he recognised it as the beach just a few miles out from Leavenworth, where him and Bucky used to go down and get ice cream on the July holiday and laugh as they tried to eat it before it melted (they never quite succeeded).

Tony turned to look at the door, and Steve shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. "I can come back
later," he said weakly, but Tony was already shaking his head.

"No, no," he said, pulling Steve into the centre of the garage by his hand. Bucky watched Steve's reaction with interest. "Sit down," Tony demanded. Steve reluctantly complied. "Maybe you can help us get the Camaro to cooperate."

"Dunno," Steve said. He glanced at Bucky out of the corner of his eye. "If Bucky can't charm her, I doubt I could."

Bucky just looked at him. God, he really was the Winter Soldier now, wasn't he?

"Did you get your kitchen sorted?" Steve asked, trying to keep the bitterness from his tone. He didn't think he succeeded. Bucky pursed his lips and folded his arms across his chest.

"Yeah," he said.

Tony shifted his eyes between them and then, either oblivious to the awkwardness or just avoiding it, went back to whispering to the Camaro.

"Come on, baby, you're my lifeline..."

"Why would you care, anyway?" Bucky asked. He wasn't accusing. He wasn't ... anything, really. His voice was level like he was playing poker. He wasn't giving anything away. "Not like you cared eight years ago."

"Yeah, well," Steve searched. Something appeared at the forefront of his brain almost immediately, so he spat it out before it retreated. "I'm not the only one who doesn't care. You didn't even cry at Ma's funeral, Buck."

Finally, some kind of reaction, even if it was minor and horribly controlled. Bucky's eyes widened only a fraction and he shuffled on his feet, so he was standing with them wide apart, strong and uncompromising.

He needed more of a push. Steve would provide it.

"You were the only one who didn't, you know," Steve said. "Even Fury-"

"How do you know what I did."

It wasn't a question. Even Steve's fucked-up brain could process that. In the background, Tony made a face at Steve that resembled, 'oh shit you've done it now,' as he scurried into the back room, which seemingly doubled as an office, safely out of dodge.

"I know what you didn't do," Steve said. He stood up from the hot-red barstool and pushed it so it hit against the workbench. It wasn't intentional, but the loud noise made a muscle in Bucky's jaw clench.

"You always think you know everything, Steve," Bucky said through gritted teeth. Steve shrugged.

"So I've heard."

"But you don't." Bucky moved closer to Steve then, so that they were only an arm's distance away. If he wanted to, Bucky could shove Steve backwards. Steve briefly wondered about the strength of that metal arm. "If you knew half as much as you think you do, you would've known that running away from your problems aren't going to make them go away."

"That's rich," Steve laughed. There was the fever, the rage. The red devil that inhabited Steve any
time the going got tough, bred in him from a lifetime of uncertainty and bullying. He refused to be pushed around by anyone, even Bucky Barnes. Especially Bucky Barnes. "Coming from you. You're the king of running away from problems. Either that or talking your way out of them and hoping no one thinks to bring them up."

"New York's been good to you, I see," Bucky spat. "It's made you into an asshole."

"At least I don't slam a door in people's faces," Steve argued. "At least I don't swear at someone I haven't seen for eight years."

"Exactly!" Bucky yelled. This, now this, was familiar. Bucky was always a yeller. "I haven't seen you for eight years Steve! What the absolute fuck! What did we say, for years Steve, huh? You and me, against the world. You and me. Always going to be there for each other, have each other's backs."

"People grow up, Bucky," Steve said. He didn't sound convincing, even to himself. "People change."

"But we weren't meant to!" He ran his hands through his hair. It was long and slightly greasy, probably from the oil that pervaded every surface of the garage. "People change but we weren't meant to, Steve."

"Well fucking excuse me," Steve said. "I didn't know you cared that much."

Bucky's shoulders fell to the ground. The anger erased itself from between his eyebrows. His eyes, his grey eyes, became soft, like rocks blurred at the edges from years of continual erosion.

"Are you joking me, Steve?" he whispered. "Are you fucking joking me?"

He seemed to be waiting for a response, so Steve shrugged. Bucky looked up to the sky in exasperation, and then back to Steve, who could no longer make eye contact.

"Just so you know, Steve," he said. "When I got back from Sarah's funeral, I cried so hard my nose bled. I didn't cry at the funeral in front of everyone because I was trying to be strong."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, to say that tears didn't necessitate weakness, but Bucky stopped him.

"For you," he said, jabbing a finger into Steve's chest. The skin burned where he had touched it, but Steve didn't flinch away. Bucky spoke the next words one at a time. "I wanted to protect you."

Tony's head popped up in the window that looked through into the office. His eyes were comically wide and he had his hand over his mouth, and the other wiping away an imaginary tear. Steve had to restrain himself from rolling his eyes at Stark, because Bucky might've taken it wrong and decked him. He wouldn't put it past this new Bucky, this Winter Soldier.

"It didn't work," Steve replied simply, because he wanted Bucky to bleed. He wanted him to feel the pain of rejection, the suffering that came with being dismissed.

"Yeah, well," Bucky shrugged. "At least I tried."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Bucky exploded suddenly, without finesse or restraint. "My parents are dead too, Steve!"
Steve's breathing quickened. No, no, no. He searched Bucky's face for some form of lying, some kind of a joke, but there was none. Of course, you'd have to be a sick person to lie about something like this.

"Wh-"

"Pa died after my first year in college," Bucky said. His eyes were back to that cold, impenetrable force. "Emphysema. Those cigars finally caught up to him, you know? Mom died two years later. The cancer came back."

Steve could feel his chest tightening, could feel the panic overwhelming him. He could still hear Winnie's sweet voice, could feel George's rough hand scuffling his hair, could hear Winnie say, "Okay Bucky, he can stay for one more night," but then letting Steve stay the week instead.

It felt as if he had lost Sarah all over again, though perhaps this time it was worse, because it was Bucky who was suffering, Bucky whose voice became thick with loss and emotion.

"The other girls were all grown up by that stage," he said, "'cept Becca, she was only eight. Wouldn't have been fair to give her to our Aunt and Uncle, they were basically strangers at that point. Besides, I was the oldest. It was my responsibility." Bucky began to chew at the corner of his mouth. It spurted blood in an instant, and the red sank into the chapped lines of his lips. "I dropped out of Harvard, began working with Nat. She set up a little ballet academy down on Main Street as a sort of sideline. I work the books, things like that. Becca needed me."

Steve should've said something comforting. He should've told Bucky how he coped with Sarah's death (though whether he had coped at all was up for debate). Instead, there was one thing that hang palpably in the air, and he knew that he would never again be able to look Bucky in the eye until it was said.

"You should've called me," Steve said. Bucky narrowed his eyes.

"You hadn't kept in touch," Bucky replied smoothly. "For two years. I figured you didn't give a damn anymore."

"You know that I did," Steve spat. "If you didn't, then you obviously never knew me at all."

"I had more important things to be thinking about than trying to get into contact with you, Rogers," Bucky said. He was closer than ever to Steve now, and Steve thanked God for his growth spurt so that they could finally be eye to eye.

"I loved them too," Steve breathed. But it was so weak and so small and so broken, Steve with his deaf ear could not hear it.

Bucky shot one more look at Steve that cut through him, stomped over to the garage door and grabbed his leather jacket off the coat hook as he went. He did it so roughly that the jacket ripped, but the murder in his eyes was too intense to notice.

"You traded in New England for New York, and I'm proud of you, Steve, I am," he said. (The scary thing was, Steve knew he meant it.) "I hope you're proud of yourself."

That last part, however, was definitely insincere.

As the garage door slammed closed for the second time in as many days, Steve felt a shiver go through him. He didn't think it had anything to do with the wind that had been created.
Tony crept out of the office and came to stand beside Steve, staring at the door as if bewitched.

"You two have some serious issues," he said.

Steve nodded once.

"Movie night is going to be fucking awkward," Tony said, before going back to the Camaro as if nothing had happened.

Steve sat down hard on the barstool. The screws came out underneath him, and he ended up on his ass on the floor.

If he didn't need clean jeans, he would've punched Tony in his already bleeding nose for laughing (or guffawing. Guffawing was a better word).

God, Bucky Barnes really hated him.

Tony's laughing at his misfortune only ceased when he realised Steve had not buried his face in his hands out of embarrassment, but in a last desperate attempt to stop the tears from falling.

They sat on the greasy floor of the garage until a customer arrived at the door. Tony told them to "Fuck off, we're dealing with something at the moment," but Steve's period of self-pity had passed, and so he told Tony to go deal with the customer. Judging by the thread-worn nature of Tony's clothes, he needed all the money he could get.

"Go into my office," Tony said. "I'll be there soon."

Two hours later he returned, and they spent a while in Tony's small, cramped bedroom deciding which of Tony's trousers were the least tight on Steve and trying to wiggle him into them.

Steve realised that Tony hitting on him was an attempt to make him laugh, but all he could think about was Bucky in a black suit, standing beside a grave, never spilling a tear so as to protect his sisters, all alone in that vast empty space of grief.
"Steve!" Natasha greeted, one half of her mouth curled upwards as she opened her front door. "I like your jeans."

Her residence was a modest terrace a couple blocks from Main Street, and it stood out in comparison to those surrounding it, simply due to its immaculate perfection. The cracks in the walls had been filled in, the house was painted a bright white and the front door was blood red. The small slither of grass in the front garden was clipped and there was a flowerbed directly under what he assumed was her living room, consisting of peonies and carnations and the occasional daisy.

Steve smiled and passed a packet of candies over to her, and stepped inside the house. Natasha closed the door behind them and began guiding him towards the living room.

The house was warm once they got inside, and it smelt of incense burning and the distinct aura of baking. Steve vaguely recalled that Natasha learnt in high school to manage her anger by replacing it with hobbies, and one of these had been making insanely good brownies at four o'clock in the morning when she couldn't sleep. No one complained when she brought them in and shared them with the group at the lunch table. There were few pictures hanging, although there were wall decals to fill the empty spaces, all of birds or animals, some tribal masks and a pair of Samurai swords that she'd probably picked up on her travels.

Natasha noticed him perusing her collection and smiled.

"The joys of being a schoolteacher," she explained. "I get plenty of time to indulge myself in the summer. Though I would love to visit St. Petersburg in winter at some stage."

"You could go at Christmas," Steve suggested. Natasha hummed but didn't seem entirely convinced. "Am I the first one here?" he asked, but midway through he found the answer to his question.

The living room door opened to reveal a group of people sitting around Natasha's wood burner, getting very angry over a game of Monopoly. The small TV which was squeezed onto a wooden cabinet in the corner was flickering on and off as Clint flipped through the channels impatiently, finding that the aerial had been damaged during the rainstorm.

"Come on, Barnes," Jane Foster said around the neck of her beer bottle. "You went to law school."

"For a year," Bucky replied, taking her beer from her and glugging a bit himself before passing it back. Jane appeared unfazed. "Why do you think I left?"

"Tony's going to get Mayfair if you're not careful," Sam observed. As far as Steve could gather, the group had divided into two teams; Bucky, Sam and Jane against Tony, Rhodey and Betty. Clint was too busy watching the TV and seemed as if he was half-drunk already, going by the glazing of his eyes.

"Of course I'll get Mayfair," Tony smirked. Betty massaged his shoulders like she was his coach before a big wrestling match. "I'm an entrepreneur, Barnes."

"You're a fucker, Stark, is what you are," Bucky replied. He took his attention away from the board so he could give a proper death glare in Tony's direction. "If you take Mayfair, I swear to fuck I'll cut out your intestines with Nat's Samurai sword."

"Actually," a man who Steve assumed was Bruce piped up from beside Tony (he had been so silent
Steve hadn't recognised him at first). "To do that would be defacing the purpose of the sword. The Samurai fought with honour."

"Yeah, and it would be in honour of Mayfair that I'd murder his ass."

"Threats! I'm being threatened!" Tony yelped. He grabbed Betty's arms and pulled her in front of him for protection. Betty frowned.

"My hero," she said, rolling her eyes. Tony sent her a bright smile.

Natasha cleared her throat. The group looked to the door, suddenly realising that she'd reappeared. Of course, this was to be expected; in the years Steve had known Natasha Romanoff, he'd never heard her enter a room. Her soft-footedness might've been due with her ballet career or it might've been, as Tony vehemently insisted, due to her 'KGB background.' Either option was viable, in Steve's personal opinion.

"Steve's here," Natasha announced. Clint lifted his feet off the sofa and she settled beside him. He put his legs back down over hers.

A mumbled chorus of 'nice to see you,' 'long time no see,' and 'Nat said you were coming' welcomed him, and Steve gave an awkward smile before settling himself on the small and dangerous precipice of the arm of the sofa. The group thankfully returned to their previous activities, so Steve was able to sit and take in his surroundings and become acclimatised without being overwhelmed.

He took particular interest in Bruce, although so did Natasha; she was watching him out of the corner of her eye since she re-entered the living room, and continued to do so after she returned from a brief break to get some popcorn and cheese fondue.

Bruce was a small, unassuming man of about thirty; four years older than Steve himself. He wore round, wire rimmed spectacles which provided him with a constant battle to keep them from slipping down his nose. He was wearing a pair of tan slacks as well as a polo shirt with 'Harvard Medical School' stitched onto the breast.

He looked like a doctor, and Steve had seen enough to know, but he didn't have the easy familiarity that most medical professionals had, the kind of demeanour that put you at ease and assured you that they were 100% sure of everything they had to say. Instead Bruce chewed nervously at a rag-nail on his thumb, spoke in soft, clipped sentences, and generally tried to avoid eye contact with everyone apart from occasionally Natasha (he met her gaze accidentally most times, purposefully others, and it always lasted only a moment before it seemed to overwhelm him and he turned back to Tony, ears blazing red).

Tony was his safe base, it seemed, and Bruce orientated around him even when the group shifted to sit around or on the sofa as Natasha prepared the DVD. It was Due Date, thank God, so it didn't have any explosions or violence. The closest thing it had was the mention of a bomb, and Steve had long surpassed mentions of the incident being a trigger, so he was able to relax in his seat on the floor, his back leaning against a pair of legs that he was unsure of the owner.

Betty Ross was to his left, and Jane to hers, and as Natasha searched around for the remote (Clint had somehow lost it during the group's relocation) she turned around to Steve and grinned at him. Her big grey eyes sparkled when she did so. Steve found himself smiling back.

"I was so happy to hear you were back," Betty said, her words dripping of sincerity. Of course, she was one of the most honest people he knew. "I missed you while you were gone."
"I missed you too," Steve said, with so much ease that it must've been true. Either that, or war had made him a liar as well as a fuck-up. "I hear you kept yourself busy, though."

Dimples appeared in her cheeks and she looked away from Steve and towards the TV.

"I worked hard," she said. There was something sad in that expression now, something that pointed to even Betty Ross being wounded by the passage of time. "It was pretty difficult coming from a small university, being virtually unknown, a woman in science. Funding was hard to come by. Still is, matter of fact. I spend about half my salary every year subsidising my own research."

"You don't have to do that, though," Clint provided from the sofa, with a tiredness that spoke of an age-old argument. Betty shrugged.

"I know I'm onto something," she said. She turned back to Steve. He was shocked to see tears reflecting in her eyes. "I know it'll make life better for a lot of people if I crack it. And when I do finally get there, then I'll bask in the fame and fortune. But until then, I'm happy enough bunking with Jane."

"One good thing about it is," Jane intervened, leaning over Betty to speak to Steve, "that Betty gets to spend her life doing what she loves. Whereas I let myself get talked into doing pharmacy instead of physics, and now I'm stuck dispensing antibiotics to Chlamydia ridden teenagers and doing a physics degree part time."

"Yeah, but you have a fucking hot boyfriend," Tony called out from his position beside - or perhaps on top of - Bruce. "I know I'd burn my PhD if it meant getting to tap that sweet Norwegian- ow Bruce, not you too!"

(Bruce had jabbed him with a fondue stick.)

Steve raised an eyebrow at Jane, who was now a pleasant shade of red. He then took a quick glance at Bucky, who was too busy talking away to Natasha about her Samurai swords, and so Steve assumed that Bucky's childhood long infatuation with Jane Foster had died along with most of the group's dreams.

"His name's Thor," Jane said. She was playing nervously with the hem of her ratty woollen jumper. "I met him a few summers ago when I went to Norway for a physics conference."

"He plays hockey," Tony fawned. "Which explains why his ass is so-"

"Tony really likes Thor," Betty said, with another roll of her eyes. "Or else, he likes Thor's pictures..."

Tony threw a piece of popcorn at her head.

"Let me guess," Steve said. "Thor's a Norwegian male supermodel."

Natasha's eyes widened. "How did you guess," she mocked, but by the sheepish look on Jane's face, Steve had hit the nail on the head.

"He sounds perfect," Steve said. He smiled at Jane, which seemed to comfort her somewhat. "No less than you deserve."

The entire group - bar Tony, who pretended to barf, and Bucky, who pretended not to have heard anything at all - let out an 'aw'. Natasha even pinched Steve's cheek.
"Before we start the movie," Tony said, ceasing Sam from pressing 'play.' Sam patiently sat the remote down on his thigh. "Steve, has anyone told you how Doctor Banner here managed to become a part of our little group?"

"Oh God, Tony," Bruce groaned. His face was already in his hands, and Natasha was sitting up straight in her seat.

"That's enough, Stark," she warned, but Bruce waved his hand.

"No, no," Bruce said, taking a deep breath. "He'll have to know sometime. It might as well be now."

"Did you murder someone or something?" Steve asked, a little confused over why everyone was suddenly wearing vaguely Bucky-like stoic expressions on their faces. "Are you in Witness Protection?"

"No, no," Bruce said, at the same time as Tony laughed, "The real story's better. Oh my God, Brucie, please let me tell it, please."

"Brucie?" Natasha repeated.

Bruce sighed. "Better you telling it than me, Tony," he said with another wave of his hand. He then pressed his face into one of Natasha's throw pillows to avoid the imminent embarrassment.

"Alright, so it was a warm spring day-"

"Tony, I swear to God," Rhodey interrupted. "I have a pregnant wife I'd like to get home to before she gives birth next month, thank you very much."

Tony sent a dirty glance Rhodey's way, and when that was unappreciated, he flipped him off instead. Rhodey returned the favour, and Tony returned to his story-telling.

"Right, where was I? Oh yes-"

"Bruce had just completed his residency in New York when some asshole first year medical student came up to him and started challenging his authority," Natasha explained, her face stony and bitter. "You'd think she'd been the one wronged by the medical student rather than Bruce, and it was slightly disconcerting seeing her reveal this much empathy towards - well, anyone.

"Bruce said I could tell it!"

"Shut up, Tony," Natasha said pleasantly. "Anyway, the medical student kept following Bruce around all day disrespecting him, thinking he knew better than Bruce did because he watched a lot of Scrubs and was first in his science prerequisites class or some shit, just generally making Bruce out to look like a dumbass in front of his colleagues when he'd worked so hard to get his career set up.

"And then - and then - the little shit actually started speaking up while he was shadowing Bruce consulting, challenging his authority and worrying the patients, so Bruce had finally had enough."

"Natasha's being very kind," an emerging Bruce mumbled. "But what I did was wrong, no matter how much I was provoked."

"What did you do?" Steve asked. He couldn't help leaning forward slightly. Curiosity, after all, was the trademark of an artist, and he could already feel his inspiration beginning to flow. He itched for some comic-drawing software, or even just a pen, so he could jot it down and transcribe it to paper rather than relying on his memory.
"He gave the little twerp what he had coming to him."

"What Natasha means by that," Tony interjected, the only person brave (or stupid) enough to interrupt Natasha Romanoff, "is that Bruce punched the medical student right in the face!"

Steve's mouth dropped open. "You did not," he said. Bruce shoved his face back into the pillow, therefore confirming that what Tony was saying was, for once, absolutely true.

"Broke the little fucker's nose, too," Natasha reported, bordering on proud, and leaned back into the sofa, taking popcorn from Clint's own personal stash. He didn't bother protesting.

"I'm not proud of what I did-"

"I would be," both Natasha and Tony said at the same time. Both of them looked at each other in surprise. Steve didn't think he'd ever heard the two of them agreeing.

"Oh, these really are the end times," Rhodey said in the background, and Sam nodded solemnly.

Bruce pushed his glasses up. They were skewed from the pillow. "Thankfully the student didn't sue," he said, "because that could've been my career over. Instead, the hospital politely asked me to leave, and if I cooperated, they'd sweep it under the rug. So I cooperated. I packed my bags and I left the city. I had no idea where I was going, so I kept driving, and somehow I ended up here.

"I went into Tony's garage and I automatically recognised him as one of Betty's friends." The tip of Bruce's ears went red once more, a shade to match Betty's cheeks. "We dated briefly in college. Anyway, I asked Tony if there was anywhere I could get a job. He called up Sam, and Sam's mother got me into the town practice. I've been there ever since."

Sam's mother was the matron at the clinic. When Steve had left Leavenworth she was running the practice by herself after the death of the previous doctor and was desperate for a replacement. Steve was glad that burden had been lifted from her.

"That was two years ago now," Natasha said. Her mouth was full of fondue, yet somehow she still managed to sound seductive. Bruce considered her for a moment.

"Time flies," he muttered.

"Doesn't it just," Bucky, in the first words he'd spoken in a while, agreed.

The voice came from above Steve and so he looked up, making him realise that the legs he had settled himself against were in fact Bucky's. He wondered whether he should move like he'd been burned, but then that would open a whole other can of worms, and it was better just to pretend it meant nothing. Besides, Bucky could probably tell by the surprise on his face that it was unintentional.

"Can we watch the movie now?" Sam asked, finger on the select button. Natasha nodded, and he pressed play. A comfortable silence fell on the group, though it only lasted a few moments before it was punctured, this time by Jane.

"Do you guys think Tony looks like him?" she asked, jolting her head towards the screen, where Robert Downey Jr. was in the middle of getting dressed. Everyone pondered this. Rhodey even grabbed Tony's face in his hand and turned it from side to side to check.

"Nah," he said, squinting at the screen. "He doesn't have Tony's beard."
Jane rolled her eyes. "Say he grew a beard, Rhodey. Come on, someone agree with me."

Bucky made a humming sound. "Tony's hotter," he settled on. Tony squawked in the background.

"Tony doesn't have that good an ass," Natasha argued.

"I dunno," Steve said, turning his own head slightly to get a better view. It was distorted somewhat by Tony's sitting down, but he could gather enough to make a judgement. "Tony has a damn fine ass."

"Oh my God," Tony said, cooling himself with a very expensive looking hand-fan decorated with Chinese lettering. "The Winter Soldier and Captain Rogers just called me hot. I think I'm in the middle of a wet dream."

Bruce went to pinch him, and Tony slapped his hand away.

"I swear to fuck," he warned Bruce. "If you wake me up from this I will hate you forever."

Bruce retreated back to his seat, disappointment evident on his face.

"God, you need to get laid," Clint observed. Tony pursed his lips.

"Tell me about it," he said. After a second, he gestured to Robert Downey Jr.'s character, who was now kissing his wife. "I betcha that guy gets laid all the time. My life is so unfair."

"Maybe if you weren't so fucking annoying," Bucky mused, wrapping his lips around the beer bottle. (Steve tried hard to swallow the lump that formed in his throat at the sight.) "And I was drunker, I'd do you a favour."

"Barnes," Tony spluttered, "are you making me an offer?"

"I said if you weren't so fucking annoying," Bucky repeated. "And if you had Robert Downey Jr.'s ass."

"Fair enough," Jane said. She took the bottle from Bucky and nursed it on her lap.

"God," she said, staring at the screen. "That is one fine ass."

Not much else happened for the rest of the movie, at least nothing of particular interest. Steve felt a little bit at home, though, when everyone laughed at the same jokes and expressions, when he felt the sturdiness of Bucky's knees on his back and heard Clint's soft snores (Clint never stayed awake past the first half hour of the movie. Natasha spent the rest of the time stroking his hair and looking down at him with a mixture of disgust and affection).

Back in New York, though they rarely had movie nights with their busy work schedules, Sharon never laughed at movies that were intentionally funny, and she would look at Steve when he did. Even though she never made it clear, Steve always assumed she was expressing judgement, so he stopped himself from even cracking a smile, though he would, always, cry at movies where someone died.

Jane also began to drift to sleep leaning on Betty's shoulder, and Betty gave a few sporadic yawns from time to time. Rhodey kept checking his watch or his phone, as if at any moment his wife Carol would call and tell him the baby was coming, even though it was still several months away. Sam's eyes were wide and glazed, as though he was desperately trying to keep them open, probably because he knew the second he closed them Tony would draw a dick in between his eyebrows like
he did in maths class in fifth grade. It had been permanent marker, and Steve had rushed Sam to the
bathroom, showed him the drawing, and then desperately tried to wipe it off his forehead as Sam
went out and punched Tony in the face.

God. Steve must've forgotten how much he loved school. Not so much the learning, or the
homework, or the exams, but the way in which school provided a guaranteed meeting place for the
group - this group - to come together on a daily basis and share in each other's miseries and joys.

Steve leaned his head back to look up at Bucky, whose eyes had also drifted closed. The last time
Steve had glanced at his ex-best-friend was at the stage where Robert Downey Jr. was just being
handed his new child, and a muscle in Bucky's jaw was clenching and unclenching furiously. Steve
couldn't help but notice the soft shadow of Bucky's facial hair that always came around five o'clock,
and which they were well past now; how his long eyelashes created shadows against his cheeks and
his eyebrows were heavy and hooded his gaze. There were about six empty bottles and cans of beer
sitting beside Bucky on the floor, and Steve frowned as he wondered how much Bucky was drinking, or why they didn't say anything if they had.

"Hey Steve," Natasha whispered, softly clicking the TV off as the screen went black. "If you want to
take him home, you can go on ahead."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, to say that wasn't what he was thinking at all, when he realised
Natasha wasn't, for once, insinuating anything untoward. So he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Won't everyone else think it's rude, though?"

Natasha shrugged. "It's my house," she pointed out. "Also, I think half of them are going to stay the
night anyway. I don't have the heart to wake Jane and Betty up, and Tony doesn't like how empty
the garage is."

Tony was snoring softly, pressed in between an awake Rhodey and a relaxed looking Bruce. Steve
looked at Natasha, but she was too busy looking at Bruce to notice. Bruce was smiling back at her
sleepily. "I think I should go," he muttered. "I've got work in the morning. But I don't want to wake
him."

"Then don't," Natasha told Bruce. "My living room's a hostel anyway. What's one more person?"

"Bucky'll want to get back to Becca," Steve said. He wasn't sure why he was speaking as if he knew
this new Bucky; it just seemed to spill out of him before his brain had time to process it. Natasha
nodded. Steve got up from his seat and began to slowly nudge Bucky's shoulder, ignoring how his
hand burnt with the touch, how it felt like it was eating him alive.

"Bucky, Bucky, wake up..."

"Huh?" Bucky grunted, opening his eyes the tiniest bit. They were so grey that night they were
basically see-through, and Steve immediately wanted to commit them to graphite. "Stevie?"

His heart lurched in his throat. Natasha gave a gentle cough.

"Stay with him tonight, would you?" she asked, as Bucky rubbed at his eyes. "He drank a bit too
much, and I know he wouldn't want Becca to have no one sober there in case something went
wrong."

Steve began to say that he didn't think that was a good idea, but then Bucky looked back up at him
and asked, "Stevie?" and he found himself nodding.
"Of course, of course," he said. "Come on, Buck. We're gonna go home, alright?"

"Home?" Bucky said. He glanced around Natasha's living room. "Nat..."

"Yeah, we're in Nat's house now, Buck. But we need to get you home for Becca, okay?"

"Carol's minding Becca," Rhodey piped up from the corner of the room. He had manoeuvred his way out from under Tony and was pulling on his coat. "I hope you don't mind if I drive you two home so I can get her."

"Not at all," Steve said. "Might be better getting a lift anyway." He didn't know how much Bucky weighed with that arm, or indeed with the amount of muscle tone he seemed to have gained since he’d seen him last, but he didn't particularly want to find out when Bucky was drunk. A drunk Bucky was an uncooperative Bucky, as well as a handsy little shit, from what he recalled. Touch aversion was not going to be Steve's friend that night.

Natasha stood in the door of her house watching Steve and Rhodey guide Bucky into the backseat, and then get into the car themselves. Steve got shotgun, but then thought better of it and got out once more, crawling into the back beside Bucky, who promptly turned around and grinned at him as if he was Jesus incarnate. Natasha waved to them, her bright white teeth shining in the moonlight and her breath coming out in tiny mists, and then disappeared into the warmth of her hostel.

It was a silent ride home, because Rhodey was the kind of person who valued proper concentration when driving and Steve was the kind of person who valued those kind of people. Upon arriving at their destination Steve dragged Bucky out of the car and smiled at Carol on the way past, who whispered, "Becca's asleep upstairs," to them before she got into the car. As Steve turned to close Bucky's door he saw Rhodey greet his wife with an adoring gaze and a quick kiss before they drove off into the night towards home.

Bucky turned to Steve and considered him with furrowed eyebrows.

"Why 'm I drunk, Stevie, 'n you're not?" he slurred, putting his hands on Steve's shoulders and dropping slightly down to the floor.

Steve inhaled a few times through his nose and began to lead Bucky towards the stairs, though, as usual, drunk Bucky was not a cooperative Bucky, and he instead sat down on the bottom step and refused to move.

If you can't beat them join them. Steve plopped himself down beside his friend and they looked out the window on the front door, Steve admiring the stars, Bucky wondering why they kept spinning.

He hadn't gotten an answer last time, so he tried once more. "Why am I drunk 'n you're not?" Bucky asked, with a few hiccups for dramatic effect. Steve bit on his bottom lip.

"Because it was movie night, Buck," he explained. "People don't usually get knockout drunk on movie nights."

A snorted laugh erupted from Bucky. "Huh," he said. "Dunno what Big Apple movie nights are like, but I know Leavenworfers get drunk at ever'fin."

"You're the only one drunk tonight, Buck, I can assure you."

Bucky pursed his lips together. It was, admittedly, adorable. "Well then," he said, rolling his head back on his neck, "you fix that, Mr Rogers. Get drunk wif me. Come on, it'll be fun. Like old times."
"Old times was spent freezing under a bus shelter, Buck," Steve said fondly. "I don't want to go back to old times."

"Really?" Bucky said. His eyes were wide. "Because I wanna go back all the time. Hey - I think I have Budweiser in the fridge. Go be a doll and get me some, would you? Some for your pretty self too."

This used to happen with the old Bucky as well. Bucky always sweet-talked when he was drunk, though why it was usually directed mainly at Steve he'd never quite understood.

"No more alcohol for you tonight, Buck," Steve said. "You'll thank me in the morning."

"Then for yerself."

"No, Buck."

"Why not?"

"Just accept it when I say no, Buck. God, not everyone has to drink to have a good time. Besides, alcohol isn't good for me."

"Ain't good for anyone. Everyone still drinks it."

"Listen, Bucky. I just don't drink."

That was a lie. When they'd got the diagnosis from Dr. Erskine - the only doctor to take Steve's mutterings of "I feel just feel different, Doc," seriously - Sharon had spent years researching Traumatic Brain Injury and how to cure it. She found that it should've disappeared months after the incident, though there could be some permanent side effects. She'd even implied to Steve that he was making the symptoms worse by refusing psychological help.

"I'm not crazy, Sharon," he had protested. She'd let out a scream of frustration. "No," she said, "but you were in a warzone and you got hurt, Steve. Any damn human being would need therapy after that."

Steve had still refused counselling, but he felt bad enough about Sharon that he let her pump him with vitamins and herbs and Omega 3 and 6 and put him on cold turkey in regards to alcohol and chocolate and saturated fat. He'd started working out again and found that it helped get rid of some of the anger, and on bad days it was the one thing he felt like doing, so he soon built up his soldier-like fitness again.

He was the perfect specimen physically, except for his ear and his scars. Mentally was a whole other ballgame. None of Sharon's 'cures' helped much. Then again, nothing did.

Also, his medication clearly stated not to consume alcohol while on it, and whilst Steve felt like shit he didn't really want to die, so he just avoided alcohol.

There was no point, however, explaining this to a drunk Bucky Barnes. There was no point explaining it to anyone. So Steve just kept it inside and let it burn at his stomach like everything else, and took it out on the punching bag or on his daily jog instead.

Finally, Bucky seemed to accept his answer, though he continued to regard him with slight disbelief. Steve could deal with that.
"Come on, Buck," he said. "Let's get you into bed."

Bucky went with him more easily than was anticipated, and within minutes Bucky was lying on his bed, tucked up under the covers. Steve had attempted to take his shirt off - the old Bucky didn't like how shirts bunched under his arms as he slept - but this new Bucky had refused and snapped at him to leave it alone, so Steve left the room and waited until he heard soft snores before curling up on Bucky's couch to get some sleep (or rather, not sleep, but he needed to lie down at least ) himself.

He was up throughout the night holding Bucky's hair back as he threw up violently in the toilet. Steve remembered how Sarah used to rub circles in his back when he was vomiting, and so he did the same to Bucky, and it seemed to make the pain of retching more bearable. At around two o'clock in the morning Bucky got to the stage of sickness where any foe becomes a friend, and he took Steve's hand in his as he rocked back and forth on the cold white tiles.

That seemed to be the last vomiting session of the night, for Steve listened for about half an hour and never heard the tell-tale scurrying to the bathroom that would indicate another. He himself fell into a fitful sleep, just enough to keep him functioning throughout the day.

Despite falling into REM, Steve still woke from it easily, perhaps because of his combat experience or just his insomnia. It was also beneficial as it meant he could pretend to be asleep. While he kept his breathing even and his eyes shut tight, he could hear Bucky shuffling around the living room, stop for a moment, no doubt looking at Steve with confusion.

Then something so achingly familiar happened Steve nearly burst into tears on the spot.

Bucky dropped down and hovered his mouth over Steve's forehead, before retreating hurriedly when Steve held in a breath.

A comfortable familiarity surrounded Bucky and Becca in the morning. They sat teasing each other, and they were both laughing. Bucky's grin was even genuine, and Steve assumed Becca was the only one who could bring that out anymore, except maybe Natasha and the Camaro.

Bucky was standing beside the sink, shirtless, smoking a cigarette which he snuffed when Steve walked in.

"Sorry," he said. "Forgot."

"It's okay," Steve assured him. "The asthma mostly went away as I got older." (He avoided mentioning how he took up recreational smoking in Afghanistan, because he didn't feel like explaining to Bucky that out there, everybody needed their vice.)

Bucky smirked. "And you got muscles instead?"

A small shrug of the shoulders. "I had a good doctor," he said.

"Give me his number then," Bucky replied, "so I can thank him."

"He's dead now."

Bucky's eyes became sad again. Steve had to look away.

"Sorry," he said again. The second time that morning.

"Don't be. He was my doctor, nothing else."
Not true, but it seemed to comfort Bucky. In reality, yes, Erskine had been nothing more than the first medical practitioner who had listened to Steve's concerns and got him help for it. And yes, when Steve heard that he had been shot in a house robbery gone wrong he'd felt as if he should go find and kill the bastard to avenge him. But there was still one thing that stood out in his mind that Erskine said to him, something he was determined to take to his grave.

It was the one appointment that Sharon wasn't able to attend with him. Maybe that's why Erskine said it then; Steve knew Sharon wouldn't have understood. He wasn't even sure why it resonated with him, but it did.

Erskine had leaned forward, never touching Steve, because he knew that took him right back to the doctors who had grabbed him in the army complex straight after the accident. He had looked at him with those warm grey eyes, the eyes that reminded him of someone who had loved him more than anything and would've never have let harm come his way.

"TBI can be a curse for some people," Erskine had said. "Of course, it is not ideal for anybody, but some have the ability to cope better than others. I'll tell you for why: brain injuries emphasise every facet of your personality. Good becomes great. Bad becomes worse. The people around you are presented with this extreme version of yourself, indeed the worst and best version simultaneously, and they have to decide how to cope. And if you can learn to accept yourself, all your faults and your strengths, magnified, then you will never feel alone or ashamed of yourself again, for you know that anything ahead of you is easy compared to what's behind you.

"I believe that you're a good man, Steven. I believe that you have more commendable qualities than negative. And I know this time will be difficult for you, but I need you to remember that you are not to hide yourself away. You are not to go softly into the night. I want you to remain who you are. Not a perfect soldier. But a good man."

Steve was failing him, but this thought was easily postponed for later dwelling as he sat down beside Becca at the breakfast table and she gave him the biggest smile he had ever seen a child direct at him.

"Are you Steve Rogers?" she asked excitedly. This thirteen year old girl, who had been five when Steve saw her last, was quite hard to believe. She had Bucky's eyes, though, and that was enough to ground her in reality.

Steve nodded. "Is that a good thing?" he laughed, though he meant it, and when he looked at Bucky for an answer, Bucky was too busy drying dishes from the sink to warrant him with a response.

"Of course it is!" Becca exclaimed. Her hair was in plaits and it was darker than Bucky's, but her eyebrows were thinner, just little lines that rose with her enthusiasm. "Bucky's told me so much about you."

"Has he?" Steve raised an eyebrow. Bucky dropped a bowl in the sink. It made a loud crash, and Becca immediately stopped bouncing in her seat and frowned at her brother.

"What's that for?" she asked.

"That's enough," Bucky said.

"I was just telling him you talked about him, because you do. Though I always thought you'd be smaller..."

"Becca, leave it alone. I'm warning you."

"Oh, don't mind him," Becca waved him off. "He's a big softy."
"Shouldn't you be getting ready for school?" Bucky prompted. Becca looked up to the ceiling in exasperation and stood up from the kitchen table with a force that was quite outstanding for such a little girl.

"Fine," she groaned. She disappeared upstairs, and about ten minutes of awkward silence later she stomped down the stairs once more and ran out to the bus. Bucky followed her, throwing her lunchbox to her as she went. Steve heard Bucky call out, "Love you," to her as she ran away, to which she responded, "Love you too, you big sap."

Her last three words were muted, and Steve didn't think it had anything to do with the distance. He reached his hand up to his ear and pulled out his hearing aid, narrowing his eyes at it as he tried to determine the issue. He found quite quickly that one of the switches had moved somehow, and he flicked it back. It was then that he realised Bucky was in front of him, and his mouth was moving.

"Sorry," Steve said, though he couldn't hear himself say it. He put the hearing aid back in his ear and watched as Bucky's lips pressed tightly together. "Hey," he shrugged. "You got a metal arm, I got half deaf. We've both changed, remember?"

Steve could see the Adam's apple working in Bucky's throat, but the older man simply nodded and turned back to the sink, where he moved some dishes around for no apparent reason.

Light streamed in through the wide windows that overlooked the surrounding fields. This was the only truly bright room in the Barnes' residence; everywhere else was made of wood and stone and retained a dull darkness that had created the sense of adventure for a younger Steve, but now just depressed him further. A glint of sunlight hit against the metal arm as Bucky moved it.

"Does it hurt?" Steve asked.

Bucky's eyes became cold again, even though he was smiling. "Having to look at your ugly mug every day again after eight years of respite? Yeah, punk, it does hurt."

Steve smiled, knowing immediately that was code for 'I don't want to talk about this.' He also knew that by not talking about it, Bucky was saying yes, and that cut through him more than shrapnel ever could.

He pushed himself up from the table and began to make his way back towards the living room. He was stopped by Bucky calling out in a voice that was as thick as it was broken.

"Did it hurt you? When you..."

Steve immediately went to pull his sleeve down over his hand, but then he realised he had taken his hoodie off before he fell asleep last night, and his entire arm was on show, mottled scars and all. He was so stupid. He could've scared Becca. Why hadn't she mentioned it?

"Why do you want to know?" Steve questioned, not bothering to turn around again.

"Because," Steve could basically hear Bucky shrug, "I wanna protect you."

This time Steve did turn around.

"Why?" he asked. Bucky was still shirtless. He was tanner than Steve remembered, and just as muscled as him, if it were a competition. Though where Steve was lean, Bucky was bulky, and where Steve was pale and freckled Bucky was warm and brown.

Stop looking at him, Rogers.
"You know," Bucky laughed. "I've been asking myself that for years since you left. Why it never went away. All I know is it started the first time I saw Schmidt break that stupid fucking beak of yours."

Steve's hand went up to his nose. He was about to protest that it was only a 'beak' because Bucky set it wrong, but he didn't have time before Bucky continued.

"Since the first time you walked into my house and Mom called you son and Dad called you the little guy. Since the first time you left and my sister said you weren't half bad and I told her to back off because you were my best friend, even though I'd only known you five hours."

Bucky visibly struggled on the next one.

"Since the first time I saw you drawing me when you thought I wouldn't notice."

Oh God. How many times had he noticed? Steve frantically thought back to the multitudes of sketchbooks he'd filled with studies of Bucky's hands, his lips, the curve of his biceps or the ruffling of his shirts. How he'd drawn Bucky eating ice cream and how it all melted over his chin, how he'd drawn him soaked from swimming in the lake, laughing at something fucking stupid Tony had said, how he drew him when he was half asleep and so soft and philosophical, how he'd drawn him in the dying morning light as they watched the clouds roll over the hills.

Those sketchbooks were still up in Sarah's attic, God willing. Steve had a sudden urge to search them out as soon as he got home.

In an attempt to appear cool, calm and collected, Steve smirked at his old friend. "Which sister?" he asked, which resulted in Bucky breaking out in a scandalised laugh and hitting Steve up the back of the head. Strangely, this was so familiar that it didn't cause Steve to flinch a bit.

"Hey," Bucky said then, staring at something on Steve's face. "When did you let your beard grow?"

Steve put his hand up to his face and realised with a jolt that he had obviously forgotten to shave for the past few days.

"Not that I don't like it," Bucky winked. Steve rolled his eyes. "It's just different."

"Yeah, well," Steve searched. "I just ... I forgot to bring razors from New York, is all."

Bucky shifted on his feet. The sunlight streaming in highlighted his figure in gold. He wasn't the Winter Soldier anymore, nowhere near it; he was Bucky Barnes again, and Steve was in--

"I've got a straight razor in the bathroom if you want one," Bucky said. "Used to belong to Dad. I've got my own, but it's a bit blunt."

"I could never use one of those," Steve admitted. Bucky thought for a moment, actually going so far as to rub his chin in contemplation.

"Well, I mean," he began, his throat working double time, "if that beard is bothering you--"

"It is."

"I could- I could shave it for you. You know, as a favour."

Steve shrugged. "Sure," he said.

Bucky's face raised a few centimetres in shock, as if he'd never expected in a million years that Steve
would agree. Steve felt a slight satisfaction in getting one over on him. He confidently made his way out of the kitchen and through the living room to the hall, and within minutes he was sitting in the Barnes' freezing bathroom, a razor blade in the older man's hand.

"My dad never taught me how to shave," Steve murmured as he pushed himself up on the sink. Bucky swallowed visibly and moved in between Steve's legs, moving the blade anxiously from hand to hand.

"You were twenty-five before I saw hair on your cheek, Steve," Bucky teased. His voice was somewhat shaky. Maybe he had never done this on anybody else before. "Pretty sure your face was as bare as an ass all the way through high school."

"Jerk," Steve said, smiling despite himself.

"Come on, punk," Bucky said. He put his hands on Steve's thighs, pulling him closer. "I need you closer, come on."

"Alright, alright, Buck," Steve said, suddenly feeling like this was a big, big mistake. The bathroom was pretty small to begin with, but within the last few moments it had turned into a tin can.

"Closer."

"Seriously, Buck? Are you trying it on with me or something?"

"Don't flatter yourself, Stevie, I'm trying to give you a good shave. If you want me to do it half-assed I can just send you to Barton's store to get shitty Gillettes. They won't get half as close as this beauty here."

"You always talk to inanimate objects with such affection," Steve muttered. He could feel the blade against his Adam's apple. The cool of the metal was terrifying. His hands clutched at the sink. "The Camaro, the razor..."

"Hey, hey, hey, Stevie, look at me," Bucky said. He stopped shaving and instead put his hand on Steve's cheek. "I'm not gonna cut you, you know that, right?"

"Not really," Steve huffed. "You seemed to really hate me for a while there."

"I had a right to be pissed, Steve. You left without a trace for the better half of a decade. You coulda been dead for all I knew."

Steve's mouth was cotton dry. "I almost was."

Bucky flinched. "God, Stevie," he breathed. He closed his eyes so tightly he must've been seeing stars.

"Hey, jerk?" Steve said. He focused very intently on moving his hand up to push that stupid hair out of Bucky's handsome face. Grey eyes looked into his imploringly. "I didn't, you know? I'm alright. I'm back now, aren't I? Come on. Get rid of this beard-burn, it's driving me insane."

"You know, some people like that sort of thing."

"Like Nat?"

Bucky raised an eyebrow. Steve's grip on the sink lessened, but that didn't make his palms any drier.

"Tony said you were sleeping with Nat."
"Oh, did he?" Bucky asked. Steve nodded. "Well," Bucky said. He had picked the razor up again and began gently guiding it down Steve's neck. It was a nice scratching; it grounded Steve, made him remember he was human. "I wouldn't believe everything you hear."

"But you love her," Steve said.

"If you'd stop talking you'd make my life a whole lot easier."

If you answered my question, Steve thought, you'd make my life easier, though I'm not exactly sure why I care.

"Yes," Bucky sighed. He wiped a few hairs off the razor. "I do love her. And we did sleep together, for a while. But it got weird. She wasn't really into it, so we cut it off. Besides, I don't love her that way. Not that it's any of your business, Rogers, where I put my dick."

"It used to be."

Bucky stopped. Steve stared him out.

"You used to tell me every time you got with anyone," Steve said. "In great detail. I was almost sick hearing about it."

"That was different, Steve," Bucky shook his head. "We were teenagers. I'm a man now. I reserve the right to keep my romantic life private."

Steve wasn't going to disagree. He did have that right; everybody did. But Steve still couldn't bring himself to agree either, so he remained silent instead, focusing on the sensations that surrounded him.

That was probably the worst possible thing he could've done.

Bucky's hands were in his hair, his fingers pulling slightly as he moved Steve's head this way and that. The soft touch on his scalp was insane. On the nape of his neck. Against his back, bare except for the thin fabric of a t-shirt wet with sweat from sleeping in it.

Steve remained so silent for the next ten minutes that it allowed Bucky to work swiftly and efficiently. His hands had always been steady; with a knife, in the shooting ranges, in school when he played on all the sports teams. They were hands that Steve knew, hands that he recognised.

Hands he loved.

"Hey, Steve?"

Bucky's voice broke through the stillness, and Steve found that his eyes were misty and threatened with tears.

"I'm fine," he said. Bucky opened his mouth to disagree. Steve couldn't hear it, so he said instead, "I just want you to touch me again. It's been so long since ... since someone touched me."

It hadn't really. It had only been two weeks since he had Sharon beside him in bed, had her in his arms, had kissed her on her soft lips that tasted like chocolate. But somehow Bucky understood. He always understood. The brightness of his eyes made Steve want to burst out into tears, but he'd only ever cried properly once, and that was at his mother's funeral. He wasn't going to cry over something stupid like Bucky Barnes' eyes. Yet, they were so warm, so filled with something foreign and strange and something he had long forgotten and long missed.

"I think this calls for a manly hug," Bucky said, and after a second Steve realised this was asking for
permission. Instead of nodding, he fell forward into Bucky's chest, and Bucky's strong arms were around him, holding him as he buried himself deeper, deeper, deeper.

"I wish I'd been at your parents' funerals," Steve mumbled, though he wasn't sure whether Bucky could hear him through his own chest. "So I could've done this."

"You're doing it now," Bucky muttered back. He placed his chin on top of Steve's head and rubbed little circles into Steve's shoulder. Steve noticed that Bucky was holding the metal arm in a loop around him, carefully maintaining a distance from skin. "You're here now. That's all that matters."

If there was a patch of wet on Bucky's shirt when Steve finally pulled away, neither of them mentioned it.

When Steve got home again, he fell asleep and stayed asleep for an entire six hours.
Two days later, Steve - who had been napping on and off for about forty-eight hours - woke up to the sound of a text coming through on his phone. With weary eyes and a strange feeling that spoke of energy in his veins, Steve launched over his bed and grabbed his phone, which must have slipped out of his bed and crashed to the floor sometime during. He mustn't have heard it in his sleep.

Sleep. What an unfamiliar concept. It was presented to Steve for progressively longer periods each night since the shift in Steve-Bucky relations. It was nice, to say the least. The naps, too, were nice. His body felt like it was healing.

The text was from Sam. On the movie night, it had been unanimously decided that Steve put his number into Natasha's phone so he could be added to the group chat, and why this was such an important thing Steve had no idea.

The last 'group chat' he'd been a part of was the military. Sharon's friends hadn't texted, they'd emailed. The Howlies were lucky if their phones going off didn't cause an anxiety attack. So this, along with sleep, was a new experience for Steve.

**SAM:** Me and Bucky are going to Wanda's tonight, 7pm, whose up for it?

A second message pinged through. This time, a small smile tugged on Steve's face.

**BUCKY:** what sammy means is who wants to get knock out drunk with us #itsafriday #beccaisatasleepover #icanparty

That was the point at which Steve realised that the group chat was going to get very annoying very fast. About ten messages rang in through his phone, causing it to spontaneously combust from ringtones and notifications. The text app even froze for a good ten seconds before Steve was able to see what everyone was freaking out about.

He'd really have to figure out how to put his phone on silent after this. But then, he might miss Sharon's call, if she ever decided to call. Apparently she'd forgotten he existed for the past week. That was cool. It didn't matter. She didn't matter.

(She mattered.)

**NATASHA:** I'll go as long as Tony doesn't try to out-drink me again :)

**TONY:** EXCUSE ME, what do you mean try???? I am the KING OF VODKA SHOTS!!! Also - WHY WANDA'S???? You know she gives me the heebie jeebies!!!!!

**RHODEY:** I'll protect u mate. Wat r friends 4?

**BUCKY:** rhodey youre too kind just let him get fucked up by vodka or being punched and itll be a fun story to tell

**TONY:** Does ANYBODY else feel like ROBOCOP over here doesn't like me?????

**JANE:** oh my GOD TONY SHUT UP WITH YOUR CAPS YOU’RE GIVING ME A HEADACHE

**SAM:** Does that mean everybody's up for it?

**NATASHA:** Sounds like a good time :) Tony, get your medical insurance forms ready, your liver
TONY: Romanoff you TERRORIFY me with your emoticons but I'M UP FOR IT (if I win, do I get the famous ROMANOFF DEATH KISS?)

NATASHA: No :) I'll text Bruce too, we still need to add him to this.

RHODEY: I'll get his no. 2nite

JANE: I'll pick Betty up, she's working till about half six so won't see this

SAM: Steve? What about you?

RHODEY: Yeah bud we see u creepin

Steve suddenly realised that the little circle with his face in it was visible to everybody else. He took a deep breath and with slightly shaky hands began to type.

STEVE: Would love to, don't drink though, sorry guys

RHODEY: U can b the sober friend

SAM: I'm not up for drinking much either, just a beer or two. You won't be alone Steve.

TONY: Please come, I want to see your ASS on the DANCE FLOOR challenging me to a DANCE-OFF!!!!

NATASHA: Steve will win :) :)

TONY: UNLIKE YOU, ROMANOFF!!!!!!!!!!!!

NATASHA: :/

Did Steve really want to go out to a loud place and drink with a bunch of people who would invariably get more touchy-feely as the night went on? Not particularly. But when he'd just moved back to Leavenworth literally a week before and was feeling highly isolated, was he prone to just a little bit of vulnerability to peer pressure? Absolutely.

STEVE: Alright, sounds good. What should I wear?

SAM: Yes Steve! Just whatever you feel comfortable in.

NATASHA: You'll look hot regardless ;)

TONY: You TOOK MY LINE!!!!!

What had Steve let himself in for.
Body shots. Apparently body shots were what Steve had let himself in for.

Wanda's bar was small, cramped, and could only fit about thirty people at a time. This didn't stop it housing forty people that night, scattered around the dance floor and the bar stools and the tiny tables. There wasn't one point that the line outside diminished even slightly to replace those who left early.

It reminded Steve of a medieval tavern, or at least something of that type. It was dim and had Tudor style panelling on three of the walls, and the fourth one was painted a deep red and donned a large flat screen TV. A crowd of rowdy men, some of whom Steve instantly recognised from high school, others who took more time to place, were gathered around the TV and cheering for opposing football teams. On occasion one man took a swing for another, and a tiny, angry looking woman would appear and stand between them, glaring at both participants until they were shamed into calming down.

"That's the crazy Eastern European!" Tony yelled to Steve over the din of the music and the conversation, and Steve soon found that was entirely true. She was still wearing her red shawl but donned a slightly different black gypsy skirt. Her hair lay in frizzy waves around her face, which was heavily caked in gothic makeup. But she was the perfect landlady, for she had a commanding presence about her that seemed to brainwash anybody into doing exactly what she said. Steve also noticed her brother - "Pietro," Natasha informed him - running around behind the bar at the speed of light, stopping only briefly to flirt with some of the female patrons before his sister came to admonish him.

The music that was playing was not the type that reverberated in New York clubs and hangout spots, but rather a mixture of old fashioned songs from artists like Enrique, Shakira and CASCADA, and the occasional musical number and ABBA hit, of which Tony immediately began singing along.

The atmosphere was strange, but it was homely, and the way in which Bucky called Wanda over to the table spoke of many evenings spent doing exactly this before Steve had arrived. Wanda regarded him with a somewhat amused smile that she tried desperately to hide and asked him, in a heavily accented voice, "Will it be vodka or whiskey today, Mr. Barnes?"

"How about both?" Bucky answered, and the entire group, bar Steve and Sam, who were not drunk enough to find that amusing, burst into raucous laughter. "Aw, what the hell. You only live once, right Wanda? Bring us some shots."

"Shots?" Natasha said with a smirk as Wanda bustled off to collect Bucky's order, pointing a finger at a man who was threatening to start a bar fight on her way.

"Why not?" Bucky replied. "I've never done body shots before."

"I find that hard to believe," Natasha hummed, and Bucky just shot her a toothy grin.

Steve was hit with it, then, how similar this intoxicated Bucky was to the old one. Perhaps Bucky drank because he was aware of this fact.

He was softer, more free with his body movements when he had alcohol bubbling in his veins, and he didn't seem to hold back with the metal arm at all, rather considering it to be an extension of his own body, as it was intended to be. He was flirty with Wanda and with Natasha, as well as Tony,
strangely, for Steve had always known Bucky to be nothing but straight, and he smiled with the ease of a cocky teenager headed for Harvard within the year.

He was the Bucky that Steve had remembered and idolised for so long, but yet, Steve found himself wishing that he could return to being the new Bucky again, for at least that new Bucky was the real Bucky, as compared to this act he was putting on to entertain everyone.

"You don't have to pretend to be someone you're not, you know," Steve mumbled to Bucky as Wanda set down a tray of shots in front of them. Steve could see Bucky tense, for the ceiling light above his head meant that his every movement was amplified.

Bucky took a deep breath.

"Who said I was pretending?" he said, in a moment of lucidity. He swept around with a devilish smile to his companions, all of whom were watching him eagerly. Even Sam, who had been considering Bucky with a slight crease in between his eyebrows all night, was sitting on the edge of his seat.

"Alright," Bucky called out. "Whose stripping first?"

Bruce, Sam, Jane and Betty all sat back minutely on their seats, and with the swell of the group this allowed them to all but disappear. Steve cautiously mirrored their movements. Tony and Rhodey looked at each other and quirked their eyebrows before reaching down and pulling off their own shirts at the same time.

That was when everyone realised Natasha had already rid herself of her shirt and was on the table, vodka in her navel and Bucky's mouth licking up towards the alcohol.

"Goddamnit," Tony huffed, throwing back a shot in pure frustration. He made a face and sucked on a lemon that Rhodey provided. "Colossus always gets Scarlett O'Hara first, it's not fair."

Sam placed a comforting hand on Tony's shoulder, but Steve was too busy watching how Bucky's mouth moved so expertly, how he chugged back the shots like a champion, how his lips, when he lifted his head from Natasha's stomach, were bright red and stinging with alcohol.

"Oh holy fuck," Steve whispered, to nobody in particular. Jane made a noise of assent beside him regardless.

"You can say that again," she said.

Steve tried desperately to tear his eyes away from Bucky before he was spotted, but it was too late. Bucky's eyes met with his and he smiled, just slightly, just enough for Steve to know he'd been caught in the act.

The act of what, though? The act of staring? The act of checking out his best friend? The act of wanting Bucky to do that to him? The act of wanting it so much that it burnt more than the memory of vodka?

Blood rushed to Steve's face and he pressed it into Jane's shoulder. She let out a laugh, patting him on the arm.

"It's okay," she muttered. "I fancied him too, remember?"

"I don't-"
But Steve was cut off as Natasha motioned for Jane to have her turn. Jane grinned and clapped her hands together, forgetting her previous self-consciousness as she peeled her top off. Natasha settled down beside Steve. He leaned away from her and she put her shirt back on, making a face at the stickiness of vodka on her belly.

"Do you guys do this often?" Steve asked. He was staring at the bottom of his empty glass of Coke now instead of the absolutely obscene display Bucky was putting on. Natasha let out a little chuckle.

"Not as a group," she muttered. "James, though. James does this a lot. I think you already knew that."

"Yeah," Steve frowned. "Why does he drink so often? Is it because of the-"

"The arm?"

Steve hesitated, then nodded.

Natasha ran her teeth over her bottom lip. "Look, I don't know exactly what happened to him," she said. Her voice was even lower than it was usually, and so Steve leaned in to hear her properly. He assumed this was her intention. "He never told me explicitly what happened. He doesn't like to talk about it. Not to me, not to anyone."

"You don't know exactly," Steve repeated. "That means you know enough."

Natasha looked vaguely impressed at Steve's perception.

"Enough to base my assumptions on his mental state on, yes."

Steve swirled the remainder of the Coke around the glass. "And I suppose you don't think I need to know?" he asked, feeling he already knew the answer.

Natasha's green eyes sparkled in the diminished light. "I think it's the exact thing you need to know right now," she said. "I haven't spoke to anyone else about it, except Sam, briefly. No one understands Bucky like I do. Nobody except you."

Steve glanced up. Bucky was smiling at Jane now, bright and wide and so beautiful it burned, but there was something underneath that expression, something that appeared only when everyone's attention was on Wanda instead of Bucky, when Bucky's grin dropped off his face and his shoulders slumped and his confidence all but disappeared. The fact that he could change with such grace suggested years of practice. Steve could relate.

"I dunno." Steve shook his head. "I don't think I know him at all anymore."

"You were his best friend for ten years," Natasha said. "You loved him, respected him, grew up with him. It's like saying that if I didn't see Clint for a decade he'd be a stranger to me. The people you love in childhood are the people who stay with you forever, Steve."

Steve leaned back on the booth chair, resting his head against it. The ceiling was slightly ornate, with decals joining it to the wall. It proved less intense viewing than Natasha's serious expression.

"When you left, James got involved in a bad crowd," Natasha explained. No one but Steve was listening to her; Bucky was still very much the centre of attention in Wanda's that night. "You probably remember Rumlow and Pierce from high school, right?"

He did, vividly. Unfortunately. "Those idiots were suspended a month into senior year, weren't
Natasha nodded. "That's the ones," she said. "Bucky was very isolated for a time, especially when his dad died. He pulled away from me, from Sam and Clint, everybody. Rumlow and Pierce seemed to be the only people he cared about. I think it's because they were lost causes. Bucky is always strongest when he has someone to fight for.

"That wasn't the reason he gave me for the friendship though, of course. He said he was hanging out with Rumlow because he had a sweet new coupé, one of the old style ones first made sometime in the 1920's. They used to ride the coupé up and down the street out of Leavenworth for hours on end, sometimes until the sun went down. Bucky loved that car; he never got tired of racing it, pushing it to see how fast it could go. When Rumlow and him weren't driving it, they were working on it in Pierce's garage."

A shudder ran through her then. This was the first time Steve had seen Natasha phased, and a lump formed in his throat.

"Pierce was a creep," she said. "Not that he wasn't handsome, smart, successful; he was, but he was too much of all of those things. It gave off an air of perfection that seemed ... superficial. Contrived. And the way he talked to Bucky; it was predatory, in a way, like he was buttering him up for the kill. Bucky, though, you know this yourself, Bucky loves being praised. Loves having people around who appreciate him, you know, people he can protect and get respect back for it. And Pierce provided that for him, more than any of us could. We were all going through our own shit at the time - sometimes I wonder if I hadn't ... Maybe Barnes would've turned out alright in the end."

She took a deep breath and stared forwards, looking anywhere but Steve's eyes.

"I've got red in my ledger now," Natasha said. "I have to live with a guilty conscience. But it's in the past. It's not like I can go back and glue his arm on again, as much as I want to. As much as we all want to.

"Anyway, it was around Thanksgiving, and James was avoiding going home for as long as he could. He withdrew himself from everyone after George's passing; I think he thought that if he could keep his distance, he wouldn't get hurt again. That night they didn't stop racing when the sun went down, but Rumlow told Bucky he wasn't letting him drive for more than a couple hours, so he took the wheel instead. Bucky agreed. After all, it was Rumlow's car, and he was pretty exhausted.

"Bucky saw the other car first. He reached his arm across Rumlow to grab the wheel. It all happened so suddenly. The cars impacted, Bucky's arm was pressed against Rumlow. His elbow went through the bastard's chest. I think Rumlow must've died instantly - if he didn't, it was only minutes."

"Thing was, it wasn't just Bucky who felt the loss of that accident."

Natasha's face was more stony than Steve had seen it. There was something incomprehensible communicated in that expression, something that made her go static. That was Natasha's cue, Steve had realised over the years; when she went silent, it meant she was terrified, either of herself, or of others. Sometimes, like this time, it was in fear of a higher power, one that was capable of creating coincidences like this one.

"Howard and Maria were going out of town that night. I think I heard Tony say once it was a last attempt to save their marriage; we all knew it had been on the rocks since the honeymoon, but they were desperate to try. Howard didn't want anyone prying into his business, so he turned his headlights off, so no one in Leavenworth would see him leave."
"The newspaper reports said Howard was killed on impact. Bucky told me once when he was really drunk that he watched as Maria bled out, but I'm not sure how that could've been true. I think he must've dreamt it. The crash happened outside the Wilson house, and Sam's mama told my dad that when she'd gone out Bucky was crying over Rumlow, calling out his name again and again and again.

"By the time the ambulance arrived his arm was gone. He never went back to Harvard after that, and his mom died nine months later. But the thing - the thing I never understood - was that Tony spent hours in his workshop after his parents' death. Not that it was unusual, because he always used to tinker when he was upset, but he wasn't tinkering, he was building something. He even got Rhodey to help. Together they designed a prototype, and over the years they've been refining it.

"Tony built Bucky an arm, Steve. I think that's why Bucky's so pissed at him now; Tony never said anything about Bucky killing his parents, or even that he was involved in the accident that did. Tony didn't even want anybody to know, but of course people were going to ask questions about an arm like that, and Bucky felt obligated to answer them. Still-"

Natasha shrugged.

"I suppose Stark has some good points after all, deep down."

"He's a good man," was all that Steve could choke out. He closed his eyes so he didn't have to look at Bucky across the room, so tipsy now he was falling down and being propped up by a red-faced Jane.

The story had created a sickness in Steve, a heavy rock that lay at the bottom of his stomach and seemed determined to remain there indefinitely. The fact that Bucky had suffered - that he had lost his parents and a piece of himself in such a short span of time - that Bucky had raised his little sister without even considering any other option ...

This was why Steve Rogers had always thought Bucky Barnes a hero. This was precisely why he could never create a comic book character that would live up to the strength, the bravery, the defiance that Bucky had displayed.

And at the same time, there was an anger there, a feeling of powerlessness that made Steve wish Bucky had stopped being so stubborn and picked up the goddamn phone. If Bucky had asked, Steve would've been on the next plane back. It was precisely because nobody did ask that he stayed in New York so long; that he didn't return to Leavenworth the second he got home from Afghanistan.

"His life still hasn't really picked up from where he left it six years ago," Natasha continued. "He's been working with me in my ballet school for a while, but it's just to pay the bills, he gains no pleasure from it. I just - I don't know what to do with him, that's the thing."

A notion came over Steve that was so sure and determined that he had no choice but to indulge it. His shaky hand reached outwards and took Natasha's smaller one in between his fingers. Natasha turned to him, eyes wide and necklaces jangling, her eyebrows forming a question.

"You take too much on yourself," Steve said. He put his other hand on top of their clasped ones and patted Natasha's. "You always have."

Natasha floundered for a moment before collecting herself.

"Someone has to do it," she said. Steve gave a little laugh.

"You sounded like your dad, then," Steve said. Natasha began to bite on her lip. "You're so much
like him now, you know. Even more than when I knew you."

"You have no idea-" Natasha gasped, "no idea how much that means to me."

But Steve did. That's why he'd said it.

"You need to stop beating yourself up, you know," Steve said. For some reason or another, he found himself tilting his head towards Clint, who had been dragged by Betty out of his 'nest' for the occasion. He was now dancing on a table to *Mamma Mia.*

Natasha sighed. She took her hands back and placed them on her lap, carefully, as if they were now new.

"He's a married man," she said. "I shouldn't even be around him when I ... When he compromises me like this. But I can't just cut him out of my life. He's my-"

"I know, Natasha. You don't have to torture yourself."

She knocked back a shot of - something- that had been sitting on the table in front of them. Her expression never changed despite the bitterness. Steve wondered how drunk she really was; if she'd even remember this conversation in the morning.

It was hard to judge with Natasha. She always became more correct the more alcohol she consumed.

"I thought for so long he was it for me," she muttered. "When I came back from Moscow and he was married it was like I'd missed my shot. But now, now I have someone who I feel gets me, you know? Somebody I could be happy with."

"What's the worst that could happen?" Steve asked. "He breaks your nose?"

Natasha burst out into laughter, which she quickly covered with her hand. Her body shook with suppressing it.

Steve glanced up and saw Bruce walking slightly awkwardly towards them with two drinks. He could tell the older man was trying to read the situation, see if it was intimate, and so Steve stood up from the table and smiled down at Natasha.

"He's coming over now," he said to her. Her teeth darted out over her bottom lip. "Don't miss this shot, Natasha. You're both good people. You deserve a win."

With that, Steve made his way over to Sam, who was gently pressing a tissue to Betty's head.

"She fell over," Sam explained. "She's lucky she didn't split it."

The last few words were pointed. Betty, even through her drunken haze, stuck her middle finger up. Sam rolled his eyes.

"I think I might clock out," Steve said. He was aware that Bucky was at the table behind him, listening intently to their conversation, and he really didn't want to turn around and be forced to stay. Not by anything Bucky said, just by how flushed Bucky's face looked, and how bright his eyes were, and the wetness of his lips...

"Damn man, alright," Sam said. He held his hand up for a fist-bump, which Steve appreciated more than a hug. "You're not the first one leaving though. Rhodey ducked out an hour back. I think Jane and Betty are heading home too."
"It's been a long night," Steve said. "But thanks for inviting me out. Not that you invited me, specifically, but-

"Hey, Steve," Sam stopped him. "You don't need to watch yourself with me. I've seen you with braces and acne, I don't think anything you say will embarrass you anymore than you already have."

Steve grinned at him. "Thanks, mate," he said.

"Don't mention it," Sam replied. "Hey, I'll talk to you tomorrow, Steve, alright?"

"Sounds good," Steve said. He turned away after waving goodbye to a still dazed Betty and was interrupted in his path to the door by a dishevelled Bucky.

Exactly what he didn't want to happen.

"You're leaving," Bucky said. There was a sliver of wet on his forehead, probably vodka, and his clothes were rumpled from people pulling on him all night. Steve tried really hard to suppress his desire to join their ranks.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I'm tired."

"Well, you've done good tonight," Bucky said. Over his shoulder, Steve could tell he was referring to a cool looking Natasha and a bright red Bruce, who were currently in the midst of a rather sweet looking conversation. The corners of Steve's mouth curled upwards.

"I try my best," he replied. "Night, Buck."

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

Bucky shifted his weight from right to left. "Sorry if I freaked you out or anything," he said. Steve rose his eyebrows in confusion.

"Freaked me out?" he repeated.

"Yeah, well." Bucky inhaled sharply. "I forget that most of Leavenworth have seen my arm on nights out and you ... Well, you hadn't. And I know it's a bit gross to look at the first time or whatever, so-

"Bucky," Steve laughed, suddenly taken aback by the irony of it all. Bucky put his lips into a pout. "Bucky, I promise you, you need a whole lot more than some scars to freak me out. Hell, we could basically start a boy band." - Steve held up his own scarred hand - "and besides, I wasn't looking at your arm anyway, I was too busy looking at your face, which is obscene, by the way...

It was only when Bucky started smirking that Steve realised what he'd said.

Oh shit.

"I mean - I mean, obscene like funny, you know, because you were pretty spaced out, and, um - not that your face is funny, I mean it's beautiful- fuck I mean-"

"Steve, relax," Bucky laughed. Steve glared at him. "You do realise I probably won't remember anything you say to me now by tomorrow morning, right?"

Oh yes. Bucky was wasted. What convenience.
"Yeah, yeah, I realise that, it's just..." Steve floundered. "It's just - you're really fucking hot, Buck, and I'm really fucking gay and-

Bucky's mouth dropped open. Sam, who had just walked up behind them to guide Betty to the exit, face-palmed. Steve wished the ground would open up and swallow him whole. Maybe even chew him, instead. It couldn't be more painful.

"You're ... gay?" Bucky repeated. Tony appeared beside them at that point and let out a cheer, which everyone ignored. Steve pulled the sleeve of his shirt down over his hand.

"I mean ... technically I'm bisexual, but - yeah."

"To be fair," Jane said on her way past, patting Steve's cheek with affection, "we all kind of guessed that."

"I didn't! My wet dream finally has a chance of happening now!"

"Shut up Tony, for one goddamn second," Bucky snapped. He looked as if his world had crashed down around him.

"I didn't think this would be such a big deal to you," Steve said. Anger was bubbling in his veins. He knew it was a bad idea to come out tonight, he had just known-

Bucky's eyes were still on Steve, but they were flitting from his forehead to his nose to his eyes to his mouth. "It's not it's just ... you should've told me, is all."

"Why do you care?"

Bucky opened his mouth to speak, but then forcefully shut it. He clearly had an answer he didn't want the entirety of Wanda's to hear. Either that or he had no answer. Steve let out a groan.

"Oh, fuck you, Buck," he said. "I'm going home. Thanks for a great night."

This time, Steve was the one storming out, leaving a baffled group looking at each other in confusion.
Chapter 9

Despite that small intrusion, a month into life in Leavenworth and Steve Rogers was finally beginning to resemble something of a halfway normal human being.

He began work with Natasha down at the elementary school and found, to his great surprise, that Natasha had actually chosen the perfect career, though why he was shocked to find her judgement was superb was beyond him, for he doubted she'd made a poor decision in her life.

Miss Romanoff was different to Natasha. She spoke in a slightly higher and less smoky tone, wore blouses and dress pants rather than jeans and multitudes of clanging jewellery, and had her hair tied back off her face so you could see the curve of her cheekbones and the bright green of her irises. The only thing that was the same whether she was Natasha or Miss Romanoff was the overwhelming authority she exuded. She was so confident in herself and her teaching that the children rarely spoke a word out of turn, and, when they did, she shut them down so fast Steve could see them stand stock-still for a moment as they processed what had just happened.

Natasha didn't teach a particular grade, even during the proper school year. Leavenworth's population was such that it couldn't warrant having a teacher for each specific age group, and so Natasha and another teacher by the name of Maya Hansen spent their day shuffling between the children, moving almost effortlessly from phonics and the alphabet to geography and history.

There were twenty children in the summer class, about two thirds of the ordinary pupils, and although the large room was split into sections by small dividers on the floor based on age, during break and lunch the pupils freely integrated with each other so that varying friendship groups could develop. In fact, it was much the same as Steve's elementary school experience had been. It was actually the exact same building that Steve himself had wailed in as Sarah patiently pried him off her leg five days a week for the first three years of his elementary education.

Maya told Steve in the staff room as they sipped on herbal tea and observed the children running in the small, dusty playground that Natasha had completely renovated the school when she arrived, exclusively out of her own pocket. The walls were painted a bright and invigorating blue and posters detailing world events and countries were pinned haphazardly on notice boards. Carpet was put down as it was softer on the children's feet when they took their shoes off to complete P.E. in their sock soles.

It was during one such P.E. lesson that Steve realised maybe being a teaching assistant wouldn't be that bad after all.

A small girl by the name of America Chavez had been shuffling through the group of children as Maya led them in a game of 'Simon Says'. Her big brown eyes looked up at Steve with victorious contentment when she arrived at his side, and promptly she placed her tiny hand in his large, scarred one. For the rest of the day, America and her best friend Kate Bishop sat in Steve's knee and watched with amazement as he drew comic book characters based on them, showed him around the cubby-holes where the toys stayed and the hooks which held the children's coats, and, most importantly, made him feel as if his presence that day was the best gift they possibly could've received.

At around twelve o'clock his first day, Steve was grinning because Kate had drawn America as a dog and America was annoyed that her hair "wasn't that flat." Natasha had caught his eye over the room as she taught the fifth graders maths and smiled at him, throwing him a thumbs-up.
After that, Steve had a little bit more enthusiasm concerning getting up in the morning, and the early starts to listen in on Maya and Natasha making activity plans before the school day began meant that he was forced to get showered, eat and tidy the house before he went to work, because he wouldn't have time afterwards, as that was when he usually went out with Sam or Tony or Clint.

Although Steve had vehemently refused to speak to Bucky Barnes after that incident at Wanda's - more out of embarrassment than any offense taken - he did manage to maintain a rather busy social life.

Between going to the town coffee shop with Maya and Natasha after work, helping Tony out with the Camaro (carefully avoiding the times he knew Bucky was likely to be there and varying his own schedule so Bucky couldn't attempt to contact him) and jogging with Sam in the cooling twilight every alternate day, Steve could almost say he was becoming a Leavenworther again, when such a thought a month ago would've been too hideous to contemplate.

Even better, though, was the fact that his new job allowed him enough money to buy some new clothes and treats for himself, like fresh fruit from the farmer's market which he made salads with for his lunch and which Maya always stole some of, as well as putting such tiredness in him that by the time he fell into bed at night his insomnia did not have time to clutch him before he fell into a deep and uninterrupted sleep.

He wasn't rolling in money, and he didn't have half of the autonomy and potential for leadership as he had had in the army, but it was enough to get by, and Natasha and Maya were such competent teachers he had no issue with carrying out their commands. His life was simple, and it was happy, and he had almost forgotten Sharon existed when he bumped into Sam on his way out of the house and was passed a bunch of letters.

"Who are these from?" Steve asked with a frown.

He flicked through the envelopes, but the morning was still slightly dimmed and his eyes weren't what they used to be before the injury, so he gave up trying. Sam's jacket reflected in the emerging sunlight, bathing his face in a fluorescent yellow glow.

Sam usually went to Steve's house first so Steve could get his post before he went to work instead of waiting until two o'clock, when Sam finished his rounds. He should've been able to get around Leavenworth in two hours, three at most, but the part Sam loved most about his job was talking to people as he strode through the countryside, and everyone loved talking to Sam as well, so his workday was considerably longer as a result.

"I think they arrived a few weeks ago," Sam explained. "But they got held up in Boston. I don't think the big city post offices know where Leavenworth is, so I had to go searching. I figured some of your friends in New York might send things through. I guess I was right."

"Yeah," Steve said. He finally caught a glimpse of a familiar return address. Sharon. "Yeah, most of the Howlies prefer snail-mail."

Steve had told Sam many stories about his time with the Howling Commandos, in so much detail that Sam might as well have been there himself. Sam nodded, a small smile on his face.

"Just make sure you reply to them, alright?" he said to Steve, placing a hand on Steve's upper arm. "I'm sure they miss you just as much as we did."

A stab of guilt hit Steve, one that made him open his arms up and immediately envelope Sam in a hug. Sam was obviously shocked, but he quickly relaxed into the embrace, patting Steve's back as
they broke apart.

"Hey," Sam said. His hand was still on Steve's shoulder, having not completely departed. "You're here now, right?"

"Yeah," Steve grinned. "I'm here now, Sam."

Sam began to make his way down the street before he stopped and turned back round to Steve.

"You do realise it's Saturday, right?" he yelled over the hedgerows. "No summer-school today."

"I know!" Steve laughed. "I'm headed to Tony's. Do you have no faith in me?"

Sam smirked, but didn't answer. He disappeared into the morning light, but within minutes Steve heard his voice re-emerge through the careful silence, calling out old Mabel's name as he passed her a parcel.

Tony wouldn't mind if Steve was a few minutes late, so Steve turned around and went back into his house.

He perused the letters one at a time. A few were from the banks and societies Steve had been a part of, including his old workplace, all sending him their disappointments at his cancellations and resignations. But there were two that weren't from official bodies; one small slip of a letter from Timothy Dugan, or Dum-Dum as he was affectionately known, and a large envelope from Sharon Carter.

Steve took a deep breath and used a butter-knife as a makeshift letter opener. He sat down at the round wooden dining table and read Dum-Dum's letter first, because it was sure to be the least painful.

Captain Steve Rogers,

You were always an enigma, Steve, that much we never doubted. Just like how you appeared out of nowhere to lead our unit in Iraq, you also disappear on us a few years into civilian life.

We didn't think much about Sharon cancelling the birthday party - we kind of assumed you two had another ding-dong and were too busy calming down to entertain company. When we didn't hear from either of you for a few days, we thought it was weird, but not too weird, because you were never much of an extrovert, and goddamnit neither was Sharon. I'm not sure how long we would've sat wondering if my missus hadn't bumped into Sharon in Walmart and heard the whole story. God, Sharon was proper ripped up about it. My missus said it was the first time she'd ever seen her choked up.

We're all sitting around writing this letter, and I hope you know from all of us that we hope you're doing better than she is, because you've suffered enough in this life, and you need to enjoy the rest of it. Take it from an old codger like me - you don't want to look back fifty years from now and see a sad son of a bitch where you should've been.

Sharon said she didn't know where you'd gone to, but she must've figured it out, because she gave us an address a couple days ago. Where the fuck is Leavenworth, Cap?

It took us forever to find a stamp to put on this letter, because we weren't sure where in New England it is and even Google doesn't know it exists. God, I hope it does exist and you didn't just go AWOL and make up some bullshit story to throw Sharon off your scent.
Wherever the fuck you are, we all want you to know we're proud of you Cap, and we hope you get everything in order and find peace somewhere, even if it isn't somewhere near us. We hope you get someone new, someone who deserves you (not that Sharon didn't, you're the two best people anyone could hope to know, but you guys would've killed each other, you know that). We hope we'll be invited to the wedding. Also, when you get on your feet, we really hope you'll come and visit New York sometime. Or we'll come and visit you - if we can find Leavenworth.

But we're not writing this letter to wrangle a visit to the smallest town in America. We're writing this letter because we love you, Cap, and we want to tell you that we all lost something that day in Afghanistan - especially Dernier and Junior, those poor bastards - but I think you lost maybe the most of all of us. You never looked like yourself again - even Sharon saw it. She mentioned it to my missus once when she was particularly drunk and worried and you'd refused treatment again. But we just want you to know -

What happened in Afghanistan wasn't your fault.

I know you'll never accept that, and God, maybe if I was in your position I wouldn't either. But it was inevitable. God had that as part of his plan, as corny as that sounds. It was war, Cap, and war kills, and war enjoys killing, you understand me? But you don't. So whatever burdens you're holding in your heart Cap, whatever you're running from, whatever you associate those scars with, you better know that none of the Howlies think you're accountable.

You were a damn good C.O., and most of all, you were the best fucking Captain the United States military has ever seen, and don't you forget that.

Not all men are built for war Cap, but you were. But that doesn't mean it's the only thing you can do.

Your friends,

The Howling Commandos.

The Howlies had each pressed their thumbs into ink and signed the letter off with their fingerprints, and Steve ran his hand over each of them before folding the page three times and placing it back in the envelope. He put it at the back of the letter rack on top of the fridge and then sat back down again, preparing mentally for what Sharon would provide.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate what the Howlies were trying to do with that letter, he did. But he hadn't needed their pity when he was in New York and he didn't need them to lie to him to make him feel better now. He'd finally been able to sleep at night, but sometimes the sound of a grenade blasting beside him still woke him up in a cold sweat, and it was just something he had to live with.

He'd fucked up in Afghanistan. That was on him.

Steve slid the paper out of Sharon's envelope. It was cool and smooth like her skin had been, and the writing was immaculate and immediately comprehensible, as if her handwriting was a font (perhaps it was). It was short and to the point, and that, that Steve appreciated.

Steve,

I was looking through your things and found your medical records and other personal information. I assume you're not coming back - if you were going to, you would've already, so these items will be necessary for you to start a new life. I have also enclosed your pen drive with your latest comic designs and your inhaler, just in case, as well as Dr. Erskine's case notes. Some of these you have
seen before, some of them I was instructed to keep. I suppose now that he is dead it doesn't matter whether you see the notes or not.

I kept your drawings of me, but have sent the rest of the sketchbook. I assume you have no problems with this, but if you do call or text me, and they will be in the next envelope to Leavenworth.

Regards,

Sharon

It wasn't signed with 'yours,' but then what had Steve been expecting?

He glanced through the medical notes, of which there were many, and the pen drive fell out onto his lap. He picked it up and stared at it, realising that it was useless without a laptop, and promptly threw it on top of the fridge also. His birth certificate, tax returns, employment history and references were all there.

Sharon, as always, had been amazingly comprehensive, not that he doubted her for a minute.

There was also a small booklet of eight photographs, three of which were of the Howling Commandos and five of which had Sharon in them somewhere, and Steve threw them away from him. They slapped onto the floor and slid until they hit the wall, which creased their corners but left them sitting, dejected, amongst fallen cereal pieces and Sarah's old, ratty slippers.

Erskine's notes, however, were new to him. The pages were tinged yellow and smelt of many years of storage in Sharon's filing cabinet, but Steve could still see the fluidity of Erskine's hands as he wrote them with his old-fashioned fountain pen.

He had always cursed the invention of biros, saying they'd taken the beauty out of calligraphy. Steve had been inclined to agree.

They were new but mostly boring documents, detailing Steve's outbursts during his sessions - always described using the most clinical of terms, e.g. violent response, aggressive symptoms shown, etc - and new and innovative ways to get through to him, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, hypothesis testing, thought catching, the like. Steve was almost about to throw the notes away as well and head to Tony's when his eyes caught on a sheet near the back that was a different colour to the others. He pulled it out.

Upon closer inspection it was not review sheets or medical documents as the others had been, but rather a page pulled out of the back of a journalist's notepad and hurriedly scribbled on. The page was dog-eared, as if it had been considered and read many times, and the writing was lighter in places. The date in the top right hand corner was noticed to be a week before Erskine's death; a day after Steve's last appointment with him.

It was addressed to Sharon. Steve felt as if reading it was an invasion of her privacy, but then she had sent it to him, so she obviously didn't care if he read it or not.

The first few paragraphs were formal and impersonal, outlining the failure of yet another therapy and Erskine's next great idea. Steve admired his patience; not once throughout did he place an unnecessary sarcastic word or comment, not once did he call Steve crazy or even 'mentally imbalanced,' as some other medical professionals had been inclined to do. But there were a few paragraphs at the end that caught in Steve's stomach and made him realise how tragic Erskine's death really had been. How he had this amazing man right in front of him but never appreciated his efforts until it was too late; how Erskine had tried again and again, gone above and beyond his duties to
help Steve and Steve had fought him at every hurdle.

Ms. Carter, I am not intimately involved in your lives or your relationship, but it is evident from my correspondence with you that you are indebted to Mr. Rogers, and he to you, and therefore it makes it very difficult as you have to watch someone you admire so ardently become someone you can barely even recognise.

But I also think it is worth mentioning to you that whilst Steven Rogers is a good man, an excellent man, and whilst I am your doctor and not your friend, I cannot ignore what is right in front of me, and that is that Steven is very angry and secretive, especially regarding his past. I believe it may be due to his mother's death, which is arguably one of the most traumatic events of his life. Yet I managed to pry out of him a name of one of his childhood friends - James Barnes. I am sure you are aware of this name; he was the one person from his past that Steve spoke of almost freely.

Mr. Rogers then showed me pictures he had drawn of Barnes. His memory of him was photographic, even after the accident - he showed me an image of him and it was identical to his most recent sketches.

This has led me to the conclusion that Steven Rogers' memory may be affected by proactive interference; rather, that old memories are interfering with newer ones. This may be the cause of his anger. If you could, Ms. Carter, assist me with unlocking these memories in between appointments, I would be very grateful.

Perhaps, if you were willing, a meeting with James Barnes under my supervision may be beneficial to Steven's mental health. I know it is a common name and thus difficult to find, but I have no doubt of your capabilities, Ms. Carter. I think I know more of them than even Steven does.

With regards,

Dr. Abraham Erskine

Erskine had cared. Erskine had noticed everything about Steve, had seen him at his lowest points, and yet he still cared.

Why was Steve worth caring about? What made him so special?

He flipped over the page and found a review sheet stapled to the back of it, even more crumpled, and stained with something that looked like coffee. Black.

STEVEN G. ROGERS - 1 August 2014

Appointment Review: I discussed proactive impacts on memory. I believe it may be the key to Steven's full recovery. He refused to discuss his mother or childhood with me, but I did learn that she died after an argument. Steven seems to carry that guilt with him.

Steven also mentioned a James BARNES - he seemed to remember him with great clarity. Will discuss this further in our next appointment.

STEVEN G. ROGERS - 8 August 2014

Appointment Review: I briefly chatted with Steven and then brought up the subject of James BARNES. Steven talked at length about James - he told me of how his kitchen used to flood, the forts they made with blankets and pillows on the living room floor,
and how James would protect him from the school bullies.

When I asked him if he had been bullied often, Steven did not respond. He refused to speak for the rest of the session.

Before he left, I asked Steven to bring in pictures or sketches of James. He seemed cheered by the idea and left in a positive manner.

I may speak to his partner, Sharon CARTER, and see if we can arrange a meeting.

STEVEN G. ROGERS - 15 August 2014

Appointment Review: I started off the session with conversation concerning James BARNES. Steven showed me his sketches as well as a photographic image of James which he had only recently procured from storage. I found that even after the accident, and without access to the photograph, Steven's memory of James was almost perfect, and the sketches had an uncanny likeness to the man.

I asked Steven how he felt about BARNES - he was hesitating to tell me when he had a lapse in concentration. When I managed to get his attention back on the matter at hand, the past hour had been lost from his memory.

This was the first lapse of memory in two months.

Whether the relationship between James and Steven was intimate is unclear.

Sharon CARTER is in the process of contacting James BARNES.

Steve slammed the page down and leaned his elbows against the table. He pressed his head into his hands and began to hyperventilate.

How could he lose an hour, as easily as that? How many times had that happened previous to those two months of non-occurrence? Had it happened at home, in front of Sharon? Had Sharon been talking to him and see the concentration fade from his eyes, see him fall into that dangerous void between reality and oblivion?

It was terrifying. The only reliable thing Steve had in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan was his own memory; now that he was aware of how it was compromised, it was hard for him to contemplate how he was to go forward in his recovery.

Was there any going forward? Or had he reached the peak of fitness that his brain would allow?

Stupid. He was so stupid. He should've just - He had time -

His phone, which was on the other side of the table, buzzed and almost fell off due to its vibrations. Steve caught it (sharp reflexes being an old, comfortable habit) and glanced down at the message.

TONY: WHERE the FUCK are you????????????????

TONY: Don't tell me YOU'RE DEAD ROGERS I swear to FUCK!!!!

Steve ran his hands along his face, slapping his cheeks a few time to get colour into them. If he
walked into Tony's garage looking like death ... Well, Tony probably wouldn't notice, but other people might, and Tony's garage was rarely empty. In fact, it seemed to be the social hotspot of Leavenworth, and that was saying something.

When Steve walked in through the door of the garage Tony let out an exaggerated sigh of relief and wiped the sweat off his forehead with a greasy rag.

"Thank God," he said. "What would America do without Steve Rogers' ass?"

"It would go on," Steve replied, but he was smiling. Tony grinned at him.

"We would go on," he repeated. He flung out his hand for emphasis and neatly missed hitting his robot. This time it was wearing a medal that read 'World's #1 (Dumbass)'. Charming. "We would go on simply because we had to avenge those fine cheeks, not because we had anything left to live for."

"You really need to get laid."

Tony let out a groan. "Tell me about it," he said. "It's been like ... three weeks. I used to get laid on the daily in M.I.T., Steve. Daily. Partly because I was the only semi-decent looking bloke there for the women and would take what was coming for me with the men, but that's beside the point."

Steve's reflexes acted before he did, and he caught the camera Tony had thrown to him with ease. Tony let out a low, impressed whistle. Steve opened the camera up, inspecting the inside. It was relatively inexpensive, but had good enough picture to produce a home movie, where grainy footage was acceptable due to sentiment.

"What do you want me to do with this?" Steve asked, holding it up and peering through. He could see Tony's bright white smile directed straight at him, and he rolled his eyes. "I am not stripping on camera, Tony."

"I had to try," Tony joked. "No, no, but seriously. I want you to record me as I talk about DUM-E over here. I'm onto something big, Steve, I really am. I'm going to crash the glass ceiling on artificial intelligence, you have no idea. Five years down the line you're going to be seeing computer butlers, artificial waitresses and waiters everywhere, and it will all be down to yours truly. I just need an opinion from my old professor at M.I.T. and then I can go right on ahead - he said he'd only send me parts if I talked about my thesis with him. Would you hold it straight, Rogers? And get my good side."

"What good side?" Steve asked.

"Rude," Tony replied. Steve sighed.

"I mean, which side's your good side, Tony," he drawled. "Considering they're both so wonderful."

"That's more like it. And it's my right - it doesn't have the chicken pox scar above the eyebrow. My right, Steve, not your right, what kind of human being are you? Oh my God, I would have an easier time building a robot to do this for me than working with you. Keep it straight. That's it."

"You know," Steve muttered. "If you keep being mean to me I'll just leave you here alone with your robots and your non-existent friends."

"I have just as many friends as you, Rogers."

"Where are they then?"
"Fuck you. Just hold the camera steady, that's the business."

Having taken a course in cinematic design for a while back in New York, Steve was very offended by Tony's continuous corrections concerning his filming technique. Eventually he conceded not to put any artistry into it at all and settled on propping the camera up on his hand as his elbow rested on Tony's workbench.

It was just as well he was comfortable, because Tony droned on for what felt like hours, about things that didn't make any sense to Steve at a speed that couldn't have made any sense to anybody. But yet, it wasn't as boring as it could've been.

Tony's eyes were wide and bright and sparkling, and his voice was feverish and warm as it raced from side to side and filled up the garage with interest and enthusiasm.

He spoke about his machines like how Bruce talked about the latest medical breakthroughs, how Natasha sounded on the phone when she gushed to Steve about her new idea for a lesson, how Bucky sounded when he started yammering on about social justice and policies.

Steve hoped he'd find his Tony voice someday. He had imagined perhaps he sounded like that when he discussed Sharon; now, after reading Erskine's notes, he had the distinct impression he'd already found his Tony voice, and it appeared when he talked about James Buchanan Barnes.

It was really hard to avoid thinking about Bucky. Really, really fucking hard. He didn't know how he'd coped for eight years.

Eventually, Tony stopped to take a breath. He began to glug down some energy drink that had been lying on his workbench for God knows how long. Steve heaved a sigh and closed the camera up, noticing how Tony had literally talked until the battery went down from a hundred to eleven percent.

If someone found out how to tap into the energy produced by Tony Stark talking, they'd be millionaires. The energy crisis would end almost immediately. Countries would never fight over oil again. There would finally be world peace.

Maybe Steve was onto something there.

Tony glanced down at his watch.

"Is this interview day?" Steve asked, trying to think back to the first time Tony mentioned hiring a secretary to help him with the day-to-day running of the garage. Tony nodded. Steve noticed his palms were red, and the skin close to breaking. "I can tell by your hands."

"Shut up, Rogers," Tony snapped, but his ears went red. Steve immediately felt bad.

"Listen," he said. "It'll be fine, Tony. They're probably just as nervous as you, if not more."

"I'm not nervous," Tony protested. "And also, it's not 'they,' it's just one person. There isn't much of a talent pool in Leavenworth, Rogers."

"Well then," Steve replied. "All the better. You don't have to decide between them."

"Her name's Virginia," Tony said. He winced and glanced down at his hand. Blood began to trickle down onto his wrist. Steve passed him a rag to wipe it on. "Thanks. Virginia, Virginia Potts. She's probably going to be some old bitty who'll do nothing but nag me about my life choices. Here, pour me some whiskey, would you?"
A month ago, Steve would've spluttered and asked Tony where the hell he was going to find whiskey in a place of work. Now, though, Steve knew to look underneath Tony's third desk, where a waste paper basket sat that was not for waste nor paper, but rather used as a storage bin for the famous Stark Liquor Collection (TM). Steve poured him a glass and used his hand to refuse Tony's offer.

"What point of medication do you not understand?"

"I mix pills and alcohol all the time, what's the big deal?"

Steve blinked at him. "How are you not dead."

"Is that a question? Because I-"

Steve's disapproving stare was interrupted by a polite cough. Both men turned around to seek out the source of the interruption.

Steve could hear Tony swallow his whiskey from a metre away.

A woman stood just inside the door of the garage, looking between Steve and Tony as if she had made a grave mistake. She was dressed in a blazer and a pencil skirt, but it didn't trigger anything in Steve until he saw she was clasping a briefcase in her manicured hand.

"Oh," Steve said. "You're Virginia Potts."

Tony began choking on his whiskey. Virginia looked vaguely concerned. She moved forward and leaned in towards Tony, but only minutely, as if she was terrified at any moment he might vomit all over her expensive looking suit.

"Is he alright?" Virginia asked Steve, her eyebrows pulled together. She was pretty, Steve noticed, but it was her complete self sufficiency that drew him to her, and which was probably the inciting reason for Tony's coughing fit.

"That's the question I've been asking myself for years," Steve replied, ignoring Tony, who kicked him in the heel for that statement. "Are you here for the interview?"

Virginia seemed more relaxed talking business than she had been comforting Tony. She perked up at Steve's question and looked him straight in the eye as she answered, "Yes, I am. And you must be Tony Stark."

"Actually," a weak voice spoke from behind Steve. A clank of a whiskey glass being set on the workbench echoed through the garage. "I'm Tony Stark."

Virginia looked even more concerned. "Oh," she said. She glanced at Steve for confirmation, which he provided. "I apologise. You weren't exactly what I was expecting."

"Neither were you," Tony said, before Steve gave him a subtle dig in the ribs. He rubbed at his chest with one hand as he held the other out for a handshake. "Tony Stark."

"Virginia Potts," Virginia said. She appeared like a rabbit presented with a wolf, but then that would imply she was the one who was intimidated, when it was clearly the other way about. Perhaps a more accurate simile would be a highly competent businesswoman meeting a manic-looking idiotic genius. Yes, that was exactly it.

"Yes you are," Tony said. He realised how stupid he sounded just as Steve winced at the second-
hand embarrassment. Virginia looked vaguely amused. "Um- would you mind if I spoke to my friend Steve here alone for a minute?"

"Not at all," she replied. "Go on ahead."

"Thanks," Tony said. He dragged Steve into his office, slammed the door behind him, and promptly began freaking the fuck out.

"Do you see her? Do you fucking see her? I was expecting a fucking grandma who would make comments about my drinking and my fucking and my general fuck-up-edness but this is a whole other level. She's so professional and cool and she looks like her skin smells of baby powder, Steve, fucking baby powder. Look at her, she's wearing a white suit to come to a garage, and I haven't washed my hair in a week and have a purposely made hole in the crotch of my fucking overalls! Oh my God, Steve, why is life like this for me? Actually, don't answer, I know why it is. It's the leftover sin from Dad making its way onto me. That has to be it. All his hookers and his infidelity and his drugs and his alcohol are finally catching up to him, but he's dead, so God's passing it onto the next sucker and it's me, Steve, it's me. God's fucking with me, is what he's doing."

"I think you've got plenty of sins of your own," Steve said. He too was now vaguely amused. "Also, you do know these walls aren't soundproof?"

Tony let out a tiny scream, which Steve cut short by putting his hand over Tony's mouth.

"Now, when I take my hand away, you are going to fix your hair, you are not going to say anything about how much you want me to put my hand on your mouth again, and you are going to calm the fuck down, alright?"

With wide eyes, Tony nodded.

"You are going to go out there and you are going to be polite, and you are going to interview Ms. Potts and see if she is capable of performing the job. And if she is, you will hire her, not because she's hot, but because she deserves it, alright?"

Tony nodded once more, and Steve removed his hand from his mouth. Of course, there was a line of saliva where Tony had licked him, but that couldn't be helped. Tony ran his hand through his hair, not that it helped much, took a deep breath and stepped out of the office, Steve hot on his heels.

"Sorry about that," Tony said. Virginia had now surpassed vaguely amused and was downright tickled. "I had to consult with my friend about what duties a secretary would have to fulfil."

Virginia raised an eyebrow. Steve wished she wouldn't, because Tony became a tomato.

"I mean - not those kind of duties. I mean like- paperwork and shit. Shit, I didn't mean to say- oh fucking hell." Tony winced. "Sorry."

Virginia appeared unfazed.

"I'm from New York," she shrugged. "I assure you, Mister Stark, I have heard all forms of profanity before."

"Mister..."

Oh fuck, she'd hit one of Tony's kinks. Steve could tell by the panic in his eyes. He had to physically restrain himself from hitting his head against a wall. Or hitting Tony against the wall.
"Um-" Tony struggled to recompose himself. His Adam's apple was jolting viciously in his throat. "What makes you feel you would be right for this job?"

"Well," Virginia began in a practiced voice. "I believe I am right for this job because I am a keen worker and have a distinct talent for finance and business. I am good with people and capable of negotiating to a high degree of competency. In high school I was valedictorian and achieved the highest exam scores in my state, as well as having two part time jobs as a waitress and a retail assistant and completing an internship at Time Magazine and Forbes during the summer. I was President of the school Debating Team, head of the cheer squad and graduated top of my class from Harvard Business School in Business with Modern Languages, of which I speak four, besides English, of course. I am proficient in Spanish, French, Italian and Russian, and am planning to learn Hebrew. All self-taught. I wish to get this job because I've heard of the Stark name through the grapevine at Harvard and believe you have a lot of potential for a great business venture, yet lack the know-how to get it up and running. You can be the brains, and I'll be the brawn. I think you hiring me would be mutually beneficial, and I highly recommend you do not pass up this opportunity."

Steve imagined his own face mirrored Tony's, which was hanging open in shock, though Tony had the added hilarity of being hopelessly turned on, all of which made the situation rather embarrassing and unfortunate, not that Virginia seemed to notice.

She was only pleasantly pink by the end of her speech, probably from lack of breath more than anything else, but Tony appeared as if she had just forced him to run a marathon in the form of a resume, and Steve supposed she had. He had certainly never met someone with such a long list of achievements, and who was so sure of herself to boot.

Natasha would like Virginia. Natasha would like her very much.

When Tony opened his mouth to speak, Steve sent a silent prayer up to God that he wouldn't embarrass himself. Of course, there is only so many miracles God himself can provide, and giving Tony Stark self control is not one of them.

"You think I have brains?" Tony stuttered. Virginia's shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment.

"Of course I do," she said, as if it should've been obvious. "Other people do as well, Mister Stark." She gestured to the PhD on the wall, which Steve turned to look at. Tony, however, remained stone still, staring at her.

"Um-"

"You've got the job," Steve said, to save Tony the trouble.

Virginia grinned and - goddamnit, that made Tony transfer from grey to a rather impressive shade of green.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed. She gave both men a rather hearty handshake. "That is much appreciated. I promise I won't let you down, Mister Stark."

"Mister..."

"You're a very impressive candidate," Steve interjected. "Tony is lucky to have you."

Virginia smiled. Her teeth were dazzling. "When should I start?" she asked.

"Tony, when should Ms. Potts start?"
"Tomorrow," Tony spat out. He was definitely going to be sick. You'd have thought he had tried out-drinking Natasha again. "You can start tomorrow, Ms. Potts."

"Excellent," she said. "I'll work out some business plans tonight. I'll see you then, Mister Stark. And you, Mister-"

"Rogers," Steve said. "But you can call me Steve."

"Steve," Virginia smiled.

"And you can call me Tony," Tony blurted in. Virginia gave a tiny laugh.

"Tony," she repeated. "Thank you very much again."

"Thank you for existing," Tony said, but thankfully she was already out the door before the last two words left his mouth.

"You fucking moron," Steve groaned. This time, he could rest his head against the cool concrete beam in exasperation. "Tony Stark, I've seen you do some pretty stupid things, but the way you acted with her tops the cake."

"Oh fuck," Tony moaned. He dropped onto the floor beside the Camaro and wrapped his arms around her body, as if she could comfort him. "Do you think she noticed?"

Steve thought back, although Virginia had appeared amused, he actually didn't think she'd noticed. She didn't know Tony; she had no point of reference for his stupidity. He might act like that all the time for all she knew.

"No, I don't think so," Steve assured him. He leaned over and patted Tony's shoulder. Tony let out another groan of frustration. "Just get your act together for tomorrow, you hear?"

"Tomorrow?" Tony repeated. He turned his attention from the Camaro to Steve and blinked a few times. "What's happening tomorrow?"

Typical.

"It's Ms. Potts' first day tomorrow, Tony," Steve explained. "You told her to begin work tomorrow."

"Oh fuck," Tony yelled. He jumped up from the floor and began pushing Steve towards the door.

"Jesus, no need to be rude," Steve said. He grabbed his coat on the way, despite Tony's small shoves making the task monumentally difficult.

"Jesus, no need to be rude," Steve said. He grabbed his coat on the way, despite Tony's small shoves making the task monumentally difficult.

"I need time to think, Steve," Tony said in an apologetic tone. Or as close to apologetic as Tony could get, anyway. "And I can't think of something to impress her with when you're here, your entire," - Tony gestured to Steve's torso and face - "is just too distracting. Now scoot."

Steve didn't even have time to roll his eyes before the garage door slammed in his face.

Chuckling to himself, and not at all offended, he made his way back home again. The ovenbirds chirping around him and sweeping down to catch their next meal made for easy viewing as he strolled to the cottage.

Once he got himself settled on his mother's armchair with an iPad resting on his lap - courtesy of Natasha, who said it helped with lesson planning and recording pupils' progress, she had refused any payment he had offered - Steve got to work downloading a drawing app and began sketching out
some comic panels, featuring a wide eyed inventor gushing about his latest masterpiece.

He was halfway through the third panel, where the un-named mechanic came up with the idea for a suit that would allow him to save the world, when his phone rang. Steve picked it up and pressed it between his cheek and his shoulder so he could continue drawing while he spoke.

"Hey Nat," he said.

"Hi Steve," she replied. "What are you up to tonight?"

"I've had a little bit of inspiration," he explained, adding a few strands of hair here and there to give the impression that the mechanic ran his hands through his hair many times a day (a characteristic, he would later note, that did not belong to Tony, but rather Bucky Barnes instead). "I'm working on a new comic."

"Oh, sounds interesting. What's it about?"

"A prequel to the Iron Man Adventures, I think," Steve mused. "It'll take some time, but I think I'm onto something. Where you phoning about something in particular, or just for a chat?"

"Something in particular."

Of course. Nat rarely phoned 'just because.'

"Shoot."

"I was wondering if you wanted to come around to the ballet studio with me on Monday after school," Natasha said. "I know we were talking about what I was planning to do with the place, and I'd like to show you first hand."

"Sounds good," Steve replied. "America and Kate will be happy to see me outside of school."

He could hear Natasha smile through the phone. Her pupils were always her pride and joy.

"They'll be ecstatic," she said. "But I was also wondering if you would maybe take a look at something. I have a blank wall, just pure white, in one of the studios, and I was wondering if you'd be up for painting a mural."

Steve's hand slipped and ended up putting a gash over the mechanic's face. The benefits of iPad drawing was the convenient undo button in the corner.

"I don't know, Nat. I haven't painted for a long time."

"So you can get back into it, then. Worst case we keep painting over it until you get it right."

After a moment's hesitation, Natasha continued.

"Come on, Steve," she drawled. "You're a part of my work life, I want you to be a part of my extra-curricular life too."

"I don't know, Nat, I mean-"

"I wouldn't be able to afford to bring another artist in, either. But I suppose if you really don't want to do it, we could do without."

"Nat..."
"It's just, the kids would really love it if they got to see your work. Maybe you could paint a few of them in the mural, get them involved with handprints or something. It would be like a big community art project, no pressure at all."

"N-"

"Please, Steve, come on. Think how happy America and Kate would be to see themselves up on the wall. You don't want to disappoint-"

"Fine, Nat, fine," Steve sighed. "I'll do it."

"Great," she said, all remnants of pleading in her voice suddenly evaporated. "I'll see you on Monday then, Steve."

Before he had the chance to say goodbye, Natasha clicked the receiver, and he was left listening to static.

He threw the phone onto the sofa, where it landed on a cushion with a soft thump.

"Oh Steve," he mumbled to himself. "What do you let yourself in for."
Chapter 10

Screaming children. Thirty screaming children dressed in tutus and leotards was what Steve had let himself in for. It was like a day of work all over again, but this time, he wasn't getting paid.

Apparently, the vast majority of school-kids in Leavenworth were enrolled in Romanoff's *Red Room*, the ballet studio and sideline project of Miss Romanoff herself. Whether that was because small town residents were appreciative of the arts or just appreciative of another hour of peace and quiet on a school night was unclear, but either way Natasha seemed to have a blast teaching the basic moves to some of the younger kids and helping the teenagers up onto Pointe.

"Kamala Khan sprained her ankle last week," Natasha murmured to Steve as he loitered in the door of the studio holding a canvas bag in his scarred hand. "So she'll be observing your paint work."

"Good," Steve said. He shuffled his bag of art supplies the other side. It was beginning to pull at the muscles on his back. Who knew paint was so damn heavy? It made him wonder how he got through years of extra-credit art lessons in high school (though, when he thought about it, he realised Bucky had carried Steve's books most of the time along with his own, like they were some sort of couple). "She can tell me how shit it looks."

Natasha rolled her eyes, which caught on Kate Bishop in the corner. "Katie, keep your back straight," she called out. "Don't make me come over there."

Kate's back became like a rod and her eyes were as wide as saucers as she continued to move through the positions at the barre.

Steve could sympathise with her terror. Natasha had inherited her intimidating nature from her adoptive father, Nick Fury, the headmaster of Leavenworth High. The most terrifying experience of Steve's life was the dressing down he and Bucky had received from Mr. Fury after the Donut Scandal of 2004.

The Scandal was at most 30% Bucky and Steve's fault and at least 70% Tony's doing, but whilst Steve was oblivious at times, he wasn't stupid. He knew when to keep his mouth shut, partly because Bucky had been glaring daggers at him throughout the entire meeting.

That was the first proper argument they had ever had. They'd sworn never to fall out ever again. How the tides have changed, Steve thought to himself grimly.

"Where should I set up?" he asked. Natasha cast a disparaging look around the ballet studio and, appearing vaguely content, turned to guide Steve out into the hallway. One of the walls had already been painted in strange geometric patterns, and in comparison the blankness of the other surface facing it seemed stark and clinical.

"It does look out of place," Steve conceded. He dropped the bag onto the ground, and it let out a loud thump that echoed through the concrete-floored corridor. His muscles thanked him immediately.

"Not for long," Natasha replied. "I'll leave you to it for a while, and then I'll send the kids out in small batches and you can direct them. My co-worker hasn't arrived yet, but once they do I'll send them on out as well."

"Alright," Steve said. He hoped Natasha would contribute the shaking of his hands to his injuries rather than nerves, which would be ridiculous, because painting was the very thing that defined
Steve in high school. The moniker 'Artist' had followed him for as long as he could remember, and when he had joined the army and lost its protective covering, he'd drifted aimlessly for several months until he received the new title of 'Captain,' which arguably fit him quite well, at least until...

"Steve, I almost forgot," Natasha said. Her shoulder-length red hair fanned outwards as she turned, one hand on the door into the studio. "I'm throwing a party in a few weeks to fundraise for the ballet school. It'll be in the studio. Clint recommended a DJ who agreed to work for free and I'll have party food and everything set out. Mama Wilson and my dad are making brownies."

"Sounds like a good time," Steve murmured. He wasn't really listening to a word she said; he was too busy trying to cast his mind back to high school as he considered which brush was the best to use for paint mixing.

"I hope it'll be. I want you to come. Everyone's going to be there - it's like that night at Clint's barn all over again."

"If you want me to come, you'd be safer not referencing that fuck-up of a night," Steve groaned. "I still have nightmares about it."

Natasha grinned with half her mouth. "A lot of people enjoyed it," Natasha said. Steve chose a brush and began setting out his paints on a piece of cardboard.

"Yeah, well I didn't," he replied.

"Fair enough. Anyway, it's going to be a themed night. 1940s. I thought you might enjoy that."

"Just because I was a World War 2 history nerd back in high school?"

"That might've been what I was going on, yes."

"Natasha, I've come from New York with the clothes on my back and not much else. I don't have anything I could wear to a 1940s party, and I think the nearest costume store is fifteen miles away."

"Then drive."

"I haven't driven since ..."

Natasha lifted her hand from the door and considered Steve was close attention. Her arms were folded, her eyes squinted. Steve's unfinished sentence hung tersely in the air, and with a sigh, he concluded it.

"Afghanistan," he said. "You happy?"

"Very," Natasha responded, but she didn't sound it. "You don't have to drive anyway. Me and Betty are ordering everybody's costumes in and fitting them in my place sometime before the party. We already rented one for you."

"You're confident," Steve observed. He tossed a paintbrush between his hands and stared down at the collection of mixed paints he had made that were sitting dejectedly in between his feet. He felt awkward painting in front of Natasha; he had always felt awkward painting in front of anybody who would watch him work.

"It's one of my better traits," she said. "So - you'll be there?"

"I don't think I have a choice," Steve laughed. "But yes, I'll be there."
"Bake some of Sarah's famous apple pie for the guests too, would you?" Natasha asked. Thankfully she had turned back to the door at this stage and so she didn't see Steve wince at the casual mention of his mother, as if he was surprised anyone but him was aware of her existence. "And Steve?"

"Yeah?"

Natasha kept her eyes firmly on the door. "I think you might need to talk to someone about whatever happened out there."

"It was three years ago, Nat," Steve snapped. "I'm over it."

"Are you? I'm only asking because when you say the name your voice wavers."

Steve stared at the back of her head, dumbfounded.

"Just a little thing you might want to keep an eye on," Natasha shrugged, and with that, she disappeared back into the studio. Her somewhat muffled voice rang in his ears when she began yelling out instructions to her class, and he sat down on his knees on the floor of the corridor.

She has a point, Steve's brain said. I don't care if she has a point, Steve said back, she's nosy and doesn't take other people's feelings into account when they interfere with her curiosity. Oh, that's a good one, his brain replied, write that in the book. So Steve pulled his sketchbook out from the canvas bag - it had been stained during transit with a large streak of blue paint on its front cover - and popped open a Sharpie.

There was a list developing now:

*Leavenworth is a shithole.*

*Sharon is always right, even when you think she's wrong.*

*You are a True New Yorker.*

*Tony Stark is a narcissistic PRICK who thinks that just because he's smarter than everyone he has the right to involve himself in people's lives, no matter how much they dislike him. If he had been in Afghanistan, he would've been the FIRST PERSON to let some other poor fucker DIE for him.*

*Bucky Barnes is an asshole. Whatever you remember about him is WRONG. He is NOT a good person, he is NOT a hero, and he is definitely, 100% NOT your best friend.*

And the latest entry:

*Natasha Romanoff doesn't know when to mind her own business. In fact, she thinks EVERYTHING is her business. Her own curiosity is more important to her than other people's feelings. She thinks she knows so much when ACTUALLY she's the one in love with a married man. DO NOT TRUST HER.*

Feeling somewhat better, and yet much worse, Steve shut the book closed as if in a second, had he kept it open, the words would jump off the page and run down the corridor towards their subject, ruining Steve's career and new social life in one swoop.

Because admittedly, Natasha Romanoff was the centre of everything here in Leavenworth, and Steve had moved his dependence on Sharon neatly to the next highly competent person without stopping to think much about it. Now he was realising maybe he was better off fighting for himself than relying on anybody else. Before long, Natasha would take it upon herself to ask Steve about his past like
how she'd pried into Bruce's and Bucky's, and Steve wouldn't be able to cope if she used means of interrogation to get to the bottom of his trauma.

Steve took a deep breath, shoved the sketchbook into the bottom of his bag, and turned his attention to the task at hand. A large, blank wall stared back at him, taunting it with its magnitude.

He glanced down at his long sleeves and remembered how he used to work in tank tops, or else roll his shirtsleeves up until they were at his elbows, because he couldn't stand how paint would catch on the ends and then splatter the canvas as he moved past. Slowly, with as much strength as he could muster, Steve pulled his right sleeve up, exposing the mottled scarring that hid underneath. His left arm proved much easier, and although it was whiter than he would have preferred due to lack of sunlight, he had no issue with showing it off. But the right...

Steve surveyed the corridor and deduced that no one had any intention of passing through before the end of the hour's dance session. He sighed in relief, rolled up his sleeves entirely, and put his earphones in, pressing shuffle on his phone.

It went straight to white noise music. Sharon had decided it would be beneficial for Steve to fall asleep to it and that it would heal his inner chakras, whatever the hell those were.

Steve made a face and pressed fast forward. Opera came up next. Then musical numbers. Then country (really Sharon?).

A jolt ran through him as Steve realised that everything in his life back in New York had been Sharon's all along. The shattering nature of this revelation led him to deciding, 'fuck it,' and he selected a MCR song and began bobbing his head along to it.

The music went through him, filtering through his fragile thoughts, triggering memories of dancing wildly to the same song in his bedroom, Bucky jumping on his bed, hair sticking to his forehead, Steve's own cheeks blazing with heat as he head-banged around the room. The school discos, the house parties, the time the whole crew had climbed in through Natasha's bedroom window so they could party on a night when Nick Fury was out of town (of course he conveniently returned to town just in time to catch Clint chugging down his fifth pint of beer).

Steve felt inspiration flowing and his hand began to act on muscle memory, sweeping the brush from left to right frantically, shading in places, highlighting others.

Eventually a form of a ballerina began to take shape. She was sitting down, one leg slightly bent and the other straight as a ruler. Half of her face was shaded in darkness and the other half in light.

True to her word, Natasha left Steve alone to work until she could see something beginning to take form, and then she sent a few apprehensive children through to help him out. Steve noticed their hesitation to commit anything to paint, and as he sympathised with it, he was able to connect with the children with ease.

"Just put your hand in the paint," he gestured, helping small Kate Bishop out by guiding her hand towards the purple, her favourite colour, "and then press your hand against the wall, that's the ticket."

He gave the same instructions to all of the children and teenagers, including Kamala Khan, who had quite the authoritative personality herself and who kept the younger ones in line. She directed the signatures that surrounded the ballerina, creating lines of calligraphy that enclosed her in her mortal form.

The hour's lesson ended and parents began to come to collect their children, who were smiling
brightly and enthusiastically talking to them about the 'art man' who had came in and helped them to immortalise their dance in paint. Steve found himself smiling and shaking the hands of parents who came to chat to him, speaking with them vividly and at length about their children and how amazing they were and how dedicated Miss Romanoff was. And then, when the streetlights clicked on and everybody but Steve and Natasha were distant memories, Steve stood back against the geometric wall and marvelled at his masterpiece, for it was arguably the best thing he had ever painted.

He had been a bit rusty, and throughout the children signing their names and their handprints Steve had returned to add bits of detail, like the tiny hairs that stuck up from the top of the ballerina's bun and the worn-down toe of her Pointe shoes. He shaded and highlighted until he could do no more, and the overall result was a rather transcendent image of a ballerina, half in reality and half in a realm of holy significance, which wouldn't feel out of place in a place of worship.

A low whistle behind Steve reverberated through the silence.

It was Bucky Barnes. Of course it was. Natasha wouldn't have chosen any other night for Steve to come and work than when Bucky would be there; that would be too convenient.

He was wearing a camel coloured leather jacket this time with a white t-shirt and dark blue jeans that hung sinfully low on his hips and clung to his thighs like they were wet. On his feet were brown patent leather shoes, and he wasn't wearing any socks, because Bucky had always been the kind of person to crave style over comfort. His hair was slightly shorter now, as if he had gotten a trim rather than a cut, and it was slicked back with hair gel in the style of ... Well, like a Disney prince. His wide grey eyes deceived him though; he was still the same boy Steve had met years before and had built forts out of blankets and cushions with.

"You've really outdone yourself, Steve," he said, but his mouth visibly formed around 'Stevie' instead. Steve pursed his lips together and kept his eyes resolutely on the ballerina rather than Bucky, who was so close to him now he could feel the outline of his shoulder in that camel-coloured jacket. "I always said you had insane talent, but this is something else."

"I was inspired," Steve muttered, though he would've preferred not to speak at all. He held up his phone and motioned to the album cover that was currently displaying on his iTunes.

Bucky showed that toothy grin of his that used to get all the girls giggling (once, when she was presented with this smile, Jane Foster had fallen off a wall and had to go to Mama Wilson to get stitches, that's how dazzling it was). He took Steve's phone in his hands unbelievingly, and held it close to his face and then further away.

"I can't believe you still listen to this stuff," he said. He began scrolling through Steve's playlist. Steve noticed he flicked through the opera and white music minutely faster than the others. Steve shrugged.

"I don't," he said. Bucky's grin faltered. "I mean - I didn't used to, when I was in New York. But I rediscovered it tonight." He turned to look at Bucky and was taken aback by the warmth in those eyes. "I guess you have yourself to thank for my inspiration."

"As much as I'd love to take credit, Steve," Bucky said. "I can't, not this time. This was all you. You're amazing, I swear to God. Wait till Natasha sees this tomorrow."

Steve furrowed his eyebrows. "Wait, Natasha left?"

Bucky's eyes flitted away from Steve's. "Yeah," he said. His voice sounded like it was underwater. "Yeah, she had to run and do some messages or something. Told me to close up shop."
"Oh," Steve said. So Natasha had literally manufactured this meeting between them, had purposefully orchestrated it so that the two of them would be the only ones in the building at that specific moment.

The nerve.

"Yeah," Bucky said. He ran his hand through his hair, disturbing the gel. Steve fought down the impulse to smooth it out. "Listen, Steve. I know you've been avoiding me."

Steve set his jaw. "I haven't been avoiding you," he replied.

"Don't bullshit me Steve, come on," Bucky countered. "I know avoidance when I see it. I've done it myself once or twice. But I just want you to know that whatever I said that night, I'm sorry."

"Whatever you said?" Steve repeated. Bucky appeared a tad sheepish. Not enough to make Steve feel any sympathy, however.

"I was really fucking drunk, Steve," Bucky divulged. "I mean really fucking drunk. I paid for it the next morning a thousand times over, and I'm still paying for it now if whatever stupid thing I said means you're in Leavenworth instead of New York and I still don't get to talk to you."

A muscle in Bucky's jaw began working as he spoke and Steve couldn't tear his eyes away from it.

"Um." He swallowed. "I mean, it wasn't really what you said, exactly, it was more what you didn't say that was the problem."

Bucky stared blankly at him. Steve swallowed again.

"I mean - it's no big deal, Buck," Steve said. "It's just I got a bit offended and I left and I thought it might be awkward if you remembered that part, is all."

"So instead of talking to me and seeing if it would be awkward, you purposefully avoided me for the better half of a month?"

"Well, technically I-"

"History is literally repeating itself!" Bucky said with a manic laugh on the end for good measure.

Steve rolled his eyes.

"No, no, don't you get sassy with me Steve Rogers, I'm being serious. We're caught in a time loop, that's what I'm saying. Some kind of alternate universe, maybe, where I'm forced to keep living a life where Steve Rogers decides to avoid his problems rather than just facing them."

"It's worked out pretty well for me so far," Steve argued, though he didn't sound sure to himself. Bucky let out an exasperated sigh.

"You have got to be joking me," he said. Steve glared at him with as much distaste as he could muster, and eventually, Bucky's shoulders lowered. "I just - I missed you, is all."

"For three weeks?"

"No, you jerk, for eight years," Bucky said. He was still so close to Steve. His aftershave smelt of something woody, or perhaps a musk. It was kind of intoxicating. Better than alcohol, anyway. "You don't know the number of times I missed you and wanted to call. The phone was just - there and I could see your face, could hear your voice in the dial tone, you know?"
Steve knew. He had felt it himself enough times, had looked up James Buchanan Barnes on the internet and in the rare phone book that would arrive in their letter box on more occasions than he cared to remember. He'd missed Bucky the most on his first tour in Afghanistan; when he was just getting used to the heaviness of the equipment and the rough fabric of the uniform, when death was only a possibility rather than a certainty that lingered in the back of his mind each time he got in a convoy.

So yes. Steve understood what Bucky meant.

But Bucky wasn't finished.

"I missed you and it was like an ache, right here." Bucky dug himself in the gut. "I went to Sarah's grave to see if I could... But you weren't there. You'd changed. You weren't my Steve anymore."

They still hadn't moved from where they'd been standing, side by side, shoulders barely brushing as they stared up at the painting, but Steve knew by the soft heave of Bucky's body that he was on the verge of tears. Steve's hand began to react, began to gravitate towards Bucky's open palm, but Steve restrained it, gripping his own jeans instead.

Bucky had probably recognised Steve's movement and subsequent cowardice regardless. They knew each other's bodies well enough that they could outline them in their dreams, could print them into the inside of their eyelids and carve them into cave walls.

Steve wondered if Bucky still had that beauty mark just above the strap of his boxers, if there was a chicken pox scar on his collarbone, if there were freckles still present behind Bucky's ear from where he'd gotten blistered in the sun the summer of 2002. He wondered if Bucky still bit at the inside of his cheek until it bled when he was working on a maths sum, or if he chewed on the end of a pen now instead. He wondered if, when you paid attention, Bucky's eyes would still change colour in the diminishing twilight as he watched the sunlight over thatched roofs.

He wondered if Bucky still watched the sun disappear into the hills and the countryside, whether he marvelled as the moon took its place. He wondered if Bucky had found somebody else to spot constellations with - maybe Jane, for she was always a physicist at heart. Steve wondered if Bucky leaned into Jane, tickling her ear with a blade of plucked grass while she laughed despite complaining half-heartedly of hay-fever, and whispered to her the stories he'd created about Adonis and Icarus and all those figures immortalised on stage at night.

But Jane didn't have hay-fever, Steve did.

And Bucky had never told anybody else how, when his parents were arguing and his sisters were screaming and all he wanted was some peace and quiet to work, he would bring his books out to the hill near his house and listen to the peaceful chirping of the grasshoppers and the lazy rumbles of the earth beneath him and the trickles of the minute stream. He would just sit there, feeling completely at home in the universe, both within and without.

Steve would join him sometimes, because the hill was halfway between both of their houses, and so, if he strained, he could see his friend's blurry silhouette against the inky sky. They'd both lie up on the grass and the strangest and heaviest of feelings would settle over them, as if they were simultaneously in love and falling into it, as the final remnants of light vanished from their memories.

Night-time was the most dangerous of all, because that was when a buzzing filled both of their veins and ignited them with excitement and passion, when they'd look at each other with wide, misty eyes and feel the overwhelming compulsion to do something, to get up and run and roll down hills and find someone to kiss and lie with and roll around in the grass with. Yet these compulsions were often
accompanied by a tiredness that ached their bones and dragged them down into their graves, and so they would settle for telling each other of what they would do if, at any time in the near future, they were awake this late at night and lacked enough tiredness that they could complete the activities they so desired to perform.

Steve had never met somebody else who felt this way, or perhaps he had and he just hadn't thought to ask them the right questions. He knew from his conversations with Bucky that it was a deeply personal thing to both of them, and so it married them, in a way, this love of the night and everything it encompasses.

Bucky had thought the night seemed so forbidden because nobody else was up at that hour, and so they had the mistaken impression that they were the only conscious people in the universe at that particular moment. Steve disagreed.

Although he had thought of the night before he met Bucky with the same admiration as any child who has not experienced overwhelming tiredness is prone to possess, he had not loved it with the intensity he did after he had known Bucky, had seen Bucky's bright eyes shine more than the moon up above, had compared the lines in Bucky's hand to the constellations, had listened to Bucky whisper and conjure up stories Steve could never have imagined thinking of before.

So maybe Steve wasn't in love with the night. Maybe-

"Hey, Buck?" Steve said, in an attempt to remain nonchalant when that was the last thing he felt. Bucky's eyes met his, and within them lay the stars and the green of the hill and the inky blotchiness of the night. "I'll always be your Steve."

Bucky gave a lopsided smile. "No you won't," he replied. "But that's okay. I'm not the Bucky you remember either, I'm sure."

The metal arm swung slightly and bumped against Steve's scarred one.

"Not quite," Steve said. Bucky nodded, having expected this. "But you know - I like this new Bucky."

Ah, how the stars were shining brightly tonight.

"I like this new Steve as well," Bucky said. It was a secret.

Steve laughed, a little sadly. "That's because you don't know him," he explained. Bucky's hand had reached such casual proximity to Steve's that he could open his hand and touch Bucky's fingertips without it seeming intentional if he wanted to (he so desperately, always, wanted to).

"Give me a chance, then," Bucky bartered. "I'll have you know this new Bucky is very interested in learning everything there is to know about the new Steve Rogers."

Steve considered him. The thing that hurt the most, besides the chill of Bucky's metal fingertips, was the blazing sincerity reflected in his friend's expression, from the kind curve of his mouth to the familiar brightness of his smile.

"You have one chance," he said, as if he wasn't the one who disappeared for years and came back with only half his mind intact.

"That's all I need," Bucky replied, as if he was the one who had left. He knocked his shoulder against Steve's, gently, like he was afraid he might knock him over.
"I'm not as tiny as I used to be," Steve protested, crashing into Bucky's shoulder with the force of a quarter backer. Bucky burst into laughter.


"Jerk."

They walked home together in the starriness of the night, taking turns to bump into each other's shoulders.

If Bucky mumbled stories about the stars to Steve as they did so, it was only for the two of them to know.
Chapter 11

Perhaps the best thing about making up with Bucky was being able to text him again, go around to his house whenever he wanted, play Cluedo with him and Becca in the light of the fire, and watch as Bucky started a tickle fight and demanded Becca showed him her cards.

Perhaps the worst thing about making up with Bucky was that everyone else reverted back to their high school mantra of "just get married already, God," which was funny back when Steve thought he was straight and Bucky didn't flirt with boys, but was just awkward (and heartbreaking) now. Betty, Jane and Natasha were the most guilty culprits, and so Steve had learnt early on that if two of the three or, God forbid, three of the three messaged him within the same hour, he should be highly, highly suspicious.

But he's getting ahead of himself.

September rolled around. He'd been in Leavenworth almost three months by this stage, and he'd watched as the summer-scheme at Leavenworth Elementary ended and the next school year began. He'd built up a friendship with Maya Hansen that mostly included discussions about where to buy the best salads and recipes for Victoria sponge, and he loved the kids. A month into the school year and Steve, Natasha and Maya were working together like they'd been doing it for years. Everything went so fluently it barely felt like work at all.

Steve was happy. Ecstatic, really. He had work that fulfilled him, two best friends to text at lunchtime (Bucky particularly enjoyed Steve messaging him some of Maya's amazing shortbread recipes, whilst Sam appreciated Steve cataloguing the various birds that landed on the branches of the tree outside the staffroom window) and he was finally, finally sleeping.

It was a Thursday, and he was helping Kate Bishop out with some early algebra, which he thankfully understood despite his hatred of all things mathematical from the age of five onwards. She leaned forward against her desk, her black eyebrows pulled together in a frown. She turned to America behind her, attempting to make conversation. She chewed at the end of her pencil. She told Steve about her dog and her bow and arrow. She tried everything and anything, except her algebra. Steve was very close to snapping at her when she said something that made the words get caught in his throat instead.

"Do you have anyone special, Mr. Rogers?" she asked him, bright wide eyes gleaming with innocence. Steve pursed his lips together and tapped the page in front of Kate.

"Come on, Kate, do your work," he said. When she continued to stare up at him, he sighed. "What makes you ask this?" he questioned.

"Miss Romanoff read us a story yesterday about two doggies who loved each other very much," Kate told him solemnly.

Steve had taken off ill yesterday. The things he missed.

"Did she?" he said. "That's nice. Do your algebra."

But Kate persisted nonetheless.

"Miss Romanoff said the doggies loved each other because they were nice doggies, and people love nice doggies," Kate explained.
"That is true," Steve said.

"So that means people must love nice people," Kate said. "And you are a nice person, so someone must love you."

Steve's heart welled up in his chest. He almost, almost, grabbed Kate into a bone-crushing hug, but the awareness that this was only a last stitch attempt to get out of her work stopped him from becoming too sentimental.

"That's nice of you to say, Kate," Steve said. "Now do your-"

"Mr. Rogers, do you have anyone nice who loves you?"

Steve sighed. "If I answer this, will you do your work?"

Kate nodded, her pigtails bouncing as she did so. Steve held out his pinkie-finger to her, and she took it in earnest.

"Fine," Steve said. "No, Kate. I don't have anyone special."

"Why not? You seem alright to me."

Ah. The eloquence of children.

"Sometimes people who are perfectly alright don't have someone in love with them, and that's okay," Steve said. "Now that I've answered you, you can get started on your work, can't you?"

Kate let out a loud, drawn out groan. "Fine, Mr. Rogers," she conceded. "But only if you help me."

"That's what I'm here for," Steve told her, though he knew she was a very bright girl, and once she got the motivation to begin her work she would be running circles around Steve. He was correct, for by the fifth question on the sheet he was hopelessly lost, and Kate was powering on ahead, happily oblivious to his presence.

"Good work," Natasha murmured to Steve. He grabbed a few comics off her desk and flicked through them to find the post-it note which contained a list of children who had already read the story. "I've only been able to get her to do algebra once."

"She's good at it," Steve muttered back. "I don't know why she resists it so much."

Natasha had a knowing smile on her face.

"I'm assuming you do, though," Steve said.

"I have an idea."

"Do tell."

"I think Miss Bishop wants nothing but your attention, Mr. Rogers," Natasha said. Steve spluttered for a second. "You're awfully kind to her. I think she quite adores you, to be honest."

"That's ridiculous," Steve said. "Why would she-"

"If you say anything self-deprecating I'm kicking you out of the classroom right now," Natasha declared. She closed the workbook she'd been marking so she could stare even more intensely into Steve's eyes. "You're a good person, Steve. You're amazing with the children. And I know you have
ideas for lessons and activities, but when me and Maya are writing up the plans, you stay silent. Why is that?"

Steve shrugged. "I dunno," he said. "You guys know better than me."

"We've got more training, that's true," Natasha said. "But if you don't tell us your ideas, you'll never know if they could work."

"I don't always need a pep-talk, Natasha," Steve said. "I'm fine on my own."

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

"No, really, Nat. I'm happier than I've ever been, that's the truth. I'm happier than I've been for years, anyway, since before Ma-"

"You don't need to bring her up," Natasha said. "If you start crying in front of the children, I doubt they'd be able to cope. Just - keep it in mind, won't you?"

Steve gave her a little salute and went back to the carpet, where three of the littlest children in the school were eagerly waiting to hear the continuing adventures of Captain America and his fearless companions, Falcon and Black Widow.

"Falcon's got brown skin like me," Timothy declared, poking the man in a red and white suit. Steve smiled, and decided this wasn't the time to try and explain to Timothy that Falcon was based on his own cousin, Sam Wilson.

"Yes he does," Steve said. "Look how fast he flies through the air. Can you tell me what this says?"

He pointed towards a speech bubble. Timothy, Scarlet and Patrick leaned forward and screwed their faces in concentration.

"It says 'whoosh,' doesn't it, Mr. Rogers?" Scarlet said. Steve shot her a reassuring smile.

"That's right, Scarlet, well done," Steve praised her. "Go get a sticker from Miss Romanoff, that's a good girl."

For the rest of the day Steve rotated his comic books around the class, alternating between the simpler texts and the more complex ones depending on the ages of the students in front of him. His chest was bursting, for every child had seemed enraptured by the stories and the colours and the characters, all of them fascinated by how life-like and relatable they were. Steve was about to tell them that he had based all of his heroes on his friends from Leavenworth, but he was interrupted by Kate leaning over his shoulder and whispering in his ear.

"Mr. Rogers," she muttered. "You told me a fib."

"I did not!" Steve replied. "What are you talking about, silly?"

"You do have someone who loves you," she said, pointing towards the door. Steve's eyes followed her finger.

He had been so caught up in his storytelling that he hadn't even heard the bell go off in the corridor. Bucky, dressed in a bomber jacket, leather pants and a tight white t-shirt, was hovering in the classroom door, a soft smile on his face. Steve met his gaze, and it obviously shocked Bucky, for he fumbled, not having enough time to hide the affection on his face before Steve saw.
"Oh, that's just Bucky, Kate," he told her, patting her arm. "He's my best friend."

"He looks at you like the doggies in the book looked at each other though," Kate argued. Her lower lip was shaped into a pout. Steve laughed.

"He's always looked at me like that," Steve said. "Now go on, get your coat. Your mom will be wondering where you are."

Steve watched her run out of the classroom, only stopping for a moment to grin up at Bucky who got down to her and said something Steve couldn't quite pick up on. He pulled himself up from the floor, wincing at the strain in his muscles.

"Hard day?" Bucky asked him. Steve just chuckled.

"Well, I was grilled by Kate about my love life," Steve said, "but the kids seemed to love the comics, so. That's good."

"I told you they would," Bucky replied. "Hey, you're still going to Nat's party tonight, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," Steve said. He looked down at his shirt and pulled a face at a stain on it that he really hoped was green paint and not boogers. "I'm getting my costume fitted tonight, apparently. Betty and Natasha got it special for me."

Bucky's eyes shone. "I'm sure it'll be fantastic, knowing them," he teased.

"I know," Steve said. "I'm terrified. Sorry I forgot to mention to you this morning about the fitting. I don't need a lift home after all."

"That's fine," Bucky said. "I like coming in here. Brings back memories, you know?"

Steve nodded.

"I love the kids, too," Bucky continued. "And seeing you with them."

A grin passed over Steve's face. Bucky mirrored it, but his throat was working, and he was clenching his metal fist.

"Steve, listen, I-"

"Right, Steve, you ready for the road?" Natasha interrupted. She was in the process of pulling on her coat, and when she saw Bucky, she hit against him with her shoulder. Bucky returned the favour.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Steve replied. Natasha bared her teeth. It was terrifying.

"Sorry, James, were you saying something?"

Steve turned back to Bucky expectantly. Bucky threw a look at Natasha that Steve couldn't quite decipher, and then his face went back to its default coolness.

"Nah, it was nothing important," Bucky said. "I was just about to say you'll probably dress him as a pin-up or something."

"As funny as that would be, do you actually want to kill Tony?" Natasha asked. Bucky shrugged.

"To be fair, we've all thought about it," Steve said.
"That we have," Natasha mused. "See you later, James."

"See ya, Natalia," he replied. "And Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

"Text me what she's got you, won't you? If you actually are going as a pin-up, I'll need some time to prepare Tony."

"Will do, Buck."

Natasha was one of the few people in Leavenworth to have a car in her possession. Bucky had a motorbike, Bruce had a bicycle, and Tony had a skateboard (the nerd) but it was a rare find to see a Ford Picasso parked up along the drive. Nevertheless, it was beneficial for Natasha in the winter time, when she had to bounce from school productions to the ballet studio and back again in the freezing temperatures. Plus, it allowed her to keep her tunes going while she drove, which was always a good thing (for her. It was country and western. Steve felt a migraine developing).

"So," Natasha said. She put the car into gear and paused to allow it to stutter off onto the road. "You and James are getting pretty close again, I see."

This was why she wanted to give him a lift. It was a trap. Steve swivelled around to see if there was any point in the road where he could jump out and not be too badly injured, but Natasha had child-lock on all the doors but her own anyway. It was hopeless.

Steve was going to die today. Killed by Natasha Romanoff. He doubted he was the first.

"Um, yeah," he said. "Not as close as we used to be but, um, yeah. Friends, I suppose."

Natasha pondered his statement. He wished she would look at the road while she was doing it rather than staring at her immaculately painted nails.

"You and James are both going to my party tonight, then, yes?"

Steve hesitated. "Yee-es," he answered. "Why?"

Natasha shook her head. "No reason," she said. It was terrifying. "Are you going together?"

"He offered me a lift," Steve said. "But I told him I preferred walking. I thought a motorcycle might ruin whatever hairstyle you've dreamt up for me."

"Interesting," Natasha hummed. Steve had the distinct feeling that he was missing something. "If it wasn't for your hair, would you have gone with James?"

"Probably? What's this about, Nat."

"Oh, nothing," she said. She pulled into her drive. Why she took the car to work five streets away was beyond Steve, but he was just happy to be getting out of the Pentagon. "Just interested, is all."

"Okay?"

Natasha sashayed out of the car, her hips swinging as she went in that overly seductive way she developed in high school when she realised boys liked her when she sashayed. She opened the door for Steve, offered him a hand out like a toddler, smirked when he smacked her away, and went into her house.
"Betty," she called out. "I've got Steve with me."

How Natasha could turn an innocent statement like that into something highly, highly intimidating was beyond Steve.

Should he run back out the door?

Would she be able to catch him?

Of course she would. She won the cross-country competition three times in high school. She was Leavenworth's champion, a worthy achievement even if there only was three other competitive runners in Leavenworth.

Betty appeared in the hall, a wide smile already distorting her features. She pulled Steve into a tight hug and ran her hands down his arms the way Sarah used to. It was probably meant to be comforting, but considering how on edge Steve already was, it was just disconcerting. He pulled out his phone.

STEVE: *I feel like I'm in a horror movie*

BUCKY: *you're on your own mate #beccasgotproblems #boysareallofthem*

STEVE: *I hate you*

BUCKY: *i hate teenage boys*

STEVE: *Fair enough."

"Go into the living room," Natasha said. "It's hanging up on the fireplace already."

Steve braced himself. Took three deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Tried to prevent himself from screaming at Natasha or Betty the second he saw the costume. And entered the living room.

He turned around to them.

"Are you fucking joking me."

"Come on, Steve," Betty pleaded. "It'll look so good on you! It really matches your skin tone."

"Brown matches everybody's skin tone, Betty!" Steve protested. "I'm not wearing it. Nope."

"Steve, you're a Captain," Natasha said. "You should look like one."

"Yeah, I was Captain of a troop in Afghanistan in 2014, not France in 1944! Goddamnit, Nat."

"Put it on, Steve," Betty said.

"No, I'm not doing it."

"You are," Natasha said.

"I'm not."

Ten minutes later and Steve was looking in Natasha's full length mirror, dressed to the nines in a brown military uniform from World War 2.
It pulled on his shoulders, but everywhere else it was the perfect size, if the perfect size was skin tight and not meant for moving in. Medals decorated the lapels and a belt cinched in his waist. His body was a literal triangle. He looked like a knob.

"I don't know, Nat," Steve murmured, still a bit chastised, and probably bruised, from being forced into the uniform.

"Oh Steve," Natasha said. "I promise you, you'll catch a lot of eyes in this getup. If I wasn't interested in someone else, I'd bang you."

"Nat!"

"You look so handsome, Steve," Betty murmured. Her hands ran over the fabric, pressing it even tighter to his skin. He was already sweating. He couldn't wear this all night, it wasn't possible.

"I'm not wearing this," he said, stepping away from both of them. "I can barely sit down! I'm sorry, guys, I really am, but I just can't do it."

Natasha folded her arms over her chest. That, Steve could handle. He was used to Natasha throwing a fit when she didn't get her way. But when his eyes caught on Betty - and how her eyes had filled with tears...

He couldn't handle it.

"Oh, Betty, no," he said. Tears streamed down her face. Confused and rather alarmed, he patted her on her shoulder. "Betty, don't cry, alright? It's just a uniform. Betty, come on."

"I looked for hours in the shop," Betty wailed. Natasha passed her a tissue which seemed to appear from thin air. "When I saw it I just thought of you, Steve. I rented it special thinking you would like it. I'm sorry, Steve. I thought you'd-

She blew her nose violently into the tissue. Natasha glared at Steve.

"Look what you've done," she hissed. Steve would rather be shouted at by Colonel Philips a thousand times over if it meant never having to hear Natasha speak like that again.

"Fine, fine," Steve agreed hurriedly. "I'll wear it."

Betty sobered up almost immediately. The tears that had already fallen were wiped away, and no more formed in her wide eyes. She shot him a grin.

He'd been played. Fucking Betty Ross.

"Oh Steve, thank you," she said, pulling him into another hug. "You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you."

"No problem, Betty," Steve spluttered (her grip was so tight it was cutting off his air supply). "If you don't mind, I'll head home now."

"Don't be late," Natasha warned.

Steve scuttled away from the house, wondering just how Leavenworth was not yet controlled by Natasha Romanoff and Betty Ross alone.

He had intended to be early, even though Sam advised against this, yet by the time Steve arrived at Natasha's party, it was already in full swing. He was a little taken aback by the vitality of the women
in swishing skirts, the tight suspenders holding up men's slacks, the shine of brogues, the whipping of curled hair, though he knew he had no real right to be. He was, after all, an hour late - he would've been half an hour late, as Sam had suggested, had a new *Game of Thrones* episode not caught his attention (Bucky had vehemently and enthusiastically recommended it, and Steve was never one not to indulge Bucky's interests).

It was as if he had stepped into a time machine and was in the middle of a dark, crowded dance hall instead of a modern, slightly crumbling ballet studio. Women of all ages were laughing and indulging themselves by dancing with many men that were not their husbands, and men were sitting back with drinks in their hands, their full bellies straining against their suspenders as they watched their wives dance with grace and vitality previously reserved for a bygone era.

The parties Steve had rarely attended with Sharon had always been loud, with flashing neon lights and gyrating bodies, or, alternatively, conservative dinners where they dined on white table cloths and had several forks to decide from (Steve always tried his best to copy Sharon's every movement and still appear natural; whether he had ever succeeded was debatable).

This, however, was exactly how he remembered Leavenworth.

A place of life, of bustling energy, of people who had conversed many times in corridors or asked each other for homework, who had seen hundreds of birthdays and funerals and weddings whiz past in the blink of an eye. The easy familiarity of the Leavenworthers when they indulged in company was plain to see, for there was no formalities present; hell, by the time Steve reached where his friends were sitting along with a blond stranger, Steve had already been accosted by several old high school acquaintances who demanded his life story.

The smiling faces of Sam, Tony, Virginia (?), Betty and Jane - who was perked up on the knee of a blond stranger - greeted Steve as he slumped into the seat beside them. Tiredness was already seating itself in his bones. Sam, who was dressed as a very dashing pilot, became an oasis of comfort, as per usual, and his warm hand squeezed Steve's shoulder.

"You okay?" he asked. Steve shot him a weary smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Steve replied. Sam passed him a glass of water. "It's warm in here, that's all."

It was obvious that Steve was not the only one who could feel the overwhelming heat of the dance studio. Betty, who was dressed to the nines in a trouser suit and donned with bright red lipstick, fanned herself with a drinks menu, whilst Jane, already quite red in the face, was pressing her head into the blond man's shoulder. Her wide skirts fanned out across his knee, and he was grasping some of them in his large hands to prevent them scraping against the dusty dance floor.

"This is Jane's boyfriend, Thor Odinson," Sam said. He gestured towards the man who was currently trying very hard to down a glass of wine in two gulps and yet prevent a single drop from falling onto his lover's hair. "Thor, this is my best friend, Steve Rogers."

Steve's eyes widened before he blinked it away. Sam's gaze, however, did not betray him, and he continued to act as nonchalant as usual, as if it wasn't the first time Sam had referred to Steve in that manner since before he left Leavenworth. Thor slapped his hand into Steve's in a very hearty, very drunk handshake.

"It is a privilege to meet you, Captain," Thor boomed, for that was the only way you could describe the magnitude of not only his voice, but his entire person. "I have heard much about you from my Jane. I believe she has known you from infancy."
Jane managed a weak thumbs-up to confirm this, and Steve laughed.

"Close enough to it," he agreed. "I've heard a bit about you as well."

This was an understatement.

Two nights ago, Steve had been sitting on the floor of Tony's garage with a sandwich in his hands, watching Bucky tinker away with the Camaro. Tony had sprawled himself over her bonnet in order to convey to Steve the depth of Thor's attractiveness - which, surprisingly, hadn't been an exaggeration on Tony's part.

If you were able to look past the obscene hand gestures Tony demonstrated - and Bucky, for one, was not, for he imitated them behind Tony's back the entire conversation and Steve had to try very hard to laugh and not find it hot in the slightest - you would be able to discern that Tony thought Thor was so gorgeous, so unattainable and so utterly appealing that Tony would allow him to "do whatever the hell he wanted to me, damn."

Steve had to, albeit begrudgingly, agree with Tony Stark. Thor was fucking hot. If Steve had seen this man when he was fifteen, maybe it wouldn't have taken him until he moved to New York for him to finally consider the possibility of not being straight.

Thor had long blond hair scraped back into a ponytail, not unlike that which Bucky sported when cooking or jogging. His biceps were large and strained against his shirt and suspenders with unprecedented strength, and the looseness of his slacks did nothing to hide the enormous and incomprehensible power of his body. Given Sharon's obsession with healthy living since Steve's 'accident,' Steve considered himself a relatively well kept and muscled man, but it was nothing compared to Thor Odinson. Hungry eyes followed the Norwegian everywhere he went in search of liquor, but Thor had eyes for no one but Jane.

Thor nodded at Steve, whether it be in approval or dismissal, and returned his attention to pressing small kisses to the back of a moaning Jane's head. Betty Ross rested her elbows on the table so she was at a close enough proximity for Steve to feel uncomfortable if he hadn't known her better. It was an intimate distance.

"I told you the uniform would look good on you," Betty murmured. Though her cheeks always maintained a somewhat rosy tiny, they were bright red that night, and accented more thoroughly by her lipstick. She reached out a hand and ran it down Steve's upper arm in admiration.

"Told me?" Steve repeated with a laugh. He turned to Sam. "She literally blackmailed me into wearing this thing."

Tony's voice bounced across the large, round table.

"She did it for the team!" he declared, which had Steve spluttering on his water long before his eyes ever caught on Bucky Barnes.

When he did spot him through the crowd though, Sam had to thump Steve very hard five times on the back to get him breathing again.

Bucky was sitting at a table just across the hall with the same ease that always terrified and excited Steve. Where Steve was nervous and self-conscious, Bucky was all confidence and smiles. He would walk into a room with so much swagger and assurance in his movements that he was very rarely introduced to anyone, for it was automatically assumed that he was knowledgeable in all affairs of human interaction. Bucky sipped at a glass of wine with noticeable insistency, and from the
light dampness of his hair Steve could conclude that it wasn't his first drink, but rather his third or fourth.

Steve gulped down some water. He could hear Betty in the background scraping her chair against the wooden floor to get closer to him, probably because he had been staring for the past five minutes and Betty had always been a nosy sort of person. Bucky rose from his seat, and Steve's heart sank in his chest.

He had his arm around a girl, a pretty girl, with a round face and bright brown eyes and small, perfectly formed curls in her hair. She was dressed in a baby-pink dress with white polka-dots, and she looked at Bucky as if he had hung the stars, as if he had painted the pink clouds onto the sky at dawn, as if he was the creator of the universe condensed into one body.

Steve could sympathise.

But the steely warmth in those grey eyes, practiced for years, along with the desire that rested behind his irises, gave Bucky away immediately. He did not love this girl. Steve was not sure why he found this a relief.

Saving Steve from having to do anything crazy like analyse his own feelings, Bucky appeared at their table with his date tucked neatly under his arm, dangerously silent. Sam jumped about a mile out of his seat, cursing Bucky to hell and back again, and Bucky just smirked.

"I hate you," Sam said.

Bucky blew him a kiss. Sam pretended to catch it and throw it into the crowd of dancers. Bucky gripped at his chest.

"You wound me," he lamented. His gaze landed on Steve. "Hey, Steve."

He was wearing camel slacks. A white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal his metal arm. Suspenders that barely grazed his chest and which immediately drew attention towards his neck ... If you were looking. His hair was gelled back in what had probably been an immaculate manner half an hour ago, but was now accented with tiny curls that escaped their confines and stuck themselves firmly to his forehead.

Steve tried to take another gulp of water just to find his glass empty. He swallowed regardless. But not because the sweat on Bucky's chest made his shirt see-through. And not because his slacks were a size too small and clung to his thighs in a way that was bordering on indecent. And not because Bucky's pupils were so blown you could barely see grey. Not at all.

It was just really warm in the dance hall. Really hot in the military uniform, though Steve should've been used to starched collars, given his previous title. God, he wished he still smoked, just for once in his life, so he would have a chance to escape the thick heat.

"Hey Buck," he replied.

He wondered how long it had taken him to respond. Obviously too long, because Sam was hitting his head gently off the table beside him, and Betty was slapping her hand to her forehead. However, when Steve searched Bucky's face, he saw no trace of embarrassment or impatience. Rather, Bucky seemed to be staring at something over Steve's shoulder as if transfixed, as if there was nothing of greater importance. Steve resisted the urge to look.

"You - where did you get that?" Bucky asked.
"Get what?" Steve stammered. Bucky's eyes drew downwards. Steve glanced at himself, suddenly recognising what Bucky was referring to. "Oh, the uniform, right. Betty and Natasha got it for me. Bit too tight in all the wrong places, if you know what I mean."

It was too early to make those kind of jokes with this Bucky, that much was clear. Bucky's face went a rather impressive shade of purple, and his grip on his date's arm tightened so much it might've left a bruise. Not that she cared. In fact, she might've considered him with even more appreciation than she was before.

"Right," Bucky breathed. It was more of a heave than anything. "This is Connie. Connie, this is my..."

He flailed for a moment. Steve smiled at Connie.

"Steve," he said. "I'm his Steve."

"Ah right," Connie beamed. Bucky had a - a strained look on his face. "You're his - friend, I assume?"

"Does he not talk about me?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow. A lump worked in Bucky's throat. "Shame shame, Bucky Barnes."

Connie laughed. No, she giggled. It was disgusting.

"Oh Buck," she cooed. "You never tell me about any of your friends, except for that ginger one. What's her name..."

"Virginia," Bucky said, ignoring his date with almost impressive fluency. "I didn't realise you'd be accompanying us tonight."

"Well, it's for a good cause," Virginia said. Under the table, Tony scratched at his palms with unmatched ferocity. "Mister Stark said he'd try his best to donate something to the studio, and I'd be more than happy to do the same."

"You're a doll," Bucky said. He ran around the table to her and pressed his lips to her cheek. She hit him playfully on the chest. "What a darling, Tony, eh? Ain't she a darling?"

His vernacular, which used to make the girls swoon and the boys grumble, was suddenly no longer out of place, but rather seamlessly integrating Bucky into the period, much like he did everywhere else. It was clearly an opening for Tony to make a move, perhaps charm Virginia even further, but of course, he missed it.

"Oh yeah," Tony muttered. "Hey, do you have any whiskey in this place?"

Betty passed him some she kept in her purse. It had a stick-note on the front labelled 'Tony's Whiskey. '

"Charming," Bucky remarked.


"Hey!"

"Listen, Steve," Bucky said. "Becca asked if you could come over sometime and help her with this essay she's writing for English. It's about The Great Gatsby, and I know you liked that in high
Bucky had got an A+ in his final English exam. Steve had gotten a C. Why Becca thought Steve would be any help to her in the slightest when she had fucking Einstein and Shakespeare in the same brotherly package was beyond him. But Steve liked - no, loved - Becca, he liked spending time with her, and he liked sitting in the Barnes' house where it wasn't quite as sad and silent as his own.

"Sure, Buck," Steve agreed. "I could come over after this, if you wanted?"

If he hadn't known Bucky so well, he might've missed the side-eye Bucky gave to Connie. But he knew Bucky as well as he had eight years ago, so he knew when Bucky was hoping to get laid that night and didn't want distractions. Steve had witnessed the same side-eye on many, many occasions, not least of which was the fucking Love Barn incident, but he didn't remember it feeling like Bucky had just kicked him in the stomach. Repeatedly. With steel-toed boots.

"Or I can come tomorrow afternoon after school, if that works better," Steve suggested.

For a second, he thought Bucky might shake his head and chastise Steve for even thinking that he would choose getting laid over his lifelong best friend. But then again, this was Bucky Barnes they were talking about, who never chose anything over getting laid.

"Yeah, that would be great," Bucky grinned. His teeth sparkled - fucking sparkled - in the dimness of the hall. The muscles in his forearm flexed as he gripped Connie tighter to him. "Come on, sugar," he muttered into her ear, just loudly enough that every other person at the table could hear him. "Let's swing."

Connie giggled - fucking giggling again, Steve was going to be sick - and they swept away towards the dance floor, where Bucky began enthusiastically participating in the swing dancing competition that Natasha was currently winning with a flustered Bruce.

"James is a marvellous dancer," Thor remarked. Jane had remained silently perched on his knee ever since he had rejoined them. She looked distinctly as if she was about to vomit. "Has he been trained?"

"No," Steve said. Not with bitterness, though, because what was there to be bitter about?

Thor burst into guffaws of laughter, hitting his knee. His whole body moved with such ferocity that Jane had to grasp to the lapels of his jacket in order to prevent falling face-first on the ground.

"He's a man of many talents, then!" he concluded.

"It gets annoying after a while," Sam stated. He chugged down what appeared to be a shot of rum. Why there were so many choices of modern alcohol at an otherwise historically accurate period party was beyond Steve, but then again, he wouldn't put it past the Drinking Buddies (Natasha and Bucky) to refuse to go anywhere without at least ten variants of liquor.

"Surely he cannot be good at everything, though, Wilson," Thor said, in what Steve assumed was his attempt at comfort.

"He's fucking perfect," Steve said. He slammed his empty glass down on the table and stood up from his chair. "I'm going to get drinks. Do you think Bucky and Bonnie will be back over tonight, or will I just forget them?"

"Connie," Sam corrected.
"Do I look like I give a fuck?"

"Jesus, no need to get snappy with me," Sam said. Steve sighed.

"I know, I'm sorry. It's just my head. It's so noisy in here."

Sam's eyebrows knitted together. "Do you need any meds? I could drive home and get you some, I've only had a shot."

"No, no," Steve waved him off. "I'll be fine. What does everyone want to drink?"

If his friends weren't so predictable, Steve would've had a very hard time remembering all of the drink orders that were flung at him, even before his brain injury. But they all still drank the same things they did in high school, so he only had to take note of Thor and Virginia's requests before shuffling over to the bar.

God, this uniform really was tight. Had Natasha and Betty done this on purpose or something, just so they could see Steve suffer?

Whilst the bartender began work on the drinks, Steve propped himself up against the bar and surveyed the surrounding party. In most respects, it was preferable to any of the parties he had attended in New York, but in New York Steve never had this pit in his stomach, the heaviness on all of his limbs that he was experiencing right now, and which faded into an emptiness the second his eyes caught Bucky in the crowd, jiving with Connie/Bonnie/whoever the fuck she was. Steve had never felt his head throb not because of music or physical exertion or therapy, but simply from seeing the best friend he had ever had dancing with a girl he seemed to really like. Why should that make him angry, or sad, or disappointed, or the strange medley of these emotions that he was feeling right at that moment? Why should it make him feel anything at all other than pride, or happiness that Bucky was finally getting his life together and getting out with a nice, respectable girl?

"Here you go, mate," the bartender said, passing Steve a bunch of drinks on a small, round serving tray.

"Thanks," Steve said. He put his hand under the drinks and focused carefully on them as he navigated through the crowd. Who fills glasses so close to the top anyway? "Stupid fucking..."

It all happened at once. Steve walked headfirst - or perhaps the other guy walked backfirst? - into a fucking brick wall of a man. Several of the drinks fell forward, and because it all happened in slow motion Steve managed to capture a few of them before they spilled too much. He was midway through a sigh of relief when the man turned around, his hands flailing in a desperate apology, and knocked Tony's whiskey all over Steve's rented uniform.

"Fuck," Steve said.

"I'm so sorry," the man said.

"It's fine," Steve said. Though it really. Was not. Fine. "It'll come out in the wash, yeah?"

"Yeah, mate, I hope so," the man, who Steve vaguely recognised as one of the footballers from his old high school, gushed. "Sorry 'bout that, mate."


When Steve arrived back at the table, he slammed the drinks down in front of Tony and hit him up the back of the head.
"Ow!" Tony exclaimed. "What the fuck was that for?"

"It's always you," Steve snapped. He grabbed his shirt to reiterate the whiskey stain. "Look what your alcohol did to me."

Tony squinted at it. "I could try licking it off, if you-"

"God, Tony," Steve groaned. "Can you ever not be weird for one second?"

"Nope," Tony said. "You know I can't! It's a medical condition!"

"Stupidity and inappropriateness is not a medical condition, Tony," Steve said. He turned around to Bucky who, surprise, had decided to return to the table after all. "Help me with this, would you?" he asked.

Steve lifted up the two glasses that had vodka trailing down their sides so that Betty could wipe at them, while Bucky inched minutely forward with his napkin brandished.

"Remember, dab don't rub," Steve said. Bucky rolled his eyes.

"Do you think I'm a fucking idiot, Rogers?" he asked. "Stay still."

So Steve stood there. Waiting. While Betty took an inordinately long time to dry the glasses and Bucky took an inordinately long time dabbing at his chest. Probably because he kept stopping to swallow so often.

"Can you both hurry up?" Steve asked, to no avail (no surprises there). If anything, Betty went slower, tilting the glasses this way and that in Steve's hands to ensure that there wasn't even a trace of vodka against the side.

"I need to-" Bucky said. He inhaled. "I need to-"

"Come on then," Steve said. Bucky clenched and unclenched his metal arm and used it to clean the stain while his flesh hand pressed the shirt flush against Steve's chest. And Steve felt a little - a little like he wanted Bucky's hands on him without a whiskey-stained shirt separating them - and it kind of hurt, a little - the wanting him, the always wanting him, the-

"It's fine," Steve said, so sharply that it shocked both Betty and Bucky. "Just leave it, it's fine. I'll find a drycleaner, it's fine."

"Steve," Bucky said.

"It's fine," Steve said. "It's fine. I'm going for a smoke."

He turned to Sam, who had yet another frown on his face. "Come on," he said to him. "I know you still carry them for him."

And fair enough, Sam produced a packet of Marlboro, otherwise known as The Only Cigarettes Bucky Barnes Will Ever Smoke.

"Do you have a lighter?" he asked Bucky. With reluctance, Bucky reached to his back pocket and produced a lighter. Steve also wanted to reach into Bucky's back pocket and -

Fuck. He needed out.

"Don't give me that look," Steve told both Sam and Bucky, who also glanced at each other. "I
haven't smoked in years. I broke up with my girlfriend two months ago and I got blown to bits before that. I deserve this cigarette."

Without waiting for a second to see their reaction - which Steve just knew would be a Sam Wilson Is Concerned face or else a rousing speech on self-care and self-love, either of which Steve was Not In The Mood For - he stormed out of the dance into the cool twilight air.

Leavenworth was so much more beautiful when there was a heavy tinge of purple to it. Usually, the town had a casual sadness to it borrowed from the larger cities that resided far away, but at this time, around half-eleven on an August evening, it was refreshingly bright, cool, and distinctly like a country heaving its last great sigh as it gasped for breath and gave up.

Steve struck the lighter, and his cigarette burnt amber against the darkness of the evening. His own shirt was drenched in whiskey and sweat, more with the humidity of the air than with the heat of it. He shrugged off the jacket so he could lean more easily against the pebble-dashed wall without fear of being charged for ruining the suit more than he already had. For a brief, lucid minute he felt like he was back in Afghanistan. For a brief moment he was twenty five again, sneaking the occasional cigarette out the back of Colonel Philips' tent while he pondered some big operation and the best way to go about it.

Most of the Howlies smoked, and so it was difficult for Steve to stop once he picked it up from them by osmosis. Gabe was the only one of them particularly troubled by his addiction, and when they were on a rare break to the States, Steve had gone with Gabe to Vegas and watched as Gabe got a no-smoking sign tattooed on the inside of his wrist.

It hadn't worked. Steve was surprised he hadn't been diagnosed with emphysema yet, for the second he got the tattoo Gabe seemed even more determined, and smoked two packs a day rather than one.

Everybody needed some way to cope. Steve supposed he couldn't say anything about Gabe's smoking being suicidal considering his own tendencies towards death. But still. It was different when you were on the outside looking in.

He tried to make the cigarette last, but eventually it reached the stage that he could no longer cling to his memory and the butt fizzled out in between his fingers. He let it drop to the ground and smudged it with his shoe, spitting on it for good nature as Dum-Dum was liable to do, and let himself miss the Howlies so much it stung before returning to the party.

Steve had just opened the door back into the dance hall when he was confronted with Bucky and his date, Connie, stomping out the way Steve had gone mere minutes before. Her small, beautiful face was pinched in rage, and the curls in her hair were wet and laying limp against her forehead.

Bucky was following after her, but when she made her way past the door Steve felt he had no choice but to hold open for her, Bucky stopped. He stood stock-still in the middle of the hall, staring out after her, then looking at Steve, then turning back to realise that the entirety of Leavenworth had witnessed his failed date, then looking back at Steve.

Steve's heart sped up with how Bucky looked at him, as if he wanted to punch him and hug him all at once, as if Bucky wasn't quite sure how to identify the emotions that were gripping him yet he was definite of their intensity. He began opening and closing his metal fist sporadically, and when Steve opened his mouth to speak, he cut him to the chase.

"You smell like smoke," Bucky told him.

"You smell like shit," Steve responded, but it wasn't true. Even though it was sweat, it was clean
sweat, and Steve kind of liked the smell of Bucky. Especially when all his aftershave melted away and all that was left behind was skin and, now, the faint tinge of metallic consistency that made Steve feel like home was right there, between Bucky's finger and thumb.

Steve couldn't exactly put that into words. If he could, he might've written a poem. He made a mental note to commit it to paper the second he found a pencil.

Bucky laughed. Steve had expected it to be strained. He gave a little bow to the crowd, and a hundred Leavenworthers chuckled pleasantly at their darling. Natasha was the only one whose face remained stoic, her arms crossed against her chest.

"I think that was my cue to stop drinking tonight," Bucky declared to the crowd, who all burst into laughter. Steve felt as if he was watching a movie. "I take her point on board."

And with that, Bucky returned to his seat, which was now pulled up to Sam and Steve's table, and proceeded to share stories with Thor that varied in vulgarity as the night continued.

"Did I ever tell you about the Great Donut Scandal of 2004?" Bucky whispered to Thor, so Thor had to lean in closer to him in order to hear the quiet thrill of his voice. "It was a Thursday, and Clint was high as a kite..."

"All of these stories begin with me being high," Clint, who was just walking past with Laura, protested, though he was smiling.

"'Cause you were high from the ages of thirteen to eighteen," Bucky commented, which Clint began to refute, but immediately realised he couldn't. "Now, where was I?"

"It was a Thursday," Jane groaned. The first words Steve had heard her say all night. Her stomach was performing a symphony. She moaned and returned her face to its home in Thor's armpit.

"Ah right, a Thursday," Bucky nodded. "Do you remember that Thursday in 2004, Stevie?"

"Every day," Steve said. "It was the best day of my life."

"Don't mind him, he's a sarcastic little shit. And anyway, we wouldn't even have been in Headmaster Fury's office in the first place if it wasn't for Steve-"

"Don't try to blame this on me, Bucky Barnes," Steve protested. "If you remember right it was you who got your ears boxed by Ma, not me."

"That's 'cause Sarah thought you were sweetness and light," Bucky argued. "She didn't seem to realise I was terrified of jaywalking when you came along and yanked me out onto the road."

Steve whispered to Thor, "He cried."

"It was an example, let's not dwell on it," Bucky said hurriedly. "We were talking about you messing up royally in prank week."

"Our school does this thing that at the end of the year, everybody gets together and fucks shit up," Clint explained to Thor.

"There was a points system for it too," Natasha murmured. She was propped up on the table now, and was resting her head on Bruce's chest. "It was very comprehensive."

"In 2004, Bucky and Steve won prank week," Sam said.
"But it was Steve who masterminded the whole thing," Bucky interjected. "Don't let the pretty face fool you. This guy is a real rebel when you get down to it."

"Aw Buck, you think I have a pretty face?"

"You two just need to kiss already," Jane said. Steve recalled with a jolt just how many times she had said that exact same phrase during high school. He wondered if anybody else-

Just on time, Jane leaned over Thor and vomited all over Bucky's suspenders.

Steve nearly cried, either in disappointment or laughter, because Bucky, the strongest man he had ever known, took one look at his soiled clothes and puked all over himself again.

"I'm beginning to think we shouldn't invite these people next time," Natasha muttered to Bruce whilst Steve and Sam helped Jane and Bucky to the bathroom, all parties trying desperately not to inhale through their noses.

"Hm," Bruce agreed. "But we don't have any other friends."

Natasha watched Steve double over and vomit on her nice, newly varnished dance floor.

"I hate my life," she said.

"Hm," Bruce agreed.

They clinked their wine glasses together and watched Tony's painful attempts at making conversation with Virginia.

"Nice party."

"Yeah."

... 

"Good cause."

"Yeah."

... 

"I like the DJ."

"Uh huh."

... 

"You look very nice."

"Thank you."

... 

"Please talk to me."

"Oh, Mister Stark. Just drink your whiskey."

"Yes, Ms. Potts."
"I hate Tony Stark," Natasha said.

"Hm," Bruce agreed.
"This has been an awful night," Steve said.

"A terrible night," Bucky corrected.

They sat facing each other across the dining room table. A rather angry looking egg-holder in the shape of a ceramic chicken glared up at Steve. He put his hand over its eyes. The right corner of Bucky's mouth tilted upwards.

"Your chicken is demented," Steve said.

"It's a guard chicken," Bucky explained.

"You're fucking crazy," Steve said.

*Crazy about you* would've been the perfect response, but instead, Bucky slammed his head on the table and let out a long, loud groan.

"Becca's sleeping," Steve reminded him. Bucky glanced up from the table, nodded, and put his head back down again. This time, the groan was almost silent, but it reverberated through his body instead.

"You look like you've been left on vibrate."

"Shut up, Rogers." But his shoulders were heaving with something that wasn't vomit this time, so it was all good.

Steve lifted his hand from the chicken's face, took in its thick, angry eyebrows and the angle of its mouth, and lowered his hand over it once more.

"I fucking hate this chicken."

"I'll buy you one for your birthday." Bucky's voice was muted somewhat by the table.

"I'll smash it."

"You wouldn't have the heart."

"What makes you think that?"

"It has a name."

Steve paused.

"What's its name?"

"Steve."

"Fuck you, Buck."

Soft laughter filled the kitchen before fading into the morning light that shone through the windows. A ray of sun hit the table at just the right angle, and Steve could see a tiny engraving on the side of one of its legs.
"Steve and Bucky," he read out, softness in every syllable. "2002."

Bucky pushed his head up onto his elbows.

"Do you remember that summer?" he asked. "God, it was so hot we could barely move, and no one wanted to go out, remember? We stayed inside with all the fans on and lay on my bed, just sweating all over my nice clean bed-sheets?"

"Yeah," Steve nodded. "You called it a bitching summer."

"It was," Bucky hummed. "It was the summer we went to Clint's."

"We don't talk about the Love Barn."

Bucky's eyes went sad again.

"I know you don't like talking about the Barn."

"Yeah," Steve interrupted. "Because everybody picked you and nobody picked me. But that's not the reason I don't like talking about it, and you know it."

"I know," Bucky said. His entire body was drooping now like a wilting flower. Probably because there was nothing Bucky hated more than vomiting. "But I just want you to know ... You know, I would've chosen you, you know?"

Steve sighed. "Look, Buck," he said. "I didn't need your pity then and I sure as hell don't need it now."

"It's not pity, swear. I just - I wanted you to know."

"Is that it?" Steve asked. Bucky nodded. Steve's shoulders slumped. "Well, since you're in the mood for sharing, why don't you tell me what happened tonight then?"

"What happened tonight?" Bucky asked innocently, putting his head back down on the table. Steve sighed and put his hands on either side of Bucky's face, guiding him gently off the table.

"You'll leave a dent if you keep slamming your head like that," Steve said.

"My skull's made of tougher stuff," Bucky protested.

"I was talking about the table."

Laughter played on Bucky's lips but didn't dare to go much farther.

"I just-" he began. "I was pretending to be someone I'm not, Steve. I was trying to be who I used to be and the thing is I'm ... I'm not that guy anymore."

Bucky shrugged.

"I don't make girls blush and fall in love with me."

"Everyone loves you, Buck," Steve said.

This was the one unutterable thing that had led him to feel so much jealousy towards the older boy for so many years.
Maybe that was why Steve had never noticed the way Bucky's Adam's Apple bulged when he was trying to hold words in. Maybe that's why he never cared that shirts clung perfectly to Bucky's strong shoulders, or how Bucky looked in slacks. Maybe he was blinded by his own envy. Or maybe it was the fact he didn't realise he was gay until he went to New York and walked straight into a Pride parade. Maybe Steve really was so dense it took that much subtlety to make him come to his senses.

Bucky's tongue ran over his bottom lip, which was bright red and bleeding from him considering it during the night. Any gel that might've been left in his hair had now surely been swept out, for the amount of times Bucky ran his hands through his curls would test even the strongest of sculpting products.

"They don't anymore, Steve, if they ever did," he said. "Not since I..."

Bucky's throat was working so fast Steve was afraid he might choke on it, so he diverted the topic completely.

"Do you remember making forts?" he asked Bucky.

"'Course I do, Steve," he said. "I remember all of it."

"Lucky," Steve replied before he could stop himself. Bucky raised an eyebrow. "Not that I don't remember us," Steve hastily amended, "because I do. It's just that you were so ... So sure of your own memory. I don't really have that anymore."

"Why?" Bucky asked. He seemed genuinely curious. Steve really wanted to tell him.

"I really want to tell you," he said. "But I-"

"I have an idea," Bucky said. He ran out of the kitchen, leaving Steve staring baffled at an empty chair.

When he returned his arms were full of pillows and blankets, his face only visible if Steve looked at him from the side (which he did, because this Bucky looked so like ten year old Bucky it almost made Steve choke up, from the wide eyes to the bright, amazing smile).

"Let's build a fort," Bucky declared, dropping all of the various soft-furnishings to the ground.

Steve let out a laugh that sounded so delighted to his own ears he was surprised if it didn't give Bucky cavities to hear it, but Bucky didn't seem to mind. Rather, he was spurred on by it, and within fifteen minutes Bucky and Steve had constructed an amazing tent out of the dining room table and blankets, with one blanket reserved for their bed which was underneath the canopy.

Slowly but surely, taking care not to bump their heads (though Bucky put his hand on top of Steve's to protect him further, regardless, more to habit than anything else) they crawled under the table.

"It's a bit smaller than I remember," Bucky said, for he was the imaginative one, despite Steve being the artist. Maybe it was the love of science in him that fostered Bucky's affinity for creating stories. "And now you're an actual captain, so that's - that's cool."
"It was alright," Steve said with a shrug. "It would've been better if you'd been there."

"I thought about following in Pa's footsteps," Bucky mused.

"How many tours did he do?"

"Just the one. He managed to get into admin after that when Ma had Delilah. Still. It might've made me feel closer to him after he..."

There was a dangerous element of sentiment looming on the horizon.

"You know," Steve said. "When you were, what, fifteen? And you said we were too old for this?"

"Yeah?"

Steve shuffled on the cushions. "I went home and cried for a solid hour," he admitted. Bucky's eyes widened. "Dunno why," Steve said. "I think I was worried you were getting too grown-up for me."

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

"Look around," Bucky gestured. "I have a murderous ceramic chicken on my table. I haven't cooked something that isn't takeaway in months. I've read as many parenting books as have been published and I still don't know a shit about teenagers. I ain't ever gonna be grown-up, so you're just gonna have to live with that."

Bucky looked so young in that light. It was then that Steve realised:

Life isn't like the Hollywood movies. It hits you and it keeps hitting you until you stay down, and you get no reward for keeping getting up. But Steve's childhood - those messy eighteen years - was as close to movie-like perfection as he could ever imagine. All the tears, and the screaming, and the misunderstandings, and the teenage angst - it all boiled down to this. Steve sitting, in a fort, with the boy he'd loved since he was eleven years old staring back at him with a soft, sad little smile on his face.

They must've fallen asleep at some stage; the comfortable silence that inhabited the fort allowed Steve to feel somewhat at peace, somewhat at home. He awoke with a crick in his neck and his head resting on Bucky's chest, for they had managed to become horizontal at some stage during the night. The air was sticky from their breathing, and his shirt was wet and so was Bucky's, but he felt more content under the dining room table than he ever had in his bed back in New York.

Steve watched Bucky's chest rise and fall. Every now and again the rhythm was interrupted by a tiny snore which racketed through him and left him slumping. His metal arm was outstretched, but his flesh arm was wrapped around Steve's midriff, as if at any stage of the night Bucky may awake and find that his friend had disappeared once more, not to return for another eight years. Bucky's mouth hung open, little cracks appearing in his lips, and his hair was back to its natural waves, sprawled out on the cushions with unmatched messiness. Steve smiled and carefully extracted himself from Bucky's grasp.

"Morning, Buck," Steve whispered when his movement caused Bucky to stir. The corners of Bucky's mouth curled upwards, and he reached out his hand and brushed it against Steve's.

"Morning, Steve," Bucky mumbled back, his voice contaminated with sleep, his throat finally at rest.
"What the hell are you two doing," a female voice echoed through the haze.

Without leaving them much time to react, the blankets that made up the fort were pulled back, and Bucky and Steve both winced in the blazing sunlight. The outline of Becca, hands on her hips and a small smirk on her face, broke up the day's intrusion.

For once in his life, Bucky didn't seem overly pleased to see his sister's face.

"We built a fort," Steve explained. Becca continued to smirk, her eyes drifting over to where Bucky had slammed his face back into a pillow. The tips of his ears were burning red.

"I can see that," Becca replied. "You do know you're like ... old, right?"

Bucky gave a little grunt of indignation. "I'm only twenty-six, Becks," he argued. He had now forced himself to sit up straight, though it appeared by the look on his face there were multitudes of other things he'd rather be doing.


With that, she stalked off, leaving Steve and Bucky staring at each other with wide eyes.

"She's lovely," Steve said, and Bucky burst into laughter so unconfined it was breath-taking. His eyes began to water, his mouth was wide with shining teeth and he kept rocking back and forth on the pillow as if staying still would be impossible.

Steve was ... He thought he was ... He knew he was in-

"You better go make some waffles," he said to Bucky, hitting him in the arm gently. "You know what teenagers are like."

"Why don't you go make the waffles, and I can go back to sleep?" Bucky said.


"No," Bucky replied. "Yes. I've been making waffles for years now. Kinda nice to get a morning off."

"I'll give you three mornings off a week," Steve bartered. Bucky's eyes became warmer than he'd ever seen them. He wondered why waffles mattered so much to him. "It's the least I can do."

Bucky blinked three times. Swallowed twice. Opened his mouth to speak.

"Steve..."

"What is taking you guys so long!"

Steve shook his head and chuckled. "I better go. Her Highness awaits."

He gave Bucky a little bow and ran into the kitchen. He went into the second cupboard from the sink and immediately found the waffle mix. Procedural memory, he muttered to himself, hearing Erskine chirping somewhere in the back of his mind.

Pretty soon, Steve found that the previous night's revelation was not confined. For what felt like the first time, Steve saw mornings in the Barnes' house for what they really were. In the next few weeks, due to spending a grand majority of his time in Bucky's company, he continued to notice them.
Bucky still cooked toast soldiers dipped in egg when Becca was sick, though he made them in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep instead of in the morning before school; and Bucky still cracked up at stupid, unfunny comedians but only when Becca looked to him after a joke, not because he actually wanted to laugh; and Bucky's kitchen still filled with three inches of water when it rained but he didn't dance while he cleaned it up; and Bucky still leaned over Steve when he thought his old friend was sleeping on the couch, and he still hovered over Steve for a moment, as if at any second courage would wash over him and he would be possessed by something unusual; and Bucky still did not press a kiss to Steve's forehead, or his cheek, or his lips, even though it seemed like he desperately wanted to.

It was one such night when Bucky had woken up in cold sweat. Steve had been lying beside him, simply because ... because, and he'd pretended to be asleep while Bucky pulled himself from the sheets, turned to check on Steve, ran his hands five times through his hair and ran into the kitchen. Everyone had their vice. Bucky's was cooking, apparently.

Bucky's bedroom was on the ground floor, so Steve could hear him rattling about with the pots and pans. He could hear him trying to be silent but failing, because whatever he had seen in his sleep had scared the quiet out of him. Steve pushed his head into the pillow and stared up at the ceiling, remembering how, in Iran, he'd stumbled out of bed around two o'clock, pulled on his boots and went into the freezing night. Junior had followed him then, with all his eighteen years of wisdom, and he'd put his hand on Steve's shoulder. They'd stood together for an hour, and after that, Steve didn't feel the need to get out of bed anymore.

Steve walked into the kitchen, being careful to make as much noise as he could so as to alert Bucky to his presence but yet not wake Becca, who was devilish when she didn't have her eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

"Whatcha cooking?" Steve asked.

Bucky turned to him. Steve could pinpoint the moment that Bucky hid his fear away behind warm grey eyes. He wondered how often he had practiced that move in order to perform it with such efficiency.

"I'm thinking brownies," he said. "Becca got an A on that English paper, so. Thanks."

"Don't thank me." Steve propped himself up on the counter. "You were always the brainiac. She probably got it from you."

Bucky looked down at the brownie mix in his arms and began beating it together with unneeded strength. It was better than punching someone, Steve supposed.

"Couldn't sleep?" Steve asked. Bucky grunted in response, keeping his eyes fixed on the mix. Steve pursed his lips together. "You know, I still get nightmares sometimes. I thought they'd go away eventually when I grew up but - they just became scarier, you know? More realistic."

Bucky stopped mixing, but still didn't look at Steve. Steve sighed.

"I see deserts when I close my eyes," he continued. "It's not always bad. I have some good memories there too - a lot of good memories. Sometimes I see Sharon swearing at someone who ripped off their bandages in their sleep. Sometimes I see my old friends laughing over a beer. And sometimes - sometimes I see explosions."

Steve could see Bucky breathing now. He was glad that Bucky wasn't looking at him; it made it
easier not to fall apart.

"I see people I was responsible for blown apart. Convoys being tipped over. Kids being shot, sometimes accidentally, sometimes not. Screaming. Lots of screaming. But the worst nightmare I've ever had is the one that I keep having. Probably because I'm so terrified of it.

"I wake up in my bed in the barracks, no sheets over me, no pillow under my head. I look around for the Howlies and none of them are there. I look for Sharon and she isn't there. I look for you and Sam and Nat and you aren't there. So I go outside and I-"

This time Bucky does make eye contact. His irises were distorted by water. It gives Steve some kind of perverse strength.

"I go outside and I see everyone I know shot down, but they don't kill me. They never kill me."

"Steve..."

Steve blinked. He shrugged. "I'm just saying," he said. "I know what it's like not to be able to sleep. It's been easier lately, but - not perfect."

Bucky's lips all but disappeared. "Same," he breathed.

They sat in comfortable silence.

"It's nice to know that ... that someone else sees fire too," Bucky muttered. His shaky hands made mixing near impossible. He set the bowl down on the counter.

"Hey," Steve said. He got down off the bench and went over to Bucky. Without thinking much about it, he pressed himself against Bucky's back and put his arms around his stomach. "I'm here, okay?"

The benefit of this position was that neither of them could see the other's face. Still, Steve could hear the tears in Bucky's drowning voice.

"Yeah," Bucky said. He put one hand over Steve's right arm. His fingers ran light marathons across the scars.

"Let's finish off these brownies," Steve said. "I have an idea."

"Oh God," Bucky said. "I thought you were tryin' to comfort me, not terrify me."

"When have I ever let you down?" Steve questioned him. Bucky laughed.

"You got me suspended twice," he said. "Arrested once. Fired three times. I could recite Headmaster Fury's 'I'm disappointed in you' speech word for word because of you."

"But they were always fun ideas," Steve argued. Bucky's neck smelt faintly of aftershave left over from the day before. "Didn't you have fun, Buck?"

"Oh yeah," Bucky said. Steve knew he was rolling his eyes. "I had great fun nearly being expelled. Thanks, Stevie. I never could've lived my teenage years without you."

"Finally you admit it," Steve said. Bucky laughed. Steve tried not to think about how close his lips were to Bucky's ear, to his neck; how Bucky's body was so warm and so strong and so familiar.

Bucky seemed to take a long time to mix the brownies, but when Steve mentioned this, Bucky
chastised him for not understanding the art of brownie making. When the brownies were in the oven and Bucky was washing his hands, Steve pulled out his phone and typed a message to Natasha.

STEVE: Hey Nat, you busy?

NATASHA: Just up doing lesson plans :) What's up?

STEVE: Do you mind watching Becca for a few hours?

NATASHA: You're up to something :(

STEVE: It's for Bucky

NATASHA: More nightmares? :O

STEVE: Yeah

NATASHA: I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Don't stay out too late ;)

STEVE: You're my hero Nat

"What're you up to?" Bucky asked. There was a smile on his face once more, which Steve took to mean he'd succeeded in cheering Bucky up.

He wouldn't usually talk about Afghanistan unless he was being tortured. Maybe not even then. But if it made Bucky feel better about himself, if it made him more likely to be able to sleep a night through without having to make brownies, Steve would talk about Afghanistan forever, freely, happily.

"I'm getting Natasha to watch over Becca for a while," Steve explained. Bucky raised an eyebrow.

"Are we going out?" he asked. He flung the tea-towel that had been hanging over his shoulder into the washing machine. Steve tapped the side of his nose. "Oh come on, Steve. Tell me."

"Nuh-uh," Steve said. "Patience is a virtue you must learn, Bucky Barnes. Now go get dressed."

While Bulky skulked away, Steve got back onto his phone, this time to Tony and Jane. (He even made a separate chat for the occasion.)

STEVE: Hey guys! You still up?

JANE: Unfortunately writing my thesis

TONY: Always UP for you CAPTAIN!!!! ;)

JANE: Gross, Tony

STEVE: When was the last time you guys went space-rock collecting?

TONY: About a CENTURY ago!!!! What AGE do you think WE ARE????????

JANE: We haven't went since Rumlow told Tony it was a kid thing

TONY: IT WAS NOTHING TO DO WITH RUMLOW, FOSTER

JANE: Why are you asking?
STEVE: Me and Bucky can't sleep. I was thinking it would be nice to stargaze for a while

JANE: Oh Steve, that's so sweet!

TONY: So ROBOCOP and CAPTAIN AMERICA are up all night and yous aren't BANGING?????? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE DO YOU HAVE NO OPPORTUNIST IN YOU!!!!!!!

JANE: Shut up Tony

TONY: What I MEANT to say was I will TOTALLY take one for the team if you need a THIRD PERSON PARTICIPANT

STEVE: Tony, shut the fuck up

TONY: LANGUAGE!!!!!!

JANE: We'll be there Steve. About half an hour in the clearing?

STEVE: I remember. See you both there

TONY STARK IS TYPING

STEVE: And Tony, I swear to God, if you say one thing about threesomes, banging or sex to me or Bucky tonight I will punch you into next year, don't test me

TONY: POINT TAKEN!!!! (is it wrong that I find that EXTREMELY ATTRACTIVE??????)

STEVE: Yes.

JANE: No.

Jane and Tony were the original Science Bros before Jane met Betty and Tony met Bruce. From the ages of eleven to fourteen, they had made it habit to go into the forest surrounding Leavenworth to search for alien rocks (Tony) and fallen stars (Jane).

Steve hadn't initially planned to tag along, but it ended up being mutually beneficial for all. Steve's presence maintained the platonic relationship Tony and Jane valued so much, for without a third pair of eyes judging them over his reading spectacles, Tony would definitely have taken a tear at Jane, and Jane wouldn't have protested. Indeed, it was because of Steve in a way that Jane and Tony had not ended up falling in love in the vague and unexplainable way that most in their friendship group had, and for that Steve felt an immeasurable sense of regret but also a sort of pride that he had preserved that one innocent relationship for Tony to cherish later on in life, for he certainly didn't cherish it while it was within his grasp.

Once, sometime in 2002, Steve had brought Bucky along with them. This did not become habit, because for Steve and Bucky, two pairs of eyes that were not their own accompanying them in the dead of the night was far too intrusive. It was hard to whisper stories about their home lives or complain about annoying teachers when other people were listening in. Yet, Steve could still remember it distinctly...

The physicists had been arguing somewhat off in the distance, Tony nudging a rock with his foot and Jane screaming not to tamper with the evidence. Steve was lying on the grass, staring up at the infinite blanket of stars that sprawled before him, and he had felt Bucky's soft footsteps beside him as his friend joined him on the damp soil.
"Thought you would've been over with them," Steve had murmured, closing his eyes so he didn't have to look at Bucky in the dark (it did weird things to his chest that he wasn't ready to deal with - not that night, not any night, preferably). "Considering you're all into science now."

"Don't be moody," Bucky had said. He couldn't tell if there was a smile on his face or that sad expression he sometimes got around Steve, more frequently lately than before. Steve's eyes were closed. "I told you, I'm rubbish at art. I couldn't keep taking classes in something I'm crap at."

"But you're not crap at it," Steve huffed. "You got a B."

"Yeah, and Harvard ain't looking for Bs, Steve."

"Harvard's a way off yet, Buck."

"Yeah, I know," Bucky had sighed. "Still. The teachers keep saying I could do it. I just - I don't know."

Looking back, Steve could realise that this was an attempt by Bucky to wrangle a compliment from his best friend, or even a hint of reassurance, but of course, Steve had been a teenager, and a jealous one at that, and the idea that his best friend in the world scoffed at a B while Steve himself was struggling to get Cs ... It rubbed him the wrong way. So he had remained silent, and so had Bucky.

Jane's voice broke through the minute tension.

"Guys, if you look up now you can see Ursa Major and Ursa Minor!"

The excitement in her voice was perhaps the only thing that could've got Steve to open his eyes on that night. He squinted up at the stars, trying desperately to see what she was referring to.

"That's Big Bear and Little Bear, isn't it?" Bucky asked. Jane hummed in agreement. Bucky leaned into Steve.

"The Big Dipper and the Little Dipper," he explained. Steve made a sound of understanding, and the group lapsed into silence.

"I still think it's just a rock," Tony had said, referring back to the sad lump of stone a few metres away.

"Tony, I swear to God."

"Hey, Steve?" Bucky had whispered, when Jane began yet another rant at Tony about how he took the fun out of everything.

"Yeah, Buck?"

"That's you and me up there," Bucky said. He pointed to the sky, drawing out the shapes with his fingers. But Steve wasn't looking at the constellations. He was looking at Bucky.

"You're the Big Dipper and I'm the Little Dipper?" Steve said. "Ha-ha, Buck. So creative."

"No, Steve!" Bucky protested. "If you'd look at the stars instead of me - Look! The Big Bear is clearly leading the Little Bear. You're the leader, I'm just along for the ride."

Steve had squinted at the constellations then. The weird feeling had migrated from his chest down into his stomach by this point, and he just really, really wanted to go home. Back to Sarah and her hot chocolate. Back to his own cosy bed with holes in the blankets. Back to a place without boys...
with grey eyes and warm smiles.

"What about that bright star at the end of the little one?" Steve asked.

"That's Polaris," Bucky said. "The North Star. It's one of the brightest stars in the sky. Sailors used it for navigation."

"It led them home," Steve murmured.

"Exactly," Bucky had replied.

In the present day, when Bucky was walking beside Steve just close enough that their fingers brushed against each other with every step, Steve realised that Bucky's assignment of the stars had been accurate, to every degree of their meaning. Yeah, Steve had been the ringleader. He'd instigated all of the plans, prepared the pranks, led Bucky kicking, screaming and crying into a life of mischief and crime.

But yet -

Bucky was his North Star. Why that had taken him so long to realise, Steve would never know. But there it was, staring him in the face, and all Steve could do was smile at Bucky while the older boy blathered on about how fucking annoying Tony Stark was.

"Steve!" Jane called out across the clearing. She was dressed specifically for the occasion, decked out in a raincoat and a pair of bright red wellingtons, whilst Tony behind her was more casual in a pair of overall bottoms and a ratty t-shirt.

"Jane," Steve responded, not even flinching when she barrelled into him face first for a hug. Tony opened his arms to Bucky, who just glared at him, and so he slowly backed away.

"How long have you been waiting?" Steve asked. "We came as quickly as we could. We needed to get Natasha to mind Becca."

"Just ten minutes or so," Jane replied. "Not enough time for Tony to annoy me, surprisingly, though the night is young. Do you guys want to help us look for space rocks, or-"

"I think we'll just stargaze for a while if that's okay?" Steve said. He could hear Bucky shuffle behind him. "Is that okay with you?"

"Of course, yeah yeah," Bucky said. "Whatever you want to do. I'm just here for the ride."

Tony opened his mouth. Steve frowned at him. He shut it again, but it formed into a pout.

"I never get to have any fun," Tony complained.

"You'll have fun tonight," Jane responded smoothly. "We'll find a pretty space rock for your workbench."

"I don't want to look for stupid space rocks," Tony argued. "That's for babies."

But Steve could see the childlike wonder in his eyes, and he knew that Tony had been wanting this for a very long time but never dared to mention it.

"You two go on," Steve told them. He flung himself back onto the cool grass, feeling the slight dampness of it from a week of humid heat. Bucky's soft footsteps echoed through his ears.
"The grass is wet," Bucky said, once he was on the ground. Steve shrugged as best he could in the position.

"The grass was always wet before, when we did this," Steve said.

"I only came with you that one time," Bucky murmured. "You never invited me back."

"Did I hurt your fragile ego?"

"No. You saved me the headache of hearing Jane bitch about Tony for another two hours of my day. I swear, if the amount of time she talks about him halfway amounts to what she thinks of him, she's so far gone it's not even funny."

Steve scrunched his nose together. "She's dating Thor now, though."

"Doesn't mean she can't be in love with someone else."

"Tony's into his secretary."

Steve opened his eyes just in time to see Bucky raise an eyebrow.

"Is he?" Bucky asked. Steve hummed. "Gee, the things you learn while stargazing, right?"

"The things you learn," Steve echoed.

Sequins of sparkling silver gleamed down at Steve like a large hand had tossed them there just for him to gaze upon.

Sarah used to tell him that the stars were God's gift to the world, placed specifically so that each soul could get their ideal view of Earth long after they had left it. It was her one deviation from good Catholic preaching; her only personal belief about the world not written down verbatim in the Book of Christ.

Most of the residents of Leavenworth were of Puritan descent, with the exceptions of Sam Wilson, who drifted in with his mother one day from nowhere but settled in almost seamlessly, and James Rhodes, whose great-grandfather had been a slave in the corn fields surrounding the town. Steve himself was also of relative novelty, as his family had arrived during the Irish potato famine, determined to return back once the disease left their soil, but instead remained within Leavenworth, finding it quite impossible to leave, as many of the inhabitants could sympathise with. Nevertheless, the large proportion of white Protestants made the work of the town preacher, Father Coulson, infinitely easier, for he only had to recite The Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead once.

"Release, O Lord, the souls of all the faithful departed from the bonds of their sins," he had droned, dead in the eye just like Sarah had been. "And by the assistance of Thy grace may they escape the sentence of condemnation."

They'd walked out of the church after that, Bucky walking slightly behind Steve, always with a cocky smile on his face when Steve turned around. Bucky had said, "Goddamnit, Steve, you Catholics, I swear to fuck. Death isn't even any peace for you people," to which Steve had to, admittedly, agree with him while chastising him for using 'Catholics' and 'I swear to fuck' in the same conversation, never mind the same sentence.

Steve hadn't been to church since his mother's funeral. At this realisation, he half expected Sarah to pry herself out of her starry confines and ride down in a chariot to Earth just so she could hit Steve up the back of his head for his lack of faith.
He remembered church with a vivid clarity his other memories sometimes lacked. Father Coulson winking at Steve when no one else was looking, passing him a sweet to chew on during the sermon. Sarah in her crisp white skirts and polished shoes, never a hair out of place. The Barnes family, always in the pew at the back of the church, George and Winnie placed strategically at either side of their offspring, Bucky, with Becca cooing and bouncing on his lap, sitting between his sisters, Mary and Delilah, lest they start an argument in the midst of prayer.

"Hey, Buck?"

"Yeah, Steve?"

"Where are Mary and Delilah?"

Bucky exhaled through his nose. He licked over his lips.

"They're at college," he explained. His voice sounded like he'd smoked a packet then and there.

"They stayed in Leavenworth a while but they were always too smart to just sit around and help out with Becca on occasion. It didn't seem fair to me to keep them here. Gives them a chance I didn't get after..."

He flexed the metal arm. Steve chewed at the inside of his cheek.

"What're they majoring in?"

"Delilah's doing nursing," Bucky said. "I think she was inspired by your ma, God rest her soul. And Mary ... Mary just don't give a damn no more, Steve. She's changed her major more times than Tony Stark's made a dirty joke, I swear. She just wants to fly and never look down. I never thought she'd dream that big."

Steve blinked a few times. "It's sad to think..." he began, but he couldn't quite finish his thought. Bucky seemed to understand though. He always did.

The stars rolled by once again. If Steve focused on one particular point, he could imagine they were in a snow-globe, and that the turmoil of their lives was only a temporary form of amusement for a child on Christmas. It made everything somewhat bearable.

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

Bucky sighed, his body heaving against the earth. Steve kind of wanted to press him into the dirt, lick salt into his neck, kiss him for all the departed souls to see and grin at, for they knew the obsession that possessed him. Anybody who knew Bucky Barnes at all would know that feeling, would sympathise with it.

"Doesn't it worry you that in years, we'll all be dead, and no one will know?" Bucky asked. Steve froze. "I mean, Anne Frank wrote a diary and that's how she'll be remembered. But millions have been alive like you and me and have terrible, devastating, amazing stories and no one will ever know. That's terrifying, Steve."

There was a pause.

"I'll tell you my terrible, devastating, amazing story if you'll tell me yours?"

Bucky laughed. "Nice try Rogers," he said. "Nah. I don't have anything that devastating to tell you."
"I think you have plenty," Steve replied. Bucky didn't answer, but his smile faltered somewhat. "Isn't that why you drink? To kill the pain?"

"I don't drink that much, Steve," Bucky chuckled. There was no trace of humour in it. "But yeah. That might be some of the reason."

"Is there another reason?"

"I just ... I wish I'd told you. Never-mind."

"Told me what?"

Bucky swallowed once. Twice. Three times. Clenched and unclenched his metal fist. Steve knew he wasn't getting anything out of him.

"You remember that time we went to camp?" Steve attempted. Bucky smiled.

"Yeah, I remember," he said. "Sam got his first hand-job at that camp."

"Natasha castrated a man."

"What did we call ourselves?"

"Camp's Mightiest Heroes, or something like that."

"Damn, I loved it," Bucky said. "It's really when it all came together, you know? You. Me. The others. We weren't really friends before camp, not the way we are now. It's one of my first memories."

"One of them?"

"Yeah," Bucky smirked. "Another one is your skinny ass falling off the jungle gym, first day I ever saw you."

"I didn't fall, if you recall. I was pushed by your psycho girlfriend."

"Hey, she's not my girlfriend."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah." There was the patented Barnes Smirk (TM). "I was just the neighbour boy who taught her how to French kiss."

Steve rolled his eyes. "How you managed to sneak past Nick Fury into her bedroom is beyond me."

Bucky tapped the side of his nose. "I was raised on chasing a good time, Stevie," he explained. "My methods of espionage simply help the cause."

"You went through the window, didn't you."

"Of course I went through the window. I was thirteen, how much more creative do you expect me to get?"

"God, Buck," Steve laughed. "You're so-"

Yes. Yes. All of the above.

Back when they were ten years old, Steve thought Bucky was the greatest boy alive. He had told himself for years that he could overlook this judgement based on his young age, but he'd been deluding himself. Bucky was still the greatest man alive.

That had to be a lot of pressure. Maybe that was why he looked sad all the time when he thought no one was looking.

"Obviously not enough of any of those," Steve replied. "Remember what Dr. Doom told us in French?"

"If you ain't got two kids by twenty-five, you're probably gonna die alone," Bucky recited, though it was admittedly paraphrased. Dr. Doom was definitely not the type of person to use words like 'ain't.' "But why you quoting that old codger anyway, Steve? He didn't know what he was talking about."

"He had a doctorate."

"Yeah, in physics, and he was teaching high school French. Obviously not the most intelligent of people to willingly choose to teach our class."

That was true. Clint had been high most of the time. He said it was when he was best at languages. Natasha had frequently corrected Dr. Doom. And Tony was just a pain in the ass.

"He had something of a point, though, you gotta admit," Bucky murmured.

"You've changed your tune," Steve replied.

"No, but what I mean is, I'm twenty-six and nothing to show for it. I didn't even finish law school, for Christ's sake. And then there's Natasha, who has her life together and a great job and she goes travelling and she knows herself, Steve, she knows all about herself. But I'm still sitting here thinking I don't have a fucking clue where I'm going or when my life is going to start."

Steve wanted to tell Bucky that his life had already started. That every breath he had taken up until that point had been cherished by somebody. How his mere presence at Sarah's funeral had made Steve fall apart only slightly, but not entirely. That every time Bucky had sat beside Steve at lunch instead of chilling with the football team, Steve had felt like, for that moment, everything was right with the world, that he was worth spending time with, that people cared. He wanted to tell Bucky that maybe he felt like he hadn't done anything with his life, but he had. Bucky's life had made Steve's life so much better. Hell, it had made it longer. Steve would've been killed long before now if he hadn't had Bucky running behind him pulling him from the fire when it got too hot.

None of this escaped his lips that night, nor ever. Instead, he said:

"I know how you feel."

Bucky let out a single, bitter laugh.

"No, really, though," Steve protested.

"That's rich," Bucky said. "Steve Rogers thinks his life is a mess. Steve, you were a Captain in the fucking U.S. army. You got higher up the career ladder in five years than I ever will in my life. You make your living out of making art you adore. You have friends around you who love you. You've seen more of the world than any other Leaven worther has, apart from maybe Natasha. And Sharon..."
Steve pushed himself up from the grass so he was sitting, ram-rod straight, staring down at Bucky. "What about Sharon?" he snapped. Bucky mirrored his movement so they were eye-to-eye and wow, Bucky's jaw-line was-

"From what you've told me about her, she's the kind of girl you marry, the kind you want to carry into your brand new home," Bucky said. "So why didn't you, Steve?"

Steve gaped at Bucky for a moment, just a second, and closed his mouth abruptly. He stared off into some space in the distance, because anything would have been easier than looking into Bucky's eyes.

"No answer?"

Steve remained silent. Bucky let out a groan and flopped back down onto the ground. Steve remained sitting upright. He pulled his legs into his chest and rocked into them, imagining that Sarah, wherever she was, might be looking down on him.

"You know, Buck," Steve said. Bucky kept his eyes closed, but it was clear he was listening. "I used to have bigger dreams than living in this town. Leavenworth just ... Didn't seem to have much to offer me. Then Ma died, and I realised there was nowhere I could go that didn't remind me of her. Even now, she's hanging off everything. I can hear her every single day."

Bucky was beside Steve now. How he had managed to move so quickly and so silently was beyond Steve, but he was just happy that Bucky was inching his arm around Steve's shoulder in comfort.

"But - it doesn't hurt me anymore. Not really. I'm ... numb, at this point, I suppose. I like hearing her. And I've come to realise that Leavenworth - it's alright. It's alright not to want the life in the big city and the big job and the fancy cars."

Bucky hummed. His throat was against the back of Steve's shoulder, and so Steve could feel the agreement buzzing through his veins.

"What do you want, Stevie?" Bucky asked. Steve yanked his sleeve down over his arm. Wrinkles appeared at Bucky's eyes. He reached down, oh so gently, and pulled the fabric back up.

"What do you want, Stevie?" he asked, this time more insistently. Steve's fingers, now exposed to the world, grasped into the dirt, for lack of a better option.

"I don't know exactly what I want, long term," Steve admitted.

"What about short term?" Bucky probed. "What do you want right now? What can you feel in your gut?"

Steve nudged his head to the side so his hair was pressed against Bucky's. Strands of blond mixed with brown until, in the darkness, he couldn't quite tell which was which.


"Right now," Steve mumbled into Bucky's hair, "all I really want is to be next to you. It don't matter where I'm going. I'm happy with what I've got."

A soft huff of breath sent Bucky's long hair forward, so it brushed gently against Steve's cheekbone.

"What makes you think you've got me, punk?" Bucky laughed breathily.

"Jerk," Steve replied.
"God," Jane yelled in the background. "Just kiss already!"

Steve grinned at Bucky, and Bucky was grinning back.

Mental note to self, Steve thought.

*Must bring Bucky Barnes stargazing more often.*
Chapter 13

On the fourth of October, the classroom was quiet, only a light buzz of background noises as kids whose parents were running late played peacefully at the sand-pit. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, highlighting the dust that hung thick in the air, and it had been a good day. Steve's head hadn't hurt one bit since he took that week off in September.

Maya slid a form over to Steve. He looked up from work he'd been marking.

"What's this for?"

Maya tucked a stray bit of hair behind her ear, though it didn't have much of an effect considering the rest continued to obstruct view of her face. He could see enough to know she was smiling, though, and Maya very rarely smiled.

"Natasha wants to send it away tonight," she said, in place of an answer. Steve peered down at the sheet, and quickly deduced that it was an official employment form for the role of teaching assistant. "She doesn't want to pay you in hand anymore," Maya explained. "She thinks you'd feel more settled if you were on the books."

"That's-" Steve began, but he cut himself off before he could continue. Maya might hear the thickness in his throat, and she might think he was close to tears, when he was nothing of the sort. "That's great," he mumbled, once he'd swallowed a few times. "Tell Natasha I said thanks."

"You can tell her yourself," Maya replied. "Tonight. When you bring her the forms."

The steel in her eyes told Steve that this mission was imperative. To be even a moment past Natasha Romanoff's deadlines was tantamount to suicide, and Maya didn't seem fond of being the murdered messenger. Steve grinned at her, though it faltered somewhat due to the terror that ran like electricity between them.

"I'll fill it out as quickly as I can," Steve promised. Maya smirked.

"That's what he said," she whispered so he had to strain to hear her, but Steve knew her well enough by this stage to know that was exactly what she had said.

"You spent too much time with Tony Stark in middle school," he said. Maya shrugged, but didn't disagree. Probably because anyone with eyes back then could've seen how desperately she adored Tony. Admittedly, Tony had worshipped her as well. Perhaps that was why he targeted Maya in the Great Donut Scandal. Or perhaps she was just in the way.

"Maybe he spent too much time with me," she argued. Steve peeled off a gold sticker and pressed it onto the hem of Maya's t-shirt.

"For breaking the Da Vinci code," he said.

Maya didn't laugh, but she looked like she really wanted to.

Half an hour later, Steve commenced his favourite part of the day; the walk home. Sometimes he would listen to music that Sam or Tony had recommended, and other times he would simply walk in silence and observe the children playing out in the streets, kicking balls off curbs and using lamps as goalposts. It filled him with a heavy warmth, a sad tinge of nostalgia that had him wishing he could return to the simplicity of life in Leavenworth before Sarah's passing. But then again, he had a life in
Leavenworth now, and, as far as he was concerned, it was as good as it was going to get. Considering where he had been a year and a half ago, life was pretty much perfect.

A mile and a half into the walk and Steve received a very panicked text from Sam.

**SAM:** Virginia & Tony keep looking at each other like they want to bone

**SAM:** They won't let me leave goddamnit help

**SAM:** Steve please come over here, get me out of this fuck-show

Steve chuckled and sent a quick text back.

**STEVE:** Be there in five - think you can make it till then?

**SAM:** Dunno. I fear there's sentiment looming

**STEVE:** Is that not better than boning

**SAM:** NO. No. It's worse. Infinitely worse

Five steps later, Steve's phone dinged again.

**SAM:** Get here fast

Steve broke into a light jog. He briefly considered letting Sam suffer, but then he thought about how kind Sam had been to him for the better half of six months, and how he'd never once mentioned Steve abandoning all his old friends for eight years without a word's notice, and he couldn't bring himself to fuck with him.

Besides. Sam had gone through enough. Bucky had told Steve the previous night over homemade curry (another of Mama Wilson's recipes) that Sam promised to help Tony out with the finishing touches on the Camaro, and so he must've already spent hours in the garage that October day with Tony before Virginia arrived.

Steve shuddered at the thought of hours alone with Tony Stark. It was worse than water-boarding, and Steve would know; he'd experienced both.

The first thing he heard when he entered the garage was Virginia giggling. It was such a peculiar sound to hear from someone so outwardly professional that it stopped Steve in his tracks. He hovered in the doorway of the garage and briefly made eye contact with Sam, who heaved a sigh of relief.

"You know, I didn't have much experience with rich people before Harvard," Virginia said. She was dressed in a pair of denim shorts and a white gypsy shirt. In all the times Steve had visited Tony's garage, he had never seen Virginia in anything less than a trouser suit, but here she was, like a veritable cowgirl sitting on Tony's barstool, wearing a pair of flip-flops. In October.

What the fuck was happening.

Tony laughed. "Darling, you don't want to interact with rich people," he said. "All they do is drink shitty-tasting wine and talk about oil prices."

"Well you'd know that, wouldn't you," Virginia said, "growing up with your father. And your mother. She was so insanely influential in the business of non-governmental organisations. Her decision to indict VistaCorp on environmental damage charges was unprecedented."
"She was so disappointed when I went into engineering instead of law," Tony lamented. "She said she'd rather me have no brains than my father's brains, which. I have to agree with."

"How come she gets to mention dead parents but I don't?" Sam piped in.

Tony's gaze remained fixed on Virginia. Sam looked Steve dead in the eye and obviously suppressed a groan.

"You're so lucky, though," Virginia sighed. Her manicured nails plucked at the fraying edges of her shorts. "You got to choose between two amazing careers, all laid out for you before you were born. I had nothing."

"But... You graduated top of your class," Tony argued. "You were valedictorian!"

"I had to work two jobs during high school and take all AP classes to get there," Virginia said. "I worked as a waitress, and that's where I learnt Spanish, because I had to. The chef didn't know a lick of English. And when I was in Harvard I worked a forty hour week on top of my studies."

Tony's eyes were wide. Steve couldn't recall a time where Tony Stark had appeared more confused and bewildered (actually, he could, but that was the Incident of 2006, so it was warranted).

"But- You can't have come from nothing," Tony protested. Sam leaned his head against the wall of the garage in frustration. Not that either of them noticed. "Look where you are now! Who you are now!"

"My mom died giving birth to me," Virginia said. "My dad was a drug-addict and an alcoholic. We lived in a trailer park, and when I was thirteen our trailer got repossessed. On Christmas Eve. Mister Stark, believe me when I say - I come from nothing."

Steve motioned to Sam to ask if he should enter. Sam shrugged his shoulders and mouthed, "They probably wouldn't notice anyway," so Steve slinked in behind Virginia, half expecting Tony to make some kind of sly or inappropriate comment regarding the sweat that stuck Steve's shirt to his chest from jogging, but Tony remained uncharacteristically silent. His mouth was hanging open. Steve leaned against the wall beside Sam and patted him comfortably on the shoulder. He noticed that on the shelf above Tony's workbench, there was a rather impressive collection of space rocks developing. Although Steve wouldn't admit it, it was one of those realisations in life you soak up and store in your heart.

"Well," Tony said finally. Virginia, who previously had her eyes pinned to the floor, stared up at him. Even in the dim lighting, Steve could see freckles on the arches of her cheekbones that he hadn't recognised before. She mustn't have been wearing makeup. And, by the looks of Tony's hair, he had actually washed in the past forty-eight hours.

What the hell was going on.

"I'll teach you how to be rich," Tony bartered. Virginia raised an eyebrow. "If, and only if, you teach me how to be successful."

Tony scratched at his palm while Virginia deliberated (or pretended to deliberate; Steve didn't believe she would say no to Tony in that moment for anything). By the time she answered, blood was caked under Tony's fingernails, mingling with oil and rust.

Virginia rolled forward, so minutely and gently across the floor that Steve barely noticed she had moved at all until her stool pressed against Tony's, and his dirty tanned hands were clasped in her pale white ones. She turned his palm up to face her and traced the lines of blood that had developed.
Tony watched with a hitch in his chest. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed deliberately at his hand.

"No need for this," she muttered. "You should've known I was going to say yes, Ton- Mister Stark."

Steve could see how Tony physically ached to kiss her. He could see in Tony's eyes as he realised just how close they were, that it would take basically no shifting at all to get into a position where he could reach upwards and press their mouths together. Steve noticed it immediately, because he'd felt the same thing too many times before and missed it.

In the distance, a phone rang. Virginia let out a delicate sigh and made for the office. Sam slid to the side to let her through, and she whispered a thank you. She looked at her hands, then at the phone, which was already covered in blood, and sighed, pressing the receiver to her ear.

"Stark Industries," she murmured. She hooked her foot around the door and pulled it closed. It shut with a thump. Steve almost mistook the noise for the beating of Tony's heart.

Sam folded his arms against his chest. "I'm glad you two had a little heart to heart," he said. "Because you both completely ignored me."

Tony blinked a few times, obviously still not hearing what Sam was saying. Steve shot him a sympathetic smile. Sam sighed once again.

"I-" Tony said. "I-"

"Like her?" Steve offered. Tony slammed his mouth together so tightly his lips went white. Then nodded.

"Well, that much was obvious the first time you met her, from what I've heard," Sam said. "What's changed?"

"I - I thought she was hot before," Tony explained, somewhat stuttered. He went to dig his nails into his palm, but stopped abruptly, visibly remembering how Virginia had treated him with such care, a delicacy he had never thought to regard himself with. "I wanted to fuck her. Still do. I want to get all over that, you know how damn horny I am lately. But it's- it's different. I-"

"Like like her?" Steve suggested. Sam rolled his eyes. "What?" Steve asked. "It's a valid question."

"It's a question for thirteen year olds," Sam argued. He glanced over at Tony, who was alternating between attempting to claw his own skin apart and stitch it back together. Sam sighed. "Fair enough," he said. "Tony, do you like like Virginia?"

"Will you keep your voice down?" Tony said hurriedly, springing himself up from the bar stool and pressing his hand against Sam's mouth. Sam licked him, but Tony remained firm.

"We were keeping our voices down," Steve said. He went over and took Tony's hand off Sam's mouth, trying to ignore how Sam flipped Tony off the second he did. "She's on the phone. She won't hear us."

"But what if she does?" Tony lamented. "Oh, my fucking life has gone to shit in an asshole."

"Charming," Sam muttered.

Tony shifted his weight from one side to the other. He picked a spanner up from his workbench and dropped it back down again, leaving it clattering against the wood. He looked around for an escape,
and when he found only Steve and Sam glaring at him expecting an answer, he relented, shoulders slouched.

"Fine," he conceded. "I have - I am - I'm feeling feelings for her."

"Thank the Lord," Sam said under his breath. He pressed his hands together in a prayer. "May You have mercy on us all and spare us from another five years of Tony Stark having a pathetic crush on an unattainable blonde."

"What do you mean another five years?" Steve asked. Tony glowered at Sam, who began whistling innocently. "Did I miss something?"

"No," Tony snapped, at the same time as Sam laughed, "Yes."

Steve blinked three times. "I don't understand," he said.

"That's fine," Tony spluttered. "You don't need to understand. We just need to focus on the fact that my life is fucked right now and there's the most beautiful woman I think I've ever seen in my office with my blood on her hands and - fuck, I'm so fucked up why is that turning me on fuck."

"How many kinks do you have?" Sam asked. There were equal measures of disgust and respect on his face that Steve didn't like to think about too hard.

"Thirty-three," Tony replied. "But she needs to stop calling me Mister Stark, I swear to fuck."

"She referred to him as 'boss' the other day," Sam muttered to Steve. "I swear he was about to have an aneurysm."

"Will you stop reminding me of that? Do you want me to get off in the middle of this garage?"

"Please don't," Sam and Steve said at once.

"You guys aren't helping," Tony whined. He even stomped his feet, just a little. Steve wanted to deck him.

"Why don't you just tell her?" Steve said.

"I'm not good with fucking words! You know that!"

"I hadn't noticed."

"Sam, be nice."

"Yeah Sam, be nice. The Captain said so. God, that's hot too."

Sam face-palmed. Steve raised an eyebrow.

"Have I missed something?" he asked, in a higher pitch than last time.

"Yes," Tony said, at the same time as Sam said, "No."

God this was confusing. It felt like they were having two conversations at once. Sam and Tony were in on something Steve definitely was not.

Steve didn't know why Tony had even asked him for his opinion on Virginia, especially considering Sam Wilson, the elected Son of God (and there was no sarcasm in anybody's voice when they
dubbed him this, not even Bucky) was standing right in front of him, and had been for about four hours before Steve even arrived. If anyone was to know something about romance and getting a girl to fall in love with you, it would be Sam, who had three-quarters of their school year fawning over him by the time graduation rolled around. Yet he remained single and - apparently - content, happy enough to spend his days with his chocolate Labrador Cookie and helping other people with their problems.

Sam definitely should've been a psychologist. Cookie would make the ultimate therapy dog.

"Okay," Steve began slowly. "Maybe you could just skip the talking then and try to do something romantic?"

"Okay," Tony drew out. "Like this?"

"Oh fuck no, Tony!"

"Put that thing the fuck away, I swear to God."

"Hey, God doesn't have anything to do with this," Tony said while he zipped his overalls back up. "It's 100% Tony Stark."

"I never want to see that again, Tony," Steve said.

"That's just nasty," Sam confirmed.

Tony opened his mouth to speak once more, but he was interrupted by the sound of Virginia exiting the office. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, as if she had gone on yet another impassioned rant about her qualifications or the unfair nature of the American education system, but she still maintained an airy coolness about her that Steve could never hope to emulate.

"That was Reed Richards on the phone," Virginia said in a crisp, clear voice, not unlike an automated answering machine. Tony slapped himself on the forehead. He left a streak of blood in one of his eyebrows. Nobody mentioned it.


"I told you before," Virginia replied. "I don't mind swearing."

"What did he want?" Tony asked.

"To see your thesis on artificial intelligence," Virginia said. "I told him I'd speak to you about it, but that your answer would almost definitely be the same as it was last time."

"Which was?" Sam asked.

"A resounding 'fuck no,'" Tony said. He met Virginia's eyes. "Sorry," he said. Her mouth set into a line.

"I really think you should look past your differences with him, Mister Stark," Virginia said. She was clutching a dossier file with a strength that made you believe it was highly sensitive information. In reality, it was probably just Tony's lunch orders. "Your M.I.T professor is not providing the funding, so we really need to start looking down other avenues if you ever want to break into the industry."

"Ms. Potts," Tony sighed. "The only time I will ever work with Reed Richards is when you need to
go to Leavenworth Cemetery, desecrate the Stark family plot, dig my grave up with your nails, rip
the coffin open and pry my cold, dead, lifeless body from my cushioned resting place. Then, and
only then, will I concede to working with Reed Richards. Maybe not even then. Maybe I should get
cremated instead, so you can't even do that. He'd probably try to kill me just to get to my work. So
no, Ms. Potts. Not even when I'm dead will I work with Reed Fuck-head Richards."

Virginia frowned at him. Tony looked at the floor.

"So-"

"Don't fucking apologise," she said. Sam let out a low whistle. Tony went an impressive shade of
purple.

"You're letting your own pride get in the way of advancing the business," Virginia snapped. Her
fingernails were piercing the dossier now, and Steve watched as it ripped under her French tips. "I
understand that you have known Mister Richards for a long time, but you haven't spoken to him in
years. I doubt anything could've happened in high school that would validate you passing up the
amazing opportunity to work with a scientist of his capabilities."

"The Flamingo Debacle of 2005!" Tony yelled, slamming his hand down on the desk. To Virginia,
he must've appeared like a fucking nutcase. But Sam and Steve immediately let out a gentle "ah."

"Ah?" Virginia repeated. "Ah? What the fuck does that even mean? What do flamingos have to do
with the biggest tech mogul in New York City?!"

"He's not technically the biggest, per say..."

"Mister Stark, you are utterly impossible," Virginia said. She let the dossier slap onto the desk and
grabbed her coat from the hook next to the door. Steve noticed that Tony had constructed a tiny
wooden sign deeming that hook to be 'Virginia's Hook.' It almost made Steve cry, for a sad, weird
moment.

"But you're into that?" Tony called out. Thankfully, she had slammed the door before the third word
left his lips. He sank into his footstool, falling backwards when he did. Sam caught him.

"Instinct," he said.

"You love me really," Tony replied.

"I really don't."

Tony sighed. "You know, Rogers," he began. Steve bristled. Nothing good ever began with the use
of a surname. "I didn't used to understand the whole anger issue thing you've got going on. God, you
were so mad all the time in high school. Even in elementary school, when I thought there couldn't
possibly be something to be angry about. But you know - I get it now. I understand."

Steve almost laughed, but he didn't. If he had been sure Tony was just lamenting over Virginia's
scorn, he might've, but he wasn't sure. In fact, he was pretty sure it was something to do with Bucky,
and Steve really did not want to be having this conversation.

Apparently Sam didn't get this memo.

"You're angry?"

"All the goddamn time," Tony laughed. "I want to blow something up."
"Then do it," Sam said. He went over to Tony's workbench and slid the metal drawer open, revealing a gauntlet, for want of a better word. Steve opened his mouth to ask, but decided he was safer not knowing.

Tony considered the gauntlet, and then Sam. He grabbed both sides of Sam's face and pressed their mouths together in a kiss.

"You're a genius!" Tony declared. He got to work screwing on the gauntlet while Sam settled down beside Steve. Steve gaped at Sam. Sam, for once in his life, appeared shell-shocked.

"He's actually a good kisser," he mumbled, so quietly that if Steve had been sitting on his left, he wouldn't have heard him.

Tony levelled the gauntlet towards the door. "I've never done this before," he called out, his teeth shining with childlike wonder.

This was the Tony that Steve had known, that he had loved; the scientist who was always striving for the next best thing, who found the meaning of life not in books, stories, or other humans, but in trying to advance humanity into a new technological age. This was Tony's legacy. This was what he would be remembered for.

"There's a first time for everything," Steve yelled back. Tony grinned at him with wild abandon.

The golden circle in the gauntlet's palm glowed in molten lava, and a bolt of light shot through the garage. It blasted right through the garage door like it was butter.

The hole smoked around its edges. Tony turned to look at Steve and Sam.

"I can fix it," he immediately said.

Steve burst out into laughter. Sam just smiled at him.

"You feel better?" Sam asked. Tony, whose shoulders had been hunched and his knees bent in anticipation at being blown backwards by the force, peered down at the smouldering mass on his palm.


Steve got to his feet and wrapped his arm around Tony's shoulder.

"I told you," he yelled, right into Tony's ear. Tony laughed and wrapped his arms around Steve's waist, apologising profusely when his palm burnt through Steve's t-shirt and into his skin.

"I'm surrounded by crazy people," said Sam, before he was brought into a bone-crushing hug between the iron idiot and Captain Reckless.

"Wait till I tell Bucky."

Good-natured groans filled the garage. Steve, not able to resist, pulled his phone out of his back pocket and snapped a picture of the three of them, Tony with stink-eye, Sam not even looking at the camera but grinning nonetheless, and Steve with a circular burn on his right hip.

"This is going in the album," he said.

"You're such a fucking nerd," Sam replied.
Nerd had never been so much of a compliment.

(The second he left the garage, Steve changed the wallpaper on his phone from him, Sharon and her Aunt Peg to him, Tony and Sam. It was time.)
It was a bad day.

Steve knew it almost as soon as his eyes cracked open, for the sun was streaming through his windows and he had no inclination whatsoever to get washed, dressed, or even to leave the comfortable yet stifling confines of his starched bed-sheets. He glanced over at his alarm clock, which was almost as old and unreliable as Sam's Mama's car, and deduced that its reading of ten past midnight was a crock of shit.

In summary, Steve had no idea what time it was, nor did he care. Natasha would be expecting him at the school for nine, but, judging from the amount of available sunlight, Steve was either late already or would not have enough time to get ready unless he rushed, and he really did not feel like rushing.

They say that, in recovery, you cannot be disappointed or disheartened if one of your bad days comes straight after one of your best days. That cannot be helped. You just have to take your meds, get out of bed, and keep going. In this case, Steve's worst day for six months came a week after his visit to the garage.

He shuffled around in the bed, feeling the roughness of the cotton sheets. His mother had always preferred the old fashioned bed clothing, having declared that polyester was as much of an abomination as sodomy, and Steve hadn't had the heart to defy her now, when she was dead, anymore than he would've had she been alive, sitting at the end of the bed, smoothing out the covers while she stirred his porridge to cool it.

Great, he thought to himself, burying his head into the pillow. Now he was depressed about Sarah as well. Maybe he'd be best just phoning Natasha and saying he was sick. Yeah, he was sick. And it wasn't lying, technically. Steve felt sicker now than he ever had with the flu, and more tired than anaemia had made him.

His phone glinted at him from the dresser across the room. Steve let out a grunt.

'Too far?' he asked his brain. 'Too far,' his brain agreed. And so he lay in bed, staring at the circles printed into the ceiling, wondering whether sleep was an option (it was as much a one as always, so ... no, though admittedly it had been getting better day on day for months now, but Steve wasn't going to think that optimistically on a bad day).

The house creaked and groaned louder than Steve had the previous night as he'd flipped from side to side in bed, cursing his insomnia, then cursing his deaf ear (he liked to be able to hear if there was an axe murderer in his room, yet he hated lying on his right side to sleep, and so he did what any normal person would do in this situation and he just didn't sleep). A few birds chirped outside his window, their familiar screech of 'teacher, teacher' only reminding Steve of his failures.

Natasha had her life together. Natasha was trying to get Steve's life together. And yet he was lying here, lazy as hell, not bothering to even call and let her know he was (technically) sick.

Prompted by thoughts of Natasha's Disappointed Face (TM), Steve reached his arm over and dragged his fingers along the rumpled mat under his bed. He strained for a minute until his hand met a plastic bag, which he dragged towards him. Its contents spilled out onto the floor; tiny pots of bubbles, small notebooks, packs of crayons, the works. It was supposed to be a fun crafts day today, to praise the kids for their successes on 'phonics Friday'.

Chapter 14
Steve was letting the kids down as well. "Fuck you," he whispered, to no one in particular, although it may have been to himself.

He lay there for an amount of time unbeknownst to him, though what his alarm clock estimated to be about an hour (though the trustworthiness of that alarm clock was, as previously mentioned, disputable) before his ears filled with a persistent knock. He pushed himself up slightly onto his elbows, inclining his good ear towards the window, wondering if the oven bird had indeed got his friends to come break down Steve's window for him. The knocking though didn't appear to be coming from the window. Steve let out a loud, drawn out sigh.

"Coming," he called out, his voice still rusty from sleep. He rolled out of the bed, groaning all the way, and reluctantly grabbed a t-shirt which he pulled on as he walked towards the door.

He shouldn't be up. He was too tired to be up, though he was also too tired to sleep. Most of all, whoever it was knocking on his fucking door should've known that if Steve didn't show up to work, it was because he was sick, and sick people typically didn't want visitors.

The peephole revealed Rhodey standing on Steve's doorstep, rapping his fist against the door repeatedly and harder with each bang. His face read of determination.

Steve knew that if he ignored him, Rhodey would probably go get the entire fire brigade (which consisted of about four men and two women, but still) to knock down the door and gain him entry. And Steve really liked his front door. So he opened it.

"Rhodes," he said, his eyes watering from the light. "I'm really not-

"Steve, my friend!" Rhodey exclaimed, pulling Steve into a hug and patting him on the back. If he noticed Steve's tense muscles, he didn't show any sign. "Wow, you smell like shit."

"As if you smell any better in the morning," Steve mumbled, remembering with vividness how Rhodey had an aversion to deodorant for most of high school, and how Tony with his troubled sinuses was the only one able to stick being around him for a prolonged period of time.

Rhodey smelt like Adidas aftershave now, as well as something distinctly fresh, like plucked cotton. Turns out even Rhodey's odour had changed since Steve had been in Leavenworth last.

"Too true," Rhodey said good-naturedly. He lingered on the doorstep as if waiting for Steve to invite him in. Steve wanted to remain a block to him entering, but Rhodey's big brown eyes were depressing to look at, so he took a small step backwards, which Rhodey took full advantage of. He barrelled into the house, dropping like a bag of bricks onto Steve's dilapidated sofa.

"Did Nat send you?" Steve asked.

He closed the front door and hovered in the doorway of the living room. Rhodey had already made himself at home, pulling over a coffee table and propping his legs up on it. He was holding a magazine dated 2007, but was reading it as if it was the latest news stories. Steve slightly envied him for the way he could fill up a room, whilst Steve stood on the sidelines, not really filling up anywhere.

"Nat?" Rhodey said, with a suitably convincing tone of surprise. "Nah. Why would Nat call me? You know she hates anything associated with Tony."

"That's not true," Steve said, though it was, undeniably, true.

"No, I'm here out of my own free will, Rogers. Well, actually, I need a favour. I need someone to
come out and get firewood with me, and everyone else is either working or doesn't give a shit, and I hoped - well, I hoped you'd give a shit."

'I don't give a shit' lingered on Steve's tongue, but he never had the heart to crush someone's happiness that brutally. "Of course I give a shit," he lied. Rhodey grinned brightly. His smile was so big it filled his face.

"Great!" he exclaimed, as though Steve had just told him he'd won a gold medal at the Olympics. "But I think you better wash first, otherwise you'll get mistaken for a fish and we'll be taken down by a bear."

Steve had never seen a bear roaming the forests outside Leavenworth, but he appreciated Rhodey's (somewhat) tact. He never expected Rhodey to be subtle. After all, someone can only spend too long with Tony Stark before losing their mind.

"I'll take a shower now," Steve muttered. "Do you mind waiting?"

"Not at all, mate," Rhodey said, digging down the back of the sofa for the remote, which he found with impressive speed. "I expect you to take at least half an hour, because Grand Home Remodel is on and I haven't recorded it back at the house."

In actuality, Steve ended up taking twenty nine minutes and a half to get ready. Between trying to get the grease out of his hair (it looked more brown than blond, which hadn't been true since the week he went without washing in Afghanistan), getting rid of the dry skin on his limbs and generally trying to combat the stench, he had a bit of a mission on his hands.

By the time he was finished, Steve hardly recognised himself. Standing in front of the mirror, he admired the way he stared back at himself. *I have a decent face*, he thought, pushing it this way and that. *A strong jaw-line. Acceptable cheekbones. Bright blue eyes* (Bucky had always loved his-). His shoulders were wide and masculine, and they filled his blue t-shirt (the only clean one he could find) so much that his muscles strained against it. His jeans were clean and fit him relatively well.

All in all, someone looking in from the outside might never have guessed what he was going through. On a bad day, this was a new and exciting prospect.

"Are you ready to go then, Miss America?" Rhodey teased. Steve, feeling just better enough to joke, dug him in the arm. "Alright, alright," Rhodey laughed. "Grab a few bags or baskets or sommat. We need to carry the wood back in somehow, and I don't have your biceps."

The walk to the woods was pleasant and calm. Steve had one adrenaline inducing experience, and that was just a bird flying too close to his head and letting out a squawk not unlike his previous C.O. spewing kill orders. Rhodey had helped him through that, noticing his sudden reluctance to walk forwards and how his shoulders drooped in on himself, by placing a comforting hand on Steve's shoulder and continuing to talk at length about how the cornfields of their youth were losing more and more money by the year with the current rat infestation.

Steve looked at Rhodey sometimes and understood why Tony loved him so much. This was one of those times.

The sun beat down on Steve's back and into his skin, heating him from the outside in. By the time they reached the hardwood forests the expanse of his exposed arms were pink and browning, and he knew that by tomorrow he would appear as if he'd bathed in sun for a week. He might even look healthy. Rhodey was carrying some bags along with him, and as they walked, the plastic whooshed and hit against his legs, making a swishing sound whilst he moved. It was comforting enough that
Steve could rely on it like the ticking of a clock, soothing him into the journey.

When they reached a suitable place for chopping firewood, Rhodey passed Steve over an axe and grinned at him.

"Wanna race?" he asked, and Steve gave him a devilish smile back.

For the next hour or so Steve was out of his own thoughts and focused entirely on the soft splintering of the axe's handle in his palms, the way calluses were forming in them that he hadn't had since he was twelve and climbing trees with Betty on his tail and Bucky's worried expression printed in the back of his eyelids.

He had a whole hour and fifteen minutes to feel the physical exertion working out the exhaustion in his muscles, could feel them straining against his skin and bursting with happiness at the work he had resumed. The birds chirped above their heads and Rhodey's brown skin glistened despite the autumn cool, and Steve was caught up in the competitiveness, his mind razor sharp and primed to the rhythm of chop-chop-pick up-chop-chop-throw. It was melodic, almost, the sound of the axe slamming into the wood, the sweet smell of pine filling his nostrils and entering his chest. His lungs were alive and burning as if he had ran for a long time, and once Rhodey stopped him and said it was enough, Steve almost felt something akin to disappointment running through his blue veins.

They sat down then, propped up against the trees who had been spared from the fire that day, and shared a bottle of water that Rhodey had hooked onto his belt.

"Thank you," Steve said, his voice still strained, but more from the burning in his lungs than the heaviness of his body. Rhodey smiled at him.

"What for?" he laughed. "You're the one helping me. Though you did beat me so bad it's not even funny."

Steve was, wasn't he? There was no doubt Rhodey could've completed the task on his own, but it would've taken monumentally longer, not to mention the risk of heatstroke or strained muscles. Steve had helped someone on one of his bad days.

"I missed this," Steve said. He picked up a clump of dirt from the ground and allowed it to run through his fingers, get under his nails, ground him to the earth. Rhodey hummed in agreement.

"I come out here every fortnight to get firewood," Rhodey said, just loud enough for Steve to hear (Rhodey had purposefully, he noticed, moved to sit on Steve's good side). "Just if you wanted to..."

"I'd like to," Steve replied. Suddenly, a fortnight didn't seem like a century, nor did it appear like a death sentence. "Thank you."

"Hm," Rhodey said.

They sat in comfortable silence.

"You know," Rhodey said, breaking the stillness, as he always had a tendency to do. "If you scream, it helps. The trees don't care."

Steve blinked twice at him.

"And neither do I," Rhodey added, shrugging as if it wasn't important. "Just if you wanted to know."

"I don't need to scream," Steve mumbled, but his voice came out shaky, and his resolve was weak.
Rhodey raised an eyebrow.

"Everybody needs to scream sometimes," Rhodey said. He had a blade of grass in between his fingers, splitting it in half. "Hell, Carol drives me so crazy sometimes I have to leave her at home, run out here and kick a tree while yelling my tonsils out. And I know you've had a lot more to deal with than a cranky pregnant wife, so I don't believe you when you say you don't need to scream."

More silence.

"I wouldn't tell any-"

Steve was already up on his feet. Rhodey jumped up with him, eyes wide as if observing a spooked horse. But Steve was midway through the loudest scream he had ever let escape his lips.

When Dernier and Junior had been blown to bits in front of him, had he screamed? No. When his own hearing was taken from him, when he watched five of his men fall because he'd failed to save them, had he screamed? No. When Sharon, his protector, his motivator, his nurse and counsellor and rock had left him, had he screamed? No.

He deserved to scream now. Rhodey was right. He screamed so loud and cried and kicked a tree and threw dust up from the ground. His vocal chords whimpered from the friction but he continued regardless.

Steve screamed for every man he had watched die, for every woman he had seen cry, for every child he'd had to watch ask questions as to why it was Steve greeting them rather than their parent. He screamed for Natasha, because he had let her down, and he screamed for Rhodey, who had been so kind, and he screamed for Bucky, who he missed, goddamnit, who he had missed every day for the past eight years but hadn't let himself admit it.

He screamed until his stomach turned into knots and then he fell into the dirt, where the only thing that came back was his echo and then a soft, comforting presence kneeling down beside him, a hand on Steve's shoulder, pressing Steve's head into his chest.

They spoke no more about it as they dragged the heavy bags of timber back to Carol, who was very heavily pregnant at this stage and more alive than Steve had ever known her. Her eyes were bright and blue and she looked at Rhodey like he was Jesus reincarnated, and Steve had slipped out the front door while they greeted each other because he didn't want to tarnish something so pure, so perfect.

Why his feet had decided to take him to the Barnes' rather than his own home was a mystery, though he supposed they'd been doing so since the beginning of time and so to change routine now would be to deny them their very purpose. Steve already had his key out of his pocket by the time he reached the front door, and so he pushed it open, walking past Becca, who was peacefully asleep on the couch.

He stopped at the base of the stairs and moved back towards her, pushing her wet hair off her forehead and pressing his lips to it instead. Then, strangely satisfied, he made his way silently upstairs.

Bucky was in the box room, and the door into it was hanging open. He was holding a Coca Cola bottle between his fingers with the label peeled off, and the light of the outdoor sunset was streaming in past the blinds, highlighting Bucky's form in slits of heaven. His feet were bare. He looked, for a breathtaking moment, like the old, teenage Bucky Barnes, with his long hair slicked back like a quiff and a soft smile on his handsome features.
Steve felt a tugging in his organs, how Bucky, in this dim and diminishing light, could look so beautiful, so much the same and yet so different. How the Bucky he had built up in his memories and convinced himself was a figment of his imagination was real, and breathing, and alive, propped up against the wall, long eyelashes casting shadows over his cheeks.

Steve suddenly wanted to kiss him, wanted to press his hands against Bucky's sides and hold him as he prayed to be taken back to the time when they first met, when Bucky looked at him with unprecedented respect and made him a family out of clay. He wanted to take Bucky's hair down and hold it between his fingers, wanted Bucky's hard, strong body underneath his own, or beside it, or wherever he could get it closest.

But Steve didn't dare make a move, not on one of his bad days. He stood instead, rather awkwardly, in the doorframe, looking at Bucky, wanting to commit him to memory or pencil and paper, wanting to love him unconditionally, uncontrollably, until the other man realised his presence and greeted him with a lopsided smile.

"Hey Stevie," Bucky said, as if Steve had just answered every one of his prayers. It was at that moment that Steve realised what Bucky had been so transfixed by.

"Hey Buck," Steve replied.

He squeezed himself into the box room beside his friend, looking at the wall opposite their bodies, which was covered in pictures of everyone Bucky had ever loved, it seemed. There was a lot of people, but then again Bucky loved more than most.

"That's me, you and Natasha at the beach, fifth grade," Bucky said, plucking the photo off the wall and passing it to Steve, who wasn't looking at it as much as he was looking at the curve of Bucky's mouth, the valley of his chin. "And that's me, Betty and Jane, at the science fair in sixth grade..."

"You won the silver that year," Steve said. Bucky looked at him, shocked. Steve shrugged. "I remember being madder than you were about that," he explained.

"Yeah Stevie," Bucky said with a breathy laugh. "You accused the judge of favouritism."

"No, I accused him of sexism. And favouritism. Schmidt and Sitwell were dumbasses, they didn't deserve to win gold."

Bucky considered him for another moment, but Steve remained staring resolutely ahead. If he met Bucky's eyes in the dim light, saw his dilated pupils, it would be too much for him, too much teasing for his fragile heart. So he leaned forward instead and grabbed a picture from the top right hand corner of the wall.

It was of George, Winnie, and all the Barnes kids in front of their stone-walled cottage, left behind by the traditional English builders upon discovery of the New World. And in the bottom, Bucky was kneeling beside a small, golden haired boy, his arm wrapped around him tightly, both of them smiling so big their eyes had turned into slits. A very young Becca was, as always, pressed to Bucky's side, looking at her brother with so much love in her face it almost made Steve want to look away.

"You've done so well with her," Steve muttered, looking up at the wall which had Bucky's five years raising his sister commemorated by school photographs, sibling selfies and report cards. I wish I could've been here, Steve thought to himself, but maybe it was better not saying that out loud.

"Yeah," Bucky said, his eyes suddenly shining. "I just ... I miss them, you know? I miss ..."
A memory flooded Steve with the force of a rifle. He remembered sitting in Bucky's living room, letting Becca practice her spellings with him, and seeing Winnie run her hands through Bucky's hair comfortably, as Bucky melted into her side.

Slowly, cautiously, he opened his arms up to his friend, and Bucky gratefully fell into them. Steve's hands went up into Bucky's hair then rested there. Moving at all might push Steve into a hole that he had since avoided falling into. But he was humouring himself. He had loved Bucky Barnes for fourteen years. Maybe even longer than that, if one believed in previous lives, where he had met Bucky at birth, at death, at everything in between.

Steve tried to remember how Winnie comforted her oldest child, and it came as easy to him as breathing. A smoothing down of hair, then a cupped hand beneath his jaw. Bucky inhaled shakily, but melded with Steve like molten gold, and the incarnation was complete.

"I love you," Steve whispered, his voice muffled substantially by lips pressed to Bucky's head. "I love you so fucking much."

"I missed you, you know," Bucky said. Whether he had heard Steve's words and this was his response, or whether it was out of the blue, Steve didn't care. His heart twisted in his chest.

"I missed you too," Steve replied, clearly this time. "I just didn't realise it until I saw you."

"I realised it when it rained," Bucky breathed, "and you weren't at my front door."

It should've hurt Steve. It should've pulled on his stomach, how Bucky still needed him, still wanted him there with wellies on and a bucket in his left hand. Instead, it made his heart pound so loud in his chest he was surprised Bucky showed no signs of hearing it.

"I'm here now," he promised. "I'll always be here when it rains."

Steve's pretty sure that was the first time he'd ever seen a grownup Bucky Barnes cry.
Steve’s Ma’s house - which was his house now, technically, but didn't feel like it at all - was old-fashioned, and that was putting it lightly. From the floral fabric sofa to the doilies on the thick, mahogany display cases, it reeked of the 1980s, something Steve hadn't noticed at all whilst he was growing up but which now, given Sharon's penchant for modernising their home in NYC every season, hung at the forefront of his mind.

Sarah hadn't had the money to redecorate, not while Steve was still at home. Any cash that could've gone towards a new sofa or some fresher mattresses was poured into Steve's school books and his uniforms and his trips, so it would seem to the other pupils that Steve was just as well off as the rest of them. Sarah had a strong and somewhat strange sense of pride considering her circumstances, and she refused to let people believe she was of any less worth than them monetarily, even though that was not the reason they adored her. Howard had tried on multiple occasions to tell Sarah that it was her warmth of character, her determination and her motherly instincts that made people respect her, and that she had no need to keep working so hard to sustain a life that was well beyond her means. Yet Sarah had a stubbornness about her that Steve had unfortunately inherited, and which had unfortunately led to her working herself down to sickness and, eventually, death.

She had been planning to buy herself a new king-sized bed when Steve went away to college, almost as a well-done present to herself for raising a boy to the standard where he could forge his own path, but she never made it there, and neither did Steve.

Despite his occasional bad days, which were admittedly few and far between in Leavenworth compared to New York and which he attributed to the countryside air, Steve had been motivated to clean the place up a little. He had removed dead flowers that had been rotting for a solid eight years from their vases and replaced them with wildflowers he and Becca scrounged from behind the Barnes’ sagging house. He had thrown out the magazines from nine years ago and cleaned the windows so he could see the beauty of the sunset without streaks disturbing his view. He had washed the sheets and even bought new ones, simply because after years of Sharon’s 100% Egyptian cotton, he couldn't force himself to sleep in his mother's old starched, scratchy duvets. He tried, he really did.

All attempts at properly cleaning, however, were soon abandoned. Steve always found something else to do that was better and easier than sorting through his mother's mail and photographs, whether it be Sam coming over to watch baseball, Bucky arriving with a worried pout and yet another Becca Situation to discuss, or Natasha ringing him for their daily bitching session, he kid himself that he had no time whatsoever in the day to tackle the memories that lined the walls.

Nobody else had even noticed, or so Steve thought. He maintained a cool outer persona when one of his visitors saw a picture on the wall or their eyes caught a piece of paper and they hummed, reminiscing about Sarah, when really all he wanted to do was scream. Sometimes he didn't want to scream. It depended on the day.

Sam arrived with a reluctant Bucky in tow to watch a Red Sox vs. White Sox game, not that any of the friends supported either teams with any particular enthusiasm. Steve had the sneaking suspicion that it was a rouse to get Bucky out of the house and away from Becca for a couple of hours, who alternated between weeping and screaming, "Oh my God, Buck," every five minutes.

(Once, over dinner, Bucky had asked Becca how she was getting on at school. Steve could tell it was simply an attempt at making conversation, for mealtimes had gotten progressively more silent with each passing year in the Barnes house, and Bucky didn't want her folding in on herself and
never speaking to him again. Becca had glared at him, slammed down her fork and exclaimed, "Oh my god, Dad, just leave me alone."

A vein had appeared in Bucky's forehead. Steve chewed on his carrots. They were hard.

"What did you just call me?" Bucky had spluttered. The true meaning of his guardianship had just been laid down before him, and with one foul swoop Becca had reminded him of just how long he had spent raising her, how he would never really be her brother.

An expression crossed Becca's face that Steve couldn't quite place, and which he definitely hadn't witnessed on her features before. She went awfully silent, blinked more times than was strictly necessary, and went back to her carrots.

"The carrots are hard," she mumbled, tears dripping down onto her napkin. Bucky looked wrecked. Steve couldn't remember seeing that much blatant emotion on his friend's face, and that was saying something, because Bucky was an open book.

"Told you," Steve muttered, to ease the tension. It didn't work.)

From the kitchen, Steve heard Sam yell something incomprehensible. He glanced at Bucky, but his eyes were glassy and it was clear he wouldn't have heard an asteroid hit the earth if it was two feet away from him.

"What did you say?" Steve called back, flicking the TV to the sports channel. Sam arrived around the doorway into the kitchen grasping five share packs of Doritos in his hands. All tangy cheese, because anything else was an abomination.

"I said your house is sad," Sam said. Bucky made an aborted attempt at disagreeing. Steve didn't bother. "Seriously. I went to get garlic dip from the fridge and it sparked at me."

"It does that sometimes," Steve murmured. "Can't be helped."

"Can't be helped?" Sam repeated. He dropped the Doritos onto the sofa beside Bucky so he could use his arms for emphasis. "Steve, you seriously need to update this place before you get electrocuted. It's not just dreary anymore, it's dangerous."

Bucky obviously did not share these concerns - for once - because he had already burst open a pack of Doritos and was shovelling them into his mouth with force.

Steve glared at Sam.

"Don't tell me you don't have money."

His eyes dropped to his lap.

"Sam, just leave it, okay?"

A muscle in Sam's jaw twitched. It was the I'm Disappointed jaw twitch.

"Am I right?" he asked.

An advertisement on the TV about toothpaste became a lot more interesting.

"Steve, don't ignore me," Sam said. "Everyone always ignores me when I say smart shit, it's getting old."
"Fine, Sam," Steve conceded. "You're right. But that doesn't mean I have to listen."

He half-expected Bucky to stand up for him, even though Bucky had never shown any signs of disagreeing with Sam before, and he seriously doubted he would break that streak now.

"Bucky?" Steve said. Bucky looked at him and shovelled another handful of Doritos into his mouth. His cheeks bulged like a hamster's.

"Can't talk," Bucky mumbled around his food, barely understandable. "Eating."

Steve furrowed his eyebrows together. Sam, however, seemed very pleased with himself.

"He didn't agree with you," Steve argued.

"He didn't agree with you, either," Sam replied. "Come on, Steve. We'd help you out, you know we would. If you're finding it hard going through your Ma's stuff, I could do it for you. I wouldn't throw anything out; it would all still be up in the attic if you wanted it."

Steve considered it for a moment, but didn't dare glance at Sam for fear that his big brown eyes and bright smile would cause him to crumble embarrassingly easily.

"I suppose it does need a bit of a revamp," Steve muttered. On the TV, the baseball game had started, and so the conversation was dropped like a lead-balloon until the next ad break.

For an entire half hour, Steve, who was squashed in the middle between Bucky and Sam lest an argument about who mattered more to him should break out, couldn't focus at all on the game. He occasionally felt movement beside him from Sam, which was a signal to let out a small 'whoop' and take another glug of non-alcoholic beer, but other than that, the small players on his old TV were just blurs on a screen. He had no idea of the score, or even who won, and he doubted Bucky did either.

He remained silent, horsing Doritos into his mouth with determination, or perhaps because it provided him with a reason not to talk when Steve or Sam tried to begin a conversation. Sam, because he was Sam, was enthusiastic, but without someone to back him up or even crack a smile he soon waned into nothingness, and when the break came on, he grabbed the remote and flicked the TV off. Bucky made a half-hearted sound of annoyance.

"Alright, what's up with you two today?" Sam demanded. "You're acting as if everyone's died belonging to you. Come on, spill."

Steve hadn't got laid in nearly six months. That was the first thing that came to mind; it was definitely the less painful explanation for his morose behaviour. He was about to open his mouth and say this, but then he remembered a lunch back in high school when Bucky had said the exact same thing, but replacing six months with one week, and Sam had raised an eyebrow in confusion and said, "So?" as if it wasn't a perfectly viable reason to be cranky.

Bucky pursed his lips together.

"Becca's worried about something," he said, "and she won't tell me what it is."

Sam hummed. "Did you try asking Natasha to speak to her?" he suggested. Bucky nodded. "No luck?"

"No, she sang like a canary to Nat," Bucky said. "Only thing was, Natasha won't tell me now. I hate not knowing."

"That's weird," Steve murmured. "Natasha has told you everything about Becca before, and Becca
knows that nothing's sacred between the two of you. What's different this time?"

Bucky's face went a strange shade of pink that Steve had only seen a handful of times before.

"I think it's - I mean I have sort of an idea what it is," Bucky spluttered. He reached into the last packet of Doritos and found it to be empty. His hand flailed around for a second in despair. "I mean - I know what it is, I'm pretty sure. Natasha took her to get it sorted and all, but I - I need to - I feel like I should know but I really, really don't want to know."

Sam's mouth formed an 'o.' Steve still didn't get it.

"You haven't figured it out yet, have you?" Sam whispered to him, patting his shoulder consolingly. Steve shook his head.

"God, Stevie," Bucky laughed. It was quite breathy and - strained, Steve supposed, but in an embarrassed kind of way? Embarrassment was such a strange expression to see on Bucky's face, but that was undoubtedly what it was. "Do I have to spell it out to you? Thirteen year old girl. Needs a woman to help her with it."

"Pregnancy?" Steve tried. Bucky choked on his own saliva. Sam face-palmed, getting cheese dust on his forehead.

"Fuck Stevie, no," Bucky yelled. "The opposite of pregnancy!"

"What does that even me- oh."

Steve could feel the heat rising from his feet all the way up to his forehead. In fact, he was pretty sure that if he didn't stop thinking about it soon, he would burn his way through his clothes and be sitting on his ugly sofa butt-naked.

"She's - bleeding," Steve said in a hushed voice. Bucky squawked and buried his face in his hands. Sam rolled his eyes.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Sam said, and when Bucky sent him the patented 'Winter Soldier' death stare, he relented. "I mean, I get that you don't really know what to do with it, but it's a natural thing, isn't it? All the girls we know probably have it."

"Yeah, but I didn't need to know about it!" Bucky protested. "Oh, fuck my life."

"Get a grip," Sam said, but there was a fondness in it. "It's no biggie, alright?"

"No biggie?" Bucky repeated incredulously. "No biggie? It's a fucking massive-y, is what it is! First comes periods, then comes sexual attraction and the next thing you know Becca's coming to me at fifteen and she's got a foetus in her stomach and I'm not bloody ready for that, Sam, you hear me?"

"Not every teenager wants to have sex," Steve protested, though he didn't much believe what he was saying. Sam's shoulders heaved.

"Yeah?" Bucky said. "Don't bullshit me, Steve, I'm serious. Name one teenager you know of that didn't want to hump someone. Go on."

Sam opened his mouth. Steve and Bucky turned to look at him. He closed his mouth, and his shoulders fell down again.

"Well?" Steve said to him. Sam shrugged. Bucky threw himself dramatically over Steve and buried
himself away in the pillow on Steve's lap.

"Becca's a good kid," Steve said. "And she's been raised by the best. She's just like you, Buck."

"That's what I'm fucking afraid of, Steve," Bucky exclaimed. "I screwed my way through half our senior year, remember?"

"So why was that okay for you and not for her?" Sam questioned. Bucky pulled himself up from Steve's knee to answer, but soon found himself floundering.

"Because it just is, okay?"

"You should be a politician."

"Shut up, Wilson, okay, just because you were a good boy and didn't sleep with anyone in high school-"

"I'm gonna stop you there," Sam said, his mouth drawn into a hard line. "I didn't sleep with anyone in high school because I didn't want to."


"No, really," Sam said. "I don't really see the appeal-"

Steve noticed he was picking frantically at a rag-nail on his thumb, the tell-tale sign that something rare had been breached that could cause Sam Wilson to lose his cool. He put his hand on top of Sam's and smiled at him.

"You don't have to explain yourself to us," Steve said. The corner of Sam's mouth twitched upwards.

"But Bucky-"

"Bucky's sex-obsessed," Steve said.

"That's true," Bucky chirped from the back.

"I wouldn't take anything he says to heart," Steve finished.

"That is also true," Bucky provided.

Sam grinned. It was amazing.

"I love you guys," he said. At once, Bucky and Steve pounced on Sam and pressed him into the corner of the sofa in a bone-crushing hug (Bucky's metal arm got in the way more than once, but he found that if he stuck it up in the air it wouldn't catch on anybody's shirt, so they appeared like a massive ball of loving and one random arm sprouting from it like a tree).

When Sam finally managed to pry Steve and Bucky off him, he was red, but looking very pleased. Steve wanted nothing more than to keep that smile on his face, and obviously Bucky felt the same.

"Why don't we start work on the house tonight, Steve?" Bucky said. "What do ya think?"

Steve glanced over at the armchair, which was now resting slightly capsized against the fireplace from where Natasha had jumped up from it once realising the stain was actually blood. In the dull light of a winter's mid-afternoon, you could barely see it, but Steve knew the last of his mother's life was still lying within it, and that was all it took to get him nodding his head.
"Great!" Sam declared. "We're going to have to get some new furniture, fill those holes in the walls, strip the wallpaper and put some new stuff down, get new mattresses, sort out that sad son-of-a-bitch you call a TV, replace the carpet because there's no way in hell you're getting that bastard clean, even if Betty comes and tries..."

Sam continued listing the things he wanted to do, counting them off on his fingers and eventually grabbing a newspaper to jot them down on, while Bucky just met Steve's eye and gave him a small, tentative smile that told him it's alright, Stevie, it's all gonna be alright. I'm right here, everything's gonna work out fine.

The thing was, six months ago, Steve would've scoffed at that smile, not that he ever would've received it from the angry Bucky regardless. But now, Steve truly believed Bucky that he was telling the truth, honestly thought that Bucky could protect him from whatever traumas lay within those four walls. As the weeks gradually went on and the house became more and more like a home, Steve found that he wasn't wrong in his trust, and that Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson were perhaps the greatest best friends a person could have.

They tackled the stove first. Upon seeing the mess around the hobs, Bucky became sheepish, and quietly apologised. Steve punched him in the arm.

"Why are you sorry?" Steve asked. Bucky shrugged.

"I ruined your stove," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, Buck?"

"Yeah, Steve?"

Steve moved towards him, took Bucky's hand in his own (though he couldn't feel his tough skin through the yellow cleaning gloves they were both donning) and said, with enough force that even Bucky Barnes could not attempt to argue, "You were the only reason I got through Ma's funeral, you know that, right?"

Bucky exhaled shakily. "You're a tough little shit on your own, Steve."

"I know," Steve said, "but you convinced me that I didn't have to be alone, remember?"

"I remember it all, Steve," Bucky said. "To the end of the line."

A lump formed in Steve's throat.

"I'm sorry I missed your parents' funerals," he said. Bucky shrugged.

"Why are you saying sorry?" he asked. "You've got no reason to apologise. I didn't call you. You wouldn't have known."

"No, Buck." Steve shook his head. "I have every reason to apologise. Hell, I should be on my hands and knees for you right now."

Bucky swallowed three times in quick succession.

"I messed up a hell of a lot, and I'm sorry," he said.

"Apology accepted, Steve."

"I wanted to be there, you know."
"I know. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted, Buck."

"You didn't need to be there to say goodbye, though. They knew you were with them. I knew you were with me somehow too."

"How'd you know?"

Bucky took his hand back from Steve and went back to scrubbing at the cooker. Metal arms come in useful for many things, and one of them was getting tough stains off the hob.

"Dunno," Bucky replied. "Just felt you there, I guess."

If he could feel Steve's gaze on him for minutes after that, he never moved a muscle to show it. But when Bucky pursed his lips, and a frown line appeared between his eyebrows as he cleaned, it was so reminiscent of Winnie that it cut through Steve like a butcher's knife.

When Steve was sixteen years old, he had asked Winnie about George. How she knew without a doubt that he was the one man she would spend the rest of her life with, for she had always been so sure about him, so much love in her eyes that Steve couldn't imagine a time when they weren't together (though evidently there had been, in the end. It might've been kinder for both of them to have been taken at the same time).

"It was his eyes that did it," she had said whilst drying off the dishes. She passed them to Steve and he scuttled to put them away. It was a warm midsummer's night, and Bucky was in the back-garden playing with his sisters, and Steve could see them through the kitchen window. "His dark brooding eyes. There was always some form of excitement in them, some fancy that took him and made him pursue the day with a vigour I could never hope to match. But there are other parts of him that I adore as well.

"The brightness of his laugh - oh, how he laughs when I speak to him, like I am the only person who has ever made a joke at his expense before. The calluses on his hands that I know come from working so hard to provide for his family. They are protector's hands - I know he will always keep me safe, even if it meant tossing himself into the fire to extinguish it. How he talks to his car, like it's a love interest in one of those old black and white movies, how his lips form around the words. How he looks at each and every person as if he's in love with them, but then there's something else when he catches my eye, something soft and oh-so-sad, as if I'm breaking his heart just by being next to him."

Steve remembered looking out the window at Bucky, with his wild eyes and the curls hanging down over his forehead. He had considered how everyone in school adored Bucky and treated him with the reverence Steve so desired, probably because Bucky had given it to them in the first place. He had watched as Bucky picked up his sisters and flung them onto the trampoline, his upper-lip shiny with sweat and his large hands catching them every time they jumped into his arms.

It hit him that afternoon as he watched Bucky scrub at the oven that Bucky was exactly the same as the George Winnie had described. Steve wondered if it had tugged at her organs, how Bucky was exactly the same.

He just wished he'd had a chance to ask her.

"How did your mom cope when your pa passed?" Steve asked gently, hoping to convey that Bucky didn't need to answer if it would hurt him physically to do so. Bucky's tongue darted out over his
"Not so good," Bucky admitted. "She adored him, you know? Didn't seem like herself the second after he was gone. She just walked out of the hospital room and she was - empty. She was already dead, in my opinion. The cancer just ended it for her."

Steve had known this would be the answer. He just wished it wouldn't have been.

The next week, while he and Sam ripped tiles off the wall in the kitchen to replace them, Sam had picked a clump of pages up off the counter.

"Are you keeping these?" Sam asked. Steve, who was in the middle of getting yet another tile off, didn't answer. "I'll read through it then, just to make sure it's nothing important, alright?" Steve grunted in response.

The only sound that filled the kitchen then was the chip-chip-chip of the hammer and a butter-knife, which Steve considered the only viable tool to remove tiles with and which Sam regarded with a horror that was almost comical. Finally, the tile was pried off the wall and shattered on the floor. Steve wiped his forehead off with his shirt-sleeve and turned to Sam, who was wearing an utterly concerned expression on his face.

He was holding Steve's medical information. Shit, shit, shit.

"I can explain-"

"You haven't been taking your medication," Sam said, turning the page around so Steve could see the list of his prescriptions. "You haven't been taking it because you don't even have it in the house. You're supposed to order medicine in, Steve."

"Yeah, well," Steve faltered, "I tried but they don't - they don't deliver to Leavenworth."

"Are you trying to pull that with me, Steve?" Sam asked. "I'm a fucking postman. I go to the main office in Boston once a fortnight. And you're trying to tell me that I wouldn't have realised if there was a big ass box from OSCORP Pharmaceuticals sitting in your tray? Give me a break."

"They're all just anti-depressants anyways," Steve contested. "I got Bruce to check them out for me."

"Bruce is a GP, Steve," Sam said. "Not a psychologist. Clearly you need to be on these. If you didn't need to be, then your doctor who prescribed them would tell you that!"

"It would be a bit hard for my doctor to tell me that," Steve said, "considering he's fucking dead, Sam."

Sam didn't falter for a second.

"You need to take your medicine, Steve," he said.

"I feel fine."

"I don't give a flying fuck if you feel fine, Steve," Sam said. "You were diagnosed with depression years ago. It doesn't just go away as easily as that. As strong as you are, you need professional help. You've got to talk to someone-"

"Oh, what do you know about it?" Steve snapped.

"I know more about it than you think!"
"Just because you've got a degree in it you think you-"

"Because of personal experience, Steve!" Sam barked. "I can't be the first person to tell you this."

"No, Sharon told me it every fucking time we got in an argument," Steve yelled. What he didn't say was that his failure to take his medicine was usually the inciting incident, but what Sam didn't know couldn't hurt him. "Everybody just uses it as an excuse to blame me for my problems!"

"That's not what we're doing, Steve!" Sam said. "I don't have any idea what happened to you out there. If you ever want to tell me, I'm all ears-

"Believe me, we are never having that conversation," Steve said. Sam flinched. "It's nothing personal. I've never talked to anybody about it."

"Exactly my point. You need to let it out. You're never gonna move past it if you keep lugging it around with you in a massive suitcase, Steve. You need to get that shit into a man-purse, I'm telling you. And the only way to do that is to get help."

"I don't need your advice, Sam," Steve said. "I didn't need your help with the house and I don't need your help now."

Sam's shoulders were so high they were basically in his ears.

"I know you're angry now," Sam said, "and you don't mean it. But that's no excuse to take your shit out on me. I'm just trying to be your friend, Steve."

"Well kindly give me a break," Steve snarled. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Don't step on the tiles in your temper, Twinkle-Toes."

"Oh, shut up," Steve said, though on the way out he did, admittedly, watch his step. There was pieces of broken tile all over the kitchen floor.

He got to the bathroom and found the toilet still had bleach in it and couldn't be flushed, so he diverted his course into his bedroom. His sketchbook lay on top of the rumpled covers, and Steve sat down beside it. The book called out to him, almost flapping its pages to get his attention, and Steve sighed and picked it up.

Right under where he had written about Natasha, Steve put his pencil onto the page and allowed his hand to express the anger he was feeling.

_Sam Wilson thinks that just because nobody's called him out on his shit before now that he's done no wrong. In reality, everybody's just too terrified to tell him what they really think. He's a KNOW-IT-ALL who doesn't even know the full story before deciding to give his opinion on it. In fact, he's OPINIONATED, NAIVE and STUBBORN, because even when the full story is told to him he refuses to change his stance.

Steve paused for a second, the pencil hovering above the page. He thought deep and hard, but couldn't come up with anything else to hit Sam with, and it was almost embarrassing, how good a guy Sam Wilson was. The realisation of this goodness was a freight train into Steve's stomach, and as he slammed the sketchpad closed he felt as if he was actually going to vomit this time.

He couldn't blame his brain anymore. It was Steve who was writing these things, Steve who was thinking them. He needed to stop, but he couldn't. Any time someone tried to help him, he felt the insane need to build up a Berlin Wall between himself and the world.
Maybe he did need professional help. But where did you even find a psychologist in Leavenworth? He knew everybody from high school, and it would be weird talking to Sam about his problems, especially considering how strongly he had argued against having them. But yet, Sam had a point.

Fucking damn it.

When he returned to the kitchen, Sam was brushing up the broken bits of tile, a sombre expression on his face.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Steve murmured.

"You've been saying that a lot recently. To everybody."

True. Not nice, but true.

"Yeah," Steve said. "I'm sorry about that too."

"Hey," Sam said, standing up and brushing himself down. "I know you've went through some shit. But you have to know I'm here for you no matter what kind of bullshit you try to throw at me, okay?"

"Would you hate me if I-"

Sam cut him off by pulling him into a hug. Steve melted into his arms, and he could hear Sam's heart pounding, strong and steady, in his ear. He was warm, too warm, heated by the physical exertion of work he'd been completing for Steve, for no other reason than because he cared about him.

Sam Wilson, man.

"Before you go," Steve said when they parted, "do you mind coming up with me to the attic? I - don't want to do it alone."

"Of course, mate," Sam said. "What're friends for?"

The Rogers' attic had been untouched for more than fifteen years. Sarah didn't have the height nor the head for heights to force herself up into the rafters, and Steve was always far too young and footless to ever consider visiting. Now, though, he had Sam underneath him to give him a boost up so they didn't have to trail a ladder up the stairs, and he wasn't as afraid of the dark as he had been at seventeen, though it did still leave a thick lump in his throat and an aching in his chest.

"What do you see?" Sam's voice called out from underneath him. Steve peered around, moving his flashlight to observe the surroundings.

"Not much," Steve admitted. "It's all just old paintings and stuff she bought from the charity shop. Not because she liked them, she just wanted to support the cause."

"That was Sarah alright."

There was one box, however, just within Steve's grasp if he strained towards it, that caught his attention. It was marked 'Videos,' and Steve's heart thumped with the mere notion that he may see his mother moving once more. Veins appeared in his arm as he reached outwards and managed to grab the box before it fell onto its side. He grabbed it and yelled down to Sam, and together they collapsed to the ground, mostly intact, but a little sore.

Sam grabbed a pen-knife and cut through the duck tape in one thin line. The box opened, smelling of
fusty age and long forgotten memories, and Steve had to cough a couple times before exploring its depths. Sam was right by his side, a reassuring hand between his shoulder blades.

The majority of the tapes were of Sarah's relatives, all of whom were dead by the time Steve was old enough to remember them. It was a certain disappointment and a certain relief that the only tapes that were semi-interesting to the men were those labelled 'Joseph - 1981' and 'Howard - 1988.'

"Call Tony," Sam said, but Steve was already on the phone.

Tony's voice was loud and chirping. It would go through even the most patient of skulls. "Oh Captain, my Captain, what can I help you with today?"

"I've found a video of your father."

Silence on the other end of the line. An unmistakeable sound of scratching. Then-

"I'll be over soon."

Steve and Sam spent the time waiting for Tony's arrival poking out an old VHS player and hooking it up to Steve's ancient TV (one of the benefits of forgoing a flat-screen, he muttered to the sceptical Sam, who had to reluctantly concede).

The doorbell rang and Steve went to get it. It had evidently been raining at some point during the last five minutes, because Tony was soaking wet, and rain ran down his cheeks like rolling tears. Maybe he was crying, but it was hard to tell, because his eyes were usually as red as his palms were anyways.

"Come on in," Steve said, and Tony barrelled past him into the living room, where a sympathetic Sam passed over the remote. Steve had already decided that he would leave ripping his own heart out with memories of his father until another day, but Tony had no such hesitation, and almost before Steve had the chance to sit down he had hit play and was watching with rapt attention.

The tape was static, and the sound of Sarah's voice testing its reception bounced in and out a few times before stabilising. Sarah wasn't in the picture, and her voice was less scratchy than Steve remembered it. He could see her hands though, and they were dry from washing them so often in the hospital. A tarnished wedding band decorated her finger.

Slowly, the camera panned upwards to reveal a sepia-toned Howard and Maria. Maria's stomach protruded slightly from her blouse, and she had a wide grin on her face as she watched Howard bluster about, running his hands back through his hair, eagerly telling Sarah about something technological that was barely comprehensible to either Sam or Steve, but had Tony grinning and nodding along.

"Howie!" Sarah called out. She wouldn't have known she was pregnant at that stage; Tony was seven months older than Steve. It was a strange thing to see one's parents when they did not know you yet. "Quit with your babble, you're giving me a headache."

Howard beamed at Sarah, the smile almost splitting his face in two. He grabbed Maria's shoulders and turned her to him before kneeling down before her, considering her stomach with abject wonder. His hands pressed into her skin, stroking around the contours of a baby who was wriggling already, and Maria watched him with softness in her features and her fingers tangled in his black hair.

"What do you want it to be?" Sarah's voice asked. Howard turned back to her and shook his head. "Oh come on," she protested. "I wish you'd find out so I could knit a blanket for it before it comes. And so I can stop calling it 'it.'"
"I want it to be a girl," Maria hummed. "A beautiful little girl called Antonia."

"I hope it'll be a boy," Howard said. "Just because I want a son. My old man was a great dad, and I'm going to be even better than him!"

"You have such high expectations of yourself," Maria sighed.

"You love it really," Howard winked.

"It's why I married you," she replied.

"I can see you with a son," Sarah said. "He'd be a great man."

"Smartest little whippet in Leavenworth," Howard declared, waving his arm in the air to demonstrate. Maria laughed. "And as handsome as my beautiful wife."

"You charmer, Howard," Maria teased.

"I'll be proud of my son," Howard said. "He'll be the greatest boy I've ever known, can't you tell, Sarah? Can't you?"

"I think if he belongs to both of you," Sarah said, "he'll be a hero."

Howard ran towards Sarah at that, his arms outstretched, and the tape abruptly ended as he grabbed her into an embrace.

Silence settled over the living room. Tony's breathing was harsh and heavy.

"Well," Sam murmured. "That was nice."

"I liked seeing Ma again," Steve said. "What about you, Tony?"

Tony, who hadn't broken from his stupor once, not even to rub at his palm, still had his eyes fixed on the TV screen. They were wet.

"I have to go," Tony said abruptly, when Sam put a hand on his arm. "Hay-fever, you know? God I hate these fucking allergies. But times must, you know? Gotta get home and get some antihistamines into me, can't stick them. Thanks for inviting me round Steve, Sam."

"But it's winter," Steve protested.

By the time he had said the words, Tony had bolted from the house.

Sam and Steve stood in the hallway, staring at each other in confusion.

"I think that's my cue to leave," Sam joked. Steve smiled.

"You're welcome to stay if you want," he said. Which really meant please stay, I can't sleep in this house alone.

"Alright," Sam said. "I'll take the couch. At least now it doesn't have stains all over it."

"You have yourself to thank for that," Steve replied.

For the rest of the night, Sam snored peacefully on the couch and Steve, iPad in hand, sketched out a new comic, this time about a meek and mild mannered scientist with sudden outbursts of anger.
turning into an enormous green monster, and about a broken boy with a metal arm, who was wrongly judged yet saved his friend time and time again.

When he got to the last page of his comic, he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the sleeping Sam, posting it to Instagram with the caption, 'Let sleeping birds lie' and a falcon emoji. He’d joined Instagram a few weeks beforehand, starting with a selfie of him and Bucky with paintbrushes, touching up his bedroom walls, a view of the fields outside his house and a shot of Natasha taking a photo of Steve himself to send to Bruce, just so the Howlies back in New York could see.

**Dum-Dum18 left a comment:** you cheatin on Barnes?

**captainSGR replied**: never! hows the wife?

**Dum-Dum18:** as wonderful as always. tell your boy to send some more recipes over the interweb, those brownies were to die for (preferably for apple tart?)

**captainSGR:** good luck getting him to spill that, it's his secret weapon!

**Dum-Dum18:** i trust you to persuade him

**captainSGR:** mission accepted

Steve didn't think he'd ever felt more content.
Chapter 16

Steve, Bucky and Becca lay sprawled on the sofa watching *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. Nine months ago, you could not have convinced Steve in a million years that he would actively look forward to watching five women scream at each other and throw plates, but what had initially been Becca's curiosity had soon developed into both Bucky and Steve being desperately hooked on the dramatics of the show.

*The Real Housewives* is a gateway drug into reality television. It would all go downhill from there.

"Vicki's insane," Bucky murmured. His hands were shiny with butter from the popcorn he had resting between his knees. Becca, who shared a younger Bucky's tendency to disregard societal conventions about seating, had her legs propped up against the back of the sofa and her head hanging off it, so she was watching all of the proceedings upside down.

"I like her," Becca replied.

"She was a big part in Tamra's marriage break-down though, you have to admit," Steve argued gently, leaning over Becca, who was between him and the popcorn. Bucky didn't attempt to help him in his quest. He frowned at the TV screen.

"Tamra though," Bucky said. "What a woman."

"You always go for the crazies," Becca declared.

Her face was a rather unhealthy shade of purple from hanging upside down for too long, although it might have been for the best if she killed off some brain cells. She was too smart for both Steve and Bucky already.

Bucky pouted, but couldn't disagree.

The screen changed to an ad for a toaster oven, and to turn Bucky's attention away from yet another infomercial ("We don't need an automated banana peeler, Buck." "Don't tell me what to do with my life! I am a motherfucking adult, Rogers.") Steve peered at Becca, who could tell immediately by his expression to cover her face with her hands.

"God no," she mumbled. She slid down the seat and landed in a rather unfortunate pile on the ground, her dark brown hair fanning out around her. She was wearing one of Steve's shirts, however that had happened, and Steve was surprised Bucky hadn't made a joke about it basically fitting her, considering how small Steve's shirts already were on him.

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain," Bucky said. Becca parted her hands for a moment so Bucky could see her sticking her tongue out at him. He rolled his eyes. "Mature," he said.

"You would know," she replied.

"It's nothing embarrassing," Steve said, though really, it was. "I've just noticed you talk about that boy from maths class quite a bit lately. What's his name again?"

"Jared," Bucky drawled. He shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth so he wouldn't have to speak again on the subject, and when Becca tried to imitate him, he held the snack above her grasp.

Becca's face set into a cute but all-too-familiar frown, probably because she wore it 70% of the time
nowadays.

Steve could still remember her being born. Bucky had ran straight to his house, knocked five times hard on the front door, and burst into excited tears the second Steve answered. Steve was so terrified that something was wrong because Bucky couldn't get the words out that something was right. It was an experience that was paralleled a couple months back when he got the phone call from Rhodey to tell him Carol had gone into labour. A little boy, who they named Marvin (after Marvin Gaye. Sam was the godfather, along with Tony).

"So?" Becca said. She was trying so hard to pretend the name didn't affect her that Steve's heart almost burst on the spot. "What about him?"

"You tell us," Steve said. "Is he a friend?"

"Ye-es."

"More than a friend?"

"Oh my God, Steve," Becca whined. She pulled her hands down and set them in her lap.

Natasha had painted her nails black a week ago, and she'd refused to let Bucky take the nail polish off since then, so it was chipped at the tips, not that Becca cared as long as it was Natasha who had put it there.

Her face was a rather impressive shade of purple, though Steve already knew she would try to blame it on being upside-down rather than the mere thought of her feeling any sort of romantic inclination towards a boy, of all things.

"Well?" Steve asked. Becca shuffled slightly, but didn't respond. They sat in silence for a moment until a heavy sigh racked through her body, and she pulled herself up to glare at Steve.

"Fine," she snapped. "He makes me feel - tingly, okay?"

"Oh my God," Bucky said, grasping the popcorn holder with unnecessary force. "I don't want to know this, I don't want to know."

"He calls me darling," she said, either spurred on by breaching the barrier of a first confession, or because it seemed to be paining Bucky so greatly for her to do so. She even went so far as to twirl a piece of hair around her finger.

Bucky went grey. His eyebrows furrowed together, so it appeared he had one giant uni-brow, and a forehead more wrinkled than a pug.

"Never trust a guy who calls you darling, Becca, you hear?" Bucky commanded. Becca rose an eyebrow. "I'm telling you. They're up to - well, I don't know what Jared's up to, but it can't be any good if he's coming on to my sister. Now you go into school tomorrow, and you tell him to fuck off, you hear?"

Becca was white-hot with fury. In fairness to Bucky, it didn't take much to get her there. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably at her sides, itching to leap out and hit at someone, maybe scratch their eyes out.

She opened her mouth to spit out venom and evaporate Bucky on the spot, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. The light taps along with the practiced rhythm immediately identified the visitor as Becca's best friend and cousin, Rikki. Becca glanced upwards to the sky, inhaled deeply, and
glared at Steve and Bucky once more before going to the door.

Steve could hear her voice and grin from inside the living room.

"Hey Rikki! God, you look amazing, look at your hair! Aunt finally let you dye it then, eh?"

"Yeah, Becks, I managed to talk her 'round, though I suppose you were something to do with it. You and your silver tongue."

"Awk, I learnt that from my brother. Come on, I have to tell you something-"

Thunder rolled over the Barnes' house as the cousins barrelled up the stairs towards Becca's room, rocking the entire foundations as they did so. Once Steve heard the slam of her door, he turned to face Bucky, who appeared somewhat sheepish, though not enough.

"I know it seemed like an over-reaction-"

"It was more than an over-reaction," Steve said. "She's thirteen. It's innocent."

"But what if it's not! What if..." Bucky shook his head so hard it must've hurt. A strange urge to place his hands on either side of his head to stop the viciousness overwhelmed Steve, and he gave into it. Bucky's eyes widened minutely, but he immediately ceased.

"Calm down," Steve whispered. "Come on. What could go wrong with a teenage crush?"

Bucky chuckled, but remained very, very still so that Steve had no excuse to move his hands.

"You have no idea Steve," he huffed, "the pain a crush can give you."

Steve bit at the corner of his lip.

"I have some idea, actually."

Bucky opened his mouth, then shut it again. Steve nodded at him to continue.

"It's ... You only call a girl 'darling' at that age if you want into her pants," Bucky said, all in one breath. "At least that's my experience."

Steve burst out laughing, which served as a reason to remove his hands from the heat of Bucky's skin and instead grasp onto his own sides to prevent them from splitting. Bucky shuffled back so he was on the other end of the sofa, arms crossed, face in a soft pout, one strand of hair hanging out over his forehead.

"Oh bab- Buck," Steve corrected himself. "You're such a sleaze. You're like - the ultimate fuckboy."


Steve threw a couch cushion towards Bucky, who failed to catch it.

"I'm thinking," he protested. "I can't react when I'm thinking."

"And you say I'm the dangerous one."

"Shut up, I'm being serious. What am I supposed to do?"
Steve thought for a moment. "I dunno," he shrugged. Bucky rolled his eyes. "No, really. I don't know."

Steve Rogers was well known around Leavenworth for many things, but being emotionally sensitive and giving good advice were not included in them.

Nevertheless, Tony had asked Steve for help regarding Virginia, and Steve had indulged him. Unfortunately, it had not worked out to either of their favour, for his phone began buzzing so hard it nearly fell off the table. He got up, knowing that Bucky was far too absorbed in his distaste towards Jared to pass Steve his phone, and pressed it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Rogers?"

Steve's face must've read of confusion, because Bucky stopped frowning about Jared and began frowning about the phone call.

"Speaking?"

"It's Virginia Potts," a rushed voice said. It was chipped and far from proper, and it sounded nothing like Virginia, except for the slight New York accent that pervaded her name.

"Virginia?"

"We have a bit of a situation down at the garage," she said, "and T- Mister Stark has you down as his emergency contact."

"Wait - is Tony dead?"

Bucky's jaw dropped open. Virginia swore down the phone.

"Sorry, Mr. Rogers-"

"Call me Steve."

"Steve. Sorry. No, he's not dead, he's just - in a bit of a predicament at the moment. Mostly because of me, I'm afraid. Do you mind..."

"No, of course not," Steve replied. He held his phone between his ear and his shoulder as he hoked around under the sofa for a pair of shoes. Bucky's Doc Martens were the first to come to hand, and he shrugged and pulled them on.

"You should probably bring a first aid kit," Virginia said, and before Steve had the chance to respond, the line went dead.

"What the fuck was that about?" Bucky asked. "Is Tony okay?"

"Tony's done something fucking stupid," Steve replied.

"And that required a phone call? Surely Virginia's bound to know he does fucking stupid things on the daily, she's been round long enough now."

"I dunno," Steve said, for about the fifth time that day. "I'm guessing this is something bigger than usual. I've never heard Virginia panic before."
"Fuck, Steve. What if he's properly hurt?"

Steve jumped to his feet and stomped around a few times to get the feel of the shoes. They were still too big for him, even after his miraculous puberty, but they'd do. He didn't have time to try and find his own Converse anyway, especially when they were probably among the multitude of pairs Becca owned.

"He won't be," Steve said. He went over to Bucky and placed his hands on his upper arms, rubbing gently over them. "Relax," he said, and Bucky obeyed. "He'll be fine, okay? Now where's the first aid kit?"

"Top cupboard on the right, under Steve," Bucky replied. "The chicken Steve, not you Steve."

"I got that."

"Steve?"

"Yeah, Buck?"

"Text me when you get things sorted, would ya? As much as I don't like Stark, I don't much want him to die, either. He repairs my arm."

Steve stroked his fingers down Bucky's hair and smiled at him.

"I'll keep in touch, Buck, don't you worry," Steve said. "I have a feeling it'll be something we'll laugh about a month from now."

"As long as it ain't another Donut Scandal, we should be good."

With Bucky's wisdom ringing in his ears, Steve began the jog down to Main Street. The Barnes' house was in a more optimal location than the Rogers', and so Steve reached Stark Industries in less than five minutes.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but to walk in and see Tony and Virginia both on the floor, Tony with his head in Virginia's lap and a worried expression on her face definitely wasn't it. It was as if he'd been shot. God, maybe he had.

"Have you been playing with that gauntlet again?" Steve called out. He ran over to Tony, slid to the ground and began opening up his medical kit, trying desperately to remember all that Sarah had taught him.

There was no blood on his clothes, or his visible skin. He wasn't pale, or clammy, but his forehead was shining with sweat, and there was oil and blood mingling in the wrinkles on his hands. In fact, the only thing that seemed different at all was his eyes which -

It was his eyes.

His bright eyes had more red than white, and there were tears running down his cheeks and dripping onto his shirt, not that you could've noticed the stains amongst the others. He was blinking ferociously, which just seemed to be making everything worse, and Virginia was staring helplessly at him, utterly paralysed which was - unexpected, of her. Steve had been under the impression that a tornado could've hit Leavenworth and Virginia would've been the only one calm enough to figure out a plan. But then again, Tony did have a habit of attracting people to him that would die rather than see him get hurt. Rhodey was a prime example.
Marvin Anthony Rhodes-Danvers had a lot to live up to, especially given the length of his name.

"What happened?" Steve asked. Virginia began to respond, but Tony cut her off.

"She fucking pepper-sprayed me, is what happened," he yelled, or rather gurgled on his own tears.

"I didn't mean to pepper-spray you," Virginia argued desperately.

"Well you did a fine fucking job of avoiding me, then."

"You snuck up on me!" Virginia exclaimed. Steve took a second to look around the immediate vicinity. A bouquet of pink daisies and a box of capsized strawberries lay on the ground beside them. A cool feeling of guilt built in Steve's stomach.

"Well I won't do that a-fucking-gain, that's for sure," Tony spluttered. "Fucking psychopath, is what you are."

"Honey, if I was a psychopath I'd have left you squirming on the floor. Instead I called Steve to come help us."

"Steve?" Tony said. There was a hopeful air to it, and Steve felt his chest well up.

"Yeah, Tony, I'm here."

"Fuck's sake," Tony said, smacking his head against the garage floor. Virginia let out a yelp. "You had to invite my fucking high school cr- friend to come help me in my most embarrassing hour, didn't you? You're on fire today, Pepper."

"Pepper?" Virginia repeated.

"Yeah, Pepper," Tony said. Was he - laughing? "You like it?"

Virginia shrugged. "It's better than Virginia," she said. "And if we can laugh about this someday, I - I'd like that."

"We can laugh about it today if we get his eyes washed out," Steve said. "Come on, Tony, work with me."

Tony didn't work with him. If anything, he went more limp, so Steve had to grab him under his armpits and drag him over to the garage sink (he only let him hit his head against the porcelain once, maybe twice, and it was accidents both times). Virginia - or Pepper, Steve supposed - held onto Tony's squirming body while Steve yanked his eyes open.

Steve had heard less screaming from men who were being tortured than he heard from Tony Stark that afternoon. It was almost embarrassing, but then again he had to realise that this was probably the worst physical pain Tony had suffered in his entire life. Apart from maybe 2006. That was a painful year for him.

"Is this a bad time?"

A small, but powerful murmur echoed through the garage, sending a chill up Steve's spine. He briefly looked up from his task to see Wanda Maximoff standing mere feet away from him, car keys hooked around her ringed fingers.

"Oh fuck, is that creepy Wanda?" Tony asked, obviously not realising just how close Wanda actually was to them, and that she could hear - and flinch at - his every word. "Tell her to go away,
Pepper hushed him while Steve let go of Tony's hair and went over to Wanda. On first sight, he would've been inclined to agree with Tony, and perhaps even on second sight, when he saw how Wanda silenced those men in the bar without a single word. But now, Steve could see her for what she actually was.

A young woman stood before him, barely twenty-three, with sad eyes, swathed in a thick black poncho. Her face was caked in pale makeup apart from her eyes, which stood out from seas of darkness, and there was something glimmering behind them, something that drew Steve in and made him want to learn more, because there was definitely something more to her.

"Tony's a dick," Steve told her. Surprisingly, she laughed, a tiny, gentle chuckle that would've warmed the harshest of hearts. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Oh, no," Wanda said. She spoke so slowly and deliberately that Steve had to stop between each word and consider an alternate meaning before realising there was none; that was simply how she spoke. "My brother - Pietro - he has... motorbike issues. I wanted to see if Mr. Stark could help him with them, but he has made it clear he is uninterested."

She made for the door, and without thinking much about it, Steve stopped her by grabbing onto her delicate wrist. For a second, it appeared as if Wanda would hiss at him, but her face remained stoic, like a winter soldier.

No wonder Bucky got on so well with her.

"I happen to know a little bit about bikes," he told her. She tilted her head to the side, removing her hand from his grasp. It disappeared into the folds of her poncho. "If you'd let me take a look at it. I'm no engineer, but."

"That would be nice," she said. "Steve, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes," Steve said. "Wanda?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "James talked about you a lot over the years, especially when he was drunk. I'm glad you finally decided to come home."

The way she worded it should've gotten Steve's back up. It should've made the anger well inside of him. It should've made him less motivated to help her with her brother's bike, but it did none of these things, because Wanda actually seemed to be completely genuine. There was no evidence in her face of sarcasm or bitterness, which had been so skilfully hidden on all of his friends' faces since he had returned to Leavenworth. It was refreshing.

"I could do it now, if you wanted," Steve suggested. Wanda glanced past him to where Pepper was still pushing a screaming Tony's head under the sink.

"Are you sure your ... friends can handle this situation?" she asked.

Tony's blinking had became less laboured around the third rinse. His grip on Pepper's blouse faltered somewhat, his dirty fingernails a stark contrast to her whiteness. Pepper let go of his overalls, and he slumped to the floor. She joined him, albeit with a scrunched nose, and propped herself against his shoulder, her chest heaving.

There was a familiarity and an understanding about their position. It was obvious that they had found themselves in it many times before, either after a long day at the garage or just because the sudden
The unfairness of their lives had hit them at once and left them crashing into each other for comfort. Tony's eyelashes were darker than oil against his cheeks, and Pepper's were barely visible. Tears had welled in her eyes, and so she popped out her contacts, throwing them into the trash-bin that was previously reserved for liquor storage. Tony wordlessly reached up to the workbench, his fingers straining to reach a white glasses case. Pepper took them with gratefulness, smiling at him as she whispered, "Thanks, Tony."

With shortness of breath, he leaned in so their noses were touching, but went no farther, transfixed by the minty scent off her breath, how those freckles framed her cheekbones. She was so pure, and Tony could not bring himself to tarnish her.

"They got themselves into it," Steve replied, though there was a lump in his throat. Wanda pretended not to notice. "They can get themselves out of it. Now let me see the bike."

So they left Pepper and Tony on the floor of the garage, though Steve doubted they even recognised their departure, and walked to Wanda's house. She made no attempt at small-talk. After a few tries himself, Steve gave up, and sent a quick text to Bucky instead.

STEVE: I think Virginia might have a new nickname????? Pepper?

BUCKY: pepper? it suits her

STEVE: You think?

BUCKY: how did she get it is tony okay

STEVE: Tony's fine, as usual. Virginia pepper-sprayed him

BUCKY: #stingy

STEVE: I know

BUCKY: how much did he scream

STEVE: More than the soldiers I knew in Iran

BUCKY: is that a lot of screaming

STEVE: Yeah

BUCKY IS TYPING

STEVE: It was entertaining though

BUCKY: shouldve recorded it

STEVE: Never thought

BUCKY: natasha will hate you forever #endoffriendship

Steve smiled at his phone, but was prevented from texting back by the sight in front of him. He was actually surprised he didn't smash his phone to the ground.

The wind had begun to pick up for winter in Leavenworth, so as Wanda walked away from Steve to stand behind the most beautiful bike he had ever seen, her poncho billowed like a cape, and her hair blew back off her face to reveal a beautiful, sad girl Steve had never thought to look for before.
"Is that a Triumph Rocket III Roadster?" Steve breathed. Wanda ran her hand along the seat and beckoned Steve to do the same. The leather was cool, and oh so beautiful.

"I'm not sure," Wanda murmured, though there was something in the smokiness of her tone that left Steve questioning this. "I- My brother tried to turn it on today and it wouldn't run. Something tells me it's the electrical systems."

"Probably why you went to Tony, eh?"

Wanda pursed her lips. Steve sighed and slicked his hair back. He put his hands on his hips and stared at the bike intently.

"Are you going to check the fuses?" Wanda suggested.

"Yes, yes, of course," Steve said. He leaned down and timidly popped the cap off the motorcycle's rear. "Wow," he said. "There's a lot of wires in here."

Wanda smirked. "Yes," she said. "You were being honest when you said you were not an engineer."

"I'm always honest," Steve lied. He poked around, hissing when the heat of the fuse burnt into his finger. Wanda pretended not to see, which he was grateful for.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to him.

"Wanda, could you get on the bike for a second?"

She considered him dubiously.

"Please, just trust me," he begged. It didn't take much more to get her to throw her leg over the side with practiced grace. Her feet went immediately towards the brake pedal. "Do you ride with your brother a lot?" he asked. Wanda looked at him for a moment and carefully set her foot flat on the ground.

"Ye-es," she said. "Quite often."

"Then you'll know where the starter button is," Steve said. "Press it for me, would you?"

Wanda obliged. Nothing stirred, not even a splutter. Steve grinned.

"It's your battery," he told her. "Do you have a spark plug?"

"Have you ever done this before?"

"Yes. It's not that difficult."

This wasn't entirely true. He had hot-wired a car before, though. A motorbike was bound to be easier.

Wanda disappeared inside her house and reappeared with a tiny toolkit. Steve hovered over the tools for a second and picked out the spark plug wrench. Wanda watched him, though how she saw out through the curtains of her hair was beyond him.

"See, you just remove the plug," Steve narrated, though his words were somewhat mumbled by the wrench being held in his mouth, "and then you reconnect the spark plug wire and lay the plug next
to the spark plug hole, that's the ticket. Then I make sure metal is touching metal and - voila."

A small spark bounced off the engine. Wanda grinned at Steve and got back onto the bike, pressing the starter button. This time, the Roadster roared to life.

"Where did you learn to do this?" Wanda asked. "Did your father teach you?"

"No," Steve replied, pushing himself up off the ground. He rubbed his hands off on his - Bucky's? - trousers. "Iraq, actually. I hot-wired a car a few times."

"So you lied," Wanda teased. At least, she seemed like she was teasing. "When you told me you'd done this before."

"I have done this before," Steve said. "Just on a car rather than a motorbike. It's the same thing, really."

"You know that isn't true," Wanda hummed. She leaned into the Roadster, her small hands revving the engine, causing birds to flee. "I guess to uphold your virtue you must pretend you never lie rather than admit to yourself it's what you do consistently."

A cat, which seemed to be one of the many that inhabited the Maximoff residence, rubbed against Steve's legs. He tried to pretend it wasn't there.

"I don't-"

"Oh, I don't care if you lie to me," Wanda muttered. Steve wondered how he was supposed to hear her with a deaf ear and an angry Roadster. "I doubt James cares if you lie to him. It's just lying to yourself - that's an issue. And you really should care about that."

"I'm not lying to myself," Steve protested. "You don't even know me."

Wanda blinked. "Doesn't that make me more qualified to point out your flaws, then, without any affection getting in the way?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "Is this what you do for fun? Try to pick out what's wrong with other people?"

"Sort of," Wanda replied. "Am I right?"

Steve remained silent. Wanda smiled.

"I thought so," she whispered. "Thank you, Steve, for helping me with my bike. It is much appreciated."

"You're welcome," Steve said. He began to walk away when he realised what she had said, but when he turned back around, she was already beside him, cocked up on the roaring Roadster, a devilish grin on her face.

"You lied!" he protested. "You said it was your brother's bike."

"What's mine is his," Wanda said. "And I never said I was honest. Do you want me to give you a lift home?"

He should have refused on principle alone. The audacity of Wanda to try and psychoanalyse him when they had just met, the lying, the disregard she showed towards any modicum of decency - it all should've been enough to have Steve turn his nose up at her and refuse. But yet-
The Roadster was so, so gorgeous, and Wanda looked so powerful when she was on it, and Steve wanted to feel that power too. It roared for him, beckoning him, and so Steve let out a deep sigh and hopped on the back of the motorbike, wrapping his arms around Wanda's thin torso.

"Hold on," she said.

What followed was perhaps the best view of Leavenworth Steve had ever seen. Whilst he had no time to pick out the individual buildings as Wanda, who was not wearing a helmet, sped past in her red-hot fury, he soon found he knew the town well enough to document it from nothing more than a bunch of squiggly lines as he zoomed past.

Old abandoned side streets where they used to play hopscotch, and ten years on used as passages to stagger home, grasping onto each other's clothes for support. Alleyways where they got drunk after prom, Darcy the most of all. She had ripped her dress somehow during the night and had to be carried home over Bucky's shoulder wearing nothing but underwear and Clint's dress-shirt. The old candy store where Bucky stole a gob-stopper and then felt so bad about it he paid twice the price for any sweet he bought from old Geoffrey again, even to this day. Behind the butcher's shop, where Steve got his first kiss and Clint interrupted. Behind the greengrocer's, where Clint got his first kiss and Steve interrupted just to spite him.

They whipped past Leavenworth Elementary, which was the first place he had ever met Tony Stark under the bleachers. He'd been made fun of for being smart, and he was sitting poking around on his robot, rubbing insistently at something on his face and declaring it to be hay-fever, when Steve sat down beside him and offered a slice of Sarah Rogers' Victoria sponge.

The playground where he had first met Natasha Romanoff and she had pushed him off the top of the jungle gym (that was the first time he broke his nose).

The bowling alley where Bucky had first encountered Jane. She'd almost hit Steve with a bowling ball, and Bucky started shouting before realising it wasn't Jane's boyfriend who had thrown the ball but the tiny Jane, who got just as angry just as quickly as Bucky, and who Bucky, once he realised this fact, instantly fell in love with (Steve had tried to tell Bucky he knew Jane on several occasions, but Bucky was so determined to protect Steve's honour that he didn't listen to Steve's protests).

Lastly, as they rolled into the Leavenworthian countryside, the Barton family farm came into view upon the hill. Steve could recall tyre swings, and rolling down the hill inside the spares. The old yard where they rode go-karts and ended up blowing the engine up right in Clint's brother's stupid face. The old shed where Rhodey lost his virginity during a house party. And then the forests, where Sam climbed and fell, where they ice-skated on the lake in winter, where Bucky saved Steve's life, where Tony and Jane lapsed in and out of love, where space rocks and alien evidence were found weekly.

Yes, Steve thought to himself, the Roadster pulling to a stop outside his house. There was still a certain air to the town of Leavenworth that made Steve feel like he was coming home.

"Thanks for the ride," he said to Wanda, who merely jolted her hand in an aborted wave before speeding off into the cool afternoon. Wind rustled through the trees like a song, reminding Steve of the magic of that ride, how it captured for him exactly the feeling he used to have - still probably would have - when he was alone at night with Bucky.

He'd judged Wanda too harshly. He had judged everybody too harshly. With shame, he remembered the back of his sketchbook, and the many awful things he had written, all of which were untrue.

He adored Leavenworth. Sharon was not always right. He had never been a True New Yorker. Bucky Barnes was the best man he had ever known, and Natasha Romanoff was a damn good
person. Tony Stark was annoying, yes, but he was not the self-absorbed asshole everyone seemed to think he was. And Sam Wilson was perfect.

Steve went into the kitchen and reached for the sketchbook on the top of the fridge, intent on ripping that page out and perhaps burning it, but was interrupted by the honking of a car horn outside his house.

It was Natasha, Sam and Bucky, all of them piled into Natasha's Ford Picasso, Carrie Understood blasting out of the open windows.

"Get in the car, loser," Natasha called out. "We're going shopping."

She was wearing a pair of sunglasses - in November - and she had put a pink fluffy cover on her steering wheel. A pair of dice hung from her mirror, probably put there by Sam, and Bucky was pouting in the back seat, probably also because of Sam. Steve grinned and slammed his door shut behind him, piling into the back with Bucky, whose knees were up to his shoulders.

"Sam won't put his seat forward," Bucky lamented.

"Damn right I won't."

"Children, please," Natasha said. "This is going to be a nice family outing."

"Family?" Steve repeated.

"Yes, Steve," Sam said.

"Family," Bucky repeated. They had all turned around to consider Steve with small, sentimental smiles.

Steve felt a little bit like crying.

"Well drive then," he said to Natasha, instead.

She rolled her eyes and launched the Picasso into motion.

"Watch you don't tip her," Sam warned.

"Did I ask for your opinion, Wilson?"

"You didn't have to, baby," Sam replied. He was too busy staring out the window to notice how Natasha's fond gaze nearly caused her to crash into an oven-bird.

"Fucking New England," she hissed.

Bucky leaned into Steve.

"This is the day we die," he warned.

Steve had only driven a few streets with Natasha before, so he took Bucky's word for it. He linked his pinkie finger with Bucky's and kept his eyes on the road.
They made it to the shopping centre fifteen miles out of town.

 Barely.

 "You're insane, Nat!" Steve yelled, once the Picasso stopped and they all slumped out of the car onto the tarmac.

 Natasha smirked. Sam doubled over, retching onto the car-park, but nothing came out, probably because he hadn't eaten in anticipation of driving with Natasha. Bucky, though, simply stepped out of the car, flung his arm around Natasha's shoulder, and smiled as she grasped onto his hand.

 "You're getting better," Bucky said to her. With his free hand he leaned forward, pushing a strand of red hair off Natasha's forehead. A line appeared in between her eyebrows, and he moved the piece of hair back.

 "Seriously, Buck?" Steve gulped. "I thought you'd be the one-"

 A sharp glare from Natasha forced Steve into shutting his mouth.

 "I was just going to say-"

 "That it's a lovely day for Christmas shopping," Natasha said.

 A large, sagging metal box that dubbed itself the 'Leavenworth Shopping Complex' sat in the middle of the pot-holed car park. There were no windows, and the large sign above it had most of its lights fading out, so instead it read 'Le worth Shop Cmpx' which was charming, for lack of a better word. In Steve's memory, the shopping centre had been large and new and exciting, but in the years since he had left it was clear there had been no attempts to maintain the grounds, and so weeds grew in the spaces between the tarmac and graffiti decorated the outside walls.

 "Are you sure we'll be able to get all our gifts here?" Steve asked. Halfway through his question, a child began screaming from inside the complex. Steve could sympathise.

 "We know you're a New Yorker now, Steve," Sam said. Bucky pursed his lips together. "But surely you can remember coming here."

 "I remember it," Steve said. "It just looks - different than my memories."

 "Everything always does," Natasha muttered. Bucky smiled down at her, his sad grin that met only the extreme edges of his mouth and not the rest.


 It didn't take long for them to decide on the shops to tackle considering there was even less of a variety than there had been when Steve was eighteen. Hell, even the claw machines that Bucky had become addicted to and spent all his pocket money on had large Out of Order signs plastered over them. There were two clothing stores, a comic book shop that doubled as a tech store, a dreary bookshop, a Pet Stop and a Starbucks, because even Leavenworth was not safe from its reach. They spent the grand majority of the time in one of the clothing stores, for everyone already had the gifts that the other stores offered, and even if they didn't, the prices were low enough that they could get them for themselves if they so desired.
The clothing store was where Steve's slight tendencies towards gossip made him willing risk his life at the cost of information.

"So," Steve began. A green stone pendant hung in the valley of Natasha's neck. "You and Bruce."

"I didn't come here for an inquiry, Rogers," Natasha replied smoothly. Steve glanced around. Sam and Bucky were on the other side of the store, frantically arguing about which colour suited Bucky best out of red and blue (both. The blue brought out his eyes, but the red brought out his lips).

"It's just you and me," Steve said. "When would be a better time?"

"Preferably never." Her hand went up to the necklace, and she tugged on it as she spoke. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you love him?"

"God, Steve," Natasha laughed. "Right in there with that, aren't you?"

Steve scratched at the back of his neck. It gave him an anxiety rash to confront Natasha for a response at any time, but especially about something like this.

"Tony said Bruce said that you said you adored him."

Natasha froze.

"Never trust anything Tony Stark says," she advised. "But in this case... Unfortunately he was correct."

"So what's the difference between love and adoration?" Steve questioned.

"I think love is complete," she murmured. "It's all encompassing. It tears away at you and leaves holes where it shouldn't, holes that can only be filled by them being there. Adoration, though, I think is more of a - a theoretical concept."

"I think you need a dictionary."

"Shut up, Rogers. I'm giving you my definition."

"Did you give the same explanation to Bruce?"

"He knows," Natasha protested. "He knows that I'm in love with the prospect of him, not the real him. Not yet. Maybe not ever." She sighed. "I used to think love was for children. As I've grown, I've realised how wrong I was. It's complicated, Steve."

"You're the one who told me it was the simplest thing," Steve reminded her. "Back in high school, remember?"

"Oh my God," she said. "That's because love for you is so simple, Steve. It's always been right there for you. But for me - I find love a difficult concept to grasp. At least in the way that other people want it."

Steve hummed in understanding, though he didn't really understand at all. "So why don't you just wait for someone else who wants it the way you do?"

"Because it's easier to change myself than wait a lifetime for someone who may never come."
"That's a tough way to live."

Natasha pursed her lips together. "It's a good way not to break, though. Bruce is enough. He's a good doctor, not a good person. And neither am I."

"I think you're hard on yourself."

"Nothing matters, so we might as well," Natasha said. "I'm making Bruce happy by being with him. I think. Anyway, what else is there?"

"Your happiness," Steve replied. "Have you never thought of that?"

"I don't know what my happiness would consist of, Steve," Natasha said. "I can't go through life searching. I don't have the energy."

Steve had, for once, noticed something he doubted others around him had. There was an exhaustion that hung over Natasha that had been vitality when he knew her. It was so subtle, and so tragic, that he doubted anyone who had seen her on a daily basis for the past eight years would've even noticed the change. But Natasha noticed it. She noticed it every single day. It weighed on her how she would never be who she used to be, that she would never reclaim the meagre innocence she managed to escape Moscow with the first time. She was a sketch that was gradually fading to history, her pencil strokes wearing thin along with her patience and her hope. But still - there was life in those eyes. The bright green of Leavenworth's hills rested in them.

"I'm not saying anything, because it's not my place to say," Steve said, "but I feel like you should talk to Sam."

"Sam?" Natasha repeated. "What would Sam know?"

"Well he's - you know."

Natasha blinked twice.

"He doesn't love like other people either," Steve attempted. "I just thought maybe you two could - I dunno, find comfort in each other, or something? Just forget I said it."

Silence fell over both of them, but Natasha's 'thinking line' had appeared between her brows, and Steve knew his words, however stuttered, had hit something within her.

Several minutes later, she picked up a polo-shirt, holding it up to judge the size against Steve's torso. Too small, he thought to himself.


"Well," she huffed, throwing the shirt back down onto the display. "What do you want, Steve?"

Steve glanced at his boots. "That's a bit of a loaded question," he admitted. Natasha made a sound in the back of her throat that sounded a bit like surprise, but that was such an un-Natasha-like reaction that it took Steve a moment to process.

"It's just you and me," she recited, her already smoky voice becoming lower as she sidled up closer to him. It was another of her habits that she'd picked up in high school when she realised boys liked her when she swooped beside them and they got a hint of her rose perfume. "There's no better time if you wanted to try tackling it."
A gust of air escaped his lungs. How the tables had turned.

"I don't know where I would start," he shrugged.

"Just say how you're feeling," Natasha said. "Nobody ever knows where to start. I certainly don't."

"Yeah but at least you always know who you are," Steve said. His hand grasped into one of the shirts, and the price sticker crumpled under his grip. "You're always you, Natasha. You never feel..."

"I never feel... what?" Natasha prompted. Her eyes were dull, but with a hint of interest lingering behind them, as if it would be embarrassing for her to seem as if she cared for a moment, even if that was all she ever did.

"You never feel... lost, I suppose," Steve mumbled. "Lost in your own mind, scrambling for meaning."

"Is that what it feels like in that pretty head of yours?" Natasha asked. There was no remnant of a smirk left on her face. Her fingers caught on the end of Steve's sleeve and gently stroked over his wrist.

Steve swallowed. "I think so? I don't know."

Natasha didn't speak. She didn't push, but she didn't retreat either. Eventually, Steve let go of the t-shirt and bit into his own lip instead.

"I just - I see myself differently, now," he said. "And when I try to explain how it feels to have the perception of yourself altered so much, nobody seems to understand. It's like - I thought I was one person, but it turns out I might never have been him. I know it probably doesn't make sense to anybody else."

"It makes sense to me," Natasha said suddenly. Steve turned to her, but she wasn't looking at him anymore. Instead, something in the distance had become much more interesting. Her hand drifted from Steve's and hung at her side. "I get it, Steve. I do. I think James would as well."

"Maybe," Steve admitted. "But Sam - Sam said I was a good man. Everybody's always said that, for as long as I can remember. In high school I just - I held onto that."

"It became your identity."

"It became the only thing I could do that Bucky couldn't do better." His shoulders heaved downwards. "I shouldn't be saying that. Bucky's a good person..."

"He's a hard act to follow," Natasha muttered. "I understand that, more now than I ever could in high school. You spend a year in Moscow being known as 'James' friend' and you find out how exhausting growing up with him could be. You were always with him."

"It wasn't always exhausting," Steve said, though loving Bucky had been just as tiring as hating him, at times. "He's my best friend. It's just - he's so good at everything. I thought, maybe if I could be good at being a person, it would be enough to make people look at me instead. But the thing is... I'm not that guy anymore. Maybe I never was."

"Steve, come on," Natasha said. "Apart from Sam, you're the best person I know."

Steve averted his eyes. "You've never said that to me before."
Natasha shrugged. "Doesn't make it any less true," she said. Steve gave a bitter laugh. "Steve, stop it. Be honest with me, now. Do you trust me?"

Something in her voice betrayed her. The question wasn't just to prove a point to Steve about his own self worth; it was to prove something to Natasha, to validate something within herself.

In that moment, she was no longer the confident, powerful Miss Romanoff, or the hopelessly cool Nat, she was Natalia Romanova, the scared eleven year old girl Steve had met on the top of the jungle gym, one and a half years out of Russia and six months into realising this was permanent.

Steve placed his hand on her arm. Her skin burnt where he touched it.

"I do now," he told her. Natasha's eyes became the colour of grass, or algae peeking up through seawater. "And I'm always honest."

The last part was a lie, as Wanda had so helpfully provided evidence for. But the first bit ... Steve was surprised to find there was no remnant of deceit in his heart concerning it. Natasha, who was always adept at reading people, obviously realised this as well, because she abruptly went back to picking up shirts and folding them again.

"So you should believe me when I tell you that you're a good person, Steve," she said. She sounded like she'd smoked fifty cigarettes in the last minute, like she was struggling against the waves, drowning. But her point had been made, and that was all that mattered to Natasha.

"The person you knew might've been," Steve said, "but this new Steve? He's-

He's a man who put bullets through guys' brains and threw bombs into buildings with kids in them. He's a man who pretended not to be aware of the civilian casualties he was causing, but knew the exact numbers to put in the reports. He's a man who took short-cuts in a warzone in order to prove something to himself about his own worth. He's not a man who deserved a shot at redemption. Sometimes, Steve wished he was.

"Oh, get your head out of your ass," Natasha snapped, "and look around. Every single one of us is a fucking asshole. You think Clint got a wife and three kids by being nice? You think Rhodey has his life together because he helped grannies across the street? You think Tony has got this far due to having an insane ability to make everyone around him feel comfortable? No, Steve. We're all horrible people, because we were raised that way. We've compromised, sometimes in ways that make us not be able to sleep at night but we did it because we're all the same, Steve! There's a reason why no one visits Leavenworth and this is it! We're all awful human beings, every one of us."

She ran her fingers through her hair, her perfectly manicured nails scraping against her scalp.

"But the thing is - our awfulness joins us together. It makes us unable to live anywhere else but here. And you're stuck with us too, Steve, whether you like it or not. So shut your mouth, stop being so depressing, and choose your fucking polo shirt before I strangle you with it, you hear me?"

Steve gaped at her, his hands immediately going up to protect himself when she flung a particularly ugly shirt at his face. He pulled it down to reveal Sam and Bucky, both looking disgruntled, coming back towards them. Bucky held a blue t-shirt folded ten times over in his hand.

"What happened over here?" Sam raised an eyebrow.

Natasha gave him a mega-watt smile. Her elbow went into Steve's stomach for him to do the same, but he was too busy trying to remember how to close his mouth, and for more reasons than just Natasha's uncanny ability to change her personality within a second's notice.
Nothing happened that should've made this realisation hit Steve at that precise moment. In fact, it was one of those moments in life that were so overwhelmingly normal and forgettable that one could feel a sense of comfort when living them, that anything they did or said would soon be forgotten to the passage of time, probably by the end of the conversation. As shoppers buzzed around behind them discussing Christmas trees and how many were coming for dinner, Steve couldn't see anyone but Bucky.

He was wearing that small smile that he sometimes got when Sam insulted him. His hair was slightly shorter now than it had been when Steve first arrived on account of Natasha cutting a chunk off of it 'by mistake' while she and Buck had been drinking, and it was slicked back against his scalp, shining in the dim, fusty lighting. There was a small line of worry between his eyebrows as his gaze darted between Natasha and Steve, and it developed further when he realised Steve was still standing there, face stoic, staring at him.

"Steve?" he said, his lips forming around the word like a spell.

God, his mouth.

How had Steve not wanted it before? How had Steve not noticed that tiny piece of skin on his lower lip, chapped from hours of consideration, from years of concern over his friends and sisters?

Bucky's hands, still brown despite the absence of New England sun, had random letters jotted down over their surface that Steve knew Bucky would never remember the meaning of by the end of the day. He would ask Steve, then, what they stood for, and Steve would shake his head, and Bucky would turn to Becca, who would roll her eyes, and then, reluctantly, he would phone Natasha, who was so adept at guessing Bucky's codes that she might as well have taught him them.

Steve wanted to run his fingertips along the curve of the 'a' in the one full length word Bucky had trailing up the side of his pointer finger; BECCA. He wanted to move up beside his friend, rest his chin on his shoulder, and say something like, "what's she done this time?" with kisses in between each word, just to take the tension out of those shoulders, to get another easy Barnes smile, to have Bucky sigh and say something charming like, "God, Steve, you don't need to kiss me all the time, but boy am I glad that you do." Something like he used to say when he opened the door and saw a soaked Steve Rogers holding a bucket in one hand and a broken umbrella in the other one.

Something like that.

"Steve!"

Steve shook his head. The thoughts vanished without more persuasion, as they always had a tendency to do.

Ignoring it had worked for nearly fifteen years. Pretending they didn't exist worked even better. The day and hour he confronted these feelings would be the day he lost his best friend, because Bucky Barnes was as straight as a ruler and there was nothing Steve could do to change that.

Not that he wanted to. Bucky was his friend, just like Nat was his friend, or Sam was his friend, or Tony (maybe not Tony).

But Steve had never wanted to kiss Nat, or Sam. He had (sadly, and very embarrassingly) considered Tony one lonely day before he had met Bucky, but that hadn't reappeared since, a fact he was glad of.

"You trying something new?" he managed to say, gesturing to the t-shirt Bucky was holding. Bucky
looked at him, one raised eyebrow, and licked out over his lips.

"Stop licking your fucking lips!" Steve screamed. "You do it all the time and I can't stop looking! It seems like I have an oral fixation, just fucking stop."

But he only said it inside his head, so no one heard it but him.

"Oh yeah," Bucky laughed. "This fucker here's dared me to try it on."

"It's time to get some colour in your wardrobe, my friend," Sam said. He thumped his hand against Bucky's back. Bucky sent Steve a pleading expression. Steve just shrugged, mostly because he'd caught sight of the extra-small size label on the shirt, and- that was just fantastic, really-

"I think it'll suit you, James," Natasha said. Bucky ruffled her hair. (The fact that he did it with his metal arm spoke volumes as to how little he trusted Natasha's reaction to be that of a normal human's. After all, she did castrate a guy once just because he dared to piss her off.)

"Go on, Tin-Foil," Sam said. "We'll be waiting."

Bucky gave him a salute and disappeared into the changing room. The rest of the group followed him and situated themselves on the old couch that had been placed for bored family members to rest themselves upon.

Natasha picked at her nails. Sam scrolled down through his phone. Steve's eyes were fixed on the shadow that moved underneath the flap-door of Bucky's cubicle.

He still got his shirt caught on his head when he was pulling it off, and had to strain for a moment to get himself free. It was the little moments like that when Steve felt his heart fall out of his chest; the moments that reminded him that Bucky was a human, and a nerdy one at that, and that he had thoughts and feelings and motivations beyond getting screwed by a pretty girl or getting elected as valedictorian.

Steve pulled his sketchbook out of Natasha's carrier bag and flipped to the middle, past landscapes of Leavenworth hills, portraits of the Howlies, the beginning of Sharon's cheekbones which he never managed to finish. Natasha tapped Sam's arm and he put away his phone, smirking at her.

Absentmindedly, Steve began sketching the curve of Bucky's mouth, the roll of his tongue over it, the valley of his chest-bone. When Steve closed his eyes he could picture Bucky's skin being sheen with a mixture of sweat and bathwater, brown in patches, little hollows of heat captured in cell. In the drawing, Bucky's hair lay in baby ringlets against his forehead and was perfectly accented by the sharpness of Steve's pencil, the rub of his fingers.

He was only beginning to shade Bucky's lips when a small cough interrupted his flow.

Steve's pencil snapped in his grip. Sam was too busy passing Bucky a fiver to notice, but Natasha began chuckling lightly to herself under her breath.

The shirt was blue and decorated with the emblem of an American flag. The fabric clung to Bucky's skin, and it was clear he couldn't move his arms and probably would have to buy the shirt just so he could cut it off later (what a fucking thought, what a-).

The tips of Bucky's ears were tinted with a dusting of red, and his toes were pointed inwards. It was clear he was uncomfortable, but when Sam said, "God, man, look at you," it seemed to perk him up and he began messing around, striking a modelling pose that made Steve's mouth go into cotton, because it wasn't so much of a pose as it was a pout, and Bucky's lips ...
Bucky was - he was *obscene*. He made Steve proud to be an American, more than he ever had been in the army.

"What do you think, Stevie?" he asked.

Quickly, Steve cycled through the options in his head.

1) You look great, Buck, if you wanted to try out for a porno.

No. It would just make him uncomfortable again. Or worse: it would make him smirk.

2) Your fucking mouth.

No. That one wasn't even about the shirt.

3) Buy it buy it buy it please so I can rip it off you with my teeth.

No. Too-

"It's definitely - different," Steve spluttered. Bucky glanced down at himself. "Good different, though," he said. "Really good different. Well I mean - not that your normal is a bad same, I mean it's good, I love you in leather - fuck no, I mean that your jackets are cool and I always liked the whole bad boy - oh fuck."

It was times like this that being bisexual was really, really hard. Bucky smirked (Steve's knees became wobbly, and he was a grown man, for God's sake) and pulled at his lower lip.

"You think I should get it?" he asked.

"I think you'll need to," Steve said, "to get it off."

"I could probably manage it," Bucky replied, "if I had someone to help out."

Nope. This wasn't happening. Nope. Not that fucking day. Steve was not going to go into a tiny cubicle and peel that shirt off Bucky's body, simply because although it was tempting (so tempting it hurt his throat to think of it) he wouldn't be able to hold himself back from putting his tongue down Bucky's throat and-

That wouldn't be good.

Steve pursed his lips together. "Cool," he said, and Bucky's eyebrow twitched, because that didn't make any sense. Steve grabbed his sketchbook off the ground and made a break for it, banging his shoulder painfully against the door of the changing rooms as he passed it.

"Steve," Natasha called out to him. Thankfully, she was the only one in the group to follow him. "Steve, are you okay? You're grey."

"Yeah," Steve said. He tried to think of something else. Anything else but Bucky. "I'm fine. I just remembered I saw this shirt I want for - for Christmas, yeah, and I was gonna go get it for you to get me."

Natasha folded her arms across her chest and opened her mouth to speak. Steve was already halfway across the store by the time her first word came out, which was a death wish, but not as much as it would've been if he'd stayed to explain himself.

Five minutes later and Bucky and Sam also emerged from the changing room, Sam with a frown on
his face and Bucky appearing significantly like a chastised teenager. Steve resolutely avoided both of
their eyes and scuttled past them.

"I'm trying on this shirt," he explained to Sam, who, without even looking at him, Steve just knew
had the most done expression on his face. "What? Nat is desperate to buy me one for Christmas."

"Go try on your polo," Sam said, "before I strangle you with it."

Weird. That was the second person who had said that to him in the same day. There must've been
something in the water.

Steve closed the door, focusing solely on getting changed - he deduced that yes, this shirt was too
small and therefore it was, according to Natasha, perfect - and trying not to faint. When he was back
in his ordinary clothes, he stared for a moment in the mirror and noticed his dilated pupils, the small
sliver of sweat on his upper lip. He hastily wiped it away, smoothed down his hair and made his way
back towards his friends, who were conjugated in a suspicious-looking circle on the other side of the
store.

He crept towards them, making sure that they couldn't see him for the clothes hangers that interrupted
their view. They were talking in hushed voices, so Steve was basically upon them by the time he
could hear with his deaf ear. Both Natasha and Sam looked perplexed.

"No," Bucky said firmly. "No, no. I'm not asking him."

"Why not, though?" Natasha asked. "Last time we had this conversation and you refused, he left for
eight years. It's time, James."

"Yeah, man," Sam said. "You need to grow some balls and just spit it out."

"You don't think I've been trying?" Bucky snapped. "You don't think I've looked at him a million
times and wanted to ask him? You don't understand."

Shit. Had Bucky realised -

"No, I don't understand," Sam admitted. "But Natasha does, even if she doesn't want to say it."

Natasha remained silent, but seemed to agree.

"What's stopping you, James?" she asked.

"I'm fucking terrified, okay?" Bucky said. His voice was strained and breathy, like he'd ran a
marathon. His throat was working overtime. "I can cope with most things. I try not to - not to dwell
on things that scare me. But this is the one thing in my life that I can't do, Nat. I can't do it. Please
don't make me."

"But what if it's all just a big misunderstanding? What if he-" Sam questioned. Bucky groaned and
ran his hands down his face.

"He doesn't!" Bucky said. "He's made that pretty damn clear. It would mean one of us letting the
other down easy, and that would be worse. Just-"

"This one fits," Steve interrupted, coming into view. Bucky's eyes widened into saucers. His mouth
snapped shut. Natasha frowned. Sam glared at Steve. Steve swallowed and passed the shirt over to
Natasha.
Bucky's chest swelled. "Steve..."

"I gotta go," Steve said. "I told Gabe I'd phone him today, and he goes to work soon."

"Steve," Natasha warned.

"I'll see you guys later."

"Steve!" Sam called out after him, but Steve could move faster than Sam could speak. He made his way for the exit, but then, upon realising Natasha was his ride, swore harshly under his breath. A woman with two small children shot him a look, but Steve couldn't find it within himself to care.

His breathing became rapid. He couldn't really feel his face. Well, he could, but it was like a mask that was quickly melting off. He wondered if Bucky had caught the realisation on his face. He wondered how he would cope if he had.

Thinking fast, Steve ducked into the shopping centre's disabled toilet, locked the door behind him, and pressed his hands into the wall.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he muttered, kicking at the floor until the toes of his brown boots were scuffed. Bucky would be mad about that. He always loved those boots.

The second he recognised that thought process, Steve glanced up into the mirror and swore again. He was bright red at this point, blotches the colour of a fire-truck developing on his cheeks. He gripped onto the sides of the sink, remembering how he had done the same thing when Bucky shaved him so many months ago, and he considered doubling over when he realised just how much he wanted that to happen again.

Bucky knew. Bucky could see it on Steve's face. That was the only thing they could've been talking about so seriously.

Ten seconds. Five breaths. That was all he allowed himself to panic for. He wasn't going down that road again, of shutting down the second he witnessed emotions on his own features.

Although it was Bucky who was causing this pain, all Steve wanted was for him to be standing in the doorway, a small sad smile on his face, as if Steve was breaking his heart just by being next to him. Which was how he had always looked at Steve. Which was how George had looked at Winnie. Which was how Steve looked at Bucky, now.

"Fuck," Steve said to himself. It was no longer a whisper. "I love Bucky."

As a brother, Steve told himself. No, no, his brain replied. Don't do this to me, Steve thought, not now. Please don't tell me I'm in love.

Water dripped onto the cracked sink at the same time as a knock appeared at the door.

Steve froze.

"Steve?" Bucky's voice echoed. "Steve, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Steve called back. He grabbed toilet paper and rubbed at his face, but the tears kept coming. It was the first time he'd cried since - since...

"Steve?"
"I'm fine, Buck," Steve protested. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine to me, pal," Bucky replied. "Come on. Let me in."

The toilet paper broke apart, leaving little remnants over Steve's sticky face.

"I can take care of myself," he shouted desperately. A thump on the door. Bucky had either begun to lean on it or, and the thought made Steve's breath catch, he had pressed his head against it.

"I know you can," Bucky, barely audible, mumbled. "But you don't have to. I'm here, Steve."

Steve sat down on the toilet seat and put his head in his hands. He couldn't get oxygen into his lungs. His heart was beating faster than it had in his life.

"Please, Steve," Bucky said. "Please, let me in."

I can't, Steve thought to himself. Agreed, his brain replied.

"Just tell me what's wrong, Steve, I can help."

How could Bucky help Steve with the fact that he'd been in love with his best friend for fifteen years and had only just realised it? Bucky couldn't begin to understand how Steve had wanted him so much for all those years, but still left. How, in Afghanistan when the Howlies were talking about their wives, Steve was only thinking of grey eyes and a smile in the shape of a crescent moon. How Steve, when he heard that Winnie and George were dead, had went to the gym and broke a punching bag off its chain, how he still hadn't begun to process that grief that everybody else in Leavenworth had already moved past, how it brought him right back to being eighteen again with everyone who belonged to him six feet under.

I love you. That's what's wrong. I've always loved you.

"I just feel sick, Buck, that's all," Steve said.

"Probably Sam's gumbo last night, eh?"

Steve chuckled despite himself. "Probably," he said.

"That son-of-a-bitch has been wanting to poison us since camp."

"Us?"

"Alright, Steve, me." There was a pause. "I was a bit of an asshole, wasn't I?"

"Was?"

A soft laugh broke Steve's heart all over again.

"Am," Bucky corrected.

"I'll be fine," Steve said.

"We're leaving in about ten minutes," Bucky said, "if you wanted to meet us at the Picasso. It might be a bit of a walk."

"I've walked further," Steve said, thinking of deserts.
"Not in the dead of winter," Bucky replied. "Besides, it's Christmas, Steve. Or close to it. We're not leaving you here alone, no matter how much indigestion Sam has given you."

Steve rubbed his hands over his cheeks. Without even looking in the mirror, for he knew what he would see, he clicked the door open.

This action obviously shocked Bucky, because the older man stumbled forwards slightly. His eyes narrowed as he took in Steve's appearance.

"Allergies," Steve said. Perhaps spending most of his childhood with Tony Stark did have some benefits, because the excuse came so naturally Steve almost believed it. Bucky, however, did not.

"I thought it was the gumbo."

"I'm allergic to gumbo."

"Steve..."

"Come on, you guys," Sam called. "Natasha's getting testy."

"I fucking am not," Natasha snapped. "We've been shopping for two hours, and my limit is an hour. I've been more than patient, Wilson."

"I know, darling," Sam replied. "You're a saint."

Steve gave Bucky a weak smile. "You hear Her Highness," Steve said. "We should probably go."

"Steve, I need to talk to you about something."

Steve began to walk towards the exit. "Talk about it in the car."

Bucky's hand grabbed onto his wrist, holding him back.

"It's important," Bucky implored. Steve looked at him. His eyes were hard.

"Will it change things?" Steve asked.

Bucky blinked. "Maybe?" he answered.

"Then don't say it now," Steve said. "Hey, no need to look so devastated, Buck. We have plenty of time, right? We don't need to talk about this, not right now."

Bucky sighed. "You're right," he said. "Plenty of time."

Steve threw his arm around Bucky's shoulder, which was significantly easier now that he was slightly taller, and they walked towards the exit, two eleven year olds, content to have made a friend who understood the importance of setting a nose the right way, yet still attempted to do it regardless.

He had ignored the Bucky Barnes Problem for fifteen years, ever since that week in high school when the mere idea of having a crush on his best friend had hit him with the force of a freight train. He could ignore it a couple more, if it meant he could still feel Bucky's shoulders move as he laughed, if he could still sit in the back of the Picasso, pressed between Bucky and Sam and feel the same easy camaraderie that had been present their entire lives.

Nothing had to change.
It was no big deal.
Chapter 18

It wasn't a big deal.

In fact, life might've even become slightly easier now that Steve didn't have to concentrate so hard on not thinking about how attractive Bucky Barnes was.

He could go around to his house and play Uno without having to restrain himself from appreciating how Buck's muscles strained against his shirts, how his jeans clung to his thighs, or how his lips twisted into the most beautiful of shapes with each passing emotion. He could bake with Bucky and flirt without his inner Steve screaming at him. He could fantasise about Bucky, could draw him and dream about him without wondering why that was.

But yet-

It also meant that when he saw Bucky pull his sister into a tight bear hug, he had to sit there and live with the pain in his chest. It meant that when Bucky winked at him, he had to try and wriggle his toes to get feeling back into them. It meant that every single time Bucky was endearing towards another person or, God forbid, an animal, Steve went home and beat up his own pillow to get the frustration out. It meant that he couldn't touch Bucky anymore without wanting to touch him all over (and maybe lick him, too) which was highly difficult, considering the fact that they touched all the fucking time.

Steve had never noticed that before, but then again, he hadn't wanted to notice it, either. But now that he had, he couldn't help but bristle each time Bucky's fingers drew across his while they were walking, or how Bucky would come up behind him when he was cooking and place his head on his shoulder, his soft minty breath tingling on Steve's neck.

It was a week and a half before Christmas. Becca had demanded that Steve and Bucky help her make gingerbread men and cookies for her friends' presents, kind of like a little goodie bag to thank them for putting up with her shit, because she was a terribly angsty teenager (though no worse than Steve or Bucky had been, admittedly). Steve had went up to his attic and found some of his Ma's old recipes, and together with assistance from the ever accommodating Mama Wilson, they managed to create the perfect concoction for Becca's classmates to enjoy.

He watched with a fond smile on his face as Bucky's face went red from beating the cookie mix.

"You're weak," Becca said, taking the bowl from him and continuing to stir herself. Bucky punched her gently on the arm.

"I'm disabled," he corrected, flexing his flesh hand.

"Don't pull that shit with me," Becca said. "You've got a metal arm, Buck, come on."

"Language," Steve and Bucky said at the same time. Becca let out a groan and went back to the cookie mix. If she licked the back of the wooden spoon a few times behind Bucky's back, Steve wasn't going to say.

"Your friends will love these," Steve said, taking the bowl from her.

"Yeah, hopefully. Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah Becks?"
"Can you come to my play?" she asked. She scooped the dough out onto baking tray, forming it into tiny hills. Leavenworth High had an annual production - Steve knew, because he'd gone to watch Bucky in it four years in a row - and Becca had been ecstatic to be given the role of the Virgin Mary.

"Of course I can, Little Miss," Steve replied. He ruffled his hand through her hair and she beamed up at him. Bucky put the tray into the oven and set the timer. "I thought you only had one ticket left after Mary and Delilah's, though."

"I do," Becca said, "but I want you to come." She lowered her voice, leaning in close to Steve to whisper conspiratorially as Bucky moved some of the baking equipment around. "Bucky's too embarrassing. He takes so many pictures. When I was eleven, he got Miss Frost to stop the entire play so he could get a photo of me for the album."

"I still think he'd like to be there," Steve said. Becca's mouth formed into a pout.

"But my friends love you so much!"


"Polly's an asshole."

"Be nice, Becks."

"I am being nice! I let her sit beside us at dinner time and everything. That's nice."

"That is nice," Steve said, struck once again by the similarities between Becca and her brother. They were both so popular, the ringleaders of their social group. If you heard something at any stage of the day, it was probably Becca's phone ringing, a different person each time. "Do you know what would be even nicer?"

"If I let my stupid brother come," Becca groaned. Bucky, who had began to listen in on their conversation behind Becca's back, smirked.

"Do you think there'd be enough tickets for both of us?"

"I don't think Jared's dad is going," Becca mused. "So I could get one off him."

"That would be great," Steve said. "We all want to see how amazing an actress you are."

Becca grinned. Bucky mouthed 'thank you.' Steve smiled back.

"I'll keep him from being embarrassing," Steve mumbled to Becca. She held out her pinkie finger, and Steve linked it with his own.

"Swear?" Becca said.

"I'll try my best," Steve laughed.

Seemingly content, Becca sat down at the kitchen table and began scrolling down her phone. Steve started washing some of the dishes, simply because they didn't have enough bowls to make the gingerbread in. He felt Bucky press up against him as he did so.

"Get off, Buck," he laughed.

"Nah." The heat of Bucky's breath sent shivers up Steve's back. "You can multi-task."
"Yeah, I know. Considering I'm doing all the work," Steve said. On the other side of the kitchen, Becca's mouth formed into a scowl, no doubt at something Jared, now her boyfriend, had said. Steve didn't know why she'd date him if he made her so angry all the time, but it was something to do with him being a quarterback. Bucky understood.

"And I appreciate you for it," Bucky replied. "It'll be a nice throwback, making your Ma's gingerbread again."

"Yeah," Steve swallowed. "It'll be nice."

"We're bringing the taste sensation to a whole new generation, Stevie."

"The Lord's work."

"You two are so gross," Becca murmured, throwing her phone down on the table. Bucky laughed, but removed his hands from Steve's waist and took a couple steps back. Steve felt the lack of warmth immediately.

"Hey, watch it kiddo," Steve warned. "Or we'll leave you to make these gingerbread men yourself."

"I think I can handle it," she replied.

"We have something you don't, though," Steve said.

"Years of experience!" Bucky piped up in the background.

"Oh my God, you two are so-"

They never got to hear the end of Becca's latest observation, because a knock bounced against the thin walls of the Barnes' residence.

"Get that, would you darling?" Bucky said, trying, and failing, to get the apron off over his head. Steve stepped towards him to help him out, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, but was once again interrupted by Becca. This time, it was a loud question emanating from the hallway.

"Who are you?"

A familiar crisp response came back.

"Sharon Carter. I'm a friend of Steve's. I was told I could probably find him here. Is he home?"

"Yeah, he's here." Becca glanced back at her brother and his best friend, who were both frozen in place, staring at Sharon. A glob of dough on the end of the spoon Bucky was holding splatted onto the floor. "Do you want to come in?"

Sharon smiled awkwardly at her. "That would be nice," she said. Becca stood back to allow her in, and closed the door behind her, mouthing 'what the fuck' under her breath. Neither Steve nor Bucky chastised her.

Sharon was wearing all white, as per usual, and her hair was perfectly coiffed into an elaborate up-do, probably at the courtesy of Maria Hill. A trench coat billowed around her as she stepped out of the wind, and she let out a shiver, wrapping her thin fashion scarf more tightly around her neck.

Neither Bucky nor Steve made an attempt to speak. Sharon's cheeks were tainted with pink, and her eye-makeup was smudged from the snow.
"Sharon Carter," she said, stepping towards Bucky first. Her hand was outstretched. Bucky dropped the spoon into the sink and stared at her hand as if it was a gun. After an awkward pause, he gave her a tentative handshake.

"James Barnes," Bucky said, and it was odd hearing him introduce himself like that. He wasn't James to anybody but Natasha, and maybe Winnie when she was irritated at his antics.

"You're not what I was expecting," she said with a weak attempt at a smile. The Adam's apple in Bucky's throat jolted upwards.

"What were you expecting?" he asked. There was a dangerous edge to his words that took Steve back to the very first time he had seen him upon his return. The Winter Soldier had emerged, and Steve wasn't quite sure what had prompted it. Sharon was being perfectly polite, and she had never wronged Bucky; hell, she'd never even met him.

She floundered, but soon gathered herself. The handshake, which had been going on for an inordinate amount of time, abruptly ended, and she shoved her hand into her coat pocket. Bucky let his own hang limply by his side.

"A nineteen year old boy in a Harvard hoodie," she admitted. "It's just always how I pictured you. Steve spoke about you a lot."

Lie. Steve had barely ever spoken to Sharon about anything, but especially not about Bucky Barnes. However, upon this sentence, Bucky and Sharon seemed to remember that Steve existed, and turned to look at him. Bucky had a strained expression on his face, whereas Sharon was smiling.

"What're you doing here?" Steve managed. Sharon deflated.

"It's Christmas," she said, as if that should've answered everything. When Steve continued to gape at her, she sighed. "You're supposed to be with family on Christmas. Listen, Steve. I made a mistake, and I'm sorry. Please. Come home."

Steve opened his mouth to speak. Becca did the same.

"Do you mind giving us a moment?" Bucky asked instead. Sharon narrowed her eyes at him, but conceded.

"Of course," she said. She stepped out of the room, guided by Becca, who was finally doing something other than rolling her eyes, though whether the confusion and repeated whisperings of 'what the fuck' were any better than her attitude was debatable.

"What is wrong with you?!" Bucky demanded the second the door closed. Steve sat down hard at the kitchen table. His hands trembled minutely.

"I don't - I don't know."

"You're not seriously considering it, are you?"

Steve stared at a piece of cookie dough under his thumbnail. Bucky swore under his breath.

"Fuck, Steve," Bucky spat. Despite wearing an apron that said Kiss the Cook, he was still the scariest sight Steve had ever seen, besides Natasha, the first day he met her. "Why wouldn't you go running back to Sharon? After all, she just dumped you on your birthday!"

Steve winced.
"Why would you stay here, where I could protect you? You'll just leave again, and you'll lose your hearing completely, and I'll lose another arm and we'll be even more fucked up than we are right now."

A loud crash made Steve jump. Bucky had thrown a bowl into the sink with enough force to smash it.

"God, Buck," he said, finally jolted into speaking. "Don't wreck the place."

"You're thinking about it though, aren't you?" Bucky said. Steve licked his lips. Bucky's metal hand clenched and unclenched frantically by his side. "You're fucking thinking about it. I can't believe this."

"She's my girlfriend."

"Ex-girlfriend!"

"Shut up," Steve said. "She'll hear you."

"I don't give a flying fuck if the Queen of England hears me, Steve," Bucky snapped. "You're being stupid."

"And you're being insensitive!" Steve shouted back. "I was with her for years, Buck. Those feelings don't just disappear. If the love of your life was standing right in front of you, begging you to come home, what would you do?"

The question seemed to be a dagger in Bucky's chest. He slumped over the kitchen counter, breathing heavily.

"Exactly," Steve said, though he knew Bucky hadn't answered. Maybe it was best that he didn't. "I need to go back to New York, Buck. It's where I belong."

"Is it?" Bucky asked. His eyes were wide and glassy.

"I know you'll miss me for a while," Steve said. "But I'll keep in touch this time, I swear. We can still be friends."

Bucky rolled his head back, eyes closed. "Friends."

"Yeah, Buck," Steve said. "I'll text you so much you'll wish I wouldn't. I'm not going to make the same mistakes again."

Grey eyes remained fixed on the ceiling.

"Do you love her?" Bucky asked.

"Yeah, Buck," Steve said. "I love her."

Bucky swallowed a few times, obviously struggling for breath. Steve stood up from the table and moved towards the door. He only paused for a moment to consider going over to Bucky and pulling him into a hug. He decided against it.

Sharon and Becca were sitting silently on opposite ends of the sofa, the latter obviously annoyed and the former visibly pained. When Steve walked in Sharon shifted, and sent him a wide smile.

"Well?" she said.
"I'm coming home," Steve said. Sharon grinned and stood up, wrapping her arms tightly around Steve. (Steve tried not to think about how small her upper arms were in comparison to...) "I'll go pack my things, okay?"

He couldn't look at Becca as he left, though he did hear a small whimper.

Somehow in the past six months, Steve had basically moved into the Barnes' residence. There was no point fighting what had become second nature over their lives together. Even in elementary school, the teachers knew to send homework back with Bucky to help Steve keep up when he was sick. Everybody had known that if Steve and Bucky could be together, they would be.

Steve's satchel containing his sketchbook was sitting propped up against the bed that he and Bucky shared (for ... warmth, he supposed? To stop the nightmares?) and so he used it as a suitcase, throwing some clothes into it, not much caring if the t-shirts were his or Bucky's. It was difficult to tell the difference now, anyway, they both wore the other's clothes so frequently. Bucky had even begun to wear more colours than black now, namely blue and red, so it made the distinction even more vague.

Upon going down the stairs, Steve could hear Sharon and Bucky talking lowly. He paused, sat himself down on the middle step, and listened.

"He loves you so much, I could tell," Sharon mumbled. "He told me plenty without saying a word. The fact that you're the only one he didn't write about in his comics just cements for me that you're different from everybody else for him."

"Different from you?"

"Yes, I think so, even though on regular occasions he told me he adored me, and I believed him."

The stair creaked under Steve, but thankfully the weight of the silence between them meant they never thought to check on the noise.

"You will still keep in touch with him when he comes to New York, won't you?"

"Of course I will," Bucky replied, without hesitation.

"Because if you hurt him, I'll find fifteen different ways to shove your hand up your ass."

Bucky let out a little laugh. He was probably desensitised from threats from a lifetime of being Natasha Romanoff's right hand man.

"Last I heard, doll, you were the one who hurt him. And he left me, remember?"

Sharon's voice suddenly got very soft, and very hard to hear.

"I know how hard it is to love him." Or at least, that's what Steve thought she said. "I know you understand that more than me. But he's a good man, despite his faults, and he just needs some patience, some care and understanding. I was never good at that. I tried so hard, but I wasn't. You were, though. You are."

"Yet you came back. You obviously don't think I'm that special, sugar."

Steve's breath hitched in his chest. He was somewhat expecting to hear Bucky clatter to the floor following the patented Carter Punch, but there was nothing. Curious, Steve peeked over the banister and through the open kitchen door. Bucky had put one hand up to his temple, and Sharon was
grasping onto his sleeve.

"Chin up, James," she said. Slowly, she reached into her purse. "Here's my number. I'll answer, day or night."

"What is this?" Bucky asked. "A book club?"

"Something like it," Sharon laughed. "A Steve Rogers Support Club, perhaps. If I'd had one before, it might've been easier."

Bucky stared down at the business card, his eyes darting from one corner of it to another. His throat worked dangerously.

Steve pushed himself forward and walked back into the kitchen. Both of them glanced up at him. Becca came in not so long after. Sharon surged upwards and pressed a soft kiss on Steve's bare cheek. Her fingers, nails painted white, entwined with Steve's own.

"I love you, you know," she said. Steve bit at his bottom lip.

"I love you too," he said, looking over her shoulder as he did so, because Sharon was standing right in front of him, telling him she loved him, whilst Bucky was standing behind her not saying a word.

On one hand, there was familiarity. Sharon was a pair of old shoes; slightly worn down, perhaps, and broken in places, but comfortable. Bucky, however, was an unknown adventure, and for once in his life, Steve was too terrified to take the risk.

The decision was easy. Or it should've been, on paper.

Bucky averted his eyes and went back to scraping the dough off the inside of the bowl. It was such a strange thing to be doing at that moment. Sharon noticed it too, for she rose an eyebrow in his direction, though her face read of a sudden understanding. Steve, as usual, was on the outside.

"Have you got everything?" Sharon asked. "We can stop by your house on the way, if you want."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah, that's me."

"Well," Sharon said. She dusted off her slacks. "Time to get going, then. We have a long drive ahead of us. Pleasure meeting you, James."

"Feeling's mutual, sweetheart."

Steve's grip on his satchel tightened. Becca pushed herself up from the kitchen table. There was no phone in her hand, but there were tears in her eyes. She pulled Steve into a hug, pressing her face into his chest with such force it almost collapsed his thorax.

"You're not really going, are you?" she said, her voice stifled by tears and Steve's shirt. Steve gripped tightly onto her arms and closed his eyes. He pressed his lips into her hair, and she gasped a sob.

"You know what I told you when you and Freddie broke up?" Steve asked. Becca nodded against his chest, but didn't say anything else. "That you have to do what makes you happy, no matter what?"

"Yeah," Becca said.

"I'm doing what makes me happy," Steve mumbled into her hair. She smelt like ginger. "And I'll
always be on the other end of the phone, okay?"

"I love you, though," Becca said, so low that Steve could barely hear what she'd uttered. But Bucky could tell by the way her body wracked, and he glared at Steve with so much malice in those grey eyes that it almost broke Steve's heart all over again. Yet, it also convinced him he was making the right choice. He didn't want Bucky looking at him like that because he knew Steve was in love with him.

"I love you, too," Steve said. "So much, Becca, you have no idea."

Becca shook in his arms for a few more minutes until Bucky cleared his throat and she abruptly let go. Tears continued to stream down her face. She considered Steve briefly before opening her mouth and letting out a scream.

The scream continued as she stormed up the stairs. When she got about halfway to her room, Steve could clearly hear her yell, "Fuck this! Everyone I love leaves!" and slamming her bedroom door.

Sharon's eyes widened. She turned to look at Bucky, who had his eyes closed. His breathing was heavy but regulated.

"I - I'm sorry," Steve spluttered. The front of his shirt was damp.

"Don't be," Bucky said. His smile was pointed. "Like you said. You need to do what makes you happy, right?"

Reluctantly, Steve nodded.

"She'll get over it," Bucky said. He didn't sound convinced. "When Mary and Delilah get here, she'll forget you ever existed."

"I don't want that," Steve choked. Bucky pursed his lips together. Sharon shifted her weight. "I don't want that," he repeated.

Nobody spoke. There was a sick silence permeating every molecule of air in the room. Bucky threw a palette knife on top of the smashed bowl, and Sharon took this as her cue to begin ushering Steve out of the house.

Bucky stood in the door, watching as Sharon went over on her ankle trying to navigate the wilderness of his garden path. Steve couldn't help but look back several times, and each was worse, because a cycle of expressions was happening on Bucky's face and Steve couldn't read a single one of them.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to James?" Sharon hissed, her hand on the door of the car.

Steve took one final look back, hoping that whatever he was feeling could somehow be conveyed on his face so Bucky could understand. Maybe not today, but in the future. It sounded like wishful thinking, even to himself.

"Hug him?" Sharon suggested. Steve shook his head. If he hugged Bucky, he wouldn't have been able to let go.

Sharon shrugged and got into the car. Steve copied her movements. In the mirror, he could see nothing but a closed door and an old sagging house, lost to time.

She had one hand on the steering wheel and another clasping onto Steve's. If she noticed the
sweatiness of his palm she didn’t say a word, but that was one of the things Steve appreciated about her. She knew when to stay quiet and not speak about things. Everyone in Leavenworth, though, wanted to talk about their feelings. Steve wasn't good at that; he never had been. He was a True New Yorker, after all.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you said yes," Sharon said, breaking the tension. Steve sniffed and looked out the window at Main Street, which sped away from him quicker than it had ever returned. "I had this awful thought that you'd refuse and I'd have to drive out of this place alone."

"Yeah," Steve said.

Sharon's Audi pulled past Stark Industries, and Steve could see the outline of Tony smoking out the front, leaning back against the wall in that effortlessly cool way he had spent years learning off Bucky. A shock of red hair was beside him, and both their heads turned to consider the car as it pulled off once more.

"Wait until you see what I did with the apartment," Sharon said. "It's all blue, your favourite colour."

"Yeah," Steve said. He didn't bother to tell her that his new favourite colour was red, but a very specific shade of red. Somewhere between the colour of Natasha's hair, the Camaro and Bucky's lips. Somewhere in that range.

Sharon drummed her fingers against the steering wheel. "And the Howlies," she said. "They've missed you."

"Yeah."

"Aunt Peg, too. She's been doing a bit better lately, though she forgot me yesterday. It kind of-" Sharon stopped talking. Steve glanced over at her. Her eyes were a brighter blue than usual. "It kind of made me consider my own life a bit. What I wanted to do with it. Who I wanted in it."

"Yeah."

"She was a bit confused, so I told her to look in her diary. She assured me that she'd never told anybody she kept a diary. I told her she'd mentioned it to me a few years back, because I was her niece."

Steve grasped onto her hand just a little more tightly.

"She said she must've loved me very much," Sharon said. A single tear sat perched on her eyelashes. "I said the feeling was mutual."

As the hills of Leavenworth rolled past and out of view, Steve wondered if either of them had got back together because of each other, or if they had been motivated by other people.

Then, because the answer came to him in such a rapid fashion, he ignored it.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second Steve walked into the apartment, he was hit with a strange feeling of déjà-vu. A wave of confusion spread through him, and the spatial awareness that he had begun to take for granted in Leavenworth had evaporated into the smoggy air.

The space was unrecognisable. It was immaculate, so neatly presented in comparison to the Barnes' house that Steve had the urge to look around for a camera. The walls were painted a blinding white, and there was a large grey corner sofa propped on the far end of the apartment, decorated with many variations of powder-blue throw cushions. A minimalist bookcase held Sharon's classic literature collection, and a few pieces of paper stuck out of *War and Peace*, the only evidence of Sharon's aptitude for hiding information that could be seen with the naked eye (and without breaking through some of the walls). The large windows that looked out onto the city had their sills transformed into seats, piled high with cushions for reading. A picture hung on the wall above the dining table. It was half of a woman's face. Her painted lips were twisted into a smirk.

"I kept your clothes," Sharon murmured, leading Steve into the bedroom which was, thankfully, much the same as it had been six months before. He sat down on the side of the bed and ran his hands over the soft cotton sheets and the silk throw. "Just in case you ever wanted them back."

"Yeah," Steve said.

His eyes roamed around the bedroom. Photo frames no longer contained his face, but were instead filled with Sharon's S.H.I.E.L.D friends and her Aunt Peg, who had raised her since she was eleven years old.

"I stocked up on bananas in the hope that you'd come back," Sharon explained. "And other things too, of course. Your meds are in the cupboard."

Steve had asked Bruce to take him off his medication weeks before, despite Sam's pleas not to. He didn't tell Sharon this, however, already sure she would be on Sam's side on this matter.

"Yeah."

Sharon wrung her hands together and rubbed them down her thighs. "Well then," she sighed. "I'll leave you to unpack. Do you have any dinner requests?"

The scars on his hand looked grotesque against the blanched whiteness of the bed-sheets. Steve yanked the end of his sleeve down over them and shrugged. Sharon pulled a face and departed before she could say anything.

Their interactions became gradually less awkward and stilted as the week went on.

Carefully, Steve upgraded his responses from one word to two, and then finally managed full sentences while Sharon chatted away as she usually did when there was a silence.

He fell back into his routine of getting up at eight o'clock to a cool bed, a stick-it note placed on Sharon's pillow amongst stray blonde hairs, and a plate of bacon on the kitchen counter. He got used to the smallness of her frame, and how he would lie beside her at night, staring up at the ceiling rather than the outline of her body.
They didn't sleep together. It was a conscious decision that went unspoken between both of them and which Steve appreciated, though he wasn't entirely sure why. It had been seven months since he'd been with anyone. He should've been jumping at the chance. But his heart wasn't in it, and as much as Steve loved sex (probably the same amount or even more so than Bucky, to everyone's surprise), he had never done it without emotion at the forefront, and he probably never would.

About two days after his return to New York, Sharon was sitting reading *War and Peace* for about the fiftieth time since Steve had known her. As she read, her hair fell down in tiny golden waterfalls across her face, and her eyes roamed over the words, devouring them with a vigour that Steve could only compare to Tony during one of his impassioned rants, or Bucky when he spoke of his sisters' accomplishments. Every ten seconds or so Steve heard the frantic flip of a page and Sharon shifting slightly in her seat, preparing herself for the next adventure. Steve had tried to read the novel several times but he was never much of an English student, and by the second chapter he had, frankly, lost the will to live. Perhaps that was why they broke up the first time; perhaps some part of Sharon that he couldn't understand was hidden in the book he couldn't be bothered to read.

"Why *War and Peace*?" Steve asked, turning his attention from the reality show that looked much more impressive on Sharon's massive flat screen.

Sharon glanced up, and when she saw Steve's eyes on her she jumped minutely backwards, shocked that he had even acknowledged her presence. She closed the book with the purpose of a minister after his sermon. "You've never asked me that before," she said. "We didn't ask each other a lot for a long time," Steve replied. "Why *War and Peace*?"

Sharon bit at her lip. "It's a mirror of our time," she said. "It's about three people who are trying to find their place in a world that has been torn apart by war and political confusion. It teaches you how to live and join Tolstoy's quest for deeper meaning. It resonates with me. I feel like, when I've had a bad day at work or somebody's died on my watch, I can flick to any page and find affirmation as to why I still do what I do. It's comforting."

Steve hummed. "That sounds very SAT." Sharon burst into laughter. "Come on, answer the question. Why *War and Peace*?"

Her face was filled with bright sadness, but there was also an appreciation there. Steve hadn't spent enough time trying to get to know her as anything other than a person there to support him. How long had Sharon been killing herself to save Steve? How long had others been doing the exact same thing? (Fifteen years. Yeah, fifteen years sounded about right.)

"When I moved out to Brooklyn to live with my Aunt Peg," Sharon began, "I was angry at the world, at my parents, but mostly at myself. Me and Mom never really got along, and Dad didn't care enough to try, so I felt very alone for a long time. It was like my entire childhood was made up of the teenage years, and you know yourself, Steve, they aren't pretty."

Steve supposed if he hadn't had his mother and Sam and Bucky by his side during them, they wouldn't have been.

"The first thing I did when I got into her house was yell that she wasn't my mother. The good thing about Aunt Peg was that nothing phased her. I'll always remember her smiling, and the wrinkles that appeared at her eyes when she did so. She smiled at me and she said, 'Go up to your bedroom, my
"I ran up the stairs as fast as my legs would take me. I'm pretty sure I tripped three times along the way. I burst my bedroom door open, and I saw this tiny little room, all dark and dreary, but she'd hung fairy lights around the ceiling so it looked like a star-scape. She said she did it because she knew I loved the stars."

Steve raised an eyebrow. Sharon glanced down at her fingers, which were shaking.

"I lost my love for them as I grew up," she explained, "and I definitely didn't appreciate what she'd done for me enough. I asked her 'what kind of surprise are lights?' and she told me that wasn't the surprise at all. On my bed was an old battered copy of *War and Peace.*"

Rain howled outside the window, but it didn't make the glass shake in its frame like it did back in Leavenworth.

"I screamed at her that I hated reading. I threw the book back at her and slammed the door in her face and got into bed and cried for a solid eight hours. When I stopped crying, I went to open the door and she wasn't there. All she'd left me was the book, and there was an inscription written inside."

Sharon passed the novel over to Steve, who took it into his hands with gentleness, its weight unfamiliar and intimidating. There was a yellowed sheet stuck down with cello tape to the inside of the cover, obviously torn out of the first copy Peggy had given her.

*Seize the moments of happiness, love and be loved! Everything that I understand, I understand only because I love - Leo Tolstoy*

"I didn't get it," Sharon muttered. "Aunt Peg was a widow for such a long time. She always talked about a soldier she knew in the war, but it was more of a memory than a motivation. And then I realised - she was talking about me."

Steve touched along the alcoves of the lettering, the soft calligraphy of the fountain pen.

"Everything she understood was because of me. I couldn't believe it at the time. When I was sixteen, I asked her about it. I asked what she'd meant by her inscription, what the phrases she highlighted in the text meant to her. She told me that if I wanted to understand, I had everything I needed right there in my hands."

"So you've read it at least thirty times since I've known you because your Aunt told you to?"

Sharon let out a wet laugh. "Yeah," she said. "I'm just doing as Peggy says."

"Have you found your answer yet?"

"Nope," Sharon said, popping the 'p.' "I'm not even close, Steve. I'll probably never figure it out until she's gone."

"Does it annoy you? The not knowing?"

"Not in the least," she said, "because I know that when I do figure it out - and I will - she'll be right there beside me, no matter how long she's been gone. And that - that's all that really matters. That she'll be remembered after she leaves."

They sat together in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the only sound the beating of rain against the windows.
Buildings blurred into each other, making the entire city into an impressionist painting. Sharon returned to her book, sniffing as she turned the pages more slowly than she had been before. Steve rooted around under the sofa for his sketchpad, and for the first time in over a year, he managed to finish a sketch of Sharon.

She moulded into the novel, became one with it and the city surrounding them. Curled up amongst the pillows in her reading nook, she became an isolated figure, yet at one with both literature and urbannity, the shock of her blonde hair the only distinction from the brown-brick apartment blocks.

Sharon belonged in New York, in the same way as Tony didn't seem alive when he wasn't in his workshop tinkering on something, or how Natasha looked more at home in the snow.

When Natasha and Steve had just became friends (or rather, tentative acquaintances bonded only by their love for Bucky Barnes) they were sitting on top of the famous jungle gym, staring out over a white playground. It was such a flurried winter morning that it was impossible to tell where the ground stopped and the sky started. They seemed to be the only people for miles apart from Bucky, who was determined to build a snowman despite how purple his fingers were.

Natasha's hair was soaking wet and brown because of it. "This must remind you of Moscow, huh?" Steve had asked. Natasha had stared into the distance, her eyes so much like a jungle it was instinctive to lean towards them.

She shook her head. "Too warm," she had muttered. "No shapka-ushanka in sight."

Bucky had let out a loud groan of frustration at that point and kicked a hole through the snowman's abdomen. Natasha let out a light, tinkling laugh and dropped down onto the ground with the grace of a ballerina. She went over to Bucky and took his face in her hands.

"Milii moi," she had purred. "Vy nastol'ko sladkiy i nexhnyy." *

Bucky had looked at her with such affection and softness, and leaned towards her with his eyelashes against his cheeks.

That had been the first time they kissed, even though Bucky had no idea what she had said and Steve was pretty sure the smirk on her face meant it had been either an insult or sarcasm. It was also the first time Steve felt an irrational hatred for Natasha Romanoff that he hadn't been able to explain at twelve years old and which now made sense.

Steve shoved the sketch into the back of his book, and proceeded to watch The Real Housewives.

The Howlies came over a couple of times. The most notable of the occasions, however, was when all four of them were sprawled out over Sharon's nice new sofa, chugging down non-alcoholic beer out of twisty straws, because that was all Sharon had in the house (she assured them it was an honest mistake, but when she left the room she went out with a grin, so Steve wasn't so sure).

Dum-Dum, as usual, was at the centre of the festivities.

His large belly hung out over his jeans, and his bowler hat sat at a rakish angle on his head, close to falling off with every word he spoke. His moustache quivered with more insistency the drunker he got. Soon, Steve and Gabe fell into the familiar activity of placing bets on how many times Dugan's moustache would appear as if it would fall off his face into the popcorn. As usual, Gabe won, though it was a highly subjective victory.

"This stuff tastes like shit," Dum-Dum announced. Morita and Falsworth hummed in agreement in between glugs.
"To be fair," Gabe, ever the diplomat, interceded, "normal beer also tastes like piss, so."

"Yeah, but at least you can get pissed on that stuff," Dum-Dum argued. "Where's the fun in this?"

Steve opened his mouth to agree, but Sharon arrived before he could, holding a selection of food for the men to enjoy.

"It's better for your health, Dugan," Sharon said, flicking the bowler cap off his head. "The missus will be thanking me."

"She's already thanking you," Dum-Dum said. "I'm pretty sure she's in love with you. Tell me if you're about to take my wife, wouldn't you, Carter?"

"Oh honey," Sharon muttered. "You're so drunk you probably wouldn't notice if I did."

"That is also true," Dum-Dum said. With grubby fingers he grabbed a selection of treats: some cocktail sausages, a handful of chips and a few nachos, amongst others. The other Commandos tucked in as well, and Sharon smiled at them, brushing the crumbs on her hands off on her trousers, frowning when they left a stain against the white.

"Hey," Morita said. He used his twisty straw to point towards the TV. "That guy just tackled him the same way as Cap took down that strike team, remember?"

The Commandos chorused in agreement. Steve grinned.

"Oh yeah," he hummed. "2013?"

"2012, Cap," Falsworth corrected. The ruckus had diminished somewhat, and all of the men were staring at Steve with a mixture of concern and annoyance. Mostly concern.

"In my defence," Steve said, "my memory isn't all that great around that time period."

The Howlies hooted in laughter, Gabe hitting Steve on the back for being a 'sport,' and all went back to tucking into the homemade pizza Sharon had provided for them.

It was nice being back, and Steve had missed them. However the fact that every time he looked at any one of them, he was brought right back to Afghanistan weighed heavily on his mind. He was brought right back to the place he had been in when he left New York in July, the place where he blamed himself for his actions and was convinced that everyone else did as well. So when his phone went off and Sam's picture appeared on the screen, Steve had no qualms about standing up from the sofa, excusing himself and running down five flights of stairs just to get into the cool night air.

"Hey, mate," Steve said. "Nice of you to call."

"Nice of you to pick up, Hot-Shot."

For half an hour they chatted about mundane things, like the weather in New York and what everyone in Leavenworth was getting for Christmas. At least it was mundane, until Sam hit Steve with a sledgehammer.

"Bruce and Nat got engaged," Sam said. Steve fished a packet of cigarettes out of his back pocket and fumbled with one hand to light it.

"Really?" he muttered with one half of his mouth. "That was quick, don't you think?"

"It's all been very quick," Sam replied. "They kind of came out of nowhere, if you ask me."
"Do they seem happy?"

"Bruce does. I don't think I've ever seen Nat happy before, so I have nothing to compare it to."

That was a lie. Sam had seen Natasha ecstatic before, usually as a result of him or Bucky or Clint. He knew what a contented Natasha looked like, and obviously she wasn't.

But Steve was in New York now. He couldn't phone Natasha up and have a heart to heart with her over the phone. He couldn't leave on the mouth of Christmas and go to her house and ask her what the fuck she was doing.

"When's the wedding?"

"April sometime. The tenth I think. She didn't tell you?"

"She hasn't kept in touch," Steve said. Natasha had answered his call all of once, and hung up before he had the chance to say 'sorry.' It wouldn't have been enough, anyway. "I think her and Tony are annoyed at me leaving."

"Maybe a little," Sam conceded. "I have to admit, I've been acting pretty bleak this past week without you here to tag-team tease me with Barnes."

To break the sentiment that seemed to be looming on the horizon, Steve asked, "Is he her maid of honour?"

Sam burst into laughter. Steve smiled and watched as a ring of smoke danced up into the Manhattan night.

"Oh God, I never thought of it like that," Sam said.

"So she has asked him?"

"Yeah, Steve, she has."

"How'd she choose between him and Clint?"

"I don't think she wants Clint standing beside her when she says her wedding vows."

"Ah."

"Yeah." Sam took a heavy breath. "Listen, Steve. Enough about boring old Leavenworth. How's everything with you?"

"It's going."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm settling in a little better, I think. It's still weird as fuck how she basically erased me from her life though."

She didn't seem to have a problem doing it either, Steve thought to himself, but he preferred to keep that part unspoken.

"Maybe she found it hard to live surrounded by memories of you? I know Tony had to change the screensaver on his phone, he kept going grey every time he saw it. I, on the other hand, barely noticed you left. How long have you been gone now?"
Steve shook his head, a small amused smile on his face. "I miss you too, Sam," he said. "Only a tad though. You should see the Howlies watching football. They make even you and Buck look civilised."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Steve chuckled. He took a few more drags of the cigarette and then let it drop to the ground, smudging it with his foot. "Listen, Sam. I better head back in. Sharon will be nagging me about ducking out while we have company."

"Alright, mate," Sam said. "I won't hold you back. Tell Carter I say hi."

"Will do," Steve replied. He clicked the phone off, but not without considering the screensaver, which he had since changed to a rotating display of him, Sam and Tony in the garage, to him and Nat grinning at the camera, to Bucky and Becca flipping off a failed meringue.

He bit into his lip so hard he could taste blood. He decided that was a good time to go back inside.

On the 24th December, Steve woke up in a cold sweat. He wasn't sure what he had been dreaming about, but he had the distinct impression it was something to do with shrapnel. He rolled over on his side, reaching his hand out to the sleeping figure beside him.

"Buck," he murmured.

Then his eyes opened properly, and he realised that it was a snoring Sharon instead.

With a pounding heart, Steve extracted himself from the covers, threw his legs over the side of the bed, and rubbed his hands down his face.

Sleep wasn't an option.

Steve padded into the kitchen instead.

Sharon was a creature of habit, that much was clear, for all of the baking ingredients were still in the exact same cupboards as they had been six months ago, and indeed five years ago. Neither of them had been much of a foodie so there were no recipe books, and with a sigh Steve tried to jot down from memory the ingredients to Mama Wilson's apple pie (not because it smelt like Bucky).

His body acted on impulse. He began stirring and mixing together the ingredients, stewing the apples before putting them into the pastry to ensure they were soft and sugary. He felt the knot in his shoulders unwind as he pushed the pie into the oven, and while he was waiting on it cooking he stood with both hands on the freezing granite worktop, imagining that someone strong was behind him, a chin on his shoulder and a smile on his voice.

"What are you doing up?"

Steve lifted his head and saw a bedraggled Sharon standing in front of him, dressed only in a striped shirt, not unlike that of Ebenezer Scrooge. Her hair stuck up in random directions, and Steve immediately wanted to smooth it down, but he knew that to do so would mean breaking a barrier he wasn't ready to overcome. He stood there, staring at her, before eventually managing a shrug.

"I'm baking," he said.

"Yes," Sharon said, looking confused. Her voice was thick with sleep. You'd never think that sometimes, she woke up screaming too. Insomnia did not terrify her like it did Steve. "I can see that."
"I just-"

The timer went off, and Steve grabbed the pie out of the oven before it could burn. It was a science as well as an art, but when he set the pie in front of Sharon with a flourish, he could immediately tell she didn't think of it that way.

"I have work tomorrow," Sharon said. "We're working on a new case. Suspected terrorists. I would appreciate it if I didn't have to drink three cups of coffee in the morning to get ready for it."

Steve sighed. The New York skyline wasn't Leavenworth, but it was pretty breathtaking. They were in the centre of Manhattan, though they had originally lived in Brooklyn, before Sharon insisted they move closer to the amenities the city provided. Lights twinkled like stars, and the inky blackness of the night had Steve aching for someone who would comment on their beauty with him.

"Why don't we go up to the roof," Steve suggested. Sharon's eyebrow quirked. "We can stargaze."

"You'll catch a cold," Sharon said, "and you're always a whine when you're sick."

True. Mean but true.

"Come back to bed, Steve."

"Do you love me?"

Sharon's eyes widened at the suddenness of his question.

"Of course I love you," she said. "That's why I came to Leavenworth."

"Is it?"

Her lips went white. "Just try to get back to sleep, Steve. Was it nightmares?"

It was always nightmares. Bucky understood that; he saw the car coming towards him and the red pooling around Maria's neck more than once a month.

"If you get to sleep again, they won't come back tonight," Sharon said, as if it was so simple, so matter of fact, as if she knew that his horrors wouldn't keep resurfacing.

(That was unfair. Sharon, perhaps more than anyone, knew the losses that came with war. Steve just liked to pretend that she didn't.)

"So you say," Steve said, but he was trailing himself back into the room. They crawled back into bed.

Sharon was asleep in an instant.

Steve stared at the ceiling for three hours, forty-five minutes, and thirty-six seconds before deciding maybe a jog would be better for him.

Making sure to leave a note taped to his pillow (saying nothing but 'gone for a jog') Steve pulled himself from bed and began his usual path towards Central Park and back again, not daring to breach its gates that early in the morning. Afterwards, with sweat on his chest he stopped at a vendor and picked up a crepe and some coffee. He sat down hard on a bench and contemplated two one-legged pigeons fighting over a cheeseburger.

By the time he got home it was well after lunchtime. Sharon was sitting on the sofa, her legs
dangling over the end as she tapped away on her phone.

"Meeting was cancelled," she said.

"The lack of sleep didn't get you fired then," Steve shot back. Sharon winced, but took it.

"I'm pretty sure somebody will be," she said, "considering the terrorists got on a flight to Dubai last night at twelve."

"I feel safer already," Steve said sarcastically. He went to grab orange juice out of the fridge and found the carton to be empty. He glanced at Sharon, but she was fixated on her phone with a sad smile on her face. "Someone you dated?"

"Oh God, no," Sharon said. "I haven't dated since you left."

"Who, then?"

"James."

Steve blinked. "James Falsworth?" Sharon shook her head.

"James Barnes," she replied. Steve frowned down at the empty carton in his hand, cursing Tropicana, amongst other things.

"Why are you-"

"He says you missed Becca's play last night."

Steve threw the carton into the garbage with enough force that it exploded.

"Fuck," he said, grabbing a tea-towel to wipe remnants of orange juice off his jeans.

"He also says he misses you," Sharon said. Steve cursed louder and continued to scrub with ferocity at the stain. "He's asking how you're doing. Should I tell him you're having a breakdown over fruit juice?"

Steve glared up at her. She was considering him with an innocent smile and wide blue eyes.

"Tell him what you want," Steve snapped. "I'm going for a shower."

"Alright precious," Sharon called out after him. "Can't wait for your return."

(Steve made sure the door was closed behind him before whispering "Asshole.")

It took a few minutes of contemplation and cursing for Steve to remember how to work Sharon's very elaborate shower. It took even longer for him to get accustomed to the feeling of water pounding into his skin considering both the Rogers' house and the Barnes' residence only had a bathtub.

The tile was cool against his forehead as he pressed all of his weight into the wall. He stared at his own feet, how they wriggled in the water, until his skin became wrinkly and pink.

Although Sarah had worked most of Steve's childhood out of her own misplaced sense of pride, Steve could always rely on her to show up to his events. Whether it was a prize day where he won the award for best endeavour whilst Bucky won the excellence prize, the football trophy and individual awards for almost all of his subjects, or a play where Steve acted the part of a tree and
Bucky was the lead, Sarah would always be sitting in the front row, a handkerchief being gently pressed to her made-up face and her hands trembling with pride. Steve hadn't thought about how much her presence had meant to him, nor had he ever thanked her for being there, until he was twenty-one years old and being awarded with a medal for valour and he looked down at the front row and his mother was not there.

He wondered how Becca felt looking down and seeing an empty seat beside her brother where Steve ought to be.

She doesn't care that much about me, Steve thought to himself. He didn't need his brain to tell him that this was a search for justification.

Becca loved him. Bucky loved him. Maybe not in the way Steve wanted him to, but he loved him. He had proven that over and over again throughout the years.

Steve stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around himself. Without thinking much about it, too caught up in his disappointment of yet another Barnes, he stepped out of the bathroom. On his way to the bedroom to pick up some clothes, he heard Sharon shuffle behind him.

"I've never seen your scars in the light before."

Steve's grip on the towel tightened. He could feel his muscles ripple under his skin. Sharon sighed.

"You can run if you want," she said.

"Okay," Steve replied.

He marched into the bedroom, pulled a shirt and jeans on despite the wetness of his skin, and began throwing things into his satchel for the second time in as many weeks.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sharon questioned. Steve had evidently surprised her. "I meant run back into the bathroom or something, Steve, not skip states."

"I'm going home for Christmas," Steve said.

"You do realise it's Christmas today, right?"

Steve furrowed his eyebrows together and looked at the calendar. There was a Santa sticker on today's date.

"I realised," Steve lied. New York crepe vendors continued to work even on Christmas, it seemed. "Wait - were you going to go to a meeting on Christmas?"

"Well, yeah," Sharon said. "Duty calls, Steve, and I have to answer."

For some reason, her words just made Steve even surer he was making the right decision. He heaved his satchel onto his shoulder once again and glanced backwards to make sure the sketch of Sharon was sitting on her pillow. Thankfully, she did not follow his gaze. He wanted her to discover it when he was gone, so she could remember him.

"The Howlies are coming for Christmas dinner tonight, Steve."

There was no force in her words, nor did it seem like she wanted to fight for him. Rather, it spoke of a woman going through the motions of a break-up without really caring much about it.

"You explained to them once before why I left, you can do it again."
"Steve, whatever choice you make right now, this is it," Sharon said. They stood in a stalemate in the hallway, Steve's hand already on the door handle. Sharon wasn't crying. Neither was Steve. "There's no going back this time."

"Okay," Steve said. "I choose Bucky."

A grin passed over his face that was so bright and so bold it nearly rivalled the sun. It was perhaps the only time Sharon could remember Steve emanating sheer happiness.

When Steve thought back over that Christmas Day, he would recognise the knowing in Sharon's eyes. She had been fighting a losing battle ever since she looked at Bucky and saw the love reflected in his every movement. Steve just had to work it out for himself.

"You know," she said to him, leaning in the doorway. "You always wanted to protect me. I always wanted to get you into something dangerous."

"I never needed much persuading," Steve said. She put her hand against the nape of his neck. Steve inclined his head in such a way that he could kiss her cheek.

"We were never going to work, were we?" Sharon asked.

"No," he said simply. "You're a True New Yorker."

"And you're a True Leavenworther."

Steve kissed her one last time. "Damn right I am," he said, beginning to jog down the corridor towards the stairs.

He had mere hours to get home before the sun set, and he was determined not to let another Christmas go by without seeing Bucky Barnes.

It was only four hundred and fifty miles. Worth every one.

Chapter End Notes

* Translation: "My dear, you are so sweet and gentle."
Chapter 20

A weaker man may have lost his resolve around the two hundred mile mark. Steve, however, was no weak man.

He began to lose his resolve around the four hundred and forty mile mark.

The last ten were hell on earth, and he had been in a literal war-zone. Without the cover of a train or a kindly woman named Bertha driving him to Leavenworth in her beat up Volkswagen, Steve became drenched in the snow within minutes, and began sneezing within half an hour. His lungs protested against every step he took, and he was pretty sure his nose had only stopped running because any fluid that wasn't inside him had frozen by that point.

New England was fucking brutal in winter. Snow piled up in inches and held Steve down, save for the brief relief in which he managed to pull his foot out to freedom before plunging it back under again.

Driving might have been easier, but then again, Steve hadn't driven since Afghanistan, and he really didn't want that awkwardly long road trip to take place with a silent Sharon in the driver's seat. The breakup would be far less dramatic then as well, and therefore would savour of anticlimax. Steve was an intrinsically dramatic person, as much as he hated to admit it.

The church clock at the end of Main Street read eleven o'clock by the time Steve struggled to it. He estimated it would take another half an hour to reach the Barnes’ residence, which was unarguably his destination. Revitalised by the proximity of his goal, he continued onwards in the blistering winds.

The weather made the house almost impossible to detect amongst the hills of Leavenworth and the sky, but Steve knew its location so well by now that he could follow the lines on his palm and still manage to arrive on their doorstep. When he did, he hesitated for only a moment to slick back his hair (though he knew his face had wind-burn and his nose was comparable to Rudolph's) before rapping on the door.

A soft orange glow emanated from the living room window. Steve could hear no voices apart from Bucky's soft one telling Becca he would get it. Steve watched with baited breath as Bucky's shadow manoeuvred into the hallway.

The chain rattled against the door. The hinges clinked. Bucky pushed it open, only slightly at the beginning, until Steve's red nose greeted him and he swung it open entirely.

"Steve?"

He was wearing a Christmas sweater. It had a drunk Santa printed onto it, and its stitching was messy and inexperienced. It had obviously been a gift, probably from Betty, or perhaps a practical joke.

Nonetheless, he looked fucking amazing in it.

"I left her," Steve said. "It's over. I'm home."

Bucky's lips parted. No words escaped them, perhaps because no words could convey the depth of emotion that appeared on his face. Steve had given him the best gift he could've asked for and the most unexpected one simultaneously, and so he was rendered shocked, only able to open his arms up
for Steve to collapse into.

They were large, and warm, and safe, like always. His sweater smelt like apple pie and Natasha's perfume, and there was a hint of his own cologne underneath there as well, if Steve strived enough to search for it. His chest was hard and it was comforting, and when Steve heard the steady beating of Bucky's heart and realised it was synched to his own, he was glad he had the cold to blame for the tears on his face.

God. He'd started crying that day in the mall and he hadn't stopped since.

"Who is it?" Becca's voice called out. She appeared behind Bucky, dressed in a pair of thick, warm pyjamas and bunny slippers. Bucky stepped back to let Steve in, and before he even had the chance to close the door Becca grabbed Steve into her arms and began crying stormily.

"I'm so sorry I missed your play," Steve mumbled. He tried his best to stop shivering, but it was nearly impossible. Becca's warm pyjamas were getting soaked too. She cared as much about that as she did about Steve's discomfort.

"You should be," she replied. "Bucky stopped the entire thing not once, but twice to get a picture."

Steve looked up at Bucky, who just shrugged, still looking somewhat shell-shocked by Steve's sudden reappearance.

"She looked beautiful up there," he said. "Mary and Delilah wanted the photos too, Becks, don't put all the blame on me."

"Are they still here?" Steve asked.

"No," Bucky replied. "They left after dinner, about five hours ago."

"I would've liked to see them," Steve said. "It's been so long."

Bucky opened his mouth to reply, but Becca shot him a glare that had him closing it again.

"I'll go run you a bath," Bucky said, "and get you some fresh clothes, you're soaked to the bone."

"Aw, it's no big deal," Steve said, teeth chattering. Becca finally released him. She hopped from foot to foot in excitement.

"And you, sweetheart," Bucky said. He pointed his finger towards Becca, who stuck her tongue out in response. "You're still going to bed."

"But Bucky," she whined. "Steve's here!"

"Yeah, and Steve will still be here in the morning," Bucky said. A thought occurred to him and he looked up at Steve for confirmation. Steve, heart hurting, nodded. "It's damn near midnight now, though, so you better get some shut-eye. Don't want to have black circles for your Boxing Day date tomorrow, do you?"

Becca's cheeks became dusted with pink. "No," she said. "But still."

"Is Jared taking you out somewhere nice?" Steve asked. Bucky's eyes widened, and he quickly shook his head. Becca frowned at Steve.

"That idiot!" she spat. "I don't want to hear his name ever again as long as I live! No, I'm going out with Thomas now. He's never told me I'm stupid just because I'm a girl!"
"That's not what Jared did, sweetie," Bucky said patiently. "Don't ham the story up to get sympathy, it doesn't work."

"Oh, practice what you preach," Becca replied. Annoyance came over Bucky's face at the unutterable fact that she was correct.

"Go up to bed, Becca," Bucky said.

"No," she replied. "I want to stay with Steve."

"Steve will be going to bed soon too," Bucky said. "But that doesn't matter anyway. When I tell you to go to bed, you go to bed."

"I'm thirteen years old, Buck!"

"By the count of three, you better be up those stairs."

"That doesn't even work anymore, I'm a teenager Buck, what are you-"

"One."

Becca stared him out with her arms folded over her chest. It was an old Western stand-off. All Steve wanted to do was get upstairs and get some heat into him before he died of pneumonia.

"Two."

Becca faltered. Bucky remained firm.

"Th-"

A scream ripped from Becca's mouth and she stormed up the stairs, slamming her door behind her.

"Hope you're happy!" she yelled down to him.

"Ecstatic, sugar," Bucky replied. "Now," he said, turning to Steve, "let's get you warmed up."

Steve pottered up the stairs behind Bucky and got undressed in his room, slipping into one of George's old moth-bitten robes. He watched Bucky fill the tub and test the temperature with his elbow the way he used to do when his sisters were younger and he was put in charge of making them presentable.

"It's hot as hell," Bucky chuckled, "but I think you need hot right now. You got everything you need?"

Steve looked at him for a moment. Bucky's hair was short again, like it had been when they were kids, except for a tiny bit at the front where it flopped into his eyes. Steve wanted to push it back. The robe still smelt of George's aftershave.

"Steve?"

"Oh, yeah," Steve said. "You're good. I mean - I'm good. Thanks."

Bucky cracked his fingers and muttered, "Right," under his breath. "I'll leave you to it."

"Hey, Buck?"
"Yeah, Steve?"

"I'm sorry I missed Becca's play," he said. Bucky bit at the inside of his cheek. "And I'm sorry that I left. Again."

"Hey, it's fine, Steve, honestly."

"Don't say that, Buck. It's not fine. I keep leaving and expecting everyone to just take me back in with open arms."

"I wouldn't say you're expecting that for a second," Bucky said. "I think you know how Nat and Tony are going to greet you."

"With a punch in the nose, I know," Steve said. "But I keep expecting you to open your home to me, even when I've let down you and your sister-"

"Hey, Steve. Stop right there. What did I tell you when we were kids, yeah? I'm not gonna quit you now pal, no matter how many times you try to make me. I'm a loyal bastard that way."

"That you are," Steve murmured. Bucky gave a little nod of contentment, happy to have made his point, and left Steve to his bath.

He stayed in it until the clock chimed midnight, and he realised that the water, which had previously been scalding, had gone cold. A sweater of equal unattractiveness to the one Bucky had been wearing, though with a drunk Easter bunny rather than a Santa Claus, and a pair of pyjama bottoms hung on the bathroom door. Steve put them on and went down into the living room, trying desperately not to sneeze, for he knew Bucky would just-

A sneeze slipped out. Bucky jumped from the sofa where he had been watching *Home Alone* like he'd been shot.

"You're sick!" he exclaimed.

"No, I'm not," Steve protested, though his nose started running. He swore under his breath and began glancing around the room for a tissue. He found a packet lying on the coffee table, much to his relief.

"Yes, you are," Bucky frowned. "Lie down on the sofa, and I'll go get you a hot water bottle and some aspirin for your head. Or maybe paracetamol, that might be better if you have a temperature... Of course you have a fever, look at your face, you're as blazing as the sun-"

"Buck-"

"Lie down on the fucking sofa, Rogers. Now."

Steve slammed his mouth closed and fell back onto the sofa, trying not to think about how desperately hot an authoritative Bucky Barnes was. He allowed Bucky to fuss over him and wrap blankets around his torso even though he was alternating between freezing and unbearably warm, and cooperated when Bucky made him a cup of chamomile tea and shoved tablets into him with the force of a doting mother.

"I called Bruce," Bucky said. "He's coming to check on you as soon as he can."

"Buck, that's not necessary. Not on Christmas."
"Oh hell yes it is, punk. You want me worrying you're gonna die in the night?"

"Jerk."

"Yeah yeah."

Bucky went back to watching his movie, and Steve went back to pretending that he didn't notice how Bucky's eyes nearly swivelled out of his head any time Steve so much as sniffled. Bruce came and went, spending more of his time reassuring Bucky than assessing Steve, and the night passed by in slow, lulling waves. Steve admired the curve of Bucky in the armchair.

He could map out Bucky's body on a page for little more than a dime. Hell, he'd done it fifty-odd times already for free since he'd returned, in the dim lighting when Bucky dozed off in his favourite chair, his lips parted and his cheeks beautifully pink, his skin shining.

Steve knew where hurt when Bucky came back in from working in the garden. He knew where a scar from a burning cigarette butt that Bucky had shoved into his pocket to keep his mama from finding out he smoked would be. He knew there was a birthmark on Bucky's hipbone, and chicken pox scars in a little cluster on his shoulder because he couldn't keep from scratching them. Steve knew there'd be a red mark on Bucky's stomach from how he lay in his chair whilst he slept.

He knew all about Bucky, how his lungs released breath and the blood moved in his veins and his heart pounded in his chest, a steady *bum-bum-bum*. But he still didn't know it well enough. His fingers burnt with the urge to touch. His stomach assailed him. Bucky's tan skin mocked him. His hands were large and calloused and achingly familiar.

He loved Bucky so much it hurt. So shoot him for using the slight delirium near-pneumonia caused as an excuse to get closer.

The next time Bucky got down on his knees beside the sofa and pressed a thermometer into Steve's mouth, he took the chance to murmur, "You're so hot Buck," against Bucky's chest, warm breath against his neck.

"You have a fever, Stevie," Bucky said, weirdly choked up. "You're the one whose hot."

"Nah," Steve said. "You've always been hot. Hotter than anyone."

The thermometer fell to the ground. Bucky inhaled sharply and strained to reach it under the sofa. Steve watched how his back moved as he did so.

"We didn't have such pretty nurses in the army," Steve said when Bucky re-emerged, more red faced than ever he'd known him. "Those lips..."

Bucky became a statue apart from the trembling of his mouth. Steve trailed his finger around the outline of it, directly where lip-liner would go if Bucky wore such things.

"Kiss me, Buck."

Bucky blinked, not comprehending, but Steve had used up all of his courage for that day and couldn't make the words come out louder. Something in Steve's eyes must've clued Bucky into his desires, for he pressed a kiss to Steve's forehead, finally, probably thinking that was what Sarah would've done.

For once in his life, Steve didn't want Sarah at all. All he wanted was Bucky. His Ma would've been proud of the fact that, even for a second, he wasn't missing her. He was moving on.
"I don't know what you want me to do, Steve," Bucky whispered, his face so pliant and soft in the light of the fire that Steve, if he hadn't been in love already, would've fallen immediately at the sight.

"Sure you do," he muttered. "Such pretty lips..."

Bucky swallowed thickly. Once, twice, three times. He clenched and unclenched his flesh arm this time, rather than the metal. His fingers, the fingers he'd had since childhood, cupped Steve's jaw in his.

Steve took in a shaky breath. If nearly dying of exposure could've encouraged this, it should've happened ten years ago. But Bucky did not go for Steve's chapped lips, and he did not go for his neck, either. Instead, Bucky pressed tentative kisses all over Steve's face; the middle of his forehead, his temples, the bridge of his nose, between his eyebrows, the outline of his jaw, and finally, the corner of his mouth.

"You know, Buck," Steve said, slightly choked up. Bucky looked at him with grey eyes, pupils so big they were tunnels. "Me and Sharon - we headed up the mountains about a year after I got back from Afghanistan. She wanted me to wear my uniform, my medals. Said it would get us a discount. I tell you something, though. It got us five dollars off, but the weight of those medals ... I felt this small standing under Mount Rushmore."

Bucky glanced at Steve's fingers which were placed less than an inch apart. He placed his own against them and pushed them down into Steve's lap.

"Don't you say that, Steve," he warned. Emotion warred in his throat. "You're bigger than all of us, okay? You're bigger than the whole goddamn planet if you'd just accept it."

"But I'm not, though," Steve said. "You don't know what I did."

Bucky rolled back so he was sitting on his butt rather than his knees. It gave Steve the space to breathe again without smelling his cologne, without wanting him closer.

"Then tell me," Bucky said simply. Steve opened his mouth to protest, to give some excuse, but realised he didn't want to.

He didn't want to. He was ready. He was ready to talk about it.

"It wasn't my first mission," Steve said, pressing his head back into the cushion. The flicker of the fire was just outside his field of view, and Bucky was a part of it. "I can't blame inexperience for my mistake. I didn't clock what I was supposed to.

"I was out with the Howling Commandos. We were a specialist unit. I chose them all specifically for their unique talents, and because they were the kind of guys who didn't usually get picked for stuff. I'd known all of them for years already, 'cept for Junior. He was just eighteen. He got married real young. His wife was called Daisy. I asked him why he'd gotten married so young and he just said, 'When you know, you know.' I couldn't argue with him, not when he was so sure of it. He was a damn good soldier, too. Knew how to have a laugh. Always had a pack of Marlboro on him. And he understood the need to just step back and - shush. He would stand with me outside the barracks, sharing a cigarette, for half an hour sometimes after a bad mission. I can't tell you how much I appreciated that.

"The Howlies had teamed up with another unit, just for that mission. It was standard, nothing we hadn't done a thousand times before. We were going through in the convoys when Dugan turned to me and said he felt something fishy. So we stopped, right in the middle of the biggest hunk of open
land you could get, just 'cause I wanted to prove I listened to my men, even if they were talking shit. It wasn't Dugan's fault though; I think he can sleep because everyone rightfully blamed me. I ordered the men to spread out, and they went into a circle.

"The place was silent. If it hadn't been, I don't think I would've heard it. A grenade rolled up, right into the middle of my men. I spent too long running towards it and not enough time warning them."

Bucky's throat worked. His metal arm made little whirring noises, probably because of how tightly he'd made his fist. Steve continued regardless. The floodgates were open. There was no turning back.

"Junior, another Howlie Dernier, and three of the other unit were the closest to it," Steve said. "I was a bit further back so I got out with hearing loss, scarring and a brain injury. They didn't get out at all. I watched Junior and Dernier get blown to bits right in front of me."

"It was war, Steve," Bucky said, his voice thick. "People die."

"I know," Steve said. "It's what I signed up for. But I also signed up to protect people, and that's what I failed to do. I never should have stopped. We would've been fine inside the convoy. I wouldn't have needed to be honourably discharged, I wouldn't have had to listen to Colonel Philips change the reports around to stop me getting disciplined, and I sure as hell wouldn't have had to go to Daisy and tell her that her husband was dead because of me. An eighteen year old girl, widowed, because of me."

"It wasn't your fault, Steve."

"Last I heard she changed her name and moved out of state," Steve said. "Her family said she wasn't the same after I showed up on her doorstep. One of the other men, they called him Kelly. He had five kids and a husband. Dernier and the other two were single, so I had to go to their mothers."

"Fuck, Steve," Bucky said. He ran his hands through his hair. "That's some heavy shit you're carrying around with you."

"It was my mistake that killed them," Steve said. "It was - how can I not carry that around? Don't I have the duty to think about them every day, to make up for it? How can I-"

Bucky stood up abruptly. "Move over," he demanded, and Steve obliged. Bucky positioned himself on the sofa so he was half hanging off the edge, but held on by his grip around Steve's waist.

"You take too much on yourself," he said.

"You probably think I'm a bad person, now. You should. I am."

"No, Steve, fuck that," Bucky said. "Fuck that, Steve, alright? You're still the best guy I know."

"God, you must know some pretty fucked up people then."

"You know I do," Bucky said. Steve managed a weak laugh. "But seriously, Steve. If our positions were reversed, and I sat down in front of you and said I'd killed people, would you give up on me?"

"Of course not."

"Look, I know Nat told you about the Starks. And you're bound to know by now that I take responsibility for that, because the guy who should've is dead and buried himself. I know I don't practice what I preach, but when Nat told you, did you think about me any different?"
"No," Steve said. "I just wished I could've been there."

A small, sweet smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He reached up and pushed Steve's hair back off his forehead.

"The feeling's mutual, Steve," he said. "You think I don't wish I was in Afghanistan with you? I would've kicked those other guys' asses."

"No," Steve said. "You would've jumped on the grenade so I wouldn't have to."

"That's entirely true," Bucky said. "Maybe it was a good thing I wasn't there. Mary or Delilah would've had to take Becca in."

"I think you've suffered enough without throwing yourself on a bomb on top of it."

"I could say the same thing to you. What have I told you before, Steve? If I could go back to Sarah's funeral and say something that could make you stay, I would, a thousand times over. I would do anything to make these last eight years go away."

"I wouldn't," Steve muttered. "I'm pretty happy where we are right now."

Bucky looked down at their bodies, pressed flush against each other and sweating through their thick jumpers.

"Steve," he said, "we would've ended up here anyway. Some things are just meant to be, and me sticking around to piss you off for the rest of your days is definitely one of those things."

Steve smiled. He shuffled awkwardly under the blankets until he found the end of his sleeve and pulled it up to reveal the scars.

"So you don't feel sick when you look at these?" he asked. Bucky tilted his head to the side.

"Do you?" he asked. Steve nodded.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "I do."

Bucky looked into Steve's eyes. Carefully, without breaking eye contact, he lifted Steve's wrist and pressed his mouth against it. His lips drew over the mottled skin with such delicacy, Steve had to look down just to make sure his skin hadn't been replaced with paper.

"I don't love what happened to cause them," Bucky murmured. He moved his kisses down Steve's arm towards the indent of his elbow. "But I love these scars, like I love every part of you, you hear me?"

Steve watched how Bucky's kisses drifted across the particularly ugly streak right above his elbow.

"You hear me?" Bucky repeated.

"Yeah, Buck," he said. "I hear you."

"Do you think you could make it upstairs and get some sleep?" he asked gently. Steve shook his head. "Do you want to stay here?" Bucky asked. Steve nodded.

He felt like saying 'forever' might be a bit too obvious. Kisses to anywhere but the lips could be explained in the morning as tiredness and the cover of night, but Steve's unwavering love for sleeping beside Bucky was something that was less permissible among friends.
"Go on, then," Bucky said. "Get comfortable."

Although the thick blankets attempted to hold him down, Steve managed to turn away from Bucky so his back was pressed against his chest, and he could sleep without the flickering light of the fire awakening him. Bucky's fingers went into his hair, combing through it with long, comforting strokes until Steve felt sleep overwhelm him.

He could sleep safely. He knew there would be no nightmares.

Steve Rogers was finally free.
"Gross."

The blankets shuffled. A loud groan echoed through Steve's skull, rousing him from his slumber.

"Do me a favour, Becca," Bucky mumbled. Steve, surprised to find he couldn't move between how close he was to the back of the sofa and how tightly Bucky was pressed to his back, turned his head just in time to see Bucky roll his eyes. "Go get your own damn breakfast."

"You tell me to watch out for boys," Becca said, "but you're the one having sex on the couch."

"We didn't have sex!" Steve protested. He placed his hand strategically in the space between their bodies, pushing himself up to a seated position. "We didn't, did we?"

Bucky pressed a pillow onto his face and groaned into it. Steve glanced at Becca. His vision had only just came into focus, and he could see she was holding her phone. It was on the camera.

"Really, Becks?" he said, gesturing to her hand. Becca shrugged.

"I'm documenting your relationship so I can play it at your wedding and be the best maid of honour ever," Becca replied. "Unless Auntie Nat beats me to the punch. But if you're two guys, you can have two maids of honour, couldn't you? Because technically neither one of you is the bride-"

"Me and Steve aren't getting married," Bucky said, at the same time as Steve said, "We're not in a relationship."

"Whatever," Becca said. "I want waffles."

Without waiting to see if either of the friends would accept her request, she flicked her long brown hair over her shoulder and sashayed out of the room. Bucky closed his eyes and heaved a deep sigh.

"She's getting too like Nat," he said.

"We need to stop them seeing each other immediately," Steve agreed. Nobody needed another Natasha Romanoff. They would probably start a gang together and take down the rest of the world with their bare hands, only stopping when they broke a nail.

"Oh, and Buck?" Becca said, poking her head around the living room door again just as Bucky opened his mouth to speak. "Everyone's coming in like an hour, so you better get up unless you want Tony having an aneurysm seeing both of you in bed together."

"In sofa together," Bucky corrected.

"Wait," Steve said. "What do you mean 'everyone's coming in an hour'?"

"Exactly what I said," Becca replied. "Is anybody getting me waffles?"

"You're thirteen, goddamnit," Bucky said. "You need to learn to make your own damn waffles."

"You know what happened the last time I got near the cooker, Buck."

Chapter 21
"What happened the last time she got near the cooker?"

Bucky sighed a lot in the mornings. It could have been because he was tired, or it could be that he was sick of being confronted by the world, but either way Steve marvelled at how he could keep upright. If Steve exhaled that often, he'd be on the floor, dying of asphyxiation.

"She set the place on fire," he said hurriedly. Becca spoke over him, rather proudly, and said, "I set the house on fire."

Steve blinked. "Wow," he said. He didn't know what he'd been expecting.

"To answer your question, my darling sister," Bucky said. "Me and Steve will be ready in about half an hour, and then we'll make your waffles."

"Is nobody going to answer my question?" Steve asked. Becca and Bucky looked at him. "Why is everyone coming around? Who is everyone?"

"Nat, Bruce, Tony, Jane, Betty, Sam, Rhodey, you know." Becca shrugged. "Everyone."

"And why are they coming?"

"Because I texted Natasha last night to tell her you were home," Bucky explained, "and she demanded to be able to come around and, I quote, 'punch him into next week for leaving again'."

"And you're still letting her come round? She's probably going to kill me!"

"She won't kill you," Bucky said. He pushed himself off the sofa and stretched out his muscles. His back cracked as he did it. Steve winced at the sound and tried desperately hard not to think about how much strain the prosthetic must put on Bucky's bones on a daily basis. "She loves you."

"That was before I left a second time," Steve said.

"It'll be fine. I'm going to take a bath."

"If I die, I'm blaming you."

"I've been told I give a good eulogy. I'll make sure you go out with a bang, Stevie."

Steve only had a bath the previous night, and so he didn't feel the need to have another one so soon. He pulled on his - Bucky's? - trousers and a thin blue t-shirt. Despite being Christmas, the Barnes' house was absolutely boiling, probably on account of the open fire that burned twenty-four hours a day and gave everyone who visited a rosy glow. Steve poked a few times at the fire, threw some more newspaper and wood into it, and then pottered down the kitchen to make some waffles, much to Becca's approval.

"You always cook better breakfasts than Buck," Becca said around a mouthful of waffles with strawberries. Steve laughed and grabbed a plate of his own.

"Your brother tries very hard for you, you know," Steve said. "You should say thank you more often."

"I know," Becca sighed. Although she had initially tucked into the pancakes with the hunger of a ravenous wolf, her appetite seemed to have waned, and she pushed strawberries around the plate. "It's just..."

"Hey, Becks?" Becca's hand was propping up her head, and Steve touched it gently so she would set
it down and look at him with wide eyes. "I know I let you down, and I'm sorry about that. Sometimes it takes people a little while to figure out what's right for them, and I know now, more than I ever have before. Right here is where I belong, okay?"

"O-kay," Becca drew out. "Does that mean you're staying?"

"Yes." Steve nodded. "I'm staying."

"Forever and ever?"

"I hope so, Becca, yeah. I hope so."

"Bucky told me I should say I'm sorry that you and Sharon didn't work out," Becca said, her eyebrows furrowed. "But I'm not sorry. I know that's mean, and I'm not trying to be mean, but I just- I like having you around. Is that bad?"

"I like having you around too, Becca. In fact, you're one of the people I missed most when I was in New York."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I bet you I know who you missed even more than me, though."

"Oh yeah?" Steve laughed. He ran a cloth over the hob of the cooker. "Shoot."

"My brother."

Steve froze. God, was he that transparent?

"He's my best friend," Steve said, after a beat. "You were going to say something, before, about your brother. What was it?"

Becca, whose eyes had been sparkling with mischief, went back to staring at her plate. It was mostly empty, which Steve took as the biggest compliment she could give his cooking.

"It's mean," she mumbled. "You tell me not to say mean things."

"If it's bothering you, it might be better for you to say it to me now than to your brother when you're angry sometime."

"Maybe."

Steve tried to cast his mind back to his childhood, to see how Sarah would've handled the situation. He remembered sitting on the other side of their kitchen table, trying to get words out about why he was so angry at the world that particular day. Sarah had smiled at him gently and remained silent, so Steve felt an obligation to fill her listening ears with words that meant something. So, despite the fact that Steve wanted to prod for more information, he remained quiet, and started drying some dishes that had been sitting beside the sink.

"It's just - he doesn't know how to do anything," Becca said. Steve opened his mouth. "You said I could be mean!"

Steve closed his mouth.
"Like, my friend, Isaiah, he tells me that any time he has a problem he just goes to his mom or his dad and they know exactly what to say and they help him feel better, as if whatever happened didn't matter or that if it did, it could be fixed. But when I go to Bucky, he just gets this dumb look on his face and starts running his hand through his hair and it makes me want to punch him."

"Becca..."

"I mean, he's good at some things, don't get me wrong. He always knows what clothes go together and what trends will stick around. He's really smart and he can help me with any homework question, and he knows more about dating than anyone I've ever met. But it's just... Sometimes I feel like I don't have anyone to turn to, because it feels like, even though he's older, he's the same age as me? If that makes sense?"

"It makes sense," Steve said. "Can I speak now? Or do you have anything else you want to say?"

Becca let out a huff of breath that sent her bangs flying into the air. "I want to say a lot of things," she said, "but I don't think Bucky would appreciate me saying them to you."

"Hey, that's alright," Steve said. "Family confidentiality and all that."

"No, nothing to do with the family," Becca said. "It's more to do with you."

Steve swallowed. "Oh," he said. Becca reached into her handbag that was hanging over a dining chair and popped a piece of chewing gum into her mouth. She chewed with the obnoxiousness that Bucky used to while sitting in Headmaster Fury's office. God, Steve had wanted to hit him so much back then. He'd also wanted to make out with him, but that was besides the point.

"You make some good points," Steve conceded, "and I agree that there are some areas Bucky could work on, but there are also plenty of areas where he's doing an amazing job, a better job than most parents."

Becca popped a bubble. Steve leaned forward on his elbows towards her.

"Can I tell you something, Becca?" he asked in a lowered voice. She stopped chewing quite so loudly and leaned in to him. "This might help you or it might not, but I think you should know it anyway."

"Spit it out, Steve," she said, because whilst Becca Barnes was a good person, patience was definitely not one of her virtues.

"I used to be so jealous of Bucky it made me feel physically sick," Steve said. Becca rose her eyebrow.

"Really?"

"Really. I thought he was the best guy the world had ever seen. He was great at everything; sports, maths, science, history, English, making friends, keeping friends, ending fights. Everything I was awful at. And I wanted - I wanted so badly - to be good at just one thing so I wouldn't constantly be living in his shadow, but no matter what I seemed to do, everyone just kept looking at Bucky. You know what I mean?"

Becca's eyes were vacant. She obviously didn't. Steve sighed.

"Maybe you're the Bucky of your friendship group, then," he said, "because there's always one. I love Bucky, have done since we were eleven years old, but I hated him so much back then that I
started fights sometimes just so I could see someone else take him down a notch or two."

"That was mean."

"Yeah, Becca. It was mean. But that's what jealousy does to people, yeah? I was so busy thinking of myself I barely ever thought about Bucky, or considered that he might have feelings, or that he might be thinking the same things about me."

"Is there a point to this?"

"I'm getting there, calm down. What I'm saying is - and I only realised this when I got older - I saw Bucky as the greatest man that had ever lived. That was a lot of pressure. When anything went wrong, people used to look to Bucky to fix the problems they'd created, and he'd do it without causing a fuss, but it must've weighed on him. He does it now, too. He hides his own problems and just listens to other people's, because he's a good man, Becca, no matter how long it's taken him to realise that. He's a good man."

"So you're saying..."

"I'm saying that I know what it feels like to want to punch Bucky in the face," Steve said. "But I also know what it's like to love him, and it's the best feeling you can ever have."

"I know," Becca said. "I know."

"He tries his best," Steve finished. "He's not perfect. He never was, despite what I used to think. But every time you say something to him, or think mean things about him, just remember that he gave up everything for you. That's not something you owe him for, nor is it something I think he'll ever cast up. It was his decision, but it's just another decision he's made that was for the good of other people and not for himself. So maybe just - give him a break, yeah?"

Becca bit down on her lip, her eyes raking around the room. Slowly, she got up off her seat and went around to where Steve was standing. She gave him a quick and tight hug, and looked up into his face.

"I think," she said, "if you stick around, I'd like to talk to you about things. Problems. If you didn't mind."

"Becca," Steve said, kissing the top of her head. "It would be an honour."

She patted him on the cheek.

"Don't make it weird," she said.

She let go of him and made her way up the stairs, but not after piling another few waffles onto her plate. It was at that stage that Steve heard the roar of the Picasso outside.

The doorbell had been made redundant, as had simply rapping on the door. Instead, Natasha's voice could be heard loud and clear as she yelled, "Hey fuck-boy, open up!"

Steve shook his head and obeyed her command. The first thing he saw was Natasha's open palm coming for him, and he narrowly missed her slap. She dug her hand into his stomach instead, leaving him wheezing in the doorframe as Bucky came down the stairs with a low whistle.

"Nice to see you again, Steve," Natasha purred. She went straight to Bucky who was freshly shaved and had his hair in a ponytail, and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Dorogoi," she said to him.
"Kotyonok," he replied, and Steve almost did a double take, because when did Bucky learn Russian? (In Moscow, of course, but he didn't think of that at the time. He was still too busy trying to catch his breath and not vomit.)

"Was that really necessary?" Steve spluttered, using the banister as a support for his failing body.

Bruce was the only one of the group who didn't nod their head and rather provided Steve with a sympathetic smile and an arm to help him to his feet. Even Sam refused to help Steve off the floor, but then again, Sam held grudges for laughs and giggles sometimes when he was bored. If he was truly annoyed, Steve knew he wouldn't just shake his head and brush Steve off. No, if he was really annoyed, Sam would be cursing the place up.

Nobody made Sam angry if they could help it. Natasha's temper was well documented, much like Bruce's and Steve's own, but Sam's was such an elusive species that it terrified anyone who even attempted to witness it.

Natasha batted her eyelashes in Steve's direction. "You jumping ship again wasn't necessary either, was it?"

"I did it because I thought it would make me happy."

"Strange," she muttered. "That was exactly why I wanted to hit you in the face, too."

"Natasha, please," Bucky said. He clapped his hands once, loudly, to get everyone looking at him. "I've got some hot cocoa in the kitchen if anybody wants some."

"I'll make it," Rhodey and Jane said at the same time. They glared at each other for a moment before Tony said, "Just share it between the two of you, God. Such kids," and they scampered off towards the kitchen to begin preparations. The rest of the group settled themselves into the Barnes' comfortable living room; Natasha on Bruce's knee in the large armchair, Betty, Tony and Sam sprawled out on the sofa, and Bucky and Steve on the floor with their knees crossed.

An awkward silence filled the room which Tony, as per usual, broke.

"You missed Christmas dinner," Tony said. "We had turkey for you and everything."

"I know, but-"

"What kind of sick, twisted monster abandons their family on Christmas for a hot, dangerous blonde?"

"Didn't you abandon us five years ago for the same reason?" Sam piped up in the background. Steve tried to send him an appreciative glance, but Sam skilfully avoided it.

"That's not the point, Wilson!" Tony protested. "Besides, I only left for a night. Maybe two. Captain Awesome over here was gone for more than a week."

"I'm sorry, guys, I am," Steve said. "I really didn't want to leave, honest. I tried to keep in touch, even though some of you wouldn't let me."

"You never messaged me!" Tony squawked. Steve fished his phone out of his back pocket and showed the messages to Tony. Tony, with great indignation, went for his own phone, only to find it smashed in his pocket. "Oh," he said. "That's what the crack was."

In the background, Sam and Betty face-palmed.
"Nice screensaver, by the way," Sam commented as Steve's phone was passed back over to him. "What're you guys so pissed off at?"

"The meringue," Steve said, at the same time as Bucky. They glanced at each other and shrugged, perfectly in time. "It wouldn't rise," they both said.

Everyone blinked at them.

"That's just fucking creepy," Sam murmured.

"Agreed," Bruce said. "Sorry guys, it was."

"You missed the annual Leavenworth gift giving, too," Natasha said.

"I made you and Barnes matching sweaters," Betty said, "but it wasn't as much fun with just one of you."

Steve stretched up to her from the floor and took her hand in his. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," she replied, but it was clear he should be. "They were ugly sweaters."

"I thought that was the point?" Tony said. Natasha and Bruce both shot him a glare that had him melting into the sofa.

"What about Pepper?" Steve asked. "Did you get her anything for Christmas, Tony?"

"Yeah, I got her something."

"He won't tell anyone what it is," Bruce supplemented. "Natasha's been trying to get it out of him for weeks."

"Congratulations on your engagement, by the way," Steve said. "I had no idea it even happened."

"There was a reason for that," Natasha said with a tight, pointed smile. Wolves and girls, both have sharp teeth.

"Thank you," Bruce said hurriedly, to cover his fiancée's murderous tendencies (God help him). "It all happened rather suddenly, but I think it's right."

"You make a lovely couple," Steve lied, because in reality he had never seen a more unhealthy relationship before in his life. Too much self-loathing for one household, in his opinion, though they did seem to share interests outside of that, so there was hope.

"Barnes will make a gorgeous bridesmaid."

"You know the fuck I will, Stark," Bucky said. "I'll be the sexiest damn maid of honour out there."

"We need to get you in a dress," Betty hummed, leaning over the sofa so her lips were right beside Steve's ear while she said that. "Don't you think Bucky would look good in a dress?"

Steve opened his mouth, but was interrupted by Tony.

"Of course he fucking would! Have you seen the tits on this man? Breasts of steel, I tell you, and thighs that could crush me any day."

"Simmer down, boy," Rhodey said.
He came into the living room with several cups of cocoa dangling precariously on the tips of his fingers. Jane was hot on his heels, and they quickly handed the beverages out until everyone was happily sipping away. It was, admittedly, very like the family Christmas that Steve had always dreamed about as a child, surrounded by his brothers and sisters instead of just himself and his mother, who was always sleeping in the chair by the time dinner rolled around.

Steve was very pleased that the subject of Bucky in a dress seemed to have passed, but then Natasha Romanoff met his eyes across the room. She smirked. Steve swallowed.

"We should get you a garter, James," Natasha said, "because I'm not having Bruce take mine off in front of everyone."

"I think that would be swell," Bucky said. "Whatever the bride wants, am I right? What do you think, Stevie?"

"I-"

"Aw, bless," Natasha hissed. "He's gone red."

Steve hadn't been red, not until she said that. He glared at her. She sipped at her cocoa.

"I'm not red," he protested.

"You kind of are, mate," Rhodey said.

"Who's side are you on?" Steve spat.

"Whoever's side is right," Rhodey replied smoothly. "Whose side are you on?"

"Bucky's!"

"Wait, hold on," Tony said, holding up his mug in confusion. "What are we talking about, here?"

"It seems Rhodey made a poor attempt at a burn, and Steve made a poor attempt to answer it."

"Thanks for the concise summary, Betty."

"Not a problem, Steve."

They sat in the blazing heat of the fireplace, Steve's ears burning ferociously and Bucky with a smirk so wide on his face that it almost exceeded his jaw-line. Betty shifted so her head was on Tony's lap, and when he made a noise halfway between a squawk and a yelp she sighed and moved so she was leaning on Sam's thighs instead. Sam reached under her head and freed her hair from being caught, and Betty smiled.

"This is good cocoa," Bruce muttered.

"Amazing cocoa," Bucky hurriedly agreed.

"It's just cocoa from a jar," Rhodey said.

"An amazing jar of cocoa, then," Jane said.

God. It was shaping up to be a fun afternoon.

Steve glugged down his cocoa (which was not amazing in the slightest and rather left a dusty
aftertaste in his mouth and a coating over his lips) and stared at the bottom of the mug.

"Any more news about the settlement?" Sam asked Tony.

It took Steve a second to realise he was talking about Tony's inheritance, and how he had been battling Obadiah Stane for it. His momentary lapse in concentration was nothing to do with the chocolate dust that Bucky was currently licking off his lips. Nothing at all.

"Well, the good news is it's over," Tony said. "The bad news is I'm fucked."

"You didn't get any money?" Steve asked.

"The good news is Obadiah didn't get any money," Tony said. "The bad news is that I didn't get any either."

Rhodey nodded, his lips pursed. He had obviously heard this story before; he had probably been the first one a (most likely) drunk Tony had called, besides maybe Pepper. Jane, however, frowned.

"How is that possible?" she asked. "Your parents were rolling in it!"

"Yes they were," Tony said. "But over the years, lawyers start to get impatient, and they start to charge more money, even when you try to pimp out your friends to pay off the debt."

"I dated Matthew in college," Natasha said. "It was hardly a pimping situation."

"It turned out by the end we barely broke even," Tony said. "It was split fifty-fifty. The good news is I still have my amazing intellect and my awesome garage to keep me going, whereas Obadiah relied on Dad for everything, so I might be able to paper-cut him to death with a dollar note yet."

"I'm happy for you, Tony," Steve said. "It's another chapter closed."

"I just wanted my Ferrari back," Tony pouted.

"One of the few drawbacks of growing up rich, apparently," Bucky muttered to Steve under his breath, "is not knowing how to live without vast amounts of disposable income."

"I used to be able to buy weed off Clint by the boat-load! Now I can't even do that! Fuck my life, and fuck Obadiah Stane, and fuck Dad, too, just for the fun of it. Wait, that sounded wrong-"

"Speaking of Clint," Bruce said. "Where is he?"

"Probably defrosting his tractor," Sam said.

"He's taking Lila and Cooper ice skating," Natasha said in a cool voice that hadn't betrayed her yet.

"Does he not remember the last time we all went ice skating?" Bucky spluttered.

"Oh, he does," Natasha said. "He told me he'd make sure it would never happen again."

"He said that to me the last time," Bucky huffed, "and look what happened."

"What happened?" Bruce asked. Jane, Sam and Natasha all opened their mouths, but Bucky yelled over them before they could speak.

"We are not talking about this!"
Natasha's eyes narrowed. Jane and Sam glanced at each other and shrugged. Steve rolled his eyes.

"How come I can talk about the Incident," Steve said, "but we can never, ever mention that Christmas?"

"Because," Bucky said. Steve waited for the end of his sentence, only to realise it wasn't coming.

"As good a reason as any," Bruce said, in an attempt to keep the peace.

"A fucking stupid reason, is what it is," Sam said, in an attempt to get Bucky riled up. It worked.

"There's things that every single one of you fuckers don't want to talk about," Bucky snapped. "Steve's is the Love Barn, Sam's is camp, Natasha's is also camp, Tony's is the Donut Scandal and mine is that Christmas, alright? So just shut the fuck up, the lot of you."

"Jesus, Barnes," Sam said.

"Ty chelovek spokoyny, ya znayu," Natasha muttered. *

"Fuck off," Bucky replied. "I hate every one of you."

"I hate when my parents fight," Tony said.

"This isn't helping my curiosity," Bruce muttered to Natasha, just loud enough for everyone to hear. Steve guessed that was his intention. Natasha put her hand on the side of his face and smiled at him.

"I'm sure you'll hear soon enough," Natasha said.

"We never gave that Christmas a title," Jane pointed out.

"That's because we're never talking about it again," Bucky said.

Tony swallowed the last of his cocoa. "But it was still an event in our lives, and it deserves to be immortalised."

"No it fucking doesn't, Stark, I swear to fuck."

"Language, Terminator. Now, does anyone have any ideas?"

"If anyone speaks, I swear to God-"

"Bucky's Nightmare at Christmas," Natasha suggested.

"The Great Christmas Disaster," Jane provided.

"Of Ice Skating and Men," Betty muttered.

"I like Natasha's the best," Steve said. "Sorry Jane, Betty."

Bucky let out a long, drawn out groan.

"Is that where Becca gets that from?"

"Shut up, Steve, you little shit."

"That reminds me," Tony said, "of another great and magical time of our early lives."
"If you bring up..."

"I'm not bringing that one up, I swear! No, I'm talking about the Great Discovery (and Exploitation) of Steve Rogers' Six Pack, 2006!"

Steve put his head in his hands and began laughing. He couldn't help it. It was the pure joy in Tony's face when he said those words together in a sentence that made it sound as if Steve was some kind of Adonis.

"We must recreate it," Tony declared, "so Bruce may be initiated into the group."

"I'm not getting in the lake in the middle of winter, Tony," Steve protested. "I'll literally freeze to death."

"He's not getting in the water, Tony," Bucky said. "Don't make me break you."

"Not even for science?"

"No."

"Jesus, you two need to stop saying things at the same time. It's reaching whole new levels of weird. How about we do it when the weather gets better then, what about that?"

"Bucky's birthday," Natasha mumbled from the corner.

"Why that specific date?" Steve levelled at her. Natasha shrugged, but she was smirking.

"I just think Barnes would appreciate having that occasion repeated on his birthday, wouldn't you, James?"

"I loved the lake," Bucky agreed. "I wouldn't mind going back out for my twenty-seventh."

"Vy by ne proch' videt' yego s yego rubashki snova libo," ** Natasha said to Bucky. Bucky grinned.

"Bylo by obuzoy, ya by s radost'yu prinimayu," Bucky replied.***

Steve blinked. "What did you just say?"

"We said," Natasha answered, "that it's settled."

"Oh Bruce, my boy," Tony said. He leapt from the sofa to wrap his arm around Bruce's shoulder, much to the annoyance of the displaced Nat. "You're going to feel so close to us by the end of that day you'll basically be up my ass."

"Can't wait," Bruce muttered, utterly endeared despite it all.

Steve could sympathise.

Chapter End Notes

* Translation: "You are the calmest man I know."
 ** Translation: "You would not mind seeing him with his shirt off again either."
 ***Translation: "It would be a burden I would happily accept."
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a battered cardboard box in the corner of Steve's bedroom. The industrial tape had been picked at so often that it barely managed to keep the flaps folded inwards. Colour was worn away by the strips of sunlight that passed through the window. A label, hastily scratched onto the side with Sharpie, read simply, 'Steve's Stuff.' It was just vague enough to appeal to curiosity, if anyone was to stumble upon it.

If the stumbler happened to look inside, they wouldn't find secrets or valuables. They wouldn't find old clothes, packaged up to go to the Samaritan Army, and they wouldn't find Sarah's uniform for it was still in the wardrobe, nine years worth of dust in between the cotton fibres.

No, instead they would find an ugly Christmas sweater that, if they could glimpse past the shoddy stitch-work, depicted a drunken Santa Claus. They would find a tiny whirring contraption that glowed blue in certain lights and which its function, if there ever was an intended one, was unknown. They would find a rolled up poster of Carrie Underwood, and an American flag t-shirt. If they hadn't given up by then, at the very bottom, where there was a danger of it clattering out onto the ground, they would discover a VHS tape, almost worn out, entitled 'Joseph - 1981'.

If they watched the tape, they would see that the first two minutes and twenty-nine seconds were dedicated to its namesake, a blond teenage boy with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, grinning at the girl who was recording him from the passenger seat of his beat up Volkswagen Beetle. They would hear the girl, Sarah, laughing, and they would hear her say, "Oh Joseph, don't look at me! Look at the road!" and, when he obeyed, she would sigh and hum, "Your profile is exquisite."

"This is what I get for dating a film student," Joseph would chuckle, though there was fondness in the corner of his mouth that wasn't holding the cigarette.

If, hypothetically, the stumbler was not a stranger, but rather Steve Rogers himself, who did not know that his mother ever went to university never mind to study film, he might be excused for showing no signs of annoyance when it turned out the VHS of his teenage parents had been taped over on his very own thirteenth birthday. Surely anyone else would be angry that such a thing had occurred, but Steve knew that his mother had chosen that tape specifically, so there must've been a reason.

Bucky Barnes appeared about two inches from the lens, tapping on it like it was a fishbowl. He was missing a front tooth, but he made up for it with enthusiasm. Sarah gently chastised him, muttering, "Go get Stevie, James," and Bucky threw her a salute, running off into the party.

It was a modest gathering, mostly because Steve didn't have many friends. In fact, it was just him, Bucky, his mother, and a morose Natasha Romanoff sitting in the corner grumpily with a party hat perched on top of her head. There was a rather sad looking cake on the table that sagged in the middle.

"Go on, Stevie," Bucky said, hitting a timid looking Steve on the back. "Blow out your candles."

Steve glanced up at his mother.
"It's okay, darling," she said. "I'm recording."

So thirteen year old Steve blew out his thirteen candles. When he reached the halfway point, he began spluttering, and coughed all over the icing. Bucky jumped a metre into the air and grabbed a packet of tissues from his own pocket, pressing one against Steve's face. Steve, although he tried very hard to thank him, was coughing too hard to do so.

"Steve, honey, are you alright?"

The camera shook as she walked over to him. Steve's young eyes were wide. The camera moved down. There was dark blood all over the tissue.

"Ma," Steve said, with a chesty wheeze. "I think I'm gonna faint."

The camera clicked off just as Steve fell to the floor.

A predisposition for tuberculosis had been present in Sarah's side of the family for centuries, ever since they had moved from Ireland to Leavenworth during the famine. It had almost killed Steve twice. It had succeeded in killing Sarah once.

The Picasso rolled up outside Steve's house. He grabbed his satchel, which contained his sketchbook, some pencils, a few pieces of charcoal and some paint, just in case he was inspired by nature (or Bucky). He slid into the back seat beside Sam and Tony. Tony was spreading sun-cream over his arms and Sam was laughing at him doing so.

"You think I want to get skin cancer, Wilson?" Tony snapped. Steve slammed the Picasso's door shut. Natasha smirked at him in the rear-view mirror.

"I ain't getting skin cancer," Sam replied. "Melanin is a hell of a soldier."

"Shut up," Tony said. He put his mouth into a very Bucky-like pout.

Bucky turned around from the passenger seat to look at Steve. He was wearing sunglasses, and his lips were red from him pulling on them.

"Hey, Steve," he said very softly.

"Hey Buck," Steve replied.

"What's up?"

"Nothing much. You?"

"Becca asked me for help plucking her eyebrows last night," Bucky said. "Kotyonok over here was too busy planning her wedding to come over, so I had to deal with it myself."

"And you did a perfectly good job," Natasha hummed, "all by yourself."

"I asked her why she couldn't just wait for one more day until Nat could teach her," Bucky explained, "but she said she wasn't going into school with her eyebrows like that. I asked her, 'what's the big deal? You've been going with them like that all year!' and she-

"Let me guess," Sam said, "she threw something at your head."

"Close," Bucky said. "She threw her phone at the wall. That reminds me, I need to look around for a summer job for her."
"She's getting a job?" Tony asked.

"Hell yeah she is. Little brat threw her phone at the wall and expects me to pay for it. I don't fucking think so."

"The story, James."

"You keep me on track, baby, and I love you for it. As I was saying, she ran up to her room and just. Kept. Crying. So I went up and said, 'Hey, you can practice on me if you want before you try it on yourself?' and she got this look on her face, Steve, I swear to God. I should've known to take it back right there and then."

Bucky whipped off his sunglasses. Just where the bridge of the glasses had been, Bucky's skin was red as hell. There were tiny cuts all over it, and when Steve leaned forward to touch it, Bucky moved away so fast he hit the back of his head against the roof of the car.

"Jesus Christ, Steve, it's sensitive."

"I was just trying to see if she did a good job," Steve protested.

"You're weak," Natasha muttered. "Women have to pluck their eyebrows - and various other parts of themselves - daily. For decades."

"Your eyebrows **are** pretty badass now though, Barnes."

"Thanks, Wilson. I'll send Becca over to your place tonight so she can extend her talents further."

"Don't you fucking dare."

Everyone in the car burst into laughter, but Steve couldn't quite join in. He looked out the window as Natasha sped towards the lake, remembering the many summers they had as a group lounging about on its banks.

In the three months between Christmas and Bucky's birthday, Steve had been gradually accepted back into the group (it actually occurred in the first week for everyone besides Natasha, who kept a grudge until it was absolutely necessary not to do so. That, and she needed Steve to do some photocopying for her). He had reintegrated into his job, trying to ignore Natasha's passive aggressive comment that "you're lucky you took off during Christmas break. The kids would've been wondering where you were" and he went back to spending most of his nights at the Barnes' house, albeit on the sofa or in the guest room rather than pressed against Bucky's back, as he had been before he left. He supposed he could only ask for so much.

"Steve."

Sam's voice jolted Steve out of his trance. He glanced over at his friend.

"What's the matter?" Sam asked. "Tony just made a perverted joke at your expense and you didn't even deck him."

"I'm fine," Steve said. Four pairs of eyes - even Natasha's, in the mirror - glared back at him. He sighed. "It's nothing, swear."

The car became silent. It was difficult not to notice how fast Natasha was driving when no one was talking over the revs of the engine. Steve swallowed.
"Did you know Ma studied film for a while?" he said.

"Your Ma?"

"Yeah, Buck. My Ma."

"I thought she went to nursing school."

"She might've trained on the job," Sam said. "That's what Mama did."

"Where'd you find it out, Steve?" Bucky asked.

"Nowhere," Steve replied. Bucky raised an eyebrow. "A video. VHS tape. It was of her and Joseph. They were both... God, they must've only been late teens, maybe early twenties."

"That is so cool man," Sam said. "I wish I had a tape of Mama when she was younger. You never really think of your parents as human until you do."

"I only had like two minutes of it," Steve said. "Ma taped over it with my thirteenth birthday party."

"None of us were at your thirteenth," Sam said.

"I was," Bucky and Natasha said at the same time. The fact that Bucky remembered was basically a given, but Steve was slightly surprised at Natasha, not that he'd ever admit it.

"I would've been," Tony said with a shrug, "but I was out of town at a college open day."

"At thirteen years old?"

"Yes, Wilson, at thirteen," Tony said. "I chose to stay with you fuckers, alright? I could've gone to MIT at fifteen if I'd wanted to. They gave me an offer. I rejected it."

Now, it was Tony who was receiving four wide-eyed looks.

"And I regret staying with you idiots every day of my life," Tony said hurriedly.

"You chose us over MIT?" Bucky repeated.

"Yeah yeah, Barnes," Tony said. "Don't make it weird. Just forget I said it."

"Your thirteenth was brutal," Natasha murmured. She tapped her black nails against the steering wheel.

"That was the year you were diagnosed with TB," Bucky said.

"The second time," Steve replied. "You didn't know me the first."

"Jesus," Sam muttered.

"You passed out on us," Natasha said. "I remember James crying about it."

Steve turned to look at Bucky, who had his sunglasses back on and was staring out of the front window instead of back at Steve.

"I didn't cry," he said.

"You wept."
"You know what, Natalia, fuck-"

"And we're here!" Sam called out, just as Natasha's grip on the steering wheel increased to a that of a vice. "Time to get out, stretch our legs, chill out, have some fun in the sun..."

"It's March," Steve said. "It's fucking freezing."

"I like the cold," Natasha said. She stepped out of the car and stripped off her jacket, leaving her in only a tank top and a pair of low-slung denim jeans, probably Bruce's. "James does too."

"Now that's a goddamn lie," Bucky said. He went around to the trunk and pulled out the supplies. Steve thought he saw a barbecue, and his mouth began watering already at the thought of Sam Wilson's famous Hawaiian hamburger.

"That's right," Natasha said. "It brings back bad memories, doesn't it, milii moi?"

"Of frost-bite and frozen windows," Bucky huffed.

"You wouldn't have gotten frost bite if you'd worn clothes some of the time."

"Any time my clothes were off my body was being exercised, Natalia, don't test me."

"For Chlamydia? I'm surprised you're clean."

"I practice safe sex," Bucky said. Natasha smirked, but her eyes drifted over to Steve as she did so. He mouthed 'what' back at her. She didn't respond.

"When's everyone else showing up?" Tony asked. The banks were wet from the rain and muddy, so when Tony and Steve made to sit down they slid a little towards the lake.

"Probably when all the work is done," Sam muttered. Together, Sam and Bucky tried to work out how to get the barbecue to stand up. Bucky kept fumbling with the instructions, and when he thrust them in Sam's face, Sam grabbed the sheets and threw them behind his shoulder into the lake.

"Oops," Sam said. Bucky had a murderous expression on his face.

"Now I'm gonna have to go get that," Bucky said, "and the water's probably freezing."

"It's fifty degrees out," Sam said. "Don't be such a wuss. You lived in Russia for a year, Barnes, give me a break."

"Yeah, and I hated every minute of it!" Bucky pulled off his trousers and then his shirt, and dog-tags - Steve's dog-tags - clinked against each other before resting in the valley of his neck. He took a deep breath, rubbed his hands together, and prepared to jump into the lake when Sam pushed him in.

"Fuck you, Wilson," Bucky yelled, though he was grinning, and Steve was fumbling. Natasha passed Steve a picnic blanket to hold for a second, and it dropped through his fingers the moment she let go. Exasperated, Natasha picked it up and held it between her thighs instead.

"Useless," she muttered.

Steve just watched Bucky. He dove underneath the waves, his strong muscles rippling in his arms as he did so, his wet boxers clinging to his thighs. There were a few tense moments as Bucky disappeared from view. Little bubbles appeared on the surface.

"If you've died," Sam shouted, "don't think I'll care."
Bucky's head poked up above the water again, probably because staying underwater would've been possible with the amount he was laughing. He clutched onto his stomach as he rolled backwards and forwards in the waves, and with his other hand he held the sopping instructions up above the lake. It was a failed exercise, really. The ink had faded into nothingness, and the paper had become flakes in his hands already. But yet, he was pleased with himself, and when he got to the banks and slicked his hair back against his scalp, Steve wondered if placing his hand on a piping hot barbecue would be enough to break him out of his appreciation.

Bucky was - he was -

Put it this way. Steve was definitely, definitely bisexual (not that there was ever any doubt, not really). And he was totally checking Bucky out, who seemed, for once, oblivious. Perhaps having admirers since the day and hour you could talk to others your age gave you the insane ability to ignore people looking at you with lust in their eyes. Steve wouldn't know.

But everybody in Leavenworth had a crush on Bucky at some stage, it was like a rite of passage. You weren't a True Leavenworther unless you had a) got black-out drunk at the Barton farm, b) had the shit scared out of you by Headmaster Fury, c) fallen from a tree in the forest or gotten lost in the cornfields and d) had the hots for Bucky Barnes.

If this was how it felt to lose your individuality, Steve wasn't complaining. After all, he was a True Leavenworther.

"The crew have arrived!" Tony announced, and indeed, over the hill appeared Rhodey, Jane, Betty, Clint, Pepper and Bruce. Upon seeing the last, Steve glanced over to Natasha, who was purposefully avoiding his gaze.

Oh Natasha, Steve thought to himself, why are you doing this for someone you don't even love.

Tony grinned at Rhodey and threw his arm around him. "Platypus!"

"What have I said about the pet names?" Rhodey said. "They're weird."

"Aw, you love them really, cupcake. Come on, Wilson's making hamburgers."

Pepper followed, scratching at her elbow, as Tony and Rhodey made their way over to Sam. In the distance, Steve could hear Tony say, "Oh, Pepper. I didn't know you were coming," and her dead-pan reply, "you're the one who invited me, dumbass."

Clint and Bruce made a beeline for Natasha, though Natasha had her sunglasses on and was lying on the stony bank, Gone with the Wind perched on her lap.

"Hey, Nat," Clint said, at the same time as Bruce leaned down to greet his fiancée with a kiss to the cheek.

"Can't right now," she said to both of them. "Reading."

Both men looked at each other, shrugged, and went to introduce themselves to Pepper. She had never had the pleasure of enjoying the company of the entire group before, probably because Tony was terrified that something embarrassing would come out about him in front of her, as if he didn't embarrass himself more than his friends ever could.

"Nice to see you both," Steve said to Jane and Betty.

In place of a greeting, they enveloped him into a three-way hug that threatened to crush his larynx.
Steve laughed and hugged back, pretending that his heart didn't jump in his chest when he saw Bucky, now unfortunately dressed, smiling at the scene from his vantage point beside Natasha. The group slowly arranged themselves in close strategic proximity to the barbecue and waited with anticipation as Sam flipped the burgers with utmost precision and care.

"Come on, Wilson," Bucky groaned. "How long is this gonna take?"

"Do you want to get food poisoning, Vanilla Ice?" Sam waved the spatula in his face. Bucky grabbed the spatula with his metal hand, putting a dent in it. "If you keep wrecking my equipment, I'll spit in your burger."

"You'd probably do that anyway."

"You know me so well."

Once the burgers had received Sam's seal of approval, the friends grabbed one (or two, or three) each and sat down on the banks of the lake, dipping their toes into the water despite the very real possibility of frostbite claiming a few of them. Conversation was stunted somewhat by the contented murmurings of "so fucking good" and "what do you put in these, cocaine" until finally, they all had full bellies and nothing to do but savour the brightness of the day and the familiarity of the company.

"Do you remember the Great Discovery of Steve's Six Pack?" Tony muttered. He rubbed little circles onto his stomach to ease the indigestion, yet another health condition that he had developed since Steve had left Leavenworth.

"I remember it well," Jane replied.

"I remember Barnes and Rogers both refused to take off their shirts," Clint said.

"The two hottest men here-" Tony squawked in the background, Natasha ignored him "refused to take off their shirts. It was a travesty."

"I wouldn't have cared," Bucky said.

"Nah, you'd slept your way through half the school by then," Rhodey said.

"Actually," Bucky said, "I was a virgin at sixteen, Rhodes, so there."

Natasha pulled off her sunglasses. "Really?" she said. "And why would that be, Barnes? Saving yourself for someone special?"

Bucky's eyes flickered minutely towards Steve, who found interest in the toothpick that had been used to hold the burger and its contents together.

"Nah." Bucky swallowed. "Just didn't have interest then, I suppose. Not until-"

"We don't talk about that," Steve reminded him. Bucky closed his mouth abruptly and Bruce raised an eyebrow. "The Love Barn. No one wants to talk about that."

"You're right," Tony said hurriedly, glancing over at Pepper, who didn't seem to be paying attention to the conversation in the slightest. She was dressed in a pair of denim overalls and an AC/DC shirt, and if Tony hadn't already been in love with her, he would've fallen just for that alone.

"Anyway, James and Steve refused to take their shirts off," Natasha said.

"Nobody had seen Steve naked before apart from Bucky, so it was a big conspiracy," Betty
explained.

"Some of us thought he had an alien growing out of his bellybutton," Jane said.

Tony ran a hand down his face. "Next time, just say my name, Jane. Everyone can see you looking at me."

"So eventually, this son-of-a-bitch," Sam said, jabbing his thumb into Bucky's chest, "decides 'fuck it' and rips off all his clothes and dives into the lake."

"Steve was still refusing to play ball, though," Natasha said.

"It was weird," Steve said. "It still is weird, stripping off in front of all of you. It goes against every natural instinct I have."

"You're a weirdo, Rogers."

"Thanks, Nat, it means a lot."

Betty leaned on her elbows. "Eventually Bucky managed to talk him into it, silver tongue and all that he has."

Bucky winked at her.

"So he pulled his t-shirt off and instead of an alien we find out-"

"Steve was shredded!" Tony exploded. Gravel flew up off the banks. Pepper, who had been staring out over the water, winced. "Literally, no fucking joke. He had a six pack and everything. Little Steve Rogers, right, I could've beat him to the ground. He gets to fourteen and grows like three foot in two years. I thought it couldn't be possible. He's bound to be skinny under his clothes, this is just an elaborate muscle suit. But no! It was real! I touched the washboard abs, and it was like licking the stomach of a god, I swear."

"Wait a minute," Steve said. "When did you touch my abs?"

"Under the water," Tony replied. "Anyway, you're missing the point! Steve was fucking ripped, and he'd been hiding that from the world for what, two years, and-"

"You said that was an accident!" Steve spluttered. Tony rolled his eyes.

"God, Steve," he laughed. "If you'd have seen yourself, you would've done anything to get a piece too. I'm not like Barnes. I don't get to touch you all the time. But boy, was it worth it."

"I don't touch him all the time," Bucky protested.

"But I want you to," Steve said.

But it was only in his head, so nobody heard it except him.

"Tony's face, though," Rhodye said. "I would pay a million bucks just to see it again."

"What was it like?" Bruce asked.

"It was a mix between a trout and a meerkat. I don't know what other way to describe it."

"I love you so much, Rhodye, honestly."
"Well someone needs to deflate your ego, and it sure as hell isn't your robots."

"They're artificial intelligence. They make their own decisions."

"You literally programme them to like you."

"Rhodey, shut up!" Tony's attention darted over to Pepper. She had a hand up to her mouth, and her shoulders bobbed with giggling. Tony sent her a smile laden with a thousand years of adoration and she returned it ten-fold.

Steve was going to be sick.

"After that," Jane said, "Tony went on to cheat in the school science fair-"

"Hold up," Tony said. "I did not cheat."

"He didn't cheat," Rhodey confirmed. "He just used an opportunity that was provided to him."

"Getting Steve Rogers to stand half naked beside your stall to attract the judges and other pupils over to it isn't an opportunity, Rhodes, it's poor sportsmanship. I can't believe Steve agreed to it."

"To be fair," Steve said, "I was getting paid quite a bit."

"Exactly!" Tony exclaimed. "Steve got his new paint-set or whatever shit he wanted to buy, I got the first prize medal, and everyone was happy."

"Everyone apart from me," Jane said.

"That's not my fault. Maybe you should see a psychologist about that?"

"Fuck you, Tony."

Tony smiled, but only because he didn't have firsthand knowledge of how scrappy Jane Foster could really be in a fight. Steve had seen it the first time he ever clapped eyes on her. She'd been ready to take on both Steve and Bucky that day, and she'd managed to leave a bite mark in Bucky's wrist (Steve had pretended not to notice how Bucky got uncomfortably turned on by that). She fought dirty, and Steve didn't think Tony, with his experience of one lost fight behind him, stood a chance.

"Where's Thor?" Steve asked pleasantly instead.

Jane's pink face turned to him in delight. She was a little like Becca in that regard; she could switch her emotions as easily as she pleased, as long as it was getting her off a subject she'd rather not discuss.

"Back in Norway," she said. "He has a very busy job, you know. He works for Asgard Modelling, and he flies around the world weekly to go to shoots. I haven't seen him in a few months now, not since the week of the 1940s party."

"How do you manage it?" Bucky asked in awe. "I couldn't live for months on end without--"

"We love each other," Jane said. The eye contact between her and Bucky was intense for a reason that Steve couldn't quite understand. They had a history, of course, but he'd never seen the inference in her gaze before. "If you truly love someone, you could go for years without so much as kissing them, and the love would still be there. Wouldn't it, Bucky?"

Bucky swallowed. He clenched the metal arm a few times fast.
"I - I still think kissing them would be better," he muttered.

"Of course it would," Jane said. "If you had the balls to do it in the first place."

"I feel like we're talking about something else here," Bruce murmured, just loud enough for everyone to hear. Jane furrowed her eyebrows together and flopped back onto the bank, narrowly missing landing on the sprawl of Natasha's red hair.

"Are we getting in the water or not?" Rhodey asked. He already had his shirt off and a pair of cargo shorts on. "Because I came to recreate our childhood summers, and we never stayed out of the lake this long before."

"It's freezing," Betty protested. "It's not that bad," he said. "I went in before you guys came. Wilson over here threw the fucking instruction manual in the water."

"We figured it out without instructions," Sam said. "If Neanderthals could do it, we can do it."

"That's not the point, Wilson."

"Is anyone else joining me?" Rhodey asked. The water lapped at his waist, and he shivered, splashing his hands around in the water as if that would heat it.

"Yeah, I'll hop in," Bucky said. Not to be outdone, Tony jumped up from his seat at the exact same time as Pepper did.

Tony paused and watched Pepper yank off her shirt. He swallowed with visible difficulty.

"Together?" she suggested, holding her hand out to him. Tony looked at it for a moment in much the same way as Bucky had looked at Sharon's, and grasped it tightly in his own.

"Together," he said. The three of them barrelled into the water, Bucky letting out a chain of curse words as he went and Tony tripping over something on the lake bed and falling flat on his face. Pepper burst out laughing and dived in after him.

"We might as well go in too," Clint said to Bruce.

Bruce sighed and took off his glasses, setting them on top of his folded newspaper. After a few moments, Jane, Natasha and Sam followed, until everybody was in the water apart from Betty and Steve.

"Come on, losers!" Bucky called out. It was a wonder he could speak at all considering Natasha was on his shoulders in what appeared to be a very aggressive piggy back ride. "Get in the lake!"

"I can't swim!" Betty yelled back. She glanced over at Steve, and he smiled at her.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll stay with you. Swimming's pretty tough since my injury anyway."

"Suit yourselves!"

Betty and Steve huddled together under a picnic blanket, sharing the leftover burger baps as their friends paraded around in the lake. Bucky's skin was glistening, and his face was wide and bright with the smile that was on it. He held Natasha down under the water until she kicked him ferociously and dunked him under instead. After anything happened, whether it be him finally getting the edge over Natasha or him managing to splash Sam in the face, he would look up at Steve and throw him a
thumbs-up, as if asking if he was watching, as if Steve could look anywhere else.

Steve wanted to dry him off when he came out of the lake. He wanted to comb through his wet hair that night and kiss the back of his scalp as he fell asleep, his muscles knackered from lifting Natasha with such apparent ease. Steve was so in love with Bucky he saw it in everything he did, and it ate away at him, the fact that he was keeping a secret from his best friend.

Maybe if he told someone else, it would weigh less heavily on his mind. He opened his mouth to speak to Betty when a loud thwack of a body hitting against the water interrupted him.

Pepper had followed Natasha's lead, and she had been up on Tony's shoulders in the shallow water near the bank when the courage overtook him and he tried to reach his head around to kiss her. Instead, she dropped down off his back, moved in front of him, took his legs out and laughed as they both fell hard onto the bank, the wind knocked out of their lungs.

She surged upwards and kissed him, right where water from the lake sat in pools on his chapped lips. Both of Tony's hands went immediately to her hair and grasped onto the tiny curls that were free from her ponytail, and her hands went around the bareness of his midriff.

They broke apart when it would mean asphyxiation if they did otherwise. With heavy breaths, Tony considered her under him with quiet and religious appreciation, and wiped the water off her face with his thumb.

"I love you," he said. Steve doubted if anybody else but him, Betty and Pepper could hear, but it wasn't for them anyway. Pepper grinned up at him and pulled him by his neck to meet her mouth once more.

"I know," she replied in between kisses.

"Oh my God," Rhodey called out from several feet away. "Fucking finally. I've been listening to the both of you yap about this for months. Maybe I'll get some fucking peace. Pass me my phone, Rogers, I need to text Carol."

Steve obliged, and Rhodey caught his phone in one fluid movement. Tony, however, didn't seem to have realised Rhodey had spoken at all. His attention was wholly on Pepper, whose freckles were unidentifiable against the red of her cheeks. Tony's mouth formed little words that Steve could barely make out, but which seemed like some variation of, "thank you for loving me, thank you, thank you, love you so much."

His heart pounded in his chest. The idea that Pepper and Tony had just gotten their aches affirmed just made it all that much harder to take the sight of Bucky without attempting to do the same thing as Pepper had just done. Steve turned to Betty with a lump in his throat.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Steve asked. Betty nodded instantly, and they began to get up from under the rug.

"We're going to explore," she told Jane, the only one of the group not to be fussing over Pepper and Tony at that exact moment, though that was precisely what she was heading to do. Jane pushed her hair off her face.

"Okay," Jane said. "Make sure you get back before dark."

"We've got about an hour left," Betty said. "We should be fine. Yeah, Steve?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "An hour should be more than enough time."
Steve had been planning to talk about anything other than Bucky for as long as humanely possible. Now he needed to do that and also find a way to slot in the old 'hey, I'm in love with my best friend' card into the hour before the sun set against the surrounding forest. He grabbed the blanket and drooped it around Betty's shoulders, and they ventured off, their feet cracking against twigs.

They must've wandered for ten minutes before the sounds of their friends' voices faded and were replaced by the songs of birds and the humming of the trees. Betty sighed and closed her eyes, soaking in the freshness of the air and the scent of pine needles that permeated every breath.

"Do you remember coming out here after SATs?" Steve asked. He scuffed his shoe along the ground and watched as disgruntled ants made a break for it.

Betty laughed. "Yeah," she said. "It's not the first thing I think about when I come out here but. Yeah."

"What's the first thing?"

"The time you fell out of the tree," Betty replied. It was so odd seeing her without her glasses. Every now and again, she would reach to push them up, and her hand would drift awkwardly away once she remembered their absence.

"Oh. Which time?"

"Probably the first. It was literally the most terrifying experience of my life."

"Worse than the Incident?"

"The Incident was pretty bad," Betty agreed. "But when you fell, I was still up the tree, seconds away from grabbing onto the branch you broke with your fat ass."

"That branch was going to break anyway," Steve said, "and you can't say I was fat, Betty. I weighed less than your little sister did up until I was fourteen."

"I didn't mind," Betty hummed. "I always thought you were kind of cute, being so angry all the time when you were so little."

Betty was the first girl - besides Natasha, but she had always been closer to Bucky so she didn't really count - to give Steve the time of day. In fact, she did more than that, and throughout middle school she provided him with a lab partner and a place of respite from the many accomplishments of Bucky Barnes.

"God, I liked you so much," Steve said.

"I remember crying to you because some girls teased me for my hairy arms."

"I always thought they were kinda hot. You made it work."

"I remember you asked me if I wanted to shave it off and give it to you, if I hated it so much."

"To be fair, I just wanted something to show off to Buck. Son-of-a-bitch was ahead of me even in body hair."

Betty stopped in the middle of the clearing and turned to him. "That hasn't changed."

"What?"
"The amount of times you bring Bucky into a conversation that has nothing to do with him."

"I don't do that!" Steve protested. "Not all the time."

"Yeah, you're right. It's just most of the time." She began to walk once more, knocking her shoulder against Steve's as she did. "That's why I... why we broke up. It wouldn't have been fair."

"To him?" he asked. Betty looked up at him with grey eyes. There was a remnant of a smile on her face, but Steve only recognised it because he'd known her for so long. To anybody else, she might've appeared sad.

"To you," she replied.

The ground squelched underneath Steve's boots, still wet from the spring showers that had plagued Leavenworth for the past month. There had been the concern that the lake visit would have to be postponed for another day, but as usual, Bucky was blessed with good luck, and his birthday morning began with bright sunshine and fluffy white clouds dancing just above his field of view. Betty donned a pair of Mary-Janes, and so the mud went over her bare feet, not that she made a single complaint about it. Without him saying the words, she knew Steve needed her. The fact that Sharon shared this characteristic was one of the things that drew Steve to her in the first place.

"Nobody talks about Darcy anymore," Steve murmured, "or Jessica Drew."

"They both left a long time ago," Betty explained. "About a year after you went to New York, Darcy's parents got divorced. Her mom moved out to Boston, and her dad stayed here."

"I thought her and her dad didn't get along."

"They didn't. That's why she moved to live with her mom within the month. She tried to stay in touch, but it was difficult. The last time she came back her and Jane had a fight about something, I'm not sure what. I never got the full story from either of them. After that, Darcy's visits became few and far between. Her dad killed himself three years ago and she hasn't came back since, not even for the funeral."

"God," Steve said. "And Jessica?"

Betty shrugged. "She went to a school in New York and just never came back. Last I heard she's living in London now, but it might just be a vicious rumour. There's a lot of rumours going around about Jessica now."

"All the girls are leaving," Steve said. "It's just you, Jane, Carol and Natasha left."

"The testosterone is insane," Betty laughed, "but I've gotten used to it. Me and Nat aren't really as close as we used to be either."

"Any particular reason?"

Betty picked at the rag-nail on her thumb. "She's getting married," she began, rather lamely. "She doesn't have as much time for friends as she used to."

"She only got engaged recently," Steve said. "There's bound to be another reason."

Birds gave their final call before sundown, and the trees were swarmed with reuniting couples, all carrying various insects in their beaks. Betty chewed absentmindedly on the end of her thumbnail.
"I thought Bruce was it for me," she said finally. "That's all."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Soft footsteps amongst the foliage was the only sound for the next few minutes. He had to say it sometime. He had to give a reason for dragging her this far around the lake and into the forest. If he said it out loud, it would get easier. She'd know what to do. She was the closest thing to Sarah that Steve had left. He had to tell her. He had-

"What about Carol?" he asked instead, kicking himself internally. Betty blinked a few times fast. "I just - she doesn't hang around with us much anymore. Not like she did - before."

"She's not really well enough to leave the house," Betty said, "and we don't like to talk about her when she's not here because it just feels weird. Besides, Rhodey gets all ... He gets tired. I think that's the only way I can explain it. He's tired."

"Is she sick?"

"She's had three bouts of cancer in the past eight years, Steve. The doctors basically told her the next time it comes about, that's it. That's why she wanted to have Marvin so badly - she wanted to experience motherhood before. You know."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah. It's tough on Rhodey, too, that's why nobody talks about it. Carol says she's fine with pretending nothing's wrong, but I don't think she is. I think she's just staying strong for him and Marvin. She told me she's writing letters, though, for when she's gone to help Rhodey out with raising him alone. She said to me that he barely knows how to cook macaroni on his own, never mind keep a house. And now that her brother... Well."

"You never think," Steve attempted. "You never think that everyone else has shit like that to deal with until you hear about it."

"Everybody has something," Betty sighed.

"Even Sam?"

"Yeah, Steve. Even Sam." She let out a little puff of breath. The condensation was visible, even in the fading light. "He didn't tell you about Riley, then."

"Riley Danvers?" Steve asked. "Carol's brother?"

"The very one."

"He went to boarding school for as long as I knew of him."

"He went to train for the Air Force after school. In between his training and his first mission, he came back to Leavenworth and camped out on his sister's couch. I think he wanted to scope out Rhodey, but you and I both know Rhodes is golden."

Steve smiled with half his mouth. "He couldn't find a thing on him," he said. It wasn't a question, but Betty answered regardless.

"Right. Anyway, Riley was a sweetheart. He always had a good thing to say about every person he
met, or even people he hadn't met. You saw him after a bad day and you just thought 'aw, I'm glad it's Riley.' He was calming, that man."

"Sounds like someone I know."

"Yeah, him and Sam clicked instantly. I think since you left, Sam sort of had a gap in his life where a best friend should be, and he filled it with Riley. There couldn't be a better guy, I suppose. They were inseparable. I've never seen two people closer, apart from maybe you and Bucky."

Steve almost asked why he hadn't met Riley.

"Something happened to him, didn't it."

Betty nodded. "Yeah, Steve. Something happened. Three days into his first mission, he got shot out of the sky. The soldiers came to Carol's door and said there was nothing anybody could do. When Carol asked for details, they couldn't give her anything. Turned out he'd been in some kind of special ops force, so they never got the body back home again. Carol was heartbroken, I tell you that much. Rhodey was worried she wouldn't make it through the chemo that time. She just couldn't find a reason to try."

"And Sam?"

Betty gave a sad smile.

"Sam was pretty broken up about it, yeah. Riley died around the same time as Bucky got in the car accident. I remember going around to Sam's house to tell him and he just hugged me and cried. He said it was his fault that Bucky had gone off the rails, that he should’ve been there to support him. I told him it wasn't his fault. It was all of our faults, really. If Natasha hadn't been so mad at Clint for getting married, if I wasn't so focused on my research, if Jane hadn't have fucked off to Norway, if Tony was less angry... There's a lot of things we could've done better."

"At least you were all here," Steve said. "I was the dickhead who left."

He expected Betty to disagree, because that was the kind of person he remembered her being. A pacifist. A people-pleaser. Whichever or whatever you wanted to call it.

She nodded, lips pursed.

"Tony was angry," Steve, slightly stung, repeated. "I thought Natasha said he built Bucky's arm."

"He did," Betty agreed. "But that was after a solid six months of being furious. He blamed Bucky for all of it. I think it was probably because the way Bucky spoke about it made it seem as if he'd been the one driving. Tony was around at Natasha's house helping her with something, and Bucky was there, and Tony saw his missing arm for the first time and he freaked. He spent the next six months in his workshop. Only Rhodey and Carol knew what he was doing in there. Bucky came out on his birthday with his arm back, or at least the first prototype. It's gotten a lot more sophisticated since then."

"I need to tell you something," Steve said suddenly. Betty stood stock still and looked at him.

"Go on," she prompted.

Steve sat down hard on a rock. He ran his hands down his face. The air smelt of rain.

"It's going to seem minor after everything you've just told me," he said.
"That's good," Betty replied. "If we can deal with all of those, this will be a piece of cake."

"I'm in love with Bucky."

A bird screeched above them. Betty blinked, just once, shocked that Steve had just admitted it with such ease (and volume).

"Yeah," she said.

"That's all you have to say?" Steve asked. "Yeah?"

"Well I mean- you've been in love with him for years, haven't you?"

Steve looked at her. Betty burst out into laughter.

"That's nice," Steve huffed. "Laugh it up. It isn't as if my friendship with Bucky lies in the balance or anything."

"Steve, you're so stupid," Betty said. She wiped her eyes with the corner of the picnic blanket. Steve furrowed his eyebrows together. "I can't believe I had a childhood-long crush on a guy who is so fucking stupid."

"Am I missing something? I feel like I'm missing something."

"Oh honey," Betty said, slumping down on the ground beside Steve. She rested her head on his shoulder and continued to tremble with suppressed laughter. "You're always missing something. It's one of your defining character traits."

"If it's so obvious," Steve said, "why hasn't Bucky said anything?"

"Oh, he probably has," she replied. "It would take a brick hitting you in the face for you to realise there was a tornado, Steve."

"That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense! Listen, you being in love with Bucky is as much of a given thing as Natasha being annoyed at Tony. That's why it was so weird to everyone that you left to begin with - I can't even think of you without him. The whole damn school wanted you two to get together, you know that?"

"But Bucky's not gay."

"Maybe not," Betty conceded. "But look at it this way. Tony's got a preference for males, and he picked Pepper, right?"

"Tony has a preference for everyone," Steve said.

"You're not getting what I'm laying down here, Steve."

"You're saying that I should take the chance of destroying my lifelong friendship with Bucky for the sole purpose of seeing if he wants to date me as well."

"Date? I thought you wanted to marry him and have lots of sex and babies."

"This is not a time to quote Love, Actually, Betty."
"You're right," Betty said, jumping up from the ground with the vigour of a kangaroo. Steve followed her lead, slightly dazed by her quick movement. "This is a time for you to go back to the group, tell him how you feel, and have a Dirty Dancing moment in the lake."

"And if he doesn't like me back?"

"Then this day will go down in history as the Worst Day of Steve Rogers' Life," Betty said solemnly. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, okay?"

Steve grinned at her. "Okay," he breathed. "I'll do it."

Betty grabbed onto his arm. "Come on then," she said, yanking him down the path. Her shoes sent dust flying. "We need to go!"

"Wait," Steve said, stopping for a moment despite Betty's displeasure at the interruption. "So you liked me too?"

Betty blinked at him. "Of course I liked you," she said. "I dated you, didn't I? You are one dense-"

"Well, yeah, but you never seemed to - be as into me as I was..." Steve drifted off. A thought occurred to him, and he sheepishly asked, "Was it me calling you darling?"

"Oh Steve." She sighed. Her hand patted gently against his cheek. "No, Steve, not in the slightest."

Steve chuckled. "I should've left the pet names to Bucky, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, absolutely," she replied.

Betty smiled at him like she used to when he got a question right in maths class, or finally worked up the nerve to ask the teacher for help. With a lump in his throat and stinging lips from how much he had chewed on them, he mumbled, "Thank you."

"For telling you that you weren't as smooth as you thought you were?"

"For coming with me on the walk. For - listening to me."

"That's what friends are for, Steve, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

He trundled on down the path towards the most terrifying experience of his life. Instead of thinking about Bucky, he focused on the feeling that was building in his stomach that he needed to thank Betty, not just for this occasion, but for all the years she had stood beside him and understood him when few others did.

"Betty."

"Steve."

"You've had trouble getting research published, haven't you?"

She ducked her head down, though it was evident that her cheeks were pink. "Yes," she said. "Quite a bit of trouble. Nobody wants to take the chance on gamma radiation."

"Have you ever heard of Wakanda Publishing?"
"What?"

"Have you ever-"

"Of course I have, Steve!" she exclaimed. "Wakanda has a finger in every pot, from comic books to literature to scientific journals, and from what I've heard, its CEO has a background in experimental technologies. It would be the dream. Why?"

"No reason," Steve hummed. He slid his phone out of his pocket and passed it over to Betty with a photograph displaying him, Sharon, T'Challa and his wife Ororo all sitting around the dinner table two Christmases ago. Betty grasped the phone in awe and poured over the photo, zooming in on T'Challa's face and then Ororo's.

"Is that..."

"Yep. T'Challa has been my publisher for years. I stayed with him and his wife for about five months when I first moved to New York. They're good people, and they owe me a few favours. I'd be willing to put you in touch with them, if you wanted."

"Really?" Betty's eyes were wide.

"Really."

Betty's small arms wrapped around Steve's waist like a koala. She jumped up and down on the spot and pressed wet kisses to Steve's cheek and ear.

"You're the shit, Steve Rogers," she said. "The absolute shit. Wait till I tell Jane, oh my God."

Steve opened his mouth to say it was no big deal. He would be talking to T'Challa pretty soon anyway to discuss the latest comic books he'd emailed him (The Hulk and The Winter Soldier were, admittedly, the best comics Steve had ever created, and he could admit that even whilst trying to be humble about it). He couldn't quite get the words out as Betty dragged him back towards their friends.

As both of them rounded the corner towards the banks where everyone had been lying, Steve's smile dropped off his face like a stone and landed in his stomach, pulling it to the floor.

Bucky, dressed in a soaked Henley, had his eyebrows furrowed together and his jaw locked. Veins were present in his upper arms, and Natasha was talking to him in hurried, whispered Russian.

He was holding Steve's sketchbook. It was open to the back page.

Well shit.

"I can explain," Steve said.

"You better start," Bucky spat. "I don't even know why you're here right now, Steve, considering Leavenworth is so much of a shithole and Sharon is always right. Surely you should've stayed the fuck in New York, then, and left us the hell alone."

Betty stepped in front of Steve. "What is this about, Buck?" she asked. The fact that Steve being in the wrong hadn't even occurred to her just made Steve feel sicker.

"Do you want to tell her, Steve?" Bucky asked. "The True New Yorker always knows the best way to talk himself out of situations, right?"
“What is he talking about?” Clint questioned. Tony and Pepper stopped grinning manically at each other for a moment to consider the pointed looks that flew around the group. Bruce picked his newspaper up and stuck his nose into it, despite the fact that he’d read it three times that afternoon already.

“Milii moi,” Natasha muttered. Her hand drifted to sit on Bucky’s chest, but he was too far gone to notice her touch. “Uspokoysya.”

“Don't tell me to calm down,” Bucky barked. "He's written shit in here about you too, Nat."

“What are you talking about?” Rhodey asked one more time. The joy that had rested upon his shoulders from recreating a simpler time had evaporated, and for the first time, probably as a result of him looking for it, Steve noticed the tiredness in his eyes. "Use your words, Barnes."

"Do you want me to read it out?" Bucky's eyes were trained dangerously on Steve. He was rooted to the ground, and his mouth hung open. No words could escape.

"Tony Stark is a narcissistic prick who thinks that just because he's smarter than everyone he has the right to involve himself in people's lives, no matter how much they dislike him."

Tony turned to Pepper, his lips pinched, but shrugged. "I've heard worse," he muttered under his breath, but Bucky wasn't finished.

"If he had been in Afghanistan, he would've been the first person to let some other poor fucker die for him."

Tony's entire face jolted backwards as if he'd been slapped. He looked down at the ground with wide brown eyes and turned his palm to face him. Steve saw that the cuts were freshly scabbed, but they reopened easily when Tony began scratching at his hand once more.

"Tony," Steve tried. "I-"

"I think you've said enough, Cap," Tony replied. He lifted his gaze to meet Steve's. There was a hardness to the edges of his expression that shocked him. Steve faltered for a moment, and was interrupted by Bucky continuing to read out the words he'd written in anger and malice.

"Bucky Barnes is an asshole," he read out, a bitter smirk punctuating the insult. "Whatever you remember about him is wrong. He is not a good person, he is not a hero, and he is definitely, 100% not your best friend. All the nots are bolded, as well, so you were pretty goddamn sure about it."

"Bucky, please," Steve begged. "If you'd just-"

"Hey, Barnes." Sam had been silent the entire time. He appeared beside Bucky and peered down at the page. "Is there something about me, there?"

"Yeah," Bucky sighed. Sam leaned over his shoulder and ran his finger along the writing.

"Sam Wilson thinks that just because nobody's called him out on his shit before now that he's done no wrong," Sam read out. "In reality, everybody's just too terrified to tell him what they really think. He's a know-it-all who doesn't even know the full story before deciding to give his opinion on it. In fact, he's opinionated, naive and stubborn, because even when the full story is told to him he refuses to change his stance."

"Sam," Steve said. Sam gave a little laugh.
"You know," Sam said. "I'd rather never change my stance than be like you."

With that, Sam went over, collapsed the barbecue, grabbed his stuff and made for home. Rhodey glared at Steve and mimicked Sam's actions, following him into the darkness.

"Good going, hotshot," Rhodey muttered under his breath. Steve tried to grab onto him, to explain himself, but Rhodey just hit his shoulder against Steve's and moved him out of the way. "You coming, Tony?"

Tony sat hunched over on the banks. Pepper's movements were furious when she helped him to his feet and guided him towards Rhodey. Steve tried to meet her eyes, but she evaded him with a cool professionalism that nobody could match.

It was only Clint, Bruce, Natasha, Jane, Betty and Bucky left. Clint glanced at Bruce and asked him, "Are we going?"

Natasha answered him. "Wait," she said. "Is there anything about me?"

"Yeah," Bucky said solemnly. "There is."

"Have you read it, yet?" she asked. Her face was stoic, and her arms were crossed against her chest like a shield for her heart. Bucky shook his head no. "Then read it out, by all means."

Bucky swallowed with difficulty. "Natasha Romanoff doesn't know when to mind her own business," he said. Natasha quirked an eyebrow. "In fact, she thinks everything is her business. Her own curiosity is more important than other people's feelings. She thinks she knows so much-"


"You think I'm going to stop now?" Bucky snapped, because he didn't know what was coming. Steve flailed as he tried to think of a way to put off the inevitable. Besides physically shoving Bucky to the ground, he couldn't think of anything. "No chance, Rogers."

"Keep going, then," Natasha said in an uncharacteristically clear, crisp voice.

Bucky heaved a breath. "She thinks she knows so much when actually she's the one in love with a married-"

He stopped mid-sentence. Steve turned to look at Natasha. She was frozen, her eyes wide open. Bruce dug his head further into his newspaper. Clint stared at his best friend.

"What the fuck, Steve."

Steve wasn't sure who said that, but he was pretty sure it was either Jane or Betty. Bucky was bright red now, trying desperately to talk over himself, but the words were in the air now, and they had already travelled into Clint's ears and further out over the lake.

When you looked at Clint, it was usually pretty easy to tell what he was thinking. He was an open book; the one guy you could trust with anything and that you could rely on to tell the truth. Right now, though, his eyes were glazed over, almost blue in the twilight, and a muscle in his neck was twitching.

Nobody moved. The only sound that could be heard was Bucky's inane mutterings as he attempted to fix the situation. Natasha stared at Clint, her mouth forming around words that were neither English nor Russian.
Finally, Clint looked up at her.

"You were the one who said no to me," he said. He took a few steps towards her. Natasha resembled a deer when presented with humans for the first time; she did not move, nor did she make any acknowledgement that he was getting closer. "You were the one who told me you didn't care, remember?"

"Moye gore," she muttered. "I've called you that for years. You never looked it up?" *

Clint fumbled. Of course he hadn't - it wasn't in his nature. Besides, she had said it with such fondness that he couldn't possibly have guessed its true definition. Natasha Romanoff had not cried in more than a decade, but there was something tingling at the ends of her eyelashes then, something that made her makeup into blackened pools.

"But... I- Before Moscow..."

"I know," Natasha said. "I never wanted to tell you."

"So you just told everybody else?" Clint accused. "Does everyone know apart from me?"

"No. Not everyone. Just James and - and Steve."

Clint glanced desperately around the area, scuffing his shoe against the dust.

"I gotta get home," he said. "My wife, Natasha."

"Love is for children," she recited. She swallowed thickly. "And it's for good people, as well."

Bruce folded his newspaper over and sat it down on his lap. His face was unreadable, but he was staring at the back of Natasha's head with a ferocity that was only comparable to the glare Bucky was sending Steve's way.

Clint nodded abruptly. He made his way towards the car. Once they heard the door slam shut and the ignition rev, Natasha and Bruce exchanged a look and also packed to go.

"Natasha," Steve said to her, moving forward. His fingers brushed against her arm and she jolted away like she'd been burnt.

"To think I trusted you."

"Nat-"

"Go to hell." She grabbed her bag and slung it over her shoulder with force that would've toppled any normal person. Grabbing onto the end of Bruce's sleeve, she stomped her way up the bank towards the Picasso. "You coming, Barnes?" she snapped.

*Bucky no, Steve thought, don't look at me like you hate me, please. It's more than I can take. I love you. I love you.

"I thought I was the asshole," Bucky said. "Everyone was wrong about you, Steve, especially me."

"Bucky," Steve said. "Bucky please. I didn't-t-"

"Save it. You wrote what you wrote, Steve."

"I wrote it months ago!" he protested. "When I first came to Leavenworth I wrote it. I was angry and
nobody seemed to notice I'd left -"

"So that gives you permission to talk shit about us?" Bucky asked, incredulous. "If you wrote it so long ago, Steve, you could've ripped it out. Instead it was right there for the world to see when the wind sent your sketchbook flying."

"Didn't you see the rest?" Steve asked desperately. "Didn't you see the drawings?"

"I don't think the drawings matter a shit, Steve, not now."

Steve tried to say that the drawings were all that mattered. He couldn't be that bad of a person, because yes, he had written those things, but he had surely made up for it by the careful consideration he poured into each sketch and painting.

The drawings mattered because there was love scratched into the pages, little details that nobody else recognised and which Steve utterly adored, like the way Natasha always had a stray strand of hair stuck against her forehead after her morning jog, or the tiny frown that appeared in between Bucky's eyebrows when his sister stormed up the stairs for the third time that day, or how Sam's fingers tapped against the steering wheel of the Picasso when Natasha was too drunk to drive.

Three figures stood abandoned on the beach, one of them with guilt in his heart and two with nothing but shock printed on their pale faces.

Shock was the most flexible of all human emotions. It could twist without breaking, could appear in any situation at any time and stay for as long a period as it desired. It could also turn to anger within the second. As wind began to pick up, making Betty's hair lash against her face, she turned to him.

"Why?" she demanded. "Why, Steve?"

Jane stood a little further back, scratching at the inside of her elbow. Steve wondered why she had never told Tony she loved him, why she had told Bucky instead.

"I was angry," Steve attempted, though that was really a broad explanation for anything Steve had done in his life, even loving. "I lost the person I loved the most."

"But you were loved here, Steve!" Betty yelled. Her voice was strained, and her eyes were filling with tsunami tides. She gestured to where the town of Leavenworth could be seen resting upon the hills in the distance and waved her hand in desperation. "By me, by Natasha, by Tony. Tony adores you, Steve, and yet you left! And Bucky? That man would become a martyr for you and never regret it for a second! He'd die for you, Steve, in a heartbeat, you know he would. He was so torn up when you left."

With the memory of a broken man, Betty's shoulders slumped, and the arm which had been reaching pathetically towards their hometown fell to her side.

"He loved you, and not like a friend, either. I think you know that. I think you always had to have known that. I just never thought you could be so intentionally cruel."

Every great cause has martyrs. Steve has - or used to have - Bucky.

Maybe Betty was right, and that was the way it had always been; maybe Bucky would always have been willing to lie down on the wire and let Steve crawl over him. Maybe Steve had always killed Bucky when he smiled, made his heart stop when he laughed, made his eyes water when he got all sentimental.
Bucky had loved him. With years between them, Steve could try to accept it, could try to believe that it was real.

But to think that his best friend had stood at his side since eleven years old and felt the agony that unrequited love could bring without stopping for a moment to consider voicing his affections ... To think that Steve had caused Bucky that great and unutterable pain, that he had left for eight years, disappeared for two weeks and pulled the stunt with the sketchbook on top of it, yet Bucky still looked at him with adoration ... To think that all those times Steve slung an arm around Bucky's shoulder, or their fingers brushed when they were walking, or they held each other as they slept ... To think that Bucky had been lying in the midnight hour, staring at the back of Steve's head and considering each tiny blond strand, trying to work up the courage to do the one unutterable thing and kiss him before it was too late ...

To think that Bucky had been too late, and so had Steve. To think that they may be destined to be apart, no matter how many times Steve stood on Bucky's doorstep and begged to be let in.

To think any of that ... It was unbearable. It hurt more than the shrapnel ever did.

"I'm not a bad person," Steve mumbled, mostly because he wanted someone to agree with him. He had always wanted someone to provide him with that, to grab his face and tell him with certainty in their tone that he was the best person they had ever known. He had received it, many times. He was probably - definitely - asking too much for it to be replicated once more.

Betty didn't budge. She grabbed her bag off the banks and made for the path back home. Jane, however, had known Steve since infancy. Although they didn't have a particularly intimate bond, lifelong acquaintances can have more of an accurate perception of you than a best friend.

"You're a good man," Jane said. She spoke so softly it almost disappeared with the lake lapping against the banks. "You just fuck up a hell of a lot."

"I'm sorry," Steve said. Jane nodded.

"You didn't hurt me," she hummed. "Not directly. Bucky, though - it's hard for me to see him upset."

Steve understood, though he doubted Jane did.

He had seen how Bucky looked at him with betrayal reflected in his movements, Jane hadn't. He had seen Bucky on multiple occasions as they grew up, crying on his bed because he hadn't wanted to start the fight but he didn't want Steve to have to end it, either. Jane hadn't.

Yet, the most important difference between Steve and Jane:

Jane hadn't been the one to make Bucky Barnes cry, not this time.

No, this time it was Steve, and it was so much worse than the Love Barn.

Chapter End Notes

* Translation: "My heartbreak."
The day after Bucky's twenty-seventh birthday, Steve knew two things to be true:

1) He was in love with Bucky Barnes.

2) Bucky Barnes was in love with him (or had been, before he fucked it up again).

The day after Bucky's twenty-seventh birthday, Steve looked around his mother's house and couldn't find a trace of her underneath his painting materials, Bucky's clothes and Sam's CD collection. She was as far from him now as she had been the day of her funeral.

He trudged downstairs and gulped down some painkillers, because during the night a giant had tapped over his forehead, leaving it splitting. With caution in his movements, he went over to the fireplace where Sarah and Joseph stared out at him.

They could've been siblings for the amount they looked alike. Light hair, piercing blue eyes and large white grins that spread across their whole faces. Steve leaned closer to the photograph until his pupils crossed against each other, making his vision go blurry.

"How did you tell her," Steve muttered to his father. He touched a finger to his mother's cheek. "Or did you tell him?"

Those were the kind of questions Steve had never asked his mother. He had realised, in the vague capacity that teenagers were likely to realise such things, that his mother had adored his father, that she had considered him the best of humanity and thus deemed him acceptable to spend the rest of her life with. Steve understood that his death had paralysed some part of Sarah, and that was why when Winnie and George attempted to set her up with their very successful widower friends, she would always give a sad smile and shake her head no.

Steve had wanted her to remarry. He had wanted a father figure that didn't also belong to Bucky, that he didn't have to share with anyone at any time. It was a selfish indulgence, but it was something he desired so much it burnt, at times. George tried with Steve. He tried more than he was obligated to, taking Steve out fishing and camping with his own son, not even rolling his eyes when Steve got covered in a rash from the bug bites. But it just wasn't the same. The unfairness of death had hit Steve in between the eyes for the first time at age eleven when he walked into Bucky's house and George had given him a Spongebob plaster for his scratched knee.

A few days before Bucky's twenty-seventh birthday, Steve had grabbed his coat from the hall and made his way into the cool March morning. It was before dawn, so he had to squint to see through the bleakness of the day. It was wishful thinking that he could ever forget the way to the place where he was going; it was a death march and then some, every step heavy and unforgettable, straining at his legs.

The graveyard had sprawled out in front of him, a meagre and ill-kept place, for not many in Leavenworth were sentimental for stone markers, rather preferring to believe that their loved ones were right there beside them instead of six feet under. Steve had made his way to the fourth row from the front gate, roamed his eyes along the various inscriptions, and finally reached his parents' graves, right beside each other, just as Sarah had planned since the day Joseph coughed his last breath.

JOSEPH ROGERS - We would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

SARAH ROGERS - Rest in Peace.
Steve felt a stab of guilt then, and he felt it again staring into the photographed eyes of his parents. It was quickly becoming his most common emotion.

He didn't really remember Joseph. He only remembered him dying. Sarah had poured over the Holy Bible for the week between his death and the funeral, tears dripping down her face, the water causing the pages to curl up at the edges. She had agonised for hours over what to place on his grave, what she thought he would want to be remembered for. One of the nurses had told Sarah that, from what she knew of Joseph, he would've been happy just to have Beloved Husband and Father on his gravestone. If that was true, Steve wished he could've known him. Sarah had her mind made up by that point regardless, and she sent the specifications away moments after deciding.

The night Sarah died Steve had stormed out.

He couldn't even recall what they'd been fighting about, but the anger that had been bubbling through his veins was as close to him now as it had been back then. He was furious, angrier than he'd ever been before, at the world, at Bucky, at Natasha, at Sam, at all of them, and Sarah had been the closest, and most patient, person to him. He never considered that by the time he cooled off and came home, the house would be silent, and he would look through all the rooms even though he knew he would find her in the living room, and that his mother would be sitting in her chair, the Holy Bible resting on her chest.

He had ran to her, then, had dropped to his knees in front of her chair, tears already running down his red face. He had grabbed onto her weak arms and shook them hard, and when there was no response, he had grabbed her Bible and threw it to the other side of the room, because if that didn't wake her up, nothing would.

Maybe it was God spiting him for throwing His book. Maybe that was why Steve didn't go to Mass for the entire time he lived in New York, nor did he pray to thank God for saving his life or giving him Sharon or protecting the Howlies when they stayed in Afghanistan after Steve was sent home. Either way, Sarah had not woken up, and she had not smoothed down Steve's hair and whispered, "My sweet boy," and she had not shuffled into the kitchen assuring him that she was well enough to cook dinner, and she never worked another shift at the hospital.

When the clock on their living room mantelpiece - long dead as well - chimed midnight, Steve had finally lifted his head from his mother's lap. He stretched for his phone which was had been lying discarded about a metre away. His legs wouldn't work, so he crawled against the carpet which hadn't been cleaned in a month, and he typed in the number he knew off by heart.

Bucky had answered the phone and said, in a worried voice, "Steve?" and Steve had whimpered, "She's gone, she's dead, Mom's dead."

After that, his memories got fuzzy, but there were some things he could never forget.

Like the knock on the door, and the subsequent banging as Bucky broke his way in because Steve couldn't get to his feet.

How Bucky, with wide, dry eyes had spotted Steve and Sarah in the middle of the living room and immediately took Steve into his warm arms and mumbled, "It's okay, Steve, it's okay, it's okay" even though it wasn't.

How Winnie and George had came in directly after Bucky and instructed Bucky to take Steve upstairs and take care of him, as if he hadn't been doing that already.

How Steve had tried to tell Bucky it was his fault but he couldn't get the words out, so he just let
Bucky think he was a good person and keep pressing kisses into his blond hair even though Steve didn't deserve it (or him).

How, at the funeral, Steve swayed beside the grave, his body gravitating so viciously towards his mother that he wasn't sure if he was going to join her as she was lowered into the ground.

How Bucky had stayed by his side, a reassuring hand on the small of Steve's back, or in between his shoulder blades, or around his waist, anywhere that Bucky could get to at that moment in time.

How Bucky had came home that night with Steve and looked at him as he said, "I need to leave," and Bucky had known, because he wasn't stupid, that this time, Steve wouldn't be leaving for a day, that it was their last night being best friends, being Steve and Bucky.

How Bucky had seemed like he wanted to say something so desperately at so many points during the night but instead busied himself dealing with the people who arrived at the door with sympathy cards and casseroles.

And lastly how, the next morning when he had packed his suitcase, Steve looked back at Bucky breathing heavily in his bed, still dressed in his crumpled funeral suit, and pressed a kiss to Bucky's forehead. Steve left him while he was still sound asleep, because the prospect of Bucky being awake, of him saying goodbye...

Steve swallowed and set the photograph back up on the mantelpiece with enough force that the glass inside of it broke.

"Fuck," he muttered. He sat down hard in the armchair. His hand went for his phone and he began to type in the number he still knew by heart, when he remembered that it probably wasn't Bucky's number anymore, and that Bucky hated him now.

Instead, he phoned Jane.

"Can't say I wasn't expecting to hear from you," Jane said in place of a greeting.

"Hello to you too."

"If you're asking me to do damage control, I'd love to, but Betty would kill me for cleaning up your mess."

Steve rubbed his hands down his face. "Jane, I'm having a bit of a rough day," he said.

"All self-inflicted, my dear."

"Not all of it," he replied, slightly annoyed. "Look, I just need to talk to someone, okay? Someone who doesn't hate me."

"Nobody hates you, Steve," Jane said. "We're all just really pissed at the moment. Especially Natasha. I think you know that already."

"Yeah, I know. School's gonna be awkward tomorrow. That is if she doesn't fire me."

"She wouldn't do that. You know Natasha. She's annoyed, furious maybe, but she wouldn't mess with your livelihood. That would be playing dirty."

"As if Natasha has played fair her entire life." The Love Barn, for one. The Donut Scandal, for another. "Jane please."
"Fine. What do you want me to tell you?"

"How do I fix this?"

Jane let out a little laugh of disbelief. "You're asking me? I'm hardly the most socially aware person to be giving advice. Why didn't you phone Betty?"

"I did. She didn't pick up."

"So I'm your second option?"

"Sharon didn't pick up either."

"Super. I'm in third place, then. You know what, Rogers, fuck you."

It was without malice. At least, Steve assumed it was.

"I think the first thing you have to do is apologise," Jane continued. "And then after that, grovelling for about six months should do the trick."

"Where do I even start, though? I've literally pissed off everyone I know."

Jane didn't speak for a moment. Steve could hear her chewing through the phone. There was the distinct crunch of chips, probably Doritos.

"Sorry I'm interrupting snack time," Steve said sarcastically.

"Shut up, Steve, I'm eating everything in my cupboards before Thor can."

"Is he there?"

"No, he's coming in a few weeks again when he gets a break. He's doing a cover for Vogue right about now. He's-"

Everyone in Leavenworth knew that if Jane Foster started talking about her Norwegian supermodel boyfriend, she would never stop talking about her Norwegian supermodel boyfriend.

"Jane," Steve said.

"Back to the matter at hand, then," she said, albeit it with slight hesitation. "Who do you think would be the most likely to forgive you?"

Sam hadn't cursed at him, or even raised his voice, not really. That was all evidence to the fact that he hadn't been really annoyed, not like he had been at - Steve shuddered just thinking about it - camp. The Fish Finger Fiasco was not one Steve would like to repeat.

"Sam," he said.

"And the least likely?"

"Romanoff."

"So you've annoyed Sam, Nat, Tony, and Bucky, is that right?"

"As well as most of the inhabitants of Leavenworth, but yeah. Those are the main ones."

"So go for Sam first, then Tony because he's crazy about you, then Bucky and then Nat."
"But I have to go to work with Nat tomorrow," Steve pointed out. He could hear Jane lick the cheese dust off her fingers through the receiver. It was gross. "Can you eat some other time?"

"I don't have time for some other time!" Jane exclaimed. "I have so many bags of Doritos to get through before Thor comes, you have no idea."

"Fine, fine," Steve sighed. "I think you're right, though. Sam first, then Tony. Maybe Nat, because of work?"

"You're putting off talking to Bucky, aren't you."

"No!" Steve protested. His voice went several octaves higher than he wanted it to. He gave a light cough. "No," he repeated. "No."

"Betty told me you're in love with him."

"Is nothing fucking sacred?"

"You told Clint Natasha was in love with him."

"That wasn't my fault. Nobody was supposed to see that."

"But people did see that. You know, this is why people don't typically write down deep, dark secrets like that. It tends to bite you in the ass."

"You think I haven't noticed that? My ass is well and truly bitten, Jane."

"Kinky."

"You're not helping!"

"You take the fun out of everything. What else do you want me to tell you? I can't physically go and apologise for you, and I'm definitely not taking a bullet if Nat decides to shoot you because you totally deserve it."

"I thought you said I was a good person?"

"You are. But you also deserve to get your balls chopped off. And not just because of this whole shit-show. The leaving-for-eight-years and then leaving again thing was enough for us to murder you already, except Bucky made an appeal on your behalf that your Ma died so that's why you did a runner."

"That-" Jane's words gradually sank in. "Wait. Bucky made a what?"

"He got us all together," she explained, "and gave a whole big speech about how you've gone through a lot and you've suffered trauma and we should be accommodating blah-blah-blah. Nat was planning on hanging you by your scrotum from Clint's wind-vane until Bucky talked her out of it."

"When was this?"

"Uh - probably about a week after you got back? Straight after Bucky saw you for the first time since God knows when, yeah. Right about then."

"But-" Bucky had hated him. He'd stormed out of Tony's garage and told him to fuck off. Why the hell would he put himself out to make everyone else give Steve a chance if he didn't want to himself?
"I can literally hear you thinking through the phone," Jane laughed. "Seriously, Steve, it isn't that difficult. Bucky loves you. Even though he was angry - we all were - he's known you since before you became Captain Rogers and grew to six-foot-eleven or whatever hell height you are. He's loved you forever. Why wouldn't he want to talk us down from crucifying you?"

"I'm pretty sure right about now he's building a cross for me himself," Steve lamented. He glanced up to the mantelpiece where glass was scattered across the wood and sighed. He'd have to clean that up at some point.

"Stop being so dramatic," Jane groaned. "Just go round to Sam's and-"

"Hold on," Steve said, glancing down at his phone. "Another call's coming through."

"I need to finish these Doritos anyway. Let me know whether anyone forgives you."

"You fill me with confidence."

"Hey, we're friends with assholes, what can I say?"

"True. Talk later, Jane."

Steve clicked the red button on that conversation and moved swiftly onto the next one.

"Sharon," Steve said.

"What the fuck, Steve."

Did no one say hello anymore?

"I get home from a week-long mission, ready to fall into bed and then I see a voicemail from your dumb ass. I answer it and all it says is, 'My life is over, Sharon, I can't go on. I've fucked up so bad Goddamnit help me' and then you fucking hung up."

"Mission?" Steve repeated. "Were you safe?"

"Obviously I was safe, I'm talking to you, aren't I?" Sharon replied. "Don't scare me like that, you piece of shit! I thought you were dead somewhere or something."

"Physically I'm fine. Mentally I'm dead."

"Yeah, well, what else is new."

"You're not helping!"

Sharon sighed. Steve could hear her shuffling around in bed. "Nobody ever does, Steve," she said. "Enlighten me, then. What's killing you?"

"I fucked up."

"We've established that. Why are you phoning me."

"Because I fucked up so bad that nobody else is answering."

"So I'm your last option? You know what, Steve, f-"

"Yeah, fuck me, I know. I've heard that today already."
"Just tell me what happened, Steve."

Steve heaved a breath and launched into a - rather colourful - rendition of the past couple of weeks, including but not limited to him realising he was in love with his best friend and the fact that he was a complete dickhead who didn't deserve any friends never mind the ones he had. By the time he had finished the lake section, his voice-box was croaking, and his words were coming out in such a way that it sounded as if he'd been crying for hours when that. Wasn't the case. At all.

"So?" Steve asked her, when she didn't say a word for about five minutes.

"You really fucked up."

"Thanks, Sharon."

"What do you want me to say? You fucked up."

"You're not surprised by any of it?"

"Steve, I've known you for years. I basically expect you to fuck up now. No offence."

"None taken." Though there was, admittedly, some taken.

"As for you being in love with Barnes, I knew the second I saw the two of you together. I always had an inkling anyway, even from the little amount you talked about him, but I guess I just didn't want to believe it. The idea that you had someone who you'd loved twice as long as you'd loved me was a little bit intimidating."

"I'm sorry I came back to New York," Steve said. "I thought - actually, I don't know what I thought. I didn't think."

"You realised you were in love and you ran from it. It's what you do, Steve. You have commitment issues."

"I do not have commitment issues!" Steve spluttered. "I was with you for six years, Sharon!"

"Yeah, and you never married me even though you knew that was where we were going," she protested. "You see someone loving you and it freaks you out, Steve. Maybe it's because you don't think you're worth loving or something, I don't know, but it's what you do -"

"I didn't phone you for psychoanalysis, Sharon. I phoned you because I had no one else."

"Don't get snappy with me. I've had a week long mission, Steve, I'm exhausted. I could've left phoning you to the morning but I was worried about you."

"Yeah, okay. Sorry."

"I'm not the one you need to be apologising to. Get your tight ass moving, Steve, and go get your friends back."

"Has anyone ever told you that you could be a motivational speaker?"

"Yes. I shot them. I'm hanging up now."

"Hey Sharon?"

"Yes Steve?"
"Thanks."

"Don't do this to me again."

"I won't."

"You will."

"Sorry."

"Idiot."

The phone rang off with a click, and Steve was once again sitting alone, with nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company.

Sharon was right. He didn't have time to sit and wallow in his self-pity; he needed to be out making amends. He pushed himself out of the armchair, grabbed his jacket and made his way towards Sam Wilson's house.

His long, purposeful strides meant that he arrived, slightly out of breath, on Sam's doorstep within ten minutes. He rapped on the door once and stood back, watching as the blinds on the upstairs windows shifted.

The door creaked open. Sam, with furrowed eyebrows, said an abrupt, "Hi."

"Hi," Steve replied.

He scratched at the back of his neck. What he had expected from this journey was - nothing, really. He hadn't stopped to consider much about it, nor had he planned what he was going to say. He had hoped, somewhere within him, that Sam would guide him through the apology like he guided him through everything else, but instead, Sam just stood there in front of him, a mildly amused expression on his face, his arms folded against his chest.

"Can I come in?" Steve attempted. Sam shrugged, but moved to let Steve past.

"It's a free country."

Steve sent an awkward wave into the living room where Mama Wilson was watching *Judge Judy* and followed Sam into the kitchen. Sam closed the door behind them.

"What are you doing here?"


Sam went over to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of Dr. Pepper and popped the lid off. He slumped into a chair and put his feet up on the table. Steve remained standing.

He couldn't remember the last time he had felt unwelcome in the Wilson home. In fact, he doubted he had ever felt less than revered in the Wilson home. Even Sam's Mama and his multitude of siblings had accepted Steve as their best friend since the very first day Sam introduced him to his family.

"I'm sorry," Steve said.
"Gonna have to do better than that."

"I'm really sorry," Steve said. "Seriously, Sam, I am. When I wrote those things - which aren't true, by the way, not in the slightest - I was angry. I know that's no excuse, and I know what I did was wrong, but I was going through a tough time, and I just- I didn't want to let anybody in. I didn't want to believe that anyone else had my best interests in heart."

Sam glugged some Dr. Pepper. "Why?" he asked. The casualness of it almost tore Steve to shreds with how starkly it opposed his tension.

"I didn't think I deserved it, I suppose," Steve replied. "But that's my issue, not yours. I shouldn't have taken my anger out on you. You've done nothing since I've came back but try and get me back into the world."

"Although I'm maintaining that I said otherwise," Sam began, "it wasn't that much of a hardship. Much as I hate to admit it - I missed you for a while there. When you left."

"I'm sorry for that too."

"You know," Sam said. "I think I might be the easiest motherfucker in this place to win around. The second I saw you on my doorstep I'd forgiven you. Hell, the second I heard what you'd written I'd forgiven you. I was just fucking with you."

Steve's eyes must've widened, because Sam burst into laughter.

"See?" Sam spluttered, pointing at Steve's expression. "It's so easy to mess with you and Barnes, I swear to God. I think if I'd asked you to kiss my feet you woulda done it, you sad son-of-a-bitch."

A little smile tugged on Steve's lips. "You know," he said, pretending to turn around and leave. "I think I made a mistake coming here. Absolutely. I never wanted to be friends with you in the first place. The abuse you hurl at me."

"Hey hey hey, it ain't abuse," Sam chuckled. "Not until the Red Sox beat the White Sox. Then I'll punch you."

Sam didn't care about sports. Steve knew him well enough to realise that this was his search for justification for punching Steve, probably for leaving.

"That would be fine," he responded. "I'd probably deserve it, if that happened."

"Hell yeah you would," Sam replied. His teeth glistened around the bottle. "What are you doing standing around like a lost puppy?"

Steve laughed. "I'm trying to angle for a hug, mate," he said. Sam slammed the Dr. Pepper down on the table and wrapped his arms around Steve.

"You shoulda just said that, Cap," Sam said. "Everybody needs a little bit of Wilson love every now and again."

"It's better than cocaine," Steve replied. Sam grinned.

"Have you used that line on all your friends?"

"Nah, just you so far," Steve said. "None of my other friends are speaking to me."

"Neither was I, till about five minutes ago," Sam pointed out. Steve nodded, and then shrugged.
"I dunno," Steve said. "You're pretty easy, Wilson. I think everybody else might have different plans for me."

"Oh no," Sam drawled. "It's easy for you now. But when the Red Sox win? You're getting it. Let me see what the army taught you then, huh?"

"Nothing more than Rumlow and Pierce did in middle school, I can tell you that much."

Sam thumped Steve on the back. "That's the Steve I knew," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if he'd gone and died somewhere."

"You know, I was beginning to wonder that too."

Another bottle of Dr. Pepper was passed to Steve. A strange peace offering, but one nonetheless.

Sam's eyes were warm. "Guess you got your answer, then?"

"Yeah," Steve mumbled, looking down at the bottle. "Guess I got my answer."

"Hey," Sam said, tapping Steve's chest. A shit-eating grin was plastered on his face. "What's this I hear about you being in love with Barnes?"

Steve groaned. "Did Betty tell everyone?"

"She didn't need to. We've been talking about it since you came back the second time. The whole desperately rushing home in the rain to Barnes' doorstep thing kind of gave you away."

"Yeah well," he said. "I guess it's been there for longer than I thought. Forever, I guess. I'm just-"

"Oblivious? Dumb? Stupid?"

"Scared." Steve picked at the Dr. Pepper label. "I was scared."

Sam made a noise in the back of his throat.

"I didn't tell you because I know you don't like all the - the romance stuff."

"I don't like being a part of it," Sam clarified. "I don't mind knowing about it, especially if it involves two of my best friends."

"You're the third person to hear it from me, anyway," Steve told him. "Jane and Betty kind of beat you to the punch."

Sam shrugged. "Makes sense," he said. "They've been rooting for the two of you to get together for years now."

"Really?"

Sam gave a low whistle. "Wow," he said. "You really are dense."

Half out of relief, at least on Steve's part, they both burst into laughter. Once it had died away, Sam's expression became somewhat sombre.

"Have you spoken to him, yet?"

"Not yet." Steve shook his head. "I'm thinking of tackling Tony next, then Nat."
"You're avoiding your problems."

"I think I have a bigger problem with Tony and Nat than I do with Bucky."

"Fine. You're avoiding telling him, then."

"He's made it this long without knowing. A few more days won't kill him."

"They might."

Steve considered him. Sam shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. It was longer than he had kept it years ago, when he was conscious about being one of the only black people in Leavenworth. Steve was glad that Sam was finally coming into his own, in more ways than one.

"He's liked you a long time, Steve," Sam muttered. "That's all."

"I need to get going," Steve said. "I need to sort things out with Tony if there's any chance of me sleeping tonight."

Sam pursed his lips together. "Damn, alright. I get you. Take a Dr. Pepper with you. It might work as a peace offering."

"I knew that was what this was!" Steve exclaimed. Sam groaned.

"That was nothing, Steve. It was me quenching the thirst of a guest and nothing else. Don't make it weird, man, come on."

Steve grinned at him and grabbed a bottle from the fridge. "I'm making it weird!" he called out over his shoulder as he left.

"Fuck you, Rogers!" Sam yelled after him.

It was the little things in life that made you realise how much someone cared for you, like the small inflection on their insults that tell you they couldn't mean anything but the opposite, or the little smile they wore when they saw your face. It was what Steve used to hear and see every day in Leavenworth, the second he stepped into school in the morning.

He only hoped Tony would be able to see the emotion on Steve's face when he looked at him.

The Barnes' house was in between the Wilson residence and Main Street. As he travelled along the familiar dusty road, carefully avoiding the potholes he'd tripped on hundreds of times, Steve felt a pulling in his stomach, a gravitational force that he couldn't help but follow even though he really, really didn't have the strength to do it.

He stood on Bucky's doorstep and, with a shaking hand, rapped a few times against the door. The soft sounds of the TV had drifted out through the open window became muted. He could hear Becca get to her feet and pad out into the hall.

She had earphones in both of her ears, and she was blasting Fall Out Boy at full volume. Steve almost told her to turn them down - he knew better than almost anyone, besides Clint, how deafness could change a life - but Becca spoke first.

"Fuck you," she said, her grey eyes hard and uncompromising. Steve frowned at her, but he doubted she saw his expression for the speed she slammed the door closed.

Through the open window, he heard Bucky yell "Language!" to which Becca responded, "It
worked, didn't it?"

Feeling distinctly like it was his twenty-sixth birthday all over again, Steve stumbled back from the house and continued on towards Main Street.

He didn't bother knocking on the garage door. Very few customers bothered to stand outside and peer in through the glass, and even fewer friends remained on the sidewalk until Tony crawled out from whatever corner he'd been working in that day, so Steve made his way into the workshop and rested against DUM-E, who chirped contentedly at the attention.

Five minutes passed. Steve used them to actually consider what he was going to say, even though he knew his plans would be out the window the second Tony opened his mouth.

He always seemed to throw him a curve-ball, even when they were kids. But there was sentiment at the base of their relationship, despite their arguing; you never fought with someone if you didn't care, and Steve and Tony fought a hell of a lot. Yet Steve loved him since the first time he saw Tony sitting under the bleachers rubbing determinately at his eyes and saying it was hay-fever, since the first time he realised that was what Tony said when he was trying desperately hard not to cry.

Finally, Tony appeared from his office. His hair was bedraggled and it was evident that he had ran his hands through it many times that day. He had grease under his fingernails and smeared on his forehead, and his overalls were made up of more holes than fabric.

He looked so much like Howard it cut into Steve's chest. He stumbled back against DUM-E, who whirred in response. Tony turned to investigate the noise.

When his eyes met Steve's, he did not frown, nor did he scowl. Instead, his bottom lip quivered minutely, and he began blinking rapidly as Steve steadied himself.

"What are you doing here?" Tony asked. Steve held up the bottle.

"I'm bringing you some Dr. Pepper," he replied.

"I've already got a Pepper. But thanks."

If Steve had the ability to talk about emotions and feelings without spontaneously combusting, he might've said 'don't do that.' He might've told Tony that he didn't need to hide behind humour and sarcasm because before he was the Captain he was Steve, and he had been Tony's friend for years. They trusted each other, at least as much as two complete opposites could. The Flamingo Debacle had proven that.

Instead, Steve huffed a laugh and set the Dr. Pepper down on the bench beside him.

"I really came to apologise," he said. Tony turned his back on Steve and begin reorganising his workbench. It mostly included moving a mug of half-drunk coffee from side to side.

"No need," Tony said. "Takes more than your opinion to take me down, Cap."

"Don't call me that." Tony froze. "I'm Steve."

"Barnes and Noble call you that," he protested. It took Steve a moment to realise he was referring to Sam. "Why can't I?"

It was because they didn't use it as a way to distance themselves from Steve. But of course, Steve was not going to say that.
"They just - can, alright? But you call me Steve."

"Alright, Captain," Tony said. "Don't know if you realise, but this is my shop. You can't tell me what to do in my own shop."

A nerve in Steve's jaw twitched. "Just turn the fuck around, Tony," he said. The muscles in Tony's back moved, but reluctantly he obeyed. "Look at me."

Steve instantly regretted it. Tony's eyes were big, they were deep and they were full of hurt. Most of all, they were currently swimming.

Eye contact had always been an issue between the two of them - it either instigated a fight or continued one - yet this was the first time Steve averted his gaze.

Tony smirked.

"Problem, Cap?"

"You-" Steve stopped. Took a deep breath. Three, two, one. "I came here to apologise. To say sorry."

"As I said," Tony replied, "it really isn't necessary."

"I'm sorry."

"Apology not accepted."

Steve frowned at him. "I thought you said it wasn't necessary?" he said.

"Just like me accepting isn't required, Cap."

Oh, fuck you Tony Stark. Fuck you-

"Where's Pepper?" Steve asked instead. He felt a sick sense of victory when Tony appeared to be caught off guard by this question.

"She's visiting her parents for a while," he replied, rather awkwardly.

"You didn't join her?"

"I don't do well with parents. Plus it's in Cleveland. I'm not going to Cleveland."

Steve's diversion had backfired. He had no idea what to say.

"I'm sure she-"

"She's pissed at you, that's for sure," Tony continued. His eyes never strayed from Steve's. "She doesn't understand why I could be friends with someone who's so mean to everyone. I said we were never really friends, and-"

"What?"

Tony stopped talking. Steve had gotten his wish. His emotions were showing on his face, and they were nothing but hurt.

"I mean-" Tony fumbled. "I mean we weren't really best friends, were we? I had Rhodes and you
had Barnes and Wilson and we just - we drifted apart."

"Yeah, I know," Steve said. "I just - I always thought that we were friends, Tony. God."

He shifted over to another work bench and propped himself up on it instead. DUM-E whined at the loss of contact, but Steve was above caring about a robot's opinion, especially a robot that was created by Tony Stark. Even though he did, admittedly, care for the little fucker (whether he was referring to Tony or the robot was irrelevant).

"I'll take that Dr. Pepper now," Tony spoke up. Steve threw it over to him. Tony missed, of course. The bottle smashed against the wall. "That was a shit throw," he said.

Steve shrugged."That was a shit catch."

They stood in silence. To stay was awkward, but it was better than leaving. If Steve left, he might never see Tony... DUM-E again. And as much as he had protested against it for years, he didn't want that to happen.

"I read a few of your comics."

Steve glanced up. Tony wiped at his palm with a rag, and it came away red.

"Oh?" Steve said.

"Yeah. I found some of them online."

"What did you think?"

"Fucking cheesy as hell."

Steve laughed, despite himself. "Comics tend to be that way," he said. Tony smiled.

"I didn't mind the Iron Man ones, though," he said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He's kind of cool with his - with his money and all. And his suits. They could - technically - be made in real life. But he would get whiplash from falling, no matter what bullshit science you put in there, Rogers."

"I'll pass that criticism onto my editor," Steve said. "I'm sure Ororo will think of some way around it."

"How did you even come up with him, anyway? I mean - the suits and all."

Steve shrugged. "I based him on you," he said.

Tony didn't reply. When Steve looked up, it appeared as if he was choking on air. Tony's eyes were wide and bloodshot, and his mouth was hanging open in a way that was almost comical.

He was evidently taken aback by the information, but he shouldn't have been, considering Iron Man's goatee and his martinis and his women and the engineering, but anyway.

"But..." Tony spluttered. "But- Wh- Why would you base him on me? I'm not ... I'm-"

Steve was never going to hear the end of what he was about to say, but it had to be said.
"Because you were my hero, Tony."

Tony, as usual, was unable to take the compliment. In fact, he physically jolted from it.

"Thought Barnes was your hero."

"Bucky protected me for years," Steve conceded. "But you taught me how to protect myself. You're the strongest guy I know, Tony, and I've met a lot of tough soldiers."

"I'm not a soldier." There was something hard in Tony's expression.

"No, you're not," Steve said. "But if you were, you would've been one of the best. I was wrong about you, you know. If you'd been in Afghanistan, you'd have been the guy that everyone loved in base camp. You'd hear them laughing for miles when you walked into a room. You'd crack jokes when we were assembling rifles and you'd make a sarcastic comment when someone gave you stupid advice. And when it came to it - when it was down to the wire - you'd be the first one to make the sacrifice."

Tony licked out over his lips. He stopped scratching at his palm and glanced down at it.

"You knew someone like that, yeah?"

Steve gave a sad smile.

"I knew someone like you, yeah," he replied. "His name was Jonathon. We called him Junior."

Grease stained hands went up to Tony's face and rubbed harshly at his eyes.

"Hay-fever," Tony said when Steve made to move towards him. "I'll be fine I just- need to get some antihistamines. I'll be back in a- be back in a second."

Steve watched him leave. Tony ran into his office and slammed the door behind him. The office window, however, had its blinds wide open, so Steve could see the tears streaming down Tony's face, despite how hard he pressed the heel of his hand into his eyes in an attempt to prevent it.

Feeling as if he was witnessing something he shouldn't, Steve diverted his eyes back to DUM-E, who was whirring anxiously in the direction of the office.

"I know pal," Steve said, patting the robot on the - head? "I know."

Moments later Tony crept back into the garage. His face was dry, and apart from the puffiness of his cheeks it was nearly impossible to tell that anything had affected him.

"You know," he said slowly, "we're all going down to the beach tomorrow after Nat gets home from school."

This was his peace offering. Steve smiled at him.

"I'm not saying I'm inviting you," Tony continued. "I'm just saying that if you wanted to know, Barnes is getting the four o'clock train. Think he's getting it alone, too."

"Thanks, Tony," Steve said. "It means a lot."

"Hey," Tony said with a lopsided smile. "I'm just doing what Iron Man would do."

That would've been a nice way to end their meeting. Instead, just as Steve was about to leave, Tony
suddenly realised he was Tony Stark, and that he couldn't possibly allow someone, especially Steve, to believe he was capable of sentiment.

"I mean, it's not exactly what he'd do. If I was Iron Man, I'd probably buy the whole damn train station, and a hot-tub while I was at it. Wait, I'd put the hot-tub in the train station. Wait - I'd buy the whole of Main Street and put hot-tubs everywhere, because then people would have to use them, and you can't say that it wouldn't benefit the economy, I mean people would come from far and wide to see me getting out of the water, our annual income would be larger than Russia's-

"Goodbye, Tony."

"Just imagine the possibilities, Steve! Imagine the-

Steve closed the door behind him.

The next day, Maya Hansen slammed a box of exercise books on the desk.

"Okay," she said. "I don't know what is going on between the two of you, but it's driving me crazy."

Steve looked up from the work he had been marking with what he hoped was an innocent expression on his face. "Nothing's going on," he said. "We're fine."

"Nat stepped on your foot fifteen times today. She dropped pages in the playground and made you run after them for a solid half hour. She hasn't spoken one word to you that isn't completely necessary, and she put baby powder in your tea."

"Yes, I know- wait, she put what in my what?"

"You're missing the point," Maya said as Steve pushed his mug as far away as possible. "Look, Steve. I've been working with the two of you for basically a year now. I know you don't normally act like this unless something is seriously, seriously wrong. So why don't you get your head out of your ass and tell me so I can help fix it?"

"I really don't want to tell you."

"Why not?"

Damn. Now that she'd mentioned it, Steve couldn't get the distinct dryness of powder out of his mouth."Because I have enough people hating me as it is, thank you," he replied, rubbing at his tongue with a tissue. Maya rolled her eyes.

"Come on, it can't be that bad," she said.

"It's that bad."

"You're being dramatic."

"Fine!" Steve groaned. He threw a book down on the desk. "I wrote in my sketchbook that Natasha was in love with her best friend and he found out about it and now she hates me."


"I wrote in my sketchbook that-"

"Yeah, I got that part." She waved her hand dismissively. "The bit I don't understand is the bit where you say Nat's in love with her... I thought she was getting married?"
"She is," Steve said. Maya continued to look at him. "Now you understand why it's bad."

"Was Bruce there when the best friend found out?"

"Yes."

"Oh shit, Steve."

"You know, that's really getting old." Steve reached for a bottle of water. "Baby powder in my tea? Seriously?"

Maya shrugged. "She said you, Sam and Bucky did it when you were kids. Something about a Prank Squad, I believe."

The Prank Squad had been Steve's inspiration for Black Lama's Death Squad in the Iron Man comics. Like the fictional villains, the Prank Squad, which consisted of Steve, Sam, Bucky and occasionally gleaned ideas from Natasha Romanoff herself, were infamous in the town of Leavenworth, and especially in Leavenworth High. They were talked about in hushed whispers, and when the three of them walked into the cafeteria you could hear forks clink against plates as people stared, either in admiration or fear.

It was mostly Steve's project, but if he was being political about it, Sam began the whole thing long before they even got to high school. After the successes of the Fish Finger Fiasco and the Donut Scandal, Steve and Sam dedicated Monday nights after homework to discussing new ideas for wreaking havoc on Nick Fury's tight regime. Tuesday nights were then reserved for convincing Bucky to join them in their endeavours, and when he finally conceded that whatever they had concocted probably wouldn't get him barred from attending Harvard, he would point out minor flaws in Steve and Sam's plan that would've definitely gotten them expelled.

The system was flawless, and the Prank Squad were never caught, though there were a few close misses. If Natasha was taking inspiration from them, Steve was going to be dead within the week.

Maya patted his shoulder comfortingly. She also remembered the brutal efficiency that the Squad had displayed. With shame, Steve recalled that she was the target of one of their pranks, but in their defence, they had been contracted by Tony, because simply telling Maya he had a crush on her was absurd. It was much better to construct an elaborate scheme to get her to consider him a hero, after all.

"She hates me," Steve muttered. "She hates my guts."

"I'm sure that's not true," Maya replied, though it was obvious she also thought Natasha hated his guts.

"I've tried phoning her twenty-three times," Steve said.

Maya sighed. "Maybe she just... Maybe her phone isn't working."

Steve stared at her. "She answered me the fifteenth time just to tell me her phone was working and she was ignoring me and then she hung up."

"And you kept phoning? Weak, Rogers."

"I need to show I care!"

"You know," Maya said softly, for Natasha had re-entered the room carrying a box of painting
equipment. Steve tried to smile at her when she walked past, but she ignored him. "There are other ways to show you care. Why don't you write her a letter?"

"A letter?" Steve repeated. "You sound like my therapist."

Maya raised an eyebrow. "You're actually going to therapy?"

"I thought considering Sam was pissed at me already, going to therapy might get me back in his good books," Steve replied. The truth was that he had been going to therapy with Dr. Quentin for a while now, and although it took him two trains to get to his weekly session he found himself smiling when he left, as if some of the burden had been lifted off his shoulders. Bad days were few and far between. It was worth the journey.

"Maya," Natasha called over. "Can you come help me with this?"

Steve was scheduled to give his very first art lesson the next day. The children had left an hour before, and the staff of Leavenworth Elementary had been planning to spend the afternoon preparing for Steve's taster of teaching. He had considered going back to college and becoming qualified as a teacher in his own right, but first he needed to see if it would work for him, and if the kids would even listen to a word he said.

He had been looking forward to that afternoon. Natasha and Maya were lovely people, and when the three of them got together and drank wine or put whiskey into their tea it was always a good time. However, if Natasha refused to talk to him, it would be a long day.

And it was.

Natasha never lifted her head from the paintbrushes, which she placed in size order along the desks with unneeded perfectionism. She mumbled some instructions to Maya, but Steve could never hear her words clearly enough to swoop in and try to regain her affections; he assumed, but couldn't be sure, that it was intentional.

With a sigh, he plopped himself down at a table on the other side of the room, grabbed the famous sketchbook (with its last page ripped out and burnt, finally) and began following Maya's advice.

The pen froze more times than was strictly necessary, but then again, Steve was allergic to emotions. Apologies came a little easier to him now than they used to, probably because he had so much practice over the past few days, and also partly due to the overwhelming guilt that was subsided somewhat when he heard "I forgive you" escape a friend's lips, in whatever way it came.

Natasha, he began.

I wanted to write you a letter to apologise. Dr. Quentin told me that sometimes my mouth can run away on me and I don't say the things I want to say, and that it might be better if I wrote things down. To be fair, I think I fuck things up even when I write them down, but the doc is a smart lady, so I'm going to follow her (and Maya's) advice.

What I did with the sketchbook was inappropriate, disrespectful, and selfish. I know that you wanted to hang me by my scrotum from the top of a barn when I came back to Leavenworth but you didn't, and that's all that matters. I don't care how much persuading it took for you to let me back into your life; I just care that you did, and that I broke the trust you put in me.

For the longest time I thought we could never be friends. I thought that we were too different, that our morals and opinions on the world were so opposite that there was no way we could even be in the same room for longer than a few hours. I realised I was wrong the first day you punched
Rumlow in the dick for me. I realised it even more the first time you got suspended for me, and the second. After that, I realised it again and again and again. In fact, I can't remember when I stopped realising and it just became normal, having you in my life.

That's not to say I don't still cherish the fact that you stick around, I do. You're one of my best friends. You're my partner and my confidante. I wish I'd told you so many things when we were younger, and I wish I'd talked to you about deeper issues than what the answer to maths problem 2B was and whether Betty Ross had a crush on me. You always had such amazing advice. I suppose I just didn't like hearing it. I still don't, but I'm working on it.

I'm a stubborn asshole. When you tried to help me in the dance studio that night, when you made me say Afghanistan out loud, I was so angry at you for intruding that I never stopped to think why you did. It was because you cared, wasn't it?

You care all the time, for everyone, you just like to pretend that you don't. I've noticed your walls have came down somewhat since I knew you and I am happy about that. But you're sadder now, and I'm more selfish. I never thought to ask you how you were feeling, it was always about me. I'm asking now.

You love Clint. You always have. But I think a part of you knows that it wouldn't work out, because you both want different things. It doesn't mean that the love disappears, or that it hurts less. I think you came to accept it long ago, and I've reopened that wound. I apologise.

You don't love Bruce. You want to, though, desperately. You connect with him about things that I can never begin to connect with you about, and the two of you are so, so similar in so many ways. Sometimes I hear him talk and I could swear it was you, and vice versa. But yet - you're about to marry him. And of course I'll stand up there - if you still want me to - and I'll smile when you say your vows and I'll give a drunken speech afterwards but I know, I just know that this isn't what you want.

I want you to know that you are you, and I don't want you to be anyone else. Nobody does. We all love you, Natasha, in whatever and whichever way you want us to. You don't need to change the way you love for anyone, even Bruce.

I got off track. I'm sorry for that as well, but they're all things I've wanted to say to you forever and now I have.

I'm sorry for the sketchbook. I'm sorry for being a shit friend. And I'm sorry for breaking Bucky's heart, because I know you're probably pissed at me for that too, as you should be.

Mostly, though, I'm sorry that you feel as if whatever you feel isn't good enough, that you aren't valid and that your feelings about love are not important or acceptable. I wish you could see how much bullshit that is.

Love you, Nat. That's all I really had to say.

Steve

"Hey, Rogers."

Steve glanced up from the letter. Although the pen had left ink splotches in some spots, the writing was legible, and Steve knew that this time, every single word he had written had been straight from the heart. It was the truest letter he had ever written, although to be fair, it was also the only letter he had ever written that was intended for another person's eyes.
Natasha glared at him across the classroom. Maya was wearing a sympathetic smile, but even she could not prevent the wrath of Natasha Romanoff. Steve gulped and nodded.

"Yeah?" he said.

"What're you doing sulking in the corner?" Natasha asked. "We're doing all your lesson planning for you."

_Think of something charming to say, Steve, _his brain told him. _Okay, _Steve replied, _I've got this._

"Uh- yeah," Steve said. "I mean - you know what you're doing and all and I - I'd just mess it up."

"You tend to do that," Natasha responded.

He deserved that, if for nothing other than the opening he had provided her.

Steve picked his stuff up and shuffled over to where Maya and Natasha were sitting.

"We have glitter and sponges, and some cardboard shapes that the kids can use as stencils," Maya explained, gesturing to the various materials. "Do you have any other ideas, Steve?"

"We could- We could cut paper, like this," Steve said. He grabbed a page and pair of scissors and began working his way through, making the paper into a snowflake. It was a party trick that had thrilled both Becca and the drunken Howling Commandos alike, and so he assumed it would go down well with the children too. "They could paint through the holes, and make their own snowflakes, yeah?"

"You could teach them how to make snowflakes themselves," Maya suggested. "It would be good practice for explaining things. Even if they didn't get it exactly right, they'd be so excited to try."

"We could do spin painting too, and we could give them paper plates to make into masks."

"Great idea!" Maya exclaimed. "Isn't that a good idea, Nat?"

Natasha stared at her nails. They were painted black, like her soul.

"O-kay." Maya scratched at the back of her neck. "I'll just jot these ideas down and go photocopy the instruction sheets."

Steve tried - and failed - to be discreet about begging Maya not to leave, but she refused to listen. She ducked out of the classroom with determination in her movements, yet Steve could see her walk slow to a crawl through the window that looked out onto the hallway. 

Asshole.

Nothing could be heard apart from the scratching of Natasha's pencil against a page and the occasional sigh that Steve couldn't prevent. Eventually, he worked up the courage to slide the letter over to her, and when he did so he was immediately rewarded with a surprised quirk of the eyebrow.

"What's this?" she asked, picking the sheet up. Her eyes scanned over the words, but upon seeing one her face twisted into a frown, and she began reading the letter more thoroughly.

Steve sat and looked anywhere but at her. The classroom was hot at the best of times, but that day, it was basically a furnace. Steve was being cremated, and Natasha hadn't even killed him yet.

Maya's head popped up in the window. Steve glared at her and she pantomimed forgetting
something and dashed back down the corridor, though the triumphant and victorious smile on her face just made Tony Stark's childhood influence on her all the more apparent. She wasn't letting it go that she was the one to bring Natasha and Steve back together. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

Natasha placed the letter on the desk in front of her. Her thumb began picking at the nail polish on her forefinger, and little chips of black fell out onto her pristine blouse.

Steve opened his mouth. It was probably best that Natasha grabbed him into a hug before he could speak, because he had no idea what he was going to say.

"You fucking asshole," she muttered against the collar of his polo shirt.

That was Natasha's peace offering.

Steve relaxed against her and wrapped his arms tightly around her torso, so they were basically one person.

"You're like my sister, you know," he mumbled into her ear. If it hadn't been Natasha Romanoff he was talking about, he might've described the sound she made at his confession as a whimper.

"Makes sense," Natasha replied. Her voice was muffled by his shirt, and he could feel damp soaking through onto his shoulder. He knew without looking that there would be mascara stains on his sleeve.

He let out a low chuckle. "Why's that?" he asked. She shuffled minutely in her seat, just so her elbow wasn't digging into his spleen.

"You've always been my idiot brother," Natasha said.

Tears might have appeared in Steve's eyes. If they did, nobody but Maya saw them.

(Steve could see her mouth 'I told you so' through the window. He smiled and buried his face in the red of Natasha's hair. Her rose perfume made her smell a little like Sarah.)

Mission accomplished.
The railway station in Leavenworth always smelt thickly of coffee and wet wool. This was mostly due to the conductor Ms. Havenshim, an old, angry woman who drank copious amounts of espresso and wore cat sweaters which she had knitted herself.

Ms. Havenshim was seventy-three years old, and she had seemed older than even when Steve had known her. She sat in the station’s office and glared out at patrons, and when someone dared to go up and get a ticket or, God forbid, ask a question, she would furrow her rakishly plucked brows at them, her messily painted lips turning into a frown. A rumour had gone around high school that she was cousin to the devil and sister to Chucky, and there had never been conclusive evidence to go against either allegation.

She had hated Steve since he was six years old.

Young Steve had been loaded up with sunscreen by his mother and worked into an excitement over their trip down to the beach, which was really the only worthwhile destination Leavenworth Railway Station provided. Sarah met up with some of her old school friends two steps into the station and, knowing she would talk for a good half an hour, Steve had wandered off to explore the trains. Like any young boy, he was rather obsessed with trains, and also rather disappointed when they failed to deliver on his expectations.

He had wobbled uncertainly towards the tracks, where a train stood stock still waiting for some travellers to arrive. This was customary in Leavenworth, for otherwise the transport system would not be profitable enough to continue; the train would sag longingly on the tracks for about ten minutes and then, when its driver realised no one was coming, it would pull off sadly towards the dusty sunset.

That was when Ms. Havenshim arrived, her face a thunderstorm. She had grabbed Steve harshly by his collar and Steve, who had never been touched by an adult in a way that equated hurt before, had stood on her foot and ran off towards his mother. Ms. Havenshim followed, and if she had any affections for the boy after him stomping on her foot they were quickly erased as he yelled to his mother and her friends that the ‘angry witch’ was following him.

It was mean. It was distasteful. But he was six. He seriously didn’t think it would make her go as red as it did, or that she would hold a grudge for as long as she had. Despite the slight guilt he felt for offending her, the distaste was mutual, and it had only been exacerbated due to Ms. Havenshim's involvement in The Incident (she had insinuated that Bucky had gotten what he deserved, and that alone was enough to make Steve hate her for the rest of time).

He had forgotten Ms. Havenshim existed, her reign of terror over the Leavenworth train network a memory that his damaged brain did not consider important enough to keep, nor did his self preservation deem necessary to warn him about. He only remembered his lifelong feud with Ms. Havenshim when he was standing in front of the ticket booth and saw her bright blue eye-shadow and magenta lips.

*Oh shit,* his brain said. *Too right,* Steve agreed.

"One ticket to the beach, please," he said through the glass. Ms. Havenshim cast her eyes upwards.
Upon seeing Steve, they narrowed into slits.

"Steven Rogers," she said. "I almost didn't recognise you."

The fact that Ms. Havenshim, of all people, was trying to make pleasant conversation was enough to make the already-nervous Steve feel physically sick.

"Yeah, I grew," he said. "One ticket to the-

"I heard you, boy, don't be impatient," she chastised. "Kids these days."

When Steve was sixteen, Bucky had told him that he had caught sight of a photograph stuck to the inside of the ticket booth. It was of Ms. Havenshim and five children. Apparently they were all smiling, even her. It was strange to think of Ms. Havenshim being kind to anyone, never mind motherly, but as Steve had recently learnt, there were different sides to everyone.

"I'm not a kid anymore," he mumbled.

"I haven't seen you in years," his nemesis said. She took her sweet time inserting the details into the computer and printing his ticket. He was going to miss the train at this rate. "I thought you'd run off on us."

"I joined the army," Steve said. He glanced around the station, but from his vantage point he could only see one man sitting on a bench reading a newspaper. Mr. John Calton, from what he could tell.

Ms. Havenshim raised an eyebrow. "Oh," she said, seemingly impressed. "Did you do a tour?"

"Three, actually," Steve said. "One as a Sergeant, one as a First Lieutenant and the third as a Captain. Iraq and Afghanistan respectively, with a few months intelligence in Iran here and there."

Steve didn't like talking about his military days, even to admit that they'd happened, but the surprise on Ms. Havenshim's face that Steve had achieved anything in his life was well worth the years of service.

"And now you're back home," she said. There was an inference in her tone that made a nerve in Steve's jaw jump.

"I didn't quit," he protested. "I was honourably discharged on medical grounds with a record of excellent service. And now I'm home."

Ms. Havenshim raised her eyebrow one again, and her nostrils flared like a bull's.

"Now if you don't mind," Steve said. "I would like a ticket to the beach, please."

"I'm surprised Barnes didn't get you one on his way through."

Steve's heart stopped in his chest.

"Bucky's here?" he breathed. A strange expression, something like understanding, passed over Ms. Havenshim's face. She ripped the ticket out of the machine and pressed it into Steve's clammy hand. If she felt his heart beating in his fingertips she didn't say a word.

"He came through about five minutes ago," she told him. "I thought you would've been meeting him."
"I am," Steve said. It wasn't technically a lie. "I just - I didn't think he'd be here this early, that's all."

"Barnes was always early. It was you we had to stop the train for, remember?"

Steve gave a weak smile and diverted his gaze to the ticket. The typing was thin and grey, faded in some areas, as if the ticket machine was permanently out of ink.

"You wouldn't have had to stop it if you'd let me jump on."

"As if I'd do that!" Ms. Havenshim declared, her chin wobbling in indignation. "Steven Rogers, who do you take me for? If I let you jump onto a moving train, what would Sarah think?"

"So now that she's not here..."

"She'd roll in her grave, God bless her soul."

Steve smiled. Ms. Havenshim grinned too, and it was kind of disconcerting. Although Steve and Ms. Havenshim had been self-confessed enemies, her and Sarah had always gotten along like a house on fire. Sarah had her around for tea on a number of occasions, and their companionship was evident because she didn't refer to her as Ms. Havenshim, but rather Julie.

Steve never saw her as a Julie. Now he realised Ms. Havenshim only turned into Julie when she smiled.

"You miss her, don't you?" she asked. Her nails were painted purple, and when she raised her hand to take Steve's money he noticed how frail her skin was, how her veins matched her nails.

He nodded, a lump in his throat.

"Yeah," Ms. Havenshim said. A tissue appeared from her sleeve and she blew her nose so loudly Sharon could probably hear it in New York. "I miss her too."

A few cool coins were dropped into Steve's hand and he shoved them into his pocket. "Thanks," he said to her, feeling as if something had been resolved, though he wasn't sure what.

"Just doing my job," Ms. Havenshim replied.

"No. Thanks," Steve said, "for the casserole. I - I couldn't eat, but Buck said it was the only edible one of the lot."

Ms. Havenshim tapped the side of her nose. "My mother-in-law's secret recipe never disappoints," she said. "If you wanted me to make more for you two sometime, I would be glad to do it."

"Buck would appreciate that."

"Oh, and Steve?"

"Yes?"

"That time, on the train tracks," she began. "I didn't mean what I said. I mean - you boys were being stupid, but you were just kids. You're still just a kid."

The corner of Steve's mouth twitched upwards.

"Yeah, well," he murmured. "I don't feel like one. But thanks."
Steve made his way around the corner to wait for the train, thinking that if worst came to worst, he could just find Bucky when they arrived at the beach.

Then he saw him.

Bucky was leaning up against the wall of the station with the coolness that many had tried (and failed) to emulate. He moulded into the bricks with such a naturalness about him that it made everyone else feel uncomfortable, as if they had walked into his lounge and defaced it. But then his eyes rose, and the immediate affection that betrayed him even as his face turned into a scowl made Steve's heart warm, because the Bucky that he knew was standing in a blue bomber jacket with Steve's dog-tags hanging around his neck, the seams of his black jeans straining against his thighs, and Steve was in love.

This was either going to be the last day he spoke to Bucky Barnes or the beginning of a new phase. Either way, by tomorrow morning, Steve would know if his best friend loved him back, if he hated him, or if he wanted to stay friends, which wouldn't be completely heartbreaking, not if Steve could convince him to burn those jeans and stop licking his goddamn fucking lips.

Steve nervously ran a hand through his hair to smooth it down and made his way over to Bucky. Bucky took a drag of his cigarette and blew it out in the opposite direction - a habit he hadn't managed to lose despite Steve's assurances that he wasn't going to have an asthma attack and die - and trained his grey eyes on Steve, scanning him up and down.

"What're you doing here?" he asked.

Steve shrugged. He realised that wasn't good enough, and he sighed. He rested against the wall and winced when a bit of brick dug uncomfortably into his back. How did Bucky do it?

"Tony told me you were going down to the beach. I thought I'd tag along."

"Tony doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut."

"Do you want me to leave? I can leave."

Bucky crushed the cigarette in his metal arm. Steve watched as the embers flared up and faded out, dropping to the tarmac.

"Why do you want to come?" Bucky demanded. "What's this about, Steve?"

"I wanted to apologise," Steve said. "I wanted to apologise before, but your little sister told me to fuck off, which was ... interesting."

There was two ways Steve expected Bucky to react to that: punching him in the face or going quiet and refusing to speak to Steve either again. Instead, Bucky subverted all expectations and burst into laughter. Not just ordinary, 'that was a little funny' laughter, no. It was full blown, belly holding, chortling laughter that spread through his whole body and left him red and wiping at his eyes.

He was so hot. Goddamnit, even when he snorted Steve wanted to make out with him. Was that wrong?

Finally the laughter died down and Bucky could open his eyes to consider Steve once more. When he did, he furrowed his eyebrows together, and his Adam's apple made a vibrant resurgence.

"Hey," Bucky said. "Is there something on my face, punk?"
Steve should've said, 'No, just your normal ugly, jerk.' He should've said that so Bucky had an excuse to wrap an arm around his shoulder and muss his hair up, chastise him for being so stupid and writing in that fucking book, but of course he'd forgive him, Steve was his best guy.

The words got caught in his throat and so he just. Stood there. Looked at Bucky. Tried to think of a way to put how much his existence hurt Steve into words.

Bucky gave a little cough. "Well," he said. "You said you were here to apologise. So give it your best shot."

"Okay," Steve said. "I'm sorry."

They stood in silence on the platform. Bucky's lips quirked in amusement.

"Are you joking me?"

Steve shrugged.

"That's all you have to say?"

"I fucked up, Buck. I really did. I fucked up so bad I shouldn't have expected any of you to forgive me, but - you guys surprise me. You always have."

"It's part of growing up in Leavenworth," Bucky said. "It's shocking when you actually turn out to be a good person."

Steve laughed. "You always were a good person, though," he said. Bucky's hair moved slightly in the breeze as a train whooshed past. Not their train, he hoped. "You were always a - a hero."

"Yeah," Bucky hummed, though he wasn't agreeing. "Tony emailed me some of your work. It's pretty good art. You should be proud, if you weren't such an idiot."

"Oh yeah?" Steve scuffed the front of his boot against the tarmac, screwing his nose when a piece of discarded chewing gum became lodged on the sole. "Which one did you read?"

"All the Winter Soldier ones," Bucky replied. "Kind of had to, considering they were based on me, don't you think? Had to make sure you weren't doing a character assassination or anything."

Steve could feel his pulse in his throat which was definitely not normal.

"How'd you know they were based on you?" he asked, attempting to play nonchalant.

"Because of the fucking metal arm, genius."

"Hey," Steve said. "In my defence, Iron Man has metal arms. And metal legs."

"That's a suit," Bucky protested. "Not the same. I'm the badass here, Rogers, alright?"

"The Winter Soldier was the badass," Steve clarified.

Bucky flicked open another pack of cigarettes, putting one in the corner of his mouth, right where Steve so desperately, always wanted to touch.

"Yeah, he was pretty cool, you got me there," Bucky said. "But the story was gay as fuck, Steve, you have to know that."
"There's a reason for that."

"Yeah?"

"I am also gay as fuck."

Mr. Calton looked up from his newspaper in annoyance as Bucky's hoots of laughter bounced through the hollow station. When Bucky had gathered himself once more, he lit his cigarette, offering Steve one, which he refused.

"I mean, seriously Steve," he muttered. "Cap and the Winter Soldier were gay from the get-go, let's be real. In the bar scene - you know, before they went barging into war together like fucking idiots - Winter was totally flirting with him."

"You think?"

"I know. Fuck, Steve, he was actually asking him if he was going to keep the outfit. You can't tell me that son-of-a-bitch wasn't thinking kinky thoughts that day, I'm telling you. And even before that, saving the little guy's ass every time he was getting a beat-down? He totally wanted to bone him."

Steve smirked. Their train hissed to a stop before them.

"Really?" he said. They stepped into the carriage and rested themselves against the window like they always did. Steve liked looking out at the countryside for inspiration, and Bucky liked pretending to be deep. That day, however, Steve knew they'd both have their eyes solely on each other, and that made his stomach fly up into his throat.

"Oh yeah. Winter goes on that suicide mission for Cap, and he saves his ass one last time and then he goes and gets himself killed for the guy, like that's cold as shit, man. But for some reason I don't think he would've minded dying for him."

"Why's that?"

"Because he was in love, Steve!" Bucky cried in exasperation. He ran his hands down over his face. "Listen, Winter obviously could've went home after Captain Tight-Ass saved him from Azzano. He could've been written off and allowed to go home and get with some pretty 1940s dame and it would all be okay, but he stayed because he loved him so goddamn much he couldn't let him suffer out in the warzone without him. He needed to stay to protect him."

"It could be interpreted that way, yes."

"Interpreted that way?" Bucky repeated incredulously. "Read between the lines, Steve! The subtext is right fucking there. Winter died for Cap and he was happy to do it, and that's all there is to it."

"To be fair," Steve muttered. "Cap also died for Winter. And I'm pretty sure if he'd actually died - he wouldn't have regretted it either."

A ticket collector walked past and frowned at Bucky smoking. He snubbed the cigarette against his shoe and threw it into the bin, sending her a dazzling smile as he did it.

"But then you don't even let them die, you cruel person," Bucky lamented. "Like seriously, Steve, it's like you take pleasure in giving these characters pain."

"All the best stories are tragedies."
"You think that?"

"It's what my editor says, so."

Bucky laughed. Steve liked being the one who caused it.

"So Cap finally gets back into the modern world and he's kicking ass with Black Widow who's hot as shit, by the way, and then he's on this highway and he's fighting this completely beefed up assassin and the mask falls off and there's this really dramatic bit where he's just like .... Winter? And Winter doesn't fucking know him!"

"I know, I wrote it."

"That's the meanest thing you could've done! All those years of them being friends and Winter being in love with Steve and now Winter just can't remember any of their past? Like his brain has been scrambled and everything? That's fucked up."

"I guess it is kind of fucked up."

"You're a sick person, Rogers. And it isn't even the gayest bit! Cap goes to fight Winter and Winter's beating the crap out of him and Cap. Just. Lets. Him. He lets him beat him to shit! Because he loves him too, right?"

That was the first time Bucky had stopped his rampage to look at Steve. Feeling distinctly as if he was answering another question, Steve swallowed and nodded once, just a little.

"So there's two super soldiers up on the Helicarrier thing and Cap's getting beat up and then Winter's like - wait. I remember you now and then he pulls him from the river? And then he fucking leaves? Like why does he always leave?"

The train moved with such speed that you couldn't distinguish any individual field; instead, they all blurred into each other and created a Van Gogh.

"I don't know why he always leaves, Buck," Steve admitted. "Maybe he just didn't feel like he could cope with what was in front of him, so he needed some time to regroup. Figure things out."

Bucky made a sound in the back of his throat.

"I think Cap - I mean Winter - more than made up for leaving, though."

"Yeah," Bucky muttered. "He came back to fight when Cap literally started a civil fucking war over him. Like what the fuck was that about."

"I'd do-" Steve cleared his throat. "Cap would do anything for Winter."

"That much is clear," Bucky surmised. "But then - and here's the shitty thing! - Winter doesn't want to fight anymore. He just wants to go home and not have to hurt anyone, though he still goes back into the fight because he knows Cap needs him, and he's still willing to die for him, no matter how long it's been."

"Do you think that's realistic, though?" Steve asked. Bucky shuffled from foot to foot and talked with his hands, like he hadn't done since they were thirteen.

"I think it is," Bucky said. "I mean - I'd die for you now. I mean - if you started a civil war over me, I'd kind of feel obligated to - I mean, like, help you out. Punk."
The veil had been lifted. Steve had never been more relieved, nor had Bucky ever been so red.

"I'd let you beat the shit out of me too," Steve said. "I mean - if you were brainwashed and stuff. I couldn't fight you, no matter what you'd done."

Bucky clenched his metal fist.

"How long have you-"


"So you mean... All those years that you knew you were gay as fuck... You never... It never occurred to you..."

Steve remained silent, but there was something tense in the air. That first day of summer, with a break waiting palpably on the horizon. A day in maths class when Bucky had been so beautiful, so cocky, so helpful, so Bucky that Steve had wanted. He wanted so much.

He had been in love and vehemently tried to refuse and ignore it. He was done with lying to everyone else. It was time he was done lying to himself.

"How long have-"

Bucky's answer almost came quicker than the question.

"Forever," he said. He covered his face with his hands and groaned into them. "Fuck, no," he said. "I mean... Since the first time I saw you throw a punch at Schmidt."

A week after they had first met.

"Wow." Steve whistled. "I took a while to catch up."

Bucky's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "Yeah," he said. "You always were oblivious."

The train rocked to a stop. Through the window, Steve could see the driver waving to a farmer as his cows made their way over the tracks. Fucking New England, man.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Steve asked. Bucky smiled.

"Course it does, punk," he said. "I woulda forgiven you the day you came to my house, 'cept Becca really wanted to tell someone to fuck off at least once in her life. I wasn't gonna take that away from her."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well," Steve said, taking a step closer to Bucky. Out of instinct, Bucky took a step back, and found himself crowded against the wall of an otherwise empty carriage. "I'm glad Becca isn't here right now."

"Oh yeah?" Bucky muttered, his voice thick and working in his throat. "Whatcha gonna do, punk?"

Steve shook his head. "Jerk," he said, and pressed their lips together.
It was a small peck that gave him nothing but proof that Bucky's lips were as soft as they looked. Both of their arms hung stiffly by their sides, and so Steve took the initiative, reaching a hand up to the nape of Bucky's neck and kissing him again, this time harder.

Bucky's hands flew onto Steve's back and froze. Steve nudged against his lips and Bucky let out a shaky breath, grasping onto Steve's shirt with enough insistency that the seams protested.

"Steve," Bucky said in a wrecked voice that made Steve see stars. The metal arm hovered above the heat of Steve's skin. The coolness of it could be felt through his thin shirt.

Steve pulled back, just a little, just enough so he could touch his thumb to the Cupid's bow of Bucky's lips. He dragged it along the outline of his mouth, and he could feel the hot breath on his fingertips, could hear the little whimpers in the back of Bucky's throat.

"Sorry," Steve murmured. There was a lump in his throat the size of New York. "I'm being weird."

"Good weird, though."

That was all it took for Steve to press him hard against the wall of the train. His movement surprised Bucky just enough that the older boy had to put the metal arm on Steve's waist to steady himself, and once Steve's mouth was on him again he seemed to forget his insecurities, dragging the metal fingertips down the back of Steve's shirt.

Bucky's mouth tasted like cigarettes and mint chewing gum. His hair was soft and curled at the nape of his neck, and when Steve pulled a little on it to move him, Bucky grasped on tighter to his t-shirt and murmured, "Yes, Steve," against his lips. It felt as if they had been kissing forever and not nearly long enough, and Steve didn't know how he was going to back away because now that he had Bucky, he wanted to be wrapped up in him forever.

Their noses bumped together and Bucky gave a light laugh.

"Wow," he said. "No idea... You have no idea how long I've wanted that."

Steve bit at his lip, wondering if it was as red as Bucky's.

"I never wanted you to suffer, you know," he whispered. "I never wanted you to-

"Steve..."

Bucky put a hand up to cup Steve's cheek. He immediately melted into the touch, into the warm embrace of his grey eyes.

"If I could take your place," Steve said, "I would, you know."

The edges of Bucky's smile were tinged with bittersweet.

"I wouldn't want you to," Bucky replied.

Steve leaned forward into Bucky's chest, the train coming to a slow crawl. In a few minutes, they'd be at their stop, but all Steve wanted was to turn around, go home and go to sleep beside Bucky. He was exhausted; it felt as if some marathon he'd been running his entire life had ended.

"This might be a good time to tell you I got a new job," Bucky muttered. His voice reverberated through his rib cage, and Steve had to strain to hear it over the beating of his heart.

"Oh?"
"Murdock and Nelson advertised for a legal assistant. It would just be answering calls, sorting out case files, that sort of thing."

Steve glanced up at him. Although he had to bend his knees slightly, he was back to being smaller than Bucky. It was a certain comfort and a certain annoyance.

"You're excited about it," Steve said.

"Yeah," Bucky said, eyes shining. "I am."

Steve pressed a tiny kiss to the corner of his mouth, infatuated with this new thing. "Then I'm excited," he said. "Have you told Nat?"

"No," Bucky said. "That's why I invited everyone out today, actually. I know it's silly celebrating something like this, but..."

"It's not silly," Steve said. "Everyone loves you, Buck. You know we'd celebrate you getting out of bed in the morning if we weren't scared of you murdering us."

Bucky grinned at him. "You're the best boyfriend ever, you know that?"

His back became ram-rod straight. Steve could feel his eyes widening, and he saw Bucky immediately begin to backtrack.

"Hey, it's alright," Bucky said, though it didn't sound alright. "We don't have to talk about this now. Just knowing you feel the same is enough."

*I wish I could give you everything you wanted,* Steve thought to himself. *You don't have anything to give,* his brain replied.

His brain was right. Bucky was so bright and so beautiful, and he was fishing around in his pocket for a five dollar bill as the beach rolled into view.

To deserve him, Steve would have to become someone else, and he didn't want to be anyone else, not now. It would take some time for him to get used to not deserving Bucky, but he would handle it, and maybe someday... Someday he could buy him a ring and a house and start a new life together. But he just didn't have the strength that day, or the next, to do anything but smile.

"Now, come on," Bucky said. His hand clasped onto Steve's, their fingers intertwining. "I heard a rumour that the ice cream van might be here today."

Steve laughed. "It's March, Buck," he said. They stepped off into the rackety station, a wide grin on Bucky's face.

"Okay, so I think Nat bribed the ice cream guy to show up," he admitted. "But I didn't tell her to do it, so technically it's nothing to do with me."

"Sure." Steve rolled his eyes fondly. "I've heard that one before."

Bucky considered Steve, a soft smile on his face, and then pulled their faces together. Steve closed his eyes, expecting to taste the smoky freshness of his best friend's lips, but instead, he heard the unmistakable sound of Bucky running away.

"Hey!" Steve yelled out after him.

"Race you to the beach!"
"That's cheating!"

Steve tore down the steps after Bucky, the wind hitting against his face and rushing through his hair. His lips were stinging and his fingers itched for warm skin, but there was no time for that now, not when Bucky was so far ahead of him and Steve had never won a race.

The ground became a blur underneath him as Steve powered across the tarmac towards the sand. Within minutes, he grinned at a bewildered Bucky as he overtook him. He arrived on the hot beach and thrust his arm into the air triumphantly, only having time to see the rest of the group walking towards them before Bucky tackled him onto the sand and they fell together, laughing, to the ground.

"You little shit," Bucky said, pinning Steve down by his wrists. Steve wriggled underneath him, trying to get free, but Bucky still had more upper body strength, and the metal arm didn't exactly make things fair. "When did you get so good at running?"

"I joined the army," Steve retorted, and when Bucky bent down to kiss him, he took the opportunity to hook his leg around Bucky's and flip them over, so Bucky was underneath him.

"Punk," Bucky said. Steve kissed him, and a warm fuzzy feeling came over his chest when he felt Bucky smile against his lips.

"Fucking finally," a shrill voice proclaimed. Steve and Bucky turned to the source at the same time and found it was Jane, who was very excitedly grabbing onto Betty and Thor's arms and flapping them up and down.

"It's only been fifteen years," Steve protested. He rolled off of Bucky and got reluctantly to his feet, helping Bucky do the same. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Natasha walked up to Bucky and touched his cheek with her hand.

"Milii moi," she said. "Vy nikoga ne vyglyadeli boleye krasivymi." *

Bucky ruffled her hair. "On menya tozhe lyubit," he told her. Natasha smiled at him and turned to Steve, her face half impressed, half intimidating. **

"You be good to him now, you hear?" she said. Steve pretended to think about it for a moment, and Bucky dug him in the ribs.

"Of course I'll be good to him," Steve replied. "What do you think I've been doing for years?"

"Being fucking stupid," Clint supplied from the back. Evidently him and Natasha had spoken, for when she looked at him, he gave her a small smile.

"I can't believe this actually happened," Jane squealed.

"I know," Tony said. "You know, if you ever want a third person participant-"

"Tony," everyone groaned.

He held his arms up in surrender, but winked at Bucky when he thought no one would see.

"We got you lollies," Bruce said, passing them over. While everyone else was wearing t-shirts and jeans, he was the only sensible person who had brought a coat to the beach. It was March after all, and it was freezing. Fucking New England, man. "Don't eat them around Tony if you want to retain your innocence."
"Lost that long ago, my friend," Bucky replied, in that smooth voice that made Steve's knees disappear. "But thanks."

"So how did this happen?" Jane demanded, flopping down on the picnic rug. Betty hadn't finished spreading it out, but it was doubtful Jane even noticed her flipping her off. "I need to hear all the details. This is seriously amazing, you know."

Steve glanced over at Bucky. "Do you want to tell the story?" he asked him.

"Hell yeah I want to tell the story," Bucky said. He dropped down onto the blanket beside Jane. Everyone else followed suit, as per usual. "I've suffered long enough, Steve. I deserve to tell the motherfucking story."

"Fair enough," Steve conceded. "Just be nice, okay?"

"Only because I love you," Bucky said in a singsong voice. "Alright," he began. The group leaned forward in anticipation. "I was just standing in the train station, minding my own business, when this little shit comes walking up to me, and you'll never guess what he started off with-"

The story should've been a simple one, and it definitely shouldn't have taken the better half of an hour to tell, but Bucky's eyes were sparkling as he elaborated on every detail, and in between sentences he took a lick of his ice cream and occasionally pressed a crowd-pleasing kiss to Steve's lips, and so Steve could look nowhere else but him, nor could anyone else. Steve's ice-cream was forgotten, at least until it began to drip on Natasha's skirt, but she wasn't as angry as she usually would've been. Instead, she took Steve's hand in her own and held it until Bucky finished the story and looked to Steve for approval.

"That's a nice story, Buck," Steve said. "But you forgot one important detail."

"Oh yeah?" Bucky quirked an eyebrow.

"You blame me for being oblivious, but I literally told you I was gay and you were hot as fuck and you just stood there like a goldfish."

"Wait," Bucky said. "When did that happen?"

Laughter made its way around the group, and Bucky just shook his head, smiled and looked at Steve as if he was breaking his heart by being beside him. He looked at Steve like he always had, and Steve loved him so much it burnt into his stomach, ate away at any remaining trace of his self-preservation.

Steve was so in love it was dangerous. A year later, that would scare him enough to make him consider running. But that day on the beach, Steve laughed with his friends, kissed his Bucky and grinned as Becca screamed, 'I knew it!' when they told her later on that night.

For that day, if not all the others, Steve could feel at home.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

*Translation: "You have never looked more beautiful."
**Translation: "He loves me too."

Thank you to everyone who has left kudos and comments. I cannot tell you how amazing the response to this fic has been, or how much your thoughts have inspired me to continue updating. This fic is very close to my heart and I am very excited to continue building on it with a prequel and a sequel, both of which are yet to be written and published. I hope you all enjoyed the fic and that you will enjoy the next few parts of this series as well!

You are amazing readers and I thank you all so much for every nice thing you have said!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!